

Textual unification in a community of Native American storytelling voices

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Abstract. This article explores the centerpiece of contrast between the dominant American and Native American tribal societies – the interaction of individual and group in maintaining community. While Western paradigms of personal development focus on the individual – a model consistently reflected in the most popular Western narrative structures, Native Americans prefer a support group as a center for individual development. In extreme forms, statements about this social phenomenon can become ethnocentric and stereotyped. Ethnographic observations confirm this difference in social systems, but sometimes specifically question stereotypical interpretation. Our analysis leads us to the conclusion that instead of necessarily including an individual in a group, American tribal society can value both group and individual.

1 Introduction

The mutual dependence of individuals and the group in maintaining their community has become almost a standard point of contrast between Native American tribal cultures and the dominant Indo-European American society. This social design presupposes an interrelated network of support extending far beyond the local nuclear family. This phenomenon has been explored by numerous folklorists, including Charles Eastman, James Mooney, Franz Boaz and Barre Toelken, amongst numerous others. Barre Toelken summarizes this social phenomenon as the central interests of Indian life and religion that are largely served through mutual concerns, human interactions, and reciprocating responsibilities among men and between man and nature [1].

Western personal development models, in general, emphasize the individual throughout life, an autobiographical model we see reflected in narrative structures inherited from Europe, the *Kunstlerroman* and *Bildungsroman* traditions, for example. In contrast, Native Americans tend to emphasize the mutually supportive group as the focus of individual and creative development (See Fig.1). In extreme forms, statements about this social phenomenon may become ethnocentric and stereotypical in arguing that such “third world” societies subsume the individual under the communal and thereby create not only a sense of

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difference between these two societal patters, but also an inference that Native American cultures are less developed and inferior.

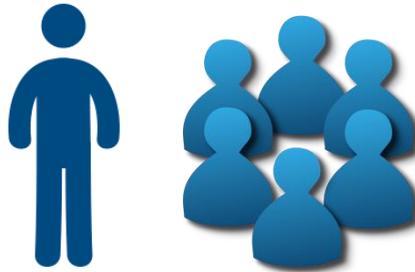


Fig. 1. Individual vs Group.

Ethnographic observation conducted by anthropologists over many years, while confirming, in general, this difference in the two social systems, has sometimes questioned specifically the conclusions of a stereotypical interpretation. Ake Hultkrantz, a religious studies professor and authority on Native American shamanism and religions, conducted extensive research amongst the Shoshni, a plains people, who share some important characteristics with Momaday's Kiowa (also a plains people). In his work, Hultkrantz observed that, while community activities are deeply valued by the Shoshoni, he found also a strongly developed individuality among tribal members, displayed, for example, in the solo vision quest (a religious ritual common amongst many Native American peoples). Hultkrantz attributes that strong individuality to a dependence on hunting, which, except for the buffalo hunt, has been essentially an individual activity. Hultkrantz's analysis leads to the conclusion that the American tribal society is much more complex than generally thought and that, rather than necessarily subsuming the individual under the group, regards both group and individual as essential [2]. Thus, for example, in Native American literature, James Welch, in his historical novel, *Fools Crow*, develops his protagonist fully as an individual, autonomous, character whose story is linked to and very much also the story of a community [3].

2 Discussion

In N.Scott Momaday's texts, as in James Welch's fictional treatment of Blackfoot history, one can see an implicit assertion of this complex culturally specific social ideal that links the individual with the community. In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, the community controls the focus of all three narrating voices, but the personal voice provides access to the community's imaginative and documented experience and makes this "whole journey" through history continuous into immediate experience [4]. Similarly, the mythic and polyglot voices of *The Ancient Child*, their interrelatedness underscored by the literal kinship of the two primary centers of consciousness, cohere into a continuous process that interrelates multiple expressive modes as the narrative moves in a circular fashion from myth into literature and again into myth. At subtextual levels, then, both works argue that a community of voices including the personal, the mythic, and those in a cross-cultural dialog are reciprocally related [5].

In *Ceremony*, Leslie Marmon Silko validates thematically the model of community that takes as its warrant the interrelated, reciprocal responsibility of individual and group for maintaining the strength and life of the community. The two primary narrating voices of the text reinforce this ideal social contract through imagery, social setting and character development. In Silko's creation, a clear purpose emerges for that contract -- the

maintenance of the “fragile world” so that the community and the individual can, in her protagonist’s words, “all go on.” Silko’s text validates a very wide range of forces as participants in the democratic community signified by the culturally marked double narrators who tell the story. The “all,” the social community alluded to, extends far beyond the local human community and has universal implications [6]. As in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*, that community includes the life-sustaining elemental forces of the natural world and in the human dimension disregards local “cultural” boundaries [7]. As Bernstein remarks: “A community or polis is not something that can be made or engineered by some form of *techne* or by the administration of society. There is something of a circle here, comparable to the hermeneutical circle. The coming into being of a type of public life that can strengthen solidarity, and a commitment to rational persuasion presupposes the incipient forms of such communal life” [8, p. 226].

Mytho-poetic images are central to what Vico calls the *sensus communis* of a group or community: a shared sense which, he suggests, affords all its participants the possibility of coordinating their activities together in terms of a shared form of “judgement without reflection” [9, para. 142], that is, a shared set of unthinkingly expressed, practical responses, to shared concrete circumstances. Although this common sense is made or created by us, and thus works to relate our judgments to “human needs and utilities” [9, para. 141], our making of it is clearly, suggests Vico, not a matter of individual, rational choice. But nor is it a matter of chance or necessity either. Something else is at work, *sui generis*, which operates “without human discernment or counsel, and often against the designs of men” [9, para. 342]. This ‘something else’ is in the special joint or dialogical nature of our social accomplishments: the fact that in simply responding spontaneously both to each other and aspects of our larger surroundings, our individual reactions are always a complex, interactive amalgam of interrelated, moment-by-moment changing influences, so that what you and I are doing at any one moment is always inextricably a part of, and shaped by, what overall we are doing -- where what we are doing overall is uniquely created as an unintended consequence of our joint action in response to our joint circumstances. Indeed, it is the inescapable continuous creation of novelties that is the hallmark of all dialogic relations. For, as Bakhtin puts it, due to the responsive nature of all dialogically voiced utterances, “an utterance is never just a reflection or an expression of something already existing outside it that is given and final. It always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable, and, moreover, it always has some relation to value (the true, the good, the beautiful, and so forth). But something created is always created out of something given (language, an observed phenomenon of reality, an experienced feeling, the speaking subject himself, something finalized in his world view, and so forth). What is given is completely transformed in what is created.” [10, pp. 119-120]

Ceremony, like *The Ancient Child*, has explicit metafictional elements. Story and ceremony are significant thematically and formatively, both as signified and signifiers. In the community evoked in this work, “stories” per se are crucial as a form of discourse and as active social agents. The title indicates this work is not only about a particular ceremony or about “*Ceremony*” in the abstract, but is itself a ceremony in form. Hultkrantz’s analysis leads to the conclusion that the American tribal society, rather than necessarily subsuming the individual under the group, can hold as valuable both group and individual. Thus, for example, James Welch, in his historical novel, *Fools Crow*, develops his protagonist fully as an individual character whose story is very much also the story of a community.

Another example may be found in N. Scott Momaday’s work. As in Welch’s fictional treatment of Blackfoot history, one can see an implicit assertion of this culturally specific social ideal. In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, the community controls the focus of all three narrating voices, but the personal voice provides access to the community’s imaginative

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Silko alerts the reader to the thematic significance of community at the beginning of *Ceremony*. Concern about the protagonist's individual responsibility for maintaining community underlies his initial, self-destructive anguish. Tayo had gone to the Philippines in world War II to protect his cousin/brother Rocky. When Rocky was dying as a result of combat wounds, Tayo cursed the ever-present rain of the tropics. During combat Tayo “saw” his beloved Uncle Josiah die in the person of a Japanese soldier. Returning home, he discovers that Josiah is indeed dead and that a drought has made the reservation a waste land -- the Indians’ “Old dried up Mother Earth,” as his fellow veteran, Emo, phrases it. Thus Silko sets her protagonist's search for identity and expiation within a social space of global proportions.

Tayo's sense of an interrelatedness between his own and the larger global social space informs his initial despair. He thinks that he has personally failed to save both Rocky and Josiah and has caused the drought by his curse. In expressing his deep frustration and his sense of helplessness, he validates the presumption of interrelatedness: “He wanted to yell at the medicine man, to yell the things the white doctors had yelled at him -- that he would never get well as long as he used words like “we” and “us.” But he had known the answer all along, even while the white doctors were telling him he could get well and he was trying to believe them: medicine didn't work that way, because the world didn't work that way. His sickness was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything.” [6, pp. 125-26]

Tayo's acceptance of the overwhelming responsibility for the impending destruction of this “something great and inclusive of everything” naturally must destroy him.

Tayo is not, however, destroyed. Silko's development of this character is remarkable as she moves him consistently toward individual fulfillment without any loss of that sense of global relatedness. The author validates reciprocity and interrelatedness at every step of her protagonist's journey. Old Ku'oosh, the Laguna medicine man, insists that Tayo's personal complete cure is important to the people. He tells Tayo, “There is something they have sent me to ask you . . . It is important to all of us. Not only for your sake, but for this fragile world” [6, p. 36]. Tayo thus has a special knowledge crucial to the care of this fragile world.

The assumption of a necessary reciprocity in social connections is evidenced not only in the ceremony's ultimate goal (a mutual healing of individual and group), but also in the extensive community of forces -- human, animal, and the earth itself -- that Silko draws into the very complex and difficult resolution of Tayo's personal crisis. The army's drugs, intended to treat him for malaria, fail to heal, but the army psychiatrist does force him to become visible, to exit from his nonidentity as “a gray winter fog . . . where hunters are lost indefinitely” [6, p. 15]. Tayo attempts to purge his own system in the traditional manner through ritual vomiting, but only Old Ku'oosh's blue cornmeal actually soothes his recurrent nausea. The local medicine man, however, cannot cure Tayo's mental anguish about Rocky and about the drought, and he persuades Tayo to go to another powerful practitioner, Betonie. Equally vital in Tayo's cure are his search for the tough, half-wild spotted cattle (Josiah's project for maintaining the people during the drought) and his mystical love experience with Ts'eh. Ts'eh's home at the base of the mountain Tse'pi-na, “The woman veiled in clouds” (Mt. Taylor), her powerful hunter companion, who appears

able to shift shape into a Mountain Lion, and her nurturing powers link her to the sacred earth. Through Ts'eh, Silko brings the earth itself into the reciprocally supportive community.

The minor character of the Laguna medicine man, Ku'oosh, demonstrates the concept of reciprocal responsibility in action. Ku'oosh knows how to use his own powers but also accepts their limitations. A critical element in Tayo's healing involves his similar "realistic" self-assessment, and his realization that he can, in fact must, trust others also to be responsible.

Silko thus surrounds Tayo with a wide-ranging supportive network, but his own acceptance of personal responsibility for participating in the ceremony and in life itself remains crucial. Silko emphasizes Tayo's active, conscious decision-making at several critical points. In his final search for the stolen cattle, a fall from his horse and a head injury incapacitate him. Lying on the earth, he contemplates sinking into its total peace, but he allows his pain to draw him back to life and to his search. During the temptation of the "witchery" at the abandoned uranium mine on Enchanted Mesa, 100 miles south of Los Alamos and 150 miles north of the Trinity site, Tayo makes a life-preserving decision for nonviolence. His ability to make that individual choice of global import rests on his having accepted the help of others and on his realistic appraisal of his own personal responsibility.

At the physical and thematic center of *Ceremony* is the story of the "witches" conference at which an unidentified Indian witch invents the white race as a tool to be manipulated by witchery. Radiating out from this fabulous space of power, witchery infiltrates the entire novel from beginning to end. As powerful as witchery is, however, the first story of the novel demonstrates that witchery is the invention of a more powerful creator; all things in the universe-- and thus witchery-- were created by Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought Woman, and her sisters. Similarly, the last story of the novel demonstrates that witchery can be manipulated and turned back on itself; manipulated by Tayo, witchery has "returned into its belly" and "is dead for now" [6, p. 261]. Like all things, however, witchery will return. Witchery's return is guaranteed not only by the law of the universal cycle-- birth, death, rebirth-- but also by the law of universal balance: witchery was created and continues to exist as the "counter force" to "vitality and birth."

The importance of Tayo's goal -- the return of the balance of the fragile world -- associates him with the traditional culture heroes of the Southwest, as several critics, notably Edith Swan (Swan, 1991), have argued. Like his nominal cognate, Tiyo, who brings the Snake Ceremony to the Hopi (Mullett Spider Woman), and like the hero of the Navajo Mountain Chant, who also returns with a new ceremony, Silko's Tayo brings powerful resources back to Laguna. Through the spotted cattle the tribe has a chance for survival even under harsh conditions, and Tayo's new spiritual knowledge affirms his own and his people's place in the cosmic design. Early in the narrative the medicine man, Old Ku'oosh, recognizes Tayo as a potential culture hero.

Consideration of how Old Ku'oosh was able to see this possibility in Tayo clarifies a thematically significant element in Silko's character designs. Old Ku'oosh is not the only character in whom Silko manifests the concept of social interrelatedness. The most powerful individuals in this ceremony are ethnically and genetically mixed -- the Mexican/Navajo medicine man Betonie, the part Mexican dancer (the Night Swan), and Tayo himself whose unknown father was white. The spotted cattle who represent physical survival for the tribe and for Tayo are likewise genetic blends. Old Ku'oosh never reveals precisely how he knows of Tayo's secret power that is so critical to the people's future, but the reader can infer the basis of the medicine man's knowledge. Silko manifests Tayo's hidden power in his physical body where two races live as one, a "secret" with global implications which Old Ku'oosh recognizes. He chants in the native language, and explains to Tayo that his curing is important not only for his own sake, but the entire world that is

under the spell of witchery [6, p. 28]. But Tayo vomits before Ku'oosh gets very far in the ceremony, and Ku'oosh realizes that he cannot heal him because, "Some things we can't cure like we used to . . . not since the white people came" [6, p. 38].

Images that valorize the intersection of cultures make up an important mimetic element in this work. Silko's and Tayo's native Laguna has long been a place where multiple cultures intersect. For the ethnographer, Elsie Clews Parsons, this history of ethnic mixing (Hopi, Zuni, Navajo, Mexican, Euro-American) made Laguna a particularly significant example of the problems contingent upon acculturation [12, p. 87]. Silko's protagonist manifests that ethnic mixing in his name and physical appearance. The name "Tayo" designates both Laguna and Hopi culture heroes. Silko's Tayo literally embodies ethnic mixing in his "light" skin and "Mexican" eyes. One negative effect of that ethnic mixing is Tayo's initial loss of place on or off the reservation, expressed in his wish to inhabit a "gray winter fog . . . where hunters are lost indefinitely" [6, p. 15] and in his feeling that he, rather than Rocky, should have died in the Philippines. But the medicine men's discussions of the need for flexibility and change in the traditional ceremonies, the mixed breed status of the key figures discussed above, and Tayo's final integration into the community reinforce the perception of this novel as part of a discourse about the need for a multicultural social space, a discourse of global significance apparently of long standing at Laguna.

The novel's textual shape and the internal dialog between its primary narrating voices is directly related to this discourse which has global consequences. Like Momaday in *The Ancient Child*, Silko makes the cross-cultural and universal nature of *Ceremony* clear in the culturally specific connotations of its two narrating voices. The poetically lined voice in the style of traditional Keresan (Laguna) narratives accompanies a prose narrative of the central character's personal struggle in a contemporary realistic Anglo-American voice. The double narrators suggest that both voices are somehow crucial to the protagonist's total world view, but initially neither the character nor the reader can easily unite mythic and realistic dimensions of text or society. The textual shape, like those of Momaday's works, however, encourages our efforts to find coherence within it. By constructing the text as a single physical unit without chapter divisions, Silko reinforces subtextually the thematic concern with interrelatedness.

Whether or not we are familiar with ethnographic records of traditional Keresan storytellers, we recognize the unusual "mythic" voice in *Ceremony* by its distinct typeface, its lines suggesting verse, its diction, and its fabulous characters and events. Its fabulous characters alone signal to the unfamiliar Western eye (ear) the cultural "otherness" of the narrator. The poetically shaped stories in traditional formulaic diction tell how a group of fabulous beings (sometimes in animal and sometimes in human form) work to bring Reed Woman and the storm clouds back to a drought-stricken world. The mythic voice also describes how groups of humans work to return a child and a young man from their adopted personae as animals to the human social dimension.

Like Momaday, Silko places the mythic voice so as to emphasize its power. Though appearing only intermittently throughout the text, this traditional storytelling voice is nevertheless featured in the primary physical locations of beginning and ending. Silko "embeds" within this mythic framing the other visible member of the narrating community, the spatially dominant realistic voice associated with Anglo-American narrative tradition.

Silko opens the realistic voice with a focus on the protagonist's radically divided personality and on his search for a balanced identity, a strategy Paula Allen also uses in her novel, *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* [13]. Initially flashbacks fill Tayo's psychological space simultaneously with two separate times, geographical regions, and climates -- the drought-stricken post-War American Southwest and the rain-soaked WWII battlefield of the Philippines. Thus for him the world itself is both climatically and socially out of balance. Tayo's recurrent nausea overtly manifests a parallel state of psychological

imbalance. Silko reinforces the description of the protagonist's disequilibrium by creating in the reader a congruent state of imbalance. We experience behaviorally the confusion and "entanglement" of time and space in which Tayo can see no pattern. In the first third of the novel, unannounced flashbacks, sudden unexplained shifts in point of view, and ambiguous referents for demonstrative pronouns converge to generate a disturbing state of confusion and imbalance that links reader to protagonist.

Such confusing shifts in time, setting, and narrative center of consciousness occur as Tayo and his buddies tell stories in a bar. The pause in the text underscores the scene's implicit linking of global and local communities and their shared threat: "Tayo could hear it in his voice when he talked about the killing -- how Emo grew from each killing . . . "We blew them all to hell. We should've dropped bombs on all the rest and blown them off the face of the earth." He went into the old man's field to look at the melons, all round and full of slippery sinews of wet seed. He raised his foot carefully and brought his boot down hard on the center of the melon. It made a popping sound . . . He made certain they were all gone." [6, p. 61 – 2]

Reading through Joseph Frank's "principle of reflexive reference," we realize the "He" of the third paragraph quoted here is Emo, rather than Tayo [14]. Such erratic and radical shifts in perspectives and time break the narrative continuity so as to create a conscious desire for stability and pattern in the reader -- a desire expressed overtly in the protagonist. Thus Silko in a behavioral sense draws the reader as participant into the striving for balance, into the community of ceremony.

Especially at the beginning, both reader and character must work to see connections between the mythic travels and the efforts to stabilize Tayo's psychologically divided space. At times Silko makes explicit the interrelatedness of the mythically voiced characters (for example, Fly, Hummingbird, Buzzard) and of the realistically voiced characters (Tayo, his uncle Josiah, the medicine man Betonie, Tayo's spirit-woman lover). Both narrative modes move toward ending a drought, and the concept of "witchery" -- human activity sustained by the destruction of life (compare Emo and the melons) -- appears in both. Tayo's desire to retreat from overwhelming social responsibility parallels the incidents of fabulous humans who slip away from human society into animal personae. Divisiveness also creates parallels. Radical divisions characterize Tayo's cognitive dissonance, the climatic zones of the real world (drought versus flood), the mythically voiced worlds of starvation and plenty, and the dual narrating styles which mutually create the novel's text.

Other crucial connections are implicit. Silko creates parallel movements from states of imbalance to stability and parallel geographic and symbolic spatial categories, as characters in both discourse modes move between above-ground or every-day space and psychological space. In reference to the reciprocal social model, one significant implicit parallel stands out. Multiple individuals and natural forces aid in Tayo's very difficult healing. Similarly, a wide community of earthly and cosmic forces join Fly and Hummingbird in returning Reed Woman and her nurturance to the people.

Silko intentionally draws the reader into this struggle within a textual and social world out of balance through the novel's opening epigraph. The mythic frame creates a radical shift in the reader's situation by "surrounding" the conceptual space with the text, as Silko "liberates" the reader from ordinary experience into the creative narrating dimension:

Thought-Woman, the spider,
named things and
as she named them
they appeared.

She is sitting in her room
thinking of a story now

I am telling you the story
she is thinking [6].

Here the mythic framing voice immediately and radically reduces the “space” between the reader and the text by linking the reader and Thought-Woman through the same mediating physical text (“I am telling you the story / she is thinking”). The single sentence contains “I” (Wayne Booth’s implied author), “you” (the reader), and “she” (Thought-Woman, the cosmic creatrix/author). The shift from mythic past tense (“as she named them / they appeared”) to present tense (“she is sitting . . . now”) immediately works to negate our psychological “distance” from both textual time and story time. This act of textual unification invites the reader into direct dialog with the community of storytelling voices. Such devices for establishing a community of storyteller and audience are very old and their best known models are in oral performance genres. Here the literary device of being real or true enables the reader to participate doubly in the ceremony. Before the reader and protagonist form a community, the reader specifically enters into the social dimension generated by the textual shape -- the culturally marked community of narrators, and thus into the phenomenological act of creation.

The narrating community’s dialog is initially adversarial rather than mutually supportive, but the conflict subtly diminishes as the protagonist moves through the healing process that eventually balances his identity. The self-reflexive introductory mythic epigraph warns us that his conflict involves “the stories” themselves:

I will tell you something about stories,
They aren’t just entertainment
Don’t be fooled.
They are all we have, you see
all we have to fight off
illness and death.

You don’t have anything
if you don’t have the stories [6].

Thus the epigraph explicitly foregrounds the healing function for story, an emphasis we see also in numerous works by other Native American writers, for example Paula Gunn Allen and James Welch [13; 3].

As the epigraph’s speaker focuses on a struggle involving initially competing discourse modes, the stories themselves become active agents:

Their evil is mighty
but they can’t stand up to our stories.
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 [6].

3 Conclusions

These stories are thus potential antagonists in the drama the reader is witnessing and experiencing. Like narrating voices and readers, the stories actively participate in the community.

Silko's metafictional elements, like the narrating voices they comment on, carry cross-cultural implications. She locates the conflict involving "the stories" across cultures, thus demonstrating the novel's potential, identified by Bakhtin, to embody in style a "struggle" between cultures and languages. Early in the narrative, Silko reiterates the conflict between two forms of discourse through Tayo's memories: He had believed that on certain nights, when the moon rose full and wide at a corner of the sky, a person standing on the high sandstone cliff of the mesa could reach the moon. Distances and days . . . all had a story. They were not barriers. If a person wanted to get to the moon, there was a way; . . . it depended on whether you knew the story of how others before you had gone. He had believed in the stories for a long time, until the teachers at the Indian school taught him not to believe in that kind of "nonsense." [6]

The teachers' critical vocabulary has introduced a conception of the stories as nonstories -- as "non[-]sense" -- and thus as without meaning, function, or applicability in the dimension of real experience. The Indo-European, Western, education provides him with knowledge about European and American history. But this education does not simply leave him ignorant about his own "history": it disengages him from his own history by subjecting him to a stereotypical knowledge about himself and his people and land, by devaluing his local knowledge of his community, and essentially creating a contrast between the two histories, privileging the Western one. This process of dissociating oneself from the traditional Native American community goes hand in hand with the desire for a "fresh start," for the romance of the life in the Anglo-American world. The process of mimicry, the constitution of a certain type of acceptable identity, must be understood as a direct response to the Anglo-American exercise of power which, as Bhabha has shown, produces the "crucial bind of pleasure and power", thus making possible the creation of an acceptable identity held together as much by mastery and pleasure as by anxiety and defense. The constitution of this identity in response to the incitement of Anglo-American power, the subjection to and acceptance of, the stereotype, takes place in the regimes of both visibility and discursivity-fetishistic, scopic and imaginary [15]. In other words, the stereotype is what Barthes calls an "image-repertoire" as well as a discursive structure of knowledge [16, 17]. Consequently, the formation of the phantasy produces both knowledge as well as ignorance, and this ignorance itself has "knowledge-value"; it helps the subject disavow, devalue, and ignore the traditional community and its history and values by producing a certain "knowledge" or, more accurately, a certain impossible standard, a behavioral code, which the subject may or may not perceive as such. But this, as it were, "official" or "authorized" knowledge can never successfully replace or suppress the "local knowledge" the subject has grown up with. Hence, "as a form of splitting and multiple belief, the 'stereotype' requires, for its successful signification, a continual and repetitive chain of other stereotypes" [15].

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