

# UNST 124g    spring 2012

## *fall like rain*

## 1    introduction

### 1.1    narrative

Last fall we defined narrative—fiction or non-fiction—as a story or a fragment of a story that describes a set of events, placing them in a temporal context. We recognized that narrative has many uses, including entertainment, education, and the maintenance of identity within and among groups. Discussing the importance of stories in Pueblo identity, Leslie Marmon Silko (1996) wrote about opening the door when stories are told:

Two points seem clear: the spirits could be present, and the stories were valuable because they taught us how we were the people we believed we were. The myth, the web of memories and ideas that create an identity, is a part of oneself. This sense of identity was intimately linked with the surrounding terrain, to the landscape that has often played a significant role in a story or in the outcome of a conflict.

(p. 43). The stories are both ancient and contemporary, serving both as historical record and modern road map (both figuratively and literally).

Can a story be told without any words? Marmon Silko might tell us that landscape *is* the story but because the people and the land share a common identity, we must understand landscape to include the spoken tradition. Describing traditional story telling on Baffin Island, Rink and Boas (1889) similarly suggest that the words are not the essence of the story, but rather the value lies in the shared experience of the telling of the tale:

To be properly understood, the tales must be heard as told by the story-teller in the snow-house; the surroundings greatly enhancing their charm and facilitating comprehension. The contents of the tale have been often talked about. Now the lamps are made to burn low; the story-teller strips off his outer jacket and retires to the rear part of the hut, facing the wall. He pulls his hood over his head, puts on his mittens, and begins in a low chant, first singing slowly, then with increasing rapidity, in a monotonous recitative, until he comes to one of the songs, which are frequently interspersed between the tales. These are still more difficult to render, the words being often rather trifling, the sentences abrupt, and the author presuming the audience to be familiar with the whole subject of the song, and able to guess the greater part of it.

(p. 123). The only narration to appear in Eric Drooker's graphic narrative *Flood!*—which you are asked to read for this assignment—is Boas and Rink's translation of a song written by a young man from Baffin Island named Utitaiq upon returning to shore after a week adrift on a sea ice floe.

## 1.2 back to nature

Last fall we read two sets of issues of *Swamp Thing* written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Rick Veitch, John Totleben, and Alfredo Alcalá. The comics were written between 1982 and 1987 and collected for republication as “classics” of the horror genre. The second collection, *Earth to Earth* (2002), explored the common literary themes of community, alienation, and self-awareness through the lens of green consciousness. The central conflict in these issues was Swamp Thing’s struggle to save Abby from the Gotham legal system. When Moore puts Abby’s love for Swamp Thing on trial—literally—he puts humanity’s relationship to nature on trial and gives Swamp Thing the task of defending it.

Abby’s trial does not take place in the verdant (if polluted) bayou of Louisiana but in the gray grid of Gotham. The change of location is important to the development of the protagonist’s challenge and it presents an appropriate landscape for transformation. Swamp Thing grows the city into a jungle and fights his battle without the usual human violence, but while Abby is set free and some people revel in the green, the war is not won. Return to a primal natural state does not cure the city of its disease, just as it does not cure the narrator’s broken heart in *Locksley Hall* (Tennyson, 1842).

Swamp Thing’s struggle with humanity is both external and internal. The government’s clandestine “D.D.I.” wish to eliminate the threat they perceive him to pose to their operations. Batman wants his city back. Although he sympathizes with Swamp Thing’s existence on the human borderland, Batman cannot allow nature to run wild through city streets. Swamp Thing is loved by the pilgrims who travel to a city remade in nature’s image but he is not one of them either. He does not *fit in*. He stopped clinging to an illusory notion of humanity



Figure 1: Gotham transformed. From *Swamp Thing* Vol. 5: *Earth to Earth*, pages 75 and 77.

way back in issue 22 (Moore, et al., 2001). Abigail Cable, however, holds fast. She is the one on trial for biophilia (Wilson, 1995) and it is her pain we feel when nature loses.

### 1.3 rain

Civilizations rise and fall on the availability of fresh water (deMenocal, 2001; Mächtle and Eitel, 2012). Last term, each of you researched a cultural group that when confronted with an environmental challenge, underwent great change. In every case, the challenge was drought. If we read the environmental archaeology and anthropology literature more broadly, we will find that too much water can cause just as much trouble as too little water.

Nowhere is the dramatic effect of too much water more clear than in the archaeological record of coastal Peru, where the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) dominates climate variability on annual and longer time scales. Recall that variations in the strength of the tropical easterlies, coupled together with circulation changes in the shallow ocean, produce variations in sea surface temperature all across the wide Pacific. The ocean temperature variations in turn yield cycles of drought and intense rainfall in Peru—where the phenomenon got its modern name—and elsewhere. Communities have adapted to ENSO variability in a variety of ways over the history of human occupation of Peru and differences in adaptive strategy reflect cultural differences among those social groups (Dillehay and Kolata, 2004). However, some ENSO events have been of such great magnitude that no anticipatory strategy could prevent disaster. In some cases, land management strategies turned tolerable variability into intolerable change.

Some time around the year 1350, the Chiribaya people living in the valley of Ilo—some of whom were probably descendants of Tiwanaku’s drought refugees—were struck by massive El Niño induced flooding and debris flows. Concentrated by the narrow valley, unusually heavy rain produced torrents that destroyed agricultural infrastructure and buried entire villages. Some Chiribayas survived to rebuild but the small remnant population was subsumed by the next wave of immigrants to the valley (Satterlee, et al., 2000).

The land reveals a similar narrative farther north along the arid coast of Peru, in the region most famous for the “Nazca lines.” The Nasca people of Ica valley, like the early 20th cen-



Figure 2: From Swamp Thing Vol. 5: Earth to Earth, pages 69 and 125.

tury farmers of the north American high plains, set the stage for their own environmental challenge. Deforestation of the surrounding landscape—clearing the ancient huarango forest and replacing it with agricultural fields—left the soil vulnerable to erosion by El Niño rain and dry season wind (Beresford-Jones et al., 2009). Those effects together began to turn the once fertile region into a desert and with no trees or native grasses to moderate water flow, a particularly strong El Niño around the year 500 swept away the remaining fields and village infrastructure. The remnant population was subsumed into the neighboring Wari empire (see for example, Buzon et al., 2012). All evidence of Nasca habitation in the valley was either looted or buried under drifting sand and has only recently been discovered by modern archaeologists (Beresford-Jones et al., 2009).

It may come as no surprise, then, to learn that Peruvian folklore includes some disastrous floods. Traditional stories of ancient floods are told throughout the tropical Pacific, a region vulnerable not only to ENSO but tsunamis and cyclones as well (Nunn, 2001). While it is important to distinguish local traditional stories from those influenced by colonial traditions, it is clear that diluvian tales are told the world around and many can be traced to environmental sources. Earth’s climate provides the inspiration, but how the water is put to work—both in the world and in the telling of our stories—is up to us.

## 2 urban environment

We return to a city much like Gotham in *Flood!* (Drooker, 2007). The “novel in pictures” was written during a time when social activists in developed economy countries were beginning to gather to speak out about the global injustices they perceived to be arising from “globalization” and *neoliberal* political policies. Eric Drooker began his career as a poster artist, tenant rights organizer, and street peddler in the Lower East Side of New York City. In *Flood!*, he examines some familiar themes in the context of the changing landscape of the late 20th century urban center.



Figure 3: Pages from *The City*, Frans Masereel, 1925.

Each of the three chapters, *Home*, *L*, and *Flood*, was written as a distinct project—over a span of seven years—and self-published by Drooker. They were first published together as a book in 1992 and republished by Dark Horse Books here in Oregon.

Before you read *Flood!*, have a look at two new paintings

- *El tres de mayo de 1808 en Madrid*, Francisco Goya (1814)

- *Guernica*, Pablo Picasso (1937)

remind yourself of our conversation last term about two more

- *City Perspectives*, Raymond Jonson (1932)
- *The World No Longer Resembles Itself*, Katherine Porter (1985)



and recall the woodblock prints by Frans Masereel that we discussed last term. Think also about all the fiction we have read, not just *Swamp Thing*. Through his protagonist's struggle to come to terms with lost love, Alfred, Lord Tennyson struggled to come to terms with the modern world in *Locksley Hall* (1842). Professor Fisher suggested that we think about the "violence of progress" when we read Marianne Moore's poem *Feed me also, river god* (1921). Moore challenged her river god in a very particular way. Ursula LeGuin (1975) challenged you, her reader, to find yourself among the people of Omelas. Whom might Eric Drooker be challenging in *Flood!*? What violence does he depict and how does his protagonist respond to it?

Figure 4: Page from *The City*, Frans Masereel, 1925.

Please prepare answers to the following questions as you read *Flood! A novel in pictures*. Your responses to questions 1 through 4 are due May 21. Your response to question 5 is due May 23. Be sure to use correct grammar and to cite sources in all of your responses.

1. What symbols and visual metaphors are used by Drooker to convey meaning in his story? How are they used?
2. How do you feel about the protagonist in Drooker's story? Do you understand his predicament? Does your understanding of the character change over the course of the story?
3. How does Drooker use Utitiaq's song in his own narrative?
4. What work is the rain doing in Drooker's story?
5. The story told in *Flood!* connects with many recurring themes in this class. Identify a theme addressed in *Flood!* and another artistic work we have discussed this year, describe the issue, and discuss how it is represented in those works. Are the uses and viewpoints of the artists similar or different? This is an essay-length question. You

should begin with an outline of your thesis, supporting arguments, and conclusion. Please turn in the outline you write in preparation for the essay together with the essay itself. Be sure to cite and reference sources as appropriate.

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