

*"To understand this world differently":
Reading and Subversion in
Leslie Marmon Silko's "Storyteller"*

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LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S *Storyteller* is a book of stories and a book about stories: it contains traditional Pueblo Indian stories, Silko's family stories, poems, conventional European style short stories, gossip stories, and photographs, all woven together to create a self-reflexive text that examines the cyclical role of stories in recounting and generating meaning for individuals, communities, and nations. *Storyteller* has been described as an uniquely Native American form of autobiography and as a simulation of the oral tradition in written form.¹ The book simulates the oral tradition both in the compilation of many stories that create their own interpretive context (functioning like an oral community) and in the lack of discrimination made between the many kinds of stories. By eliding distinctions between genres and between old and new stories, Silko creates a dynamic juxtaposition that duplicates the way in which meaning is created in the oral tradition through a constant interaction between the stories and the material circumstances of the community, between the old stories and the on-going creation of meaning. Her image for the oral tradition is a web: strong, flexible, resilient, everchanging, interconnected, and in dynamic relationship with the rest of the world.

Silko's book functions in the "contact zone," a phrase coined by Mary Louise Pratt to describe "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (444). Pratt describes a certain kind of text created by the colonized or conquered, by those made "other" by

the dominating social group, as an "autoethnographic text," "a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them" (445). Pratt argues that

[autoethnographic texts] involve a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or the conqueror. These are merged or infiltrated to varying degrees with indigenous idioms to create self-representations intended to intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding. Autoethnographic works are often addressed to both metropolitan audiences and the speaker's own community. Their reception is thus highly indeterminate.

(445-46)

Silko's *Storyteller* is an autoethnographic text, a book that engages with the dominant representations of Native Americans in order to appropriate and transform those representations. The book contains many of the forms of expression and faces many of the perils that, according to Pratt, distinguish writing in the contact zone:

Autoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expression—these are some of the literate arts of the contact zone. Miscomprehension, incomprehension, dead letters, unread masterpieces, absolute heterogeneity of meaning—these are some of the perils of writing in the contact zone. (450)

Pratt emphasizes the perilous and indeterminate nature of the reception of texts in the contact zone. In this essay I focus on the role of the reader in Silko's book in an attempt to negotiate the charged terrain of the contact zone. I read *Storyteller* as a ritual of initiation for the reader into a Laguna Pueblo representation and understanding of the world, a reading that emphasizes the potential for the text to transform consciousness and social structures. Finally, I consider the position of literary criticism and my own work in this paper within this contact zone.

Silko explains in a talk entitled "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective" that "a great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener, and the storyteller's role is to draw the story out of the listeners. This kind of shared experience grows out of a strong community base" (57). But how does the storyteller address both those inside the community base and

those outside it as well? In describing *Storyteller* as an autoethnography and as an initiation for the reader, I will focus on the reader as outsider, the non-Laguna and non-Indian reader. What serves as an act of transformation for a non-Indian reader may serve as an affirmation for the Indian reader. But insofar as Silko engages with and challenges the dominant representations of Native Americans, she confronts the ideologies that all "Americans" are subject to in varying degrees—many Native Americans have also been educated in Euroamerican schools, for example. Silko begins *Storyteller* with stories that correlate with, and repudiate, the Euroamerican representation in which American Indians are tragic figures, scattered remnants of a dying culture. As the reader moves through the book, she or he gains greater familiarity with Native American stories and perspectives, until the final stories of the book use the humour and subversion of Coyote stories, stories of the quintessential Native American trickster, to show the vitality and humour of Indian culture, while also laughing at the dominant representations of power, of history, and of American Indians. Silko engages with the terms of the dominant culture and then moves them progressively into a Laguna context, shifting the reader's perspective from one interpretive position to another. Thus Silko creates "resistance literature"; she appropriates the terms of the colonizer in order to change forms of representation, to change readers, and to change the world.²

One of the central ways that Silko challenges dominant representations of Native Americans is by contesting the relegation of Native Americans to the past, and by breaking down the oral/written distinction that is used to support the past/present (them/us) dichotomy. Native American arts and storytelling were for a long time in the academic purview of anthropology, and European anthropologist Johannes Fabian argues that anthropological temporal categories served to construct the colonized "other" as part of the past, excluded from contemporaneity, in order to justify the colonial mission. He writes:

Anthropology contributed above all to the intellectual justification of the colonial enterprise. It gave to politics and economics—both concerned with human Time—a firm belief in "natural," i.e., evolu-

tionary Time. It promoted a scheme in terms of which not only past cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time—some upstream, others downstream. Civilization, evolution, development, acculturation, modernization (and their cousins industrialization, urbanization) are all terms whose conceptual content derives from whatever ethical, or unethical, intentions they may express. A discourse employing terms such as primitive, savage (but also tribal, traditional, Third World, or whatever euphemism is current) does not think, or observe, or critically study, the “primitive”; it thinks, observes, studies *in terms* of the primitive. *Primitive* being essentially a temporal concept, is a category, not an object, of Western thought. (17-18)

Clearly Fabian’s analysis of Western temporal categories applies to the colonization of the United States, a colonization justified by a narrative in which Europeans discovered a New World that was empty except for a few nomadic savages who could only profit from contact with a more advanced society, primitives who needed to be brought from the past to the present (even if it killed them). There are also other contemporary manifestations of this evolutionary time concept, as in romantic ideas of Native Americans—new versions of the “noble savage”—that relegate them to some idyllic past to which other Americans wish they could return. Jimmie Durham, a Cherokee artist and writer, states that in “the United States, people phrase their questions about Indians in the past tense” (424).

The distinction between oral and written cultures has been used in anthropology to define the preliterate, prehistorical, and primitive (that is, static and dead) cultures in opposition to the literate, historical, and, by implication, contemporary (European) people. These reified divisions between oral and literate cultures have been criticized by contemporary Euroamerican anthropologists, such as Joel Sherzer and Anthony Woodbury, who argue that

[some statements describing an oral/written distinction] do not come to terms with the nature of oral discourse, but tend rather to take written discourse as a model and then view oral discourse as less complicated, less advanced, and seemingly deficient in relation to the written texts of literate, technological societies. . . . there is no simple dichotomy between oral and written discourse, between non-literate and literate societies. Rather there is considerable and quite interesting continuity between the oral and the written, showing

diversity within each: There are oral genres in Native America that have such "written" properties as fixed text, "planning," and abstraction form context, and written genres in European-based societies have such "oral" properties as spontaneity and "repair," scansion into pause phrases, and context-dependent interpretability. (9-10)

In *Storyteller*, Silko challenges the distinctions between oral and written by constructing the written as a secondary and diminished version not simply of verbal presence but of the entire dynamic situation of place, people, and stories in the oral community.

Silko also works against the representations of traditional Native American stories as simplistic and static, without any contemporary applicability or pleasure, ideas perpetuated by anthropologists' stylistic choices in transcription and translation. Silko disdains the work of ethnologists Franz Boas and Elsie Clews Parsons, who "collected" stories of the Laguna Pueblo in their book *Keresan Texts* in order to preserve what they considered a dying culture ("A Conversation" 30). Dennis Tedlock, a Euroamerican anthropologist, has also criticized Boas's and Parsons's methods of transcription and translation as another way of rendering Native American people as primitive precursors. He writes:

[When translating from oral to written] the direction of movement is opposite to that of translation as practiced between two written traditions: whereas the professional translator brings what was said in another language across into the saying of his own, the professional linguist takes his own language partway across to the other, artificially creating a new variety of broken English. Not only that, but as Dell Hymes has pointed out, those who wish to keep what was said in the other language at a great distance, whether giving it the status of an early link in their own evolutionary past or filling out the spaces in a literary bestiary, will even take this broken English as a sign of authenticity. (12)

Tedlock proposes that Native American oral narratives should be written on the page like dramatic poetry to emphasize oral and performative stylistics as they shape the meaning and aesthetics of oral narratives, thereby stressing the continuity of forms between the oral and the written. Silko uses some of the typographical devices that Tedlock suggests (not necessarily at his urging). She uses the ends of lines to indicate verbal pauses, she indents to

indicate visually the structural importance of repetition, and she uses italics to indicate verbal asides to the audience. These textual indicators control the pacing and reception of the stories, increasing the accessibility and emphasizing the poetic and narrative effects for readers. Silko also blurs the distinction between oral Pueblo stories and written short stories as *Storyteller* progresses, in part by rendering them all in writing, but also by obscuring the formal differences on the page until in the final stories the forms of poetry, traditional stories, and European style short stories are virtually indistinguishable.

While blurring the distinctions between oral and written arts and asserting the contemporaneity of Native American verbal arts, Silko also carries Native American concepts of language into her written text. In Native American oral traditions, language is neither a lens offering a mimetic representation nor a problematic social structure—language has the power to create and transform reality. Numerous students of Native American culture have noted the efficacious power of the word. Kenneth Lincoln offers a description of “tribal poetics”: “Ideally generative, words make things happen in Native America; language is the source of the world in itself” (20). Elsewhere, Brian Swann writes, “The Word, in fact, is a sacrament, a vital force, so that, for instance, a hunting song is not just a pleasant aesthetic experience, but possesses an active relationship with the hunting act” (xi). He elaborates: “A truly sacramental sense of language means that object and word are so fused that their creation, the ‘event,’ is itself creative, bringing into this time and place the enduring powers which truly effect that which the event claims, and such action cannot be undone” (xii). The term “sacramental,” with its religious echoes, conveys a spiritual concept in which a symbol becomes what it symbolizes—there is no gap between signifier and signified. The spoken word is thus a powerful creative or destructive force.

The creative and transformative power of language connects linguistic acts to the transformative processes of ritual. Storytelling is a central element in Native American rituals, and Silko refers to the creative and destructive powers of language throughout *Storyteller*. Anthropological theories of ritual and lim-

inality may be applicable to all acts of reading. But I wish to connect Silko's *Storyteller* to ritual in order to propose the transformative potential of this book in its particular position in the contact zone and to read the structure of the work as a tool in the transformative process.

Rituals are formal events in which symbolic representations, such as dance, song, story, and other activities are spiritually and communally endowed with the power to shape real relations in the world. The anthropologist Victor Turner divides the ritual process into three stages: rites of separation, rites of limen or margin, and rites of reaggregation or integration ("Are There Universals?" 8-18). Turner theorizes "marginality" or "liminality" as a space and time within ritual in which social classifications break down and social relations are transformed. The rites of separation and reaggregation frame and mediate between the social structure and the status-free experience of liminality. Within the limen, a time and space outside of categories is created, a place where dangers have free play within the limits set by the ritual. This is the arena of the "other" where the power of mystery supercedes the power of the social structure. Within the limen all participants, having temporarily put off their status, will see the world differently. Ritual thus creates a time and space in which the non-differentiation of *communitas* and the powers of otherness can break into, while being contained within, the pre-existing power structures in the society (*Ritual Process* 128).³

Turner's three phases of ritual can also describe the process of reading, in which ritual processes of separation and reaggregation are compared to the (less formalized) actions of sitting alone with a book and then putting the book down. In this analogy, the act of reading correlates to the liminal phase of ritual. Liminality, according to Turner, is the central phase of ritual, a pedagogical phase in which neophytes about to be initiated are all of equal status outside of structures of social order while a ritual leader has absolute powers. Turner's description of the liminal phase as a time and space of possibility could well describe the ideal reading process:

... the liminal phase [is] in the "subjunctive mood" of culture, the mood of maybe, might-be, as-if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, de-

sire . . . Liminality can perhaps be described as a fructile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities, not by any means a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structure, a gestation process, a fetation of modes appropriate to and anticipating postliminal existence. ("Are There Universals?" 11-12)

The narrative is a liminal space, both within and outside daily life, a place and time in which a reader may take imaginative risks that may transform his or her perception of the world.

But the conjunction of reading and ritual also has a particular strategic value for Silko writing in the contact zone. Ritual is an indigenous idiom for many Native Americans, and it is a formal element in many contemporary Native American narratives. Paula Gunn Allen asserts that many contemporary novels by Indian authors "derive many of their structural and symbolic elements from certain rituals and the myths that are allied with those rituals" (79). This use of ritual can be read as autoethnography, a way of carrying Indian forms of representation into the European-derived form of the novel, which has the consequence of altering the novel. The convergence of ritual and written narrative brings into the novel—by implication, structure, or artistic effect—more of the physical, spiritual, and communal aspects of ritual that tend to be deemphasized in the individual, intellectual, and often secular experience of reading novels. Beyond this, the assertion of ritual properties in written narratives creates a potent model for change, similar perhaps to narratives aimed at religious conversion, in which the narrative seeks to provide a visionary experience. Silko gives *Storyteller* ritual properties: the sense of a community of voices, a spiritual vision, a visual, physical relationship to the text, and a structure that moves both progressively towards a vision and in a circle, suggesting cyclical and balanced relations rather than a sense of closure. But the complexity of *Storyteller* as a text correlates with the danger of the heterogeneity of meaning and the indeterminacy of reception that Pratt noted. As I trace some of the structures I find in the text, I hope my attention to reception can help me to avoid a homogenized reduction of the web of reading and meaning that Silko has constructed while making its powerful vision more accessible to the reader.

In order to describe the structural movements of *Storyteller* and the way it functions as a ritual of initiation for the reader, I designate six thematic divisions in the text. The first two sections are drawn from Bernard A. Hirsch's discussion of *Storyteller*; the four remaining sections correspond to those designated by Linda Danielson in her work on the book.⁴ Hirsch designates the first section as the Survival section (1-53) and describes this section and *Storyteller* as a whole as "a self-renewing act of imagination/memory designed to keep storytellers as well as stories from so tragic a fate" as to be lost to memory (4). In this section, Silko establishes the familial and collective transmission of stories as vital cultural forces. The stories depict the determination of Native Americans to resist the forces that are dismantling Indian families, traditions, and interpretations. Most of the stories in this section are also tinged with a sense of loss and displacement caused by "European intrusion" (6) and the tensions between Native American and Euroamerican cultures. In the two short stories "Storyteller" and "Lullaby," the characters reaffirm the power and continuity of the stories, but the situation of the storytellers is perilous. At the end of "Storyteller," the Yupik protagonist is imprisoned literally by the Euroamerican authorities and figuratively by their interpretations of her story, for which they brand her as criminal or crazy.⁵ In "Lullaby," the old Navajo woman sings her song of continuity as she sits outside with her husband, preparing to freeze to death after a lifetime of losing everything including all of their children, to white social workers and doctors and white wars. In both "Storyteller" and "Lullaby" stories and songs provide consolation for Native American people besieged by white culture and authority, but the survival of the people and the stories is threatened by Euroamerican legal and interpretive structures within which these stories are meaningless or unheard. This threatens not only Native Americans; the apocalyptic imagery of "Storyteller" suggests that the survival of the earth depends upon the perpetuation of these stories.

Some of the stories in the Survival section also tell of the matrilineage of storytelling, its power and its tensions. Silko tells two traditional stories that her Aunt Susie told her as a young girl.

Both stories—the story of the young girl who killed herself because her mother would not make her *yashtoah* (her favourite food) and the story of the two little girls who lost their mother in a flood and turned to stone—portray severed relationships between mothers and daughters, and may well have served as solace for Silko in her relationship with her mother.⁶ Silko also shows her writing to be a continuation of a female lineage of storytellers, such as Aunt Susie, in her family photographs and reminiscences. When Silko recollects her Aunt Susie's stories she writes:

I remember only a small part.
But this is what I remember. (7)

In the balance of these two lines, Silko embodies both the loss of so much of the oral tradition, as well as the perpetuation of the oral tradition in her own memory and her own retellings. In the Survival section the reader is made to feel the depth of loss both of the stories and of the people who attempted to tell the stories and live by them. But Silko does not simply present the tragedy of the loss; she creates in her readers the need, the desire, and the ability to hear and understand those stories from a Native American interpretive perspective.

The second section (54-99), dubbed "Yellow Woman" by Hirsch, contains a number of stories about Yellow Woman, or "Kochininako" in Keres, a generic female character in Laguna Pueblo stories. Yellow Woman encompasses a great diversity of traits: in some stories she is loyal, beautiful, or powerful; in other stories she is selfish, thoughtless, or, worst of all, a witch.⁷ Here, Silko focuses especially on the so-called abduction stories, in which Yellow Woman is taken from her husband and children by a powerful male figure—Whirlwind Man, Buffalo Man, or the Sun—but in Silko's stories the woman is drawn into the adulterous relationships as much by her own desire as by the man's. Hirsch argues that this focus on women's sexuality shows that "individual fulfillment can be equally important to a tribal community" as individual sacrifice (17), since in this section, and especially in the poem/story "Cottonwood Parts One and Two," Silko's retelling of two traditional stories, Yellow Woman's desire and agency bring benefits to the people.

In the Yellow Woman section, Silko tells stories of women's roles developing within the dynamic exchange of old and new stories. In the short story "Yellow Woman," for example, the first person narrator tries to figure out if, in her experience of abduction, she is Yellow Woman: "I was wondering if Yellow Woman had known who she was—if she knew that she would become part of the stories" (55). The narrator's relationship to the old stories is ambiguously resolved both in the title to Silko's story and in the last line of the story, when the narrator thinks "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" (62). The narrator's proximity with the old stories gives her experience a significance and a place in the life and stories of the people. As Silko writes in her poem "Storytelling," a humorous juxtaposition of traditional and gossip stories, "You should understand / the way it was / back then, / because it is the same / even now" (94).

It is especially pertinent to consider the relations of old and new in the treatment of women's roles. Silko's description of her hunting experiences in this section, connected by a story she was told as a child about a great young girl hunter, point out some of the ways in which "traditional" roles for women mean something quite different for Native American and Euroamerican women. Rayna Green makes these differences explicit:

The ironies multiply when, contrary to standard feminist calls for revolution and change, Indian women insist on taking their traditional places as healers, legal specialists, and tribal governors. Their call is for a return to Native American forms which, they insist, involve men and women in complementary, mutual roles. I underscore these differences because they may teach us more than analyses of Indian female "oppression." I am not suggesting that a return to tradition in all its forms is "correct" but that attention to the debate about the implications of such retraditionalization would mean healthier, culturally more appropriate scholarship on Indian women. (264)

Silko's focus on women's roles in this section of *Storyteller* compels the (white?) reader to reevaluate ideas of tradition, often considered by Euroamericans as something static, repressive, and unyielding. The way women construct and imagine their roles and their relation to tradition in Silko's stories parallels the give and take between old and new stories that gives the oral tradition its continuing vitality and relevance.

The next two sections, coming in the centre of the book, comprise a cycle from drought to rain. The Pueblo Indians, as well as the other Indians living in the arid southwest, focus many of their stories and rituals on the need for rain. Drought results from disruptions of harmony, from witchcraft, from bad thoughts or deeds, or from forgetting the old stories and the old ways. Rain results from an establishment of the right order and balance and sometimes from a ritual of healing to counter witchcraft.⁸ In Pueblo and Navajo religions, witchcraft is a reversal of the right order and balance of things—it is a destructive rather than a creative use of power.

In the Drought section (100-57), Silko recasts the terms of power, so that white power, which is often represented as overpowering and absolute, is treated as a misunderstanding and a misuse of power—the sort of power to bring drought rather than rain. In two stories, the short story “Tony’s Story” and the poem/story of the creation of white people by witches, the association between white power and witchery is explicit. In the creation story, in which a witch tells a story of white people that creates them as it is spoken, white people are described as people who objectify their surroundings and who bring death and destruction to people, animals, and land (with clearly historical allusions). The witch’s evocation concludes with the white people’s use of the rocks “in these hills”: “They will lay the final pattern with these rocks / they will lay it across the world / and explode everything” (136).⁹ In “Tony’s Story,” Silko recounts a true story about a traditional Indian who killed a white state patrol officer. Since the story is told from Tony’s (the Indian’s) perspective, the reader is left to ponder both the delusions of Tony’s vision and the logic of his assumption that the cop is a witch because his manifestation of power seems lifeless, arbitrary, and destructive.

The story of the Ck’o’yo magician connects white “power” to the illusions of “magic” by inference rather than by explicit reference. In the poem/story the magician disturbs the balanced relationships between the people and the land, the animals, and the spiritual powers, and thus he brings drought. The Ck’o’yo magician fools the people with tricks, “magic,” that look like power but prove to be a false power. Like the power of technol-

ogy, the Ck'o'yo magician can create magical and impressive visions while ignoring and even trampling on the cycles of worship, balance, and reciprocity required for fruitful relationships and necessary to bring the rain.

Following a group of photographs, the Rain section (158-186) begins with a rain chant, "The Go-wa-peu-zi Song," written first in phonetic anglicized Laguna and then in English: "Of the clouds/ and rain clouds/ and growth of corn/ I sing" (158). This section continues from the previous one, but the emphasis has shifted from the disruptions that cause drought to the positive and creative forces the rain represents. The stories in the Rain section are lighter and more humorous, written in a light-hearted tone that celebrates the creativity, growth, and balanced relationships that bring the rain and that the rain signifies.

This section, halfway through the book, signals a shift into a Laguna Pueblo "language" and understanding. As Pratt has described it, autoethnography collaborates with and appropriates the representations the dominant group has of the dominated. In *Storyteller*, Silko uses the process of initiation to transform the reader and to shift the interpretive vantage point and the definition of terms from the Euroamerican to Native American. At this point in the book Silko moves toward affirmation and representation of Native American philosophical and spiritual beliefs from a more Native American centred world view. For example, both "Tony's Story" in the Drought section and "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" in the Rain section end with the promise of rain, but in the former story Tony's beliefs seem disturbing and out of touch with his surroundings, while in the latter story it is the Anglo priest whose beliefs seem disturbing and out of touch within the Laguna community. Although the perspective throughout the book is clearly Native American, the weight of Euroamerican representations lifts in this section, and the storyteller exhibits a greater confidence in the reader's ability to engage with Native American concepts and representations.

This shift in the emphasis of the collaborative enterprise is depicted most clearly in "The Man to Send Rain Clouds." In the story an old Laguna man is found dead by his relatives who prepare for his burial ritual and who ask him to send them rain

clouds. It is believed that when the dead leave the fifth world (the world we are most familiar with) and travel to the other worlds below (which have no resemblance to Hades or Hell) they can carry an appeal to the rain clouds to bring rain to the fifth world. When the Anglo priest in the story is asked to bring his holy water to the burial ceremony, the Euroamerican character and belief system are put into the Native American context; the priest is the outsider who cannot comprehend the religious and cultural forms that surround him. The readers are put in the Laguna position, finding humour and pathos in his misunderstanding. In the end of the story, as the priest watches in bafflement as his holy water soaks into the sand, we see the sacred powers of the priest and the symbolism of his water get engulfed by the ceremony and beliefs of the Laguna and their (and our) understanding of the symbolism of the water.

The other stories in this section describe productive relationships and growth as part of the cyclical processes of the world. To illustrate the vastness of the natural and spiritual cycles, Silko depicts the dissolution of illusory boundaries of time and space. Four lyric poems in this section best exemplify this concept, especially "Prayer to the Pacific" in which the cycles of rain become a continual process that links the very origins of life and time to the present and the future, and every part of the globe to every other. Thus Silko presents a world of temporal and spatial coexistence, a world without boundaries, in which all things are interrelated.

The story "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" provides a link between the Rain section and the Spirits section (187-211), since the earth's cycles are connected with the processes of life and death and the presence of the spirits of the dead. The concept of temporal coexistence in the Rain section has direct bearing on concepts of ancestral presences, as Johannes Fabian observes:

. . . all temporal relations, and therefore also contemporaneity, are embedded in culturally organized praxis. . . . To cite but two examples, relationships between the living and the dead, or relationships between the agent and object of magic operations, presuppose cultural conceptions of contemporaneity. To a large extent, Western rational disbelief in the presence of ancestors and the efficacy of

magic rest on the rejection of ideas of temporal coexistence implied in these ideas and practices. (34)

The dissolution of temporal boundaries in the Rain section prepares the reader for an understanding of spiritual presences and our relationship to them.

In the Spirits section, Silko tells a number of stories about family members who have died, especially about her Grandpa Hank; the section is framed by photographs of her Grandpa Hank and her Grandma A'mooh. The Deer Dance becomes a model for the reciprocal relations between the living and the dead. Silko describes the Deer Dance which "is performed to honor and pay thanks to the deer spirits who've come home with the hunters that year. Only when this has been properly done will the spirits be able to return to the mountain and be reborn into more deer who will, remembering the reverence and appreciation of the people, once more come home with the hunters" (191). This cyclical relationship is also used in poems in the section to describe the pain and homage in love relations, in "A Hunting Story," "Deer Dance / For Your Return," and "Deer Song"; and to describe the relations between the old stories and the new with a deeper spiritual dimension than in the Yellow Woman section. "Where Mountain Lion Lay Down with Deer" is a beautiful poetic evocation of the processes by which stories bring the spirits of the past back into existence. And in Silko's description of the anthropologists' explorations on the Enchanted Mesa, she describes a different kind of death that has threatened Indians, when pieces of the past are buried in museum basements, and the spirits and stories of the past are taken out of circulation.

In the last two stories of the section, which are two versions of a story, Silko describes spiritual transformations that affect the living. In one version a young boy taken by the bear people is brought back gradually to his humanity by a medicine man, but he will always be different after his connection to the bears. In the other version, "Story from Bear Country," the reader, referred to as "you," is in the position of the young boy, and we are being lured back from the beauty of the bears' world by the narrator—the poem is the song by which the storyteller, in the

role of the medicine man, calls the reader back. In these stories Silko conveys the power of stories to create spiritual transformations, thus offering stories that help to understand the reader's initiation and transformation in the ritual process of the book.

In the last section of the book, Silko tells stories of Coyote, the Native American trickster figure and ultimate survivor, to complete the shift to a Native American perspective and tradition. Coyote stories, common in the western and southwestern parts of North and Central America, differ among various people and regions, but the central feature of Coyote is his or her propensity for trickery, immorality, and deception. Exemplifying reprehensible, anti-social behaviours, Coyote is depicted as a lecher, a glutton, a thief, and a clown, whose uncontrolled appetites lead him to death again and again, though his death is never permanent. Jarold Ramsey describes Coyote's outlawry as a focus of social censure and of group humour that provides moral examples and psychological release, education and entertainment (xxxii). But Coyote's foolish errors, his appetite, and his laziness are not just amusing character flaws, they are characteristics that have shaped the world—thus he is also a very human character. William Bright argues that Coyote stories, while teaching morality through Coyote's negative examples, also depict the foolishness and the power of humanity (346).¹⁰ In this last section of *Storyteller*, Silko introduces a character who represents human foibles and human creativity, as well as the power of Native American, and human, survival.

At this point, two structures can be seen in Silko's *Storyteller*: there is a progressive initiation into the Laguna Pueblo "language" and systems of belief and representation, and there is a mirror or circular structure. The Rain section responds to the Drought section, the Spirits section deepens the dynamics of change treated in the Yellow Woman section, and the Coyote stories reconsider the Survival section, and now the Indian perspective, traditions, and values pass judgment on the white world. The structure of the book can be envisioned as a butterfly: the two halves of the book provide two sides to a Native American perspective—on one side the sadness and struggle, on the other the humour and subversion—and both parts are necessary for a

full understanding of power relations. At the same time, through the progressive movement of the book, Silko deflates the "dominant" vision of a "dominating" system of power.

The reader's experience of the text may be compared to the experience of Silko's great-grandfather Robert G. Marmon, a white man who married a Laguna woman and lived the rest of his life in Laguna. Near the end of *Storyteller* Silko looks at a photograph of Marmon as an old man, and she writes, "I see in his eyes / he had come to understand this world / differently" (256). Her observation, rendered in poetry to control the pace and emphasis, conveys the depth and importance of this difference in her great-grandfather's altered vision. Silko's book works to transform the reader's vision as a lifetime at Laguna did for her great-grandfather—to convey and reinforce the power and beauty of the Laguna vision.

This final section of my essay focusses on a story in the Coyote section, "A Geronimo Story," that exemplifies the process of initiation that *Storyteller* as a whole enacts. In "A Geronimo Story," the reader learns, along with the narrator's younger incarnation, how to "read" Laguna meanings through an understanding of the strategies of humour and subversion. The narrator, Andy, tells the story of a trip he made as a naive young man, when he accompanied the Laguna Regulars, led by his uncle Siteye and a white man, Captain Pratt, on an assignment to track and capture Geronimo. The United States Army, at war with Geronimo and the Apaches in the early 1880s, took advantage of inter-Indian hostilities and employed Laguna men to help them against their Apache enemies.

The narrative voice of the mature Andy follows the young Andy as he learns, through the subtlety of his uncle Siteye's humour and wisdom, about the ability of the trickster to turn white authority back on itself. The reader is put in the same position as the young Andy; the narrator provides the reader with the knowledge Andy already had when he went on the trip, but he does not explain the lessons he learns as the trip proceeds. To understand the story and how it affects Andy, the reader must, like Andy, learn to understand the humour of Siteye.

The story begins by establishing Andy's "horse sense"; he describes his uncle's larger Mexican horse and his own smaller

Navajo horse as he ropes and saddles them for the trip. But Andy does not understand why the group heads for Pie Town when Siteye and Captain Pratt know Geronimo is not in that direction. Captain Pratt, a "squaw man" (as was Silko's great-grandfather Robert Marmon), has married a Laguna wife, adopted many of the Laguna ways, and is respected by the Laguna. Captain Pratt, in his respect for Siteye's opinions and for the Laguna people, is contrasted to other white men. Major Littlecock is the other kind of white man, whose authoritative stance, repeated errors of judgment, and racist underestimation of the Laguna are a source for the Laguna of amused contempt, a contempt also signified by his name.

The comradeship, stories, and lessons of the trail end when the Laguna Regulars reach the white people's town, Pie Town, and encounter the white people's distrust and hostility, at which the full power of the Laguna sense of humour is released. The more fiercely and foolishly Major Littlecock acts out his authority and prejudice, the faster the jokes fly, until a joking session ends with Siteye's words and Andy's comprehension:

Siteye cleared his throat. "I am only sorry that the Apaches aren't around here," he said. "I can't think of a better place to wipe out. If we see them tomorrow we'll tell them to come here first."

We were all laughing now, and we felt good saying things like this. "Anybody can act violently—there is nothing to it; but not every person is able to destroy his enemy with words." That's what Siteye always told me, and I respect him. (221-22)

The Laguna strategies of humour and collaboration become clearer to Andy by the end, when he puts them fully into the context of survival. First there is the following exchange with Siteye:

Before I went to sleep I said to Siteye, "You've been hunting Geronimo for a long time, haven't you? And he always gets away."

"Yes," Siteye said, staring up at the stars, "but I always like to think that it's us who get away." (222)

Siteye's sentence can be read two ways—to mean that it is "us" who escape from Geronimo, or that he *is* "us." Anything enigmatic in the statement is made clearer when, the following day, they prove to Littlecock that he was wrong about the Apaches' prox-

imity. Andy thinks Littlecock was wishing he were still in Sioux country, which was more familiar to him. Silko writes, "Siteye felt the same. If he hadn't killed them all, he could still be up there chasing Sioux; he might have been pretty good at it" (223). The sarcasm and subtle humour of Silko's story suggest that the Laguna "collaboration" is both a strategy for survival and a deception of the white military authorities—a pretence of collaboration.

The journey becomes an initiation ritual for Andy, as he learns new places and the unspoken relations between Laguna and white men. Siteye teaches Andy tracking, explaining the process of memory based on an awareness of details and an ability to etch them into one's mind. The process of tracking Geronimo becomes a metaphor for Andy's initiation process, as he learns not only how to find him, but why they *do not* seek him. In Siteye's stories of the Apaches and the white soldiers, the soldiers' stupidity is a more prominent element than the murderousness of the Apaches; although there is no love lost between the Laguna and the Apache, the Laguna have even less respect for the white people with whom they ostensibly collaborate. The process of tracking and the idea of the hunt also become metaphors for the reader's initiation, as we trace through the subtlety of Silko's humour to figure out what Andy has figured out. Geronimo is, in a sense, the ultimate trickster figure of the story, the absent focus around whom the Laguna play with the whites and Silko plays with the reader. The hunt for Geronimo comes to mean much different things to the white authorities and to the Laguna. By the end of the story, Andy and the reader understand, without having heard it directly, that a successful hunt for Geronimo means *not* to find him, and that Siteye's final words in the story—" 'You know,' he said, 'that was a long way to go for deer hunting' "—are a great joke on the white men.

Immediately following this story in *Storyteller* there is a photograph of "The Laguna Regulars in 1928, forty-three years after they rode in the Apache wars" (272). The photograph of a group of older men, some in jeans and workshirts, others in suits and ties, gives Silko's story historical authenticity, while also attesting to the survival of the Laguna Regulars. By bringing together the

photograph with the story, Silko demonstrates how history can be rewritten as a Coyote story, which should subsequently enable the reader to reread history. In Silko's version, the power relation generally assumed is reversed. Her story suggests that the Laguna did not act in complicity with white people against other Indians, but instead that they had found better ways to survive white domination than direct retaliation.

In "A Geronimo Story," Silko uses humour to establish a relationship with the reader and thus to insinuate the reader into another way of understanding Native American history and people; the humour becomes a means of reinterpreting history, power relations, and strategies for survival. Humour, the predominant feature of Coyote tales, is an essential ingredient in Silko's construction of a Native American perspective in the last section of *Storyteller*. In *Custer Died For Your Sins*, Vine Deloria, Jr. writes:

One of the best ways to understand a people is to know what makes them laugh. . . . Irony and satire provide much keener insights into a group's collective psyche and values than do years of research.

It has always been a great disappointment to Indian people that the humorous side of Indian life has not been mentioned by professed experts on Indian Affairs. Rather the image of the granite-faced grunting redskin has been perpetuated by American mythology. (146)

In humour, more than in other kinds of stories, the teller depends on common viewpoints and sensibilities. In the Coyote section, Silko uses humour as a final stage in an initiation process, showing Indian humour, resilience, and self-awareness along with her trust in the reader's ability to laugh with and at Coyote.

Throughout *Storyteller*, Silko reflects on the role of storytellers; in the final section, she connects the storyteller's art and her own role as storyteller to the strategies of Coyote. The storyteller is, like Coyote, a culture creator and transformer. But the analogy also connects to the subversive role of Coyote, in which Coyote's reversal of power relations and subversion of rules serve to expose the deceptions of white people or to represent Indians undermining white power. In an interview, Silko says:

Certainly for me the most effective political statement I could make is in my art work. I believe in subversion rather than straight-out confrontation. I believe in the sands of time, so to speak. Especially in America, when you confront the so-called mainstream, it's very inefficient, and in every way destroys you and disarms you. I'm still a believer in subversion. I don't think we're numerous enough, whoever "we" are, to take them by storm. ("Interview" 147-48)

By the end of *Storyteller*, Silko appears to be a Coyote figure herself, as she subverts the dominant representations of history, power, and knowledge.

Finally, I want to raise a question: is it possible for white or non-Indian literary critics, or any critics in white academic institutions, to resist a reading practice that appropriates and diffuses Native American literature and its potentially subversive differences? As Fabian argues, objectification through distancing in time is not just a part of anthropology; it is part of Western epistemology. So although moving the study of Native American literature from the domain of anthropology to departments of English may be an improvement—a recognition that Native American art exists as art—the study still remains in the domain of the colonizer (and here I mean institutions more than individuals). Wendy Rose, a Hopi poet and anthropologist, refers to the current "literary-colonial canon" as another form of "cultural imperialism" (410). To revise Fabian's subtitle, how does literary criticism make its object, and is it possible to avoid objectification in our practice?

I have tried to suggest in this paper that one way to treat these stories may be to ask how they might change us as subjects, as readers—to rephrase Silko's description of the storyteller's role: what story does this book draw out of us? The concept of double consciousness could give those of us who are part of the white institutional structure a means of reconsidering our own subject positions, of viewing ourselves differently. The African American theorist W. E. B. Du Bois identifies "double consciousness" as both a gift of second sight and as an unwelcome psychological repercussion of racism; he describes "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (17). Autoethnography is, in some sense, an act of double con-

sciousness, a means of addressing the disparity between the two perceptions. The autoethnography, if it does capture the attention of the subjects in the "dominant" social position or institutions, can impose on those readers a "second sight" that reveals their own misunderstandings and misrepresentations of others and of themselves. In the process of initiating the reader in *Storyteller*, Silko puts the reader (and especially the Euroamerican reader) into this self-critical situation. The Native American perspective and interpretive context that Silko creates puts white readers in the position of feeling the humour *and* the discomfort of our historical roles and responsibilities. For the subject in the so-called "dominant" social position or institution to take on the responsibility of double consciousness may make possible a less authoritative and a more self-conscious approach to our own reading practice.

Perhaps it will also lead us to rethink our conception of the United States, replacing the vision of an inviolable, "indivisible" political, economic, and ideological entity with a vision of fragmented nation, a contact zone, in which colonized nations are demanding their land and their sovereignty, demanding that international laws and treaties be upheld. And maybe our ideas of contemporaneity as well as of the future will change. In this regard, I conclude with Silko's ideas about the future:

The Pueblo people, of course, have seen intruders come and intruders go. The first they watched come were the Spaniards . . . But as the old stories say, if you wait long enough, they'll go. And sure enough, they went. Then another bunch came in. And old stories say, well, if you wait around long enough, not so much that they'll go, but at least their ways will go. One wonders now, when you see what's happening to technocratic-industrial culture, now that we've used up most of the sources of energy, you think perhaps the old people were right. ("Language and Literature" 67)

Perhaps we need to learn a Pueblo vision for the future, for the survival of all of us.

NOTES

- ¹ The self-consciousness of *Storyteller* and its roots in the oral tradition have invited critics before me to read it as more than a random collection of stories. Arnold Krupat describes *Storyteller* as an autobiography that manifests the biculturalism of all autobiographies by Native Americans. According to Krupat, Silko also recon-

ceives autobiography: she rejects the authoritative individual voice common in Western autobiographies and replaces it with a polyphony that indicates the Native American conception of the individual's story as part of the collective stories of the people. Bernard A. Hirsch reads *Storyteller* as a simulation of the dynamic interaction of stories in the oral tradition. Hirsch suggests that by reading the stories in relationship to each other, the reader gets the sense of "the accretive process of teaching" inherent in the oral tradition. He proposes that Silko confronts the static nature of the written word and the absence of the dynamic context of storytelling by reproducing an episodic structure and a juxtaposition and compilation of stories. Linda L. Danielson describes *Storyteller* as a feminist work, a continuation of a Laguna matrilineal storytelling tradition, and as a work structured like a web in its circularity and intricate connections.

- 2 Barbara Harlow, in her study of postcolonial literatures, argues that the "dynamics of debate in which the cultural politics of resistance are engaged challenge both the monolithic historiographical practices of domination and the unidimensional responses of dogma to them. . . . the emphasis in the literature of resistance is on the political as the power to change the world" (30).
- 3 Turner uses the word "communitas" rather than community to indicate an attitude among people rather than mere proximity. *Communitas* is constituted by spontaneous, immediate, concrete relations rather than relations dictated by abstract structures (*Ritual Process* 128).
- 4 I got the first two categories and the very idea of thematic categories from Hirsch's article. Since by chance I read Hirsch's article before Danielson's, I owe his work a greater debt, but I was gratified to discover that Danielson's divisions of *Storyteller* correspond to my own, which suggests that these designations are not entirely arbitrary.
- 5 See Vangen's article on "Storyteller."
- 6 When, in an interview, Kim Barnes asked Silko about her ambivalent representation of mothers, Silko replied that in matrilineal and matriarchal society, the mother becomes the authority figure with which the child must reckon. She explains: "So the female, the mother, is a real powerful person, and she's much more the authority figure. It's a kind of reversal. Your dad is the one who's the soft-touch, and it's the mother's brother who reprimands you. . . . [You feel] more of an alliance with the father because he, in some ways, has less power in the household. . . . If someone was going to thwart you or frighten you, it would tend to be a woman; you see it coming from your mother, or sent by your mother" (97).
- 7 In the Pueblo Indian tradition, and in Native American traditions in general, witchcraft is not a specifically female practice as it tends to be in Christian traditions. I will treat witchcraft practices more thoroughly in my discussion of the Drought section of *Storyteller* below.
- 8 This is especially true of the Navajo, for whom witchcraft is more pervasive—see Silko's "Conversation," 32. The cycle from drought to rain that composes the centre of *Storyteller* is also the central ritual movement of *Ceremony*, which accounts for the fact that many of the stories in these two sections of *Storyteller* also appear in *Ceremony*.
- 9 Silko refers also to the uranium mines on the Pueblo reservations in her novel *Ceremony*.
- 10 See also Toelken and Wiget on Coyote.

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