Emergence: A Commonplace Look at the Lyric Novel

Justine Chan

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2015

Committee:

Shawn Wong

David Bosworth

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

English, Creative Writing

University of Washington

Abstract

The Abstract of the Creative Writing Capstone Project

Justine Chan

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Creative Writing Director Andrew Feld
English, Creative Writing

Ten short stories concerned with themes of loss, language, identity, folklore, relationships, family, landscape and place, and so on.

In late March of my senior year of undergraduate, I stomped into my poetry professor Michael Madonick's office hours and declared, "I want to write a 'Dear Daddy' poem." After patiently listening to me (totally on the verge of tears) explain my story, Madonick said, "Write it—but not as a poem. Write it in prose." And so, I ended up writing a memoir. It was the most cathartic and best writing I had ever done for myself even to this day. I haven't looked back at the piece for many years now, but I still remember the feeling: it could not have been written in any other form.

Baudelaire, dedicatory letter to Arsène Houssaye: "Who among us, in his ambitious days, hasn't dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical, without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience?"

Is it such a miracle? How will we know when such a miracle has happened?

From a handout from *Ann Hamilton: the common SENSE*: "Commonplacing was once a common verb that referred to the process of reading, copying out, and managing selections from one's books. The practice has its origins in antiquity in the idea of *loci communes,* or 'common places,' under which ideas or arguments could be collected for use in different situations. A commonplace book is a model for organizing and arranging the collected excerpts of a reader and reflects the idiosyncratic interests and practices of an individual's organization of knowledge."

I started my own commonplace book at 18, before I knew the term "commonplace book." The cover has "Guaranteed Irish Linen" written on it with pictures of maps. It's filled with the titles of books I've read and quotes that will always strike my heart (an axe to a frozen sea).

This is a kind of commonplace book.

Some of Carol Maso's questions from "Notes of a Lyric Artist Working in Prose":

"How to prolong the lyric moment?"

"What is narrative?" (32)

"How to incorporate the joys and pleasures, tenderness, delicacies, the generosities and seductions of the novel and its narrative capacities with the extraordinary, awesome capabilities of poetry? There's the challenge. Who is up to it?" (53)

My quest/questions (in no particular order):

What happens when poets write novels? Or when novelists write poetic prose? What happens to Language? What happens to stories then?

What is this cross-genre space these novels occupy? What is lyric space? What are the possibilities of this space? Why write in this space?

How does time work? How do these poets' novels gather momentum?

What constraints or obstructions do these novels work under?

How do I write into this space? What do I need to know first?

How does one transition from writing short prose poem stories to prose poem novels?

How does one write about trauma? Or madness? What are the relationships among cross-genre and trauma and madness?

What role does or should Landscape and Place take in our writing? How should one write about specific landscapes or places?

Why the constant pull towards folklore?

How do I write about my experiences and/or emotional states with any kind of justice? How does one write without bleeding all over the paper?

What is at the heart? The heart of the madness, the heart of writing?

According to Stephen Fredman in *Poet's Prose,* the hybrid, cross-genre territory of poet's prose, also known as the "last genre," is a precipice—edgy and threatening. He goes so far as to say that "the choice by major poets to write in prose rather than the venerable forms of verse … constitutes a 'crisis of verse'" in its "mixture and ultimate abolition of genres" (3).

I have chosen to discuss primarily Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient,* Paul Harding's *Tinkers,* Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony,* and Li-Young Lee's memoir, *The Winged Seed.* The singular thread concerning form that holds them together is they all function and read as long prose poems. And/or poet's novels. Whether or not there truly is a crisis of verse, each of these pieces revolve around their own crisis and traumas, navigating and understanding their stories within a lyric framework.

Encountering Ursula Le Guin's "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" was monumental and refreshing for me. She critiques the traditionalist approach to fiction—the only thing I had known of Story—that a narrative must have a hero who spears his or her way through the piece like an arrow or machete, and that the central concern must be conflict. Conversely, she offers:

> the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag. A book holds words. A word holds things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us (153).

Considered in this way, narrative makes more sense to me, in the shapes it can take. Every word is precious. The "tools" of literary arts—opsis, melos, lexis, character, plot, and theme—can be held in balance, where every part is vital.

From Maggie Nelson's *Bluets,* #215: "It often happens that we treat pain as if it were the only real thing, or at least the *most* real thing: when it comes round, everything before it, around it, and perhaps, in front of it, tends to seem fleeting, delusional" (87).

This may simply be a discussion / a matter of survival.

Each of the poet's novels I'm working with is lyrical. The lyric is difficult to define, and even more difficult to define well. Most of all, what I gather is that the lyric seems to be a poetic gesture towards capturing the specific gradients and complexities of an individual's emotion state in a certain time period. It can be "a suspension or interlude, a unique intensification of literary language." Or an intimate, solitary, overheard utterance of dream or vision (Brewster 6). It is often written from the speaker of the lyric "I," which is itself both vague and inclusive; the speaker can speak for the poet, reader, or a universal sense of self (31). And inherent and integral is the sense of performance, of music, the vestigial lute strum humming beneath the language.

The lyric, specifically the love lyric, the elegy and the religious poem, also holds a particular and wondrous power in how it attempts to confront emotions and world of the unutterable and bridge gaps in time as it "place[s] a textual self in dialogue with the other …

often deploying elaborate modes of address in an attempt to bridge the gap between the 'I' and an unattainable presence … The lyric mode strives to reach beyond the limits of language, yet it remains anchored in the present moment of its utterance" (113).

In any case, the way the lyric evades a certain "true" definition is its strength. And as G. Gabrielle Starr in *Lyric Generations* describes, the lyric "is an ideal that calls as loudly for violation as for worship" (125). The challenge is exciting, but how does one violate the lyric? How does one worship it? Is poetic prose a violation or worship of the lyric, or does it not matter?

I chose these particular poet's novels for their evocation of place and landscape as I admire the sense of place and landscape that emerge and I am striving to learn from the. I myself often write to capture different places and landscapes, to understand the spaces between place and displacement.

I have always been fascinated by Leslie Marmon Silko's explanation of the connections between folkloric histories and Landscape in her essay, "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination." Here, in the arid, harsh Pueblo desert, we see a culture where the people do not distinguish themselves as separate from the land, but rather, they recognize the profound, complex and fragile interrelatedness of everything in the landscape, and that the key to survival depends upon harmony and cooperation among all things (265). And within the Pueblo culture, stories hold paramount importance, serving as maps of the landscape and keepers of the tribe's collective memory. Whether the geographical features of the landscape or the story came first in many cases is often unknown—the stories lead to recognition of the land in all its rich detail (268-269). Ultimately, "not until [the Puebloans] could find a viable relationship to the terrain,

the landscape they found themselves in, could they *emerge*" and become themselves (270). Silko further likens landscapes to dreams in that:

> both have the power to seize terrifying feelings and deep instincts and translate them into images—visual, aural, tactile—into the concrete where humans may more readily confront and channel the terrifying instincts or powerful emotions into rituals and narratives which reassure the individual while reaffirming cherished values of the group. The identity of the individual as a part of the group and the Greater Whole is strengthened, and the terror of facing the world alone is extinguished.

While this Pueblo culture is not mine, I would like the places and the landscape in my writing to reflect these beliefs: we are made up of the many places we have visited and belonged to and we carry them with us. I want to take up the role of a translator, a bird watcher, a small element in a vast land. I want stories where the emotion and language and places I write of bind us all together.

Almásy of *The English Patient* on maps and stories and lives, on landscape, on how we are all connected: "We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for all this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe in such cartography—to be marked by nature … We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps" (261).

For Starr, the novelistic approach to the lyric is different, where the novels assemble disparate, fragmented generic parts. In fact, the "absorbed lyric … creates a substitute for fragmented experience, a surrogate community or consensus. Lyric prose in novels often mediates, chiastically, between two viewpoints or experiences, describing and determining the relationship between them" (114). In a way, this lyric prose in novels seems natural; as the lyric has powerful roots in narrative form, especially with the ballad, romance, and epic, the novel genre further "provides the groundwork of coherence that links one lyric moment to another (167).

According to Fredman, American poets have turned to prose for freedom, "the freedom to construct a poetic entity capable of including what poetry has been told to exclude" (7).

Almásy of *The English Patient* on the construction of memory and desire: "When we meet those we fall in love with, there is an aspect of our spirit that is historian, a bit of a pedant, who imagines or remembers a meeting when the other had passed by innocently … But all parts of the body must be ready for the other, all atoms must jump in one direction for desire to occur" (259).

This quote was interesting to consider as I find that the spirit of the historian is always present in the way I think and write, even if the historian(s) of my mind or the minds of my characters do not necessarily focus on romantic relationships. When brooding on a story, before I even begin to consider plot (and I don't tend to focus on plot so much), I am always more interested in a particular and very specific emotional state, or the strange situations that provoke particular, specific emotional states. The questions I then have to contemplate are: how did

(royal) we get to this state? What is going on right now, in this situation? Where are we? Why are we here? Where are we going? It is always difficult to answer the last question and so much easier to look back; the past always holds more breadth.

I also like this quote because it captures the romanticism and nostalgia and unreliability that come with looking back: suddenly the smallest, insignificant events gain so much meaning, and everything becomes a matter of coincidence.

Li-Young Lee on North American poetry: "I think that sometimes it's afraid of schmaltz. You know, "schmaltz" literally means chicken fat. For me there is good schmaltz and bad schmaltz. You're born, you die, people go to weddings, people go to war, they come back crippled, they come back heroes; it's all schmaltz. Everybody's walking around wounded; everybody's falling in love with the wrong people. Life is schmaltz, and we sometimes forget that. There are poets like Yehuda Amichai, Neruda and Rilke who don't forget that good schmaltz" (Fluharty).

Sometimes we cannot control the inevitable dramatic things we *have to* and *must* write about. For Hardings, he describes the process of leaping off from a "half-dozen, handful linchpin premises that are based in fact … basically family stories" to a novel as: "I just took those one or two sentence premises and tried to imagine the sentence before and the sentence after until the fictional material hit its own critical mass, its own momentum, and took over. I imagined it all and just kept writing until they started to overlap together."

Consequently, *Tinkers* is very much fiction where he has turned his family story into legends and myths, so that they mutate into the "spirit of the thing," which is more important than the truth (Filgate).

The lyric and narrative seem to be two oppositional forces in regards to both history and form. Boiled down, it is simply a matter of Time:

> Whereas narrative requires temporal progression and sequentiality, lyric is a suspended moment that stops the time of narrative and focuses instead on the "now" of composition and reception. Within this moment of suspended time, the poet can give free play to thought and emotion, associating ideas and images that would not be linked by the chains of cause and effect that typically govern narrative. The lyric poet can also make use of this freedom from temporal progression to linger on the formal and figurative aspects of language, thus calling attention to it as language. In contrast, the interests of narrative cannot afford to dwell indefinitely on the formal beauties of its language" (Morgan 3-4).

The key term for this frozen, suspended time of the lyric is *simultaneity.* Thus, the difference between lyric and narrative, if we're looking for an image to properly capture it, is a single photograph versus a film (a series of sequenced linked stills).

Nelson quotes Goethe in his worries over how "to keep the essential quality [of the thing] still living before us, and not to kill it with the word" (74). Yet, isn't the best thing we can do sometimes is write? Yet, I, too, worry. I worry that writing about [the thing], dwelling on / in [the thing] so much, has a way of biting back / killing us.

At the heart of the lyric / poetic prose / these poet's novels / I believe, is music. Although the lyric was once inseparable from music, music has become vestigial (Brewster 16). Moreover, music and poetry as a whole have grown far enough apart that: "the 'thought' of music is

different from the 'thought' of poetry … The two arts can only meet on an emotional plane" (Lewis 35).

Yet, I find there is still music, that is, the true music of the lyric / poetic prose / poet's novels lies in Robert Frost's concept of "sound of sense." As Frost describes, the sound of sense is the sound of living emotion behind a sentence—"the abstract vitality of our speech"—"pure sound—pure form"—the "intonation entangled somehow in the syntax idiom and meaning of a sentence" (59, 61). While Frost strives to "make music" out of the sound of sense, I want to argue that the sound of sense *is* music. And that is because, somewhere, the roots of language and music are the same. I believe it has to do with, in musical cognition terms, cadenced interjections, the pre-musical and pre-linguistic communicative and expressive auditory gestures that are tied to our emotions, our instincts—our basic caveman reaction to the world. Moreover, the sound of sense is also connected intrinsically to the body, so much so that "the ear is the only true writer and the only true reader" (66) and "words exist in the mouth not in books" (62). In this way, the sound of sense is organic and inherited, a kind of legend.

How/Why folktales and folklore seem to fit into this discussion: "In folk-poetry things happen" (Lewis 52). I can only imagine that these things are compelling, intricate, and interrelated.

Maso on music:

"Not to forget the lost songs of the troubadours and the unfixed relationship between words and music. A way in prose perhaps of speaking to some of my extraordinary solitude.

The beauty and terror of silence intrigues me. Poetry reveres silence. Fiction too often tries to fill it up. And sound, voluptuous, reinsisting itself against that backdrop of silence, takes on a different quality" (49).

"I am made from planets and wood, diamonds and orange peels, now and then, here and there … I feel sorrow so deep it must be love" (Harding 136).

Russell Edson on why poetic prose: "Something that needs expression is not being fully released by regular poetry. It may simply be a time of re-thinking poetry, the kind of rethinking that cannot be done inside poetry for a while."

While I could begin to understand the sound of sense from my experiences as a singer-songwriter (i.e. As "a sentence is a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung" (Frost 63), the sound of sense is much like a song melody before lyrics attach themselves to specific parts of the melody sound), I also truly understood the sound of sense when I memorized poems for Friday Harbor. While I was assigned to memorize Keats' "Ode to Autumn," I also chose to memorize Yeats' "When You Are Old," Dickinson's "[I Started Early – Took My Dog]," and Louise Bogan's "To Be Sung on the Water." And the interesting aspect of memorizing was that while I could focus on the ordering of the words themselves, it was easier to follow the sounds and rhythms behind each poem. And the more I recited the poems to myself, the more they became like charms, like prayers. "Ode to Autumn" felt the most like a prayer: I was out by myself at Greenlake on a September night watching for the aurora—which never appeared—trying to memorize it on my phone, and I was cold and terrified, and the poem

grew and stretched colossal in my mind, in all its sounds. It felt like the one thing keeping me safe.

When poetic prose is re-envisioned as song, there seems to be something more, a certain lingering, haunting quality to the language and theme. This sentiment best appears in Brigit Kelly's "Song," a lyrical poem that tells the tale of a little girl's goat whose head gets hacked off by some boys, the eerie song of the goat's head echoes on in the boys' head "singing, just for them." The last lines that struck me the most were:

> There would be a whistle, a hum, a high murmur, and at last, a song,
> The low song a lost boy sings remembering his mother's call.
> Not a cruel song, no, no, not cruel at all. This song
> Is sweet. It is sweet. The heart dies of this sweetness.

While not all songs are as sweet as this tragic goat head's song, the voice and perspective in the poet's novels seem to reflect a similar voice, that is, a similar sound/song that embodies the same bit of care, tenderness, ineffable and profound sadness, this sweetness.

Traditional roots in oral storytelling have greatly influenced both Ondaatje and Silko in their approach to poetic prose. For Ondaatje, it is indeed because of Ceylon's oral traditions of "tall stories, gossip, arguments and lies at dinner" that he staunchly resists the western "habits of narrative." Echoing critic John Berger, he states, "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one" (McCrum). I think this image is interesting—the story is the dinner with the air buzzing with all the stories and anecdotes.

Likewise, for Silko, as a poet and Laguna Pueblo woman, her writing holds many roots in the tradition of oral storytelling and reading her work aloud. According to Shawn Wong, Silko wrote the poems in *Ceremony* first. The story was constructed later. And this explains the way she approached her structure.

Harding's *Tinkers* appeared to be about madness and escape and dreams. I believe it had to be written in the lyric mode, as the lyric is about romanticism, about believing in another world, and other lives, the potential of the world. I thought this moment was particularly powerful and important:

> I could feel his surprise, his bafflement, the dismay felt in a dream when you suddenly meet the brother you forgot you had or remember the infant you left on the hillside miles away, hours ago, because somehow you were distracted and somehow you came to believe in a different life and your shock at these terrible recollections, these sudden reunions, comes as much from your sorrow at what you have neglected as it does from dismay at how thoroughly and quickly you came to believe in something else. And that other world that you first dreamed is always better if not real, because in it you have not jilted your lover, forsaken your child, turned your back on your brother (135).

I think this romanticism is why we write. There must be a lot of hope, but there is all the more tragedy in such hope. But it is this hope that forms the novel, whether poetic or more traditional.

Time is strange. The time within poetic prose is strange. Li-Young Lee tried to write *The Winged Seed* in a single night in order to capture his consciousness in one night. It took him

three nights, and "it had taken [him] five years of processing to be able to even write it in that time." All along he was suspicious of plot, so much so that he claims:

> I wanted to transcend craft. I was interested in the possibility of actual human utterance without revision—that seemed like life to me. We can't revise anything we do in life; I wanted the book to have that kind of trajectory. I would revise by writing the whole book over again. I had to make it up as I went along (Lee, James).

While I can understand Lee's impulse here, it still terrifies me—the writing and the rewriting. I have the feeling that all my stories have the same heart, the same schmaltz, the same waltz within.

As much as poetic prose reinvents the narrative with the lyric, the poet's novel still very much needs the Story. There is power in the Story. We see this very much in *Ceremony* where one of the first poems says stories "are all we have, you see, / all we have to fight off / illness and death. / You don't have anything / if you don't have the stories" (2). Indeed, the novel weaves between the mythical voiced poems of Pueblo stories and Tayo's narrative, where each build on each other, informing the other, growing more beautiful and stronger together.

In *The Winged Seed,* Lee and his siblings beg to hear the stories of their Javanese servants, because of their "emotional accuracy" (123) and the stories behind the stories. As Lee describes, "the greater stories called to some correspondent thing inside us that resisted a name, something barely apprehended and timeless" (124). Moreover, "even more than the stories themselves, it was their saying we wanted to hear; a spacious, impersonal near-singing that seemed to belong to no one, even as we felt gathered in it. By hearing that voice, we felt heard

by it, as though it recognized, heard, and spoke everything we hid or could never articulate" (127).

And lastly, we see it in *Tinkers*, these same kind of stories are in the "old forgotten songs" of all the stirring "old unnameable sorrows in our throats," the "old forgotten songs we never really knew, only think we remember knowing, when what we really do is understand at the same time how we have never really known them at all and how glorious they must really be" (128-129). Are these songs or stories ever truly forgotten? Is our writing a way of remembering?

Virginia Woolf: "What is the phrase for the moon? And the phrase for love? By what name are we to call death? I do not know. I need a little language such as lovers use, words of one syllable such as children speak when they come into the room and find their mother sewing and pick up the scrap of bright wool, a feather, or a shred of chintz. I need a howl; a cry."

I think Woolf is speaking to the sound of sense here in terms of cadenced interjections. She seeks the sounds of delight, of wounds, of understanding the world as a very raw, textured, strange place that we have stumbled into by accident.

In a way, *The English Patient* structures itself like a commonplace book. As Ondaatje himself describes, "these were all fragments I collected or wrote down over a five year period. One gets really interested in map making or bomb disposal, this relationship here, you're constantly learning and you're not quite sure if it will hold together, if there's a whole ship" (Dafoe). Indeed, *The English Patient* is fragmented and multi-voiced, using free indirect discourse to leap from each of the different characters' perspectives, and there are actual

fragments from Herodotus, the books Hana reads to Almásy (i.e. *Kim, The Charterhouse of Parma*), Hana's letters, Almásy's own commonplace book, and other texts. The narrator, whether it is Ondaatje or not, comments that "many books open with an author's assurance of order. One slipped into their waters with a silent paddle. But novels commenced with hesitation or chaos. Readers were never fully in balance" (93). This last remark seems true, especially for this novel, as it is lyric and chaotic from the beginning, despite the gentle, musical, and almost tender voice of the narrator guiding readers throughout. Even as Caravaggio listens to Almásy's story and Almásy switches to describing himself in third person,

Yet, the organizing principle at the heart of *The English Patient* is the very riddle of the English patient's identity. And in a way, the riddle functions like a bomb, unmatched by the senseless atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the very end. Indeed, every fragment of the novel feeds toward the emotional arc, like wires on a bomb, but without any order, but to get to Almásy's "true story" and identity, which does not provide much relief from the chaos. The heart is the affair between Katherine and Almásy, with its doomed end at the Cave of Swimmers. Every time we as readers visit the Cave of Swimmers it gets more and more tragic and utterly heart wrenching. Ultimately, it is more difficult knowing the truth than not knowing.

The fragmentation further reflects the post-traumatic emotional states of each of the characters, even if Hana and Kip seem to deny having much emotion after their traumatic. And so, the novel is a weaving of lyric moments for each of the characters—it holds them in simultaneity, as if time is frozen in their isolated villa, where the world unfurls around them. Perhaps, "unfolding" or "unfurling" are not even the accurate words to describe what is happening, because while the narrative voice behind each character, and even Almásy's first person monologues, seem to hold a lot of control, there is always a sense of disintegration—a

bomb exploding and imploding all at once—and no true order where everything makes sense as when a riddle is solved. Even love cannot bind and reach far enough, such as when "[Almásy] has been disassembled by [Katherine] … How does this happen? To fall in love and be disassembled. We will either find or lose our souls" (155, 158). Yet, perhaps the love, and the sense of desire, in this novel is what shakes it: "When Almásy speaks [Caravaggio] stays alongside him reordering the events. Only desire makes the story errant, flickering like a compass needle. And this is the world of nomads in any case, an apocryphal story. A mind travelling east and west in the disguise of sandstorm" (248).

Maybe the form of *The English Patient* is ultimately meant to be a celebration, a blur of colors: "There were traditions [Almásy] had discovered in Herodotus in which old warriors celebrated their loved ones by locating and holding them in whatever world made them eternal—a colourful fluid, a song, a rock drawing" (248). This is that such eternal, lost world.

The English Patient was the first of these poet's novels I read to understand, and it has been the most haunting and powerful—a lingering symphony.

Harding's *Tinkers* also governs its form around a kind of unfolding, but unlike a bomb or the scattered reveal of a riddle, it is slow and inevitable: the death of George Crosby. His death unleashes a kind of specific countdown, from seventy years to 132 hours to 96 hours to 72 hours to the very moment before his death, where each moment marked moment triggers a lyric moment of simultaneity where George reflects on his life and the life around him, disintegrating because of his amnesia and loss of memory. In the lyric moments that George flashes into his childhood, the narrative skips from George's perspective into his father Howard Crosby's perspective, so that the novel had a kind of twinning effect where George and Howard were

twinned through the generations. Overall, the concept of Time was strange in that George and Howard and Howard's unnamed father all inhabited the same time and mindspace—it was a piece about family and loss. The image and metaphor of clocks—clock making and clock repair and clock parts—also created the effect that this book is broken into lyrical fragments (it is also like a commonplace book with its passages taken from George's journal, *The Reasonable Horologist*, and a pamphlet by Howard) that function as little clock pieces fitted together. Even so, there is a sense that the characters themselves are little gears in a mighty clock. Harding presents this very image in: "When it came time to die, … we were used to fix broken clocks, music boxes; our pelvises were fitted onto pinions, our spines soldered into vast works. Our ribs were fitted as gear teeth and tapped and clicked like tusks. This is how, finally we were joined" (190).

Yet, while the image of clocks might create the impression that the novel should be orderly in its form, there is always the sense of madness—the irrationality of death especially after a long life, and the clinical madness of Howard's epilepsy—constantly threatening the notions of family and love, and the form reflects such breaking, even down to the sentence level. The sentences are long, chaotic, and unruly—building lists and clauses in all directions—playing with sound, rhythm, and momentum.

Even so, the ending clicks everything into place in multiple ways. That is, with the form, the novel transforms into a nest, a nest of treasures, a kind that Howard describes, where "the materials for the nest must be collected and woven *strand by strand*" (170-171). The treasure that syncs the narrative thematically is the memory George has before he dies about how Howard came back to visit him after so many years estranged from his family. The encounter is not long or elaborate, but it is what the reader has been rooting for the entire time—a final connection in

all the chaos. The ending made me realize that the novel has been truly structured around a seeking, a journey, a quest, for understanding and familial love that seems denied throughout.

Unlike the other poet's novels, Silko's *Ceremony* first appears to be presented most traditionally with a hero and a journey and an almost chronological story. And yet, it is not traditional with the many pieces of white space scattered throughout the narrative as well as the sections of folktale poems. Silko does what I would like to dare to do, that is, break the narrative into lines, but her decisions to different than mine would be, but they work for her in that only the folktales are broken apart. In making them into poetry, she gives the folktales more space and time, the way that they would have been shared and passed down orally.

Overall, *Ceremony*'s form revolves around a journey and a ceremony, a ceremony where the main character, Tayo, must recover from PTSD, come to terms with the past and his grief, explore and adopt and understand his Puebloan culture and folklore, recover his uncle's lost cattle, fall in love, and lose and find himself in nature and the stories. It seemed not to just be a story about Tayo but a struggle through time of the Puebloan people, and Native Americans in general, against the witchery from the beginning of this fifth world. While the first half of the novel seems more coherent as Silko presents Tayo's narrative very chronologically, once Tayo meets the medicine man, Betonie, in Gallup, NM, near the center of the novel, the prose and focus of the novel shifts and drifts more and more into a kind of mythical realm. We as readers are not sure whether the woman Tayo meets is necessarily real or not, or whether he is truly being chased by his friends, but no matter what he is able to set things right, for himself and his clan. He comes to "see the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had

never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time" (246). He changes the ceremony, just as Silko changes and evolves the novel to carry us all through the story.

The one element in *Tinkers* that really led me through the chaos was both the language, and more importantly, Harding's treatment of images, or the art of Opsis, and in particular, his images of nature. In short, Harding's descriptions of nature are stunning, and I would like to learn from them for my own descriptions of place (In particular, my short prose poem story "So the night begins / between" takes place in New England, and I am trying to draw better ways to capture the New England landscape). Not only does Harding name the trees and plants of the woods of New England and describes the atmosphere and sky in considerable detail, he turns and twists his images of nature, in bizarre and beautiful ways. He literally spins his world in a kaleidoscope: "it was as if the sky and the ground were turning end over end in front of him, around in a circle, so that the earth, as it swung up over the sky, dropped leaves and spears of grass and wildflowers and tree branches into the blueness and, as it rolled back down toward its proper place, in turn, received a precipitation of clouds and light and wind and sun from the sky" (143). This sense of transformation is also seen when he describes a patch of grass covered in snow and browned from the autumn—one of my favorite passages—as a strange ossuary, where "the interlocking network of stalks and branches and creepers was skeletal, the fossil yard of an extinct species of fine-boned insectoid creatures" (117).

Consequently, similarly to *Ceremony* and *The English Patient*, the landscape is vital to *Tinkers*, especially this particular isolated, wintry landscape, the narrative and the lyric aspects.

It was beautiful and incredibly helpful to see the landscapes of the Saharan Desert in *The English Patient* and the high American Southwest desert in *Ceremony,* especially as I continue to write and revise my story/prose poem, "No Telling" as well as "Stray." The Desert has fascinated me for a while; the greater source of my heartbreak and devastation all my first year as an MFA student was a person from the Californian desert. I embarked on a Great American Roadtrip around the Four Corners area of the American Southwest the summer between my first and second year because 1) I wanted to go on an adventure, 2) I needed to do something for myself and get better, 3) I had never been to the desert and I wanted to understand it. And indeed, I came back much, much better, and with such a profound understanding—it was so important for me to learn that the desert did not belong to this person, but that this person was a miniscule part of the desert, smaller than a grain of sand or a little twig of rabbitbrush.

I actually read *The English Patient* after my roadtrip, and I felt that it informed my understanding of the desert, how vast and nebulous and miraculous and terrifying it is. I grew to love and see the Saharan Desert through all of Ondaatje's descriptions and images (even though he was staying in the gorgeous Rockefeller Foundation compound in Bellagio while writing). For instance, my absolute favorite part of the novel was when Almásy describes his heartbreaking trek from the Cave of Swimmers to El Taj where he is only using the stars to navigate—"he waited for the live chart of stars, then moved forward reading them every hour. In the past, when they had had desert guides, they would hang a lantern from a long pole and the rest of them would follow the bounce of light above the star reader" (249). The Saharan desert is beautiful here as it is uncontainable—it "could not be claimed or owned—it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones" (139)—"the most loved waters, like a lover's name, are carried blue in your hands, enter your throat. One swallows absence" (141). While I could not

necessarily trace the geography of the Saharan Desert, I could certainly feel the absence, how the landscape functions as both a vacuum but its own fierce, desolate character that saturates everything with its great howl, absence, and loneliness.

Moreover, with *Ceremony,* it was important for me to understand the Four Corners deserts not just from my travels, but through the perspective of a writer who grew up there as a Native American and could understand the desert in profounder, intimate ways. This is just one of her many descriptions, for example: "to the cliffs, winding up the chalky gray hill where the mesa plateau ended in crumbling shale above the red clay flats. The sun felt good; [Tayo] could smell the juniper and piñon still damp from the rain. The wind carried a wild honey smell from meadows of beeweed" (220). What's interesting is that even though many of the trees and shrubs are the same throughout this desert, and landscapes appear to be quite similar in the mesas and rock formations which are difficult to actually describe in words, Silko's descriptions never felt repetitive—they were always fresh, and it is important that she keeps emphasizing the presence and power of the land.

Maso on the importance of paying attention to language: "That language is feeling. That syntax is feeling. One should feel in one's whole being the necessity and inevitability of tense, point of view, tempo, voice, etc. That where the paragraph breaks is not taken for granted. That the notion of chapter is not taken for granted" (38).

Each and every word, sentence, paragraph, and movement counts. I do not believe language should only be used as a vehicle to serve a larger story—the brio and spring is in the language, the water seeped through sandstone, the sheer music.

Harding on the *arrested moment*: “Any given instant takes on a kind of geometry to it. In terms of physics, it would be an outdated idea. You think of time as a room, or time having a volume. Any given instant you can wander around within suspended, or rested moments in time” (Filgate). The room, the volume, is silence.

To write his novel, to make this silence, he explains, “I literally took scissors and tape and staplers and cut [all the pieces of paper] all up; it was like a puzzle. I spread it all out on my living room floor and I put the whole novel into order … and it all worked” (Wragg).

What is this order? What are the possibilities? How infinite?

Li-Young Lee also has a lot of questions—“Love, what is night? Is a man thinking in the night the night? How may I touch you across this chasm of flown things? What won’t the night overthrow, the wind unwrite? Where is the road when the road is carried? What story do we need to hear, so late in childhood?” (13-14) “Is night my ancestor’s gloomy customs, then? Will I be free of my great-grandfather’s three thousand descendants? Did I finish writing that letter to my father, or did I let the pencil fall from my hand? My love, why can’t you sleep? Why does each night lead into a sister night? Is there nothing one can say about tonight or any other night the night won’t unravel, every effort undermined by night itself? What were those seeds doing in my father’s pocket? What is a seed? (32-33)—but I don’t know if he ever comes to any true answers. It seems the purpose of *The Winged Seed* is for Lee to ask such questions.

As a whole, it is most difficult to describe *The Winged Seed* as it is 1) a memoir and thus, intensely intimate and heartbreaking throughout, and 2) the most lyrical of all the poet’s novels in this discussion, and not necessarily steeped in a very certain, concrete place. There are certainly places that Lee describes, from their family home in Indonesia to the homes of the

housebound community members in Pennsylvania, but the *here* is not clear. It could be at Lee's wife Donna's side at night, but it does not seem important. The memoir begins with a dream, or nightmare, of his father appearing back from the dead at a family reunion, starved and in the saddest, shabbiest shoes, and this dream unleashes the longest lyrical moment of simultaneity. It seems to be a meditation on night or seeds, rather the image of the chrysanthemum seeds carried in Lee's father's pocket, but really, it is most definitely written for Lee's father. Like *Tinkers,* the book is about twinning and family over generations, but Lee's purpose seems more raw and *real*:

> in one boy's compulsive recollection and a second boy's obsessive reconstruction, one seems charged with the horror of the other or the other lit with the eeriness of the one; either way, the boy who grew up and married and fathered children, me among them, carried inside him, until the day of his death, those twin shafts of muddy light, sibling horrors among many other varied and myriad episodes—forgotten or remembered, terrifying or beautiful—episodes which I call, arbitrarily, "his life," as a way to get a handle on it, as a way to think about him, which, as it turns out, is just another way to think about myself (165).

Indeed, in terms of form, the memoir propels itself through these episodes of memories. I could not actually tell you the order of events in Lee's life, but it seems the point is not the order of events, but these emotional triggers that keep the memories and memoir falling and building upon itself. There are moments, especially with the questions on night, where the narrative enters another realm, a jazz riff on language, and it may not make sense in terms of narrative, but the emotional arc punctures through, whistling.

I really loved the voice in *The English Patient*, no matter who was speaking. And even though the dialogue felt very realistic, it was also lyrical so much so that it might have seemed unrealistic, but not inaccurate. It just requires a lot more patience to read, I believe—the patience one needs for poetry—but I'm not sure how Ondaatje sets that up for the reader, if he does. Perhaps it is the language with its quality both musical and dreamy that allows us to suspend our disbelief. I felt this suspension, a kind of breathlessness, in this almost-monologue from Hana to Kip right after she interferes with his bomb defusing, nearly hurling both of them in danger, and he rescues them both:

> I thought I was going to die. I wanted to die. And I thought if I was going to die I would die with you. Someone like you, young as I am, I saw so many dying near me in the last year. I didn't feel scared. I certainly wasn't brave just now. I thought to myself, We have this villa this grass, we should have lain down together, you in my arms, before we died. I wanted to touch that bone at your neck, collarbone, it's like a small hard wing under your skin. I wanted to place my fingers against it. I've always liked flesh the colour of rivers and rocks or like the brown eye of a Susan, do you know what that flower is? Have you seen them? I am so tired, Kip, I want to sleep. I want to sleep under this tree, put my eye against your collarbone I just want to close my eyes without thinking of others, want to find the crook of a tree and climb into it and sleep. What a careful mind! To know which wire to cut. How did you know? You kept saying I don't know I don't know, but you did. Right? Don't shake, you have to be a still bed for me, let me curl up as if you were a good grandfather I could hug, I love the word 'curl,' such a slow word, you can't rush it (103).

Typing this out, I noticed how the grammar retaliates with all the comma splices and run-ons, but it seemed for the purpose of hovering, never stopping fully. The whole monologue felt like what I describe as "pillow talk," the ramblings of one falling asleep. It is all connected and complete and silly and full of adoration and, as I call it, *necessary.* Here, it is the moment that begins Hana's and Kip's romance, and thus, I think it has to have a lyric, a prose poem, to mark that shift.

Lee on *night*: "The term 'night' – I'm not sure what it means, life or death. Somehow the word 'night' means inescapable escape at the same time it means freedom. It's always double for me, in that all the associations of that word bring out that place in me where the meeting of opposites happens. And I do think that the practice of poetry is a way to find a path of negotiation between all of our opposing tendencies – good and bad, the demonic and the angelic, the spiritual and the material – to find exactly that center and suffer right there all of the contradictions of our human nature" (Alterio).

While folktales did not seem to play a huge role in *The Winged Seed*, thematically they still felt incredibly important to the narrative. That is, we first catch a glimpse of them in the riddle of the seed where the knife challenges the seed to stump him in exchange for his life. The riddles the seed gives do not make much sense, in terms of a traditional riddle—for instance, "opposite houses and the one I inhabit is twice-hidden, by light all day, by nearness the long night, when I lean on a jamb to hear a bird call from its unseen sleep" (50)—and I believe this passage of folklore is to present the framework that this memoir might be a riddle without any

answer. Again, a riddle without relief. But perhaps the point is that folklore keeps evolving, because its true purpose is to understand life and provide a kind of framework and guide to understand life.

The memoir ends with a folktale told to children about "mother wren, soldier heron, and pastor crow … waiting for citizen seed to wake, to rise from his dark bed, walking, to speak" (204). One day a hand, "a blind thief," dies for the sake of entering the seed and once inside, it reads a book with many missing pages, and the memoir ends with "all one hundred rooms of the house of the seed echoed with the sound of a hand reading" (205). It is not a conventional folktale, but by the time the end of the novel comes, we are ready for a story, the kind of story that will finally let us sleep, even if half the pages of this book are missing and this is a book within a book . . .

Folklore and folktales formed the heart of *Ceremony*. Whether it was the folktale of Ka't'sina or the mother corn or the hummingbird and the fly or the Gambler taking away all the rainclouds or the witches' creation of white people, the folktales all seemed about drought and the potential of disaster in the world if we do not take care of it. While Silko presents each of the folktales in the form of a lineated poem and without a speaker, I found this tactic to be more tactful and powerful in the sense that they emerged from a kind of collective memory, from the senseless void post-WWII, from an ageless ancient time, from a kind of dream. I was most struck by the folktale on the bear child (129-130), where "they couldn't just grab the child / They couldn't simply take him back / because he would be in between forever / and probably he would die." While the people do coax the child back to the human world, there is still the sense he is "not quite the same / after that / not like the other children." This kind of outsider theme

pervades the novel, and even the poet's novels here—how difficult and strange it is to be human, how difficult it is to go back once one has broken the barrier, which is not truly a barrier but a sound.

If anyone knows how to survive, it is the Puebloans of the Four Corners. As Silko describes, "the Hopi elders say that the Hopi people must 'live by their prayers' if they are to survive" (275). These prayers are a sound. The sound is in the poet's novels. The poet's novels are living things. They are medicine bundles, here to keep us safe.

To me, there is something of Home in longer poetic prose, a kind of homecoming. I always seem to be writing about home and belonging in my (prose poem) stories. Maso would understand—she has affirmed me—as she describes: "And so we get to the notion of home. The move towards home and the longing called home and all that memory, imagination, desire, belief, doubt can conjure as we circle and circle on this extraordinary journey. The novel filled with acting out, rehearsals, meditations, games from childhood, melancholy rainy afternoons or bright sunlight" (50). Poetic prose is a call home—it is familiar and dreamy—drawn out long in poetic prose, like a journey, where the journey itself is home.

I admired *The Winged Seed so* much. It truly felt like everything what I want to do. Every page felt heartbreaking.

I have never read an ending quite like that of *The English Patient*. Ondaatje leaps a number of years into the future when Almásy and Caravaggio's stories and the villa have faded

away, and the only stories that remain are Kip's and Hana's. The image of Kip's life is the most concrete—he lives as a doctor in India, married, with children—and yet, he is able to see her, briefly, in a kind of glimpsed vision, but really, only her face and her hair. Ondaatje himself does not let us see her either, and he admits—for the first time, stepping into the piece—"She is a woman I don't know well enough to hold in my wing, if writers have wings, to harbor for the rest of my life" (301). This confession is so lovely to me in its humbleness, and it seems to strike at the fact that language is often inadequate. Yet, more importantly, with poetic prose, we have characters we are morally responsible to, and the struggle becomes more than just one of language, but how do we capture our characters, these people we create? How do we capture them right? It is important that Ondaatje reminds us, especially those of us writers.

Nelson, #199: "For to wish to forget how much you loved someone—and then, to actually forget—can feel, at times, like the slaughter of a beautiful bird who chose, by nothing short of grace, to make a habitat of your heart."

How much forgetting is necessary? When do we press "pause?" What does writing do?

At the bottom of everything, does it not simply come down to feeling? Our reaction and response to the world that lets us survive and thrive? As Ondaatje explains, the lyric is all about emotions and emotional truth, so much so that "I would prefer to replace the word 'lyrical' with the word 'emotional'. Because I think that's what we are governed by, or affected by: we make decisions in moments of excitement or terror or passion or whatever it is. We also make intellectual, more reasonable judgments, too. But what interests me is that kind of emotional depth" (Webb).

As Lee explains, “I value feeling. I think a lot of times in North American poetry there is not a value of feeling. We are suspicious of feeling … maybe, ultimately, feeling is the dangerous thing” (Fluharty). I agree. I do not want to live in fear of feeling and true emotion.

Every word counts: “Later [Hana] will realize [Kip] never allowed himself to be beholden to her, or her to him. She will stare at the word in a novel, lift it off the book and carry it to a dictionary. *Beholden. To be under obligation.* And he, she knows, never allowed that. If she crosses the two hundred yards of dark garden to him it is her choice, and she might find him asleep, not from a lack of love but from necessity, to be clear-minded towards the next day’s treacherous objects” (Ondaatje 129).

Every word counts: “The word [Ku’oosh] chose to express ‘fragile’ was filled with the intricacies of a continuing process, and with a strength inherent in spider webs … It took a long time to explain the fragility and intricacy because no word exists alone, and the reason for choosing each word had to be explained with a story about why it must be said this certain way. That was the responsibility that went with being human, old Ku’oosh said, the story behind each word must be told so there could be no mistake in the meaning of what had been said; and this demanded great patience and love” (Silko 36).

Every word counts: “Didn’t I participate in my father’s making? Didn’t his flesh eat mine in order to get on with its life? And when he was eating me, wasn’t I quiet? Though he yelled, *Brave boy won’t cry? Good! I’ll beat you until you cry out!* But I did not cry out. Because it was my strength he admired and loved, and I would be what he admired, I would be his beloved. And

because I was determined that *he* must cry out. After all, wasn't it his own voice he desired to hear? Wasn't it his own cry he was trying to pare me down to? And I knew that the only way he would expel his own cry was if I held out, if I let him glut himself on me until he could not stand it and then yelled *Enough!* So I vowed in silence, *You must beat me, Ba, until you cry out! For there is, I know, one cry inside you. And now I will help you utter it"* (Lee 188).

While every page of *The Winged Seed* held some kind of wound, a punctum, for me, I felt this part was the strongest because I could relate to it the most (maybe as a Chinese American, maybe as a daughter). And in that way, the whole novel rotated around this moment, Lee's realization that his role is his father's beloved. And that the novel seemed to be about assuming this role, speaking against the silence—in the silence—for his father. It seemed to be a kind of "pillow talk" novel, written at night, building the silence for his father to emerge, out of Lee's love for him. There is blood all over this memoir, but Lee always holds a sense of control, despite his rage and frustration at the weight of everything.

In a Youtube interview with Silko, she explains how *Ceremony* evolved: she was in Alaska writing where it was raining heavily all the time and she suffered from illness and severe migraine headaches. While her writing began as just a short story on Harley, the more time she spent in this harrowing landscape, the more it became a story about her friends and family who came back from WWII with PTSD that no one could really understand. The more it became a story about Tayo who emerged trapped in a jungle of rain and torrential grief, much like her. The more it became a story about the beloved landscapes that Silko missed so much and a story for the Navajo people. The more the story became a kind of recovery and healing journey for Silko.

The more writing the novel became its own ceremony. “I often tell students: ‘I wrote that book to save my life,’” she says.

Nelson, #196: “ ‘Oh, how often I have cursed those foolish pages of mine which made my youthful sufferings public property!’ Goethe wrote years after the publication of *The Sorrows of Young Werther.*”

I, too, fear that I am only a very young writer, writing of my young sorrows and trauma. I don’t quite understand what it means to write to be an older writer—is it a matter of voice? Of worldview? Of experience? Then, is it okay if I am not there yet? I love and wonder about Almásy’s remark to Caravaggio—“I can talk with you, Caravaggio, because I feel we are both mortal. The girl, the boy, they are not mortal yet. In spite of what they have been through” (253). What does being mortal mean? Are those who are not mortal immortal? What does it take to be mortal?

This is perhaps the greatest thing I have learned over my MFA career—how young I still write, how much I will have to write to get better.

Lee on the journey: “Soon, there will be so little of me I may actually arrive. Soon, I’ll be born. Soon, I’ll know how to live. Soon, my teeth may stop hurting me. Soon, I’ll be able to sleep” (32).

Harding: “What persists beyond this cataclysm of making and unmaking?” (120)

What happens after the writing?

Lee on (obsessively) re-writing *The Winged Seed*: “It’s so horrifying, so scary to me—the whole process of creating any art. I never know what I am dealing with. It’s like a weird monster that keeps changing” (Fluharty).

For Keats, negative capability is “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason … with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.” Does it not matter then if we’re talking of the lyric or narrative, of poetry or prose? Aren’t we just speaking of Beauty?

I do not have all the answers yet. I’m not sure I ever will.

WORKS CITED

Alterio, Carolyn. Interview with Li-Young Lee. *The Site of Big Shoulders.* The Site of Big Shoulders. Web. 6 Apr. 2015.

Annenberg Learner. "In Search of Novel, Leslie Marmon Silko." Online Video Clip. *Youtube.* Youtube, 26 Aug. 2013. Web. 4 Apr. 2015.

Brewster, Scott. *Lyric.* New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.

Dafoe, Willem. Interview with Michael Ondaatje. *Bomb – Artists in Conversation.* BOMB Magazine, 1997. Web. 23 Mar. 2015.

Filgate, Michele. Interview with Paul Harding. *Bookslut.* Bookslut, 2009. Web. 1 Apr. 2015.

Fluharty, Matthew. Interview with Li-Young Lee. *Missouri Review* 23.1 (Spring 2000). Web. 31 Mar. 2015.

Fredman, Stephen. *Poet's Prose.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983. Print.

Frost, Robert. *The Letters of Robert Frost, Vol. 1: 1886-1920.* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014. Print.

Harding, Paul. *Tinkers.* New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2009. Print.

Kelly, Brigit Pegeen. *Song.* Rochester, NY: Boa Editions, 1995. Print.

Lewis, C. Day. *The Lyric Impulse.* London: Chatto and Windus, 1965. Print.

Lee, James. Interview with Li-Young Lee. *Bomb – Artists in Conversation.* Bomb Magazine. Web. 31 Mar. 2015.

Lee, Li-Young. *The Winged Seed.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995. Print.

Maso, Carole. *Break Every Rule.* Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000. Print.

McCrum, Robert. (2011) "Michael Ondaatje: The Divided Man." *The Guardian.* Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/aug/28/michael-ondaatje-the-divided-man/

Monte, Steven. *Invisible Fences.* Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. Print.

Morgan, Monique R. *Narrative Ends, Lyric Means.* Columbus, OH: Ohio State University, 2009. Print.

Nelson, Maggie. *Bluets.* Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2009. Print.

Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient.* New York: Vintage International, 1993. Print.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. Ceremony. New York: Penguin Books, 1977. Print.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination." *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia, 1996. 264-275. Print.

Starr, G. Gabrielle. *Lyric Generations.* Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2004. Print.

Webb, Kate. “Michael Ondaatje Interview: On Writing and Emotion.” *Nothing Is Lost.* Nothing Is Lost, 1992. Web. 24 Mar. 2015.

Wragg, Carlin M. “The Literary Horologist: Paul Harding ‘Tinkers’ With Time.” *Open Loop Press*. Open Loop Press, 2009. Web. 6 Apr. 2015.