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**“The Telling Which Continues”:
Oral Tradition and the Written Word
in
Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller*¹**

Bernard A. Hirsch

“**I** WAS NEVER TEMPTED TO GO TO those things . . .,” said Leslie Marmon Silko of the old BAE reports. “. . . I . . . don’t have to because from the time I was little I heard quite a bit. I heard it in what would be passed now off as rumor or gossip. I could hear through all that. I could hear something else, that there was a kind of continuum. . . .”² That continuum provides both the structural and thematic basis of *Storyteller*. Comprised of personal reminiscences and narratives, retellings of traditional Laguna stories, photographs, and a generous portion of her previously published short fiction and poetry, this multigeneric work lovingly maps the fertile storytelling ground from which her art evolves and to which it is here returned—an offering to the oral tradition which nurtured it.³

Silko has acknowledged often and eloquently the importance of the oral tradition to her work and tries to embody its characteristics in her writing. This effort, as she well knows, is immensely difficult and potentially dangerous, and this awareness surfaces at several points in *Storyteller*. She recalls, for instance, talking with Nora, whose “grandchildren had brought home/a . . . book that had my ‘Laguna coyote’ poem in it”:

“We all enjoyed it so much [says Nora]
but I was telling the children
the way my grandpa used to tell it
is longer.”

“Yes, that’s the trouble with writing,” I said.

You can’t go on and on the way we do when we tell stories around here (p. 110).⁴

“The trouble with writing,” in the context Silko here establishes for it, is twofold: first, it is static; it freezes words in space and time. It does not allow the living story to change and grow, as does the oral tradition. Second, though it potentially widens a story’s audience, writing removes the story from its immediate context, from the place and people who nourished it in the telling, and thus robs it of much of its meaning.⁵ This absence of the story’s dynamic context is why, in writing, “You can’t go on the way we do/when we tell stories around here.”

But Nora does a wonderful thing. She uses Silko's poem to create a storytelling event of her own. In this sense Silko's poem itself becomes a part of the oral tradition and, through Nora's recollection of her grandfather's telling, a means of advancing it as well. The conversation with Nora is important in *Storyteller* because it reminds us of the flexibility and inclusiveness of the oral tradition.⁶ Even writing can be made to serve its ends.

Storyteller helps keep the oral tradition strong through Silko's masterful use of the written word, and the photographs, to recall and reestablish its essential contexts. The photographs are important because they reveal something of the particular landscape and community out of which Laguna oral tradition is born, and of specific individuals—of Aunt Susie, Grandma A'mooh, Grandpa Hank, and all those storytellers who have accepted responsibility for "remembering a portion . . . [of] the long story of the people" (p. 7). The photographs, however, as Silko uses them, do more than provide a survival record. As we shall see, they involve the reader more fully in the storytelling process itself and, "because they are part of many of the stories/and because many of the stories can be traced in the photographs" (p. 1), they expand the reader's understanding of individual works and also suggest structural and thematic links between them.

The photographs also are arranged to suggest the circular design of *Storyteller*, a design characteristic of oral tradition. The merging of past and present are manifest in the book's design, as is the union of personal, historical, and cultural levels of being and experience, and through such harmonies—and their periodic sundering—the ongoing flux of life expresses itself. The opening photograph, for instance, is of Robert G. Marmon and Marie Anayah Marmon, Silko's great-grandparents, "holding [her] grandpa Hank" (p. 2, 269). The second picture, three pages later, is of Aunt Susie—of whom Silko is the "self-acknowledged, self-appointed heir"⁷—and Leslie Silko herself as a child. These photographs do not merely locate Silko within a genealogical context or even that of an extended family, but within a continuous generational line of Laguna storytellers as well. The last three photographs in the book bring us full circle. The first of these comes at the end of the book's written text; it is of the adult Silko and was taken among the Tucson Mountains where she now lives. The second is of Grandpa Hank as a young man after his return from Sherman Institute, and the third is of three generations preceding her, including her father as a boy, Grandpa Hank's brother, and her great-grandfather. Though there is clearly an autobiographical dimension to *Storyteller*, Silko's arrangement of photographs at the beginning and end of the book subordinates the individual to the com-

munal and cultural. Her life and art compels us, as does the literature itself, to acknowledge the ongoing power of Laguna oral tradition in her writing.

This cyclic design, of course, is not merely a function of the arrangement of photographs. It derives primarily from the episodic structure of *Storyteller* and the accretive process of teaching inherent in it. Each individual item is a narrative episode in itself which relates to other such episodes in various ways. Oral storytelling, Walter J. Ong tells us, “normally and naturally operated in episodic patterning . . . episodic structure was the natural way to talk out a lengthy story line if only because the experience of real life is more like a string of episodes than it is like a Freytag pyramid”;⁸ and it is real life, “the long story of the people,” that is Silko’s concern. Moreover, the telling of her portion of the story, and of the individual stories which comprise it, involves, like all oral storytelling, a teaching process, one in which the varieties of genre and voice Silko uses are essential.

In *Storyteller*, the reader learns by accretion. 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 of 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. This process in effect makes the reader’s responses to the various narrative episodes a part of the larger, ongoing story these episodes comprise while simultaneously allowing the episodes to create the contexts which direct and refine these responses. In this way the stories continue; in this way both the story and the reader are renewed.

It is impossible within the limits of this paper to explore the workings of this process over the entire length of *Storyteller*, yet the interrelationships between the various narrative episodes and photographs throughout is so rich and intricate that any attempt to formally divide the work into sections or categories would be arbitrary at best, of necessity reductive, and at worst misleading. Still, there are groups of narrative episodes that seem to cluster around particular themes and cultural motifs which I believe can be meaningfully seen as representative of the overall design and method of the book.

II

N. Scott Momaday has said: "We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. . . . The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined."⁹ It is apparent throughout *Storyteller* that Silko would agree, and she reminds us that in the oral tradition, "sometimes what we call 'memory' and what we call 'imagination' are not so easily distinguished" (p. 227). In "The Storyteller's Escape," the old storyteller's greatest fear as she waits for death is that she will go unremembered—unimagined. *Storyteller* itself is a self-renewing act of imagination/memory designed to keep storytellers as well as stories from so tragic a fate. The book's opening section, which I will arbitrarily call the "Survival" section (pp. 1–53), establishes this particular concern.¹⁰ Embracing 5 reminiscences, 4 photographs, 2 traditional Laguna stories, the short stories "Storyteller" and "Lullaby," and the poem "Indian Song: Survival," this section explores from various angles the dynamics and meaning of survival, both personal and cultural, for tribal people in contemporary America.

Silko visually establishes continuity through the photographs. The first two, described earlier, reveal in their depiction of three generations of Silko's family genealogical continuity, but especially important in primarily the second and third photos is the idea of cultural transmission. Such transmission involves more than the passing of stories from generation to generation, essential as that is. It involves the entire context within which such passing occurs, and this includes both the land and the relationship, beyond blood ties, between teller and hearer. That is why, to tell the story correctly, Silko must bring us into the storytellers' presence, to let us somehow see them, learn something of their histories, and most of all, to hear them tell their stories.

These elements are certainly present in the book's title story, "Storyteller," which is at the hub not only of the "Survival" section but of the book as a whole. Explaining, in Silko's words, "the dimensions of the process" of storytelling, this tale, set not in Laguna but in Inuit country near Bethel, Alaska,¹¹ is at once dark and hopeful, embracing all that has come before it in the book and establishing both the structure and primary thematic concerns of what follows. It is a tale of multiple journeys that become one journey expressed through multiple stories that become one story. At its center is a young Eskimo girl, orphaned, living with a lecherous and dying old man, the village storyteller, and his wife, victimized by Gussuck and "assimilated" Eskimo men, and determined to avenge herself against the Gussuck storekeeper responsible for her parents' death.

Speaking of his use of “three distinct narrative voices in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*—the mythical, the historical, and the immediate”—Momaday says: “Together, they serve, hopefully, to validate the oral tradition to an extent that might not otherwise be possible.”¹² A similar mix of voices occurs in “Storyteller”—indeed, throughout the book as a whole—and to similar effect. Against the backdrop of the prophesied coming of a “final winter,” the girl comes of age and the old man, the mythic voice, begins his story of the great bear pursuing the lone hunter across the ice.

He tells the story lovingly, nurturing every detail with his life’s breath, because it is the story that makes his death meaningful. The story is an expression of sacred natural processes, ancient and unending, of which his death is a part, processes Silko will treat later in the book in such works as “The Man to Send Rain Clouds” and the poem “Deer Song.” But most importantly the story, in the intensely beautiful precision of the old man’s telling, becomes the girl’s legacy, a powerful vision by which she can unify the disparate aspects of her experience to create herself anew in profoundly significant cultural terms.

She recalls having asked her grandmother, the old man’s wife, about her parents, and her grandmother told how the Gussuck storeman traded them bad liquor. The grandmother is the historical voice. Her story and that of the giant bear become linked in the girl’s imagination. Once, while listening “to the old man tell the story all night,” she senses her grandmother’s spirit. “It will take a long time,” the old woman tells her, “but the story must be told. There must not be any lies.” At first, she thinks that the spirit is referring to the bear story. She “did not know about the other story then” (p. 26).

This “other story” is in truth the conclusion of her grandmother’s story, a conclusion that will make it the girl’s story. As it stands, in the inaction of civil and religious authorities and in the storeman’s continued existence, the story of her parent’s death has not been properly told. The story is life and in life it must be completed. And the story of the giant bear “stalking a lone hunter across the Bering Sea ice” tells her how. “She spent days walking on the river,” getting to know the ice as precisely as the old man had described it in his story, learning “the colors of ice that would safely hold her” and where the ice was thin. She already knew that the storeman wanted her and thus it is easy for her to lure him out onto the river and to his death. Though he appeared to chase her out onto the ice, it was she who was the bear.

The attorney wants her to change her story, to tell the court that “it was an accident,” but she refuses, even though to follow his advice would mean freedom (p. 31). Hers is the “immediate” voice, the voice

that carries the old stories into the present and locates the present within the cycle of mythic time. Through the story, life derives purpose and meaning and experience becomes comprehensible; also through the story, and through her fidelity to it, the girl recreates herself from the fragments of her own history.

Her emergence whole and intact from her experience is, in this respect, like Tayo's emergence in Silko's 1977 novel *Ceremony*, a victory for her people;¹³ given the immediate context in which the title story is placed in *Storyteller*, it is, like all stories in the oral tradition, a ritual. The girl's role as a culture-bearer, for example, receives significant emphasis from the surrounding material.

Following "Storyteller" there is a picture of Marie Anayah Marmon, Grandma A'mooh, reading to two of her great granddaughters, Silko's sisters. She is reading, apparently, from *Brownie the Bear*, a book, we later learn, she read many times, not only to her great-granddaughters but to Silko's uncles and father. Accompanying this photograph is a reminiscence about Grandma A'mooh, whose name Silko, as a child, deduced from the woman's continual use of "'a'moo'oooh' . . . the Laguna expression of endearment/for a young child/spoken with great feeling and love" (p. 34). That love is evident on the faces of the old woman and the little girls; it is also clear that although she is not in this captured moment telling a story from the oral tradition, she has turned the occasion, much as Nora did with the printed version of Silko's coyote poem, into a rich oral storytelling experience.

We come to the title story by way of several other narrative episodes, beginning with Silko's brief reminiscence and history of Aunt Susie, her father's aunt. Aunt Susie

was of a generation
the last generation here at Laguna,
that passed down an entire culture
by word of mouth
an entire history
an entire vision of the world . . . (pp. 4-6).

In its rhythms and repetitions, Silko's telling here assumes the quality of a chant and in this she reinforces not only Aunt Susie's role as culture-bearer but her own as Aunt Susie's cultural heir. Their relationship provides a necessary context within which to consider the girl and the old man in the title story. That relationship is complicated in several ways, but this context, along with the photograph that follows "Storyteller," highlights her role as the storyteller-successor to the old man.

For Silko, how a story is told is inseparable from the story itself. The old man's bear story exerts its hold on the girl's imagination

through his intensely precise, chant-like, dramatic telling and retelling of it. Silko recalls a child's story Aunt Susie told about a "little girl who ran away," and she insists that we hear it as Aunt Susie told it: "She had certain phrases, certain distinctive words/she used in her telling./I write when I still hear/her voice as she tells the story" (p. 7). In her own telling Silko uses poetic form with varying line-lengths, stresses, and enjambment to provide some of the movement and drama of oral storytelling. She also provides several italicized expository passages to evoke the digressive mode of traditional storytellers and the conversational texture of their speech. When the little girl asks for "yashtoah," for example, we are told that

"Yashtoah" is the hardened crust on corn meal mush
that curls up.
The very name "yashtoah" means
it's sort of curled up, you know, dried,
just as mush dries on top (p. 8).

"This is the beauty of the old way," Silko has said. "You can stop the storyteller and ask questions and have things explained."¹⁴

Aunt Susie's story, in some respects, is a sad one about a little girl who, feeling unloved because she does not get what she wants, decides to drown herself. Attempts by a kindly old man and her mother to save her fail and the child drowns. Grieving, the mother returns to Acoma where, standing on a high mesa, she scatters the girl's clothes to the four directions—and "they all turned into butterflies—all colors of butterflies" (p. 15). This is a child's story and whatever truths it may teach it should evoke the child's capacity for wonder and delight. Aunt Susie succeeded brilliantly in this respect. She brought the characters to life, the mother's tenderness and the prophetic foreboding of the old man "that implied the tragedy to come":

But when Aunt Susie came to the place
where the little girl's clothes turned into butterflies
then her voice would change and I could hear the excitement
and wonder
and the story wasn't sad any longer (p. 15).

The child learns something of pain through such a story, but she learns too of life's perpetuity, that from death itself can emerge beautiful life. She learns of the delicate balance in which all things exist, a balance forever threatened and forever renewed.

But harsh realities, having been delicately yet honestly prepared for by Aunt Susie's story, dominate, appropriately enough, the two

recollections leading directly into "Storyteller." The first offers a brief history of Silko's great-grandparents, and we learn that Robert G. Marmon married a Pueblo woman and "learned to speak Laguna"; but "when great-grandpa went away from Laguna/white people who knew/sometimes called him 'Squaw Man'" (p. 16). The second recollection is of the Albuquerque hotel incident in which Marmon's two young sons, because they are Indians, were not permitted in the hotel.

"Storyteller," is fed by the various motifs and concerns of the narratives leading into it and it recasts them in new ways. In that sense it is as much a retelling as an original telling. It is not merely a story of survival but, like the bear story within it, a survival story itself. It is unsparing in its treatment of the nature and consequences of discrimination and unqualified in its vision of the capacity of oral tradition not merely to survive discrimination but to use it as a source of power. However, as the narratives that follow "Storyteller" suggest, the oral tradition is only as strong—or as fragile—as the memories that carry it and the relationships that sustain it.

Silko's remembrance of Grandma A'mooh, which follows "Storyteller," is warm and moving, yet painful as well. Grandma A'mooh, as her name suggests, was love itself to Silko. She loved the land, her people, her granddaughters, and the stories that evolved from them, yet it was thought best, in her later years, to remove her from all that sustained her and have her live with her daughter in Albuquerque. The daughter had to work, so much of the time Grandma A'mooh was alone—"she did not last long," Silko tells us, "without someone to talk to" (p. 35).

"Indian Song: Survival," like the narrative episodes which precede it, concerns what survival is and what is needed to survive, but it considers these ideas from a somewhat different perspective than the others. It is in the first-person and this heightens the intimacy of the sustaining relationship of the individual with the land the poem explores. The poem moves in a sequence of spare yet sensual images which express at once the elemental and regenerating power of this relationship, and Silko's versification, like that of most of the poetry in *Storyteller*, is alive with motion and the subtle interplay of sound and silence. It is a "desperation journey north" (p. 36) she describes, but it is marked by neither panic nor haste.

"Mountain lion," Silko writes, "shows me the way." He is her guide as he has been for Laguna hunters throughout the time, and his presence helps to establish the true nature of this journey. It is a journey to reestablish old ties, ties essential to survival in any meaningful sense. As the journey continues the "I" becomes more inclusive as the speaker becomes increasingly able to merge with the nature

around her. Asked at poem's end "if I still smell winter/. . . I answer:"

taste me
 I am the wind
 touch me,
 I am the lean brown deer
 running on the edge of the rainbow (p. 37).

The "desperation journey" has become a journey of self-discovery, of finding one's being entire in the land. Now she can travel spirit roads.

The wholeness of the relationship emerging from "Indian Song: Survival" enhances our understanding of what, precisely, the young girl in "Storyteller" accomplishes. Her life has been a desperate journey and her final awakening involves the reestablishment of a vital, intimate connection to the land. This is what the bear story requires of her. The poem also intensifies further the poignancy of Grandma A'mooh's last days by compelling us to learn again the value of what, for her own "good," had been taken from her.

Silko follows "Indian Song: Survival" with a painfully enigmatic story from Aunt Susie, a Laguna "flood" story in which a little girl and her younger sister return home to their village after a day's play only to find it abandoned except for "the old people/who cannot travel" (p. 40). Their mother and the others went to the high place to escape the coming flood. If "Indian Song: Survival" concerns the establishment of vital relationships, this story tells of their being sundered. There is a beauty in the girl's devotion to her sister as there is pain in their mother's leaving them and these elements, devotion and separation, are central to the short story, "Lullaby," which follows.

If, as Momaday said, the greatest tragedy is to go unimagined, the title of Silko's "Lullaby" is in one sense bitterly ironic. Having been robbed of her grandchildren, Ayah, the old Navajo woman at the heart of the story, sings a song for them, a song that she remembers having been sung by her mother and grandmother. It is a beautiful song expressing with delicate economy the world view in which she was raised, and its closing words doubtlessly provide some consolation:

We are together always
 We are together always
 There never was a time
 when this
 was not so (p. 51).

But we cannot forget that there are no children to hear it and, though Ayah's "life had become memories," those memories seem dominated now by the loss of children—of her son Jimmie in the war and the

babies to the white doctors. For Silko, to go unremembered is to go unimagined, and in that sense Ayah's is a tragic story. Grandma A'mooh, in her last years, was taken from her grandchildren but she does not go unremembered. Such a fate, though, seems likely to befall Ayah, for her babies are taken not simply to make them well, but to make them white.

The "Survival" section, however, does not end on a hopeless note. Ayah's "lullaby" expresses a timeless harmony and peace which are reflected in the photograph which closes the section, taken from the sandhills a mile east of Laguna. The land seems whole and eternal here, and where that is so the people, and the oral tradition, will survive.

III

But today, even the land is threatened. A photograph in what I will call the "Yellow Woman" section of *Storyteller* (pp. 54–99) is of the Anaconda company's open-pit uranium mine (p. 80). "This photograph," Silko tells us, "was made in the early 1960s. The mesas and hills that appear in the background and foreground are gone now, swallowed by the mine" (p. 270). This photograph deepens our understanding of many things in *Storyteller*: of the importance of the photographs to the stories, for one thing, and of Silko's father's love of photography for another. "He is still most at home in the canyons and sandrock," she says, "and most of his life regular jobs/have been a confinement he has avoided" (p. 160). Some might think less of him for this, but Silko stifles this tendency—first by the story of Reed Woman and Corn Woman that precedes the reminiscence about her father (pp. 158–159) and second by his photographs themselves, one of which is that of the now vanished mesas and hills. Moreover, his photography intensified his love of the land and enabled him to relate to it in new and fulfilling ways. We learn, for instance, that

His landscapes could not be done
without certain kinds of clouds—
some white and scattered like river rock
and others
mountains rolling into themselves
swollen lavender before rainstorms (p. 161).

Clouds, as we know, are a source of life itself to the land, and for Lee H. Marmon they bring to it a profound and varied beauty as well. Essential to the continuity of physical life, the clouds are no less essential to his spirit in that they help him express through his art

his particular vision of the land and by so doing, to define himself in terms of it. Equally important, in these times, is that his artistry can help others, be they Indians removed from the land or people who have never known it, to develop a richer, more meaningful sense of the land than is held by such as those who run Anaconda. It is precisely the development of such a relationship—to the land, to the spirits that pervade it, and to the stories that derive from it—that occupies the “Yellow Woman” section of *Storyteller*.

The “Yellow Woman” section, comprised of the short story “Yellow Woman,” 4 poems, poetic retellings of two traditional stories, 4 reminiscences, 4 photographs, and 2 “gossip stories,”¹⁵ is framed by “Yellow Woman” and “Storytelling,” a poem consisting of six brief vignettes based on the abduction motif of the traditional Yellow Woman stories. As does “Storyteller” in the “Survival” section, “Yellow Woman,” and the traditional stories from which Silko’s version evolves, establish the primary structural and thematic concerns of this section.

Based on the traditional stories in which Yellow Woman, on her way to draw water, is abducted by a mountain kachina, Silko’s “Yellow Woman” concerns the development of the visionary character. This is hinted at in the story’s epigram, “What Whirlwind Man Told Kochininako, Yellow Woman”:

I myself belong to the wind
and so it is we will travel swiftly
this whole world
with dust and with windstorms (p. 54).¹⁶

Whirlwind Man will take her on a journey beyond the boundaries of time and place, a journey alive with sensation and danger which promises a perspective from which she can see the world new and entire. This in effect is what happens in the story. Like the prophets and visionaries of many cultures, Indian and non-Indian, the narrator travels to the mountain where she learns to see beyond the range of mundane experience. She recalls that, at Silva’s mountain cabin,

I was standing in the sky with nothing around me
but the wind that came down from the blue
mountain peak behind me. I could see faint
mountain images in the distance miles across the
vast spread of mesas and valleys and plains. I
wondered who was over there to feel the mountain
wind on those sheer blue edges—who walks on the
pine needles in those blue mountains.
“Can you see the pueblo?” Silva was standing
behind me.
I shook my head. “We’re too far away.”
“From here I can see the world” (p. 57).

The pueblo, which comprised her whole world before, is, from the perspective of the mountain, but a barely discernible part of a much larger whole. With Silva, on the mountain, she has entered the more expansive and truer realm of imagination and myth.

When we can see imaginatively, William Blake has said, when we can see not merely with but through the eye, "the whole creation will appear infinite and holy whereas it now appears finite and corrupt. This will come to pass by an improvement of sensual enjoyment" (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 14).¹⁷ This is the narrator's experience. She follows a strong impulse in running off with Silva; desire moves her to leave the familiar, secure world of the pueblo and her family to walk a new and daring road. She opens her story in the morning, after she and Silva first made love:

My thigh clung to his with dampness, and I
watched the sun rising up through the tamaracks
and willows . . . I could hear the water, almost at
our feet where the narrow fast channel bubbled
and washed green ragged moss and fern leaves.
I looked at him beside me, rolled in the red
blanket on the white river sand (p. 54).

She does not awaken to the proverbial harsh light of morning awash in guilt, but to a newly, more vibrantly alive world of sensation within and around her. But this is a world which, like Silva himself, is as frightening in its strength and intensity as it is seductive, and when Silva awakens she tells him she is leaving:

He smiled now, eyes still closed. "You are
coming with me, remember?" He sat up now with
his bare dark chest and belly in the sun.
"Where?"
"To my place."
"And will I come back?"
He pulled his pants on. I walked away from
him, feeling him behind me and smelling the
willows.
"Yellow Woman," he said.
I turned to face him, "Who are you?" I asked.

Last night, he reminds her, "you guessed my name, and you knew why I had come" (p. 55). Their lovemaking made her intuitively aware of another, more vital level of being, one which had been within her all along, nurtured since childhood by her grandfather's Yellow Woman stories—and she knew she was Yellow Woman and her lover the dangerous mountain ka'tsina who carries her off.

But imaginative seeing on this morning after is threatening to the narrator, for seeing oneself whole demands eradication of those perceptual boundaries which offer the security of a readily discernible, if severely limited, sense of self. The narrator clings to that historical, time-bound sense of self like a child to her mother's skirts on the first day of school. "I'm not really her," she maintains, not really Yellow Woman. "I have my own name and I come from the pueblo on the other side of the mesa" (p. 55). It is not so much "confusion about what is dream and what is fact"¹⁸ that besets her here as it is the fear of losing that reality which has heretofore defined her—and him. As they walk she thinks to herself:

I will see someone, eventually I will see
 someone, and then I will be certain that he
 [Silva] is only a man—some man from nearby—and
 I will be sure that I am not Yellow Woman.
 Because she is from out of time past and I live
 now and I've been to school and there are
 highways and pickup trucks that Yellow Woman
 never saw (p. 56).

Jim Ruppert is right, I think, when he says that the narrator "struggles to . . . establish time boundaries and boundaries between objective reality and myths,"¹⁹ and that struggle is part of the learning process she undergoes in the story. Newly awakened to her own imaginative potential, she has yet to discern the proper relationship between experiential reality and the timeless, all-inclusive mythic reality of her grandfather's stories.

Her desire, however, is stronger than her fear. After they reach his cabin, eat, and she looks out over the world from the mountain, Silva unrolls the bedroll and spreads the blankets. She hesitates, and he slowly undresses her. There is compulsion, this time, on his part, and fear on hers, but she is held to him more by her own passion than by his force. When she does leave, during their confrontation with a rancher who, rightly, accuses Silva of stealing cattle, it is at his command. "I felt sad at leaving him," she recalls, and considers going back, "but the mountains were too far away now. And I told myself, because I believe it, that he will come back sometime and be waiting again by the river" (p. 62).

She returns home. Yellow Woman stories usually end that way. And as she approaches her house, A. Lavonne Ruoff tells us, "she is brought back to the realities of her own life by the smell of supper cooking and the sight of her mother instructing her grandmother in the Anglo art of making Jell-O."²⁰ The details here suggest a world

governed more by routine than by passion, a world somewhat at odds with itself, as mother instructing grandmother suggests, and a world no longer receptive to the wonder and wisdom of the old stories. Having sensed this, she “decided to tell them that some Navajo had kidnapped me” (p. 62). But the unnamed narrator here, like the unnamed Eskimo girl in “Storyteller,” keeps the oral tradition alive by going on her own journey of self-discovery—a journey born of acknowledging the rightful demands of passion and imagination—and by intuitively accepting the guidance of her grandfather’s stories. Her life itself has become part of a visionary drama to be completed by Silva’s return, and within that context it has gained fullness and meaning. Her recognition, in the story’s final sentence, that hers is a Yellow Woman story—and that she is Yellow Woman—reveals as much. She has come to see herself, in Momaday’s words, “whole and eternal”²¹ and like Momaday when, on his journey, he came out upon the northern plains, she will “never again . . . see things as [she] saw them yesterday or the day before.”²²

Cottonwood, which follows “Yellow Woman,” is in two parts, each a poetic rendering of a Laguna Yellow Woman story; taken together, these poems and Silko’s story provide a richer, more inclusive perspective than they do separately on both the relationship between oral tradition and the written word and Silko’s use of the Yellow Woman character.

The focus in “Yellow Woman” is on the unnamed woman narrator. She tells her own story, which concerns her evolving consciousness of who she is, and though that story has definite communal implications, its focus is interior and personal. *Cottonwood*, however, though undeniably Silko’s creation,²³ derives directly from the oral tradition and retains that tradition’s communal perspective. Neither “Story of Sun House” nor “Buffalo Story,” the poems that comprise *Cottonwood*, deal with character development or internal conflict any more than do the stories on which they are based. Rather each poem underscores the communal consequences of Yellow Woman’s action, and in each case those consequences are positive. Given the narrator’s references within “Yellow Woman” to the grandfather’s Yellow Woman stories—indeed, Silko’s story ends with such a reference—the *Cottonwood* poems, placed where they are, suggest that however offensive her actions may be to conventional morality, the narrator brings from her journey with Silva a boon for her people.

“Story of Sun House” ends as follows: “Cottonwood,/cottonwood./ So much depends/upon one in the great canyon” (p. 67). It is this tree, “among all the others” (p. 63) where Yellow Woman came to wait for the sun. Like the lone cottonwood, Yellow Woman too has been singled

out, and much depends upon her as well. She is called by the Sun to journey to Sun House, and this involves the loss of what is familiar and secure and dear:

She left precise stone rooms
that hold the heart silently
She walked past white corn
hung in long rows from roof beams
the dry husks rattled in a thin autumn wind.

She left her home
her clan
and the people
(three small children
the youngest just weaned
her husband away cutting firewood) (p. 64).

The sacrifice is great, and in the spare yet powerfully evocative images of these lines Silko conveys the intense pain of separation. Her versification here, with “home,” “clan,” and “people” isolated in separate lines and children and husband further isolated in parentheses to the right, makes such pain almost palpable, as does the southeastward movement of the verse as it mirrors her journey toward the sun. Such “drastic things,” however, “must be done/for the world/to continue” (p. 65). Harmony between the people and the spirit powers of the universe is necessary to existence and, through her marriage to the Sun, Yellow Woman perpetuates this harmony. The “people may not understand” her going (p. 64); the visionary is invariably misunderstood. But that does not deter her, for she goes “out of love for this earth” (p. 65).

The narrator in “Yellow Woman,” too, restores an essential harmony through her going—a going which is also likely to be misunderstood. Her experience in living the reality revealed in her grandfather’s stories has shown her the oneness of past and present, of historical and mythic time, and of the stories and the people. More, she has given the people another story and that, too, “must be done/for the world/to continue” (p. 65).

Yellow Woman brings about good in “Buffalo Story” as well, and in a sense its link with Silko’s short story is even stronger than that of “Story of Sun House.” Like “Sun House,” it enriches the short story by locating it for the reader within the necessary cultural and communal context, but “Buffalo Story” is itself enriched by the individualistic perspective cast forward upon it by “Yellow Woman.” “Buffalo Story” follows the abduction storyline somewhat more closely than does “Story of Sun House” and evokes the sexual aspects of the traditional

Yellow Woman stories more insistently. During a time of drought, when game is scarce and crops cannot grow, Yellow Woman, looking for water for her family, comes to a churning, muddy pool. At first she fears that a great animal had fouled the water. Then

she saw him.

She saw him tying his leggings

drops of water were still shining on his chest.

He was very good to look at

and she kept looking at him

because she had never seen anyone like him.

It was Buffalo Man who was very beautiful (p. 69).

She has ventured far from her village, as has the narrator in "Yellow Woman," and the intense sexual pull Buffalo Man has on her here recalls that of Silva on the narrator. When Arrowboy, her husband, finds her asleep and calls to her to run to him so that they might escape the Buffalo People, to whose country Buffalo Man had abducted her, "She seemed to/get up a little slowly/but he didn't think much of it then" (p. 72). Her slowness here, he later learns, is not due to fatigue. After he kills all the Buffalo People, he tells Yellow Woman to go tell the people that there is meat, but she refuses to come down from the cottonwood which they had climbed to escape the Buffalo People's pursuit. Arrowboy sees that she is crying and asks her why:

"Because you killed them,"

she said.

"I suppose you love them,"

Estoy-eh-muut [Arrowboy] said,

"and you want to stay with them."

And Kochininako nodded her head

and then he killed her too (p. 75).

Paula Gunn Allen, while acknowledging the underlying centrality of oral tradition in the lives of tribal people, nonetheless maintains that "the oral tradition is often deceptive in what it makes of the lives of women." She says that

so cleverly disguised are the tales of matricide, abduction and humiliation that the Indian woman is likely to perceive consciously only the surface message of the beauty, fragility, and self-sacrificing strength of her sisters though she cannot help but get the more destructive message that is the point of many tribal tales.²⁴

Such a "destructive message" is at least potentially present in the "Buffalo Man" story in Boas' *Keresan Texts*, but Silko casts the killing of Yellow Woman in "Buffalo Story" in a much different light. In

Boas' version, when Arrowboy explains to Yellow Woman's father why he killed her, the Chief says, "Indeed? . . ." "All right," said he, "never mind." His response seems to justify the killing.²⁵ In "Buffalo Story" her father, though implicitly accepting the justice of what was done, cries and mourns. Moreover, in Silko's rendering we are told that "It was all because/one time long ago/our daughter, our sister Kochininako/went away with them" that the people were fed and buffalo hunting began (p. 76). Yellow Woman here is not an adultress who deserted her people but rather remains "our daughter, our sister" whose journey, like her journey in "Story of Sun House," brought good to her people.²⁶

The context here established by the written word—Silko's short story—is essential in helping us to see Yellow Woman more completely than do the traditional stories alone, just as those stories in turn provide the necessary cultural context for "Yellow Woman." Through the narrator's telling in Silko's story, the individual dimension predominates and personal longings are shown to be as powerful and worthwhile as communal needs. Silko well knows, as the *Cottonwood* poems make clear, that individual sacrifice is at times crucial to community survival. But, as "Yellow Woman" reveals, individual fulfillment can be equally important to a tribal community, especially in the modern world where acculturation pressures are perhaps greater than ever before. Silko shows us, in this opening sequence of the "Yellow Woman" section, that personal and communal fulfillment need not be mutually exclusive—that they in fact enhance each other. And, by extension, the same is true of oral tradition and the written word as ways of knowing and of expression. To attain this harmony requires a powerful and inclusive vision, one receptive both to internal and external demands and the diverse languages which give them meaning. The development of such a vision, and of the network of relationships to the land, the people, the stories, and oneself it fosters, is, as I have said, the controlling idea of what I have called the "Yellow Woman" section of *Storyteller*, and it is expressed in various ways in the narrative episodes that follow.

The five short pieces that follow "Yellow Woman" and the *Cottonwood* poems focus on learning to see the land rightly and developing the proper relationship to it. This learning process is implicit in the narrator's experience in "Yellow Woman," both in her journey with Silva up the mountain and in the precise, evocative detail in which she describes particular aspects of the landscape; it becomes refined and expanded in these brief narratives. In the first one, a poem entitled "The Time We Climbed Snake Mountain," the narrator is a teacher who knows the mountain intimately and knows that "Somewhere around here/yellow spotted snake is sleeping": "So/please, I tell them/

watch out./don't step on the spotted yellow snake/he lives here./The mountain is his" (p. 77). "Them" are never identified, but that is unimportant because this kind of teaching has been going on for thousands of years. It is a simple lesson in perspective and respect.

What follows is a personal reminiscence which in a different way reinforces this lesson. It is of Silko's girlhood when she first learned to hunt, and through her telling we learn something of how she began to acquire the wisdom she hands down in "The Time We Climbed Snake Mountain." Hunting alone one day Silko saw, or thought she saw, a "giant brown bear lying in the sun below the hilltop. Dead or just sleeping, I couldn't tell" (p. 77). She "knew there were no bears that large on Mt. Taylor; I was pretty sure there were no bears that large anywhere" (p. 78), and she also knew "what hours of searching for motion, for the outline of a deer, for the color of a deer's hide can do to the imagination" (p. 77). Almost paralyzed with caution and curiosity, eager to examine the bear up close but unsure if it is dead or is just sleeping or is at all, she walks, "as quietly and as carefully as I probably will ever move," away from it. As she goes she looks back, still unsure of what she has seen, and "the big dark bear remained there. . . ." "I never told anyone what I had seen," Silko laughingly recalls, "because I knew they don't let people who see such things carry .30-30s or hunt deer with them" (p. 78).

That the bear impressed itself deeply on her imagination, however, is apparent as she recalls another hunting trip which took place two years after the first one. Her uncle had killed a big mule deer, and, as Silko went to help him, she realized that it was the same time of day as when she saw, or thought she saw, the bear:

I walked past the place deliberately.
I found no bones, but when a wind moved through the
light yellow grass that afternoon I hurried around the
hill to find my uncle.
Sleeping, not dead, I decided (p. 79).

At this point, there is no longer any doubt in her mind that the bear was real; and her use of poetic form further suggests that this place where she saw the great bear has become part of an inner as well as an outer landscape. Through an act of imagination she has learned a profound truth from the land which intensifies her bond to it.

The photograph which separates these two reminiscences reinforces this idea. In it, laid out on the porch of the old cabin in which Silko and her hunting party stayed on Mt. Taylor, are five mule deer bucks, prayer feathers tied to their antlers, Silko herself, and her Uncle Polly (p. 78). She and her uncle had just finished "arranging the bucks . . .

so they can have their pictures taken" (p. 270). Given the "special significance" of photographs to her family and to the people of Laguna (p. 1), the careful arrangement of the deer, and the prayer feathers, we are prepared for the subtle revelation in her second reminiscence. Her vision of the bear, like the deer, was a gift to help the people survive. It was the intimate expression of the land to her imagination of its own spiritual integrity and that of its creatures. Through the mystery and wonder of her seeing, the land, impressed itself indelibly upon her memory.

Two photographs follow the second bear reminiscence. The first, discussed earlier, is of hills and mesas that no longer exist and, placed where it is in *Storyteller*, the photograph movingly conveys the need, more important now than ever before, for all people to know the land as the place that gives us being and the source of our profoundest wisdom. It reminds us, as does *Storyteller* as a whole, about the oral tradition—of the fragility of what was once thought whole and eternal and of how much all life ultimately depends on imagination and memory. The second photo, taken from the east edge of Laguna looking toward the west, enhances this idea by showing us the place from which the stories in *Storyteller*, old and contemporary, arise. What follows is a series of such stories and reminiscences unified not by subject or theme but by the shared landscape that nurtured them. They express the richness, diversity, playfulness and humor of Laguna oral tradition. Like the first of these two photographs, they also express its fragility.

The first story which follows these photographs is a poetic retelling of a hunting story Silko, when a child of seven, heard from her Aunt Alice. It flows smoothly out of the photograph of Laguna in that it endows a particular portion of the land with mystery and wonder, and by so doing makes it a gift of and to the imagination. Though she heard this story six years before she saw the great bear on a hunting trip, the story flows out of her recollection of this experience as well; and by using cyclic rather than chronological structure, she more strikingly evokes, as with the "Yellow Woman" and *Cottonwood* sequence, the timeless significance of the oral tradition to the understanding of human experience. Told, as are other such stories in the book, in the conversational accents and occasional expository digressions of the traditional storyteller, the story is again of Yellow Woman, here a young girl and a fine hunter who, having gotten seven big rabbits in a morning's hunting, comes upon "a great big animal" who asks for one of her rabbits, which he immediately devours (p. 83). The animal's demands escalate with his appetite and they are rendered by Silko in a compellingly dramatic sequence as the animal,

having demanded and received all the girl's rabbits and weapons, insists upon her clothes as well. Rightly fearful that she herself will be next, little Yellow Woman fools the animal into letting her remove her clothes in a cave too small for him to enter. Knowing, however, that her escape is at best temporary, she calls upon the twin Brothers, Ma'see'wi and Ou'yu'ye'wi, who kill the animal with their flint knives. They then cut the animal open, pull out his heart, and throw it. At this point in the telling the legend melds with contemporary reality, myth enters experience, as we are told that the heart landed "right over here/near the river/between Laguna and Paguate/where the road turns to go/by the railroad tracks/right around/from John Paisano's place—that big rock there/looks just like a heart/. . . and that's why/it is called/Yash'ka/which means 'heart'" (pp. 87–88).

By telling this story to her seven year-old niece, who is disappointed at not having been allowed to join her parents on a hunting trip, Aunt Alice both entertains and teaches. She raises the child's self-esteem by showing her that young girls can be skillful and clever hunters, alerts the prospective young hunter to the unexpected dangers that at times confront a hunter, reassures her that such obstacles, however dangerous, may be overcome, and perhaps most importantly, helps her niece to see the land with the same sense of wonder and joy with which she heard the story. A part of the landscape heretofore ordinary and unremarked has by means of the story been made precious to the child. Six years later, when she sees the giant bear, Silko will have her own hunting story to tell—and Aunt Alice's story will be recalled anew, recreated as it is here, richer and truer than ever.

The story told by a loving aunt of a special place engenders a reminiscence of another place which is special because of the woman who may, or may not, be buried there. With this reminiscence Silko shifts her focus from the land *per se* to the people—more precisely, to how people get remembered. This reminiscence concerns two women. Silko's great-grandmother, Helen, was born of an old traditional family, and Silko recalls that "even as a very young child/I sensed she did not like children much and so I remember her/from a distance . . ." (p. 88). Much dearer to memory is a woman Silko never knew, old Juana, of whom Silko learned from the stories of Grandma Lillie, one of Helen's daughters. Juana, who "raised Grandma Lillie and her sisters/and brothers" (p. 88), was not born into a "genteel tradition" as was Grandma Helen. A Navajo, "Juana had been kidnapped by slavehunters/who attacked her family . . ." (p. 89). Stripped of her family, of whom no trace remained, her language, and her heritage, Juana "continued with the work she knew" and was eventually hired by Silko's Grandpa Stagner to care for his family. Silko recalls going

on Memorial Day with Grandma Lillie to take flowers to Juana's grave. The graveyard where she was buried was old and the "small flat sandstones" which served as grave markers were mostly broken or covered over; as a result Grandma Lillie could never be certain if they found her grave—"but we left the jar of roses and lilacs we had cut anyway" (p. 89). Juana's actual presence, like the giant bear's in the earlier hunting story, is ultimately irrelevant. As the bear lives in Silko's imagination, so Juana lives in her, and in Grandma Lillie's heart, where they have more perfect being.²⁷ Though orphaned young, Juana is restored through the stories to a family, language, and heritage.

Juana is remembered for her loving kindness, but that is not the only way people get remembered. The tone shifts rather suddenly from the reminiscence about Juana to two "gossip" stories, both of them rich in humor and irony. The first story, of a man caught en flagrante in a cornfield by his wife and her two sisters, and Silko's telling of it—in which she uses the storyteller's conversational tone and shifts the point of view from the two lovers to the wife and sisters and then to the man alone—express a delicious comic blend of conspiracy, anticipation, antagonism and resignation. She dramatically sets the scene: "His wife had caught them together before/and probably she had been hearing rumors again/the way people talk" (p. 89). The lovers planned to meet in the afternoon, when it was so hot that "everyone just rested" until evening, when it was cool enough to return to work. "This man's wife was always/watching him real close at night/so afternoon was/the only chance they had" (p. 90). When they were caught the woman left, and the man had to take the inevitable chastisement alone. His "wife would cry a little," her sisters would comfort her, "and then they would start talking again/about how good their family had treated him/and how lucky he was./He couldn't look at them/so he looked at the sky/and then over at the hills behind the village" (p. 91). Though the man's inability to look at the women may suggest guilt, his wandering gaze has something of boredom in it, as if he were merely playing a role in an ancient and rather tiresome domestic ritual. His manhood is not spared, as the women are quick to remind him that his lover "had a younger boyfriend/and it was only afternoons that she had any use/for an old man" (p. 92):

So pretty soon he started hoeing weeds again
because they were ignoring him
like he didn't matter anyway
now that
that woman was gone (p. 92).

The irony here is rich. The man, it seems, is important to his wife and relatives, and perhaps to the community as a whole, only by

virtue of his infidelity. It is this by which he lives in a communal memory, enriches the storytelling life of the people, and gains mythic dimension. Apart from that context he “didn’t matter.”

“Then there was the night,” Silko gleefully continues, whetting our appetite for the story of old man George who, on a trip to the outhouse, “heard strange sounds/coming from one of the old barns/below” (p. 92). Checking, “just in case some poor animal/was trapped inside,” the old man is shocked to discover Frank,

so respectable and hard-working
and hardly ever drunk—
well there he was
naked with that Garcia girl—
you know,
the big fat one.
And here it was
the middle of winter
without their clothes on! (pp. 92–93).

Silko’s tone here expresses two points of view simultaneously. George, to say the least, is surprised to find a man like Frank in this situation and Silko, as storyteller, relishes the irony. Further, she creates the proper context here by giving us, through her “you know” aside, a sense of her immediate audience—another young person, perhaps, to whom Frank would be cited by conventional morality as an example to follow. “Poor old man George/he didn’t know what to say,” and his befuddlement is comically rendered in the story’s closing lines: “so he just closed the door again/and walked back home—/he even forgot where he was going/in the first place” (p. 93). But he’ll remember Frank and the Garcia girl.

It may at first glance seem strange that these stories are followed by a brief recollection of Grandma A’mooh and the way she read the children’s book *Brownie the Bear* to her great-granddaughters, especially since “Storytelling,” which follows, consists of six vignettes largely in the same vein as the “gossip” stories. This reminiscence, however, mentioned earlier in another context, is wonderfully appropriate here. Taken in conjunction with the “gossip” stories that surround it, it reminds us again of the variety and inclusiveness of the oral tradition. It also underscores Silko’s intent throughout *Storyteller* to convey the dynamic relationship between the oral tradition and the life it expresses. The life of a community, or of an individual, does not arrange itself into precise categories, literary or otherwise, nor does it follow neat, unbroken lines of development; and Silko, by juxtaposing different kinds of narratives and subjects, helps us to see vital, rewarding

connections that might otherwise go unnoticed. Remember, too, that her emphasis in the “Grandma A’mooh” reminiscence is on how a story is told. A good story cannot exist apart from a good storyteller. Much of the fun of the “gossip” stories, as we have seen, is in Silko’s manner of telling them. Grandma A’mooh

always read the story with such animation and expression
changing her tone of voice and inflection
each time one of the bears spoke—
the way a storyteller would have told it (p. 93).

Her telling makes the story live, recreates it in effect with each repetition. This is what Silko, in the “gossip” stories as well as in others, tries to do, to give a sense of the flux and immediacy of life lived. Too, it is her telling which links Grandma A’mooh to past generations of storytellers—as it does Silko.

The six vignettes in “Storytelling,” all variations on the Yellow Woman abduction stories, bring what I have called the “Yellow Woman” section of *Storyteller* full circle. The first of these is Silko’s abbreviated rendering of the opening of the “Buffalo Story,” when Yellow Woman goes for water:

“Are you here already?”
“Yes,” he said.
He was smiling.
“Because I came for you.”
She looked into the
shallow clear water.
“But where shall I put my water jar?” (p. 95).

In this version Yellow Woman is apparently expecting Buffalo Man, and though coercion might be implied when he says he came for her, her response is willing, even coy and playful. The tone of the fifth vignette is quite similar:

Seems like
its always happening to me.
Outside the dance hall door
late Friday night
in the summertime.
and those
brown-eyed men from Cubero,
smiling.
The usually ask me
“Have you seen the way the stars shine
up there in the sand hills?”
And I usually say “No. Will you show me?” (p. 97).

Silko alerts us as "Storytelling" begins that we "should understand/ the way it was/back then,/because it is the same/even now" (p. 94). The traditional stories, Silko is saying, both here and throughout *Storyteller*, offer profound and necessary insights into contemporary experiences. Specifically, the "Yellow Woman" stories, especially Silko's renderings of them, are among other things open, unqualified expressions of woman's sexuality. This is not to say that, because the traditional stories are abduction stories, Silko is dealing in rape fantasies. Quite the contrary. In her versions the coercive element, though present, is not the controlling one. Yellow Woman is at all times in charge of her own destiny. She understands and accepts her sexuality, expresses it honestly, and is guided by her own strong desire. We see this in Silko's short story, "Yellow Woman," in the *Cottonwood* stories, and again in these two "Storytelling" vignettes. By focusing in these little narratives not on the lovemaking but on the prelude to it, Silko establishes the sexual integrity of both the mythic and contemporary Yellow Woman, and conveys with playful subtlety the charged eroticism between them and Buffalo Man and "those/brown-eyed men from Cubero" respectively.

Yellow Woman's sexual integrity gets a broadly comic touch in the fourth vignette, where Silko inverts the traditional abduction motif. The F.B.I. and state police in the summer of 1967 pursued a red '56 Ford with four Laguna women and three Navajo men inside. A kidnapping was involved, and the police followed a trail "of wine bottles and/size 42 panties/hanging in bushes and trees/all along the road" (p. 96). When they were caught, one of the men explained: "We couldn't escape them' . . . /'We tried, but there were four of them and/only three of us'" (p. 96).

But sexual honesty, especially a woman's, is, as we have seen, likely to be misunderstood. In the first *Cottonwood* poem, "Story of Sun House," the Sun tells Yellow Woman that even though their union is necessary for the world to continue, "the people may not understand" (p. 64); and the narrator in "Yellow Woman" must make up a story for her family about being kidnapped by a Navajo. In fact, the abduction motif of the Yellow Woman stories proves useful, or almost so, in a number of situations. "No! that gossip isn't true," says a distraught mother in the third "Storytelling" vignette: "She didn't elope/She was *kidnapped* by/that Mexican/at Seama Feast./You know/my daughter/ isn't/*that* kind of girl" (pp. 95-96). As was stated earlier, however, there cannot be a good story without a good storyteller, as the contemporary Yellow Woman of the sixth vignette learns. "It was/*that* Navajo/*from* Alamo,*you know,*the tall/*good-looking*/one," she tells her husband. "He told me/*he'd* kill me/*if I didn't*/go with him." That,

rain, and muddy roads, she said, are why "it took me/so long/to get back home." When her husband leaves her, she blames herself: "I could have told/the story/better than I did" (pp. 97–98).

In a *Sun-Tracks* interview, Silko said of "these gossip stories": "I don't look upon them as gossip. The connotation is all wrong. These stories about goings-on, about what people are up to, give identity to a place."²⁸ What she argues for here is in effect what the "Yellow Woman" section is all about: a new way of seeing. Seen rightly, such stories are neither idle rumor nor trivial chatter, but are rather another mode of expression, a way in which people define themselves and declare who they are. Thus it is fitting that the "Yellow Woman" section, and this essay, conclude with a photograph taken of some of the houses in Laguna (p. 99). Here, after all, is where the people live their lives and it is this sense of life being lived, of life timeless and ongoing, changing and evolving, contradictory and continuous, that Silko expresses with grace and power through her melding of oral tradition and the written word in *Storyteller*.

NOTES

1. Much of the work for this study was done with the generous support of the University of Kansas General Research Fund.

2. Larry Evers and Denny Carr, "A Conversation with Leslie Marmon Silko," *Sun Tracks*, vol. 3., no. 1 (Fall 1976), p. 30.

3. Speaking to students at Laguna-Acoma High School, Silko said, "Our greatest natural resource is stories and storytelling. We have an endless, continuing, ongoing supply of stories." Per Seyersted, "Two Interviews with Leslie Marmon Silko," *American Studies in Scandinavia*, Vol. 13 (1981), p. 21.

4. New York, N.Y.: Seaver Books, 1981; all quotations from *Storyteller* are taken from this edition.

5. The Navajo, for example, "believe that the life and power of their mythology depends upon its being retained in the memory of the people and that to record the mythology is . . . to take away its vitality." Sam D. Gill, *Sacred Words: A Study of Navajo Religion and Prayer*, Contributions in Intercultural and Comparative Studies, No. 4 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981), p. 49.

6. Silko mentions this conversation with Nora in Evers and Carr, p. 31.

7. Priscilla Wald, rev. of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*, *SAIL*, Vol. 6. No. 4 (Fall 1982), p. 19.

8. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 148.

9. "The Man Made of Words" in *The Remembered Earth*, edited by Geary Hobson (Albuquerque, N.M.: Red Earth Press, 1979), p. 167.

10. Let me emphasize that the section titles used here and elsewhere in this essay are of my own devise and meant solely to identify with facility the specific groups of narratives I have chosen to consider.

11. Per Seyersted, *Leslie Marmon Silko*, Boise State University Western Writer's Series, No. 45 (Boise, Idaho: Boise State University Press, 1980), p. 38.

12. *The Remembered Earth*, p. 170.

13. *Ceremony* in fact had its genesis in a short story Silko began to write while she was in Alaska. Seyersted, *Leslie Marmon Silko*, pp. 25–26.

14. Dexter Fisher, ed., *The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1980), p. 22.

15. Evers and Carr, 29; Silko at first refers to "these gossip stories," but then quickly rejects this label: "No, I don't look upon them as gossip. The connotation is all wrong. These stories about goings-on, about what people are up to, give identity to a place."

16. Only in the *Storyteller* version of "Yellow Woman" is this short poem used as an epigram. A. Lavonne Ruoff provides a brief but useful summary, derived from Boas, of the nature and structure of the "Yellow Woman" stories. She also points out the enigmatic nature of Whirlwind Man, "who may be either an evil kachina or who may live among the good kachinas at Wenimatse. . . ." "Ritual and Renewal: Keres Traditions in the Short Fiction of Leslie Silko," *MELUS*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Winter, 1978), p. 10.

17. David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1982), p. 39.

18. Ruoff, p. 13.

19. "Story Telling: The Fiction of Leslie Silko," *The Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 9:1 (Spring 1981), p. 53.

20. Ruoff, 14.

21. *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press, 1969), p. 12.

22. *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, p. 17.

23. Karl Kroeber, writing of Dennis Tedlock's "The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation in American Indian Religion," says that Tedlock "shows that a Zuni story continues precisely because each reciter is a reviser." "An Introduction to the Art of Traditional American Indian Narration," *Traditional American Literatures: Texts and Interpretations*, edited by Karl Kroeber (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), p. 21. The same may be said of the Laguna stories Silko "revises" in *Cottonwood* and elsewhere in *Storyteller*.

24. "'The Grace That Remains'—American Indian Women's Literature," *Book Forum*, Volume 5, No. 3 (1981), p. 381.

25. Franz Boas, ed., *Keresan Texts*, Volume VIII (New York: Publications of the American Ethnological Society, 1928), pp. 122–127.

26. The changes Silko makes, of course, might well derive from a version of the story she herself had heard. In any case, Silko recalls, elsewhere in *Storyteller*, that "Aunt Susie and Aunt Alice would tell me stories they had told me before but with changes in details or descriptions. The story was the important thing and little changes here and there were really part of the story." In the oral tradition variants do not constitute a problem, as they often do where writing is concerned. Rather they are renewals which invigorate the tradition. Silko goes on to say, "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 . . . new story with an integrity of its own, an offspring, a part of the continuing which storytelling must be" (p. 227).

27. It is as Momaday says of his grandmother and of his need to retrace the Kiowa migration: "Although my grandmother lived out her long life in the shadow of Rainy Mountain, the immense landscape of the continental interior lay like memory in her blood. . . . I wanted to see in reality what she had seen more perfectly in the mind's eye. . . ." *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, p. 7.

28. Evers and Carr, p. 29.