



## Covenants, Liminality, and Transformations: The Communicative Import of Four Narratives

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**Abstract**

As a companion piece to Marc Rich's short story "Home (run) Home," this essay juxtaposes that piece against narratives by Leslie Marmon Silko, Clarissa Pinkola Estes, and Tim O'Brien to illuminate the communicative processes common to all four works. Our thesis is that in these works of fiction, narrator and reader enter into a covenant to co-create a transformative experience centered in the merger of the mystical and the mundane in liminal space. In the process they constitute a compelling invitation to dialogue that grows out of the experience of partaking in lifeworlds in which chaos and disruption are everyday occurrences and in which transformation is ongoing.

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When asked to submit a companion piece to "Home (run) Home," a short story based loosely on my childhood in New York, I was both excited and perplexed. Although obviously interested in writing an essay that could frame my short story, I was unclear about what direction to take. As I began to consider different theoretical and methodological perspectives, certain questions seemed to be central: "What does it mean to do creative scholarship?" "How can researchers look at fictive stories in creative ways?" and "What are the implications of my story and those similar to it for the discipline of communication studies?"

Since much of my work has been collaborative, I was interested in working with a peer and therefore sent my story to various colleagues representing different specializations asking how they would link a scholarly piece to my work. Responses included: "This is very interesting, but I have no idea where you might go with it"; "This is difficult because works of fiction probably need to stand on their own"; and "I'd love to help you but nothing strikes me right now." Everyone was stumped.

On my way out of the department, I saw Karen, a rhetorician with a soft spot for literature and performance, grading papers. When I explained my dilemma she offered to read my story and see if anything "jumped out at her." The next afternoon I saw her in the parking lot as I was leaving campus.

"Well," she told me, "I'm not sure *what* to do with your essay."

"I know," I said as I walked toward my truck, resigned that this was going to be a solo project. "Thanks for looking at it."

"Do you know what's strange?" she asked. "I can't figure out why your tale about a Jewish kid in New York reminds me of a Chicana piece about spirituality and Silko's *Ceremony*."

"That's funny," I replied. "I see a connection between my story and a fictional account of the Vietnam War, but beats me what it is."

We looked at each other and smiled. Our journey had begun.

Our first objective was to illuminate the link among "Home (run) Home," Clarissa Pinkola [Estes's](#) "Guadalupe; The Path of the Broken Heart," Tim [O'Brien's](#) "On The Rainy River," and Leslie Marmon [Silko's](#) *Ceremony*. After reading all four texts closely, we decided one key was the relationship they posited between narrator and reader. We concluded that each implied a narrative voice that invites a reader to be actively involved in the tale, thus entering into a *covenant* with the narrator. As [Bruner and Gorfain](#) note, "tellers and listeners do not take passive roles in a super-organic process of storymaking but actively engage in an interpretive act to make 'the story' meaningful to themselves and their own life situations" (60). We decided that a second key was that the works all contained a mix of mystical and mundane elements, a mix somehow bound up with the liminal. Thus, we generated the thesis that in these works of fiction *narrator and reader enter into a covenant to co-create a transformative experience centered in the merger of the mystical and the mundane in liminal space*. Our purpose in this essay, then, is to use "Home (run) Home" and three other stories as a case study to create understanding of how such stories function communicatively.

Our close reading eventually revealed that all four pieces follow a similar pattern. First, they establish a *covenant* between the narrator and the reader. Second, they depict a *journey* that involves the merger of the mystical and the mundane, generally in liminal space(s). Third, they create a *transformative* experience for their characters that readers who choose to accept the covenant may experience vicariously. Although we also noted that all four stories were representative of marginal voices and borderland communities, we did not initially understand the significance of this finding. By the conclusion of our journey, however, we came to understand how the voices represented in these stories could potentially deconstruct dominant narratives about liminality, transformation, and the relationship between self and other. In the following pages we define the theoretical underpinnings of our criticism, use those concepts to illuminate the communicative processes involved in the stories, and detail the implications of our analysis.

## The Transformative Process

### Establishing the Covenant

All four texts create a covenant between the narrator and reader, between first and second persona. As [Wander](#) notes, "In [...] discourse involving exchange, [...] there is implied a speaker and a speaker's intent. This is the 'I' or the first persona" (209). That implied persona has a story to share with a specific reader, the "implied auditor" or second persona ([Black](#) 164). [Booth](#) labels the author's "second self" a work's "official scribe." He explains that the "picture" readers get of this "presence" is a key factor influencing their responses to stories they read (71). The implied intent of all four narrators is to establish an intimate relationship with a reader. This relationship is critical because the individual accepting the covenant must be willing to take risks, think in unconventional ways, and participate in transformation.

The covenant begins when the reader is invited to take an active role in the story, to participate in events as they unfold. [Wander](#) explains that the

second Persona exists as a fact and an invitation. It may be an invitation turned down;

[...] but it is an invitation which can be heard and responded to here and now. It becomes morally important [...] because it is [...] an invitation to act (209).

Unlike stories that encourage a distanced response, these tales imply an involved auditor willing to take the risk of change. As [Black](#) observes, “The critic can see in the auditor implied by a discourse a model of what the rhetor would have [her/]his real auditor become” (166).

### **The Merger of Mystical and Mundane**

The mundane refers to the normal, everyday events of our lives. [Turner](#) compares it to “the chronologically regulated rhythms of factory and office” (*From Ritual to Theater* 36); [Sutton-Smith](#) links it to a “normative structure” which “represents the working equilibrium” (18-19). All four stories evince a sense of the ordinary, both in the unfolding of narrative and in the characters the reader meets. Inclusion of the mundane promotes identification by making characters and events accessible. Furthermore, mundane elements suggest authenticity so that stories about common people contain voices having the potential to deconstruct grand narratives about ethnic groups (Jewish, Native American), world events (The Vietnam War), and religion (Guadalupe).

Mystical elements help make sense of the inexplicable in everyday life. In addition, they serve to connect us to something greater than ourselves. Most of us recognize this genre because we grew up hearing stories about mythical events and supernatural characters (both religious and secular). Sutton-Smith connects the mystical to “antistructure” which “represents the latent system of potential alternatives from which novelty will arise when contingencies in the normative system require it” (18-19).

In this essay we seek to understand how the merger of the mystical and the mundane creates liminal spaces where transformations become possible. Liminality often involves a “blurring of [...] attributes and roles” ([Beidleman](#) 176) which is emblematic of life on the margins ([Turner](#), “Myth and Symbol” 576). For [Turner](#), liminal means

being on a threshold, [...] a state or process which is betwixt and between the normal, day to day cultural and social states. [...] [S]ince liminal time is not controlled by the clock it is a time of enchantment when anything might, even should, happen (“Frame,” 33).

Liminal opportunities arise when the mystical intrudes on the mundane. The results of such intrusion are diverse for, as [Turner](#) observes, structure generates “finiteness and security” whereas liminality is “the acme of insecurity.” Such a “breakthrough of chaos into cosmos” can be the “scene of disease, despair, [and] death.” Consequently, he explains, “liminality is both more creative and more destructive” than common events in everyday life (*Ritual to Theater* 47).

### **Transformation**

Transformation results from a qualitative change in a state of being. For example, drawing on [Burke](#)’s distinction between the “container” and the “thing contained” (3-20), [Blankenship](#) et al. argue that Ronald Reagan’s success in the 1980 Republican primary debates stemmed from his transformation from an actor in the debates to his functioning as a controlling element in the scene (25). Similarly, [Lee and Andrews](#) look at the transformation of Eugene V. Debs from political radical to liberal hero.

Transformations also occur when the intersection of the mystical and the mundane creates liminal zones. Such phenomena are similar to van Gennep’s notion of incorporation, the third stage in a rite of passage. Incorporation

[i]ncludes symbolic phenomena and actions which represent the return of the subjects to

their new, relatively stable, well defined position in the total society. [...] [T]his usually represents an enhanced status, a stage further along life's culturally prefabricated road (Turner, *Ritual to Theater* 24-25).

In the stories we consider, characters encounter a life-crisis, which in turn creates a highly "transformative" kind of rite (Turner, *Ritual to Theater* 78).

In western culture we tend to think of transformations as complete, "irreversible one shot affairs" (Turner, *Ritual to Theater* 25). However, at times such creative change is similar to MacIntyre's description of the narrative quest. Quests, he explains, "sometimes fail" or "are frustrated." Like life in general, they involve "harms, dangers, temptations, and distractions" which do not resolve easily (203-204). The stories we analyze create an array of outcomes which extend, problematize, and reconfigure the notion of transformation as they provide the opportunity for the second persona to experience vicariously new lifeworlds.

### The Stories and the Process of Transformation

#### *Home (run) Home*

In "Home (run) Home," the narrator, nicknamed Reggie because he idolizes slugger Reggie Jackson, recalls events in fall 1978 when the Yankees had a one-game playoff with the Boston Red Sox to determine who would go to the National League Championship Series. Set outside New York City on Pennington Way, a neighborhood of diverse races and religions, it features residents unified by their love of baseball who mostly get along with one another--except for the Kritchies whom everybody hates and fears. Neighborhood bully and anti-Semite Mitch Kritch flies into a rage after being hit with a baseball during a weekend game. The Kritchies seek vengeance by terrorizing everyone, but especially Reggie and his sister because they're Jewish. The ensuing violence is a symbolic enactment of a larger struggle over identity and community.

**The Covenant.** The story opens as Reggie invites the reader to act as one of his friends might and thus collaborate in the irony and whimsy integral to the narrative. Implied author and audience thus engage in the kind of play described by Huizinga as "a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary life'" which demands that one treat it "as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the play intensely and utterly" (13). To partake of this sort of irony requires a reader to participate in constructing the narrative.

Throughout the story the first persona "winks" repeatedly at the reader, employing ironies that let her or him in on the quirky milieu that is Pennington Way. For example, irony permeates presentation of the community's discursive norms as readers listen to the talk characteristic of the neighborhood's young denizens:

My best friend, Bobby Esposito, was already out front warming up his arm. Espo was [...] the only eleven year old I knew who could throw a fastball, curve, and slider.

"Hey, Reggie Jackson," Espo yelled, because I always swung for the fences.

"Hey, asshole," I yelled back, because I felt like it.

To which Espo's father responds:

"I oughta wash both your goddamn mouths out. You little shits sound like you grew up in a fuckin' sewer."

Espo and I laughed, picked up his two aluminum bats, and started heading to Michael's

house.

Clearly this place isn't a training ground for Dartmouth or Vassar.

Irony tinged with satire marks the story's treatment of its villains. Reggie confirms the reader's "friend" status by letting him or her in on a source of mirth for himself and Espo. After introducing bad guy Mitch Krich, he says,

Under our breath, me and Espo started singing the "Mitch Krich Song" we wrote:

*He is bad, bad  
Mii-tch Krich  
He is one bad son-of-a-bitch  
Doesn't know his right from wro-o-o-ong  
And he's got a hairy dong.*

Leroy Brown had nothing on Mitch Krich.

A similar tone pervades the description of the crisis created when Reggie finally connects with one of Espo's pitches during the neighborhood baseball game.

I tried not to look but even if I hadn't I would have heard the thud when the ball ricocheted off Mitch's head and the crash when it broke the windshield of his dad's new Cadillac. [...] Mitch Krich just wiped his head, checked his fingers for blood, and then turned to see me standing with a bat in my hand.

The story thus uses irony playfully and, in the process, reinforces the reader's role as a friend who can empathize with the helplessness Reggie and the rest feel when faced with the Krichs' wrath. Such a reader can therefore cheer the uprising led by Reggie's sister and share in the community's triumph over the Kriches.

**The Journey.** The friendship between author and reader creates an opening into a world where a baseball game creates a liminal space that gives rise to a communal transformation that overcomes oppression by generating a narrative of liberation. The community itself is a borderland and therefore liminal. Its transformation occurs when mystical characters and liminal events intrude on the everyday and the taken-for-granted.

**The Mundane.** "Those of us not ethnic enough to live anywhere else," says Reggie, "were stretched out across Pennington Way, where people didn't care if you celebrated Christmas or Chanukah, ate meatball heroes or enchiladas." The community thus is a crossroads where diverse folk live ordinary lives, united in their love of baseball, the one activity that holds their "street together tighter than crazy glue." The story traces their activities as they prepare to play and then turns to a description of the game itself, one punctuated with the antics of resident canine Ludwig, a 150-pound Bull Mastiff:

Bruce Bruno [...] fouled off Espo's first pitch behind first base. It bounced once and landed within a few feet of Ludwig. [...] When Ludwig was younger, we used to be able to pry baseballs from his mouth. Now, the dog was like a slobbering vise grip.

Underlying the surface ethnic/racial harmony, however, is a threat of disruption in the person of Mitch Krich and his family.

Mitch was "one of the meanest kids to ever walk the earth. He was a fourteen year old with the body of an adult and the brain of a squid [...] and a hatred of every kid on Pennington Way." The mundane in the story

is placid and predictable yet always subject to disruption. The piece thus sets the stage for what [Turner](#) describes as the “drama” that “constantly emerges,” “even erupts,” “from the otherwise fairly even surfaces of social life” (*Ritual to Theater* 9).

**The Mystical and Liminal.** Pennington Way is itself liminal because it is a marginal space peopled by Americans living on the hyphen—Jewish-Americans, Italian-Americans, African-Americans, and Latina/o-Americans. They reside in a borderland space, a community where anything could, and does, happen. Framed by ethnic neighborhoods, Pennington Way is a “fish hook shaped street in danger of being swallowed up by the surrounding communities.”

The mystical character in this story is Grandpa. As a survivor of both the holocaust and a coma, he has entered into and braved experiences in liminal zones. Jewish to the core, he inexplicably speaks Spanish after a car accident. Simultaneously elderly and Jewish, his is an augmented mystical/ liminal status. Because of their “proximity to death,” says [Kaminsky](#), older people fit naturally into the “categoryless category” of the liminal. If, however, they are Jewish as well, they are “liminal figures par excellence” (31). Like Jung’s more general archetype, the old wise Jewish man often has an almost mythic status in literature and family stories.

Grandpa does not figure actively in the story until the beating of Reggie’s sister Janet by Witch Krich. Just when needed, however, he appears to guide his granddaughter’s journey through liminal space:

[M]y grandpa seemed to appear out of nowhere. My sister looked up at him and their eyes locked. [...] I stopped, the Kriches stopped, I’m pretty sure the whole world stopped. My grandpa [...] seemed to be growing taller and stronger. [...] When my sister finally turned around everyone except for my grandpa, who had already disappeared, gasped.

The wise old man thus turns the tide in the neighborhood fight and so creates the conditions for the story’s transformation.

**The Transformation.** Reggie’s sister defends him from attack by Mitch Krich but proves to be no match for *his* sister, the one they call Witch. Witch sinks her teeth into Janet’s arm.

When she finally let go, my sister was on the ground crying and Witch had a mustache made of blood. Mitch let go with a hideous laugh and threw my baseball bat as high as he could into the street. I felt sick to my stomach.

Forced to retreat to the accompaniment of anti-Semitic epithets, Janet’s face registers “a combination of fear and embarrassment.” But after Grandpa enters she morphs into a warrior:

Maybe it was the pain.

Maybe it was the humiliation.

Maybe it was the holocaust.

Whatever it was, my sister was not of this world. She was taking slow deep breaths and coiled like a rattler. [...] I stepped back in absolute fear and Ludwig whined. The first punch my sister threw must have broken Witch’s nose because I’ve never seen blood flow so freely. Witch fell backwards and my sister was on her like a disease.

And so, the Kriches lose and everyone goes home to watch the Yanks play the Red Sox.

The story's most important transformation is the victory over oppression experienced by the neighborhood and ultimately by the reader. As racist and anti-Semitic characters with the muscle to back up their threats, Mitch and his sisters terrorized the community. After the work's climactic fight, however, others become empowered. Even Chris Clifford, an African-American with a speech impediment whom everybody picks on, finds the courage to fight back:

Mitch tried to take a cheap shot but Chris Clifford threw a split-fingered fastball that knocked Mitch Krich's balls up into his throat.

"Don't call me a taw baby you wacist asshole!"

Thus, the fall of the Kriches lays the foundation for a communal transformation by the residents of Pennington Way. Positioned as the narrator's friend, a reader can bask in the transformation and resulting empowerment.

### ***On the Rainy River***

O'Brien's "Rainy River" recounts his response to being "drafted to fight a war" he "hated" (44). A twenty-something from Worthington, Minnesota, Phi Beta Kappa and Harvard bound, he spent the summer of 1968 deciding whether to go to Vietnam. O'Brien describes the torment of that summer and his eventual flight to the Rainy River wilderness that marks the boundary between Canada and the United States, thereby inviting a reader to bear witness to the events that resulted in a choice he says he made because he "couldn't make" himself "be brave" (62).

**The Covenant.** The story's covenant is the bond between a confessee and confidant. O'Brien explains that this narrative is one he's "never told before. Not to anyone." That telling is an "act of remembrance" which he hopes will relieve the dreams of the war that still haunt him (43). Because he projects a trust born of need and fraught with vulnerability, the piece positions the reader as a valued other asked to join in an act of remembrance. At the work's climax, however, the narrator ups the ante:

I can still feel that tightness. And *I want you to feel it*. [...] You're twenty-one years old, you're scared, and there's a hard squeezing pressure in your chest. What would you do? [...] Would you cry, as I did (59; emphasis added)?

Readers thus must not only *hear*, they must *feel* empathetically. The relationship between first and second persona, then, is one of openness, vulnerability, and reciprocity that increases in intensity as the story progresses.

**The Journey.** Once readers accept the covenant of the confessional, they enter a ritual space in which narrator and reader travel from the mundane, tension-ridden world of summer 1968 into the liminal milieu in which O'Brien makes his decision. In "Rainy River," an invasion of the mundane by the mystical effects transformation.

**The Mundane.** The work's opening pages present a world fraught with tension between stability and chaos. O'Brien describes Worthington as a "little spot on the prairie, a *place where tradition counted*, and it was easy to imagine people sitting around a table down at the old Gobbler Café on Main Street" (49; emphasis added). His home had a kitchen where "[e]verything sparkled"; it was a place "full of bright sunshine" (49-50).

Underneath such stability, however, lay chaos from a war that bred anger and uncertainty and fear. That conflict, Tim explains, seemed to have "no unity of purpose, no consensus on matters of philosophy or history or law." Citizens argued over whether it was a "civil war," over "[w]ho started it, and when, and why." Consequently, "America was divided on these and a thousand other issues" (44). The draft notice injected this chaos into his personal life, for "the options seemed to be narrowing, as if [...] [he] were hurtling down a huge black funnel, the whole world squeezing in tight" (47). He began to experience "a

moral split” because although he “feared the war,” he also “feared exile” (48).

The story’s style mirrors this tension by juxtaposing dispassionate descriptions of events with accounts of emotional torment. The notice came “June 17, 1968, a humid afternoon, [...] cloudy and very quiet.” He spent that summer “standing for eight hours a day under a lukewarm blood-shower” “working in a [...] meat-packing plant.” Within a month he “began thinking seriously about Canada.” Contrasting with this laconic litany are sketches of his emotional life: the “sound” in his “head”—a “silent howl” he heard upon receiving the notice; feelings of isolation and paralysis; and the “raw fact of terror” because he “did not want to die.” His “emotions went from outrage to terror to bewilderment to guilt to sorrow and then back again to outrage” (45, 47, 46, 48, 45, 47, 49). Thus he explains that

[w]hat I have never told is the full truth. How I cracked. How at work one morning, [...] I felt something break open in my chest. I don’t know what it was. [...] But it was real; [...] it was a physical rupture—a cracking-leaking-popping feeling (49).

This rupture impelled him flight, to enter the limen. The last paragraph of the work’s first section states simply, “I drove north” (50).

**The Liminal and the Mystical.** Driving “north” meant a trip up through the middle of Minnesota to International Falls and then west along the Rainy River to finally stop at the Tip Top Lodge where he met his spiritual guide, the wise and silent Elroy Berdahl. The wilderness around them “seemed to withdraw into a great permanent stillness” as it “unfolded in great sweeps of pine and birch and sumac.” O’Brien’s trek was a “blur” accompanied by a “giddy feeling” heightened because “there was the dreamy edge of impossibility to it. [...] It was pure flight and mindless.” The Tip Top Lodge had a liminal feel because it lay on a “peninsula that jutted northward into the Rainy River, [...] had a dangerous wooden dock [...] [and a] main building [...] with its] roof sagging toward Canada” (52, 50, 51).

There he met the narrative’s version of the wise old man who, [Jung](#) explains, appears “in a situation where insight, understanding, good advice, determination, and planning [...] are needed but cannot be mustered on one’s own resources” (126). Berdahl had a “silent, watchful presence” augmented by eyes that were “the bluish gray color of a razor blade.” O’Brien was “certain that the old man took one look and went right to the heart of things” (51). Elroy possessed a “willful, almost ferocious silence”; yet he could compress “large thoughts into small cryptic packets of language. One evening [...] he pointed up at an owl circling over the [...] forest. [...] ‘Hey, O’Brien,’ he said. ‘There’s Jesus’” (52-53).

Even after entering the limen, O’Brien still “was wired and jittery.” Plagued by vomiting and sweating he “went through whole days feeling dizzy with sorrow” (53). Unable to sleep, he spent nights tortured by dreams of

[g]etting chased by [...] helicopters and searchlights and barking dogs—I’d be crashing through the woods, I’d be down on my hands and knees, [...] the law closing in on all sides—my hometown draft board and the FBI and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. (53)

Six days later, on a “cold,” “sunny” afternoon, Elroy took him fishing on the river. “All around [...] there was a vastness to the world, an unpeopled rawness, just the trees and the sky and the water reaching out toward nowhere.” Berdahl’s purpose, O’Brien believes, was “to bring me up against the realities, to guide me across the river and to take me to the edge and to stand a kind of vigil as I chose a life for myself” (57-58).

**The Transformation.** Unable to run, Tim experienced a “paralysis” that “took [...] [his] heart.” He could only cry because “[e]verywhere [...] a great worldwide sadness came pressing down, [...] a crushing sorrow. [...] And what was so sad [...] was that Canada had become a pitiful fantasy. [...] It was no longer a possibility.” Tim’s choice was his alone but it was not a solitary act, for Elroy kept watch “like the river and the late-summer sun. [...] He was a witness, like [...] the gods, who look on in absolute silence as we [...] make our choices or fail to make them” (59, 62).

As “[c]hunks of [...] [O’Brien’s] own history flashed by,” his “whole life seemed to spill out into the river, swirling away from him.” He knew he could “not swim away from” his hometown. And so he retraced his steps—back “through the pine forests and down to the prairie, and then to Vietnam.” His story’s last lines proclaim its irony: “I was a coward. I went to the war” (62, 60, 62, 63).

O’Brien’s transformation was not complete on that day in 1968. Nor was it complete when he returned to Worthington or when he went to Vietnam or when he came back from the war because as long as his “truth” remained secret, his transformation was only partial. As Frank explains, “becoming a witness assumes a responsibility for telling what happened” (137). Thus, only with the reader’s willingness to witness could O’Brien become whole.

### ***Guadalupe: The Path of the Broken Heart***

“Path of the Broken Heart” takes the form of a letter addressed to young people who wish to know what to make of mystical experiences related to the Virgin of Guadalupe. The story’s “I” first explains supernatural phenomena in general and then recounts her own experiences with the mysteries of *La Virgen*, a process she began at age seven.

**The Covenant.** “Path of the Broken Heart” immediately situates narrator and reader as its narrator addresses those who have written because they “have heard of [...] our group of social activists dedicated to being contemplates in the world,” asking what to call various mystical experiences. Embracing the role of spiritual guide, she advises them to abandon “old-fashioned words” like “*appearances* and *apparitions*” and instead speak of “*visits*, as from a great and beloved sister-mother, who [...] comes through the door without knocking” (34). The opening paragraph thus invites readers to seek understanding as they listen to the narrator’s detailing the events which began her spiritual journey. This speaker resembles Jung’s “wise old woman” who imparts the “wisdom of the eternal female nature” ([Jacobi](#) 335).

**The Journey.** Estes’s piece opens with an orientation that articulates an integral relationship between the mystical and the mundane. The narrator next turns to an account of the beginning and ongoing development of her spiritual life, followed by a poetic coda that affirms the simultaneously mystical and mundane nature of *La Virgen* and, by extension, of all who hear Her voice. The work thus typifies much contemporary Chicana writing, for it is a generic hybrid, in this case a merger of story, essay, and poetry. Such deviation from traditional (masculine) genres involves “formal and linguistic innovation” ([Yarbro-Bejarano](#) 141-142) uniquely suited to expression of the complex realities of women who inhabit the milieu of the borderland (see [Ortega and Stenbach](#) 17; [Rebolledo](#) 146).

**The Mystical and the Mundane.** The story’s introductory paragraphs present the mystical and the mundane as fused in the persona of the Virgin of Guadalupe and, by extension, in the lives of those attuned to the feminine face of the divine. Such a divinity is gentle, personal, and comforting; it embodies an immediate spirituality that contrasts with its more “remote and judgmental” patriarchal counterpart ([Rodriguez](#) 154) which is “far removed from moral, material selves” ([Castillo](#) 102).

The narrator describes four conditions under which communion with the *La Virgen* takes place. First, it is not a solitary experience divorced from normal living. “[Many] people live exactly as you do,” the narrator explains, “as very extraordinary souls living in very ordinary circumstances” (34). Second, people don’t have to remove themselves from everyday affairs to feel Her presence because “[s]he grows her strongest roses [...] [in the midst of a] humanity whose [...] sounds [...] are the exact basis for the harmonious music of the cosmos” (34-35). Third, visits from *La Virgen* are not only for the privileged few possessing refined sensibilities. Rather, She comes to all; for “She walks in every street, stands at every street corner, even those where [...] maybe even God Herself ought to be cautious” (35). Finally, to walk with Her is to walk not only toward the light but also to confront darkness, to travel the path of the “broken heart,” thus dwelling in the “mud and dirt, in the storms and thunder of daily life” (36). This last mode of engaging the mystical and the mundane is central to the narrator’s spiritual calling, a calling that has impelled her to minister in sites rarely associated with the spiritual.

The end of the section orients readers to a mundane existence richly infused with the mystical by offering a description of conditions at the immigration jail and of the narrator's preparations to visit it. She concludes by inviting readers to travel back in time to "events from long ago" that continue to motivate her to "leave [...] [her] warm bed to go to a cold jail in the midst of winter" (37).

**The Mystical and the Liminal.** "When I was seven years old," the narrator explains, "the grown-ups from my home [...] told me that [...] I, the little ecstatic child-wanderer, was now qualified to be 'reasonable.'" Consequently, she was to take part in a ceremony consecrating her to "*Le Mujer Grande*, the Great Woman." To the cadence of "avid and earnest askings and blessings" she knelt with "arms outstretched" "for what seemed like hours" and "pledged her virginity to Blessed Mother for all time" (37-38, 38).

That ceremony, however, was not the most important happening in this key period. Her own spiritual guide, her aunt Kati, explained that, "the curtain between the worlds would part for two weeks only. [...] That I should pay deep attention to [...] what events [...] would capture my heart [...] [because they] could be understood as pointing the way toward my future life and work" (38). A few days later she witnessed the rousting of homeless people by police. Watching in horror she thought she heard "a calm and gentle voice asking, 'Do you love me?'" and then, "'If you love me, comfort them'" (40). A policeman emerged from a hut with a frantic, screaming woman. Again, she heard the Virgin, this time saying, "Do you love me? If you do, then help me." She describes her response:

I shot up like a quail. I had sudden turbines in my legs, my arms reaching ten feet ahead of me, my lungs filling with a gigantic thundercloud. [...] I yelled out loudly. [...] "In Her name and all that is holy, do these people no harm!" (p. 41)

Flinging herself on the sheriff's vehicle, she thrice made the sign of the cross on its back window. A decade later, she again heard the Virgin's voice, this time calling her to visit the unfortunate in prison. Since then she has answered that call repeatedly, visiting "locked institutions," hospitals, and shelters for battered women and unwed mothers (43-44).

The structure of her story/experience, then, is a cyclical movement between everyday and liminal space. The form of the tale's last several lines represents the pattern's repetitive nature:

Do you love me?

Yes, I love you.

....

Do you love me? Do you love me?

Yes, yes a thousand times yes (44).

Her journey involves the continuous shifting from what Turner would call "routinized social living" into "dramatic time" (*From Ritual to Theater* 9). Such forays into the limen result when one open to the supernatural can attend to it, thereby experiencing the paradox of the extraordinary in the ordinary and in turn seeing the marks of the mystical in the mundane.

**The Transformation.** "Path's" transformation is an ongoing one. The narrator describes her behavior after her confrontation with the sheriffs:

I [...] ran like a crazy thing far into the field, [...] until I found my way to the creek, sat down, [...] and could not get up again for my legs shook so. [...] I [...] lay facedown for a long time, breathing in the rich healing fragrance of the iron-filled earth (42).

Her openness to Guadalupe's voice led her to risk confronting darkness and to be prepared to embrace repeatedly the risk and richness of the path of the broken heart. She had experienced a "transformative moment," for as she looked at the two homeless persons, "for a split second" she "saw in both of them" "Guadalupe suffering" (43). That she should find solace through contact with the earth intimates a connection with the totality of existence. Hence, her transformation called her to remain open to calls from the limen, to minister to those in need, and to impart her knowledge to others. The story concludes with a poem that defines the union of the mystical with the mundane in the person of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, a figure so expansive that "Her embrace can hold us all" (45).

### *Ceremony*

Abandoned by his mother and raised by his aunt who emphasizes his "half-breed" status, Tayo, the central character in [Silko's Ceremony](#), is confused about himself and his heritage. As a prisoner in World War II, he watches his brother die at the hands of the Japanese and thus experiences survivor guilt. After the war, flashbacks create intense psychic pain for him. When extended institutionalization is ineffective, his grandmother contacts a shaman to help Tayo become whole again. As he heals he learns that he must complete a complex ceremony if he and his community are to recover.

**The Covenant.** In the novel's early pages, the narrator asks the reader to choose whether to be insider or outsider, to decide to be *with* the main characters or be one of "them," an ambiguous "other" who demeans Native traditions and destroys their stories. The book begins with a series of poems addressing the second persona. Page one:

Ts'its'tsinako, Thought Woman,

is sitting in her room.

.....

I'm telling you the story

she is thinking.

The "you" addressed clearly is the reader, the second persona. Page two defines the choice the reader must make:

I will tell you something about stories,

.....

They are all we have, you see,

all we have to fight off

illness and death.

.....

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.

The reader can either join the narrator or align with an evil “they.” Persons who accept the narrator’s invitation have the opportunity to participate in “[t]he only cure” Thought-Woman knows, “a good ceremony” (3). Page four contains the single word “Sunrise,” thus signaling the beginning of a sacred journey.

**The Journey.** A reader who assumes an insider role enters a ritualistic world marked by the merging of the mystical and the mundane. The novel moves from chaos to quest as it embarks on an excursion during which Tayo and reader dwell in liminal spaces while participating in a sacred rite that creates the conditions for transformation.

**The Mystical and the Mundane.** In *Ceremony* the relationship of mystical to mundane is that of *yin* to *yang*. In Silko’s work this coexistence emerges from a collage of mystical characters and rituals interspersed among mundane people, situations, and scenarios. The novel’s early pages intimate the other-worldly by merging poetry, storytelling, and mythical characters. Poetry describing rituals and highlighting Native American lore foregrounds figures such as animals and insects as well as references to god-like beings and the supernatural. These poems often instruct, teaching lessons and providing hints about the ceremony.

Major characters generally have both mystical and mundane dimensions. For example, Tayo is a fence-rider who sees and is drawn to Native traditions yet simultaneously pulls back from them because he doubts their efficacy. Similarly, Ts’eh, his lover, lives an ordinary life tending cattle and horses but also intuits the other-worldly because “[l]ike old Betonie, she could see reflections in sandrock pools of rainwater [...] [and could hear] voices, low and distant in the night” (232).

*Ceremony*’s main mystical character is Betonie, a wise man who guides Tayo’s healing. “The old man,” the narrator explains, “was tall; [...] at one time he had been heavier, but old age was consuming everything but the bones.” When he moved, however, “his motions were strong and unhesitating, as if they belonged to a younger man.” Like many wise old wo/man archetypes, Betonie is omniscient for he senses how Tayo thinks and feels. When Tayo wants to flee, Betonie literally reads his mind, telling him, “[Y]ou can go. [...] You won’t be the first one to run away” (117, 118).

**Narrative Pattern: From Chaos to Quest.** Early in the novel, Tayo fights for his physical, emotional, and spiritual life. Tormented by nightmares, unable to eat without vomiting, he faces endless days of darkness. Turner defines chaos as a “confused, unorganized state [...] wanting in order, sequence, organization” (*Edge* 228). Hence, chaos narratives tend to occur when a person’s life degenerates with nothing to alleviate the pain. Because they depict “life never getting better,” their hallmark is an “absence of narrative order” (Frank 97). Thus, when western medicine fails to provide a cure, Tayo’s life spins out of control, becoming intolerable. Stylistically, the narrative unfolds in a non-linear fashion, marked by the intertwining of poetry and prose, abrupt shifts between time periods and geographical locations, all of which make the plot difficult to follow. Like Tayo, the reader struggles to find some way to tie the narrative’s strands together.

When Tayo’s grandmother consults a shaman, however, the narrative adopts the pattern of a quest, thereby framing pain and struggle as a journey. Frank explains:

Quest stories meet suffering head on; they accept illness and seek to use it. [...] What is

quested for may never be wholly clear, but the quest is defined by the ill person's belief that something is to be gained through the experience (115).

Tayo's quest involves situating his experience within a larger ceremony involving his community. To complete that quest, he must face his personal demons and must understand how his people have been oppressed and turned against one another. Initially he resists traditional healing, but gradually he accepts Betonie's help, giving himself up to a ritual the old man constructs to bring him back from the darkness. However, this experience does not mark the end of his quest, for, as the narrator explains, "it was not over. All kinds of evil were still on him" (144).

**Transformation.** To achieve a lasting transformation Tayo must travel through a number of liminal spaces, struggling with the disturbing betwixt and between of the limen. During battle, his uncle visits him during a vision, an experience others attribute to "battle fatigue" or "malarial fever" (8). Later, visions and nightmares make staying rooted in reality difficult. The narrator explains that "[f]or a long time he had been white smoke. [...] He inhabited a gray winter fog on a distant elk mountain where hunters are lost indefinitely" (14-15). This struggle continues after his release from the hospital: leaning against a depot wall, "he was sweating and sounds were becoming outlines again. [...] [H]e wanted to die the way smoke dies, [...] fading until it exists no more" (16-17).

Although Tayo eventually becomes more centered, he remains on edge. Ultimately, he goes to Betonie's home—an isolated residence above a populated area built both *in* and out *of* the hills. This house becomes the liminal zone Tayo must traverse to become whole. At first, he hesitates; but as the sun sets, Tayo chooses to participate in Betonie's ritual:

He took a deep breath of cold mountain air: there were no boundaries; the world below and the sand paintings inside became the same that night. The mountains from all the directions had been gathered there that night (145).

Tayo thus enters a liminal space in which all things seem to come together. His transformation is a gradual one dependent on a series of experiences; for, as Betonie explains, "[i]t is a matter of transitions, you see; the changing, the becoming must be cared for closely" (130).

The ceremony enables Tayo to frame his own story within a larger narrative about his people. By participating in the ceremony he was able to "keep the story out of the reach of the destroyers" at least for "a few more hours" and thus create a condition in which "their witchery would turn upon itself, upon them" (247). Because his actions benefit his people and himself he can become whole again.

Tayo's release is a hard-won victory in which an insider/reader can participate, thereby experiencing the unity the novel argues is so essential. As [MacIntyre](#) explains,

[t]he unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest. [...] It is in the course of the quest, [...] with the particular harms, dangers, temptations, and distractions [...] that the goal of the quest is finally to be understood (203-204).

And so, Tayo and the insider/reader discover that quests and healing are ongoing. *Ceremony's* last page reads, simply:

Sunrise,

accept this offering,

Sunrise (262).

## An Invitation to Dialogue

Our journey began when we started to consider the relationship between “Home (run) Home” and three other stories. We have learned that the four works foreground the lives of ordinary people, feature a merger of the mystical and the mundane, embody a personal relationship between narrator and reader, and privilege voices from the margins. By exploring the concepts of covenant, liminality, and transformation, we have developed an explanation of how the works functioned communicatively. Like most good journeys, we made additional discoveries on the way. While our analytic framework did illuminate the communicative aspects of the stories, the process of analysis also revealed the theoretical implications of listening to the discourse of historically marginalized voices to extend understanding of notions of liminality, transformation, and the coming together of self and other.

From most Eurocentric frames of reference, entry into the limen involves visiting a transitory time/place/space that effects movement from “one social status to another.” Persons entering liminal space often cross thresholds and may embark on an “extensive pilgrimage” characterized by the traversing of “many boundaries.” Whatever the case, liminal excursions are forays into areas of “ambiguity” or “social limbo” marked by “separation for the rest of society” (Turner, *Ritual to Theater* 25-26). Westerners who study the “Other,” typically subjects in developing countries or persons occupying borderland communities, have generated much of the scholarship on liminality. Most conclude that liminality is a transitory state, a space that subjects navigate en route to a newer, usually higher status. Liminality thus conceived is a condition that individuals pass through on their journey to a hopefully better life. These four stories, however, proffer a more complex, multifaceted conception of liminality.

The limen in “Rainy River” most closely resembles the traditional view of liminality. It is a *place*, a compelling but safe location that O’Brien visits to make a key decision and then go on with his life. Interestingly, however, the story also posits the possibility of a more lasting liminality in the person of Elroy Berdahl, who partakes of the spirit of the Northland at least during the warmer months of the year. In “Home (run) Home,” the limen is both *state* and *place*. Reggie’s sister enters a liminal state to find strength to confront oppression. Yet she and the story’s other characters live in a borderland, a crossroads existence prone to liminal happenings and complex ways of living. Liminality in Estes’s “Path of the Broken Heart” is a complex, mystical zone visited often by the work’s narrator. She does not move *through* a transitory space as much as she cycles in and out of a liminal existence, effectively merging the mystical and the mundane, thereby finding liminality in everyday life. And, finally, the liminal permeates the fabric of Silko’s *Ceremony*. There are places and spaces (Betoine’s house); there are permanent states of liminality (Tayo’s half breed status), and there are movements back and forth between the limen and everyday life (Tayo’s description as himself as “smoke”). But, perhaps most significantly, the liminal is paradoxical, for it is creative, healing, and liberating yet destructive, dangerous, and constraining. In sum, the four stories posit a notion of liminality considerably more pervasive and fluid than more conventional conceptualizations.

Conventional views of transformation describe a subject undergoing change to get from A to B. Persons who accept this linear view believe that after an individual traverses liminal space s/he reaches some end-state of existence that involves significant and definitive change. Turner’s explanation of this phenomenon as a return of “subjects to their new, relatively stable, well-defined positions in the total society” is consistent with this line of thinking (*From Ritual to Theater* 24). Transformation, then, provides closure. Reflecting on Turner’s ideas, however, Park-Fuller asks the following questions:

Could it be that the liminal (threshold) experience covers only the time that the boys in the tribe are involved in the coming-of-age ritual, only during the trials conferring manhood? How long after the ritual do the young men suffer the avalanche of obstacles in their new identities? How many times do they yearn to run to their mothers and cry, “Mama, help me”? (*Desert* 39).

In other words, she takes issue with the seeming finality implicit in Turner’s treatment of transformation, a view that privileges “endings and beginnings” that “have clear, clean borders—without messy voids in between” (Park-Fuller, *Desert* 33). The stories analyzed in this essay, however, present a more complex picture.

In *Ceremony*, Tayo's change results from numerous trips into liminal spaces and various encounters with mystical figures. This transfiguration never ends. He has become whole, but that wholeness is a new beginning, one that likely will lead to future changes. O'Brien's transformation rests on his ability to tell and retell his story. The consequent amelioration of his pain is an ongoing process that is fluid for it is constructed and reconstructed in dialogue with others. In "Path of the Broken Heart" the narrator's life story is one of continual conversions spawned by her being open to change. All of her contacts with Guadalupe and people's suffering are events that keep her open to ongoing transformations. In "Home (run) Home" the most significant transformation involves the entire community's move from oppression to empowerment. The result is a heightened sense of community, or what Turner refers to as *communitas*, "a direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities [...] when compatible people [...] obtain a flash of lucid mutual understanding on the existential level, when they feel that all problems [...] could be resolved" (*From Ritual to Theater* 48). Feelings of *communitas*, however, quickly wane. The community's victory thus is neither fixed nor permanent. Hence, the communal victory is more a beginning than a chapter's end. Thus, the works analyzed allow for a broader, and less linear, understanding of transformation. In each, the reader confronts ongoing, fluid transformations that tend to occur in stages.

Persons with the authority to name have argued that the "Other" enters transitory spaces to effect stable change. These descriptions of liminality and transformation support a world-view in which change leads to progress. Although subjects may enter a betwixt and between state, they come out the other side with increased knowledge and status (as defined by hegemonic forces). Conversely, members of borderland communities, such as those represented in these four stories, redefine liminality as a much more permanent way of being and transformation as an ongoing process. These works thus present an opportunity to hear "hyphenated" Americans and Vietnam Veterans define their own experiences. They challenge hegemonic constructions by inviting various kinds of readers to enter life worlds in which chaos and disruption are everyday occurrences and in which transformation is ongoing.

The second persona, whether or not s/he represents a historically marginalized group, steps into the role of a valued other invited to bear witness to stories from the margins and enter into a dialogic exchange with the narrator. Thus, the reader potentially can be transformed by engaging in an ongoing dialogue. This invitation is compelling because s/he is an "Other" granted respect. In "Home (run) Home" the second persona is a close friend; in "Path of the Broken Heart," someone who deserves to be nurtured and enlightened; in "Rainy River," an individual asked to bear witness to the narrator's darkest secrets; in *Ceremony*, a person granted the privilege of an insider. In each case, the invitation is one characterized by inclusiveness and respect. The journey on which narrator and persona embark is equally compelling for it describes complex transformations produced by the merger of the mystical and mundane in fluid and recurring liminal spaces. Hence, it posits an ambiguous and uncertain world yet simultaneously provides a means of making sense of such flux. Collectively the journey and invitation invoke strategies that can "break the dominant open to diversity, to difference" (Adams 131) as they negotiate the move from being "other-defined to self-defined" (Flores 152) in a way that offers diverse readers multiple ways to enter the life worlds they present.

## Epilogue

I wrote "Home (run) Home" several years ago, when I felt the need to take a break from what is traditionally known as scholarly writing. The story's first line—"The year was 1978. Jeremiah was a bullfrog and the New York Yankees were in a pennant race with the Boston Red Sox"—played over and over in my head before I knew that a story was beginning to develop. Gradually I began to "improvise" the story. [Park-Fuller](#) explains that improvisation allows "us [...] freedom to explore [...] in a [...] playful, provocative manner" (*Improvisation* 377). Thus, I would take the story in a number of directions, blending actual friends, locations and events from my childhood with fictional or embellished storylines. The elements of play I experienced while improvising provided a break from more traditional writing. When I decided to commit the story to paper, it was an enjoyable process. Although I had no idea where it might go during the writing process, I stayed in the moment and trusted that it would unfold in a coherent manner. Once I completed the story, I thought it might be published as part of a larger project. This special edition of the *American Communication Journal* provided the opportunity I was seeking.

In the opening paragraph of this essay, we posed three questions: What does it mean to do creative scholarship? How can a researcher look at fictive stories in creative ways? What are the implications of my story and those similar to it for the discipline of communication studies? We have come to see creative scholarship as analogous to improvisation. Whereas traditional research employs deductive, cognitive work, we utilized a more inductive methodology born of intuition and embodiment. At first, we were unable to see the connections between four diverse works of fiction. However, we knew on a purely intuitive level that there was something similar about the way the stories made us *feel*, and we used this knowledge to proceed in an improvisational manner.

What we found so pleasing about looking at fictive stories in creative ways was the joy we felt as a result of our discoveries. Our creative process ultimately led to a creative product. Park-Fuller is correct when she argues that improvisation goes beyond “winging it” (*Improvisation* 386). Our method was grounded in our knowledge base as scholars with expertise in different fields of inquiry. These differences, combined with an inductive method of writing, enabled us to proceed in a dynamic, intuitive way. Working from an improvisational base allowed us to “present numerous resolutions in a playful, interactive, provisional manner that [encouraged] spontaneity and [...] opportunities [...] for shifting leadership, which, in turn, [created] more dramatic decision making” (Park-Fuller, *Improvisation* 386).

The implications of “Home (run) Home” and stories like it for the discipline of Communication Studies are significant. It is our hope that the theoretical lens we created might prove useful to scholars who are interested in doing close readings of diverse texts. In addition, the stories presented in this essay not only highlight the experiences of historically marginalized populations, they also extend and problematize current definitions of liminality and transformation. The discoveries we made as communication scholars using improvisation have made us cognizant of the potential of this method. Furthermore, we are now more aware of the need to examine the relationship between narrator and auditor, particularly in texts with liminal and transformative moments. We hope that this essay serves as an invitation to the reader to embark on a similar journey.

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