

Book Review: Ronald J. Berger and Richard Quinney, *Storytelling Sociology: Narrative as Social Inquiry*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005. ISBN: 9781588262714 (Paperback). 305 Pages. \$23.50.

Reviewed by Ali Shehzad Zaidi¹

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Editors Ronald J. Berger and Richard Quinney situate *Storytelling Sociology* within a tradition in which personal reflection and autobiography become means of social inquiry. Narrative is a discursive and social practice that both reflects and modifies social beliefs (De Fina 369). Through this transformative practice, storytelling sociology countervails positivist sociology, an ostensibly disinterested approach that reduces social experience to statistics (1-2) and people to specimens of scientific curiosity.

The volume is prefaced by an essay titled “The Narrative Turn in Social Inquiry” and is divided into four parts that correspond to the themes of “Family and Place,” “The Body,” “Education and Work,” and “The Passing of Time.” Rooted in the kind of human experience that Robert Tally identifies as one of “constant navigation, of locating oneself in relation to others” (1), the twenty-one essays in the volume succeed, often with undertones of grief and joy, in making sense of a world in flux and exploring the dynamic interaction between memory and place. Limitations of space allow discussion of only half a dozen of them in this review.

In “Searching for Yellowstone,” Norman K. Denzin relives his father’s and grandfather’s biographies, recreating their psychic and physical space: “Dreaming my way into a midcentury landscape, I seek to understand my family’s middle-class version of the American dream. Yellowstone Park is as good a place as any to start” (17). Both Denzin’s father and grandfather were salesmen who travelled the country and passed through Yellowstone Park.

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His father spent most of his life chasing the American Dream without success. He was always on the move, never quite stopping to take in his surroundings. His was a shallow existence that upheld conventional American values, as Denzin explains:

My father believed in the U.S. of A. and in the American dream, no social security or affirmative action; he held to hard work, handcrafted bookcases, dark blue serge suits, gray sweaters, close-cut hair, women in the kitchen, Camel cigarettes, home-cooked meals, community theater, learning from your mistakes, and after sobriety, kindness, generosity, and fierce loyalty to family (19).

Denzin's father went through life the way that he drove through Yellowstone Park, without achieving the inner grace and satisfaction that his son attained.

Denzin recalls that when he was a child his grandfather promised to take him to Old Faithful in Yellowstone Park but never did, leaving Denzin with wistful longing. His grandfather's single photograph of himself in Yellowstone, "standing beside a Lincoln roadster, wearing a white shirt, a tie, a gray fedora, proudly pointing to a string of over twenty trout" (18), acquired a kind of mythic importance for Denzin. In his present incarnation as a sixty-one year old professor and writer, Denzin reflects,

The meaning of the picture is now evident: my grandfather's smile was an invitation to come to this site. Like others in his generation, he searched for meaning in his life. He was drawn to and found Yellowstone, and in this site he felt fulfilled and complete, fulfilled in a way that he never felt anywhere else. This is why he wanted to take me to Yellowstone, so I could experience this feeling for myself, so I could find myself in the fast-running waters of this river. (22)

In her magisterial book *For Space*, Doreen Massey undermines a common notion that in effect petrifies space, placing it beyond time. Instead, Massey understands place not just as a physical entity but as a landscape that interacts with its viewers so as to be widely imagined to conquer time (28-29). Denzin achieves such a temporal conquest, for he fuses his existence with those of his father and grandfather.

Javier Treviño's "Remembering George Washington on the Rio Grande" recalls the author's participation in a high school marching band

in Laredo, Texas during the seventies. The band members called themselves “La Banda del Ánimo,” the Band with Spirit (36), a name that conveys the liveliness of Mexican American youth in impoverished Laredo. At the time, the U.S. – Mexico border was so porous that Mexicans could take part in Laredo’s annual Washington Birthday Celebration without having to apply for visas or submit documentation. That atmosphere of openness and trust on the border had disappeared by the nineties, when the United States government constructed a border wall that forced undocumented migrants to walk through desert or mountains, causing hundreds of deaths annually in the militarized border region.

Treviño opens and closes his essay with a symbolic image taken from an ancient Mexican custom, that of burying the umbilical cord of a newborn near its birthplace. This practice, derived from indigenous cultures, represents a vital connection to place. This connection is vanishing nowadays, for as Thomas Gieryn observes, place is losing its distinctiveness, reality and significance, as can be seen in shopping malls, freeways, and office complexes (463). A spot becomes a place, Gieryn tells us, when it “ensconces history or utopia, danger or security, identity or memory” (465). In this sense, then, Laredo during the seventies still exists, for Treviño conveys not only the joys and complications of hybrid cultural identity, but also the changing social context in which Mexican American identity is formed and developed.

In “Twin Towers,” Nelia Olivencia describes how she arrived at a dual identity as a Puerto Rican and a New Yorker after the attack on the World Trade Center. She reminisces about her ninety-year-old mother who grew up in poverty and who was charged with the care of younger siblings when she was barely eight years old. As a young woman, Olivencia understood that she had to further her education if she wished to avoid the discrimination and lack of opportunities that her mother had endured.

Olivencia conveys Puerto Rican identity in her ambivalence towards the United States: “Only when I am outside of the country do I feel like I am part of it. Only then do I realize that I have internalized many things that are American – but so has the rest of the world” (28). However, the essay is marred by a forced simile (“Like each of the Twin Towers, I am half of a set of twins. Nelson and I were shaped and molded by the common bond of sharing the same womb” [28]) and a cliché (“We would never be the same, and as New Yorkers we gained a new respect and admiration from others for our ability to overcome this blow” [26]). Nonetheless, Olivencia reaffirms multiple identities of New York City,

which is at once a dangerous and unjust metropolis, a place of fulfilled promise, and a crucible of democracy and social mobility.

These essays achieve a kind of relational poetics of identity and space. As Homi Bhabha observes, “to exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness, its look or locus” (63). People do not simply assume a pre-given identity but are forever in the process of being transformed into the image that is represented for them (Bhabha 64). This understanding of identity recalls Massey’s description of place as always in the process of becoming but never quite achieved (107).

Like Massey, Bhabha intuits that there are many paths to understanding, using images such as the stairwell (5). To convey “the complexities of forming a global perspective,” Bhabha quotes an exquisite line by Adrienne Rich: “I’m a table set with room for the Stranger” (xix). The image of the set table is richly ambiguous, representing a passionate embrace of the world, and openness to its influences, currents, and vagaries. The Stranger might denote the unfamiliar, the Other, or God.

Bhabha provides a fine summation of the task of memory in making sense of the world: “Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (90). In other words, remembrance ruptures a dominant narrative that truncates and shatters memory. To see people through shards of pain and desire is to understand unrealized dreams, families rent asunder, and broken societies. It is to recognize what Bhabha describes as “the experience of dispossession and dislocation – which speaks to the condition of the marginalized, the alienated, those who have to live under the surveillance of a sign of identity and fantasy that denies their difference” (90).

Two authors in *Storytelling Sociology* epitomize, to borrow Kurt Vonnegut’s words, “people behaving decently in an indecent society” (qtd. in Wasserman), conveying what it means to be trapped and complicit in a cruel system. In “It Means Something: The Ghosts of War,” Vietnam veteran William B. Brown recalls how during basic training a drill sergeant made him do fifty push-ups for using the word “Vietnamese,” telling him, “There is no such thing as a Vietnamese. They are gooks...” (246). The American military indiscriminately used this term in order to deprive Koreans, Filipinos, and Vietnamese of their history and humanity, and to empower itself to murder those peoples at will.

This kind of basic training seemingly helped U. S. soldiers disassociate themselves from responsibility and remorse for war crimes:

“... It don’t mean nothing” became a rational response to our participation in the carnage of that war. Oftentimes the carnage was camouflaged with terms such as “domino theory,” “anti-communism,” “fight for democracy,” “for the people of South Vietnam,” and other bullshit slogans that were designed to make certain that we did not open our eyes and see what the carnage actually was: the carnage of war is the useless slaughter of human beings on all sides. After many years of observation one thing is clear: the slogan makers are not the ones who die. They simply remain busy manufacturing more slogans so others can die. (249)

However, Brown remained haunted by the image of a dead Vietnamese girl between twelve and fifteen years old whom he had killed.

Years later, Brown sought atonement. In 1987, he went to Nicaragua where he saw a dead girl lying by the side of the road. She had been raped and decapitated by the U. S.-financed contras who had Ronald Reagan’s ardent support. The sight of the dead girl triggered a flashback to Vietnam. Brown returned to Vietnam in 1990 as part of the Indochina Reconciliation Project. He lived with Vietnamese families and shared stories with other war veterans. The essay concludes with a lament over the pain and suffering occasioned by the U. S. invasion of Iraq: “The loss of these lives means something to me. My story continues the search for an ending” (263).

“The Silence of the Lambs: The Architecture of the Abattoir,” by Carla Corroto, is about a graduate student in architecture who is assigned to design a slaughterhouse. Corroto and her classmates were taken to a slaughterhouse where they observed what is otherwise hidden from sight:

Outside the still live animals were being kicked and viciously prodded as they were forced into progressively smaller pens, funneled to their doom. Their shrieks of suffering grew louder and more pathetic, until the loudest one of all came as their throats were slit. The air smelled of cruelty and death and what I used to think of as manure. I was nauseous and my head was spinning. Could I believe my eyes? These poor creatures were treated as if they could not feel pain, let alone fear, treated as objects, as commodities, as products. There were a hundred sheep that looked like fluffy stuffed toys in pens next to the hogs, awaiting their execution as well. They stuck out their tongues out at us and made soft noises as we walked

by. I thought they must be thirsty and looked around to get them some water. A fellow student said my actions were ridiculous, as the sheep were to be cut up the following day. Why bother with them? (208-09)

There was nothing Corroto could do at that moment to attenuate, however slightly, the brutality of a murderous system.

Although she did not want to design a slaughterhouse, Corroto was told that she had to do it in order to graduate. Therefore, she designed a slaughterhouse as she understood it to function. In her project description, Corroto positioned the slaughterhouse on the corner of a ramp near a freeway exit. She placed a farm, a cemetery, and a fast food restaurant at the other corners facing the abattoir to serve as a spatial metaphor for the relationship between man and nature (210). At the time, it was the best that Corroto could do. However, by subsequently telling her story, Corroto gives voice to the suffering of countless animals.

The final essay in this memorable volume, Richard Quinney's "The Glowing of Such Fire," has a crepuscular, almost elegiac quality that is distilled from bittersweet late life. The title is from Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, which prefaces the essay. The sonnet's images of yellow leaves and twilight convey the autumnal thoughts of a writer who, having retired from the university while suffering from chronic lymphocytic leukemia, returns to his family farm in Wisconsin.

Through monthly journal entries and photographic art, Quinney expresses "how life is being lived with some intention" (276). We learn that his Irish ancestors fled the potato famine and settled the farm on which he now lives. This detail deepens our sense of Quinney's connection to the land. He conveys the beauty of spring through the images of bluets blooming amid patches of melting snow and the return of birds to the farm. These images immerse us in compassion and understanding: "no absolutes, but encouragements to live in the glowing of such fire" (276).

This incandescent essay reaches its apotheosis in its concluding lines: "To be a witness to a time and a place is a calling of sorts. And as twilight comes and the bare ruined choirs appear, may there be – with some grace – a glowing of the fire. A fire that will light the way as boughs shake against the cold, as night comes. That we may rejoice in the mystery of both the light and the darkness" (282). In light of the poetic minutiae of the seasons, Quinney's call for peace after the World Trade Center tragedy resonates powerfully.

Like the others in this volume, Quinney's relational essay poignantly connects us to a tragic world. It is the jewel piece of a volume that deserves broader recognition for having enriched the field of sociology. In the eight years since its publication, *Storytelling Sociology* has been at the forefront of the rediscovery of a time-honored tradition, that of narrative sociology.

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