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English 494A

Miranda Reading Response

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I will briefly highlight some main takeaways and points for discussion from my reading of Deborah Miranda’s *Bad Indians*. I want to discuss the senses in which I found the text challenging, talk about its use of comedy, and talk about my reading of its general mission or project in reference to its form.

I found this text to be challenging in a rich, interesting way. The honesty and spirit of full disclosure on display in *Bad Indians* is undeniably powerful, and in my experience it made for slow, uncomfortable, and awkward going. I should say I don’t mean this at all as a denigration of technique or purpose in the text- the raw intimacy and honesty on display here is a main source of Miranda’s power, and I can only applaud the bravery and skill needed to lay bare all that she lays bare herein. But I can’t deny that I squirmed and grimaced through key sections. Miranda’s account of her rape and her experiences as witness, victim, and perpetrator of child abuse particularly stand out as blazingly painful, raw, openly wounded and wounding experiences that defy easy or comforting resolution. More than with other texts we’ve engaged with in this course, this approach of radical, total disclosure made me feel lasting despair in an empathic way.

There’s a lot to be said, I suspect, about this approach as compared to *Storyteller*. *Storyteller* is gorgeous, slick, and full of the soothing artifice or distance of told and retold stories- stories that, perhaps, have had some of their edges worn down. This stands in stark contrast to the most intimate and awful moments in *Bad Indians*, where the immediate, raw, ugly, personal nature of Miranda’s tragedies and struggles are presented in just about the most unvarnished fashion possible. *Storyteller* is easy to love, easy to appreciate. On its face it’s a more giving, approachable work. *Bad Indians* can at times come across as the challenging, ugly, fractured product of challenging, ugly, fractured history, but I wonder if it might be the more memorable text to me in the long run.

I should for fairness note that there’s a lot of beauty in this text. I found Miranda’s description of scattering the ashes of her father to the sea to be particularly moving, sensitive, and appropriate. Likewise Miranda’s dream at the end of the text was beautiful and cathartic in a way that recalled similar visions of wholeness and recovery in *Storyteller*. In some sense, I might argue, this comes across more powerfully and is more earned in Miranda for the highly difficult road taken to get there.

One topic I think we can discuss at length is the use of comedy in the text. While I recognize in the abstract that there is a lot of skillfully told, funny material in this book, I can’t say I ever rose to the point of laughter or even particular amusement in reading it. Even as someone who, I think, has a developed sense of and appreciation for black comedy, the comedy here was too black for my taste. I recognize how subjective humor is, but I have to imagine this will be an experience that some readers will share.

We can have an interesting conversation, I think, about how the comedy in this text is unlike to the comedy, and the vision for the role of comedy, provided in the DeLoria essay we read last week. To put it provocatively, I wonder if the comic material in *Bad Indians* is successful on DeLoria’s terms- or if it is even successful on Miranda’s terms. DeLoria appeals to joke structures that are easily recognizable in the wider cultural context, even to the point of being “groaners” or “dad jokes”; I would characterize Miranda’s general approach to comedy as an appeal to absurdity arising from juxtaposition of different contexts and cultures (see especially the Mission Glossary and Worksheet sections as well as the Coyote story). If, as I would characterize DeLoria to say, comedy is supposed to provide some kind of salve, some means to bear the burdens of the world and survive, then I feel Miranda’s comedy fails in this text- it’s too bleak and black, too raw or too bitter to do much except reinforce the generally nightmarish historical and cultural context being explored. Even toward a more narrow goal, like providing contrast or a break in tone- to let the reader come up for air, so to speak- I’m not sure the comedy succeeds.

We can certainly have a discussion about if this is all intentional on Miranda’s part, or if my experience is anomalous. Again, I am aware humor is subjective. But there’s probably something to be said about versatility of voice. I find *Storyteller* to be funny, and funny in an easy, effortless way that recalls DeLoria. *Bad Indians*, in characteristically challenging fashion, defies any such expectation.

I want to talk briefly about how I perceive this book’s project, and how the form of the text seems to me to sync up with that project. I see the “A California Indian in the Philadelphia Airport” section, starting p. 134, as something of a key metaphor for the whole text. In this section Miranda describes a realization that “when something is that broken, more useful and beautiful results can come from using the pieces to create a mosaic.” I take the text, then, as one such mosaic- albeit one made of sharp pieces, whose handling “slices our fingers and makes us bleed.” (p. 135)

The structure of the text strongly reinforces this mosaic comparison. This is a text full of fractured and incomplete accounts, glimmerings of historical and emotional truths accumulated via arduous research and painful experience. The pieces vary greatly in size, structure, and purpose. Some pieces are blatantly reclaimed, repurposed. I am thinking especially of the devastating poems refashioned from historical accounts of brutality, on p. 55-60 and elsewhere. But it’s also true of the family photographs and journals that are included as well. This is a highly appropriate structure to accommodate a melange of prose, poetry, photography, journals, historical documents, and satirical multimedia material-to name a few- which are all contained in *Bad Indians*.

The considerable strength or insight here seems to me to be the realization that these pieces, difficult as they are, incomplete as they are, interdependent as they are, work as a whole and unite in a highly elegant way. Moreover, the difficulties that arise in these pieces and the pain obvious in their telling and manipulation can be leveraged for particular effect in the mosaic medium. As I discussed earlier, what catharsis or hope we can find in this text seems to me to come across more powerfully for the milieu of deep darkness from which it manages to emerge.

I’ll close with one final observation. I think Silko’s use of photography in *Storyteller* is great, largely because she lets their powerful images speak for themselves. I found that Miranda had a contrasting tendency to comment heavily on and read deeply into photographs, to an extent I found occasionally needless or unconvincing. The extended discussion of a photograph of Miranda’s grandfather on p. 71-72 strikes me as a particular example. Images are such a self-evidently powerful medium that lack of trust in their power strikes me as a minor but noticeable flaw in technique. Miranda’s inability to resist rumination on and reading into the photograph of her grandfather is undeniably revealing and characteristically sad, but I wonder if it was effective or strictly necessary.