Maintenance and Retrieval:

Memory in *Storyteller* and *Bad Indians*

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On initial analysis it seems understandable to characterize Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller* and Deborah A. Miranda’s *Bad Indians* as works that exist in a kind of tension with each other, advancing visions that are, to some extent, in opposition. *Storyteller* can feel dreamlike, reverential, an appeal to the healing effect of subsumption in an ancient storytelling tradition; *Bad Indians* can come across as a shattered, shattering personal testament to a hard life led in the wake of genocide. This is true to some extent. But beneath the starkly different veneers of these autobiographical texts, there are also important common elements. There are undercurrents of deeply personal darkness lurking in *Storyteller*, and a defiant hope for a reclaimed future to be found in *Bad Indians*. In this essay I will attempt to find an understanding of the tensions and synergies that exist between these two works.

Using the framework for interpretation described in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s *Reading Autobiography*, I will explore and elaborate on some of the radical differences in tone and technique that differentiate these texts. I will also argue that both works share many important qualities, and their authors are participants in a similar project: a vision of hard-won remembrance and endurance for indigenous people in the modern day. In order to focus on tangible areas of similarity and difference, I will compare the texts primarily in terms of an analysis of the role of memory, one of the subjects for critical reading of autobiography described by Smith and Watson.

It seems clear at the outset that both texts are deeply entangled in the vagaries of human memory. In terms of the basic material of these works, Silko largely recalls and retells the stories she was told as a girl in Laguna Pueblo, and Miranda largely explores her recollections of her childhood and the history of her family and people, often in excruciating detail. Smith and Watson call memory the “source, authenticator, and destabilizer of autobiographical acts,” and envision the act of remembering in autobiography as a deed that generates meaning on a personal, historical, and societal scale. (Smith and Watson, p. 22) Since memory is the fickle font of all autobiography, investigating the role of memory in these texts may prove productive as a way to compare and contrast where these texts come from, what they set out to accomplish, and what they ultimately achieve.

Silko, ruminating on the stories she learned from her Aunt Susie, seems particularly conscious of the pivotal but also perilous role that memory plays in storytelling. She explicitly lays out this concern at the beginning of the text, when she describes her Aunt’s storytelling, and oral storytelling in the Laguna tradition in general, as “an entire history / an entire vision of the world / which depended upon memory” (Silko, p. 4). In some sense this can be read as a testament to the power of memory, but in context I think it also suggests the worrying ease with which a mere memory can be lost or diluted. In another essay, Silko notes explicitly of the Laguna tradition that “remembering and retelling were a communal process.” (Silko, 1986) While Silko is clearly a passionate defender of and participant in this tradition, that awareness must also involve an awareness of loss and dilution from person to person and telling to telling. In one small but revealing detail, Silko takes a moment when describing the frigid river running through the short story “Storyteller” to note its surface of “ice translucent and fragile as memory” (Silko, p. 27). Smith and Watson refer explicitly to Silko in their treatment of memory and history in autobiography, calling her a narrator “at the crossroads of conflicting understandings of memory” who, in *Storyteller*, juxtaposes “a dominant modern mode and an alternative indigenous mode.” (Smith and Watson, p. 23)

Indeed, *Storyteller* seems to sit at a crossroads between an abiding faith in and love for the memory maintained in the oral tradition to which Silko is an heir and a kind of awareness or consciousness or perhaps even embrace of the medium’s blurriness and lossiness. Names, periods, and even individual tellings of a story have a way of blurring or peeling off in many of the episodes contained in *Storyteller*. Silko seems interested in the way memories become universalized when they are shared, albeit conscious of the unexpected echoes and distortions of meaning that are part of the process. Captioning one photograph of a high desert plateau, Silko notes that it “might be from a thousand years ago” (Silko, p. 77). The short stories “Yellow Woman” and “Tony’s Story” both feature ambiguously mythical, archetypal figures in Silva and the cop, juxtaposed with and interacting in settings that appear grounded in recognizably modern history. Silko juxtaposes variant tellings of the same story several times throughout the text, notably in and between stories of Yellow Woman, Kochinanko, and one very ornery rooster.

Silko addresses concerns about the unreliability of memory quite directly when she dryly notes, in what could serve as a thesis statement for the whole text, that “what we call ‘memory’ and what we call ‘imagination’ are not so easily distinguished.” (Silko, p. 220) The poem “The Storyteller’s Escape” particularly highlights and toys with this notion of the blurry line between invention and remembrance, returning repeatedly to the notion of a tribe’s stories which exist “for the dear ones who do not come back / so that we may remember them” (Silko, p. 239). The wry twist or conundrum of the poem is that this is a story that could not have survived and could not have been remembered–the storyteller’s escape is revealed to be a fantasy, she dies on the hill–but here it is nonetheless, paradoxically preserved on the page. The question of Silko’s stance towards this phenomenon of continuous change–both loss and incorporation–in memory and in storytelling is one I will return to later in the essay.

Lest I arrive at too simple of a characterization of this text as merely tranquil or peaceful, a vehicle for toying with notions of memory in storytelling in opposition to the roiling sea of pain and tragedy that is *Bad Indians* (also an oversimplification), I want to talk briefly about memory and trauma in *Storyteller*. It is true that what Miranda faces down head-on, Silko engages with in a more subtle, glancing fashion. Both tellings of the Kochinanko story included in *Storyteller* deal with abusive relationships, false and wavering loyalties, miscommunications and deceptions between lovers, and culminating acts of violence. The violence is truncated and abrupt–so abrupt, in fact, that the spare observation that Estoy-eh-muut’s magical weapon “became a rattlesnake that struck her / and killed her” seems to suddenly slam the second version of the story shut, as if some unspoken line has been crossed. (Silko, p. 143) It’s hard to avoid reading autobiographical context into this and some of the other dark material in the text. I posit that this skill at changing gears, at giving glimpses of pain and moving past them, is itself a kind of coping strategy that Silko incorporates from the Laguna tradition, whether consciously or not. The flow and structure of the text is such that the most awful crescendos of pain and sorrow are mitigated by the knowledge that an escape into another story is soon to come. The nadir of the text features a bleak vision of genocide and apocalypse, which is “already turned loose. / It’s already coming. / It can’t be called back.” (Silko, p. 129) Bleak as this is, the possibility of escape to another story serves to offer some salve, some way to cope, or perhaps a way to forget. The poem “Storytelling” also seems to embody this facet of *Storyteller*, reflecting a flow of conversation where dark topics have a way of arising, being acknowledged, and being undercut or contrasted by humor, an aside, or an alternate telling. In fact, this coping strategy might be so effective that it causes a text packed to the brim with infidelity, death, and a host of other historical and personal traumas to feel much lighter than it really is. Perhaps the beauty of this strategy is that it lets readers confront and incorporate some of the brutality and horror at their own pace.

Miranda’s approach to questions of memory in *Bad Indians* reflects different concerns, a different background, and a very different lived experience. In light of the highly painful personal material explored in the text, I think it makes particular sense to situate a discussion of memory in *Bad Indians* within the framework of trauma in autobiography. Indeed, Smith and Watson’s general description of the handling of trauma in autobiography as “organizing the inescapable but often disabling force of memory and negotiating its fragmentary intrusions with increasing, if partial, understanding” (Smith and Watson, p. 28) sounds to me very much like a description of *Bad Indians–*except that Miranda only rarely allows herself to be disabled, recounting a litany of traumatic and tragic experiences with furious and unflinching energy. The recalled trauma in *Bad Indians* has two faces: the personal, drawn from the difficult circumstances of Miranda’s own life, and the social or cultural, drawn from the historical experience of Miranda’s family and her indigenous ancestors in California. One of the fascinating things about *Bad Indians* is the way these two factors constantly inform and reflect upon one another, creating an effect that can feel like being ensnared in a vortex of death and despair.

One telling facet of memory in *Bad Indians* that seems especially important is a general preoccupation with retrieving and incorporating memory from history by way of tangible primary sources. Miranda’s concern in this area goes far beyond the borrowed photographs and tales Silko manipulates in *Storyteller*. It can feel as if in reaction to experienced trauma and historical trauma, Miranda is clutching for something solid, true, and proveable to hold onto or reclaim. Take, for example, the poetry Miranda forges from historical accounts at several points in the text. These short pieces serve to retrieve memories and subvert their power and veracity using the very words of the genocidal white culture of Spanish Conquistadors and 1850s Californians. One such poem manipulates the space and rhythm of white language to highlight the grotesque absurdity of the claim that casual violence against indigenous people was justified, since they were “only Diggers” (Miranda, p. 60).

Indeed, Miranda can even come across as desperate to generate these connections between memory and history. In one striking and revealing passage, she spends several pathos-filled pages trying to read detail and context into a single small picture of her great-grandfather Tomás, trying to imagine or extrapolate the irretrievable details of his life. “Yes, I know Tomás,” claims Miranda tellingly, “though he died long before I was born” (Miranda, p. 72). This is just one instance of a general tendency for Miranda to try to move from a limited primary source or a known historical episode to a piece that attempts to embody a more real, remembered experience. The similarly parsed and re-interpreted accounts of Junípero Sera, the “Digger Belle”, and Jacinta Gonzalez are just a few additional examples (Miranda p. 3-5, 44-47, 61-62).

There is much more to be said than this short paper allows in regards to interpreting the role of narrativized memory in the most intimately painful and personal passage of the text, where Miranda recounts being raped and abused as a child and witnessing the abuse of her half-brother Al, before confessing her own failures as a parent. (Miranda, p. 108-118) This passage is rich enough to support a line-by-line analysis; I will settle for a few brief points. In general the use of language and technique in this passage feels dramatically different from the rest of the text. Sentences become simple, short, and direct. The confidence and sharp sarcasm on display elsewhere flicker, replaced by uncontrolled, elemental emotions of rage and despair. Miranda describes her anger in the wake of her rape quite simply and directly, as being “like a knife. Like a big silver knife.” (Miranda, p. 112) Notably, she observes that “there has been no forgetting of the events*–*only the emotions.” (Miranda, p. 115) In an essay written several years before the completion of *Bad Indians*, Miranda describes the phenomenon of “Native women living basic survival-level emotional lives” in order to endure “the constant grinding of historical traumas that directly targeted Native women’s bodies and our ability to express ourselves” (Miranda, 2002). This strikes me as a highly apt description of the reversion of Miranda’s style to a harsher, simpler, and clearly wounded mode in this section of the text. This mode is also honest, direct, and brutally effective at eliciting pathos and horror.

The analysis I have done thus far might lead a critic to characterize Silko as more conscious of the problems that arise in the act of recollection. She is more willing to experiment with, call attention to, and perhaps even find a kind of peace or joy in the plasticity of memory. Miranda’s tellings of her lived experience can come off as so raw, imminent, and urgent that they lack Silko’s wider sense of perspective. If Silko tries to understand or even embrace the way people forget and memories blur, Miranda rages against the possibility, even to the point of denying it. This naivete is striking in a text so full of utterly bleak and blackly comic material. It seems to me that Miranda believes it, or wants to believe it, when she says that “We have stories to exchange about this difficult gift, life, and those stories will never disappear” (Miranda, p. 122).

I think this gets at a fundamental, important difference that arises when viewing these works through the lens of memory and which I want to particularly emphasize. This difference arises from the diverging experiences and backgrounds of the authors. Silko uses *Storyteller* to maintain, explore, and share in the memory of her people, one piece a tradition of participation that depends on “each person / listening and remembering a portion” (Silko, p. 6). This project of maintenance comes from a place of ownership and mastery over the remembered material. Miranda doesn’t enjoy this luxury in *Bad Indians*: the memories of her people have been received in a much more fragmented and damaged state, and the memories of her own experience are so raw and painful that they can only be mastered and wielded with considerable effort. Miranda’s project, then, is one of retrieval or reinvention. *Bad Indians* sets out to claim a history, to make the memory of genocide and abuse into something ownable, tolerable, and shareable. Miranda seems to me to be describing the mission of *Bad Indians* itself when she observes that “when something is that broken, more useful and beautiful results can come from using the pieces to construct a mosaic.” (Miranda, p. 135) If *Bad Indians* can be understood as a mosaic, whose project is the reinvention of a whole from fragmented pieces, then *Storyteller* is a collage, whose project is maintaining material whose pieces have life and wholeness individually, juxtaposing the components in interesting ways, experimenting with them and commenting on them through the act of arrangement, the act of telling.

I think this framework provides a useful way of understanding these texts, which accounts for why they feel so very different to read despite having apparently similar structures and subject matters. Smith and Watson call memory “the reinterpretation of the past in the present” (Smith and Watson, p. 22). Together, *Storyteller* and *Bad Indians* serve to remind us that the past being reinterpreted by modern native authors contains a kaleidoscope of human experience. *Storyteller* closes with neither poem nor prose but a photograph of Silko’s great-grandmother and father, a testament to Silko’s continuity with and remembrance of family and tradition. *Bad Indians* closes as Miranda recalls the distant light crowning a California mountain which confounded her grandfather, at the end of a beatific, cathartic dream of the rediscovery of a once forgotten and now reclaimed sacred place. This is a tradition that should not be oversimplified. When these texts are viewed through the lens of memory they reveal a place for visions of wholeness and visions of brokenness both: traditions to be maintained and traditions to be rediscovered and retrieved.

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