

Improvisations on the Genre: Maxine Hong Kingston's and Leslie Marmon Silko's (Auto)biographical Writings

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The genre of autobiography has been redefined, reformulated and transformed by recent theoretical and practical approaches. Poststructuralism destabilized a neat distinction into genres, feminist criticism pointed to the absence of women's texts in the study of autobiography and postcolonial studies emphasized issues such as hybridity and the absence of the essentialized self. Along with such innovations in the development of the theory of autobiography, there came a strong distrust of the unquestionable authority of the narrating self and the seamlessness of the narrative representation. Thus autobiographical writings expand their scope of interest and cease to be associated with representations of the male selves only. As Linda Anderson observes, autobiography has become the text of the oppressed or culturally excluded since it demonstrates a potential for representing a particular marginalized group through one's personal experience (Anderson 104). In ethnic literatures, autobiography emerges as a very popular genre which addresses such issues as self-representation, identity formation and history rewriting. However, it is important to point out that ethnic autobiography strays significantly from its traditional laws and instead offers a blend of distinct modes of expression.

This essay sets out to analyze Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*, which are often characterized as autobiographical and serve as good examples of how many similarities there are between the techniques employed by the writers who come from different cultural backgrounds. Such similarities point at some universal and general features of ethnic improvisations on autobiography. Interestingly, autobiography is an important stage in the development of both Asian American and Native American literatures.

Brief Historical Perspective

Asian immigration to the United States between 1840-1924 was prompted by active recruitment of labor for plantation, railroad, mining or field work. The temporary nature of Asian immigrants' stay in America and the fact that they were mainly laborers whose time was taken up by hard work did not afford opportunities for literary expressions. There are some poems by unknown authors in Chinese carved into the walls of the barracks on Angel Island, where immigrants were held before being allowed to enter the United States. There are also fragments of letters and diaries in Asian languages which survived until the present but apart from these exceptions, little is known about lives of Asian immigrants from the end of the nineteenth century (Kim 23). The absence of the early life writings is also explained by the fact that autobiography does not belong to the Eastern literary tradition. As Elaine Kim explains, "in China and Korea, writing and literature were the domain of the literati, who traditionally confined themselves to poetry and the classical essay" (24). To write autobiography was an unthinkable deed for a scholar as it would constitute a material proof of his egoism and overweening pride. The first Asian autobiographical writings in America were produced by representatives of the privileged social groups such as travelers, foreign students, scholars, or diplomats. Since for the American public the Chinese, or any other Asian culture, remained in the sphere of the exotic, these first writings performed the task of explaining the differences and bridging the gap between the East and the West. As Kim puts it, such writers saw themselves as "ambassadors of goodwill" (24) and therefore, understandably, their literary productions offered a very limited view of Asian cultures and instead of

countering superficiality of presentation present in American perceptions of the East, they provided entertaining and exotic descriptions of customs and ceremonies. The examples of such writings are Lee Yan Phou's *When I Was a Boy in China* (1887), Chiang Yee's *A Chinese Childhood* or, by the best known explicator of China to the West, Lin Yutang, *My Country and My People* (1937).

The first financially successful books by Chinese Americans which can be classified as autobiographical are Padre's Lowe's *Father and Glorious Descendants* (1943) and Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945, 1950). Lowe's book, although it provides descriptions of Chinese customs and ideas, it is in essence a critique of everything Chinese and glorification of the American culture. Obviously, the derogatory elements included in the descriptions of Chinese neighborhoods and people imply that the author chooses to identify with and embrace the American values rather than Chinese. As Kim concludes her analysis, *Father and Glorious Descendants* is a "sincere" and yet "a humiliating book" (63). In this context, Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* emerges as a more mature work as the dilemma of living in two distinct cultures remains unresolved. Wong struggles to be a filial Chinese daughter but at the same time values American respect for individualism. Unlike Lowe, Wong strongly accentuates the positive aspects of her Chinese identity and provides lively descriptions of Chinese family life. In contemporary Chinese American literature, autobiographical writings remain to occupy a prominent position, and are often adopted by women writers. One of the established trends includes the focus on and examination of the mother-daughter relationship in the context of autobiography, for example Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *The Kitchen's God Wife* (1991) or Gish Jen's *Typical American* (1992).

The study of the development of Native American literature also reveals the conspicuous presence of autobiography. Importantly, it is the postmodern reformulation of the Western essentialist understanding of the self that initiated the discussion of Native American self-writing in the context of the theory of autobiography. Previously, some scholars claimed that indigenous peoples were too primitive to have a sense of the self and be able to represent it through writing; others believed that autobiography is a genuinely Western invention and therefore, Native Americans were not interested in practicing it as they shared their stories orally (Sweet Wong 126). However, there is also a third group of critics such as Gretchen Bataille, Kathleen Mullen Sands, David Brumble III, Arnold Krupat and Hertha D. Sweet Wong who, although they recognize autobiography as a Western form, they still argue that it is practiced by Indian writers who modify and reformulate the genre introducing new cultural dimensions.

The development of Native American autobiography comprises three main stages: the early period with coup tales, self-examinations, self-vindications, educational narratives, and stories of quests for visions and power and pictographic drawings; the transitional period with collaborative life histories as well as written autobiographical narratives and finally, the contemporary period with written autobiographies in many innovative forms (Sweet Wong 126-127). Collaborative life histories were the first printed forms of autobiography intended for the American public. Their characteristic feature is that usually, a writer/editor, consciously or not, performs a cultural translation and includes a subjective evaluation. The earliest example is *The Life of Black Hawk*, a story narrated by Black Hawk, translated by a mixed-blood interpreter Antoine LeClaire and edited by John B. Patterson in 1833. Another famous example is *Black Elk Speaks* written down by John G. Neihardt, and from more contemporary examples *No Turning Back: a Hopi Indian Woman's Struggle to Live in Two Worlds* (1964) by Elizabeth Q. White narrated to Vada F. Carlson and *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders* (1990) by Julie Cruikshank in collaboration with

Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith and Annie Ned. The 1768 execution sermon by Samson Occum is believed to be the earliest written autobiography by an Indian (Sweet Wong 133). The next were William Apess's *Son of the Forest* (1829) and George Copway's *The Life, History and Travels of Kah-ge-gah-bowh* (1847). Among Indian women writers from this period best remembered are Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins and her *Life Among Piutes: their Wrongs and Claims* (1883) and autobiographical essays of Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (Zitkala-Ša) also known for her collection of Lakota legends and political activism. The beginning of the twentieth century introduces a very prolific writer, Charles Alexander Eastman and his two important works *Indian Boyhood* (1902) and *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* (1916), which are the examples of how Eastman adapts the form of conversion narratives (Sweet Wong 138). The contemporary period witnesses a proliferation of life writings in many various forms encouraged by the popularity and literary success of N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and his later autobiographical works *The Way To Rainy Mountain* (1969) and *The Names: A Memoir* (1976), which serve as excellent examples of Indian transformations of the genre. Other examples of autobiographical writings include Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* (1981), Gerald Vizenor's *Interior Landscapes: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors* (1990), Diane Glancy's *Claiming Breath* (1992) or Linda Hogan's *The Woman Who Watches Over the World: A Native Memoir* (2001) to name just a few. Undoubtedly, the writing of the self remains in the scope of interest of Indian writers and Indian autobiography enjoys immense popularity.

The Trap of Classification

The apparent popularity of ethnic autobiographies as a means to promote ethnic literatures has also its downsides. Any ethnic work is tied down by public's expectation on its main goals: on one hand, to address the problems of identity and on the other, to view one's personal dilemmas arising from existing in a bicultural background. Consequently, ethnic novels which do not concentrate on the identity issues might be, and often are, ignored by many American readers. Helena Grice points out that by valuing ethnic works (mostly Asian American works but also other ethnic literatures) predominantly as autobiography "is one way in which these texts are routinely devalued as literature: autobiography has traditionally been regarded as an inferior form of fiction and other literary genres" (Grice 81). Ethnic literatures do not exhibit a stable and fixed structure but instead are in a constant flux, actively trying to find new and more efficient forms for expression. The dynamic model of ethnicity is well expressed by Michael Fischer when he points out that ethnicity is "something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual" (195). What is more, new voices appear on the literary scene, for example the recent emergence of Thai American writing and thus the identity debates bring new conclusions. Helena Grice believes that in view of such facts, "assigning texts to a particular genre" fails to take account of such dynamics and does not demonstrate how writers "adopt, adapt abandon certain generic categories" (84). Genre is never as stable as it promises to be and neither is the boundary that claims to define it, as Jacques Derrida reminds us in his "The Law of the Genre" (203-204).

A classic example of genre problem is Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. Alfred A. Knopf's decision to publish Kingston's book as "autobiography" resulted in that fact that the Library of Congress classified the book as "United States-Biography" (Goellnicht 343). Apparently, the justification of this decision was the popularity enjoyed by previous Chinese American authors and their autobiographical works, namely Lowe's *Father and Glorious Descendant* and Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. *The Woman Warrior*, with its even more confusing subtitle, *Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, did wreak "the shift in perspective in autobiography" (Davis 42) to an unimaginable extent. Shortly after the publication of the book, Kingston was faced with very severe criticism on the part of Benjamin Chang, Jeffrey Chan and Frank Chin. Chin's attack on *The Woman Warrior* was based on his division of

genres into real –these which are based on Confucian heroic tradition and Asian fairy tales, and fake– works emerging from Christian and Western traditions. Kingston, by using autobiography –a fake form– shuns her communal responsibilities as a writer and is a pure example of seeking popularity at all costs. Kingston repeatedly refused to accept the so-called communal responsibilities and seemed less bothered by the confusion resulting from numerous attempts at classifying her works. In an interview conducted by Eric J. Schroeder in 1996 she seems satisfied that her works break through categories (216).

Fragmentation and the Lack of the Authoritarian Voice

In traditional autobiographies the narrative of the self usually takes a form of a linear journey from point A to B, from innocence to maturity and experience, from a spiritual struggle to conversion and final coming to terms with one's beliefs. This structure introduces the metaphor of spiritual or personal development as a journey where progress emerges as the desired objective and hence the success of autobiography relies on the ability to express this transformation. Ethnic autobiographies reject a linear development, which is also true for Kingston's and Silko's life writings. The most striking feature of the narrative structure in ethnic autobiographical works is fragmentation. To prevent the forming of value judgments in case of these works, one has to emphasize that it is by all means a different literary device than the one from the Western literary tradition. Fragmentation in modernist fiction, for instance in T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland* or Virginia Woolf's *Waves*, reflects disintegration or separation of an individual psyche, and introduces a sense of isolation and confusion together with a lack of a clearly defined point of reference. In postmodern writings, fragmentation reflects the mistrust of the presumed stability of language, the loss of authority as such and that of the 'master narratives.' In Native American and Chinese American (and generally Asian American) literatures fragmentation carries a different set of connotations and introduces a different set of cultural values.

Kingston and Silko write about the problems of co-existing on the borders of worlds. For the narrator of *The Woman Warrior*, it is the interplay of the world of China known only from her mother's talk-story and the world of the mainstream America. For Silko not only is it the clash of American and Laguna Pueblo cultures but also the dilemma of being of mixed-blood and thus fully belonging to neither of the two worlds. However, the fragmentation that is employed in the two writers' works does not express confusion or chaos. A lack of linear, developmental structure is not a shortcoming but instead, it corresponds to an episodic nature of memory in which the autobiographies are so deeply ingrained. As Rocío G. Davis observes "[t]he organization of the discrete narratives reflects the authors' attempts to control a series of fundamental memories, to understand their significance with regard to personal formation and self-representation, beyond the dictates of causality" (46).

The decision to discuss both *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, although the latter is often classified as either biography or nonfiction, is not coincidental. Kingston states several times in numerous interviews that originally the two works were "conceived as one huge book" (Rabinowitz 69). It was only later that she opted for a division into two separate works based on gender. If the labeling of *The Woman Warrior* as autobiography is in so many ways debatable, the same label attached to *China Men* may appear even more so. However, the idea behind the two books is the construction of an identity that would cope with difficulties arising from belonging to two distinct and, in many ways, conflicting cultures. To construct a stable identity, the narrator has to come to terms with her Chinese heritage, Chinese past, and also Chinese American past; to do that she has to stabilize her relationships with both the mother and the father. To answer questions about one's place in America, it is inevitable for the narrator to reconstruct her family's early years in the Gold Mountain. The key to this conceptual problem is the inevitable figure of the silent father. Therefore, the claim that

China Men is a logical thematic continuation of *The Woman Warrior* is valid and further suggests that it may be treated as “the second part” of the autobiography.[1]

The structure of the two books reveals that Kingston bases her strategy on a cycle of short stories which, in view of the fragmentariness of narrated events, seems an appropriate choice. Rocío G. Davis rightly points out that “[c]ycles emphasize breaks, beginnings and rebeginnings, episodic structuring of lives and selves” and “present the narrator’s process of memory as non-linear, associative, non-temporal, fragmented and incomplete, *making structure and content mutually reinforcing*” (my emphasis, 46). *The Woman Warrior* is divided into five sections: “No Name Woman,” “White Tigers,” “Shaman,” “At the Western Palace” and “A Song for A Barbarian Reed Pipe.” The first story, probably most often anthologized, features the narrator’s no name aunt who, for giving birth to an illegitimate child, is doomed to oblivion by her family. The first story commences the narrative of women in Maxine the narrator’s family and sets the tone for the identity discussion. The “White Tigers” section is an improvisation on the legend of Fa Mu Lan and introduces a figure of the woman warrior who becomes the no name woman’s counterpart. The third part unfolds the story of Brave Orchid, of the narrator’s mother in China where she is a pioneering doctor and scholar. “At the Western Palace” continues the story of the mother in the United States. In this section, Brave Orchid is juxtaposed with her shy and helpless sister Moon Orchid and the two women become a telling example of two different attitudes to life: the woman warrior and the no name woman. The last section comprises the story of the reconciliation between the mother and the daughter and, subsequently, between two cultures. In this part Kingston refers to a historical figure of Ts’ai Yen, a poetess captured by barbarians and again, by improvisation, she adds her meaning to the well known story. Although the five stories appear to be merely a selection of free associations, they constitute a thematic unity integrated by the figures of the woman warrior and the no name woman. The episodic structure of the narrator’s memory allows her to improvise on the well-known versions of myths, legends and family stories, to fuse memory, history and imagination. The common factor for all the sections is the narrator’s discourse which clearly situates her in the context of her maternal cultural tradition.

Similar strategies were employed in the history of men in Kingston’s family. The fragmented structure of *The Woman Warrior* is preserved in the style that blends fantasy, history and imagination. The father, unlike the figure of the mother, continuously refuses to give accounts of his past: “No stories. No past. No China” (*China Men* 18). Thus, what the narrator offers here is a collection of possible stories of Chinese American men from her family. In *China Men* Kingston pursues the subject of reclaiming American history, nationality and citizenship, a claim which exercises immense influence on the choice of the material. The arrangement of the book resembles a map and the history of men is presented in terms of their presence in various geographical areas: “The father from China,” “The great grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains,” “The grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains” or “The American father.” By tracing the presence of male family members, Kingston toys with the idea of the frontier and, as such, reasserts China men’s claim to American citizenship and American history. Similarly, as in *The Woman Warrior*, the episodic structure encourages a blend of fact and imagination. Kingston interweaves the (hi)stories of her father, uncles and grandfathers with improvisations on Western and Eastern myths by finding parallels and a common ground which justify their use. The best example is the opening story of Tang Ao captured in the land of women whose goal is the metaphorical presentation of forced feminization and humiliation of Chinese males in America.

The common feature of the two books is Kingston’s fascination with discovering possible versions of one event the example of which is found in the first story of *The Woman Warrior*.

The No Name Aunt is deprived of her name and life in the memory of her family members. The narrator receives a very limited access to the story, in fact, what the mother gives her is merely the warning not to disclose the secret: “You must not tell anyone . . . what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born” (*The Woman Warrior* 11). This meager and scant information is treated in the most creative way in order to reconstruct the possible version of the aunt’s story. Having no traces of the aunt’s life and being unable to inquire after it, the narrator turns to imagination to fill the missing gaps in the stories. The aunt may be a strong female figure who consciously refuses to reveal the name of her lover; perhaps a passive and intimidated peasant woman who obediently agreed to have sex with a strong and commanding man; a romantic person who lost good judgment when faced with true love; or simply a spiteful lunatic who drowned herself in the drinking water well. The same strategy is employed when Kingston attempts to reconstruct her father’s coming to America. This time, having nothing but her father’s silence at her disposal, she toys with numerous possibilities of legal and illegal ways of entering the United States. What Kingston offers is a multiplicity of versions, which never assert their truth content. The goal of this strategy may be twofold: either the narrator is making guesses herself and simply does not know the answer or she does know the answer but chooses not to reveal it in order to protect her father from “immigration ghosts.” Consequently, the multiplicity of versions may have one additional feature: that of preserving family and communal secrets. By including variant stories about the lives of men and women in her family, Kingston tries to validate these people’s experience into that of her own. Their presence makes her acknowledge that her identity, her “I” originates in other’s rich stories. Therefore, at the end of *The Woman Warrior* she admits that “[t]hat is a story my mother told me not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also am a story-talker. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine” (*The Woman Warrior* 184).

Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller* amazes by its fragmentation which only seemingly appears chaotic and disorganized. The structure of Silko’s autobiography lies at the core of the Laguna Pueblo tradition. *Storyteller*, a concise collection of short stories, poems, family reminiscences, memories and photographs, is a successful attempt to render the fundamentals of the Laguna life. The unifying themes of the book are the figure of the communal storyteller, the strong bond of people with the land, the cyclical nature of time, and the sacredness of ceremonies. Although the book is not organized into chapters, Linda Krumholz argues that it can be divided into six thematic sections: “Survival,” “Yellow Woman,” “Drought,” “Rain,” “Spirits,” and “Coyote.” The “Survival” section presents stories as an indispensable element for the culture to survive in the changing world; “The Yellow Woman” improvises on the traditional story of Kochininako and redefines the women’s roles and sexuality; the “Drought” and “Rain” sections reproduce rituals of the Pueblo tradition such as the Deer Dance; the “Spirits” part presents the cycles of death and life and the meaning of transformation while the “Coyote” chapter thematically returns to the first section and, in a humorous way, emphasizes the importance of stories (Krumholz 70-71). The process of reading within the thematic sections reveals the mechanisms of simulating oral tradition: the same stories are retold in various ways (poetry, short story, photography) and from different perspectives (the old timers’ and more contemporary one). Silko thus demonstrates that her story cannot have a chronological structure because it is a story continuously retold and altered by the community.

In one of the opening reminiscences, Silko asserts that “the oral tradition depends upon each person / listening and remembering a portion / and it is together – / all of us remembering what we have heard together – / that creates the whole story / the long story of the people. / I remember only a small part. / But this is what I remember” (*Storyteller* 6-7). Here she

introduces the idea that governs both her culture and the structure of her book: fragmentation. Silko's writing derives from oral tradition and is a communal phenomenon that cannot exist without the people who told these stories. In *Storyteller* there is no solitary voice that retells stories; there is a gathering voice that is the product of a community to which it is indebted and which recognizes and respects this interdependence. In her autobiography, Silko unfolds the (hi)story of distinguished storytellers in her family, Aunt Susie, Aunt Alice and Grandma A'mooh. She situates herself in a continuous generational line of Laguna storytellers, or as McHenry puts it: she "is picking up . . . where her aunt Susie left off" (107). However, as she invents her own voice and style, she is less an imitator and more a resourceful continuator. The importance of tradition is emphasized by the opening of Silko's unconventional autobiography which does not establish a distinct and independent "I," but instead explains a relationship between stories and photographs found in a Hopi basket in the family house. Therefore, in the case of Silko's and Kingston's, the multiplicity of voices justifies a suggested spelling of the name of the genre with brackets, as (auto)biography, which better expresses the interconnectedness of "I" and those who helped to shape it.

Storyteller is often read in the context of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyvocality and dialogic discourse (Cf. Arnold Krupat, Elizabeth McHenry). *Storyteller* is shaped as a polyphonic text and Silko takes "great pains to acknowledge and insist that even her own voice is a product of many voices" (McHenry 109). The polyphonic quality of the text comes out when Silko reconstructs a multiplicity of voices by faithfully repeating the stories as she heard them ("This is the way Aunt Susie told the story." *Storyteller* 7) and when she adds her own versions to the heard ones (as the "Yellow Woman" variations). The versions may vary in details often quite significantly, and the point of the multiplicity of stories is their simultaneous coexistence without any claiming one as "true," "superior" or in any conceivable sense, a "better" story. The question of truthfulness is never an issue in the Laguna Pueblo storytelling. What is more important is how captivating a story is, how well it is told and what effect it has on the audience. One of the renditions of The Yellow Woman story concludes with words: "My husband / left / after he heard the story / and moved back in with his mother. / It was my fault and / I don't blame him either. / *I could have told / the story / better than I did*" (*Storyteller*, my emphasis 98). The responsibility for a "failed" story is solely the storyteller's so to produce a satisfactory one, it is necessary to produce many versions. As Linda Krumholz observes "[f]or Silko . . . the fragmented narrative and multiplicity of voices represent an accretive, communal and dialogic creation of meaning and truth in which meaning and truth are conscious and negotiable constructs, neither fixed nor indeterminate, but restricted by moral limits conveyed in stories" (69).

Silko, just like Kingston, is also preoccupied with reclaiming the American past through a storytelling of her own. "A Geronimo Story," one of the short stories from *Storyteller*, enters into a dialogue with the established version of the history of Geronimo and the popular culture renditions of his life. Silko toys with the absence/presence opposition and subverts the definitions of chasers and the chased. Geronimo eludes his pursuers, metaphorically in language and literally in the army's inability to trace him. The story is accompanied by the photograph from 1928 presenting the Laguna Regulars of the Apache Wars. Again, Silko plays with the mechanisms of Indian stereotypes: a photograph of warriors should feature them wearing warbonnets and traditional costumes, and necessarily on horses. Silko's "warriors" are elderly men, nice and smiling and readily posing for a photograph.

(Auto)biography

Obviously, in the case of Kingston's and Silko's autobiographical works, it is impossible to talk about the genre in its traditional form. And indeed, the focus of such a discussion should not be on how much the two writers depart from the laws of the genre but instead on how

they modify and, by introducing culture specific elements, enrich and develop it. And it seems that innovations observed in Silko's and Kingston's works are present in other ethnic autobiographies. Thus, it is possible to say that the restructuring of autobiography is by no means a new phenomenon but rather an already established trend in the theoretical debates. Maureen Sabine makes such a general comment by saying that "[c]urrent autobiographical theory is more inclined to see self-representation as a complex synthesis of personal history, private fantasy, and compensatory fictions embedded in a larger family, social, or ethnic narrative" (3).

The transformation of the genre is based on the addition of other genres as much as showing that the boundaries dividing literature into categories may be crossed and reestablished. Kingston relies on a cycle of short stories which allows her to emphasize the mechanisms of constructing an ethnic identity and invalidate the stability of chronology and sharp distinctions between fact and fiction. Whenever she lacks factual material, she turns to imagination to continue the talk-story initiated by her mother. Similarly, Silko, as a storyteller, experiments with many ways of self-expression and therefore, her work may pose further classification problems. In Kingston's and Silko's autobiographical writings, there is no hierarchy that would place fact over fiction, myth or imagination. In both cases, this strategy of demeaning the fact/fiction binary comes from the tradition of storytelling and talk-story. Consequently, their works, apart from being interesting examples of ethnic autobiographies, are also cultural texts unspoiled by didacticism or by the so-called responsibilities of an ethnic writer.

The ethnic autobiography as cultural text is closely related with cultural mediation, with ethnography and anthropology. Trinh T. Minh-ha shuns the practices of Western anthropology by defining them in terms of "a conversation of 'us' with 'us' about 'them' . . . in which 'them' is silenced" (Minh-ha 67). Written mostly in an authoritarian voice, many anthropological works still place values according to the Western standards, and provide interpretations that tend to ignore the very object of the study. Silko's *Storyteller* is an example of the text that, through its explanatory attempts, mediates between the Laguna and mainstream American discourses. However, the two discourses are not juxtaposed to show them as competing. Silko does not perceive the American discourse as "pure" or "untouched" but as already changed by the influence of minority cultures and thus multilayered and mixed. Linda Krumholz refers to Silko's book as an "autoethnographic text" in which the "colonized merge their discourse with the colonizer" in order to take back the power of self-representation while addressing both (or more) communities as audience (65). *Storyteller* is not a text of exclusion, the author uses words from her native language but provides explanation for their meaning so that a non-native reader would not experience a sense of estrangement while reading the text.

In the process of explaining her culture, Silko employs photographs accumulated in the Hopi basket over the years. The fundamental idea governing the worldviews in Laguna Pueblo context is the inextricability of people from the land they belong to. To understand the stories which are full of descriptions of places, Silko includes visual images to help minimize the distance between the readers and the landscape which for many might seem unfamiliar. Elizabeth McHenry calls these photographs "the imaginative heart of the text" (103). Bernard A. Hirsch argues that photographs help Silko actively engage the reader in the storytelling ceremony (154). The arrangement of the photographs is not accidental; it complements the thematic sections set by stories, poems and memories. As a storyteller and explicator of her culture, Silko seeks to do away with one of the stereotypes perpetrated by the popular representations, namely the one concerning Indians' fear of being photographed. In a collection of essays on Laguna life, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, Silko writes:

“The Pueblo did not fear or hate cameras or the photographic image so much as they objected to the intrusive vulgarity of the white men who gazed through the lens” (175). The embodiment of this idea is the very Hopi basket with photographs taken by Silko’s father, Lee H. Marmon, and by some anonymous Laguna photographers. Photography, Silko claims, is as much a part of the Laguna tradition as storytelling, and its appropriation by the Indians shows their adaptability to change which is a motif often omitted in nostalgic representations of indigenous peoples. Photographs which are not uncommon for autobiographical writings, are seen by Silko as complementary to words and are used as a useful tool in the process of transforming oral tradition into a written form.

Considering how much writers like Maxine Hong Kingston and Leslie Marmon Silko transform the genre of autobiography, one may conclude that it is indeed a ‘vigorous’ genre which is currently being rediscovered and continuously redefined. Ethnic autobiographies make their own use of trends of redefining genres and thus discover a method of destabilizing the relations of power in the mainstream discourse.

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Note

[1] This claim finds justification in Maureen Sabine' *Maxine Hong Kingston's Broken Book of Life. An Intertextual Study of The Woman Warrior and China Men*, which shows how the two books create an internal whole.

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