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REMAPPING THE BOUNDARIES: THE NOVELISTIC LANDSCAPE OF LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S *STORYTELLER*

Summary

The paper examines the generic hybridity in Leslie Marmon Silko's Storyteller (1981) as a tool for synchronizing the private and the public history, emphasizing a synecdochic relationship between the individual and the communal, as well as the necessity of the Western readers' conceptual reorientation for appreciating that relationship. Through its shift towards oral discourse, Silko's novel stretches the horizon of the Western genre, challenging its narrative, authorial and receptional conventions, as well as its epistemology of space and time. Infusing a sense of collectivity into the traditional Western concept of personal narrative, Silko draws upon Laguna sacred history, delineating the importance of storytelling in shaping and preserving the communal identity. Transgressing the border between the fictional and the real, the secular and the mythic, Storyteller also conveys the power of storytelling to transcend material boundaries of the real and shape them at the same time. The analysis pays special attention to permutations, as a stylistic device that converges postmodern techniques with oral storytelling in order to exhibit the variability of the oral discourse and translate it into written form.

Keywords: *Leslie Marmon Silko, Storyteller, hybridity, border-crossing, redefining the novelistic genre*

Although it was published almost three decades ago, Silko's novel *Storyteller* (1981) still stands out as an emblematic Native American text, perhaps one of the first that challenged the boundaries of Western literary tradition in both its content and form. This is confirmed by the still irremovable uncertainties related to the classification of this novel – a pastiche of traditional beliefs, clan stories, family memoirs, photographs, private letters, poems and memories[1]. Even more directly than in her first novel *Ceremony* (1977), in *Storyteller*, Silko stretched the horizon of the novelistic genre, subjecting it to the conventions of oral storytelling. Although Browdy de Hernandez finds that Silko does not oppose the "Law of genre" directly, but situates her text beyond reach of both Western and Native American conventions (34), she in many ways, as Hochbruck observes, "indianizes the novel" (222), confirming the thesis by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin that the interrelation of the anticolonial language and oral traditions in postcolonial writing radically questions the established conceptions about the characteristics and categorization of particular genres (181).

According to Brennan, unlike other fictional forms, the novel "neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it". Whereas in oral culture the narrator retells not only his but also other people's experience, a novelist's pursuit presupposes the introspection and isolation (55). Yet, in *Storyteller* Silko completely denies such a novelistic construct. From the very beginning her novel infuses the social into the private, the communal into the personal, intertwines the oral and the written, story and history. Although some critics, like Owens, hold that the novelistic form necessarily tends towards the "desacralization" of the oral-mythic material (11) and in spite of the fact that in the Pueblo culture "a written speech or statement is highly suspect because the true feelings of the speaker remain hidden… detached from the occasion and the audience" (Silko, *Yellow Woman* 48), in this novel Silko solved the problem of incompatibility of the written and oral discourse and minimalized the loss of the traditional meaning.

1 As Wong points out, unlike the novel *Ceremony*, which received considerable critical attention, *Storyteller* has been "virtually ignored" by the critics (187).

Erasing the boundary between the fictional and the real is one of the recurring signals of her authorial strategy. Although the breakdown of the border between fact and fiction and the tendency towards small forms is one of the common traits of postmodern texts (Bradbury 202, 207, 209, 235, 237), as well as the tradition of female writing (cf. Baym 290), in *Storyteller* it primarily denotes a shift towards oral discourse. The melting of the border between reality and fiction is most observable in the story "Yellow Woman" which draws upon the Laguna Yellow Woman story. Like in the traditional story, one random visit to the river completely changes the life of the contemporary heroine, a young married woman. She forgets about her family that is waiting for her in the village, and goes away into the unknown with a stranger – Silva. Although at first she thinks: "I don't have to go. What they tell in stories was real only then, back in time immemorial, like they say" (56), soon she realizes that her own reality was conceived in the story: "This is the way it happens in the stories, I was thinking…" (56). As Linda Danielson observes, this story's heroine reenacts the myth by living through the experience, thoughts and feelings of the Yellow Woman (25). The porosity of the border between the Yellow Woman story and the text we are reading is also revealed by a vague identity of its protagonists: "I was wondering if Yellow Woman had known who she was – if she knew that she would become part of the stories" (55). Although the contemporary heroine doubts her connection to the Yellow Woman, "I'm not really her – I have my own name…" (55), Silko hides her real name from us. The mythological heroine exhibits the same trait: "Maybe she'd had another name that her husband and relatives called her so that only the ka'tsina from the north and the storytellers would know her as Yellow Woman" (55). Silva's identity is equally unclear. He perfectly masters the Pueblo language, looks like a Navajo (58), but hides his origin very carefully. Although in the archetypal Yellow Woman story the male character is a ka'tsina, Silko's protagonist exhibits many contemporary traits, such as the Levi's jeans and the 30-30 gun he is carrying. The concealing of the border between the two stories is also emphasized stylistically:

> As soon as Badger Crawled in, coyote blocked up the entrance with rocks and hurried back to Yellow Woman/ 'come here,' he said gently./ He touched my neck and I moved close to him to feel his breathing and to hear his heart. (55)

At this point Silko condenses the two stories, refusing to differentiate between two different protagonists. Silva's words "come" can also refer to Coyote's appeal to the Yellow Woman. Just a slight syntactical shift, from the third to the first person singular of a possessive pronoun indicates a flexion from one narrative layer to another.

The domination of the story over reality is additionally stressed through the corrosion of time, following the penetration of the legendary into the contemporary story. After the heroine has left with the stranger, like Yellow Woman did before her, time disappears, and the sequence of events is discernible only through spacial alterations: "I watched the change from the cottonwood trees along the river to the junipers that brushed past us in the foothills, and finally there were only pinnons, and when I looked up at the rim of the mountain plateau I could see pine trees growing on the edge" (56). Traveling, they orient themselves to the four directions. At the beginning of the story the heroine is turned towards the East, watching the rising sun (54). Then, when she attempts to leave Silva, she goes home "following the river south the way we had come the afternoon before" (54). The suppression of time is additionally stressed through the metaphorics of color. In congruence with the Laguna cosmology, in the first part the colors denoting the nadir – brown, green and red predominate. Silva and the contemporary Yellow Woman travel through the plains, surrounded by "brown water birds", "green ragged moss and fern leaves", "red blanket on the white river sand" (54). As they travel toward the mountains, the colors turn to black, denoting the zenith: "dark lava hills", "black mountain dirt", "black ants" (59). This narrative method completely confirms Murray's thesis that in postcolonial texts "time broadens into space" (qtd. in Ashcroft et al. 34). At the same time, such a correlation between space and time keeps Silko's novel apart from the contemporary Western worldview. As Grossberg explains, modernity is strongly marked by the "logic of temporality", based on the assumption of the separability of time

and space and "privileging of time over space" (100). On the contrary, as Silko reveals, in oral histories, "the precise date of the incident is often less important than the place or location of the happening. 'Long, long ago,' 'a long time ago,' 'not too long ago' and 'recently' are usually how stories are classified in terms of time" ("Landscape, History..." – el. source). Similary, the oral tradition does not divide the past from the present and frequently connects events that happened at different places and times (de Ramirez, "Storytellers..." – el. source, cf. Whorf 122). Whereas the prophane story's separation from the archetypal one is manifest through its temporalization, so that the part of the text in which the heroine doubts her connection to the Yellow Woman legend abounds in time adverbials: "I don't have to go. What they tell in stories was real only *then*, back in *time immemorial*, like they say" (56). "I am not Yellow Woman. Because she is from out of *time past* and I live *now*"[2] (56), melting the border between the legendary and the real, Silko puts in the mythic chronotope. Caught "in a liminal world between reality and dream" (Jaskoski 39), the heroine herself becomes a part of the sacred history that projects the past into the present and future and petrifies time: "You should understand/ the way it was/ back then/ because it is the same/ even now" (94). The mythological Yellow Woman pattern, thus, does not necessarily signify the postmodern intersection of codes, a "hybridizing mix where the borders are kept clear" (Hutcheon 35), but it also cuts across the epistemological limits, challenging Western assumptions of space and time.

Storyteller's ontological shift is further accomplished through the variable constitution of storytelling. According to Owens, the syncretism of the traditional storytelling confirms the dynamic nature of Native American cultures (9). Every new telling is not just a repetition but is also a regeneration of the ritual-historical matrix. The retelling is an integrative part of the story itself – explains Wong (192), and Krupat confirms: "Each successive performance of traditional material 'conveys' that material, to be sure, but it is never purely a repetition of it... the 'conveyer' is always an 'interpreter' as well... (12). Explaining the inevitability of the defocalization and contextual adaptation at transmit-

2 My italics.

ting traditional Indian stories, Vizenor points out that creating the stories out of visual signs, "recollecting 'multiple senses of an experience' the narrators can tell a story from many points of view (qtd. in Jacobs 26). As Silko confirms, oral storytelling in the Pueblo culture usually includes several, sometimes even conflicting, varieties of the same event (Silko, "Landscape..." 85).

> I've heard tellers begin the way I heard it was... and then proceed with another story purportedly a version of a story just told but the story they would tell was a wholly separate story, a new story with an integrity of its own, an offspring, a part of the continuing which storytelling must be. (227)

Even myths, Blumenberg argues, are not "sacred texts that cannot be changed even one iota" (qtd. in Moss 10), as the ceremonial story is continuously serving the development of an identity for both the community and an individual. Therefore, as Silko points out, "the story will never be quite the same when told again because in some way the context will have changed" (Wright 86). Changeability and variablity of oral storytelling is thus yet another argument proving the inferiority of the written medium, as the fixity of the written word refuses the contextual modalities of the storytelling.

According to Krumholz, Silko solves the problem of the textualization of the oral discourse by blurring the border between stories and genres, "between the stories and the material circumstances of the community, between the old stories and the on-going creation of meaning" (el. source). However, Silko solves the problem of recontextualization and variability of storytelling through permutations, as well. As Lodge explains, permutations are one of the stylistic markers of postmodern writing. Yet, whereas in a postmodern text permutations signalize a refusal of the imperative of choosing (274), in *Storyteller* they point at the synecdochic tie between the life and the story. According to Vizenor, a people acquire their identity through a mass of little stories, "narrative wisps" - as he calls them, "stories that sometimes let themselves be collected together to constitute big stories" (227). Oral stories are "fragments of/in life, fragments that

never stop interacting while being complete in themselves," says Minh-ha (143). Similarly, the "Yellow Woman" story repeats several times through its variations -- the stories "Storytelling", "Cottonwood" – Part I ("Story of Sun House") and Part II ("Buffalo Story"), "Aunt Alice told my sisters and me this story one time", "Estoy-eh-Muut and the Kunideeyahs" and the poems "What Whirlwind Man Told Kochininako, Yellow Woman" and "Indian Song: Survival". Although the characters surrounding Yellow Woman and the settings vary, the trope of a heroine's guiltlessness and helplessness connects all of these versions of the original story. Whether she has been abducted by a ka'tsina, or the Buffalo Man, or blinded by the light coming from Sun Man's eyes, Yellow Woman cannot "escape" (69) the temptation of adultery. Such a reduction of the plot outcome additionally signalizes that we are reading permutations, not new stories. Non-human and mythic elements, as well as the timelessness of the story she is a part of, serve as an alibi to the heroine's rule-breaking. Even though Kochininako betrays and leaves her husband, going to the Buffalo Man's people, her behavior benefits her tribe in form of fertility, earth regeneration and social renewal:

> And so the earth continued/ as it has since that time" (66) ... "People lived/ and they would bring home/ all that good meat./ Nobody would be hungry then./ It was all because/ one time long ago/ our daughter, our sister Kochininako/ went away with them. (76)

Although Silko stresses her role as a mediator between the oral tradition and the Western reader in form of metafictional comments: "You can't go on and on the way we do/ when we tell stories around here/ People who aren't used to it get tired" (110), *Storyteller* equally contains a number of receptional pitfalls. One can uncover them by comparing the contemporary reader concept and the institution of the listener in oral cultures. Whereas the reader of a postmodern text is invited into a dialogue, and "in collusion with the writer[3]" (Žmegač 389) brings about the dynamic potential of a text (Iser 381-382, 385), the listeners of oral storytelling "co-create stories as participants within the story, remem-

3 My translation.

bering and "reuniting with the original" (Frey, qtd. in De Ramirez, "The Resistance..." el. source). According to Ruoff and Ward, improvisation -- one of the main characteristics of oral storytelling -- implies that the material is known and mutually shared. Accordingly, a text that relies on oral tradition at the same time denies some literary premises such as the one that a literary work is a universe in itself whose meaning does not "depend for fulfillment of its intentions on knowledge, ideas, images that the text does not provide" (24, 25). Quite to the contrary, in Native cultures the audience is always already familiar with the situations and characters described in a story and it is therefore quite unnecessary to introduce it to what is already known. The audience, therefore, brings into a story all that is left unsaid, and that segment is crucial for the natural course of a storytelling (cf. Kroeber 32). Repetition, therefore, is not only a convention of composition but is also "the fundamental principle of psychological and social order" (Ruoff and Ward 28). As Owens (6), Lincoln (49) and Silberman (112) contend, the recipients of a telling are not only witnesses to the stories' creation process, an instance that shapes a meaning independently of the text and the author, but are equal participants and creators of a storytelling who fill in the storytelling's synecdochic gaps. The receptional configuration in *Storyteller* very much resembles such a transaction storyteller-listener in oral cultures. This is again observable from the "Yellow Woman" story, which does not begin with a description of the heroine's meeting with Silva, since that is a common place that has already been known, but a day after these events. A similar suppression of the story by the plot is visible at the end, which reduces the description of the woman's return into her village to just a few words: "I decided to tell them that some Navajo had kidnapped me, but I was sorry that old Grandpa wasn't alive to hear my story because it was the Yellow Woman stories he liked to tell best" (62). The Yellow Woman matrix is a semantical buffer to the story "His wife had caught them together before", as well. The title, which is also the first sentence of the story, alludes that what we are going to hear is just a repetition of an "old", well-known theme that surprises nobody anymore, not even the protagonist's own wife. Filtered through

the mould of the "Yellow Woman" story, the deviant behavior of these contemporary characters is again generalized and humanized. Accordingly, the reader is invited not to create the meanings, but to uncover them by integrating new stories with those he read before. Like in oral stories, the intricacy and fragmentation of *Storyteller*'s plot, therefore, do not disintegrate the narration, but, quite to the contrary, point at the wholeness and the communal nature of storytelling. Seen in that light, permutations in Silko's fiction are not the postmodern destruction of narrativity, but, on the contrary, its rehabilitation, another strategy which abrogates *Storyteller*'s Western features[4].

Like Grandmother Spider, who knows what is going on with Kochininako when Estoy-eh-muut asks her, but she still does not reveal anything, giving him the powder to help him learn the answer by himself (143), infusing the legendary into the contemporary, Silko's novel directs the reader toward the oral substance necessary to its own decoding. Like Old Man Badger, the protagonist of the story "The Skeleton Fixer", who instills new life to the bones that got lost and separated over time, resurrecting fragments of ancient stories, Silko fostered the collective architecture, vitality and resillience of her tradition and culture, remapping the limits of the Western form at the same time:

Because things don't die
they fall to pieces maybe,
get scattered or separate,
but Old Badger Man can tell
how they once fit together.
Though he didn't recognize the bones
He could not stop;
He loved them anyway. (243)

4 Significantly, permutations were one of the main targets of censorship in the first Native American texts. Adapting the narrative material to the non-tribal logic, Anglo-American editors refused to accept the semiotic system under which a work came to be (de Ramirez, "The Resistance..." el. source), and, in accordance with Euro-American literary tradition, often reorganized their material chronologically, distorting the content of the authentic text (cf. Brumble 11, Bataille 15).

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