

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У БАЊОЈ ЛУЦИ
ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

ФИЛОЛОГ

ЧАСОПИС ЗА ЈЕЗИК, КЊИЖЕВНОСТ И КУЛТУРУ

IV 2013 8

PHILOLOGIST

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, LITERARY AND CULTURAL STUDIES



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ACTING OUT TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE IN VIRAMONTES, KINGSTON, AND SILKO

Abstract: *The ethnic writing of Helena Maria Viramontes, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Maxine Hong Kingston offers patterns of the so called “redressive” rituals, the term introduced by the renowned anthropologist Victor Turner. According to this author, redress is the third stage of what he calls “social drama” or a crisis, which tends to be resolved in terms scripted by theatrical and fictional models.*

Keywords: *acting out, autobiography, ritual, trauma.*

1. Introduction

Of the three authors discussed in this paper, only Maxine Hong Kingston's fiction has been identified as openly autobiographical, but we can argue that the fiction of the other two women writers, Helena Maria Viramontes and Leslie Marmon Silko, also contains autobiographical elements. The *acting out*, as in the title of this paper, is the central strategy in the works of the three authors, and is a dramatic, *present tense enactment* of a past event, voluntary and upon suggestion, not a reproduction of the traumatic event, but its imaginative, invented performance. It mediates between an objective and an autobiographical narration (Leys 2000: 164–60).

Fiction by the three women writers enacts, in anthropological terms, healing rituals in an attempt to recover wholeness and meaning in times of crisis, as part of a process leading to resolution (or *redress*). The result of the ritual redress¹, according

¹ Redress, or *redressive action*, according to Turner, is the third phase of social drama (in the sequence of *breach – crisis – redress – reintegration*) and the origin of performance genres (Turner 1982: 126).

to the anthropologist Turner who studied both social and stage dramas and invented the terminology to describe their constituent parts, is “an increase in what one might call social or plural *reflexivity*, the ways in which a group tries to scrutinize, portray, understand, and then *act on itself*” (Turner 1982: 75). Out of this reflexivity, as *the way of showing ourselves to ourselves*, meaning arises in memory as a negotiation between past and present, whereas out of the meaning some value and good may arise as an act of the will. The redressive phase, which belongs to the space of liminality² and thus signals potential transition and transformation, has been scripted by theatrical and fictional models. (Ibid.: 74)

The works under discussion in this paper, Kingston's “No Name Woman,” Silko's “Lullaby” and *Ceremony*, and Viramontes' “The Cariboo Café,” all belong to

² “Liminality is a term borrowed from Arnold van Gennep's formulation of rites de passage, “transition rites,” – which accompany every change of state or social position, or certain points in age. “ (Turner 1974: 231-2). The term denotes the central stage in the transition, the “threshold crossing” (entering a new and unknown experience), and is derived from the Latin *limen* for threshold (my remark).

the narratives of liminality, and though they all reflect their authors' inner dramas, their context is clearly communal: the three writers imply that they are giving voices to the silenced groups in a struggle to reconcile past and present, towards a transition from one culture to another. They focus on the therapeutic effect of story-telling in addressing conflict and violence. Silko's novel sets up a model of a ritualistic acting out through a complex process of self-recognition and is therefore central to this discussion. One important technique in the works under scrutiny is re-memory or re-vision. Much of the works of three female artists can, thus, be also classified under the heading of autobiographical writing, which undertakes to deal with their author's own psychic traumas, functioning in the fiction as events which prompt transformation. They also frequently share in the group traumas of a particular community or ethnicity.

Let us be reminded, once again, of the most widely accepted definition of individual psychological trauma in literary theory, that of Cathy Caruth, who wrote:

In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena (1991: 11).

In much of theoretical literature on trauma the emphasis is on "bearing witness to trauma," the phrase introduced by Kali Tal in her doctoral dissertation and the resulting book, where she claimed that the various psychic journeys undertaken in trauma literature involve a move from fragmentation to wholeness marked by a conflict in which survivors fight ideological battles over a struggle for meaning (Tal 1996). Because trauma cannot be simply remembered, and cannot be simply confessed, it must be testified about, "in a struggle shared between a speaker and a

listener to recover something the speaking subject is not – and cannot be – in possession of," said another notable theorist Shoshana Felman (1991: 16).

Trauma has become the subject of some recent narrative theories which focus on the healing property of story-telling. In a new approach to history, New Historian's account of events becomes a narrative, not unlike what happens in psychotherapy. In the words of Hayden White:

"The sets of events in the patient's past which are the presumed cause of his distress, manifested in the neurotic syndrome, have been defamiliarized, rendered strange, mysterious, and threatening and have assumed a meaning that he can neither accept nor effectively reject" (2001: 1717).

It is not that the patient does not know the facts of the events. He knows them too well, but has, as White puts it, "overemplotted" them, that is, "has charged them with a meaning so intense that, whether real or merely imagined, they continue to shape both his perceptions and his responses to the world long after they should have become '*past history*'" (Ibid.). As in psychotherapy, the "patient" resists the intrusion into consciousness of the traumatized memory traces in the form that he obsessively remembers them: "The problem is to get the patient to 'reemplot' his whole life history in such a way as to change the meaning of these events for him and their significance for the economy of the whole set of events that make up his life" (Ibid.).

This reemplotting is a kind of *acting or acting out* past events which can never be identical to their original form. Collective traumas which make up the context of the stories under consideration are a result of a series of events during a protracted period of time, such as racial and ethnic conflicts.

In her *Hystories*, Elaine Showalter discusses the question of recovering traumatic memory manifested as hysteria (a

post-traumatic symptom) in abused children, raped (and otherwise abused) women, victims of incest, and soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Drawing on the authors who explored this problem, she focuses on the need to integrate traumatic memories into rational schemes and transform them into narrative language, in order to be relived and relieved (1992: 144-5). Much of the allegedly objective narrating about traumatic events is thus inherently autobiographical. In discussing autobiography, Shirley Neuman distinguishes between the humanist poetics of autobiography in which “the autobiographer is seen as discovering meaningful pattern in the flux of past experience in order to arrive at an understanding of himself as unique and unified,” and the post-structuralist poetics of autobiography (1992: 214). In the latter, autobiography becomes a new way of looking at the past, inspired by Adrienne Rich’s statement that for women “rereading, or ‘re-vision’ – “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” – is an act of survival, because “survival is, profoundly, a form of autobiography” (Rich 1993: 167). Shoshana Felman, building on Rich’s views, further expands the theory of “reading autobiographically” (Felman 1992: 13), which is an activity and a performance, and a means of representing trauma, a view adopted by the author of this text in a number of papers on literature by women and drama (Nastic 2011: 112-3).

2. Maxine Hong Kingston

Maxine Hong Kingston’s fictional autobiography, *The Woman Warrior* is about the quest for identity of a young Chinese-American, which is in one of the stories from this book, “White Tigers,” described as a search for “an unusual bird” to guide her on her quest (Kingston 1977: 51). Kingston’s narrator relies on both Chinese and American role models, but finally emerges

with her own idiosyncratic strategy of learning how to ‘fly,’ thus completing the metaphor of the bird as a model and inspiration. From a silent, almost mute girl, the narrator becomes a story-teller like her mother, in the concluding story of the book “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe.” The focus of this analysis is the opening story “No Name Woman,” where Kingston, through her first person narrator, writes about her growing up as a Chinese girl raised in America, a tragic story of her aunt’s life, a young woman from a village in China in the early 1900s. The story illustrates that traditional beliefs, taught by parents, influence a young person’s development, but that a creative author can both absorb and transcend such beliefs. The story of Kingston’s aunt, is told by her mother and opens with her mother’s saying

“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.” (Kingston 1975: 319)

The opening of the narration is deliberately ambiguous as to the credibility of the mother’s warning, since it is exactly the element of the forbidden that drives the author, the inheritor of two traditions, to give her voice to the silenced woman of the past and tell her story in order to make possible her own survival in a different world. “By including variant stories about the lives of men and women in her family”, writes Joanna Ziarkowska (2006: 123), Kingston tries to corroborate these people’s experience into that of her own. Their presence makes her confess that her identity, her “I” originates in others’ stories. Therefore, at the end of *The Woman Warrior* she acknowledges that “[h]ere 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” (Kingston 1977: 184).”

The narrative technique Kingston uses is common to many American women writers belonging to non WASP or mixed ethnicities, with the woman from the past featuring as a kind of a ghost, one who has transgressed social boundaries and has consequently been repressed in the memory of the living, but who cannot be easily eliminated from consciousness. Tony Morrison described this process of coming to terms with the 'ghosts of the past' as rememory, central to her novel about slavery, *Beloved*. In Morrison's novel the ghost-girl *Beloved* is a reminder of the girl who was killed by her mother to be saved from the humiliation of slavery, while in Kingston's story the nameless aunt who became pregnant out of marriage in the absence of her husband, drowned together with her baby to avoid violence and humiliation. In both cases authors illustrate the impossibility of erasing the memory which has to be acted out and re-emplotted in order to become acceptable for the narrators. "No Name Woman," write Gilbert and Gubar,

"inspires the narrator to reinvent her as the legendary maternal figure with whose tale Kingston concludes the book – the second century poet Ts'ai Ye, who transcended the trials of exile, rape, and impregnation by transmuting her sorrow into songs." (Gilbert and Gubar 1994: 380)

The book is clearly about a rite of passage of the heroine-narrator, Kingston herself. It is not simply a realistic account nor is it a straightforward memoir. While telling the stories of her mother and aunts, the author is coining her own language charged with symbols, metaphors and allegories to express her overwhelming creativity, while singing for all of her sisters of both China and America, like the ancient poetess Ts'ai Ye. The story, told in retrospect after several decades, testifies to acculturation as survival, not so much physical as spiritual, through what Turner would call a redressive ritual, leading towards a

reintegration of the protagonist into the society.

3. Leslie Marmon Silko

Leslie Silko (born 1948) is one of the leading Native American authors who, to quote *The Encyclopedia of World Biography*, "has deepened her affiliation to her tribe through her books, which draw on Laguna myths and story-telling traditions."³ Among her several notable works, her story "Lullaby" and the novel *Ceremony* deserve our consideration as illustrations of how traumas can be 'acted out,' both individually and collectively. In "Lullaby," Ayah, an old Native American woman who hardly speaks English and cannot write, remembers tragic events of her life which is clearly nearing its end in utter material poverty and social humiliation: the loss of her elder son in the white people's war, and her two young children taken away by the state to be given to rich (white) families. She also recollects happy memories of her mother and her grandmother who told her stories, "the myths to live by," wove them in the way similar to weaving the wool into yarn to produce warm and protective fabrics for the long winters of life. Ayah, wrapped in her son Jimmie's blanket, her only possession, is searching for her husband Chato who has gone into town with a government check to spend it on drink. This last time they go out into the snow, homeless, he falls asleep, and she sings him a lullaby she never sang to her children. She is aware he is going to die: her lullaby is about the return to nature after death – the never-ending cycle, a small ritual of unification with Earth the mother, and peaceful acceptance of death. The verse is actually a Laguna native people's creation myth:

³ (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/leslie-marmon-silko/29/09/2012>)

The earth is your mother,
 She holds you.
The sky is your father,
 He protects you.

Sleep

Sleep.....

We are together always

We are together always.

There never was time

when this was not so. (Silko 2006: 2836-7)

The story 'Lullaby' takes place in present time, invoking the sad history of the native peoples of America, with a glimpse of hope in their traditional way of life and beliefs.

At the opening of Silko's novel *Ceremony*, we are informed that the story is told by Thought-Woman (from Puebla mythology), the spider woman who spun the world into existence. And through the power of the word, Thought-Woman 'named things and as she named them they appeared.' Silko thus emphasizes the power of words and of story-telling, in the Pueblo people's tradition:

I will tell you something about stories

...They aren't just entertainment.

They are all we have, you see,

 All we have to fight off

 Illness and death. (Silko 1977: 1)

The hero of the novel *Ceremony*, Tayo, is emotionally broken by the experience during WWII in Asia where he had to fight against people that were of his own race and colour. His mother was a prostitute, his father is unknown, and he is raised by his aunt who is a Christian and despises Tayo as a bastard. Silko presents a healing ceremony for all of us. She deals with evil in the world in a modern context, and how to cure it.

Tayo had a cousin Rocky who was a full-blooded Indian but believed in assimilation, while Tayo believes in following native tradition. They were in the war together. Tayo promised to bring Rocky back home safe, but Rocky died in his arms. He couldn't fulfill another promise either – to

his uncle Josiah, his surrogate father, to keep a special breed of cattle bought to survive harsh weather. They are scattered south to Mexico. The young protagonist cannot kill the Japanese people who resemble his own. While in the wet jungle he prayed against rain and his request seems to be answered at home by a draught. The feeling of complete disappointment and repulsion makes Tayo sick and he is hospitalized with post-traumatic stress disorder. When back at home he wakes up crying – his dreams are about his dead beloved. His grandmother proposes a medicine man. The protagonist embarks on a quest for his wholeness and health, against the evil of the world represented by the people called "destroyers" who fear and therefore hate the world.

In his quest he moves around the space known as Trinity Site where they exploded the first atomic bomb. Ultimately Silko says that such destructive power unites people in "the fate the destroyers planned for all of them" (Silko 1997: 246-7). Healing comes when he realizes that there is "the way all stories fit together – the old stories, war stories, their stories – to become the story that was still being told" (Ibid.). Tayo thus became aware that he was not crazy, and saw the world with, "no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time" (Ibid.). The power of Silko's story is in her theory of healing, which is the ritual that helps the escape from the evil embodied in the "destroyers."

In one of the poems in the novel Silko says: "The only cure I know is a good ceremony" (Silko 1977: 3). The whole novel is a ceremony of cure. It diagnoses the sickness, and gives a cure. Part of the healing process is male-female dialogue. Traditional healing ceremonies are not adequate for the healing of someone who has been contaminated by modern evil. Navajo healer Betonie informs Tayo that changes in the ceremony have to be made. Betonie performs the traditional ceremony but also

teaches Tayo self-knowledge, responsibility for what he is: a mixture of several cultures, races, languages, times. Tayo must learn not to blame somebody else for his pain, not to continue the chain of hatred and violence.

During his ceremony Tayo travels to the four quarters of the world: south (future?), to find Josiah's cattle; west, to Gallup where he was born and where he finds old Betonie (past?); east to the site of atomic bomb testing (present?); north to find the sacred woman, Water Mountain (himself - all these). At the same time he also travels within himself to find the center there. The episode of the sacred woman has a special significance. She is the wife of a hunter. In Pueblo mythology there is a Yellow Woman, Winter's wife, who meets summer one day and invites him to sleep with her while her husband is out hunting deer. In the myth both man agree that this holy woman will spend part of the year with Winter and part with Summer, this signifying the harmony in the world. Tayo is led by the woman to a moment 'in the sunrise' where everything was beautiful and harmonious (Silko 1977: 182). At this moment Tayo was at the center.

The love heals Tayo, but the woman warns him that destroyers don't want their story to continue. Tayo went to the mountains to escape a mental hospital. His former friends, violent young man, are sent to find him. While he is watching them hidden, they perform their cruel ritual on one of them, expecting Tayo to come out and stop the torture. Tayo is tempted, but finally realizes that they wanted him to complete the deadly ritual, and decides to go back to the village and report on this event. Thus he escaped evil (sorcery) which returned upon itself, while he is healed (Lundquist 2004: 71-80).

What Silko performs in her major novel is the revision of the initiation ritual for the whole community in order to come to terms with the past, and to be able to live

in the present. Sophie Croisy sees Silko as a "theorist of trauma" in *Ceremony*.

"In her texts" – says Croisy, "Silko brings forth the historical value of the cultural metaphor of the web (a crucial symbol in Laguna cosmology) to assert the non-singularity of trauma's represent ability, the interdependency of certain traumatic stories and traumatized bodies, the building or re-building of connections between these traumatized bodies through a critique of dangerous systematic and symbolic interventions in the healing process, and the redefinition of death as a new starting point (though a rather morbid one) in the process of building human connections (with one's own lost cultural matrix or between enemy cultures). In short, Silko participates in the process of rethinking and reshaping trauma theory" (Croisy 2006: 87).

Even closer to the genre of fictional autobiography is Silko's *Storyteller*. "The structure of Silko's autobiography lies at the core of the Laguna Pueblo tradition," writes Joanna Ziarkowska (Ziarkowska 2006: 7) who further says:

"*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."

Ziarkowska, who studied Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and *Chinaman*, and Silko's *Storyteller*, discovers many analogies between the two authors (Ziarkowska 2006: 7).

Silko is praised by Marta Ramos Oliveira (Oliviera 2009: 156) for her devotion to oral tradition which she helps keep alive, and for showing the importance of storytelling as a way of life. In this way she subverts the Western myths of superiority, conquest, and progress, dismantling the binaries such as "oral versus written, Indi-

an versus white, myth versus reality, authenticity versus change, modern versus traditional, center versus margin, photography versus storytelling". *Ceremony* and Silko's other works are modern examples of initiation rites in a multicultural world, linked to the redressive, healing rituals, and the symbolic rebirth of the protagonist in the psychological and the social sense.

4. Helena Maria Viramontes

In the stories of Helena Maria Viramontes, of special interest is her construction of the concept of the American Third World, and within it, the position of women. Helena Maria Viramontes has become famous for her short stories and their superb depictions of Chicano culture, inspired by her own family and friends. In an interview she said: "If my mother showed all that is good in being female, my father showed all that is bad in being male"⁴ Viramontes focuses on the suffering and pain of Chicana women within the family, the culture, and the society. In the short story "Growing," for instance, which is included in her collection *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985), the young heroine learns that her father becomes estranged from her as she grows up because she is a woman and thus something alien to him - the Other (Viramontes 1995: 36).

In her "Cariboo Café" Viramontes gives her voice to the traditionally silenced Latin American woman represented as an embodiment of the mythical figure of La Llorona, the ghost or symbol of a woman who transgressed the social norm in some way, and as a consequence was condemned to suffer, to lose her man and her children, whom she continues to mourn and search for. The nameless woman from El Salvador, "in a state of post-traumatic shock" (Sandoval 2000: 87), has lost her son in the brutal civil war but cannot stop looking for

him in the "third world" of LA which, in her mind disturbed by pain and suffering, she perceives as an extension of her native country, while trying to escape the pain of her former reality in a process analogous to Pierre Janet's notion of dissociation⁵. She imagines she has found him in a little immigrant boy whom she takes home and looks after tenderly. At the "Cariboo Café," supposed to be a meeting point of all immigrants, she is betrayed by the white American owner of the café who, although he too had lost a son in the Vietnam war and belongs to the working class, identifies himself with the official state policy and "the American Way." The story ends with the woman confronting police and being shot, thus becoming "a warrior woman" (Sandoval 2000: 87) like Kingston's heroine, and "a symbol of resistance" (Sandoval 2000: 89).

Viramontes, together with other Chicana authors, struggles to articulate the voice of the silenced and oppressed women of her community and of the Third World in general: "I want to do justice to their voices. To tell these women, in my own gentle way, that I will fight for them, that they provide me with my own source of humanity." (quoted in Sandoval 2000: 79) As Anna M. Sandoval observes, Viramontes adapted a theme from Chicana literature and myth into an international story and gave it a more universal character. The use of La Llorona character and its merging with the story of the washer woman serve to shift the personal "I" to the communal "we," which happens in the passage "The women came from the depth of sorrow to search for their children. I join them, frantic, desperate, and our eyes become scrutinizers, our bodies opiate with the scent of their smiles." (Viramontes

⁴ (<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/artistpages/viramontesHelena.php/30/09/2012>).

⁵ Psychological defense; existence of two states of consciousness, one of them trying to suppress the painful memory. Pierre Janet (1859-1947), proponent of the theory of dissociation was a French psychologist, philosopher and psychotherapist.

1995: 72) One woman's quest thus becomes every woman's quest. The voice of the "I" becomes the voice of a witness, one who can articulate violence, and in its plural, "we," speak with a multiplicity of voices, as Vailakis puts it (Vailakis 2000: 99). We can agree with Vailakis that Viramontes is "re-reading the culture" in the way feminist authors defined it, in order to keep the tradition alive by the act of writing, the act of storytelling, which becomes a ritual of healing similar to that in Kingston's and Silko's prose. (Vailakis 2000: 94, 103).

5. Conclusion

Kingston, Silko, and Viramontes are chosen as the case studies among numerous other American ethnic authors who are participating in the creation of a new, multiethnic culture. Ziarkowska, who calls Kingston and Silko's work "ethnic autobiography," writes how the two authors have modified the traditional genre and how they, "by introducing culture specific elements, enrich and develop it" (Ziarkowska 2006: 9). This accurate description can be applied to all three authors discussed in this paper.

The three women writers have broken the silences to which their sex, class and ethnicity have been subjected, in the words of Tillie Olsen, especially those who "never came to writing... the barely educated, the illiterate, the women. Their silence is the silence of centuries as to how life was, is, for most of the humanity. Traces of their making, of course, [can be found] in folk song, lullaby, tales, language itself, jokes, maims, superstitions..." (Olsen 1978: 10) "We who write," says Olsen, "are the survivors," explaining in the note that for her survivor "contains its other meaning: one must bear witness for those who foundered; try to tell how and why it was that they, also worthy of life, did not survive. And pass on ways of surviving; and tell our chancy luck; our special circumstances" (Olsen 1978: 39). Hopefully, this paper has

proved this to be true in the case of all three of these major American women writers, Kingston, Silko and Viramontes.

In their fiction, Kingston, Silko and Viramontes are positioned between a shamanistic, social role in negotiating the modes of integration of different communities of people who have to live together and survive (Chinese and white American in Kingston, native and white American in Silko, and Chicano and white American in Viramontes), and the artistic role of a creator of new genres, new modes of representation, to express the specific link between the personal and the political in post-colonial America. They speak through their protagonists, mostly women, except in Silko's *Ceremony*, thus building part of their own experience into their fiction, re-living and relieving their own traumas through collective rituals, in an act of the complex process of *survival* in contemporary America.

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ОДИГРАВАЊЕ ТРАУМЕ И НАСИЉА КОД ВИРАМОНТЕСОВЕ, КИНГСТОНОВЕ И СИЛКОВЕ

Резиме

У раду се анализира аутобиографска проза три америчке етничке списатељице, Максин Хонг Кингстон, Лесли Мармон Силко и Хелене Марије Вирамонтес, уз ослањање на антрополошке теорије о аналогијама између друштвене и уметничке драме коју је развио Виктор Тарнер. У приповеткама „Безимена ратница“, „Успаванка“ и „Карибу кафе“, као и у роману *Церемонија*, уочавају се обрасци такозваних *корективних ритуала* као облика друштвене драме у њеном завршном степену превазилажења настале кризе. Три ауторке пружају примере зацељења личних и колективних траума кроз њихово уметничко представљање у облику фиктивних аутобиографија.

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