

# INTERDEPENDENT SELVES: A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR CURATING NATIVE AMERICAN WORKS AND ADVANCING THE FIELDS OF DEEP ECOLOGY AND POSTCOLONIAL ECOJUSTICE

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article introduces the personality frameworks developed by psychologists Markus, Kitayama, and Kirmayer and argues for the incorporation of these frameworks into the pedagogy of sharing Native American works with non-native classrooms. Additionally, this article discusses how such pedagogy has been approached in the past and addresses how variation of self-conception among groups has been overlooked by the prior relevant scholarship. Lastly, this article explores and analyzes how these topics relate and contribute to the advancement of both deep ecology and postcolonial ecojustice.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Ecocriticism as a developing field can be described as indeterminate, complex, and winding in its scope. It tends to branch off into many different areas of discourse, yet there is one unifying aspect across its varied domains – a common premise of challenging the psychological and cultural assumptions that guide human thought, orientation, and identification. One such domain which might not seem immediately pertinent to the ecocritical discourse is the field of personality psychology. Recently, I encountered a fascinating parallel across the disciplines of psychology and literature studies. It turns out that the incorporation of a developmental personality theory may be crucial to advancing the work of deep ecologists and postcolonial eco-critics – as well as the work of those curating Native American works for non-native audiences.

In this article, I will explore, examine, and synthesize many different topics which I feel are intrinsically related to one another, though my exploration may at first seem winding in its scope. First, I will introduce the work of Markus and Kitayama (departments of psychology at Stanford and University of Michigan – respectively). Then, I will describe how their theory of personality relates to the potential problems educators and curators may encounter when presenting the works of Native American authors to non-native audiences. Next, I will discuss how these pedagogical issues have been approached in the past and address how variation of self-conception among groups has been overlooked by the prior relevant scholarship. After exploring these issues and their connection to personality development, I will show how these topics relate and contribute to the advancement of both deep ecology and postcolonial ecojustice. Finally, I will close this article with my main thesis: I posit the incorporation of Markus, Kitayama, and Kirmayer’s theory of personality into the pedagogy of Native American works and the fields of deep ecology and postcolonial ecojustice.

## **INTERDEPENDENT AND INDEPENDENT SELVES**

Personality psychologists have come to understand the development of the self as a universal process, however the type of self – that a given individual co-constructs *with* and *in the context of* their society – is very different across cultures. In “Cultures and Selves: A Cycle of Mutual Constitution,” Markus and Kitayama write:

Social scientists . . . have repeatedly theorized two distinct types of sociality . . . that can be linked to divergent modes of being or senses of self. One type of sociality assumes that social relations are formed on the basis of instrumental interests and goals of participating individuals. Labels for such social relations include *gessellschaft*, independent, egocentric, and individualist. Another type of sociality

assumes that individuals are inherently connected and made meaningful through relationships with others. Labels for such social relations include *gemeinschaft*, interdependent, sociocentric, communal, and collectivist . . . we propose that if one of these schemas becomes foundational . . . there will be widespread and important differences in the nature and functioning of the self. (423)

The differences in nature and functioning they are referring to are a matter of whether a person sees themselves as separate from or defined by others. For example, let's consider an *independent* culture such as the dominant white culture of North America. If there is no bicultural exposure, a purely independent culture would construct an *independent* self that clearly sees itself as distinct from others. Whereas, in the context of an *interdependent* culture – such as that of Native Americans – an individual might construct a self who perceives itself and its own agency as interwoven with the self and agency of others: plants, animals, ancestors, friends, and family members. It's not always a straightforward case of fitting into either category though. Consider how this construction of self is complicated by an *interdependent* culture being situated within the greater context of an *independent* culture – as is the case for Native Americans living within the context of a subsuming and dominant western culture.

This complicated journey of self-conception due to the positioning of Native Americans is an important theme being explored by Silko in *Ceremony*. When we learn of Tayo's connection to Auntie we also learn about a particular crisis of self-conception:

Only Tayo could hear it, like fingernails scratching against bare rock, her terror at being trapped in one of the oldest ways. An old sensitivity . . . surviving thousands of years . . . when the people shared a single clan name and they told each other who they were . . . from before they were born and long after they died, the people shared the same consciousness . . . But the fifth world had become entangled with European names . . . Christianity separated the people from themselves . . . encouraging each person to stand alone, because Jesus Christ would save only the individual soul . . . (62-63)

In this passage, Silko spotlights the historical ties between Christianity and the development of European individualist cultures, while also revealing the suffering that is occurring for Native Americans due to the ambivalence they experience towards their own self-conception. Throughout the novel, Tayo himself struggles between individualist and collectivist conceptions of the self. Yet, he moves beyond ambivalence by the novel's end, unlike his foil Emo. In "Earth as Mother, Earth as Other in Novels by Silko and Hogan" professor and literary critic Jennifer Brice argues that it is Tayo's "blurring of Self and Other that distinguish him from [Emo]" (132). I would agree that this "blurring of Self and Other" is a critical concept in understanding not only the essence of Tayo's healing journey but also the novel's exploration of the indigenous 'self' situated within the context of a western *independent* culture. Such an interpretation of the novel helps contribute to a more sensitive and informed pedagogy when teaching it to non-native classrooms. However, proceeding to curate Native American works with non-native audiences has intrinsic pitfalls which must be navigated with care.

### **MISAPPREHENDING NATIVE WORKS**

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One pitfall of westerners presenting native works, is the tendency to take those works out of their own context, especially when it relates to the *independent* and *interdependent* self-constructs we've been discussing. In her article, "The Culture of Religious Combining: Reflections for the New American Millennium", religious scholar C.L. Albanese uses *Ceremony* to make a case for validating and championing the religious culture combining of New Age spirituality. Albanese claims that the character Betonie is, "a kind of prophet for the new spirituality movement" (21). Additionally, Albanese makes a rather jarring metaphor in this context, stating that God is a "religious market shopper" who "loves the old and new products she can buy and combine" (22). Comparing God to a market shopper has obvious capitalist underpinnings and – perhaps in not so obvious ways – implies Albanese's own individualist self-construct. Such an individualist self is constructed to see outer experiences and encounters with others as distinct means for self-growth. By comparing Betonie to a New Age spiritual practitioner and God to a market shopper, Albanese negates the self-conception differences between her own culture and that of traditional Native Americans. Furthermore, Albanese's article lacks any acknowledgement of the novel's attempt to unify human and non-human entities in antithesis to subject-object orientations.

To better understand the systemic significance of how western individuals encounter Native American works – as well as the systemic impact of independently constructed selves – we can look to Heidegger’s theory of western thought. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, Timothy Clark reviews Heidegger’s model stating that the “general and even commonsense assumptions and language in the West” are “destructive of their object” (55). Furthermore, Clark relays Heidegger’s view of western thought as a “securing of ‘booty’ from the ‘outer’ world into the stronghold of the mind” (56).

Considering this model, it’s easy to see western thought’s proclivity for appropriating the ideas and solutions of the ‘other’ as a means for benefitting and evolving the ‘self’. This proclivity expresses itself in the western dominant group’s treatment of the environment as well as its treatment of the marginalized groups it ‘encounters’. The environment and *any* marginalized group within this understanding share a common situatedness of ‘other’ to be encountered, appropriated, and exploited. It’s interesting that the New Age spiritual movement coincides temporally with developing academic critiques of the environmental and post-colonial varieties, because Albanese is unable to take seriously that many of those engaging in New Age religious combining are members of the dominant culture and therefore orienting their experience from modes of western thought.

Against the backdrop of western modes of thinking, Silko creates a new paradigm of self-orientation in *Ceremony* by means of experimenting with multiple subjects (versus a subject encountering objects) and novel forms of language use. This is a powerful act because it operates under different assumptions than the *individualist* self-construct to which it responds. The opening of the novel asserts: Thought-Woman is sitting in her room and whatever she thinks about appears

. . . Thought-Woman, the spider, named things and as she named them, they appeared . . . I’m telling you the story she is thinking . . . I will tell you something about stories [he said] . . . The only cure I know is a good ceremony, that’s what she said . . . Sunrise. (1-4)

Rather than a ‘self’ which encounters ‘objects’ and ‘others’, the novel’s opening unifies the actions and words of a deity, an insect, a story, a first-person narrator, a third-person female, a third-person male, the listener-reader, and finally the sun, in a web of non-linear language and subject exploration. To examine the interdependent conceptions of self in the novel is to also examine potential states of living unification between numerous human and non-human entities. This explication of language and interconnectedness of identity challenges the assumptions of the *individualist* self-paradigm because it responds to a self which – situated in an *individualist* context – takes for granted its tendency to exploit and consume all things constituted as ‘other’.

When considering the systemic impacts of independently constructed selves it is necessary to understand the structural power dynamics at play. The religious combining that Albanese refers to in her article is one form of culture combining. Culture combining is unproblematic when participating cultures are in an equally distributed power dynamic. However, when one culture is harming another – indicating an underlying relationship of power dominance and power loss – any appropriation of the marginalized group’s culture is a form of unseemly culture combining. New age spirituality often performs religious combining by means of dominant group consumerism and appropriation of nondominant group spiritual traditions:

Post-colonial critics question the way some environmental thinkers refer simply to ‘humanity’ as the antagonist of the natural world, a view that ignores vast differences between human groups and with a sometimes ‘preemptory conviction . . . that global ethical considerations should override local cultural concerns. (Clark 122)

Albanese’s article lacks attention to the different orientations of New Age spiritual practitioners as compared to those of indigenous populations. Here, we see an interesting parallel. If post-colonial and eco-critical discourse questions the universality of ‘humanity’ as a ubiquitous “antagonist of the natural world” it similarly can question the universality of a ‘humanity’ performing culture combining as ubiquitous agents pursuing the same Truth. Such forms of combining cannot be universal because they are operating under diverse premises by agents with different levels of global power as well as different orientations in self-construct. There is often no trace of antithesis to individualism in the act of New Age religious combining. Rather, it’s often a spiritual consumerism which operates under the same subject-object assumptions that are consistent with an individualist cultural framework. Therefore, New Age

spiritual practitioners and Indigenous spiritual practitioners are in very different positions of power and operating under different assumptions of self-construct when they engage in respective acts of spiritual recombination. If the understanding of the 'self' being constructed differently across cultures was a more ubiquitous one, it might reduce or eliminate such misconceptions when relating to Native-American works.

#### **ETHICAL SHARING OF NATIVE WORKS**

Teaching, curating, and interpreting native works from a non-native perspective has increasingly become a concern for those wishing to take greater responsibility when engaging in such work. In his article, "Contextualizing the Ecological Indian" Scott Slovic reviews the process and result of his colleague Annette Kolodny's 2007 republication of *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*—written by Penobscot writer Joseph Nicolai in 1893. Slovic explores the topic of self-representation and the responsibility of non-indigenous curators of indigenous works to walk the "fine line between foregrounding [their] own interpretive agency and ceding the agency of self-representation to the original author" (910-911). In reviewing the 2007 edition Slovic observes that "the theme of self-representation, of who speaks for whom, permeates the entire book" (913). Additionally, he notes that Kolodny's "A Summary History of the Penobscot Nation" (which appears as an introduction in the 2007 republication) "[places] the nonnative author in the background" (913). Here, Kolodny and Slavic are most interested in approaches that maintain the self-representation of the native author. Slavic conveys the "painstaking process Kolodny went through with her tribal colleagues in order to build [trust] and correct any misrepresentations that may have crept into various iterations of the manuscript" (912-913). To accomplish this, Kolodny emphasizes the importance of working closely with members of the Penobscot nation.

In this instance, Kolodny had the privilege and opportunity to directly confer with Penobscots while engaging in her work. Two things are worth mentioning here. The first is that Kolodny's work would likely benefit from deepening her understanding of the differences in self-conception between individualist and interdependent cultures, regardless of her direct access to Penobscot guidance. The second point is that many non-native educators may not have access to building direct relationships with members of First Nations. Therefore, the independent study of personality theory based on the work of Markus and Kitayama, could be a pivotal resource for educators wishing to teach Native American works without imposing their own self-representation in the process. Understanding the ways in which the 'self' might be conceived of differently across cultures could help to diminish natural bias that can occur on the part of the educator, as westerners often take their own individualist self-orientation for granted.

Currently, self-aware approaches to teaching native works are largely concerned with doing so through the lens of a postcolonial critique. In her article, "Unlearning the Legacy of Conquest: Possibilities for Ceremony in the Non-Native Classroom" Virginia Kennedy argues that Indigenous literature, "can be used effectively in the non-Indian classroom to facilitate the 'unlearning' of established constructions implicit in the ongoing legacy of conquest" (76). Her approach is one that requires self-examination on the part of her non-Indigenous students that "can create new models of American culture and identity based on broader and more responsible knowledge of what constitutes 'America'" (76). The point she makes is reminiscent of our discussion about identity and self-construct, however it is not the same. The work of Markus and Kitayama provides a foundation from which westerners can check their inherent assumptions and biases when interpreting native works in the framework of self and other. Kennedy on the other hand is interested in helping westerners understand how natives as well as themselves are positioned in a systemic power structure. Kennedy writes, "This is not the same agenda as teaching cultural diversity, which ignores the unique status of Indian nations within the United States, nor does it claim to represent authoritative knowledge about 'what Indians think'" (76). This is a responsible stance on Kennedy's part because it may effectively prevent her from imposing her own self-representation onto that of Silko. Yet, the incorporation of Markus and Kitayama's personality theory might contribute to the success of Kennedy's overall endeavor. Kennedy writes, "*Ceremony* provides a text rich in possibilities for examining who and what we are as human beings . . . [and] . . . illuminates the nature of values ingrained in ourselves, our cultures, and relationships with each other and with the planet and what these relationships can destroy or create" (81). Surely, both the means and the ends to which she refers would

be better served by understanding the different self-constructs at play in a post-colonial power dynamic between these two cultures. While it is commendable that Kennedy is careful to not “claim to represent authoritative knowledge about “[*what*] Indians think” it is arguably critical for her and others to examine the differences between *how* westerners and Indians think.

### **APPROACHES TO TEACHING THE INTERDEPENDENT SELF**

Based on the above discussion, I posit the incorporation of Markus and Kitayama’s theory of personality into the pedagogy of Native American works. We’ve begun to look at *Ceremony*’s textual evidence for the emergence and reclamation of an interdependent self. This type of exploration of the text in a non-native classroom can be enriched and supported by a brief synopsis of the different self-constructs associated with different cultures. Still, it will be necessary to go a step further. For the success of such an endeavor, we must make these abstract schemas more tangible to western understanding.

In addition to presenting Markus and Kitayama’s framework to students, it may be advantageous for educators to engage with and share the concept of the “listener-reader”. In her article “Storytellers and Their Listener-Readers in Silko’s ‘Storytelling’ and ‘Storyteller’”, De Ramirez explains that: Many American Indian writers consciously work to transform literary techniques by infusing them anew with their oral traditions, thereby creating hybrid texts which are neither purely oral and conversational nor purely literary and discursive or dialogic. This fusion of storytelling traditions results in texts that interweave the literary and oral structures of discourse, dialogue, and conversation into a conversive whole. (5)

Indigenous ontology sees intersubjectivity as a necessary means for successful storytelling in writing. The “listener-reader” is being invited to actively participate in a storytelling event, even though the medium is textual. Understanding this imparts a unique responsibility onto readers of Indigenous literary works. De Ramirez notes that, “The relationship between the storyteller and story listener is a crucial relationship in the success of the telling . . . part of the responsibility of the listener-reader involves sufficient familiarity to be able to approach and enter the worlds of the stories” (10). Introducing Markus and Kitayama’s framework to students could contribute to the initial building of this “familiarity” for students. Co-presenting the concept of the listener-reader and the interdependent self can mutually support student’s understanding of both concepts. This co-presentation would highlight aspects of the non-native student’s individualist construct they may previously have taken for granted while also giving them an opportunity to engage with the literature in a revolutionary way. The seriousness of that engagement is conveyed by putting the onus on the student to step into the role of the listener-reader, a responsibility they’ve likely never been given before. Being provided this opportunity paired with the pressure of responsibility could create a new pattern of relational significance for non-native students.

### **DEEP ECOLOGY AND POSTCOLONIAL ECOJUSTICE**

In addition to pedagogical approaches, I also posit the incorporation of pertinent psychological frameworks into the work of the deep ecology and postcolonial ecojustice movements. When I first encountered the concept of deep ecology, I couldn’t help but see its connection to Markus and Kitayama’s work as well as the work of their colleague Laurence Kirmayer. Kirmayer builds on Markus and Kitayama’s framework, going a step further to create categories of differentiation among *interdependent* cultures. In Kirmayer’s identity framework westerners are identified as being *ego-centric* and members of indigenous cultures are described as being *eco-centric*, where the “form and function of personhood” is “oriented toward the land and wildlife” (Kirmayer 244). Kirmayer writes, “each varies in the ways the self is defined, the values that characterize a healthy or ideal self, the locus of agency in explanations of actions and events, the ways of narrating stories about the self, and associated systems of healing” (244). Certainly, this framework relates to that of deep ecology:

“The term *deep* contrasted this movement with the relative shallowness of reform environmentalism and its questionable assumption that environmental issues can be addressed merely by adjusting given economic and political structures. Instead, Naess argued that ecological insight into the complex interdependence of living things entailed a revolution in basic assumptions. . . Deep ecology, on the other hand, affirms an understanding of life in which the thinking of the ‘self’ must already

include other organisms, and all that supports them, as part of one's own identity" (Clark 23). "A viable 'self' is not the atomistic individual of liberal capitalism, for which the whole world is a source of possible self-gratification and assertion" (Clark 23).

Deep ecology's position in the context of social criticism asks that all human subjects – regardless of their social group membership – orient themselves from an interdependent standpoint. Requiring a monumental shift in identification regardless of the culture a given individual is mutually constituted with, is likely an unrealistic endeavor without incorporating theories of personality construction. I recommend an interdisciplinary approach to such a massive undertaking. It is far too tall of an order to expect westerners to reconstruct their self-orientation with any immediacy when there are extremely complex processes in identity development at play, largely occurring during childhood and adolescence. The promotion of deep ecology's framework has both a critical and practical aim, as it ultimately seeks to contribute to sustaining human and non-human life on earth through a process of human re-identification with the non-human. Oftentimes, deep ecology critics convey this process as an act of 'challenging assumptions.' But is this sufficient? Because the stakes are so high, it would be wise to consider the psychological and cultural landscapes in which challenging such assumptions takes place: "Criticisms now made of 'deep ecology' directly recall those made of some romantic arguments. The issue is whether radical social change can ever really result from targeting personal attitudes, as opposed to directly addressing the specific political and economic institutions – capitalism, patriarchy, neocolonialism – that determine how people live and think" (Clark 24).

I agree that framing such a shift in how "people live and think" as simply the process of 'challenging assumptions' ignores the systemic concerns of post-colonial eco-justice. However, I'd argue that incorporating post-colonial eco-justice concerns is still insufficient for meaningful change because it does not yet incorporate a deeper understanding of how identities and subject-object orientations are constructed. I believe meaningful societal change will only be come by direct contact with all the contributing factors. What distinguishes certain identity structures from others and the cultural underpinnings of such divergent identity structures must be considered in tandem with the concerns of post-colonial ecojustice and deep ecology.

## **CONCLUSION**

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In recognizing and naming the western conceptions of 'self' and 'other' when teaching *Ceremony* to non-native classrooms there is an opportunity for western students to not only consider their political and social position from a post-colonial framework but also to consider their own self-identity structure. Besides having fascinating ramifications, this pedagogical experiment paired with other curations of indigenous works for non-indigenous audiences could perhaps over generations evolve a different conception of the 'self' in the west. It would be unrealistic to expect that simply asking students to "challenge their assumptions" would effectively alter the acceptance of longstanding mainstream narratives, but a threefold approach that asks students to consider the ways in which their selves have been constructed, the impact such a self-construct has had on the treatment of other humans and the environment, and the potential benefits of a collective society that constructs more *interdependent* selves, might generate profound changes in the institutions and orientations of westerners.

An important aspect of this article is to understand how teaching *Ceremony* in classrooms could best be approached, and I argue that it's imperative to do so with the intention of broadening students' understanding of their own identity conception. Influencing the development of self-conception may contribute to enriching human relationships with nonhuman entities as well as enriching relationships between different human groups. In "Red as an Apple: Native American Acculturation and Counseling With or Without Reservation", authors Garrett and Pichette – drawing from the works of Bryde, Erikson, Muuss, Smith, and Sprinthall – write, "Researchers have discussed the significance of adolescence and early adulthood as a time of rapid changes occurring in physical, cognitive, and social growth (8). It's likely that students reading *Ceremony* would be somewhere between the ages of 14 and 24. Therefore, if adolescence and early adulthood are pivotal times for identity development, the co-presentation of *Ceremony* and *interdependent* identity frameworks could have a lasting effect on the identity development

of western students. Because culture is to a large degree impacted and shaped by the forms of education we receive, this in turn could affect the future of western culture.

Such an expansive curriculum must be conducted with sensitivity and self-awareness on the teacher's part. Garrett and Pichette write, "[Erikson] . . . emphasized the need for individuals to complete certain developmental tasks during specific developmental stages . . . Adolescence has been characterized . . . as the stage of "identity versus identity confusion" (8). It's entirely possible that such a pedagogical undertaking could be distressing to student's identity development. The risk of identity confusion is also complicated by the fact that 72.3% of teachers in the US—across all grade levels—are white (Zippia). Therefore, many of these adult teachers will likely have well established individualist self-constructs. This pedagogical experiment would require immense consideration and self-reflection on the part of both teachers and students.

Certainly, we can agree that the West's conception of a bounded self has contributed to the exploitation of the ecosystems we inhabit as well as the exploitation of the 'other' human groups we share a network of sociality with. This othering of both nature and human groups has in many ways proved to be catastrophically damaging. The results of such treatment may not yet have come to full fruition, though we've begun to see the beginning stages of crossing over what some call 'tipping points.' Promoting the demands of deep ecologists and post-colonial eco-critics might contribute to creating more inclusivity, more empathy, and more ethical treatment of the environment we ourselves are shaped by and inhabit. But is it too late? Is the damage already done? If not, time is certainly of the essence. I would argue that such an endeavor requires incredible precision, a growing awareness of identity construction frameworks, and the incorporation of these frameworks into western pedagogy and the work of deep ecologists and postcolonial eco-critics. Western youth adopting a less bounded notion of self, may be the key to creating a society that makes more responsible choices as regards the environment and 'others.'

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