Patrick Austin

English 494A

Silko Reading Response

6 January, 2018

I will briefly highlight some main takeaways and points for discussion from my reading of Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller*. These loosely fall under categories of style and structure, gender and sexuality, and environmentalism.

The first point I want to emphasize and discuss is the relationship between the three primary elements that make up the text: poetry, prose, and photography. I found the moment-to-moment experience of traversing the text to be an interesting one due to the way these styles were used to control the reader’s pace and accomodate the reader’s stamina.

As someone trying to read the text quickly and efficiently I could at times feel myself being deliberately slowed by the form of the poetry, forcing me into sync with the intended rhythm of the language. That rhythm, I think, is often carefully designed to elicit the experience of hearing a story full of asides, pauses, hesitations, and silences. Characters in the text also call reader attention to this experience when they themselves talk about their experiences of hearing stories, which at times go on for hours or days, continuing unabated even through sleep. Likewise, the prose often has a flowing and seamless quality that, to me, recalls the experience of being immersed in a story, less aware of the seams and structure of its telling. I observed in my reading that prose sections seemed to pass by in a more rapid and fluid way, leaving me more or less unconscious of the artifice of the text, whereas the poems had a languid quality that made aspects of the telling rather than the tale feel more tangible. My suspicion is that this has to be deliberate, as both types of experience are integral to participating in and understanding a storytelling tradition.

Likewise, I was struck by the extent to which the text seemed to anticipate and accommodate reader exhaustion. Stylistically, a long prose section is almost always followed by at least a short palate cleanser of poetry; long stretches of poetry are broken up with photographs, or a picture serves as a kind of punctuation for or reflection on a piece of text; and the poems themselves use space on the page in creative and varied ways over the course of the text, winding around, hanging for effect, drawing the eye. This is a readable text if there ever was one.

There is also much that can be said about how Storyteller uses tone. It would be natural in a text that conveys so many stories for them to muddle together in memory- especially when so many of them appear at first glance to share in common elements. But in practice I found this to not be so. The text can be tragic or funny, bleak or hopeful, mundane or mythological, timeless or clearly rooted in a particular moment. Silko is flexible enough to make all of these elements work, and their intermixing contributes to a text that I found both memorable and pleasurable to experience. It should also be noted that the photographs participate in these qualities as well; Silko’s comments on the individual pictures are instructive in this respect. She herself notes the timeless quality of one photo of a sweeping mesa, just as easily as she wryly comments on the man who consented to be photographed just so long as his corn would be in the picture as well.

The second point I want to emphasize is the rich area of sexuality and gender in Storyteller. I’m very interested to hear what those with more diverse experiences than my own think about this aspect. In my reading I appreciated the sense in which the text has no truck with or patience for helpless maidens. To a one women in these stories are participants in their own fates, with distinct and powerful voices.

The woman in the short story “Storyteller” (p. 17), who calmly plots, enacts, and acknowledges her revenge as she goes about casually defying and laughing in the face of a dying white society is one standout. The character’s potency is striking, in terms of her ability to anticipate and control the reactions of both the white and native characters she interacts with and in terms of her sexuality, which is treated with a frank aloofness, bluntness, and honesty that is completely in sync with her action and narration.

Even female characters that could be shallow or stereotypical are given careful shading and layers of complexity, as in the “Estoy-eh-muut and the Kunideeyahs” story (p. 132), where the Kochininako character somehow manages to be far from a simplistic hag archetype despite her nominally cruel and inexplicable betrayal of her husband for the forces of evil. It should be noted how this story comments on and echoes over another Kochininako story from earlier in the text, where the woman cedes loyalty and love to the Buffalo People over her husband and is rather casually destroyed. Here her divided loyalty, her dual lives as wife and witch, and her strangely conflicted actions (why leave her husband on the cliff, when he could have easily been killed?) all serve to give this character power and complexity, informed by the conspicuous variations from the previous telling- it felt just to see her in a position of power after her previous brutal and sad end. To me these factors combined to provoke a strange reaction of sympathy and shock when the character is again unceremoniously killed by her husband, the nominal hero, and the tale comes to a sudden and stark halt- as if she, not the hero, had been the figure worthy of interest all along.

I would also like to call attention to the poem “The Storyteller’s Escape” (p. 239), near the end of the text. This was my favorite piece in the text, and, I think, one of the most instructive segments thematically. But I especially enjoyed its protagonist, who I take to be emblematic of women storytellers in the Laguna tradition generally, including Silko herself. Here is a wry voice that dances across the page yet chooses words their spacing with precision, a voice of easy confidence and control. This character’s escape stories safeguard the survival of the tribe, but as the story twists her storytelling becomes power over memory and belief more generally, transcending the realities of the physical world and the literal determination of events. The pursuing enemy and the harsh reality of the pounding sun as the storyteller dies are treated with a level of vagueness and abstraction that rob them of power. The story ends with a bittersweet sigh as it is revealed that the storyteller’s escape and survival were fantasy, as she is left to wryly narrate her own end, from herself to herself, a tale in the tradition told knowing that it will go unheard- yet irresistible to tell all the same. Yet the artifice of the storyteller is such that it has survived and has been told all the same, making the escape complete after all, and completely of a piece with the other stories of women’s resistances, failures, survivals, and deaths contained in this collection.

Finally, I want to briefly touch on the story of the gambler (p. 153), which I found to contain some of the most succinct and powerful environmental themes in a text that is full of them. Again, I anticipate others can bring a lot more to this discussion, but I found this story to be a highlight. This story was outlined in the short Silko piece assigned last week, and I enjoyed it then. Thus I was glad to see it return in much greater detail in *Storyteller*.

As I mentioned in class when the story was first presented, it’s striking how powerful this simple myth is as an indictment of blind greed. The Gambler’s theft of the rainclouds is not only selfish, it’s absurdly self-defeating- for when the world dries up and human life dies off, who is there to gamble with? I also note how this story robs the Gambler of any romantic quality the name or his status as a trickster-like figure might imply, reducing him to a brutal, monstrous, bestial murderer who, among other things, makes unwitting cannibals of his victims. The telling in this collection more fully reveals the repugnant unnaturalness of a being who would seek to control the clouds. This more detailed telling also brings out the character of Spider Woman, revealing her as the complete author of the Gambler’s demise, which the Sun merely goes on to enact. This absence of human characters as agents in the story seems to me to serve as a gentle reminder of a more balanced perspective of the position of humanity on earth and in the cosmos: humans as beings who are the beneficiaries of the natural balance, whose interests tend more towards harmony than control. The Spider and the Sun are the ones who save men from the prevarications of the Gambler. Without their beneficence we would have had neither the knowledge nor the means to enact an end to the drought.

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English 494A

Dunbar-Ortiz Reading Response

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I will briefly highlight some main takeaways and points for discussion from my reading of Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Dina Gilio-Whitaker’s “*All the Real Indians Died Off” and 20 Other Myths About Native Americans*. These loosely fall under observations about rhetoric and style, and quibbles I had with arguments, facts, and figures used.

Clearly this is a text whose main purpose is to persuade a general American audience to reassess its thinking about Native Americans and the American history of which they are a part, and I think we would be remiss to ignore the style and techniques of rhetoric and persuasion used. Overall these techniques are carried off to impressive effect, I think, given the scale of the endeavor; for the authors to come off as more or less reasonable and mild after challenging and upturning centuries of embedded racism and challenging much of the naive mainstream history of the United States is no small feat.

I do have to acknowledge from the start that I found the text persuasive, but I was fairly likely to feel that way from the outset given my personal beliefs and education; I likely fall into the ‘preaching to the choir’ set. I would be interested to hear from someone who was less likely to be persuaded or for whom the book’s project was unsuccessful, if only for another perspective on where and when the text’s rhetorical tactics may falter.

I think one of the great rhetorical achievements of the text is that it takes a sometimes dry and abstract sociopolitical framework, that of postcolonial studies, and makes it immediate in a way a layman can understand, mainly via the employment of and reference to a massive body of historical evidence and research. The entailments of this framework are also likely to lie outside of the normal realms of political belief for many Americans, but the text walks a careful line to avoid alienating a general audience while also remaining assertive and confident; I could see it serving as a toe in the water to the wider body of postcolonial studies and activism for those introduced to it at a younger age, or even just a window to a wider world for someone who never really examined the received, sanitized version of United States history commonly taught in schools.

I do have a few quibbles with the text that I’m interested in discussing. One quibble arises on p. 94, where the authors claim that “the suicide rate among young American Indians is epidemic at 18 percent, more than twice the rate of non-Hispanic white youth”. While I do not at all mean to downplay or deny the atrocious toll of suicide in Native American communities, I question the use of this figure and what it is intended to convey. Namely, what I think is the naive or natural reading- that 18% of young American Indians commit suicide- seems to me to be absurd on its face, along with the apparent attendant claim that 5-10% of non-Native teens commit suicide. Cursory search reveals the rate of young adult suicide among Natives to be in the range of 22.5 suicides per 100,000 members of the population, though there is some question of undercounting (see Figure 1). The citation for this figure provided in the text, an article titled “Ending the Legacy of Racism in Sports” with no further details whatsoever, is rather unhelpful. Google returned no easy lead on the provenance of this article- I found it eventually, and the figure is provided without citation there. Should an article on racism in sports be the primary citation for a widely available figure on public health?

On further examination I think this figure is intended to be read as denoting that 18% of young American Indian deaths are due to suicide- but that is something of a stretch from what the original text is stating, and I don’t think most people would initially construe the term “suicide rate” in that way. There is some potential to mislead here, especially for a credulous audience already largely convinced by the foregoing text. I’m inclined to be charitable here, since the phenomenon in question is undeniably real and horrifying. I just want to note that the strange use of this figure took me out of the text and introduced some degree of skepticism to my reading, which is not desirable from the perspective of authors who otherwise appear to be seeking to be maximally persuasive. In a text that appears to be well-researched (or otherwise more adept at hiding sleights of hand) this snippet stuck out to me.

Of all the myths treated in the text, the one where I found the authors least persuasive was Myth 14: “Native American Culture Belongs to All Americans” (p. 100). While I’m sympathetic to the deeply problematic nature of white appropriation and “playing Indian” that the authors want to address in this section, I question both the aims and the means of the attack on “New Age” thinkers and writers. While there are unquestionably charlatans among New Agers, and the New Age need to appeal to Native tradition can reveal a great deal about the rootlessness of white society, I feel the authors approach a slippery slope when they seem to begin to argue (in my reading) that “spiritual appropriation” has taken place and some kind of communal right, contrasting individualistic rights based in the First Amendment, exists or ought to exist to block the transmission of spiritual beliefs to a culture with which they are not “consistent”. Besides very problematic questions of how such a rule could be enforced, much less abused, I question the strategic importance of such an enterprise. While is surely galling to see white figures like James Arthur Ray abuse and demean ancient Native traditions, I feel there has to be a place for solidarity, cultural exchange, and synthesis. The authors themselves seem to espouse this view in their treatment of Myth 21. Most New Age writers probably fall far short of that exalted point, but a more sensitive and wise generation of native and white authors to come, participants in a richer and more thoughtful tradition of which the awkward New Age synthesis is only a growing pain, well might. To slam the door on a future synthesis or reconciliation or recovery based in solidarity, respect, research, and full historical understanding seems short-sighted.

Also, I find the closing of the section (p. 108) to be uncharacteristically dry and unconvincing. The authors are at their best when they relate their postcolonial framework and understanding to American history and lived cultural experience; the section ends with a dump of unexplained and unexplored terminology, from “an ethic of incommensurability” to a “delinking of coalition politics”. These may be fruitful concepts but they certainly needed more room to breathe and be explored and explained, considering this text is otherwise aimed at a layman. I understand the desire to provide a link to the academic work for those interested in studying the topic further, but I feel persuasion demands a more traditional conclusion to bring the (in my opinion) rather stringy and quickly sketched arguments presented in this section into a more coherent whole.

Finally, I have some questions and concerns about the blood quantum issue treated in Myth 10 (p. 76). I’ll treat these only briefly as I anticipate this is a question about which we will have in-class discussion along with further exploration in the Miranda text. To put it briefly and provocatively, I wonder if the authors are being a bit inconsistent in their treatment of the use of blood quantum in this section versus their stated positions elsewhere. The authors seem to agree with the consensus social science view that race is socially constructed, and seem sympathetic to the problem of being raised culturally Native while lacking some arbitrary (and rather absurd) blood measure to back it up, or being of mixed Native heritage and lacking the blood to prove into any particular tribe. Why, then, are they not more forceful advocates against the elimination of this practice? They seem to encourage existing trends moving away from the quantum, but the argument seems to me to lack the characteristic force and clarity used elsewhere. It seems to me that merely relaxing quantum standards is no real solution to this issue, but the authors seem uncharacteristically willing to accept such half measures. I am interested to hear if other people’s readings support this intuition.

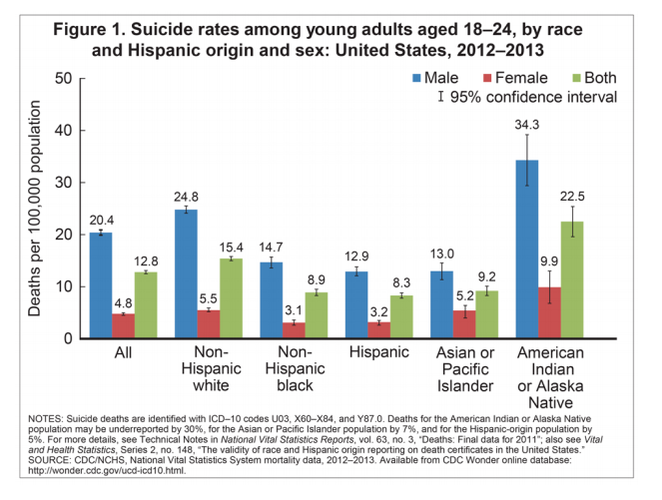


Figure 1: Comparison of suicide rates by the US CDC circa 2012-2013. Even accounting for underreporting, these figures are a far cry from the 18% suicide rate the text appears to claim. (Source: <http://time.com/4054087/suicide-rate-american-indians/>)

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Miranda Reading Response

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