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# Semiotic interpretation of photos in Leslie Silko's *Storyteller*

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**Abstract:** Leslie Marmon Silko, a Native American female writer, includes many photos about family and land in her autobiography *Storyteller*. The relations of images and words in her book are analyzed from the perspective of semiotics, particularly from Roland Barthes's image rhetoric. The linguistic message and the coded and non-coded iconic message of the photos help in understanding the Laguna Pueblo concept of time and place. Photos about family show the cyclical time expanse of the family history and the change of traditions in Laguna. Photos about land and the stories behind pass on their ancestral culture to the next and the next generation. Photos, as a sign to be against linear time and against humans' violence to nature, help the indigenous reshape their history and re-envision their subjectivity.

**Keywords:** autobiography; image rhetoric; Laguna Pueblo; Native American

## 1 Introduction

Leslie Marmon Silko is a Native American writer and artist, born and brought up in Laguna Pueblo. She tries to make the voices and images of underrepresented minorities shown in literature works. In her autobiography *Storyteller*, Silko is interested in using photos as a part of the text besides poems, myths, letters, and anecdotes. There are 26 photos about her family and the land in the novel, serving as illustrations to participate in the conversation with the text. Through the interdependent relations of image and text, she emphasizes the local sense of time, such as the earth's natural cycles, and at the same time attaches importance to the present.

The illustration-narrative relations are essential in understanding this hybrid autobiographical novel. In this case, Roland Barthes's image rhetoric (Barthes 1985), an exploration of relations between images and words, provides a good basis for the analysis of *Storyteller*. According to Barthes, images send three messages: a linguistic message, a coded iconic message, and a non-coded iconic message (Barthes 1985: 196). The three messages form a coherent whole. Connotation is only a system and can

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only be defined in exemplary terms, and iconic denotation is syntax, linking elements together without any system. Denotation has the naturalizing function related to the connotation, and “the discontinuous connotators are connected, actualized, ‘spoken’ through the syntagm of the denotation, the discontinuous world of symbols plunges into the story of the denoted scene as though into a lustral bath of innocence” (Barthes 1985: 2).

Alongside Roland Barthes, Peirce (1966), and Zhao (2022) also take photos as a sign. To Peirce,

Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that in certain respects they are exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the [...] class of signs [...] by physical connection (the indexical class). (Peirce 1966: 281)

To Zhao, “A photo is sign-text. The physical existence of photos is a sign carrier. Photography is a medium. Photos are transmitted through visual channels. Pictorial newspapers that print photos are a form of media. Photography is a genre” (Zhao 2022: 122–123).

Taking photos as a sign from the perspective of semiotics is helpful to show the self-narration and self-formation in the novel. The aftermath of colonization lingers around the Laguna land and Silko’s life, so through the photos she intends to illustrate the subjectivity of marginalize self where self-representation has become possible in the past decades.

## 2 Photo-narrative interaction under semiotics

The images and text are in dialogue throughout *Storyteller*. From the perspective of semiotics, especially Roland Barthes’s image rhetoric, the relations between photos and text can be summarized into the following three points.

First, the identity of the characters and elements of the scenes are established through the linguistic message accompanying the photo. For every picture in the novel, there is a short description and narrative, rather than a caption, for the photo. In this case, the equal relation between image and text is emphasized, preventing the reliance of the image on the text. The linguistic message from the description of the photo can serve as “anchorage and relay” (Barthes 1985: 197). In terms of the function of anchorage, the linguistic description of an image can provide identification by “fix[ing] the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs” (Barthes 1985: 197). When it comes to the function of relay, the linguistic message guides further interpretation by “constituting a kind of vice which

holds the connoted meanings from proliferating, whether towards excessively individual regions (it limits, that is to say, the projective power of the Image) or towards dysphoric values” (Barthes 1985: 197). The two functions of the linguistic message co-exist in the photographs of the novel, and the photos bear the function of memory and transmission.

Second, Laguna traditions of time and place are preserved through the denoted image of the photo. Photos in the novel record the story, anecdote, and myth of Laguna Pueblo, and the memory in photos, especially the time and place, is crucial in saving Laguna traditions. There is a symbolic message in a photo aside from the literary message, and in fact “it is an absence of meaning full of all the meanings” (Barthes 1985: 199). Roland Barthes believes, “The type of consciousness the photograph involves is indeed truly unprecedented, since it establishes not a consciousness of the being-there of the thing (which any copy could provoke) but an awareness of its having-been-there” (Barthes 1985: 200). In *Storyteller*, Silko shows her interest in time and space, past and present, illustrated in photos, which serve as a link between here-now and the there-then. In a photo, the scene is just there, captured by machines, so the relations of signified and signifier is recorded, and the lack of code maintains the naturalness of photos. Photos provide meaning construction under the appearance of the existing meaning.

Third, this semiotic space as social and historical background is shown through the image rhetoric of the photo. Although the relation of the image to its referent is one of recording instead of transformation or signifying, the photograph as a sign still has a code. “The press photograph is an object that has been worked on, chosen, composed, constructed, treated according to professional or ideological norms” and at the level of reception, the photograph “is not only perceived, received, it is read, connected by the public that consumes it to a traditional stock of signs” (Barthes 1977: 19). So it is necessary to relate the photo to a rhetoric when reading a photo. Here the rhetoric means a kind of cultural connotation. Cultural code can be revealed, given that different individuals will have different readings of the same text and same image according to their own knowledge. Images not only have signs from the utterances emitted, but also have the underlying meaning from the utterances received. The signified of connotation is the domain of ideology. The logic here is: the signifiers are connotators and a group of connotators is rhetoric, which thus serves as the signifying aspect of ideology. Through the symbolic meaning of photos in *Storyteller*, Silko, as a Native writer, endeavors to reconsider time and space, retell the history of the Native, make the Native presence visible in modern world, and construct a subjectivity that has roots in history and is grounded in the present. Just as Barthes said, “thanks to the code of connotation the reading of the photograph is [...] always historical; it depends on the reader’s ‘knowledge’ just as though it were a matter of a real language, intelligible only if one has learned the signs” (Barthes 1977: 28).

From the three aspects above, it is clear that the functions of illustrations in the novel are polarized. For one thing, in terms of symbols, a photo is a condensation of paradigms as strong and concrete signs; for another, at the level of denotation, syntax is always close to words, and it is the iconic image that naturalizes its symbols. From the photos to semiology, we can find that the meaning of a novel includes two parts, one from the system, the other from the syntagm. In other words, novels combine the charm of nature and the intelligibility of culture. Image reading depends on readers' cultural, ethical, and ideological insights.

Based on the three aspects, the photos about family and land in the novel can be “read” again. The pictures in *Storyteller*, which were taken by Silko's relatives and friends and spread with the novel and the passage of time, are all about family, neighborhood, land, and nature. Silko's grandfather took photos in earlier days and her father is a distinguished photographer, as well. In terms of the relations between photographer and the photographed, Silko agrees with Lippard's “reciprocal moment” (Lippard 1992: 37), where only subjects with a consciousness can influence posture when taking photos, although the photographer has the power to construct the shot and thus has interrelations with the photographed. Silko's autobiography with photos illustrates Smith and Watson's visual-verbal interaction. First, the photo and text are relational, which means they are parallel, without one dominating the other or one subordinating the other. Second, the image and words are contextual. For example, the photos in *Storyteller* provide cultural and historical context or background for the understanding of the people and events in the novel. Third, the relations of image and text are spatial and temporal. The photos in the novel show the stories over time and in some places in Laguna Pueblo (Smith and Watson 2002: 21–31). As Saussure notes, photos as visual signifiers “can exploit more than one dimension simultaneously [...] many semiotic systems rely heavily on both spatial and temporal syntagms” (Chandler 2021: 130).

### 3 Subjectivity formation in interpenetrating time and place

Silko was brought up in Laguna Pueblo, but educated in the USA, so she received two sets of time concepts: one is linear time, which is common in Western literature, and the other is cyclical time, which features the co-existence of past, present, and future, common in indigenous writing. Silko's interest in time comes from her childhood. For the old people in Laguna Pueblo, time is round, and the passage of time is cyclic. “All times go on existing side by side for all eternity. No moment is lost or destroyed [...]. The past and the future are the same because they exist only in the present of

our imaginations” (Silko 1996: 136–137). Apart from its having a cyclical nature, Silko also believes that time is alive with “a personality, a sort of identity,” and time “might pass, but time [does] not die; moreover, the days and weeks eventually [will] return” (Silko 1996: 136).

Through this notion of time, Silko intends to express that since the arrival of white Europeans, the indigenous have lost their land and everything, but the indigenous time concept still exists, and the past is still alive in the present and even in the future. At the center of indigenous-colonizer conflict is culture and identity itself. History and the ancestors exist in the form of stories that stand in relation to places. The Pueblo tribe in the Southwest of America is regarded as “the descendants of the original natives of North America’s vast southwest region” (Sando 1992: 1). These people have lived in the place for such a long time that a kind of tradition formed with its specific habitation, myth, and meanings. The tradition and stories serve as a geohistorical and cultural map of self. From the perspective of semiotics, *self* is a symbolic process that extends through time. When people think about self, the symbolic self is formed. The past self is the object of this symbol, and the future self is the explanatory term of this symbol. In contemporary society, a self has too many identities, forcing the self to move up and down. When moving up, there is sociological explanation of self; when moving down, there is physiological explanation of self. The former makes the self become “the self of others,” “the self of intersubjectivity,” and “the self of cultural semiotics,” which can enrich, idealize, and fill the self with social significance.

Time is related closely to place. The concept of space is often related to and confused with place, so it is necessary to distinguish these two words. Hertha Wong gave her understanding of these two similar words, based on the definition given by Marxist geographers David Harvey and Edward Soja and Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre, that is, “Space shapes, and is shaped by, society [...]. Place, then is space experience and personalized” (Wong 2018: 60–61). In other words, space is an abstract social product, but place is more personal and associated with one’s experience. In terms of their relationship, “Space defines landscape, where space combined with memory defines place” (Lippard 1985: 9). In a colonial and patriarchal context, land is linked to women and also to the Native people who are controlled and exploited with the European intrusion and conquest, with the domination of resources by the male.

Silko, like many other Native writers and other marginalized groups, tries to reconsider the concept of time and place in order to rewrite history from an indigenous viewpoint, to show the presence of the Native to the whole world, and to promote self-formation and self-development, where subjectivity is rooted in the past, is grounded in the present, and has a stake in the future. The places of Native tribes have stories, and these places and their stories together shape people’s identity

and the local culture. The shining point in a work of art lies in its extension to the surrounding world in time and place.

Silko's notion of time and place penetrates all of her novels, and images play an important role in relating time, place, and story. Her first novel, and also her greatest, *Ceremony* (2011), shows the links between past and present through the healing of Tayo in a tribal ceremony, after having suffered greatly from the trauma of a modern war. In her *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), Silko recreates the time and place of the past five hundred years in Pueblo, depicting the terrifying consequences of a world controlled by those who view the world as a dead world and assemble an army of the dispossessed on the southern border of the USA. The historical novel *Gardens in the Dunes* (2000) portrays the experience of Indigo in the 19th century, a woman who strives to keep her life in balance between a white world and the indigenous ways. In *The Turquoise Ledge: A Memoir* (2010), Silko emphasizes the relations among time, place, and story, and their further relations with subjectivity, through the detailed description of stories in the Sonoran Desert in Arizona. Silko shares her experiences through photos of the weather such as storms and clouds, of plants, especially cacti, of animals such as lizards and bees, of rocks, hills, and minerals, especially turquoise. Through these photos, family, land, and their stories are combined.

Silko changes the traditional literary norms by adding photos in her autobiography, establishing a new kind visual-verbal mode. Through these images, readers gain their own insights and understandings. Photography “seems to found in nature the signs of culture [...] masking the constructed meaning under the appearance of the given meaning” (Barthes 1977: 45–46). In doing so, the binary opposition of margins and center, self and other, visible and invisible are deconstructed, so that the writer's personal experience and the historical events are associated, and self-representation and self-articulation are achieved in the network of time, places, people, and stories.

Silko emphasizes the concept of self that is shaped by indigenous cultures over a long period, which is vastly different from someone who believes in the freedom of constructing identity. At the same time, Silko holds on to history, holds on to common experiences that help in subjectivity formation and community shaping, which differs from someone who believes in mobile identities and self-construction abstracted from time in a fluid and exaggerated way. From the perspective of semiotics, a symbolic ideography must occur between two subjects, that is, a sending subject, sending a sign text to a receiving subject. The sender attaches its intended meaning to the sign text, which carries meaning, while the receiver deduces its explanatory meaning. That is because all of us live together in the same world, and the subjectivity of an individual can only be realized within the common subjectivity; common subjectivity can only be achieved when numerous individuals exert their subjectivity.

The way to determine self is through identity, which temporarily replaces the self in semiosis. Identity is an interpersonal or social role related to sign texts. Identity does not exist in isolation, and it must be recognized by the communicating party. A person has multiple identities, such as gender identity, community identity, ethnic identity, professional identity, language identity, etc. There are three characteristics that different identities of a person share. The first is uniqueness, which means identity is a choice with self-consciousness. The second is affiliation, which means participating in certain social combinations. The third is self-knowledge, which means the self is the place where these identities gather.

## 4 Family photos in *Storyteller*

Most of the photos in the novel are of Silko's family members, and her family has a history of recording themselves and life with a camera. These photos record the story, anecdote, and myth of Laguna Pueblo, and the memory in photos, especially the time and place, is crucial in saving Laguna traditions. "To state cultural memory is manifestly dependent on symbols mainly means it is carried by symbols, which are external vehicles and reminders of cultural memory that serve the purpose of its objectivation" (Yu 2019: 73). Silko thinks photos "serve both as mnemonic devices and as stories themselves" (Wong 2018: 65). At the beginning of *Storyteller*, Silko makes it clear:

As with any generation  
 the oral tradition depends upon each person  
 listening and remembering a portion  
 and it is together—  
 all of us remembering what we have heard together—  
 that creates the whole story  
 the long story of the people. (Silko 2012: 9)

Every person in a family or a clan has to remember, share, and pass on their stories. Their experience and beliefs are all kept in Laguna stories, which are told and retold from one generation to another. The local people view themselves as a continuation of an ancient story. Taking photos is a good way to record those ancient stories. There are multiple images and voices in *Storyteller* so that a polyphonous

illustration-narrative is formed. On the first page of the novel, there is a description of a tall Hopi basket, and it is easy to see the reciprocity between photo and story. “Inside the basket are hundreds / of photographs taken since the 1890s around Laguna” (Silko 2012: 1). Silko explains why she includes the photos immediately after: “Photographs have always had special significance / with the people of my family and the people at Laguna [...]. The photographs are here because they are part of many of the stories / and because many of the stories can be traced in the photographs” (Silko 2012: 1). The whole structure of *Storyteller* is like reaching into the basket, taking out a photo, and telling the story related to the image. It is nonlinear, just depending on which photo is selected.

The first family photo is on page 2, the beginning of the book. This is a formal studio photo with two adults and a baby. Like all the other photos in the novel, without a caption, there is a description under the photo to provide the linguistic message. As Chandler notes, “as a medium, photography is primarily indexical; as a ‘message’ (which is dependent on how a photograph is used or interpreted) this sign relation may not be dominant” (2021: 56). The description helps readers to know the identity of the characters and the elements of the scene. The message tells us it shows Silko’s great-grandfather, Robert G. Marmon, and her great-grandmother, Marie Anaya Marmon. Marie holds a baby on her lap. The baby, with a pretty face and a sweet expression, is Silko’s grandfather, Hank. The three persons in the photo are all dressed modestly. Robert wears a suit and tie, and Marie wears a velvet coat, and the baby Hank wears a long white dress.

In addition, there is also a symbolic message or iconic message. Robert and Marie stare in different directions and look as if they are lost in their own thoughts. The two individuals have no interaction, neither between themselves nor with the photographer. Robert sits on the left and Marie on the right. There are some symbolic meanings, since writing and reading in Western cultures are along a horizontal level from left to right. “Symbolically, within this picture-reading tradition, the left is ‘our side’. In Western propaganda, it is not uncommon to find an image on the left representing ‘us’ while an image on the right represents ‘them’ [...] The right-hand side has also frequently been associated with masculinity so, in terms of Lévi-Strausseau analogical thinking, right is to left as male is to female” (Chandler 2021: 133). Also Robert sits taller than Marie maybe because he is elevated by the photographer. This is common in studio photos, where men were always posed taller than women or standing with a hand on their wife or child. “In pictorial composition, for one signifier to be located ‘higher’ than another is consequently not simply a spatial relationship but also an evaluative one in relation to their signifieds” (Chandler 2021: 134).

All the above exhibit the patriarchal gender roles of Western culture. Sign texts must have a social identity as support, which we can call textual identity. Sign text

is the projection of the sender's own intention, which is the form of meaning after the projection. Without textual identity, no text can convey meaning (Zhao 2022: 353). Once the sign text is formed, its textual identity can function independently. The intention of the sender will have a significant impact on this. Textual gender identity often carries societal expectations and meanings of gender identity, which are often perceived as natural and beyond the control of the creative subject. For example, people usually have various expectations for women, such as being gentle, considerate, understanding, beautiful, and preferably young. A photographer may not be entirely conscious of their arrangement, as the identity of these texts is often determined before the text is produced.

The second the third photos on pages 8 and 39 show the generational transmission of knowledge of Laguna through storytelling, orally and in book. On page 39, from the photo description we know that Silko's grandmother Marie Anaya Marmon and Silko's two sisters are reading an old book in the kitchen. Silko says that for a long time she thought her grandma's name was A'mooh, which is "the Laguna expression of endearment / for a young child / spoken with great feeling and love" (Silko 2012: 40). With the meaning of maternal love, A'mooh is also a word to pass on traditional Pueblo knowledge derived from the earth and nature. Her grandma "washed her hair with yucca roots / [...] / [I watched her] make red chili on the grinding stone / the old way [...] the old days when they didn't have toothpaste / and cleaned their teeth with juniper ash, / and how, instead of corn flakes, in the old days they ate / 'maah't'zini' crushed up with milk" (Silko 2012: 40). In the photo, the grandma and two granddaughters snuggle together at the dinner table, a symbol of family sustenance, reading an old book together. The book Marie reads to children is "a worn-out little book that had lost its cover" (Silko 2012: 117), which Silko describes later. It is about *Brownie the Bear*, which was read again and again, to three generations: to her grandparents, to her uncles and father, and to Silko and her sisters. The story told orally and in book links the older and younger generations, and links storyteller and readers. Grandma A'mooh, Aunt Susie, and Aunt Alice were "women of the book as well as women of the spoken word" (Silko 2010: 28). *Brownie the Bear* is remembered by all, because Marie "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" (Silko 2012: 117). The old stories are retold to new listeners from generation to generation. From the stories, people know who they are and how to survive. For Laguna people, if you don't have stories, you have nothing.

The photo on page 8 includes Aunt Susie and little Silko. In Silko's childhood, she often visited Aunt Susie, enjoying her meals and stories. Aunt Susie was willing to take time to answer Silko's questions, and "She 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 / which depended upon memory / and

retelling by subsequent generations” (Silko 2012: 6). The story passed down from one generation to the next had been altered by the European intrusion, and the entire Laguna culture and an entire identity of a people had changed. In the introduction of *Storyteller*, Silko tells the readers that any of her local people who participated in the tribal activities or ceremonies or spoke Laguna language in the 20th century would be arrested and punished by the white authorities. Due to the punishment, Silko’s great-grandmother only spoke English to her children to prevent them from being punished because of speaking Laguna in school. This led to many traditional stories being lost. Fortunately, Silko’s Grandpa, Aunt Alice, and Aunt Susie kept telling the next generation stories about the old Laguna Pueblo. And to some extent they even talked in Laguna language. These stories link the past, present, and future of Laguna culture and life. That is why Silko begins the book with a family portrait of her great-grandparents and baby grandfather, and ends the novel also with a photo of three generations of the family. All of the stories are framed in between, showing the time expanse of the family history and the change of traditions in Laguna.

## 5 Land photos in *Storyteller*

Location or place is a central element in Laguna stories, since stories are often remembered when people pass a particular landform where a story happened. Silko includes many photos of the land, apart from photos of family. The land photos in the novel are located in Pueblo Southwest, a place full of history and stories. Time is spatialized in her creative autobiographical form, where Silko not only shows the details of her life experience, but also highlights the land, which is inclusive of all time and the stories, which is the focus of personal subject formation. In this way, personal identity and subjectivity is always collective identity. In terms of images or visual signs, it is spatial relations that are more important than temporal relations. “Spatial syntagms are important not only in the whole range of what we usually think of as visual media (such as drawing, painting, and photography) but also in the graphic medium of writing – in circumstances where specific layout contributes to the meaning” (Chandler 2021: 130).

One of the most famous land photos is of Enchanted Mesa near Acoma on page 185. The description of the photo again helps to identify the scene in the photo, and it is a kind of denoted description of the picture. In this case, the linguistic message has the function of explanation, although this explanation is selective. This geographical feature of the local is important because Silko relates it to the old story of Pueblo, so that place and story are linked; the mythic past and the present moment are linked. This photo was taken by Silko’s father in 1949, with snow on the ground and the

clouds above the mesa as bright as snow themselves. Marmon took the photo from below and from a long distance away, so that the sky meets the Mesa top in the middle of the photo as if the sky and the land are in balance. There is human intervention in photography, such as framing, distance, focus, and angle. “When we look at photographs, we can often recognize the conventions of particular historical periods, of particular genres (e.g., news photos, snapshots, portraits, passport photos), and of individual styles (composition/framing, lighting, point of view) – we can even identify famous photographers from the ways in which they use and ‘break’ conventions” (Chandler 2021: 174). In this photo, the camera angle leaves viewers an impression that human beings are tiny and limited against the vast background of nature. There is also another photo of Enchanted Mesa on page 287, and this is the distant Enchanted Mesa. From the description, we know that this photo was taken just after the morning rain, the mountains to the north of Acoma Valley are becoming clear and the Enchanted Mesa is visible in the distance.

This place is also associated with a story about Kat’sima, and Mesa becomes a storied location. After showing the photo of Enchanted Mesa on page 185, Silko tells the relevant old story on page 249. “It reminds viewers of stories that conflate time and space into presence in particular places” (Wong 2018: 70). Grandpa Hank tells Silko a story: “In 1908 when the Smithsonian Institution / excavated the top of Kat’sima, Enchanted Mesa / Grandpa drove some of the archaeologists / out there in his buggy. / The archaeologists used a small brass cannon / to shoot a line over the top of Enchanted Mesa / so they could rig a crude elevator.” Silko asks her grandfather, “Did they find the bones of that old blind lady / and that baby? You know, the one they tell about in that old story?” (Silko 2012: 249) Before getting the answer, Silko tells a story as explanation: “There is an old story about a blind woman / being stranded on top of enchanted mesa with a tiny baby / the time the sandstone trail to the top collapsed” (Silko 2012: 250). After the insertion of story as useful information to understand the situation, Grandpa answers that he did not see any bones, “but those Smithsonian people were putting everything / into wooden boxes as fast as they could. They took everything with them / in those wooden boxes / back to Washington, D.C.” (Silko 2012: 250). Here the old story of a lost woman and her baby is connected to the story of Smithsonian archaeologists. As Peirce said, “all indices refer to single instances (e.g. ‘this man’), whereas symbolic representation can refer to general classes of instances (e.g. ‘men’)” (Chandler 2021: 56). The woman and baby lost on Enchanted Mesa are just like the items lost at the top of mesa by the archaeologists. There are three further connections behind this: the connection between storied place and old stories and family stories; the connection between story and land; and the connection between the past, present, and future of the Laguna people. In fact, Silko intends to criticize white archaeologist who took away Indian bones in the name of research, as grandpa says at last: “You know / probably all those boxes of

things / they took from Enchanted Mesa / are still just sitting somewhere / in the basement of some museum” (Silko 2012: 250). The photo here is indexical in pointing to its location, and is also symbolic in showing the conventional symbols. “While digital imaging techniques have eroded the indexicality of photographic images, it is the indexicality still routinely attributed to the medium that is primarily responsible for interpreters treating them as objective records of reality” (Chandler 2021: 55).

The story related to the photo is part of their ancestral culture, and Silko puts the near-Mesa photo in the novel to pass on the story and culture to the next and the next generation. Although everyone shares the collective self derived from their ancestral culture with a group of people, cultural identity is not always fixed in a certain past, but rather subject to history, culture, and power. That is why Hall sees subject construction as a process of change. He thinks identity is something that has not been completed and then reproduced by new cultural practices. Instead, identity should be seen as a form of “production” that never ends. It is always in process and is always composed internally rather than externally.

Among the land photos, there is one on page 102 showing such weather signs as rain clouds and rainstorm in the distance and featuring a natural sandstone rain cistern in the foreground. This photograph shows an important spatial relation of center and margin. Besides the left–right or top–bottom structure, there is also a center–periphery structure in the composition of images. As Chandler states:

“Selective perception involves ‘foregrounding’ some features and ‘backgrounding’ others. We owe the concept of ‘figure’ and ‘ground’ in perception to the Gestalt psychologists”. In the case of visual images, we routinely distinguish a dominant shape (a ‘figure’ with a definite contour) from what our current concerns relegate to the background (or ‘ground’). [...] the central figure typically represents the topic (what the sign is about), while the material form of the frame (its shape and colour) defines its function (how it should be interpreted: for instance, as a warning or as a prohibition). (Chandler 2021: 134–135)

In this photo, the foregrounding feature is the sandstone rain cistern, which is the essential element of human survival on this high desert plateau in New Mexico. Sandstone cisterns of rainwater are precious and sacred to the Laguna and Acoma people. Just following this, on the next page, there is a photo in which young Silko and her two sisters, Gigi and Wendy, hold pottery water jars. Gigi and Wendy keep the jars balanced on their heads as the Laguna women did in the old days when they went to carry water. They lived at the edge of the village rainwater cistern, which is still a sacred place for Laguna people. The backgrounding feature is the clouds and the rainstorm in the distance. In this photo, the sky is vast, and the clouds almost meet the land at the horizon, conveying a feeling of the clouds moving across the land. The abundant clouds are the source of sacred water, which has always been scarce in the Pueblo desert.

Among the 26 photos in the novel, there are 12 photos of family and 7 of the land. Most of the photos were taken by Silko's father, Lee Marmon, and a few were taken by Silko's grandfather Henry Marmon. There is also Lee's own portrait on page 186, showing him holding a camera, standing by a Jeep station wagon. As Silko explains in the photo description, her father "was seldom far from one of his cameras. His second love was automobiles" (Silko 2012: 186), and this photo was taken by Silko's mother in 1949, when the Jeep station wagon was brand-new. They regard photo and camera as a way to show subjectivity. Both the subjects in the photos, such as the family members and the land, and the person who took photos, such as Silko's father and grandfather, emphasize relationship in the novel. Silko describes the important role of photo: "The hills and mesas around Laguna / were a second home for my father / when he was growing up [...]. He used to wait for the cumulus clouds to come give him the sky / he needed for his photographs" (Silko 2012: 193).

Using photos to show the relations of humans and nature is also a focus in Silko's other works. In *Sacred Water* (1993), a special hand-made eco-autobiography, Silko emphasizes the Sonoran Desert in Tucson, Arizona, and her focus is still on time and place. "Through photographic images and prose, Silko depicts a self-reflexive sense of memories of childhood at Laguna Pueblo, reflections on various Native kinship systems and beliefs, daily observations of the Arizona land and weather—all linked by the central motif of water, a scarce, life-generating resource and the focus of most of the rituals among indigenous peoples of the arid Southwest" (Wong 2018: 703–704). Likewise, in *The Turquoise Ledge* (2010), Silko records human beings' violence against nature.

## 6 Conclusion

The themes of *Storyteller* involve family, landscape, love, identity, power, and the oral traditions of the Native Americans. This hybrid autobiography, which covers a variety of genres, seems to be scattered, but in fact it focuses on the source of inspiration for Silko's literary creation: the oral tradition of Laguna Pueblo. This tradition carries the history and culture of the family and nation, providing rich nourishment for Silko's literary imagination, and serving as her guide for observing, understanding, and reproducing the world.

In *Storyteller*, Silko tells the history of family and place in Laguna Pueblo through various images and words. On the one hand, the characters and scenes in the photos, with their descriptions, serve as linguistic messages to solve the problem of uncertain signs and fix the floating chain of signifieds. On the other hand, the sign of photos is drawn from a cultural code, appearing as the signifying aspect of ideology. The interactive relations of photos and texts enables readers to understand the

temporal-spatial continuum of indigenous people, which constitutes their subjectivity. The ancient stories and memories behind those photos all originate from the Pueblo land and the time it possesses and bestows. As a storyteller and Laguna Pueblo woman, Silko leaves a legacy for future generations. In her writing, Silko is rooted in the local, especially the land where Pueblo people have lived for thousands of years. And her time is cyclical, instead of linear, where the past has not disappeared, but to a large extent it is a part of the present, coming alive in the stories of this land. Laguna people's worldview transcends time and space and includes everything. In their national spirit and identity, land plays a vital role, and rocks and rainwater are living bodies that love each other in the eyes of the people. Oral stories are part of the daily life of Pueblo people. They weave a network of meaning, memory, and knowledge. Silko also expressed great resentment and a sense of injustice concerning the plundering of the land cultivated by Indian tribes for generations and the destruction of their homes. She affirms the struggle of Native Americans against the unjust white legal system, demanding the return of land and land use rights.

The relations between illustrations and texts in Silko's autobiography is also a representation of the relations between past and present, between life writing and self-reconstruction. Semiotics propounds that human universals are the transcendental foundation of human meaning, and the study of universals will enable us to have a clearer understanding of human consciousness and a certain grasp of the foundation of the world of meaning. Through the sign of photos, the current situation is challenged, Native history is reshaped, and subjectivity is reexamined. Self-representation is a glimpse into a life story over a long period of time. For indigenous people, self-narration is an attempt to explore their marginalized self that participates in the dominant white culture but meanwhile stands apart from it. Silko uses photos in her autobiography because she knows that the photograph is a powerful tool of colonization, and she intends to reverse the function of photos and makes them serve as a tool of anticolonization, viewing Native photography as a way to combat predatory photography. In this case, the Native is no longer the object of the white male gaze but a subject who creates their own images, and the natives are taking their own land and reclaiming their power of self-narration and self-representation.

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