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Brewster E. Fitz. *Silko: Writing Storyteller and Medicine Woman.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004. xii + 288pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3584-7.

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Textual Healing: The Syncretic World View of Leslie Marmon Silko

In a line from Leslie Marmon Silko's 1991 novel, *Almanac of the Dead*, the old Yaqui smuggler Calabazas states, "We live in a different world now.... Spoken words can no longer be trusted. Put everything in writing."[1] Calabazas's pragmatic take on the vulnerability of the spoken word reflects a world where writing is the only guarantee of a legally binding contract to secure and maintain "legitimate title" to land, and clearly signals the legal and political high stakes that underwrite much of Silko's work. But in the choice of writing over orality that Calabazas suggests, also lies a bitter acknowledgement of the price paid by Native peoples as a result of the epistemological difference between these two technologies of expression. Brewster E. Fitz's welcome study of Silko's work, *Silko: Writing Storyteller and Medicine Woman*, elegantly explores the anxiety of this difference between the oral and the written. As Fitz rightly points out, the expectations of orality are high in Native literature–particularly so in the case of Silko, whose works are read as being "informed by a living orality" (p. 3). Fitz takes on this popular scholarly and critical view, which, at times, exhibits a "distrust of writing and Western culture" in its veneration of the oral (p. 238), and claims Silko's vision as "profoundly syncretic, cosmopolitan, and at times almost postmodern, rather than exclusionary, regional, essentialist" (p. 4). This inclusive syncretism is the key to the inaugural move of his thesis, which proposes Silko as a self-conscious and self-reflexive "writing storyteller," whose textual "translations" of the oral elements of Native expression serve as a healing intervention and reconciliation between the two.

In his introduction, Fitz employs various autobiographical details in Silko's *Storyteller* to "(re)construct" the process of this syncretic approach. As he chronicles the growing awareness of a young Silko to books and the act of writing as she was growing up in and around Laguna, Fitz identifies her unique exposure as coming from an already interiorized sense of writing inherent in Laguna cultural tradition which is passed down to her by certain members of the Marmon family. Fitz later explains that this interiorized sense of writing is expressed by Silko through her use of the Laguna storytelling figures of Grandmother Spider and "Thought Woman" and the webs of verbal creation they weave as a "self-reflexive textual trope" (p. 239). But Silko herself cites a formative influence stemming from the Laguna peoples' historical understanding of the "power of written books to secure legitimate title to tribal land" (quoted, p. 24). However, a more personal experience of the conjoining of writing and the oral tradition comes from a specific Marmon family tradition which emphasized not only oral storytelling and reading aloud, but the ability of books themselves to provide a creative source of written storytelling. In an insightful reading, Fitz proposes Silko's Aunt Susie from *Storyteller* as the model for Silko's "writing storyteller." Aunt Susie represents the embodiment of two perspectives, one oral, one literary, one Laguna Keresan, and the other the Euro-American perspective gained by her Carlisle Indian School education. As a schoolteacher, bibliophile and storyteller, Aunt Susie is the inspiration, or to be more precise, the starting point for Silko's writing agenda for her constant (re)writing and acts of "glossing" or "translation" of orality that she performs in her various short stories and novels. Such an agenda stems from its inherent conflict where, like Aunt Susie, Silko finds herself caught between a "writerly acceptance of Laguna culture as literate and a desire to live and paradoxically to write in a culture that is primarily oral" (p. x). This conflict between the oral and the written is one that is constantly being played out in Silko's work and one which leads to a desire for reconciliation–what Fitz describes as Silko's "*writerly* dream of grounding the oral tradition and her texts in an ontologically privileged kind of universal language in which writing and orality are organically one, life-affirming, all-embracing, and motherly" (p. 7).

This act of textual healing and Silko's deepening commitment to a revitalized writing orality in her role as writing storyteller is charted progressively, chapter by chapter, by Fitz. Chapter 1, "Bears: Writing and Madness," establishes the vital link of Silko's nascent writing storyteller to an ontologically privileged shamanic perception gleaned from her bear stories: "From *Humaweepi, the Warrior Priest*," the story of "Shush" in *Ceremony*, and "Storyteller" from *Storyteller*. In these stories, a "special spiritual realm," where "the boundaries between words and things, myth and reality … are relaxed, if not erased" is explored to reveal the possibilities of the liminal not only for its traditional and ceremonial import, but for what it contributes to the act of writing itself (pp. 32-33). Silko's writing does not only reside in this liminal space, describing and evoking its "ancestral states and languages." Her syncretic approach also allows her to create with this liminality a "writerly, spiritual, and dialectical gesture that conflates creation and interpretation and informs the conceptual space not just of *Storyteller* but of all Silko's texts" (p. 50). However, it is Fitz's reading of the short story "Storyteller" which both signals the beginnings of Silko's self-conscious and self-reflexive role as a storyteller herself and reveals a sharply drawn epistemological opposition between Western technology and science and a Native non"dichotomous relationship with "nature and culture, the land and man" (p. 69).

If Fitz's treatment of *Storyteller* purposely dwells on the irreconcilability of two epistemological viewpoints in Silko's works, chapter 2, "Back to the Text," highlights a more ambivalent relationship between "writing and literate culture" also present in her writing (pp. 74-75). In a sensitively pitched reading of "Lullaby," Fitz investigates the medicinal role that Silko's writing can achieve, tracing the idea of writing as a "glossing" which is able to heal the devastating wounds a literate culture has inflicted on Native peoples. Through various legal documents and papers the illiterate Navajo mother, Ayah, learns of the death in combat of her son Jimmie, and unwittingly authorizes the legal removal of her remaining surviving children. While Silko, as the writing storyteller, cannot restore her children, she restores Ayah's maternal dignity and cultural memories by "wrap[ping] Ayah in a blanket of textuality or secondary orality, in such a naturally artful way that we cannot tell it from a Navajo blanket" (p. 90).

In chapter 3, "The Battle of Pie Town or Littlecock's Last Stand," and chapter 4, "Dialogic Witchery in 'Tony's Story,"' Fitz traces how Silko applies her artfulness to "gloss" both "historical" documents and journalistic reportage of actual events, respectively. He proposes Silko's "A Geronimo's Story" as a reversal of the idea of translator as "traitor" in a thinly disguised treatment of the exploits of Silko's great-grandfather and his brother as Laguna Regulars working with the U.S. Army in a campaign against the Apache raiders led by the elusive "Geronimo" (p. 93). Silko shows how a writing storyteller effectively translates the meaningful silences and highlights the subversive "rhetorical tracks" of Native voices which defy the "nostalgia, sentimentality and closure" of a particular fixed historical perspective (pp. 106, 113). In chapter 4, Silko's "Tony's Story," which bases itself on the "true" account of the 1952 killing of the policeman Nash Garcia by the Felipe brothers from Acoma, is reset from its original date of Good Friday to the feast day of San Lorenzo, which coincides with the date of the 1680 Pueblo revolt. This foregrounds not only the story's themes of conflicted syncretism–explored by Fitz's complex and brilliant reading of reflection, blindness, and vision in the story–but also introduces a subversive element in order "to rewrite as a classic narrative of ethnic resurgence the journalistic and legal story that is a classic example of the narrative of assimilation" (p. 119).

In chapter 5, "Coyote Loops: Leslie Marmon Silko Holds a Full House in Her Hand," Fitz proposes that Silko's non-traditional Coyote narrative produces a "warm, matronizing and equalizing" rewrite of a cold, Western , Flaubertian irony (p. 151)–what Fitz calls *discours indirect libre*–as well as a narrative sleight of hand where the story "'closes' as it opens with a narrative loop" (p. 146). Chapter 6's "*Almanac of the Dead*" explores Silko's "glossing" and translation of the Mayan codices whose use implies a "special ontological status" for her own (re)writings (p. 189). Yet it is, perhaps, the "difficulty" of *Almanac's* uncompromising anti-Western stance and what Fitz sees as the domination of "writing that desiccates, that devours, that kills" in the novel (p. 237) that prompts Fitz's arguably over-compensatory reading of what he himself admits is Silko's "flawed" novel *Gardens in the Dunes*. In chapter 7, "Tolle, Lege: Glossing Glossalalia in *Gardens in the Dunes*," the healing dichotomy between the written and the oral is seen as being completed in the "perfect language" that Silko proposes, which, according to Fitz, occurs in the Ghost Dance scenes and in the scene about the apparition on the Corsican school wall. For Fitz, this inclusive "perfect language" (occurring in both an indigenous and Christian context) is the ultimate signifier of the syncretic goal of *Gardens in the Dunes*. Its ecstatic expression is one of nonmediated communication–"an ontologically privileged aboriginal 'writing' that neither signifies nor rep-

resents, but coincides with being, with creation as a gift of tongues" (pp. 205-206).

While Fitz's ambitious and, at times, dense readings use seemingly disparate interpretive formulae to illuminate their many ways into Silko's work, they always honor the premise of her works as translating the voice of the storyteller into a "new syncretic tongue in which the oral and the written, the spirit and the flesh cannot be unraveled" (p. 234). Although his prose style can, at certain moments, approach hyperbole, this is reflective of the passion that Fitz himself feels for a writer whose own prose style and themes are not only inspired by both a wide-ranging literary background and the direct influence of ancestral spirits, but by an intrinsic commitment to indigenous social justice. This is, perhaps, the one area of Silko's conflicted syncretism that would have merited further investigation–contextualizing Silko's literary struggle between orality and textuality in a wider literary and social arena. Such an addition would have enhanced an already rich and inspired study that should, by its example, prompt further studies of a writer who deserves more of this kind of committed and engrossing critical attention across the full range of her work.

Note

[1]. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Penguin Books,1991), 217.

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