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## **Storyteller:**

### **Leslie Marmon Silko's Reappropriation of Native American History and Identity**

*Cynthia Carsten*

"We live forever in stories, not manners," he teased a newspaper reporter last year. "So, tease the chance of conception, tease your mother, tease the privy councils of the great spirit, and always tease your own history."

—*Almost Gegaa Browne*

**G**erald Vizenor's character Almost Browne, in *Hotline Healers*,<sup>1</sup> reveals something of the quandary faced by the American Indian oral historian. Although his version of the truth is marginalized by the dominance of another language and the literary conventions of the bearer of that foreign language, he "has never been . . . a coach of victimry. The traces of his native ancestors are always tricky, but never tragic" (1). He challenges the purveyors of the discourses of Euro-American domination—the journalist, the anthropologist, the university professor, the judge—to "tease" their own history. Almost recognizes that, for the American Indian, the conventions of Euro-American genres dictate that the story can only be told one way, and that way is as oppressive to the Indian mind and spirit as social and political dominance. Almost recognizes that "tricky stories are the sovereignty of motion

and creation, never the dead letters of cultural inventions, or the classy causes, tragic closures, and motivations of discoverers" (5). The solution to the dilemma for Almost Gegaa Browne is to subvert the conventions of Euro-American letters with the blank page. He sells his Wiigwaas Trade Books, the brand name of his empty books, at the local university, and he never has enough of them for curious students, who are told by Almost that "the best stories were heard in the absence of printed words" (25). When he is arrested by the university police and charged with "consumer fraud, false advertising, and conducting a commercial business on state property without a license," Professor Monte Franzgomery, who had danced around Almost's bookmobile "to the sound of shaman drums," pays the fine. According to the professor, Almost's blank books "were a source of inspiration . . . a 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'" (27). Professor Franzgomery, for all of his goodwill, is perhaps an all-too-familiar representative of the academic sphere, ever willing to romanticize and exoticize the Native presence, to "dance to the sound of shaman drums," and yet to celebrate the blank page of the Native voice in print.

Vizenor, like other American Indian writers who draw upon the oral traditions of their communities to inscribe their histories and identities, is of course "teasing history," pointing to the ironies of Native Americans' limited access to the production of culture. Control over the discourses and images of the Native American has, from the historical moment of contact, been in the hands of European and Euro-American elites. Non-Indian anthropologists, folklorists, and historians have for many years been those who determine what is and isn't authentically American Indian and/or worthy of serious academic regard; the courts of the United States have determined how much (or rather, how little) of indigenous Americans' oral traditions can legitimately be recognized and protected as "religion"; American journalists have perpetually sensationalized the image of the Native American; and today, practitioners of New Age pseudo-Indian religions have appropriated and misconstrued Native traditions, romanticizing and trivializing the songs, prayers, and practices that American Indians have for centuries relied on for their very survival.

What is perhaps even more troubling for American Indian writers and scholars, proficient in writing the English language, are the constraints imposed by Euro-American epistemological assumptions and the conventions of the literary genres that reflect and sustain them. Fredric Jameson points to the role of genre in "master narratives," which perpetuate ideologies through the chronologies and the predetermined endings of their plots. According to Jameson, "a genre is essentially a socio-symbolic message, or, in other terms that form is immanently and intrinsically an ideology in its own right."<sup>2</sup> As Native American writers and academics have entered the spheres of cultural production in

American society, they have discovered that telling the story according to their own cultural aesthetic conventions has led them into contested territory. In order to resist the narrative emplotment of their histories and identities as dictated and controlled by Euro-American world-views, American Indian writers have had to devise strategies to challenge the ideologies inherent in the dominant culture's conventions of knowledge and truth.

Some literary critics have begun to consider the resistance literature of "Third World" authors, arguing that, if scholars neglect the politicized dimensions of such narratives, they are complicit either in the "domestication" or the "neutralization" of them. Barbara Harlow, in her work on resistance literature, maintains that "the danger of 'domestication' is that it renders all too familiar, and thus subjugates through assimilation, the challenge posed by the unfamiliar, the alternative of 'neutralization,' . . . categorically rejects and isolates the unfamiliar as finally irrelevant."<sup>3</sup> Harlow argues further that these texts "are immediate interventions into the historical record, attempting to produce and impart new historical facts and analyses,"<sup>4</sup> and as such, they present the scholar with an ethical imperative to evaluate them critically and to treat them as sources of knowledge. These insights are relevant, as well, to American Indian literatures and the ethical dimensions of studying and writing about the oral traditions of Native Americans. Native American authors who reclaim the territory of history and identity through literary text challenge the critical reader, in light of the ethics of resistance, to reevaluate dominant ideologies of cultural meaning and truth.

Leslie Marmon Silko is one of the prominent contemporary Native American authors who reconfigures the structural boundaries of Euro-American literary genres in her work. She experiments with multiple genres—fiction, poetry, historical narrative, and memoir—within a single work. In addition, Silko subverts the Euro-American aesthetic expectations of temporal continuity and chronology of plot. These features of her work are aimed at more than a mere demonstration of her artistic literary skill. These techniques draw upon the narrative patterns of her indigenous Laguna Pueblo oral tradition, which she artfully interweaves with her original poems and fictional narratives. Her unique style results in narratives that more faithfully capture the experiential qualities of her community's oral tradition and its reflection of Pueblo orientation in time and place. Silko intentionally rejects the literary conventions of Euro-American genres because they are inherently unsuited to the inscription of Pueblo worldview and lived experience. In addition, these conventions have historically served to maintain and propagate ideologies of domination over American Indian cultures. Silko thus employs strategies of resistance to Euro-American discourses of Native American history and identity that, although clothed in the

vener of objectivity, in actuality rigidly define the possibilities of the real. Silko's autobiographical work *Storyteller* provides insight into how her strategies of resistance expand the horizons of cultural meaning and identity.

*Storyteller* is a sui generis text composed of interconnected genres. In it, Silko draws upon Native American narrative techniques to resist conventional Euro-American models of autobiography, which reflect the dominant culture's regard for the autonomous self and the core values associated with individualism. In contrast, Silko situates her individuality in a community context, drawing heavily on Laguna Pueblo oral tradition and history, shared family memories and photographs, as well as photographs of the Pueblo landscape. At the same time, she incorporates some of her own short stories and poetry, clearly including in her self-definition those elements that make her story multicultural.<sup>5</sup> Silko juxtaposes autobiographical materials with traditional stories of American Indian peoples and her original poetry and fiction based upon tribal experience in a dialectical and episodic fashion. In this way she demonstrates the manner in which multiple cultural voices and conflicting worldviews shape the inscription of contemporary Native American lives. By replicating the polyphonic character of oral tradition, Silko provides insight into the formation of Native American individuality in complex and ongoing relationships: tribal, personal, and cross-cultural. Silko thus challenges the monologic character and the authoritative voice of Euro-American autobiography.

Silko strategically positions family photos and remembrances, original works of fiction and poetry, and traditional Native stories in such a way that they "speak" to one another. On the first page of *Storyteller*, Silko tells the reader about the Hopi basket that contains her family's photographs. She relates that there are hundreds of photographs in the basket, taken from the 1890s around Laguna, and explains the significance of these photos to her memories of family, community, and tribal stories:

It wasn't until I began this book  
that I realized that the photographs in the Hopi basket  
have a special relationship to the stories as I remember  
them.

The photographs are here because they are part of many  
of the stories  
and because many of the stories can be traced in the  
photographs.<sup>6</sup>

On the next page is a picture of her great-grandparents, Robert G. Marmon and Marie Anaya Marmon, holding her "grandpa Hank." Immediately thereafter appears a reminiscence of her Aunt Susie, accom-

panied by a picture of her aunt on the Marmon Ranch. Silko then presents a traditional story often told by her aunt and relates the story as she remembers it being told, including her aunt's commentaries. Silko thus begins the introduction of her family history through a combination of photographs, reminiscence, and traditional narrative, articulating the dialogue among the voices of memory. Silko relies on this device throughout the book, revealing the multiple influences in the fashioning of her selfhood.

In *Storyteller*, Silko also positions her identity firmly in Laguna Pueblo history, tradition, and landscape. She draws heavily on her sense of the Laguna Pueblo worldview.<sup>7</sup> According to Alfonso Ortiz, the Pueblo worldview is essentially unified, in that "everything—animate and inanimate—counts and everything has its place in the cosmos."<sup>8</sup> Central to the Pueblo cosmos are human beings who are responsible for cultivating harmonious mental and psychological states through the performance of traditional ritual and ceremony.<sup>9</sup> Individual-centered rites, however, are not emphasized in the traditional worldview of the Pueblos. Ortiz notes that this is not to say that the Pueblos do not have "a set of notions to define the person," or that individuality is non-existent in Pueblo life, but that "one cannot discuss the person apart from the group nor, indeed, from all else in the Pueblo world."<sup>10</sup>

Ortiz's statement raises some interesting questions with regard to Silko's autobiography. Is "Pueblo autobiography" possible? Can a genre historically given to establishing the self distinctly over and against the communal lend itself to the Pueblo worldview? How does one talk about the self in terms integral to the "group," to "all else in the Pueblo world?" Yet this is what Silko does. In *Storyteller*, the self is emergent from the ethos of the community, its people, its history, its landscape. Silko draws on the resources of her Laguna Pueblo community, subtly weaving her self-inscription out of the stories and history of her people. Unlike conventional Euro-American autobiographies that place the "I" at the center, her autobiography locates the self within the web of the interconnected Pueblo universe.

Arnold Krupat points to the dialogic character of *Storyteller*, defending it as an example of autobiography that is distinctively Native American. Referring to the literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, who views speech as a social act, "a dialogue among speakers, not the property or in the power of any single speaker,"<sup>11</sup> Krupat argues that Silko defines herself "in relation to the voices of other Native and non-Native storytellers, tale tellers and book writers," and to the voices of the audience for her stories, as well.<sup>12</sup> According to Krupat, Silko's identification of herself as a storyteller places her in a narrative tradition that has always assumed the dialogic character of meaning.<sup>13</sup> To be a storyteller in Pueblo culture is to be part of a process of diverse tellings and interpretations that is viewed as an ongoing communal activity. From

Silko's point of view, this is indeed the case. She explains that changes are often made by individual storytellers, and these are considered to be "really part of the story."<sup>14</sup> According to Silko,

There were even stories about the different versions of stories and how they imagined these differing versions came to be.

I've heard tellers begin "The way I heard it was. . . ." and then proceed with another story purportedly a version of a story just told but the story they would tell was a wholly separate story, a new story with an integrity of its own, an offspring, a part of the continuing which storytelling must be.<sup>15</sup>

Silko clearly views storytelling as a dynamic process that is communally shared. Each act of storytelling provides an opportunity for nuanced interpretation and renewed understanding.

Krupat also views the combining of genres in *Storyteller* to have a precedent in Native American literary tradition in which the concern for drawing strict distinctions between "fiction and fact or poetry and prose" has never been evident.<sup>16</sup> He notes perceptively that "it is the distinction between truth and error rather than that between fact and fiction that seems more interesting to native expression."<sup>17</sup> Thus, although Krupat sees *Storyteller* as autobiography, he argues convincingly that Silko inscribes her life as a storyteller in a way that stands outside of European and American autobiographical standards.

Silko suggests that much of her self-understanding has come to be associated with her literary imagination. In *American Indian Women: Telling Their Lives*, by Gretchen M. Bataille and Kathleen Mullen Sands, Silko is quoted as saying, "The book [*Storyteller*] shows how directly and indirectly, relying on my past and family, how much my 'autobiography' has become fiction and poetry."<sup>18</sup> Although *Storyteller* presents a unique style of autobiographical narrative with strong Native American influences, written poetry, fiction, and reminiscence are not traditional forms of expression for tribal peoples. Sands points out that Silko's creative transcription of oral tradition into written text provides a means for bridging multicultural experience. Sands argues that by framing collective cultural memory in contemporary literary forms, Silko manages to bind individual and tribal experience.<sup>19</sup> Silko grounds her literary individuality in the shared mythical and historical themes and experiences of Laguna culture. Silko's blending of contemporary literary genre and Laguna tradition allows her to take control of the autobiographical situation, telling "the truth" about the inscription of Native American individuality. She thus argues the impossibility of molding indigenous experience and memories to fit the language and literary forms of the dominant culture.

In *Storyteller*, Silko does not attempt to merely recreate and romanticize the continuity of tradition. She reflects upon the cultural and personal disruptions engendered by European and Euro-American social and political dominance over American Indian lives that have also shaped her life and sense of self. Silko begins *Storyteller* by associating herself with the first woman in her family to place herself in two worlds: one world built upon Laguna oral tradition, the other controlled by the written word of the conquering "other." In verse, Silko tells us that her Aunt Susie was of the last generation at Laguna

that passed down an entire culture  
by word of mouth  
an entire history  
an entire vision of the world  
which depended upon memory  
and retelling by subsequent generations.<sup>20</sup>

Yet Silko claims that Aunt Susie was a great believer in books and the written word. Silko tells of the long and painstaking hours that her aunt, in spite of poor eyesight, devoted to studying and writing. In Silko's view, her Aunt Susie may have been as motivated to master literary skills by the break in the traditional world brought about by European contact as she was by the simple love of learning:

She must have realized  
that the atmosphere and conditions  
which had maintained this oral tradition in Laguna culture  
had been irrevocably altered by the European intrusion—  
principally by the practice of taking the children  
away from Laguna to Indian schools,  
taking the children away from the tellers who had  
in all past generations  
told the children  
an entire culture, an entire identity of a people.<sup>21</sup>

Silko clearly reveals the ambivalence of Native peoples toward European literacy. The acquisition of written language is tied directly to Euro-American assimilationist policies, by means of which children were removed from their tribal cultures and denied the use of their native languages and traditional practices. Reading and writing European languages was thus an act of oppression. Aunt Susie's conscious awareness of the inevitability of the colonial situation and her decision to acquire the skills of European literacy were elements in the process of cultural survival. The language of oppression was a powerful tool for cultural suppression; taking control of that language provided a means



of resistance. Thus, Aunt Susie, in Silko's text, becomes a model she herself endorses by her own self-inscription. Through the creative use of language and genre in *Storyteller*, Silko resists the colonizing effects of Euro-American control over Native American identity.

In particular, Silko reveals the ambiguities of language and conquest in "Storyteller," a piece of fiction significantly bearing the same title as the book. "Storyteller" is about a young Alaskan Native woman living in a world that has inexplicably been shattered by whiteness. The story opens with the girl in jail. From her cell she can see that the sun is trapped at its zenith, struggling feebly against the encroaching ice that threatens to obliterate all of the boundaries of the natural landscape.

The color of the sky had not been good lately; it had been pale blue, almost white, even when there were no clouds. She told herself it wasn't a good sign for the sky to be indistinguishable from the river ice, frozen solid and white against the earth. The tundra rose up behind the river but all the boundaries between the river and hills and sky were lost in the density of the pale ice.<sup>22</sup>

This is the moment the girl has been waiting for, the sign that it is time for her to tell her story. She calls to her jailer. Her jailer is Eskimo but refuses to speak his native Yupik. He will, however, be forced to act as her translator, speaking both Yupik and English to relate her story to the attorney.

Her story is one of complete cultural disruption by the Gussucks, the whites. From the strange intrusive square buildings of the school and the Bureau of Indian Affairs to the oil drillers who exploit her sexuality, the landscape and her life are ravaged by the domination of the Gussucks. The girl's parents are poisoned with bad liquor sold them by the white storekeeper, and she is raised by her grandmother and the "old man," who is a storyteller of sorts. With the death of the old way of life, the old man has nothing to do all winter but lie in his bed, eating dried fish and slowly narrating the story of a giant polar bear stalking a lone hunter across the ice. In a world devoid of boundaries, moral or symbolic, the old man is the first to use the girl sexually. The young woman eventually seeks revenge for her parents' deaths, luring the storekeeper over the frozen river onto the ice that she knows is too thin to support his weight. He falls through the ice and drowns, and she is arrested following his disappearance.

The young woman's story is ultimately one of resistance, but captivity and translation into a foreign tongue are requisite to the telling. When her attorney arrives at the jail, he instructs the jailer to tell her that there were witnesses to the storekeeper's "accident"; there is no way she could have planned that he chase her over the thin ice. All she

has to do is assert her innocence and go free. The girl, however, insists that she must tell the "truth," that her intent was to kill the storekeeper as an act of revenge. She wants the truth of her story—the corruption of her world by the Gussucks—and her act of resistance to be heard. The only way she can regain control of her world is to stay in jail, narrating her story through her jailer, who has been assimilated to the culture and language of the whites.

Silko, like the young woman in "Storyteller," is compelled to tell her story as an act of resistance. She rejects the literary structures of the oppressor in the same way that the girl rejects the legal system represented by the attorney of the Gussucks. Both reject institutions of the dominant culture that would prevent them from interpreting their lives according to their own systems of value.

In "Storyteller," Silko also demonstrates sensitivity to the problems associated with Native American autobiography. The narration of one's life is made necessary only by the contact situation and yet is problematic because, in order to narrate, one must find ways of accommodating the language and power structures of the other. Silko's young storyteller chooses captivity as the necessary condition for "telling the truth."

Krupat points to the problem of accommodation in Native American autobiography, noting that many Indians chose to enter into collaborative narrations as their only means of revealing to the world the injustices that have been committed against their people. Because defeat, and the acceptance of it, are the prerequisites to these autobiographies, many are emplotted as tragedy. According to Krupat, early Indian autobiographies follow the patterns established by Western autobiographies that glorify Indian fighters and "conquerors" of the "frontier." These autobiographies present an ideology of legitimation for displacing "savage" Native peoples in the name of "civilization." Native American autobiographies following this "taming of the West" ideology place the Indian in the role of the tragic hero accepting defeat in the struggle for civilization.<sup>23</sup> The Indian voice of strength and resistance behind the autobiographical model is obscured and rarely perceived by whites who have internalized colonial ideology.

Silko, like her young "Storyteller," wants to tell the truth about Native American autobiography, which is that it emerges from the inevitability of the contact situation but not from the acceptance of it. The emplotment of Indian autobiographies according to models of defeat and tragedy, or as salvage ethnographies of disappearing cultures, obviates the fact that Native American autobiographies arose in reaction to the collision of cultures. Silko's "Storyteller" points to the fact the American Indian narrators have a strong desire to reveal the injustices forced upon them and to protest the suppression of their cultural and historical interpretations. Paradoxically, the lack of control over the genre on the part of Native Americans in composite, collaborated

autobiographies prevented their sense of ongoing cultural dissonance from being perceived. Silko obviously recognizes the thwarted intentions of Native American autobiographers. The protagonist of "Storyteller" demands to be perceived as an agent of revenge, not as the tragic victim of fate, and to be heard as an intentional, individuated voice. She demands dialogue with her oppressors.

Silko also demands dialogue with her audience by forcing her readers to participate in a worldview different from their own. Unlike conventional autobiographies, which follow patterns of emplotment that meet the literary expectations of Euro-American readers, Silko forces her readers to enter into a dynamic process much like oral tradition. Bernard A. Hirsch provides insight into the way in which the structure of *Storyteller* acts as a teaching process patterned after oral tradition. Hirsch argues that Silko's unique use of genre and voice engages the reader in a gradual process of constructing meaningful connections among the episodic elements of the text. He writes:

Successive narrative episodes cast long shadows both forward and back, lending different or complementary shades of meaning to those preceding them and offering perspectives from which to consider those that follow. Such perspectives are then themselves often expanded or in some way altered as the new material reflects back upon them. This kind of learning process is part of the dynamic oral tradition. Silko uses it in *Storyteller* to foster the kind of intimacy with the reader that the oral storyteller does with the listener. Such a relationship is born of both the powerful claims of the story, in whole and in part on the reader's attention and the active engagement by the accretive process of the reader's imagination.<sup>24</sup>

Hirsch makes it clear that Silko's narrative strategy demands that the reader become involved with the text, exploring interrelationships among texts, both written and photographic.<sup>25</sup> By entering into this process, the reader must adopt an active means of interpretation similar to the mode of learning that takes place in the context of oral tradition. At the same time, this strategy is obviously one of resistance to the structures of emplotment evident in conventional autobiographies.

In *Storyteller*, Silko resists emplotment altogether, choosing instead to reveal how her life has been influenced by cultural conflict. The challenge of Euro-American contact to tribal life is evident in her presentation of family history. Silko refuses to follow Euro-American autobiographical conventions of genealogy by beginning her family history with Aunt Susie. In choosing to begin her genealogy with female ancestors, Silko rejects the conventional autobiographical mode



The incident demonstrates the stark realities of cultural biases strong enough to create a racial divide that cannot be closed with the closest of blood ties. This family reminiscence is followed immediately by the "Storyteller" piece, giving the readers a sense of the disruptive aftermath of Euro-American contact on tribal individuals and families.

All of the short narratives of family history presented in *Storyteller* highlight ways tribal life has been disrupted by contact with European culture. Grandma Marie Anaya Marmon, whom Silko calls Grandma A'mooh, "which is the Laguna expression of endearment," dies soon after being taken away to Albuquerque to live with her daughter. Her daughter, living in the midst of white culture, went to work every day, leaving Grandma A'mooh with no one to talk to. Silko says of her grandmother:

She might have lived without watering morning glories  
and without kids running through her kitchen  
but she did not last long  
without someone to talk to.<sup>30</sup>

Silko's Grandpa Hank wanted to be an automobile designer, "but in 1912 Indian schools were strictly vocational schools and the teachers at Sherman told Grandpa that Indians didn't become automobile designers."<sup>31</sup> So Grandpa Hank became a store clerk:

He subscribed to *Motor Trend* and *Popular Mechanics* and followed the new car designs and results of road tests each year. In 1957 when Ford brought out the Thunderbird in a hardtop convertible, Grandpa Hank bought one and that was his car until he died.<sup>32</sup>

The theme of cultural oppression is reinforced by short fictional stories of Native Americans whose lives and families have been disrupted by Euro-American imperialism. "Lullaby" is the story of a Navajo woman whose children are taken away by government social workers and the BIA because a relative had died of tuberculosis. When her husband is fired by the rancher for whom he has worked many years because he is "too old," they are forced to leave their home on the ranch. Her husband turns to drink and, as the story ends, the woman is singing a traditional lullaby to her drunk husband as he freezes to death at the side of the road.

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

sleep.  
Rainbow is your sister,  
    She loves you.  
The winds are your brothers,  
    they sing to you.  
Sleep,  
sleep.  
We are together always  
We are together always  
There never was a time  
when this  
was not so.<sup>33</sup>

The theme of the lullaby presents a dramatic contrast to the destruction of the lives that takes place in the story. Symbolic of the warmth and strength of cultural traditions that connect generations of people to each other and the earth, it is a poignant reminder of the beauty and stability of Native American orality. The story acts as a microcosm of the structure of *Storyteller*. Throughout the book, Silko provides dialogic contrasts between the harmony of the Native American worldview and the disruption of that way of life.

Silko also presents the mythical worldview of Native American oral tradition in an ongoing dialectical relationship with the narratives of cultural discord. This strategy challenges the hegemony of Euro-American cultural and literary interpretation that situates the experiences of Indian peoples within plots of tragedy and defeat. The mythic frame of reference offers an alternative way of interpreting the experiences of tribal individuals; it positions the individual in harmonious relationship with the community and with the cosmos.<sup>34</sup> Silko employs the mythical focus on harmony and beauty to highlight the conflict between Euro-American and Native American cosmologies and ethics.

The theme of human beings in harmonious relationship with the landscape is particularly relevant to this conflict. In a series of narratives about clouds and rain, Silko allows the reader to see the significance of landscape to Laguna people. A traditional song associates the clouds and rain with the growth of corn, which is a primary Laguna symbol of creative power:

Hena-ti-tzi  
He-ya-she-tzi  
So-you-tano-mi-ha-ai  
Of the clouds  
and rain clouds  
and growth of corn  
I sing.<sup>35</sup>

In the Pueblo worldview, corn provides the link between the human and nonhuman worlds, because it is symbolic of perfect cosmic order and balance. Gunn Allen states that Corn Mother connects the people to the earth because she "holds the essence of earth and conveys the power of earth to the people. . . . Corn connects us to the heart of power, and that heart is *lyatiku* [Earth Woman], who under the guidance of Thought woman [the Creator] directs the people in their affairs."<sup>36</sup> Singing to the clouds and rain and for the growth of corn is therefore a ritual means of maintaining the interrelationality between human beings and the creative powers of the Pueblo cosmos.

In this series of narratives, Silko includes two mythical stories explaining drought. Both reveal the idea of cosmic balance as a crucial element in Pueblo culture. The first explains drought as the imbalance between the creative work of Corn woman and the equally creative rest of *Iktoa'ak'o'ya*-Reed Woman. Reed Woman spends all day bathing in the river, sending summer rain to the earth. Corn Woman, who works all day in the field, become angry with her sister, Reed Woman, and scolds her, driving her back to the original world below:

And there was no more rain then.  
Everything dried up  
all the plants  
the corn  
the beans  
they all dried up  
and started blowing away  
in the wind.  
  
The people and the animals  
were thirsty  
They were starving.<sup>37</sup>

The story illustrates how crucial cosmic balance, and human beings' role in maintaining it, is to survival in Pueblo thinking.

The second narrative explains how *Kaup'a'ta*, the Gambler, captures the stormclouds. The Gambler's home is high in the Zuni Mountains. Here he waits for unsuspecting hunters willing to gamble with him. When they eat his mixture of blue cornmeal and human blood, they fall under his spell and gamble until they lose everything they have, including their lives. The Gambler becomes so powerful that he eventually captures the stormclouds. Sun Man, the father of the clouds, must restore cosmic balance by winning back the stormclouds. With the help of his grandmother, Spider Woman, Sun Man guesses the Gambler's riddle and wins back his children, the clouds. Although Sun Man has the power to take *Kaup'a'ta's* life, he reveals his peaceful nature by sparing the Gambler.

So Sun Man knew what to do:  
He took the flint blade  
and he cut out the Gambler's eyes  
He threw them into the south sky  
and they became the horizon stars of autumn.<sup>38</sup>

The clouds are released to bring rain again to the Earth. Kaup'a'ta's eyes become part of the landscape, a constant reminder to the people of the delicate balance of nature of which they are a part. The story and its corresponding constellation are also reminders to the Laguna Pueblo that ill intentions and individual domination, characteristics of their experience of Euro-American colonialism, disrupt the delicate balance of the world and threaten human survival.

Silko contrasts the harmonious worldview of the Pueblo people with the European Christian attachment to rites of death and salvation in a humorous story about a priest. The story tells of the death of a very old man, Teofilo, who had been away tending sheep when he dies and is found by his family under a cottonwood tree. According to the Pueblo view of the world, death is part of the natural order of things. Teofilo's family realizes that if they conduct the appropriate rituals, his spirit will send rain clouds. Silko writes:

Before they wrapped the old man, Leon took a piece of string out of his pocket and tied a small gray feather in the old man's long white hair. Ken gave him the paint. Across the brown wrinkled forehead he drew a streak of white and along the high cheekbones he drew a strip of blue paint. He paused and watched Ken throw pinches of corn meal and pollen into the wind that fluttered the small gray feather. Then Leon painted with yellow under the old man's broad nose, and finally, when he had painted green across the chin he smiled.

"Send us rain clouds, Grandfather."<sup>39</sup>

After the funeral, Louise, one of Teofilo's granddaughters, wants the local priest to sprinkle holy water on her grandfather, "so he won't be thirsty." When Leon goes to Father Paul with Louise's request, the priest initially refuses; the last rites and funeral mass, so crucial to his notion of salvation, have not taken place:

The priest sank down into the green chair and picked up a glossy missionary magazine. He turned the colored pages full of lepers and pagans without looking at them.



"You know I can't do that, Leon. There should have been the Last rites and a funeral Mass at the very least."

Eventually, the priest relents, reluctant to allow Teofilo's burial to be completely without Christian ritual:

The priest walked away slowly. Leon watched him climb the hill, and when he had disappeared within the tall, thick walls, Leon turned to look up at the high blue mountains in the deep snow that reflected a faint red light from the west. He felt good because it was finished, and he was happy about the sprinkling of the holy water; now the old man could send them big thunderclouds for sure.<sup>40</sup>

It is quite obvious that the family views the ritual of holy water from within the Pueblo context and not from an orthodox Christian point of view. Ironically, the priest has been tricked into participating in a ceremony arising from an understanding of death that is totally alien to his religious perspective. In this story, Silko introduces yet another strategy of Native American resistance to colonialism: tricksterism.

Silko, like Vizenor, uses the trickster tradition of Native Americans to make a point. In the case of *Storyteller*, she relies on a "tricky" tale, set in contemporary time, to demonstrate that she chooses to interpret her life story according to Laguna Pueblo lore and tradition, not according to the stories of the dominant culture. The "Yellow Woman" story, which portrays the mythical kidnapping of Kochininako by a *ka'tsina* spirit as the seduction of a contemporary Pueblo woman by a cattle rustler, asks the reader to question the boundaries between the everyday and the mythical. The story tells of a young woman who finds a man waiting for her at the river when she goes to get water. She is strangely drawn to him and goes with him into the mountains and stays with him several days. When a rancher catches them transporting meat from his stolen cattle, she is oddly disappointed. After reluctantly returning home from her escapade, the woman enters the world of the everyday: her mother is teaching her grandmother to make Jello; her husband is playing with the baby. A. LaVonne Ruoff points out that the world with which the woman decides to identify is crucial to the story's message. The question is whether she will rely on the mythical tradition to decide what is real or upon the world that has been influenced by European modernity. Ruoff observes:

Although Silko's "Yellow Woman" is based on traditional abduction tales, it is more than a modernized version. Silko is less concerned with the events involved in Yellow Woman's abduction and her subsequent return home than

with the character's confusion about what is real and what is not. Underlying this is the character's identification with Keres legends and her temporary rejection of the confining monotony of life within the pueblo.<sup>41</sup>

In the end, the woman chooses to interpret her experience as a Yellow Woman story, placing herself in the tradition of her grandfather's stories. She tells the reader,

I decided to tell them that some Navajo had kidnapped me,  
but I was sorry that old Grandpa wasn't alive to hear my  
story because it was the Yellow Woman stories he liked to  
tell best.<sup>42</sup>

With the young woman's choice of the mythic plot for her story, Silko is suggesting that tribal literary traditions provide the appropriate interpretative framework for Native American individuals' experience, not the stories of Euro-American modernity.

Silko positions a narrative patterned after Native American myth at the center of *Storyteller*. Structurally, the narrative provides a focal point for the dialogue among the various texts in the book, and the mythical story gives the reader some important interpretive insights into the other texts.<sup>43</sup> It is a story attributing the destructive aspects of European civilization to the misuse of language in storytelling. According to the story, in the beginning, the world was already complete, with no need for European culture. The break in the order of the cosmos that allowed the destructive power of the whites into the world occurred at a gathering of witches. The witches, who come from all corners of the world, begin to show off their powers, each trying to outdo the others. No one knows from which tribe the last witch came or whether it was male or female, but this witch unleashed its awful power through telling a story. As the witch tells its horrible tale of death and destruction, a new kind of people are born, a race that is destined to alienate themselves from the world as it is meant to be.

Then they grow away from the earth  
then they grow away from the sun  
then they grow away from the plants and animals.  
They see no life  
When they look  
they see only objects.  
The world is a dead thing for them  
the trees and rivers are not alive  
the mountains and stones are not alive.

The deer and bear are objects  
They see no life.<sup>44</sup>

The witch predicts that these people will come across the ocean bringing with them weapons to slaughter whole tribes, disease, and starvation. The witch claims this race will discover the means to lay waste the entire creation.

Set in motion now  
set in motion  
To destroy  
To kill  
Objects to work for us  
objects to act for us  
Performing the witchery  
for suffering  
for torment  
for the stillborn  
the deformed  
the sterile  
the dead.<sup>45</sup>

A myth set "in the beginning," predicting the coming of the whites and attributing their creation to the evil of witchcraft, acts as a complete turning of the tables on cultural interpretation and inscription. In this story, Silko interprets the conflict in worldviews from a Native American perspective. By resisting conventional literary models and replacing them with a mythic narrative, Silko manages to reverse the history of the dominance of the Euro-American voice.

In *Storyteller*, Silko takes back the power of language, counteracting the worldview that has been the cause of cultural chaos and, according to Pueblo knowledge, cosmic disintegration. Silko's dialogical juxtaposition of Native American story and imagery with conflicting images of cultural disorder creates a powerful indictment of Euro-American oppression.

In reappropriating the power of language and the interpretation of history, Silko also resists the Euro-American demythologization of American Indian identity. The sacred character of the land and the Pueblo's religious and cultural interrelationality with it are recurring themes throughout *Storyteller*. Growing up at Laguna, Silko learned that her community, their stories, and their religious traditions are inextricably bound to the land. In addition, the Pueblo worldview recognizes the responsibilities of human beings to maintain the delicate relationships among people, the community, and the land. Pueblo religious activity and oral tradition is focused on cosmic cohesion, not personal inner

experience, as is the European Christian understanding of religion. Joe S. Sando, a Jemez Pueblo, notes that the prayers, oratories, and songs that have been maintained by the Pueblos since ancestral times "are not spontaneous outpourings, or outbursts of the troubled heart, but . . . carefully memorized prayerful requests for an orderly life, rain, good crops, plentiful game, pleasant days, and protection from the violence and the vicissitudes of nature." The various ceremonial societies of the Pueblos have "particular responsibilities for weather, fertility, curing, hunting, and pleasure or entertainment of the people."<sup>46</sup> The interconnectedness of person-community-land thus forms the matrix around which Pueblo identity revolves. For this reason, Silko rejects the Euro-American model of individualism and autonomy as an appropriate vehicle of Pueblo identity. She chooses instead to inscribe the self as existing in the complex interrelationality of Pueblo cosmology as it is expressed in oral tradition.

In *Storyteller*, as well as in other of her works, Silko remythologizes the landscape, which has been desacralized by those who have reduced it to commodity: tourists, anthropologists, railroad moguls, and mining companies, among others. As Paul Beekman Taylor points out, in Euro-American society, the sacred has been relegated to the private sphere, compartmentalized away from the more public institutions of community life, its economics, politics, and social intercourse.<sup>47</sup> In such a setting, mythical modes of thinking have little bearing on the daily life of the autonomous individual. Silko challenges this view of reality by drawing on the mythic precedents of Laguna stories in reflecting on contemporary life. Silko's interweaving of the mythic and the mundane challenges the dominance of Euro-American epistemologies of objectivity and empirical truth in autobiography and the concept of literary autobiography itself. For Silko, the truths of mythical knowledge have the power to speak to human experience in the present. In *Storyteller*, Silko sets up a strategic dialogue among myth, fiction, and community and family lore, resisting the power of the dominant culture to circumscribe the meanings of self- and cultural identity and their expressions in the genre of autobiography.

#### N O T E S

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| <p>1 Gerald Vizenor, <i>Hotline Healers: An Almost Browne Novel</i> (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 1.</p> <p>2 Fredric Jameson, <i>The Political Unconscious</i> (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 141.</p> <p>3 See Barbara Harlow, <i>Resistance Literature</i> (New York: Methuen, 1987),</p> | <p>17. Harlow credits Masao Miyoshi, in his reading of twentieth-century Japanese novels "against the native grain," for this insight.</p> <p>4 <i>Ibid.</i>, 116.</p> <p>5 Silko is of mixed-blood heritage, and, although she spent her early years immersed in the traditions of the Keres Pueblo culture, she is</p> |
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also educated in Euro-American literary conventions.

- 6 Leslie Marmon Silko, *Storyteller* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1981), 1.
- 7 Alfonso Ortiz defines *worldview* as "a cultural system in the sense that it denotes a system of symbols by means of which a people impose meaning and order on their world." See Alfonso Ortiz, "Ritual Drama and the Pueblo World View," in *New Perspectives on the Pueblos*, ed. Alfonso Ortiz (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971), 136–37. Although it is somewhat misleading to refer to a generic Pueblo worldview in light of the diversity among the various Pueblo cultures (each Pueblo is politically autonomous and the languages spoken among the Pueblos are various and distinct), there are some basic similarities in lifestyle, philosophy, spatial and temporal organization, and economy that are shared by the Pueblos.
- 8 Ortiz, "Ritual Drama," 143.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*, 153–54.
- 11 Arnold Krupat, "The Dialogic of Silko's *Storyteller*," in *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 57.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 59–60.
- 13 Linda Krumholz concurs, stating that "*Storyteller* is an autobiography in which the 'I' has been recast as 'the storyteller,' one who finds her identity through her role for and in the community, which shifts the reader away from a traditional location of the 'I.'" See Linda Krumholz, "Native Designs: Silko's *Storyteller* and the Readers Initiation," in *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 65. In her essay from the same collection, Elizabeth McHenry identifies *Storyteller* as autobiography that is "nonlinear," expressing "the transcription of her [Silko's] fragmented and collective experience." See Elizabeth McHenry, "Spinning a Fiction of Culture: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*," 102.
- 14 Silko, *Storyteller*, 227.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Krupat, "The Dialogic of Silko's *Storyteller*," 59.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Gretchen Bataille and Kathleen Mullen Sands, "The Narratives to Come," in *American Indian Women: Telling Their Stories* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 129–41. See also Kathleen Mullen Sands, "Indian Women's Personal Narrative: Voices Past and Present," in *American Women's Autobiography: Fea(s)ts of Memory*, ed. Margo Culley (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 282–84.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Silko, *Storyteller*, 6.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Ibid.*, 17–18.
- 23 Krupat, *For Those Who Come After: A Study of Native American Autobiography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 33–53.
- 24 Bernard A. Hirsch, "'The Telling Which Continues': Oral Tradition and the Written Word in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*," *American Indian Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (Winter 1988): 3.

- 25 In two later works, Silko also combines narrative and photographs. In the author's note to *Sacred Waters*, an experimental, self-published text, Silko explains that her intention in pairing narratives with visual images is to create a "field of vision for the reading of the text." For Silko, photographs are not meant to "illustrate" or to "serve the text"; rather, they provide dialogic extension of the narrative intended to speak to the reader on an equal and harmonious footing with written text. See Silko, "Note from Author," *Sacred Waters* (Tucson, Ariz.: Flood Plain Press, 1993). See also Silko's *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 13–15, in which she explains that visual images are crucial to locating Laguna narratives in place and time and give them "resonance over the centuries." According to Silko, photographs are an integral and crucial component of the text because they provide for the full expression of narratives that are inseparable from locations that are personally and culturally significant.
- 26 See Paula Gunn Allen, "When Women Throw Down Bundles: Strong Women Make Strong Nations," in *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 30–42, for a discussion of how Euro-American patriarchy was imposed upon Indian peoples as a means of colonization. Gunn Allen points out that, among many American Indians, including the Pueblo tribes, the clan system is a more important unit of kinship than the nuclear family. She also reveals the central social and political roles played by women in tribal life prior to European contact.
- 27 Hirsch, "The Telling Which Continues," 2.
- 28 Silko, *Storyteller*, 6–7.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 192.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 *Ibid.*, 51.
- 34 Paula Gunn Allen provides an insightful discussion of cosmic and social balance as it is formulated in the worldviews of many American Indian cultures. She claims that European contact "created chaos" in otherwise harmonious communities that were "superbly healthy, simultaneously cooperative and autonomous, peace-centered, and ritual-oriented." In these tribal systems, individuals and institutions were seen as parts "necessary to the balanced and harmonious functioning of the whole, and both private and public aspects of life were viewed as valuable and necessary components of society." See Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 31.
- 35 Silko, *Storyteller*, 158.
- 36 Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 22.
- 37 Silko, *Storyteller*, 159.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 169.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 182–83.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 185–86.
- 41 A. LaVonne Ruoff, "Ritual and Renewal: Keres Traditions in the Short Fiction of Leslie Silko," *Melus* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1978): 12.
- 42 Silko, *Storyteller*, 62.
- 43 Silko also places a version of the story at the structural center of her novel *Ceremony*. In *Ceremony*, the narrative provides the pivotal point of understanding: the witch's story, a misuse of the power of language, has set into motion

the ultimate evil, which the novel itself, seen as a ceremonial use of language, must counteract. In some sense, all of Silko's works enter into dialogue with, and thus provide insight into, one another. Because she relies so much on the open-endedness of oral tradition as a model for her literary work, different versions of the same stories can be drawn upon in new contexts to create an ongoing process of accretive meaning. See Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) 132–38, for this version of the narrative.

- 44 Silko, *Storyteller*, 133.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 136.
- 46 Joe S. Sando, *The Pueblo Indians* (San Francisco, Calif.: Indian Historian Press, 1976), 22–23.
- 47 Paul Beekman Taylor, "Silko's Reappropriation of Secrecy," in *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 32.