Preface

This dissertation argues for a theoretically nuanced reading of four significant Native American novels: N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*, James Welch’s *Winter in the Blood*, Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, and Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*. Owing inspirational allegiance to certain dominant myths and ceremonies in the American Indian oral tradition, these novelists seek to recover a lost power—the power of attaining psychic renewal through ritual.

All these novels are profoundly invested in the imbricated logic of memory, amnesia, ethnicity and identity. Despite present-day critics’ putative concern with these loaded issues, these four novels have not been explicated in terms of the recent theories on memory, forgetting, ethnicity and identity. Each chapter in this study first constructs and then explicates the texts in the light of these theories.

No single theoretical model applies to all the novels; however, the observations of critics like Wiget, Lincoln, Owens and Velie, assertions of theorists like Jung, Lacan, Zizek, Foucault, Pierre Nora as well as the findings of anthropologists like Bierhorst, Campbell and Ruth Underhill are useful to my analysis. Broadly speaking, the dissertation adopts (but not limited to) anthropological approach to literature.
The study focuses on how the protagonists in *House Made of Dawn*, *Winter in the Blood*, *Ceremony*, and *Tracks* achieve psychic renewal through the ritual enactment of their relationship with the supernaturals. Writing, to these novelists, constitutes an artistic evocation of myths and ceremonies; their fiction betrays their inspirational allegiance to the great oral tradition. The myths in their works tell tales of the yore, but they remain vitally relevant to the modern times.

The rationale for selection of a particular novel of each author is that the work stands out from other works in its adoption of the motif of renewal through ritual. The novels are ordered chronologically as they were published and each novel has been treated in an independent chapter. The chapters are divided into sections which permit construction of the theoretical framework followed by examination of the texts. Here the expressions “Native American” and “American Indian” are used interchangeably. The dissertation follows the documentation style of the latest edition (Fifth Edition – 1999) of *MLA Handbook for Writers Research Papers*.

Chapter one offers a broad overview of myths and ceremonies. Meant to be a survey, it defines the basis of the myths and ceremonies and discusses its implications in different fictional contexts. Divided into three sections, the chapter deals with myths and ceremonies in general, myths and ceremonies with particular reference to Native American culture, and myths and
ceremonies as the underpinnings in the process of the protagonists' renewal through ritual.

Chapter two discusses the theories concerning memory, history, and the role of the artists in preserving and promoting such cultural icons like myths and ceremonies and then it examines in detail certain myths and ceremonies dramatized in *The House Made of Dawn*.

Chapter three deals with the problem of ethnicity and creative freedom in *The Winter in the Blood*. In the first section of the chapter theories concerning memory, amnesia, and rupture of ethnicity are discussed. And then the novel is analyzed in the light of these theories. The chapter shows how Welch uses certain elements of the Native lore and transmutes them into a work of art. The myths and ceremonies examined here are vision quest, sweat bath, the pipe of peace and the practice of shamanism.

The question of evolving a pluriform discourse in the practice of storytelling as a ritual is explored in Chapter four. As Silko negotiates with the competing claims of orality and literacy, she forges a text which embraces pluriform discourse. The chapter shows how *Ceremony* in the hands of Silko becomes an interactive text demanding the participation of the readers/listeners. It is shown here how storytelling helps healing. The ceremony of sand painting is examined in detail here.

Chapter five is principally concerned with one of the central myths of the American Indians: the trickster. The myth is analyzed and contextualized
in this chapter. It is argued here that the myth underpins the textual configuration of *Tracks*. The chapter also interrogates the issues of irregular histories as they impinge on the lives of American Indians, especially the mixedbloods.

In Chapter six the dissertation concludes that the four novelists construct multiple, competing and yet authentic versions of myths and ceremonies drawing inspiration from the American Indian oral lore. Acculturation notwithstanding, the American Indians, as the study reveals can recover the "word," which is their cultural capital. Myths and ceremonies are not merely cultural symbols of American Indians—they are much more than that—they pattern and sustain their metaphysical structure.