

## **Writing the Oral Tradition: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller***

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Scholars of oral traditions hold differing views regarding the viability of transcribing the oral to the written. This paper demonstrates that Leslie Marmon Silko is transcribing, and thus preserving, oral culture of the Native American in her book *Storyteller*. Through a close reading of the poem "Aunt Susie had certain phrases," Silko's attempts to convert the oral to the printed word without losing the nuances and vitality of the spoken word are analyzed. The analysis reveals that the required elements of a traditional oral performance (i.e., opening and closing narrative frames, verbal asides, repetition, emphasis on ritual and traditions) are successfully converted by Silko to the written word through the use of contemporary poetic conventions.

The eminent scholar on orality, Walter Ong, writes that "oral performance had been held in high esteem and cultivated with great skill" by early cultures, but finds that once writing systems were developed, the oral tradition began to "diminish."<sup>1</sup> Eric Havelock agrees, claiming that orality "ceases to be what it originally was" once it is written down.<sup>2</sup> Elaine Jahner concurs, stating that attempts "to adapt oral ... to the written mode" are "limited."<sup>3</sup> Paul Zolbrod also finds that "translating an oral literature into written English is ... problematic."<sup>4</sup> However, in the book *Storyteller*, Leslie Marmon captures the oral culture of the Native American in written form.

The oral performance of stories and songs is a cultural method through which a community regulates the behavior of its members, "structure[s] a world that is intelligible to a people, imbues their activities with shared principles, and affirms their commonality in a particular, and common, sense."<sup>5</sup> Among Native Americans, however, the oral tradition is more than just a cultural barometer. Native scholar Paula Gunn Allen states that "the oral tradition is more than a record of a people's culture.

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It is the creative source of their collective and individual selves."<sup>6</sup> Michael Dorris agrees, claiming that "the oral-literary tradition is a cornerstone of every tribal society. It is the vehicle through which wisdom is passed from one generation to the next and by which sense is made of a confusing world."<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Pamela Cook Miller states that "to insure the future survival of the tribe and the continuance of its customs," the oral tradition provides the important knowledge needed by the young.<sup>8</sup> The role of orality to the Native American is one of survival, not just an artistic activity.

When studying American Indian oral performance, however, one must keep in mind the differences between Western and Indian literature. Allen claims that,

... traditional American Indian literature is not similar to western literature because the basic assumption about the universe and, therefore, the basic reality experienced by tribal peoples and by Western peoples are not the same, even at the level of folklore.<sup>9</sup>

She adds that, unlike Western people, Indians "do not content themselves with simple preachments of truth" nor do they use literature for "pure self-expression."<sup>10</sup> The purpose, then, of Indian literature is

... to embody, articulate, and share reality, to bring the isolated, private self into harmony and balance with this reality, to verbalize the sense of the majesty and reverent mystery of all things, and to actualize, in language, those truths that give humanity its greatest significance and dignity.<sup>11</sup>

It must also be understood that Native Americans do not have canonical literary conventions that are familiar to the student of Western literature. Native Americans are more concerned with the content and context of the story than defining it by a literary genre. As Allen states, "literacy as understood by modern America is not particularly useful to tribal peoples who were once able to survive and prosper without it."<sup>12</sup> Modes of storytelling intertwine in the tribal culture because it has no specific genre. Janet Larsen McHughes points out that "while we make a generic distinction between prose and poetry, many cultures do not."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Zolbrod makes no distinction with regard to tribal literature, generally referring to it as poetry when he points out that "we heirs of Europe think that poetry is the exclusive province of writers and the printed word" while, actually, poetry "fares better in oral cultures like the Native Americans' than in print-driven ones like ours."<sup>14</sup> McHughes adds that many poetic devices are found in oral prose, including a decided

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rhythm, heightened (versus everyday) language, metaphorical expression, structural repetitiveness, musical accompaniment, and compression of expression.<sup>15</sup>

Aside from a literary genre which may or may not be ascribed to tribal literature, Arthur Amiotte asks an important question,

Can what was originally communicated through the oral tradition be converted to the printed word, without losing the nuances and vitality of the spoken word, in light of the gradual passing of the older generation?<sup>16</sup>

Miller argues for the need of recording oral traditions,<sup>17</sup> but finds that written versions are often "terse, unbalanced, and without magic"<sup>18</sup> and that many "elements of oral style are deleted when the stories are printed."<sup>19</sup> Joan Winter elaborates by claiming that with the printed word "only fragments of the 'mythic cycle' ... are realized."<sup>20</sup> Further, Winter finds that the "significance of the 'oral event'" can be easily dismissed because "the printed page ... can be aborted at any time" while that cannot be done with an oral performance.<sup>21</sup> McHughes disagrees with these critics and scholars, however, due to her contention that "it is difficult to separate oral and written poetry ... because the two forms intersect."<sup>22</sup> This introduces Allen's theory of Native American intertextuality, which is basically a reiteration of the lack of genre discussed earlier, combined with the fact that tribal oral and written literature cannot be so easily separated because they are both entrenched in a common cultural tradition.<sup>23</sup>

Leslie Marmon Silko's book *Storyteller* is an excellent example of this intersection, or intertextuality, of Native American oral and written literature. Frank Magill states that with regard to *Storyteller*, "it is damaging to the book's unity to separate the poetry from the prose, the short stories from the myths, tales 'spoken' from those 'written'."<sup>24</sup> Magill also finds that Silko's stories "are most fundamentally about the oral tradition that constitutes the people's means of achieving identity."<sup>25</sup> With this collection, Silko answers Amiotte's question in the affirmative, for in *Storyteller*, she attempts to convert the oral to the printed word without losing the nuances and vitality of the spoken word.

Silko says that she sees *Storyteller*

as a statement about storytelling and the relationship of the people, my family and my background to the storytelling - a personal statement done in the style of the storytelling tradition, i.e., using stories themselves to explain the dimensions of the process.<sup>26</sup>

In this collection, Silko purposely sets out to put into written word the tradition of oral storytelling with which she was raised and which continues to have a strong influence on her as a Native American woman and author.

Silko grew up on the Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico where she spent most of her time as a young child with her Aunt Susie who, as Silko tells us in *Storyteller*, was a highly educated woman, a teacher, having graduated from college. But even though Aunt Susie "had come to believe very much in books and in schooling," Silko says "she was of a generation, the last generation here at Laguna, that passed down an entire culture by word of mouth."<sup>27</sup> Of the stories told to her by her aunt, Silko says "I remember only a small part," but *Storyteller* "is what I remember."<sup>28</sup> Because of her combined love of traditional stories and the printed word, Silko is able to merge the two disparate literary processes into a printed representation of a new way of storytelling.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the entire book; therefore, in order to demonstrate Silko's ability in transcribing the oral tradition to the printed word only one poem will receive a close reading. This poem is untitled in the text, but in the index Silko entitles it "Aunt Susie had certain phrases." It is an appropriate example of Silko's representation of writing the oral tradition because it contains the elements of a traditional oral performance and, yet, through the use of poetic techniques, the elements are captured in written form.

"This is the way Aunt Susie told a story," Silko states in the first line of the poem. One necessary element of an oral performance, according to Miller, is an opening and closing narrative frame,<sup>29</sup> and Amiotte explains that "Native storytellers often preface a narration" with what could be translated in English to "phrases like 'once upon a time' or 'long, long ago'."<sup>30</sup> Silko begins her tale with a preface, or opening narrative, that lets the audience know that a tale is about to be told: "This is the way I remember / she told this one story / about the little girl who ran away." Silko also ends the tale with the required closing narrative frame: "Aunt Susie always spoke the words of the mother to her daughter / with great tenderness, with great feeling / as if Aunt Susie were the mother / addressing her little child." Just as an oral storyteller ends a tale with words to the effect that the story is now finished in order to bring her audience back to the present, Silko brings her readers back to the present by reminding them that what they have just read is one of Aunt Susie's stories. [Due to the fact that this poem is the transcription of a story told to Silko by her Aunt Susie, when referring to the storyteller, she will be called "Aunt Susie."] Aunt Susie also provides a narrative frame to her tale, which Silko retains in her written version. Aunt Susie's story begins, "the scene is laid partly in old Acoma, and Laguna," and ends with the answer to the question which most likely posed the reason for the tale:

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And today they say that acoma has more beautiful butterflies - /  
red ones, white ones, blue ones, yellow ones /  
They came /  
from this little girl's clothing.

This etiological ending is common to oral tales which, in addition to being told to explain a particular situation or answer a specific question (in this case, why a little girl ran away), also provide other traditional information (why there are beautiful butterflies in Acoma).

In addition to the narrative frame, Silko also incorporates the element of a storyteller's verbal asides to her audience which are used to explain certain terms or actions so that the meaning of the story will be understood more fully. Since the oral tradition exists etilogically as "answers to questions" and "as the reason why a certain condition occurs,"<sup>31</sup> these asides are important aspects of keeping the culture alive. In this story of the little girl who ran away, the word "yashtoah" plays an important role. With the first use of this word, Aunt Susie supplies an aside, which Silko emphasizes, as she does all of Aunt Susie's asides, by the use of italics. Explaining this Keres word to her audience, Aunt Susie says,

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.

With this explanation the audience understands exactly what yashtoah is and thus understands the little girl's desire for such a delicacy. A Native American audience, however, would also understand that corn is a revered crop among the tribes. Since Aunt Susie saw no need to elaborate on this issue, neither does Silko; she does not interject more narrative than her storyteller provides. To do so would be moving away from the oral tradition, and would, thus, risk losing the rhythm and authenticity of the oral performance.

Additional asides by Aunt Susie are incorporated throughout the poem. Waithea, the little girl, goes hunting for wood so that her mother can make the yashtoah. Waithea finds wood, "some curled, some crooked in shape, / that she was to pick up and take home." Aunt Susie picks up some wood and says to her audience, "She found just such wood as these." The use of examples when telling a story that is also teaching the necessities of every day living are important aspects of storytelling. Certain types of wood were best used in cooking, and with this tale Aunt Susie is able to teach this lesson. When Waithea returns home with the wood, another cultural tradition lost in the modern world is explained.

"First she called her mother / as she got home. / She said / 'Nayah, deeni! / Mother, upstairs.'" In an aside, Aunt Susie explains,

The pueblo people always called "upstairs" /  
because long ago their homes were two, three stories  
high /  
and that was their entrance /  
from the top.

When the wood turns out to be snakes and her mother scolds her, Waithea decides to run away: "I'm going to Kawaik." Aunt Susie interjects a brief "That means the 'west lake'" before beginning the part of the tale where Waithea meets a very old man who, upon learning she is running away, tries to catch her. The old man is hindered by the wood he carries "strapped to his back / and tied with yucca thongs." Aunt Susie explains, "That's the way they did / in those days, with a strap / across their forehead."

The old man, unable to catch Waithea and concerned for her welfare, goes to find her mother, who is making the yashtoah. Aunt Susie interrupts the tale to comment,

Corn mush curled at the top. /  
She must have found enough wood /  
to boil the corn meal /  
to make the yashtoah.

This backtracking to an earlier part of the story suggests orality, as a storyteller revises the story in the process of telling. Ad hoc editing of a story is part of the teller's style, and is what keeps a story fresh and a tradition thriving.

As the tale/poem proceeds, the mother begins to gather possessions which might entice Waithea home and goes in search of her daughter. Aunt Susie explains of the route taken by the mother, "there used to be a trail there, you know, it is gone now, but / it was accessible in those days." The breaking away from the story with such an aside reminds the readers that a storyteller is speaking and that the readers are the audience for this story, just as if they were an audience at an oral telling of the tale. Also, this aside reminds the audience that they are not of the same generation or level of enculturation as the storyteller. Aunt Susie then elaborates on another cultural tradition when Waithea ties a feather in her hair just before jumping in the lake: "In death they put this feather / on the dead in the hair." This behavior by Waithea is significant due to the fact that the traditional funeral rituals include tying a feather in the deceased's hair. With these asides, Aunt Susie manages to slow down the tale by elaborating on cultural traditions and thus imparting

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necessary knowledge to her audience, which is a technique of oral storytelling. By keeping these asides as part of her poem, Silko retains the conventions of the oral tradition. By setting them apart with a different typescript, Silko also retains a sense of two voices—storyteller/interpreter—of an actual performance.

Repetition is also a major component of the oral tradition. Repetition may be of stanzas, phrases, words, or single syllables. Miller finds fault with printed narratives because this repetition is often deleted.<sup>32</sup> In this poem, however, Silko retains the style of repetition used by Aunt Susie in the telling of the tale. When yashtoah is introduced, it is repeated six times within the next seventeen lines. Additionally, Waitheia is told to "pick up some pieces of wood / bring them home." Within a few lines the repetition "there were pieces of wood ... that she was to pick up and take home" occurs. Once home, Waitheia tells her mother, "I have brought the wood / you wanted me to bring." Another series of repetitions occur when Waitheia returns home and lays out her sticks of wood, "Here they were snakes / instead of sticks of wood." Waitheia's mother says, "You have brought snakes instead," so Waitheia returns the wood because "they were snakes instead." Once the Kawaik, or lake, is introduced, the words Kawaik or lake are repeated five times in as many lines.

Throughout the poem, yashtaoh, wood, and the lake are constantly repeated. These things hold significant meaning within the tribal culture and warrant repetition so that the listeners will remember their importance. The same can be said for the feather Waithea carries. As mentioned earlier, a feather is used in traditional funeral rituals. The fact that Waithea "carried a little feather" is repeated: "She carried a feather the little girl did." Thus, without having to state to her audience that Waithea would die by the end of the story, Aunt Susie's repetition of this feather being carried by Waithea tells her listeners what will happen. Another cultural funeral tradition is emphasized without stating its importance just by repetition of the act. The mother took Waithea's personal possessions

and scattered them out. /  
She scattered them to the east /  
to the west /  
to the north and to the south -  
in all directions.

This repetition of scattering possessions "in all directions" emphasizes the ritual of disposing of the dead's personal possessions and of the cultural respect for all four directions of the universe. Ritual and time-honored traditions must, according to Amiotte, be emphasized in oral performances so that the listener can incorporate them into her own life.<sup>33</sup> Allen agrees, stating the oral "stories are woven of elements that

illuminate the ritual tradition of the storyteller's people."<sup>34</sup> In the oral tradition, this emphasis on ritual and tradition is accomplished through repetition. Silko accomplishes this in the written form by transcribing the oral performance as it was given, including repetitions that, as Miller claims, most writers leave out of the written text.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, a successful performance of the oral storyteller "resides not only in the tale but in the manner of telling, in rhythms, tonalities, and inflections; in emphasis and proportion; in the teller's voice."<sup>36</sup> Critics who do not believe the oral can be written argue that rhythms, tonalities, and inflections of the teller cannot be transcribed. However, it is possible through poetic devices to suggest them, as Silko does in this poem. In addition to Aunt Susie's asides and the use of repetition, Silko uses varying line lengths and stanzaic structure to make her poem reflect the narrative style of the oral storyteller.

At first glance it may appear there is no discernable stanzaic structure to this poem. A closer reading, however, shows that stanzaic breaks which are very important to the orality of the poem do exist. The first stanzaic break occurs between Silko's opening narrative frame and Aunt Susie's tale. This break indicates to the reader that the poet is now moving into the tale as Aunt Susie told it. The second stanzaic break takes place near the end of the tale and is part of Aunt Susie's oral method. This major pause in the tale is a technique used to evoke suspense, for although the climax has occurred (before the break Waithea has "jumped / into the lake"), it provides the reader with a clue that there is more to this tale. After the break, we learn that Waithea has drowned and that her grieving mother performs the traditional ritual of disposal of the dead's personal possessions. This break emphasizes this ritual by setting it apart from the rest of the tale. The final stanzaic break occurs as Aunt Susie's tale ends and the voice of Silko returns to the poem, providing the closing narrative frame.

It is through varying line lengths that Silko ultimately transcribes the oral tale into a written poem. Silko says in her opening narrative frame, "I write when I still hear / her voice as she tells the story." The lines break not semantically, but where Aunt Susie uses inflections or different tones in her telling of the tale. The visible breaks force the reader to also pause and change the inflection of the words. For example, a reader sees the following two sentences:

He tried to catch her but she was very light and skipped  
along. And everytime he would try to grab her she would  
skip faster away from him.

As semantic sentences, these lines do not provide the reader with the breathlessness of an old man trying to chase a young girl, which an oral storyteller is able to provide by pauses and breaths. However,



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by varying the lines at the teller's pace, Silko is able to provide the sense of the chase just as the oral performer does:

He tried to catch her /  
but she was very light /  
and skipped along. /  
And everytime he would try /  
to grab her /  
she would skip faster /  
away from him.

The same can be seen in the following semantic sentence:

Just as her mother was about to reach her she jumped  
into the lake.

The impact of this action in the tale is much more pronounced by an oral teller's pauses used to heighten the action. This heightened telling of such a sentence is emphasized by Silko in the line breaks:

Just as her mother was about /  
to reach her /  
she jumped /  
into the lake.

With these breaks, Silko provides the suspenseful pauses used by an oral storyteller to provide the breathless rendering of the climax of the tale.

Similarly, the importance of the ritual of disposing of the dead's personal possessions does not carry the same impact when stated in prose:

She stood on the edge of the high mesa and scattered  
them in all directions.

The oral storyteller emphasizes the importance of this ritual with breaths, voice inflections, and repetitions. Silko emphasizes the ritual by line placement and repetition:

She stood on the edge /  
of the high mesa /  
and scattered them out. /  
She scattered them to the east  
  to the west /  
to the north and to the south - /  
in all directions.

The line breaks provide the reader with the feeling of movement as the mother performs her ritual, pausing and turning to scatter the possessions of her deceased child.

In her closing narrative frame, Silko also provides the reader with directions as to how the tale was told orally. She tells the reader that Aunt Susie "spoke the words of the mother to her daughter / with great tenderness, with great feeling" and that when speaking the old man's words "there was something mournful / in her voice." However, at the end of the tale Aunt Susie's "voice would change and I would hear the excitement and wonder / and the story wasn't sad any longer." With this commentary, Silko aids the reader into an enriched rereading of the poem. And the poem is meant to be reread, just as the oral stories were told again and again. With each telling of an oral tale, new nuances of meaning emerge to the listener. Similarly, with each reading of the poem, new subtleties of language and cultural representation will emerge for the reader.

A traditional storyteller "hold the listeners' attention so that they can experience a sense of belonging to a sturdy and strong tradition."<sup>37</sup> As a poet drawing on her cultural traditions and performance practices, Silko develops a written strategy for holding readers' attention. By incorporating conventions of oral performance in her collection *Storyteller*, she preserves and protects the value of the oral tradition by transcribing it to the printed page. Because she has written down what her Aunt Susie told her, an important part of the Native American heritage is preserved for future generations. The stories, and thus the tribal culture, will continue to thrive; only the mode of storytelling will change.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 66.

<sup>3</sup> Elaine Jahner, "A Critical Approach to American Indian Literature," *Studies in American Indian Literature*, ed. Paula Gunn Allen (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1983), 218.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Zolbrod, "Learning to Listen: The Native American Way," *The World* 6 (1992): 18.

<sup>5</sup> Donal Carbaugh, "Oral Tradition as Spoken Culture," *Proceedings of Seminar/Conference on Oral Traditions*, eds. Isabel M. Crouch

and Gordon R. Owen (Las Cruces, NM: New Mexico State University, 1983), 20.

<sup>6</sup> Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 224.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Dorris, "Native American Literature in an Ethno-historical Context," *College English* 4 (1979): 156.

<sup>8</sup> Pamela Cook Miller, "Listening to the Ancients," *Proceedings of the Seminar/Conference on Oral Traditions*, eds. Isabel M. Crouch and Gordon R. Owen (Las Cruces, NM: New Mexico State University, 1983), 66.

<sup>9</sup> Allen, *Sacred Hoop*, 55.

<sup>10</sup> Allen, *Sacred Hoop*, 55-6.

<sup>11</sup> Allen, *Sacred Hoop*, 55.

<sup>12</sup> Paula Gunn Allen, *Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1989), 18.

<sup>13</sup> Janet Larsen McHughes, "Oral Poetry," *Proceedings of the Seminar/Conference on Oral Traditions*, eds. Isabel M. Crouch and Gordon R. Owen (Las Cruces, NM: New Mexico State University, 1983), 81.

<sup>14</sup> Zolbrod, 17.

<sup>15</sup> McHughes, 81.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Amiotte, "The Call to Remember," *Parabola* 17 (1992): 34.

<sup>17</sup> Miller, 73, n.3.

<sup>18</sup> Miller, 72.

<sup>19</sup> Miller, 65.

<sup>20</sup> Joan E. Winter, "The Immediate in the Age of the Mediated: The Imperative for Storytelling," *Proceedings of the Seminar/Conference on Oral Traditions*, eds. Isabel M. Crouch and Gordon R. Owen (Las Cruces, NM: New Mexico State University, 1983), 14.

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<sup>21</sup> Winter, 14.

<sup>22</sup> McHughes, 80.

<sup>23</sup> Allen, 1989.

<sup>24</sup> Frank N. Magill, *Magill's Literary Annual*, Vol. 2 (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Salem Press, 1982), 814.

<sup>25</sup> Frank N. Magill, *Critical Survey of Short Fiction Supplement* (Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, 1987), 300.

<sup>26</sup> Magill, *Critical Survey*, 300.

<sup>27</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, *Storyteller* (New York: Arcade Publishg, 1981), 5-6.

<sup>28</sup> Silko, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Miller, 70.

<sup>30</sup> Amiotte, 32.

<sup>31</sup> Miller, 72.

<sup>32</sup> Miller, 72.

<sup>33</sup> Amiotte, 32.

<sup>34</sup> Allen, 1989.

<sup>35</sup> Miller, 72.

<sup>36</sup> Magill, *Literary Annual*, 813.

<sup>37</sup> Allen, 1989.