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**WEAVING LIFE STORIES:  
HEALING SELVES IN NATIVE AMERICAN  
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES**

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# **Weaving Life Stories: Healing Selves in Native American Autobiographical Narratives**

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PORTO ALEGRE  
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To all indigenous peoples  
To my Masters

To all the faces I encounter  
so much in need of healing

OM GURU DEVA OM

## **At Risk**

I played at words.  
It was a long season.

Soft syllables,  
Images that shimmered,  
Intricate etymologies.

They cohered in wonder.  
I was enchanted.

My soul was at risk.  
I struggled  
Towards hurt,  
Towards healing,  
Towards passion,  
Towards peace.

I wheeled in the shadow of a hawk.  
Dizziness came upon me;  
The turns of time confined and confounded me.

I lay in a cave,  
On a floor cured in blood.

Ancient animals danced about me,  
Presenting themselves formally,  
In masks.

And there was I, among ancient animals,  
In the formality of the dance,  
Remembering my face in the mirror of masks.

- N. Scott Momaday

A person brought to death by grief  
cannot see the sky  
cannot hear bird song or children's voices  
A person brought to death by grief  
cannot breath and speak  
cannot feel the sun  
A person brought to death by grief  
lives stooped by heartache  
in a house where firebrands lie scattered

The One Who Holds The Heavens Up  
who sends us dreams and life  
has given us the gift of words  
to bring comfort and care  
to recall for the grieving  
the beauty of this peaceful place  
the beauty of our continuance

- Roberta Hill

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Undoubtedly influenced by the very subject that has inspired this dissertation, I cannot help but think of it as a piece of storytelling inserted in a chain of other stories that preexist this writing and convert me into simply another teller performing bits and pieces of an ongoing, uninterrupted story—a story that does not begin here and will continue to be told in many forms by many tellers. Stories do not exist alone, nor are they separated from the rich tissue that connects us to one another. This particular weaving of stories owes a great debt to many, whom I wish to acknowledge here, for they have helped me in many diverse ways to embody this story in my heart.

First, I would like to thank the financial support of CAPES that allowed me to stay a year in France, where I was able to gain a certain perspective of many of the issues developed here. Institutional support was also given by UFRGS Graduate Program in Modern Foreign Literatures and my own colleagues at the Undergraduate Program, allowing me a year of leave to complete this project. I do appreciate all their support—individually or as a group—during the whole time necessary for the completion of this work. My special thanks are dedicated to my advisor Professor Rita Schmidt for believing in this project and for her unwavering support, patience, and friendship. She has always provided sound advice, while giving me confidence to follow my own path. I had also the gift of a co-advisor, Professor Françoise Besson from l'Université de Toulouse — Le Mirail, who also gave me much more than her academic capacity as a scholar. Thanks to her, I was able to meet other foreign scholars and listen to many other walks in the field of Native American studies. My admiration for both Professor Rita Schmidt and Professor Françoise Besson go much beyond their professional qualities. I would also like to thank Thomas Couser, Eliane Campello, Ubiratan Paiva Oliveira, Gilda Bittencourt, and Márcia Navarro for their appraisal of this project at different points of its making.

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## ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I reflect upon Native American life stories building on the hypothesis that, in opposition to Western canonical autobiographies, they present a different conception of self derived from a social positionality marked by different historical experiences and different epistemological and ontological views. My aim is to show how indigenous writers have appropriated a Western model which, in its canonical configuration, was used to sustain narratives of individuation and how they use it to heal historical wounds resulting from the violent colonization process and its consequences so as to envision collective survival. To do that, I briefly revise two foundational moments in the Western development of the genre which, in a first moment, mingle the history of autobiography with Christian confession and then with the process of individuation. From a contemporary perspective, much has been discussed about the linguistic impossibility of saying “I” without bumping into a series of discontinuities and dead ends, which seems to impose the total fragmentation of self to the point where it may seem impossible to utter the deictic pronoun “I.” I contrast this canonical history of the genre with indigenous narratives which use life stories to rescue experiences to sustain themselves both as a reevaluation of the past and as an opening to future possibilities. In a second moment, I revise the Western conception of time showing how, despite the fact that several chronosophies that define time as linear, cyclical or non-directional coexist, our societies are structured on the idea of progress, which sustains the binomial modernity/coloniality. In other words, the linear view of time allied to a historical process of subjugation of peoples and territorial conquest has established a model that defines itself as innovative, or state of the art, classifying all other human forms of organization as primitive stages of the same process. Using the paradigm of co-existence, I present other epistemological views, contrasting this linear and progressive time to the ways Native Americans discuss space as a catalyst of the stories that sustain indigenous relationships to the Other. It is important to emphasize that the concept of Other used here encompasses everything which is in relation with the self, including—besides other human beings—animals, plants, rivers, the land, the sun, and nonphysical entities. Finally, I analyze how indigenous life writing manifests this way of being and its healing potential in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller*.

## RESUMO

No presente trabalho faz-se uma reflexão sobre as narrativas de vida indígenas a partir da hipótese de que, em contraposição ao modelo canônico ocidental, elas apresentam uma concepção de *self* marcada por uma posicionalidade social diversa tanto a nível de experiência histórica quanto da visão epistemológica e ontológica. Meu objetivo é mostrar como os escritores indígenas se apropriam de um modelo ocidental que, na sua configuração canônica, servia para sustentar narrativas de individuação e o utilizam para curar feridas históricas resultantes da violência do processo colonizatório e suas conseqüências e, com isso, criar possibilidades de sobrevivência coletivas. Com esse propósito, faço uma breve revisão de dois momentos fundamentais do desenvolvimento do gênero no ocidente que, num primeiro momento, confundem a história da autobiografia com a confissão cristã e, num momento posterior, com o processo de individuação. Numa perspectiva mais contemporânea, discute-se a impossibilidade lingüística de se falar do eu sem se deparar com uma série de descontinuidades e becos sem saída que parecem impor uma fragmentação total do eu, a ponto de se pensar ser impossível dizer o dêitico “eu.” A esta visão canônica da história do gênero, contraponho as narrativas indígenas que se valem das histórias de vida como forma de buscar as experiências que lhes dão sustentação tanto como forma de reavaliação do vivido quanto como abertura para novas possibilidades no futuro. Num segundo momento, reviso a noção de tempo ocidental mostrando como, apesar da concomitância de várias cronofias que definem o tempo como cíclico, linear ou a-direcional, nossas sociedades se estruturam a partir do modelo de progresso, que fundamenta o binômio modernidade/colonialidade. Em outras palavras, a visão linear do tempo aliado ao processo histórico de subjugação dos povos e conquista de territórios, estabeleceu um modelo que se auto-define como inovador, ou de ponta, relegando todas as outras formas de organização humanas a estágios mais atrasados do mesmo processo. Baseando-me no paradigma de co-existência, discuto outras visões epistemológicas, contrapondo esta visão do tempo linear e progressivo à forma como os indígenas concebem o espaço como catalisador das histórias que sustentam as relações indígenas com o Outro. Importante ressaltar que a noção de Outro usada aqui abrange tudo aquilo que está em relação com o eu, incluindo, além dos seres humanos, animais, plantas, rios, a terra, o sol, e mesmo entidades não físicas. Finalmente, analiso em *Storyteller* de Leslie Marmon como os escritos de vida indígena manifestam este modo de ser e seu potencial curativo.

## INTRODUCTION

# S

## SETTING THE LOOM

I am a listener to the [Okanagan] language's stories, and when my words form I am merely retelling the same stories in different patterns.

— Jeannette C. Armstrong, "Land Speaking"

And so we learn, if we are willing to travel a path of knowledge, something about ourselves, which is to say that when we study ourselves we are studying the universe and we are studying part of the Great Creative Power, and when we study the world we are also studying ourselves.

— Jack D. Forbes, *Columbus and Other Cannibals*

When Fergus M. Bordewich chose the title *Killing the White Man's Indian: Reinventing Native Americans at the End of the Twentieth Century* for his collection of essays published in 1996, he touched a very sensitive key in the relation between Native American and mainstream culture. As I think about this dissertation and the act of life writing performed by contemporary American Indians,<sup>1</sup> I cannot but pay attention to the imaginary space that Indians occupy in contemporary media cultural production. This construction of the Indian has a long and complex history in the Americas. Traditionally, "the Indian" is

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<sup>1</sup> The terms Indian and Native American are interchangeable here. Although the politically correct expression "Native American" was coined to make good a historical mistake, which associated the original peoples of the Americas with the people from India, many Native authors see the corrective as one more imposition of the dominant culture. The danger here is the identification of Native peoples to other hyphenated Americans (Asian-Americans, Jewish-Americans, etc), which would obscure their status as members of their own Nations with the same rights to their natural resources, their own lifestyle, and cultural survival as any other nation. However, expressions such as Native American literature are commonly used by most in the academic field, Indians and non-Indians alike. The juxtaposition of the two terms is also widely used: Native American Indian. Consequently, while the expression Native American is used to designate Nations, the term Indian is used for individuals, provided that we understand that there is not *an* Indian culture. As the editors of V. F. Cordova's posthumous book *How It Is* explain: "Readers will notice that Dr. Cordova's usage slides easily among 'Native American,' 'indigenous,' and 'Indian,' all of which, she recognizes, are *shadows* of her real self, a Jicarilla Apache person" (233, emphasis added).

portrayed in two different and possibly complementary ways, the bloodthirsty savage and the noble, dying Indian. Although these representations still persevere in the popular literary and cinematographic genres, they have acquired more subtle shades at the end of the twentieth century which still subsist in our new century. One of these forms relates to the idea that Indians have not changed their ways from time immemorial, still living in a state of ignorance of the so-called benefits of modernization. This view objectifies Indians as exotic museum relics, an image that has become very popular and commodified in the contemporary “New Age.”<sup>2</sup> According to this thriving market, Indians are seen very much like those portrayed by Edward S. Curtis: isolated, noble, wise, and gone. And, since they are not here anymore, Westerners can appropriate their “teachings” without ever listening to what real Indians have to say about that. This position implies that Indians operate in a system separate from, instead of diverse and in dialogue with, Western culture and cannot speak with their own voices. In such case, Indians would belong to frozen past cultures without any complex system of self-representation, existing untouched by the many changes brought about by cultural contact, except maybe as powerless victims who are incapable of actively incorporating changes into their societies. In other words, they are not seen as agents capable of self-determination in the political arena of cultural exchange, struggling for the continuation of their own communities and culture. Referring back to this process of silencing, Chickasaw author Linda Hogan says, “others are stealing our voices and telling our stories. Even when they speak with us, even when they interview, what comes out is interpretation. It is about them, their thoughts” (“Foreword” viii).

Closely connected with this representation of “good but gone” is the attempt to blur Indians’ social, cultural, and historical specificity by incorporating them as simply another ethnic group dissolved under a multicultural hegemonizing Euroamerica. This would imply that Indians lose their identity as Native peoples when adopting elements of the contemporary world, as if being an Indian excluded the possibility of change and adaptation, as if the only possible change were that of abandoning their singular position marked by an

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<sup>2</sup> This process of rendering minorities visible by stressing their Otherness and exoticism not only reveals the emptiness of consuming individuals in industrial mass market societies but, in a less flattering light, also shows the opportunistic and cannibalistic vein of markets, which promptly transforms people, cultures, resources into consumable and desirable images. Unfortunately, Native American Indians are not the only ones to raise this kind of economic interest since other social groupings are also used in the same way. Grim as this prospect is, though, the direction of the transformations that this new acquired visibility may take leaves open the possibility of more positive turnings for the minority groups involved, as they may use their positive image—albeit distorted—to conquer new rights .

ongoing historical experience existing prior to and continuing after the arrival of Europeans in the American continent.<sup>3</sup> Dissolved in a multicultural society that homogenizes all experiences and transforms diversity into exoticism, Native Americans see their struggle to affirm a story of continuance based on a specific relationship to the land transformed into a sanitized merchandise that denies the fact that they did not arrive just a few centuries back together with the other immigrants.

Native scholar Ted Jojola describes the “melting-pot theory” as “an attempt to conceptualize the American immigrant experience as a blending of cultures, with each one adding its own distinctive flavor to the brew.” And he criticizes this semi-official ideology, which met its heyday before the Civil Rights Movement in the 60’s, saying that, “the unspoken aspect of that theory, however, was that such a recipe was palatable only if everyone came out in the end behaving like Protestants” (87). Accordingly, in this view, change and adaptation are not invested with the desires of specific groups in dialogue with new situations, but groups are supposed to yield their ways in favor of a supposedly superior hegemonic Western culture.<sup>4</sup> Emphasizing their ability to survive in new environments while preserving important aspects of their identity, Jojola remarks that “sociological theories have made little or no accommodation with the success of Native people in adapting new concepts in order to strengthen older ones” (88). He attributes this theoretical shortcoming to the

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<sup>3</sup> Although there is enough evidence of cultural contact before the arrival of Columbus and the outset of the Imperial conquest of the Americas, these exchanges have remained limited locally and did not, by far, have the same impact over local communities. According to Forbes, “Columbus’ own accounts (as recorded by Bartolomé de las Casas) revealed that he had learned that he had been preceded in the Caribbean both by bearded white men and by black people. Still further, the Icelandic sagas showed that Norse and Celtic settlers had reached Greenland, Labrador, and Newfoundland some five hundred years before Columbus’ voyage and that American captives had been taken to Norway in about 1009. Later, Inuit captives were taken to Norway (circa 1420) and their watercraft were on display in a Norwegian cathedral for many years” (37). (See also King, *Truth About Stories* 69)

<sup>4</sup> What is meant by the hegemonic Western culture or Western thought—here and elsewhere in this text—is precisely that philosophy and historical practice whose roots are identified in the rhetoric of modernity and the Enlightenment as these “liberating philosophies” came to justify what Walter D. Mignolo calls the “logic of coloniality,” that is, “the colonial matrix of power” (*Latin America* 10). Mignolo identifies four domains through which this logic exerts control over human experience: “(1) the economic: appropriation of land, exploitation of labor, and control of finance; (2) the political: control of authority; (3) the civic: control of gender and sexuality; (4) the epistemic and the subjective/personal: control of knowledge and subjectivity” (11). In a similar vein, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno identify the Enlightenment as the dialectical ideology that ends up consuming rationality itself in order to justify the subjugation of dominated people(s) under a mass market which mercantilizes and homogenizes society through personalities and institutions, including education (see esp. “The Concept of Enlightenment” 1-34).

conceptual disjunction introduced between the “traditional” and the “here and now.” These terms are not in opposition since the “here and now” is simply the vantage point where new forms of the “traditional” are expressed. The ways the “traditional” and the “here and now” combine are evidently contextual and reflect the creative response of communities to new and ever changing demands.

Although the present situation of indigenous communities<sup>5</sup> vary enormously throughout the American continent, they share a common experience of dispossession, displacement, hunger, public policies of tribal termination and forced assimilation, if not downright physical extermination, debasement and loss of traditional knowledges, and social effacement. Whereas certain Indian communities have managed to protect many aspects of their culture, due to the early development of a wide web of trade relations with incoming groups or due to a harsher environment combined with the absence of valuable natural riches sought by greedy invaders, others have met with almost total, if not total, dispossession by losing not only their traditional livelihood but also by experiencing the interruption in the chain of knowledge transmission as a consequence of heavy losses either in battles and massacres or, particularly, to brought-in diseases and hunger. The collective colonial wound is very much alive and is addressed in virtually every work created by a Native American artist, probably as a way of informing the new generations about whom they are and ensuring continuity.

When I started teaching Native authors in undergraduate courses in Brazil I realized the need to create operational concepts that could elucidate the idea of self, creativity, and healing as performed in Native American Indian literature, in general, and, more specifically, in Native American Indian life writing. Undoubtedly, my apprehension of Native American literature is mediated by a myriad of texts from and about American Indian literature, as well as by all the other literary, theoretical, semiotic, and cultural texts that surround me. As I see it, learning how to identify the pragmatic uses of language is one of the foundations of my ongoing formation as a human being. I believe that learning to listen and to integrate those texts to one’s experience and semiotic readings of contemporary events and our relation to others is an immense contribution to the public debate concerning where we are, with whom we share this space, and how we can heal all our relations and ourselves.

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<sup>5</sup> At this point, I prefer to avoid referring to tribes to emphasize that indigenous communities can also refer to displaced people, such as urban Indians, Indians from tribes not officially acknowledged, and the mixedbloods of varied backgrounds.

Having said this, I must qualify this search. One of the cornerstones of the present work is to examine what concept of self seems to emerge from the life narrative of Leslie Marmon Silko. A major contemporary Native American author, Silko has been instrumental in creating a new understanding of Native American literary traditions in that she managed to skillfully weave epistemologically different ways of relating to the world into the narrative forms she uses while showing the reader new ways of reading them. In that way, not only has Silko brought traditional stories closer to a larger audience but she has also enlarged readers' capacity to deal with culturally different materials. Parallel to her fictional work, Silko has imprinted her marks in life writing and provided models that may guide readers into new ways through which selves can relate to a larger cultural context which includes the need for an interweaving of different epistemological systems, and an understanding of experiences common to indigenous peoples. Therefore, her life writing has been chosen because once again I find that it provide the right scaffolding that allows us to see how memory and desire may engender, from a native point of view, healing and survival.

My investigation is informed by a web of readings which I hope have helped to open myself to the possibilities of reading Silko's life writing. In no way will I present as a goal of this work to analyze the indigenous concept of self. And this for the following reasons: first, because to imply the existence of an "indigenous concept of self" is to adopt an essentialist stance on indigenous peoples, which is at the countercurrent of this work. Second, because pretending it can be done from the outside would mean to adopt a rigid stance that prevents the delicacy of listening. As Owens, King, Vizenor, Silko, Sarris, and others have been telling us, the Indian self is an imperialist construct that denies authenticity to real Indian lives. Speaking about the dangers of rigid identity borders that thwart the emergence of singularities and tend too soon to establish patterns of inclusion and exclusion, François Laplantine reminds us that "identity is together with ethnicity an ideological production that has contributed to support colonial anthropology. But it has no operational reality. It falsifies more than it clarifies."<sup>6</sup> In this sense, very often the performative enunciation of identity incurs into two major problems, essentialism and dogmatism. The consequences of the former is a blindness to the multiplicity of the real and its fluidity (hybridity), whereas the latter entices a radicalism of the type "us and them", whose political consequences are widely seen today in

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<sup>6</sup> "L'identité est avec l'ethnicité une production idéologique qu'a contribué à cautionner l'anthropologie coloniale. Mais elle n'a aucune réalité opératoire. Elle dissimule plus qu'elle n'éclaire" (18). My translation.

terror and anti-terror wars around the planet.<sup>7</sup> In a series of essays where he aims at explaining his theory of complexity, Edgar Morin warns us against the narrowing effected by closed system theories which exclude any element that might indicate the presence of contradiction, paradox, unpredictability, and chance for the sake of a unified concept. According to him, “the concept of open system has a paradigmatic value. As Maruyama observes, to conceive of any object and entity as closed implies a classificatory, analytical, reductionist worldview within a unilinear causality.”<sup>8</sup> He defends the analysis of realities not as a series of essences but as a set of relations endowed with certain autonomy (49). Identities cannot be defined from the outside anymore than they can be instituted by governmental tribal rolls.<sup>9</sup> Rather, they are constituted inside communities that share traditions, a common experience, and long-held relationships. In this sense, identities are connected to a context which defines them and which they help define. The challenge is neither to define who is Indian and who is not, nor to simply counter the homogenizing representation of identity under an outside essentialist label that precludes different values, traditions, epistemologies, discourses etc, but to determine the ethic responsibilities in relation to communities and the pathways towards a desired communality.

The term “Indian”<sup>10</sup> with all its historical inaccuracy and its obvious lack of referent denotes, nevertheless, a whole set of cultural and historical specificities, including different

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<sup>7</sup> This is not to deny the importance of affirming identity or belonging, especially as it refers to rights over land, including sovereignty and natural resources, and, not least, over bodies. As Audra Simpson affirms: “There is no single, irreducible way of ‘being’ Indian nor of ‘being understood’ as an Indian, but these very values do matter, and they matter not only to the state, but to Indian peoples themselves” (481).

<sup>8</sup> “O conceito de sistema aberto tem valor paradigmático. Como o observa Maruyama\* conceber todo objeto e entidade como fechado implica uma visão de mundo classificadora, analítica, reducionista, numa causalidade unilinear” (23). My translation. \*[Maruyama, M. *Paradigmatology, and its Application to Cross-disciplinary, Cross-professional and Cross-cultural Communication*. Cybernetika, 17, 1974.],

<sup>9</sup> Tribal rolls are the official records with the names of tribal members at the time of treaty making, which have been used to define the legal status of Native Americans. Conspicuously absent from this system are those Indians whose tribes never signed any treaty with the Federal Government of the United States, nor members who in one period or another circumvented the process for several reasons, such as avoiding the label “Indian” and its stigma or, more obviously, to escape being sent to boarding schools away from their families (See Sequoya-Magdaleno)

<sup>10</sup> Michael Dorris points out that the Native peoples who inhabited the region of North America by the time of Columbus’ voyages were in no way homogeneous. In fact, as compared to Europe “by any criterion—genetic, linguistic, social, or political—,” Native American tribes were “mightily heterogeneous.” See also Sarris *Keeping* 91.



forms of engagement with the self. According to Foucault's last studies,<sup>11</sup> Western philosophy has placed a great weight on the Delphic precept "know thyself," detaching it from a larger Greek and Roman history of the care of the self. Although very important in the Platonic discourse, the Delphic precept was in fact subordinated to the idea of the care of the self, which met its golden age in the first two centuries of this era. It is only later, by a series of displacements, that the idea of knowing oneself will take precedence over its original purpose of the care of the self. In that way, as the Roman Catholic Church developed and established its core doctrine, the tradition of self-examination assumes a central role as a search for the real motivations behind actions, desires, and thoughts so as to determine whether they were truly originated in God's will or were instilled in the mind and/or the body by the devil. Consequently, knowledge of the self was gradually associated with mechanisms of repression, control, and guilt. Heir to this formation, our Western human sciences evince a psychologizing bias, as the knowledge of the individual becomes the founding stone.<sup>12</sup> In his study, however, Foucault emphasizes that different cultures engage differently with the self. He demonstrates how in the period studied by him, the care of the self along with a series of technologies of the self, aimed at preparing the individual to act correctly and to practice the truth of the self. Consequently, emphasis lied not on individual psychology but on political action, that is, knowing one's position and acting accordingly, be it either as a citizen, a father, or a friend. In the same way, my concern is to search in the life narrative of Leslie Marmon Silko the elements that she brings to the construction of the self, her purpose in doing that, and what it is that she actually ends doing.

Composing a life through writing implies selecting the appropriate stories that will add significance to one's sense of self. Life stories reveal a desire to order events, to understand motivations, to heal the past, to provide models for future generations, to build community, to find pathways to an envisioned, even if provisional, changing world. Making sense of lived experience depends on how the telling of one's life is constructed through language. Therefore, decisions relating to beginnings, conceptualizations of the self, the selection of certain events in opposition to others, or the representativeness of an experience can only be made respecting a delicate balance between self and Other, cultural values and tensions within society, personal and collective stories, and the appropriate language to express this life.

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<sup>11</sup> See Foucault. *A Hermenêutica do Sujeito*.

<sup>12</sup> In our own time, this tendency pushes to the limits of biology as scientists try to discover the source of human thinking and emotions, the core of the self, as it were, in brain cells.

Although there is not an Indian culture any more than there is the Indian, Native American life stories tend to differ greatly in approach from Western autobiographies.<sup>13</sup> As Paul John Eakin justly observes, readers are socialized to expect certain identity narrative practices, and may not understand the assumptions underlying a different practice. In his words, “[a]rmed with our own notions of what a ‘life per se’ is, what ‘a story of individuation is,’ we may not necessarily recognize another culture’s practice of identity narration as such when we encounter it” (*How* 74). Indeed, in most Native American Indian autobiographical accounts, one may notice a blurring of generic boundaries, through which poetry, fiction and stories related to myth, family, politics, history, prophesy, jokes, particular words, and landscape, to name a few, blend into the narrative.<sup>14</sup> Susanna Egan discusses the personal and generic encounters that fuel life writing as dialogical, which she defines thus:

Interactions among people and among genres are not simply dialogues because they involve pluralities but are often also dialogic — in terms of their dynamic and reciprocal relations between text and context; their revelation of the difference between self and other; the contestatory nature of many of these relationships; the frequent recognition and destabilizing of power relations; the common move toward decentered heterogeneity; the omnivorous use of genres to subvert or destabilize each other; and, perhaps most important, the

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<sup>13</sup> Even if, in its broad definition, the term autobiography refers to a life narrative performed by the self, it is mostly used here to refer to a certain canonical practice in the Western history of life writing which has emphasized the individuality and autonomy of the self. In contrast, the terms life stories or life writing is preferred when referring to Native American Indian life narratives. However, the term autobiography is too widespread to make such a distinction totally effective. Most importantly, however, autobiographical writing is extremely challenging in terms of genre, because they cannot be self-contained, but must incorporate ever-larger contexts within its form as writers engage with the world around and inside them. My inclination for one term or the other is based on the fact that, despite its changing nature, the genre of autobiography in the Western world has a relatively established tradition, whereas Native Americans have clearly always had an agenda of their own when recounting their lives. When I say agenda, I mean not only the pragmatic purposes involved in their telling but also their own ways of doing so. As such, Native American life writing, as Indian writing in general, is profoundly nurtured by oral contexts and is mostly a product of the contact zone. (See also Sidonie Smith 3.)

<sup>14</sup> In fact, the first autobiographies by Native Americans were written with the help of amanuenses. Recently, there is an upsurge of Indian writing, including autobiographical accounts. LeAnne Howe makes this point patent when she humorously states that “[c]urrently there are over two million American Indians in the United States, and most of these people, give or take a thousand, are writing stories. The first thing you may think is: LeAnne you maniac, not every Indian in America is writing a book. I know it; some are making movies, or music videos for MTV” (46). And she concludes: “Every Indian I meet is writing a story” (46).

recognition that human beings exist within a hierarchy of languages or ideological discourses. (23)

This definition opens up new analytical possibilities, as it permits a broader vision of dialogue which incorporates power relations determining the relationships that define the context beyond the text itself. And Egan continues by asserting that the elements and the explicitness of this dialogue vary greatly among different autobiographies. Contemporary autobiographical writing constantly probes into the expressive means available. Native American autobiographical writing derives much of their design from oral narratives and their emphasis on the pragmatic function of using stories to relate to their larger history. In fact, as James Ruppert brilliantly demonstrated in his *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*, American Indian storytelling evinces a different epistemological approach, which does not rely so much on motivation and psychological justification, as seen in the Western paradigmatic novel, but on narratives that require individuals to “examine themselves to see how they fit in to the changing tribal web while the community examines them to see what their role will be” (28). Consequently, storytelling creates social cohesion and a future, which is not defined in terms of the individual but of the Other. As author LeAnne Howe explains in her essay “The Story of America: A Tribalography:”

Native stories, no matter what form they take (novel, poem, drama, memoir, film, history), seem to pull all elements together of the storyteller’s tribe, meaning the people, the land, and multiple characters and all their manifestations and revelations, and connect these in past, present, and future milieus (present and future milieus mean non-Indians). (42)

As she makes it clear, human survival depends on effectively relating to everything that surrounds us from history to politics, from land to ecology, from Indian to non-Indian cultures. Therefore, American Indian narratives must reassess the past with all its pain to construct a desired future. Native life writing shares with other Native American Indian forms of storytelling the embedding of multiple narratives of landscape and place, relationship with the living world, tribal history, and imagination, sometimes incorporating pictures and drawings. What LeAnne Howe says about Navajo author Irvin Morris, whom she uses to illustrate her concept of tribalography, can be extended to most Native American storytellers: “the stories he is telling not only have been collected by his people but are about his journey

through his people's experience. In essence, he is saying identity is determined by his history and the future" (43).

Telling one's life, therefore, is not a matter of dates and arrangement of special landmarks on a linear timeline but of how stories can be interwoven to create pathways to a collective future. Even though many of these accounts are filled with stories of loss, dispossession, grief, and injustice, they all seem to emphasize continuity, change, circularity, and hope. In this context, the future is a reminder that survival depends on changing, that is, on reading tradition so that it can inform the reader/listener of his or her place in new contexts. Tradition, as Native movements of resistance remind us, does not belong to museums and anthropological collections, which in a way presuppose the disappearance of the Native agent.<sup>15</sup> Or, in an analogous movement, myths and other Native stories should not be frozen in anthropological compilations but must be seen as continuing "signs of selective and strategic resistance" (Coombes 107) by peoples who are fighting for self-determination.

If, on the one hand, Native American novels are considered an emergent literature in contemporary America, with the general agreement that the Native American Renaissance can be dated back to the publication of N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* in 1968, on the other, Native American life writing provides a privileged perspective on how this "new" literature establishes continuity to intellectual indigenous practices. That Native American novels and other written narrative forms derive much of their strength from a rich tradition of oral and nonfictional written texts is a commonplace observation. However, much ground still has to be covered to demonstrate how these forms interact and nourish one another.<sup>16</sup> In the

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<sup>15</sup> Annie E. Coombes calls this phenomenon, which she identifies in the museological practices of recent exhibitions aiming at representing cultural contact between non-Western peoples and the Western world, "the 'disappearing world' syndrome" (106), since these people's ongoing political and social struggle are silenced under a frame that relegates the producers of the exhibited indigenous material culture to a decaying past.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Warrior calls attention to the role nonfiction has played in "the enterprise of Native intellectual development" (xiv). According to him, criticism on Native writing should be more attentive to how American Indians have been addressing situations concerning their communities, and people. Although Momaday's novel represents a watershed in terms of visibility by the academia and inaugurated an upsurge of Native American writing, he points to the danger of failing to consider the context in which it occurs, namely, the political struggles of the 1970s, but mostly, the complexity of Native writing already existing at that time, including more than two centuries of clergy-based literacy, journalistic practice (the first edition of the bilingual *Cherokee Phoenix* dates back to 1828), and an extensive body of life-writing, histories, novels, and political writing, such as the Osage Nation's 1881 Constitution. Robert Dale Parker emphasizes that Native scholarship also covers a wide range of texts written or recorded at large by the anthropologic and linguistic endeavor. What both writers emphasize is the need to place Native studies in its wider context in

field of literary studies, this process only started to be explored with the publication in 1977 of Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony*, which, according to Catherine Rainwater, was:

the first work to address most deliberately the difficulties inherent in cross-cultural interpretation and to foreground, as a part of its actual storyline, an array of interpretative strategies. Unlike Welch and Momaday (in his first novel, at least), Silko has painstakingly made her novel accessible to the non-Indian reader. Many Indian writers (perhaps even Momaday in his second novel) have since followed her example of metatextuality, instructing the reader in Native American history and culture, and in how to interpret the nonwestern components of their narratives. (11)

As it is clear from this quotation, Native American storytellers have striven to ascribe a position to implied readers, indigenous and non-indigenous, by constantly shifting the focus from one cultural perspective to another and by the bicultural competence required of their readers. This entails making the Indian reader acquainted with Western forms of narrative and its emphasis on the psychological self, on the one hand, and non-Indian readers with Indian ways of constructing the narrative and knowing the world, on the other. In his discussion of the way Native American texts create this double code, James Ruppert asserts that "Native writers encourage implied readers to enter into conversations with which they are familiar and those with which they are not" (10), implying therewith that readers must learn new ways of making sense of the world. In this process, he explains, "no one ever has the last word. Each textual utterance awaits response and interpretation." (10) According to him, this cultural dialogue implies not only the ways different audiences make meaning of the world but also "the social and cultural subjects delineated" (10). In other words, mediation aims at the double purpose of re-educating readers to become competent in different ways of knowing and interpreting the world and, as a consequence, of changing the readers.

Evidently not every Native American novel displays this "pedagogic" or mediative character, especially considering the vast contemporary production of written stories and the fact that many of these stories are being written for a specific audience, that is, they privilege the Indian audience without providing the "scaffolding" that non-Indian readers would need were they to fulfill the requirements demanded from implied readers. In great part, however, Native American novels present this character of mediation for two main reasons: genre and

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order to examine how it has been addressing its own issues, focusing on social and intellectual concerns, instead of subduing Native writing to the interests of literary studies.

heritage. As a Western discursive mode, the novel follows, in generic terms, the psychological development of a central character, from a state of personal disintegration or alienation to a greater understanding of his or her predicament. Therefore, despite creating variations on the genre, Native American Indian writers do evoke narrative expectations on their readers associated to the structure of the novel. Second, because Native American novelists are bicultural, and often mixedbloods, they strive to find ways to open up new possibilities of dialogue and create survival. In this case, survival means remembering and finding alternatives to assert identity. As Gerald Vizenor (Ojibwe) says, “Tribal imagination, experience, and remembrance are the real landscapes in the literature of this nation; discoveries and dominance are silence”<sup>17</sup> (qtd. in Jaskoski *Early* x<sup>18</sup>). In other words, assimilation of new forms does not imply deculturation but incorporation of new tools to assert cultural dynamism and control of expressive means to subvert the domination imposed on tribal peoples. We must bear in mind that whereas novel writing is a product of contact, Native American intellectual tradition is much older than the presence of Europeans in the American continent. Despite wide evidence provided by other fields of knowledge, such as history and anthropology, Native American literary scholars still meet with great resistance when claiming the presence of a critical and theoretical dimension in Native American oral tradition.<sup>19</sup>

The example of Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony* can be taken here as paradigmatic in that, as G. Thomas Couser puts it, it “is freer of nostalgia for a pure racial or ethnic past”, even as it displays a traditional or “return-to-roots” form (“Oppression” 116). In fact, he goes on,

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<sup>17</sup> Vizenor, Gerald. *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994. 10.

<sup>18</sup> In this dissertation I have used the MLA system of quoting and making references (see Gibaldi). All works cited are to be found in the References section at the end of this work. However, there is an exception to this procedure. Sometimes I have chosen quotations which already contain other quotations. There are two reasons to do that. One is that the quote-within-quote might come from authors and/or works which were inaccessible to me, but whose contribution I consider relevant, nevertheless. Another reason I have to quote second-hand, as it were, is that sometimes I find the context of the original quote pertinent to my purposes. In such case, quote and quote-within-quote form an ensemble, because they carry an argument and its commentary, which are both brought to bear weight in my own text. Although these quotes-within-quotes are not conventionally included in the references, obliging the interested reader to look for two sources instead of only one, I have opted for an unusual practice here, namely: I have included the original reference of those quotes-within-quotes in the footnotes to facilitate access to them. In doing this, I kept the original format of the references as they appeared in my sources.

<sup>19</sup> For a fruitful discussion, see Teuton and Mackay.

Silko clearly affirms the need to adapt tradition to contemporary circumstances and to seek healthy accommodation between indigenous and Western cultures—in her choice of a mixedblood protagonist, in the symbolism of the mixed-breed cattle, and through Betonie’s unorthodox curing of Tayo. In various ways, she implies that the community cannot seek refuge in traditional customs and values. (116-117)

The weaving of different epistemological forms is thematized in the novel in the form of the mixedblood, the protagonist who must come to terms with his own identity and learn how to deal with the world by untangling stories and creating a healthy pattern which permits him to go beyond victimization or denial of the elements of tradition that can bring cure. Indeed, this novel is also paradigmatic insofar as it was the first to provide the vocabulary with which to think the relation between self and Other in the specific terms of the Native American experience. Knowing one’s place in the world and knowing how to live the right stories is the way of healing “witchery,” that is, the destructive forces that threaten to unbalance the self and the world. A great number of American Indian novels deal with this aspect of healing, this rediscovery of one’s roots as continuation in and adaptation to contemporary society.

At this point, it is interesting to ponder what kind of results this paradigmatic pattern can bring to real twentieth century readers. In other words, it is legitimate to test the healing power of these performative acts—the novels—in another form of creative act: the autobiography as “an act of self-construction, of poiesis that creates a new self in the midst of discovering it” (Freeman, “Culture” 109). If Indians use stories to heal displacement, dispossession, and unbalance at the different levels—for Western thinking—of the mythic, symbolic, physical, spiritual, psychological, political, temporal, or spatial world, by blurring genres and resorting to different epistemologies, the same strategies can be noticed in the way many of these writers construct their own lives through language.

In fact, the shifting from novels to autobiographical writing in Native American literature is not simply a matter of blurring the limits of genres, but of investigating how much the self is shaped by stories, that is to say, by language. The process of shaping one’s identity through collective stories and obliterating the clear-cut margins between the fictitious and the real has been used as not only a structuring device but also it has also been thematized by some American Indian writers. In this thesis, I discuss healing—the present act of reifying memory through desire in order to ensure survival—in the autobiographical

work of a contemporary prominent American Indian storyteller: Leslie Marmon Silko. Actually, Silko's life writing is not—strictly speaking—an “autobiography,” as it includes fictional stories at its core. As Susanna Egan remarks, “experience generates appropriate modes of representation” as it meets uncharted territory. “So,” she continues, “the question now is not what we may allow [in terms of the delimitations of the autobiographical genre] but what it is that autobiographers are doing in times that keep on changing” (16).

Because Native American autobiographical writings look into the ways stories and traditional epistemologies may reconstruct selves broken by the continuing displacement brought about by colonization and suggest new insights into the nature and ways of knowing and relating to the self and Other, they provide healing at different levels which go beyond an individualistic and essentialist view of the self.

Although there is an impressive body of critical work exploring these multiple sources in Native American fictional writing, still very little has been researched in the context of Native American autobiographical writings concerning how a narrative poetics of the self and a collectivity interact, what status this narrating self assumes, what is represented, which literary conventions are used, and, not least, what is the underlying conception of the self postulated by the text.

Because Native lives are in one way or another affected by a sense of “before” and “after” with profound implications for the Native self's construction of identity, many Native writers use stories to address issues related to a colonial relationship that continues to this day since conquest. This process of effacement of the Indian subject occurs through refutation or inhibition of local production of knowledge, limited or no access to traditional lands and natural resources, prohibition of religious ceremonies and traditional family and political forms of organization, marginalization of tribal languages and rituals, rejection of legal complaints (especially those related to broken treaties and/or tribal recognition), and exclusion from the wider economy. Considering the interweaving of stories in “the long ago story,” indigenous autobiographies are not different from other indigenous writings in the sense that what is at stake in them is how the person perceives and relates to their environment, meaning, in this case, the Other, which is defined by Freeman as “whatever is outside the self—whether people, nature, art, God, or what have you—that enters, inspirationally into the construction [of the self]” (“Culture” 113). More specifically, in indigenous autobiographical writing, this dialogical relation with the Other comprises the construction of self in a dynamic exchange with other selves, different systems of knowledge, and an intricate story of cultural relations.



In order to investigate how Native American life writing can provide healing by evincing a different understanding of self and its relation to the Other, I proceed to clarify a set of theoretical assumptions that bear weight on Native American studies. Reading Native American literature without considering that it comes down from a long tradition that is much older than the European presence in this continent would be misleading since it bears connections to epistemologies that are alien to most Western readers. This is not to say that it cannot be understood by non-Indians, which would be in contradiction to its mediation character, but simply that, to be fully appreciated, the reader is required to learn different ways of reading and relating to the surrounding world. Thus, I draw much from Native American sources in terms both of what they clarify in epistemological terms and of the pragmatic consequences that a critical theory has on Native and non-Native lives. As this approach is necessarily comparative, before investigating the way Native Americans tend to relate to concepts such as identity, community, healing, writing, orality, autobiography, time, and place, I evoke how these terms have been generally understood in Western society, focusing on the pragmatic consequences that such a different understanding have had on Native peoples. To keep the discussion grounded, I recur many times to examples taken from Native essays, autobiographies, novels, and short stories, thus blending fictional and non-fictional discourses. My point is that, despite belonging to different (Western) genres, all of them point to actual concerns both inside and outside Native communities. Although Native Americans are throughout assertive of the diversity of their cultural traditions, my aim is to examine general tendencies without ever reaching for closed conclusions. In this sense, it would seem that Vine Deloria, Jr. and Edgar Morin would be in accordance: an open system that does not exclude data and remains provisional, tentative, is most likely to contribute to our knowledge of the possibilities of the world. Thus, if the work of Leslie Marmon Silko, which I examine more carefully at the end of the discussion, remains throughout singular as Silko's artistry and Laguna positionality are unique, I hope it becomes clear that other Native American Indian writers are also expressing in their own terms an alternative to the Western hegemonic concept of self that, if heeded, can bring healing.

With this, I propose in Chapter One, "Placing the Warp: Autobiography and Healing", a discussion of current theories of the self and the autobiographical genre, allied to a critical dialogue with thematic and structural aspects of Native American Indian autobiographies and their notion of healing. The very division into Indian and non-Indian autobiographical traditions requires a working definition of cultural identity allied to the specificity of the historical experience of the Indian and/or the Indian mixedblood in America. Next, I define the concept of healing as it bears upon Native American storytelling and its function at the level

of community. In this sense, healing is not so much grounded on biology, but on one's capacity to build harmonious relations to the surrounding world through language and the system of values it carries.

Chapter Two, "Preparing the Shuttle: Tradition and Renewal", examines how the categories of memory and desire, translated here in the idea of healing, can be useful as an analytical tool which can give us new insights not only as a theme but also in the way the narrative is structured. In order to do that, I examine the way time has been conceived in the West until it is finally transformed into an abstract category embedded in the ideology of progress. Then I discuss how Native American reexaminations of the past are grounded on a different epistemology, rather than simply a different perspective within the same paradigm. Part of this difference is a result of the fact that American Indian traditions tend to predicate discourse on space rather than on time. In this sense, space is where all relations *are occurring now*. Subsequently, based on Italian feminist Adriana Cavarero, I stress the importance of life writing as a way of defining one's singularity not as exceptional, but as a unique story that desires to be told.

If we consider autobiographical writing as referring to temporal processes experienced by a living human being, it comes to reason that this human being is embodied in a physical body, in a natural and social environment, and in a complex network of textual signifiers. Therefore, the autobiographical self is embedded in a complex set of relationships shaped by tradition (memory) and renewal (desire) with which he or she dialogues as an individual, as a social body, and as a textual body.

Chapter Three, "Weaving Stories: Leslie Marmon Silko," contemplates the autobiographical narrative of Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko, *Storyteller* (1981). I begin the discussion by pointing out aspects of her oeuvre concerning themes, strategies, and an overall discerned intentionality. This overview of the fictional and nonfictional work serves the purpose of highlighting how Silko works out in her life writing her singularity as a Native American grounded on a different history, epistemology, and set of relationships to the surrounding world.



## CHAPTER ONE

# **P**LACING THE WARP: AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND HEALING

I opened my old composition book and lit another of my mother's cigarettes. MY LIFE, printed high and centered on the page. For a moment I was surprised by the ambition, underlined and announced. I spent my life dreaming words into place, worrying over the stories they held, and here my mother had taken up the pen as naturally as the needle or the brush. Just another craft, without a question of skill or training, never thinking of precedent or earning her art, thrusting her story to win and hold her reader.

— Betty Louise Bell, *Faces on the Moon*

... being American Indian means not fitting a definition or idea about Indianness, but experiencing meaning in the world from a particular type of consciousness, a consciousness with a creative cognitive dissonance that arises from social positionality

— Anne Waters, *American Indian Thought*

In her first full bloom novel, Betty Louise Bell's first person narrator Lucie is called back into her childhood and her decisive flight from its misery after her mother's intrusive stroke. During her mother's comma at the hospital, she reassesses the pain that the relationship with her mother and with a long chain of women's storytelling has always meant to her and decides to enjoy her freedom to be gained from her mother's imminent death. The moment she finds the few pages containing her mother's handwriting version of her life is also the moment when she learns about her mother's death. Her first reaction to the finding is that of unabridged anger, then scorn for this last act of presumptuousness. Although readers are never allowed to glance into those few pages, Lucie is struck to find there stories she never heard at the kitchen table, stories that held all the others together. As she sits on the couch, trying to understand her mother's life, abandonment and poverty, and finally the strength of that woman who strove on and cared for others with such little means to hold even herself, she cannot help but remember the old voices:

*"You do the right thing," my mother wrote.*

*"Do right," Auney said.*

*"Don't wash your dirty linen in public," Lizzie warned. "Ever' story ain't for repeating. A body don't need to tell ever thing he knowed." (184)*

Just before she turns to arrange her mother's funeral and take her life back, she burns the little notebook containing the beginning of her first novel and her mother's life history. Healed, she states simply, "I did not hate her then" (184).

Although the reason that led her mother to write those few pages is not exactly known, Lucie's reaction suggests that it is part of a long chain of storytelling, another piece to fill the puzzle that the women in the protagonist's life have been spinning throughout the years, as each new recounting adds one more detail to the whole, revealing motivations, an emotion up until then undetected, a new understanding of the past. However, the revelation accomplishes the double purpose of healing Lucie's relationship with her mother and of helping her recognize her place in that chain of displaced and abused lives. Later, as the narrator goes through the roles of Cherokee members to find her grandmother's register, she assumes the role of an "Indian with a pen", fighting no more as Quanah Parker, the combatant Indian hero of her childhood, but as a rectifier of the stories that have prevented her from accepting her own (collective) history.

What seems certain is that the undisclosed life narrative of her mother proves to be a turning point in the life of the protagonist, whose life from the moment she left her mother's house until her return is moved by denial and by an attempt to overcome the barren means of her material, intellectual, and emotional development. Does this turning point signal an emotional healing? If so, can it be that a life history has the power to heal others? If the intuitive answer is affirmative, the question of how this can possibly be done remains to be explored.

In the first section of this chapter, "Autobiography: 'The Necessary Act,'" I explore autobiographical writing as a Western genre and some of the developments of the genre in general. My idea is not so much to revise the history of autobiography since the powerful founding stone placed by St. Augustine up to present times, but to explore how main instances of autobiographical writing have posed different problems for our reading of them. Deceptively simple as a genre, autobiographies probe into the limits of representation and

the proper language to do so. As such it gets actualized in many different ways following not a single tradition but acquiring new and puzzling contours as times and context change.

The second section of the chapter, “Native American Autobiography: ‘A Long Ago History,’” examines life writing from the point of view of the Native American context. Initially fostered as a pious demand, Native life writing was from the beginning equally nurtured by Native cultural forms of speaking about the self. Starting with language problems posed by the exchange between writer and teller, these narratives are further complicated by the complexity of cultural contact, and the different pragmatic function given to them by all the parties involved in the process as they address local concerns and reflect changing sensibilities. In this context, it is important to see how Native American life writers incorporate their practice in a Native context, and together with it, propose new forms of conceiving the self.

Addressing the question of “a particular type of consciousness, a consciousness with a creative cognitive dissonance that arises from social positionality” (Waters “Introduction” xxix) is of paramount importance in the discussion of Native American life writing, since the qualifying term “Native American” denotes inclusion in a hardly definable community as it moves and changes its borders. The intricacies of “Indianness” in the United States have reached the courts as inalienable rights over tribal membership, land and water tenure, and personal identity are in dispute. The question of identity is examined carefully in the third section of this chapter, “unassimilated Identities and Otherness,” not with the intention of finding a neat definition or even an operational concept but rather to put in evidence the terms with which Native Americans have been discussing their understanding of belonging. At stake are the collective values that hold them together, or the consequences at the collective and individual level of their breaking apart. Susanna Egan gives the clue when she retrieves “Jean Starobinski’s point that crisis is seminal for autobiography” (4). Whether the “crisis” is lived within the individual or perceived at the level of community, life writing addresses this crisis and engages in ways to deal with it, hopefully to attempt some sort of healing.

Although the word “healing” is mostly used in the Western world to refer to the reestablishment of bodily health, Native Americans often use the term to refer to the achievement of a sense of balance both internal and external. The activity of healing at all levels is a common practice in Native American contexts and acquires specific contours in storytelling in general and life stories as they are addressed here. If crisis is at the roots of all life writing, solutions are evidently sought in the elements that compose the life of any

autobiographer as his or her life demands some sort of engagement with his or her environment, understood here in its widest sense. Therefore, in the fourth section, "Healing: *'Logos Boethós,'*" I will discuss how Native American autobiographies retrieve communal values as they actualize them, which might be expressed by Foucault's use of the term "*lógos boethós,*" that is, that knowledge coming to help the self when it is in danger or in crisis.<sup>20</sup> Although it issues from an utterly different philosophical tradition, this term provides some elements, to which others are added, which can guide our understanding of how stories can heal.

### **AUTOBIOGRAPHY: "THE NECESSARY ACT"**

Trying to make sense of lived experience, we turn stories about our lives over and over in our heads, if not directly out loud to some speaking partner. The way these stories are constructed vary enormously according to the context, that is, according to the linguistic pragmatic rules that inform our social beings about what can be said, to whom, when, and how it can be said. Fugitives tell their tales of escape, mothers recount their feelings at childbirth, fishermen excite their interlocutors with the intricacies of their relationship to sea, water, and fish, corrupt white collars boast over their unearned money, adolescents spend hours relating to their friends the unending rosary of "I said", "then he said", and "she said", popular stars expose their intimate moments before large audiences, hunters recount how they found their game. Consciously or unconsciously the stories we tell try to reach for some meaning, some understanding of our actions, feelings, or place among others. By bits and pieces they directly or indirectly go through our represented identity, even if containing unstable and contradictory elements. James Olney refers to what he calls "the narrative imperative" as an unavoidable impulse that urges human beings to transform experience into language: "to live a life [is] not enough; it must be narrated, even compulsively, obsessively narrated" (10)

In extreme cases, where the sense of self is seriously endangered, such as in cases of severe bodily impairment, child abuse, or mental unbalance, these sufferings are accompanied by an utter inability to tell one's own stories. Many people never find the voice

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<sup>20</sup> *Hermenêutica* 391.

with which to tell their (representative) tale. Talking about the universality of narrative as a general human faculty to translate experience into telling and admitting that this human-specific capacity "entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct and even specifically political implications" (ix), Hayden White proposes that

far from being one code among many that a culture may utilize for endowing experience with meaning, narrative is a meta-code, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality may be transmitted. Arising, as Barthes said, between our experience of the world and our efforts to describe that experience in language, narrative "ceaselessly substitutes meaning for straightforward copy of the events recounted."<sup>21</sup> And it would follow that the absence of narrative capacity or a refusal of narrative indicates an absence or refusal of meaning itself. (1-2)

Although he is interested in the discursive formation of historiographical writing that tended traditionally, with distinguished exceptions, to obliterate the distinction between a historical discourse that narrates and a discourse that narrativizes,<sup>22</sup> in this passage, Hayden White emphasizes that, to be shared through language, all experience must be mediated by narrative. In this act of translation from event to language meaning is given, the very material that forms the "core" of an experience is transformed into narrative with some degree of illusionary coherence.

Addressing the pervasiveness of storytelling in all cultures and the possible reasons why we need so many stories repeatedly, J. Hillis Miller suggests that it

could be that we always need more stories because in some way they do not satisfy. Stories, however perfectly conceived and powerfully written, however moving, do not accomplish successfully their allotted function. Each story and each repetition of it leaves some uncertainty or contains some loose end unraveling its effect, according to an implacable law that is not so much psychological or social as linguistic. This necessary incompleteness means that

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<sup>21</sup> Barthes, Roland. "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives." *Image, Music, Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. p. 79

<sup>22</sup> This distinction that Hayden White identifies in historiographical discourse corresponds roughly to Henry James' traditional differentiation between telling (diegesis, or mediated presentation) in fictional narrative and showing (mimesis, or unmediated presentation), respectively, although with completely different ontological status.

no story fulfills perfectly, once and for all, its functions of ordering and confirming. (72)

Thus, storytelling is an attempt to imprint a certain order in an otherwise unordered world. Since language can never entirely reach a definite reality outside the story and like a mirror reflects while it misses the reality of the reflected world, stories are never complete in themselves, but must be amended, expanded, deconstructed, explained to generate further meaning. Most importantly, however, he emphasizes the dependence of narratives on time, since language (and our own lives) requires that any assertion be temporally defined. Quoting Paul de Man, he says that "the paradigm for all texts consists of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction"<sup>23</sup> (76). In other words, all narratives represent processes, the very transformation through time which characterizes human life.

In the strict sense, not all life accounts are autobiographies. Although the first registers of the word "autobiography" in German and in English date back to the late eighteenth century, where it soon converged with the idea of the self-conscious "Enlightened individual,"<sup>24</sup> as a literary discursive genre, autobiographical writing has a much longer history in the Western world. The recognition of autobiography as a literary discourse begins with the publication of a series of writings by Philippe Lejeune, in France, and Georg Misch, Georges Gusdorf, William Spengemann, and Roy Pascal, in the 1960s in the United States (Wong 125). This theoretical construct established a certain number of parameters and characteristics, together with *a certain corpus that served these studies*. The history of Western autobiography entails, however, shifting expectations, especially as the status of the founding pronoun of autobiography becomes more and more elusive. Indeed, if, as Olney claims, "the narrative imperative across the centuries seems clear enough," then, he continues, "there remains the question of how a life is to be narrated" (10).

In his major study of the shifts that took place in autobiographical writing from St. Augustine's exemplary *Confessions* passing through Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* up to Samuel Beckett's *Company*, James Olney identifies

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<sup>23</sup> de Man, Paul. *Allegories of reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. 205

<sup>24</sup> In their guide *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain that the first time the term appears in English is in a preface to a collection of poems by Ann Yearsley, although, tellingly, many authors still cite poet Robert Southey's use in 1809. Actually, the term was registered in many different instances in the late eighteenth century without indications that one use has influenced another (2). What is undisputed is the fact that it refers to what up until then was called a memoir or confession. (See also Swann and Krupat x)



a gradual alteration—an evolution or devolution as one may prefer—in the nature of life-writing or autobiography over the past sixteen centuries, moving from a focus on “bios,” or the course of a life-time, to focus on “autos,” the self writing and being written; and this shift, which one sees occurring unaware in Rousseau to become finally established and pervasive in the twentieth century, has introduced a number of narrative dilemmas requiring different strategies on the writers’ part. (xv)

The importance of these canonical autobiographies, says Olney quoting Beckett on Rousseau, resides not so much in their success but on the fact that they failed “as none before [them] dared to fail, and, then, to close out the possibility of anyone surpassing [them] by failing better or worse or in a new way” (417). Before examining the thread connecting these writers, two observations about Olney’s approach to autobiography must be made. First, he opts for reducing theoretical criticism of autobiography to the minimum, thrusting the works themselves to illuminate their own practice. Contrasting what the autobiographer says he intends to do and what he has actually done, or failed to do, to use Olney’s term, highlights the difficulties encountered by each one in his writing. As the editor of an early book containing the founding essays dedicated to autobiographical writing, Olney is well aware of the contributions of critical criticism and theory to our apprehension of life writing in these last decades. However, he claims that since the publication of his previous book on the subject twenty-five years before “there has been a flood of publications on autobiography, books and articles that have undoubtedly increased and sharpened our understanding of this mode of writing but that have also, to a degree, fixed it in a place as a literary genre with rules, conventions, expectations” (xv). Referring to St. Augustine, for example, he finds that there is enough theory in the work itself to sustain a deep analysis. Autobiography is a very sensitive genre because—and here comes Olney’s second point—“the life-writing project is an all-encompassing endeavor” (xiv). It goes through the whole work of a lifetime, “for each of these takes place in a much larger history and in a vast network of texts without which we cannot understand what may admittedly be, in each case, the central piece of life-writing” (xiv). Although he is referring to Augustine, Rousseau and Beckett, the argument can be extended to all autobiographies as the writing itself will reveal, consciously or not, the complex history of its production with all its limiting factors.

Considered the founder of autobiography Saint Augustine has become an unavoidable model, not simply because of the immensity of his project, which by far surpassed the conventional conversion narratives of the period, but mostly because he

elaborated on the terms, without which the autobiographical process cannot be thought nowadays. Even if the Antiquity also had several modes of discourse on the self, and that the practice of writing about the self had an important place for many philosophical schools, they differed in important aspects from what later on we will understand from the practice of autobiography with all its different modulations throughout the centuries. In various instances Foucault elaborates on the tradition of writing about the self in the first and second centuries, which was one of the practices of the care of the self. As he says in his essay "Technologies of the Self,"

The self is something to write about, a theme or object (subject) of writing activity. That is not a modern trait born of the Reformation or of Romanticism; it is one of the most ancient Western traditions. It was well established and deeply rooted when Augustine started his *Confessions*. (232)

These writings took the form of letters and *hupomnemata*, which he defines in "Self Writing" as "individual notebooks serving as memory aids" (209). The purpose of these was to serve as an exercise of memory to be used as a source for future rereading and meditation. "One wrote down quotes in them, extracts from books, examples, and actions that one had witnessed or read about, reflections or reasonings that one had heard or that had come to mind" (209). Although emphasizing that these practices of writing had a very important role in the process of the subjectivation of discourse, Foucault is very clear in pointing out the difference between these practices of note-taking and of exchanging letters and the practice that emerged later with the *Confessions*. Notwithstanding their purpose of contributing for the shaping of the self, in no way could they be understood as "narratives of oneself" (210).

It is in Augustine's autobiography that the processes of justification, validation, and necessity are to be found for the first time. Claiming that the past and the future do not exist but as memory and expectation, Augustine nevertheless considers it wholly feasible that these can be brought to the mind and activated in the present. According to Olney, it is Augustine's conception of memory that "grounds his ideas about narrative in general and life-narrative in particular" (3). Whatever St. Augustine tells us in his *Confessions* is ratified by an act of memory. Even facts about his early childhood which are not present in his memory any more and about which he cannot say "I remember!" are ratified through an appeal to his late experience. This ratification through sameness of experiences (since, for instance, all babies suck, play with their bodies, cry etc) implies nevertheless "a belief on the continuity of being covered by the use of *I* and a belief also in the capacity of memory to sustain this continuity

of being"<sup>25</sup> (7). However, memory is going to find different formulations throughout his autobiography. Taking as an example the recitation of a psalm, Augustine seems to conceive of memory as a physical reservoir from which he draws, transforms its contents by his very use of it, and then drops it again so that it remains available for future use in a circular way. This movement from expectation (future) through recitation (present) to memory (past), which is actualized in time, is then expanded to describe the process of narrative. "And what is true of the whole psalm is also true for every part of the psalm and of every syllable in it. The same holds good for any longer action, of which the psalm may be only a part. It is true also of the whole of a man's life, of which all of his actions are parts" (11.28, 282). Therefore, for Augustine the act of narrating finds its justification in the twin act of *remembering* and *telling*, a process that he is often going to bind through the use of paired verbs: "remember-and-confess, recall-and-narrate, recollect-and-tell" (Olney 5). Indeed, the *Confessions* evince a belief that whatever is recalled can be given a form in narrative, a belief that is certainly lost in the twenty-first century when the reliability of memory is radically called into doubt, together with the capacity of transforming memory into narration, or even the possibility of assuring the continuity of being of the narrating self.

Augustine conceives of two different models for memory, one based on a spatial metaphor and the other on a temporal metaphor. Olney calls these models the archeological model and the processual model, respectively (19). In the first one, "the fields and spacious palaces of memory" are described as having "recesses," a "bottom," "a huge court," and "subterranean shrines." Olney concludes that for Augustine such a model implies

that memory is something fixed and static, a site where an archeologist of memories can dig down through layer after layer of deposits to recover what he seeks. And when he finds the memories he is looking for, they will be as they were deposited, unchanged except as they may have suffered from the decaying effects of time. (19)

For Augustine there is no fear that events will not be made accessible to his memory, will arrive out of order, or will not be understood. Like a Psalm, the past, that is, whatever is retained in memory, unfolds again in the present as a "present of things past," and is made available to him exactly in the same order in which he narrates. The second model identified by Olney evolves almost imperceptibly from the first and is built around the metaphor of

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<sup>25</sup> Emphasis in the original.

weaving as a temporal process. In Augustine, the image of weaving surpasses the idea of the construction of narrative, acquiring a more basic value: weaving as indicative of the process of memory, so that "[u]nlike the archeological dig, the weaver's shuttle and loom constantly produce new and different designs, and forms, and if the operation of memory is, like weaving, not archeological but processual, then it will bring forth ever different memorial configurations and an ever newly shaped self" (Olney 26).

In the latter model, memory appears much more as a selective process based on the way internal and external events are interpreted than as a retrieval mechanism of untouched stored material. According to Olney, Augustine is aware of having progressed during the writing of his *Confessions* through the act of remembering. Should the reader read his work in the order in which it was written, says Augustine, then he would see this progress. Therefore, he strives to make the reader understand this order. In this sense, the *Confessions* must be read as a double narrative, as the title already implies. If on the one hand, Augustine is revealing his crimes prior to the conversion act, so as to serve as an example of what a person should or should not do, on the other hand, he is also confessing his faith when he juxtaposes facts about his life and suggests their conformity to the Genesis. In this way, Augustine succeeds in exploring in sensuous language the reasons that motivated him to act in the past, while he strives to reach for an atemporal history, to which he has no access but through the language of ordinary sensory experience. In short, Augustine's narrative unfolds with great subtlety in an attempt to show a complex myriad of little threads "spiraling out of singleness" (Olney 38). Augustine, then, writes a multilayered narrative in which he attempts to tell his individual story as it dissolves into the mythic story of Christianity. As Olney explains,

The one most salient feature of this project that makes it so vastly and unavoidably complex is that it is a story unfolding in time and told in human language that would, if successful, have ultimate reference to a reality that exists before and outside of time and that—because it is nontemporal—cannot be captured in a language that must utter itself in time and that must fade away even as the words are sounded. The individual story Augustine tells is of the slow, step-by-step, day-by-day development that prepared him to attempt the leap of interpretation of the story beyond all stories and specifically to go beyond and outside time to an understanding of the narrative of creation in Genesis. (40)

Surely, Augustine cannot do without the language of time and the senses but he will ingeniously develop—through the temporal narrative of his life—a tripartite structure of the mind which would mirror the divine structure that, while outside all structures, because atemporal, is the measure of all structures in the manifest world. So, Augustine punctuates his work with analogies intended to show how God gives an idea of the Trinity by infusing the world with small-scaled trinities. However, the primary analogy is with “the mind, the self, the whole being as a single unity invested entirely in each of its three distinct attributes or faculties—memory, understanding, and will” (Olney 47). Despite this tripartite division, Augustine never doubts the unity of the self even if he is willing to admit the coexistence of two contradictory wills. In this way, Augustine can safely employ a very sensual language, “the very language of desire” (Olney 56), to tell the reader about his mistress while at the same time being sincere about his rejection of desire. According to Olney, and Kahn, whom he cites, the interpretative scheme for passages like this should call for “the principle of hermeneutical generosity” (72) as used by Augustine. Just like Hermes acting as mediator between the divine and the human beings is obliged to adapt the gods’ language to human ears, so must the Scriptures suffer from trying to say the unsayable. As Augustine interprets the Scriptures, this principle of hermeneutical generosity is an argument for the multiplicity of meanings and should in no way be mistaken for indeterminacy of meaning. Augustine can accept a “multiplicity of truths” (Olney 73) derived from the same Scriptures, but never does he doubt the capacity of language of saying them. “While Augustine,” concludes Olney,

never suggests that language can say the unsayable of God (“For with God there is pure intellect, without the noise and diversity of languages”),<sup>26</sup> he equally never suggests that language, in its nature, is not sufficient within and for our world. He never exclaims with J. Alfred Prufrock, “It is impossible to say just what I mean!”—or, were he ever to exclaim thus with Prufrock, it would be a reflection on his personal incapacity, not on any intrinsic inadequacy in words. (77)

Without ever doubting the power of language to carry his narrative, Augustine became a model without which autobiography cannot be thought, for he is the initiator of a long line of life-writers. Before expanding on the gap that divides our time from Augustine’s thirteen books of the *Confessions* at the turning of the fourth to the fifth century, it is worthwhile considering what kind of subjectivity Augustine creates in this transition from Antiquity to the

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<sup>26</sup> Saint Augustine *Two Books on Genesis against the Manichees*. 1.9.15,63.

Christian world. For Augustine is not simply a skillful rhetorician, he also marks an important moment in the emergence of a new sensibility which has had profound implications for our present world.

In his 1982 course at the *Collège de France*, Foucault develops a study of the history of the care of the self in the period that goes from Socrates' *Alcebiades* until the first and second centuries of our era. According to him, this period knew a series of practices of the self that aimed at transforming the subject so that the "he" or "she" might know, express, and manifest the truth in his or her person. This conception of truth, a truth that only becomes available through the transformation of the subject by means of a series of practices, is in total opposition to the Cartesian conception of knowledge, where the possibility of knowledge is dissociated from the spiritual capacity of the subject who enunciates the truth to know and express it. As Foucault reads it, in that first period, the concept of care of the self occupied a central position for many philosophical groups, such as the Stoics, the Epicureans, the Cynics, etc, even to the point of eclipsing the Delphic imperative: "know thyself" so important for Plato. Initially an integrant part of the larger practice of the care of the self, the concept of the knowledge of the self, though, has acquired major importance in our own time through a dislocation occurring in the fourth and fifth centuries, as the Christian church was establishing its core doctrine, and as it made its way up to our modern morality. This dislocation can be expressed in terms of the ontological status of the concept of truth. In Christianity, truth can only be measured in relation to the Scriptures. The question is no longer whether the guide (preceptor, philosopher, or spiritual master) says the truth because he or she lives that truth and his or her whole being is an expression of that truth. Rather, Christian practice will demand a certain price from the subject who is being guided and that charge consists of a thorough examination of his or her conscience in order to investigate the source from which his or her thoughts and desire emanate, so as to assert that they originate from God's will. Consequently, the Delphic precept, as adopted by Christians, takes the form of a self-examination which aims not so much at preparing the subject to say and manifest the truth but rather to confess. Whereas in the first and second centuries the act of self-examination meant the constitution of the subject as a subject of truth, the discourse required for the transformation of the subject in Christianity is one in which the guided subject is both the subject and the referent of enunciation (*Hermenêutica* 495; *História* 61). Considering this shift, it is not surprising that the first paradigmatic autobiographical work should have been the *Confessions* of St. Augustine. In it the author revisits—in order—his childhood, adolescence, his luxurious relationship to friends and mistress, as constitutive parts of himself and incorporates these multiple experiences in a unified, though complex, whole.

This same enterprise, albeit with different aims, is taken on again and radically modified by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his desperate search for "a form to accommodate the mess"<sup>27</sup> (Beckett qtd. in Olney 12).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau begins his autobiography with a very interesting project. Claiming that one cannot know oneself without reference to the Other, he proposes to unveil his own self so that Others might have a term of comparison. And he justifies his authority to dispense with the Other as measure of his own self by claiming to remember the state of purity of his soul. The intent is also carried out with the explicit purpose of defending himself from accusations, thrusting the written word to do a better job than direct confrontation with his enemies would do. He promises complete sincerity, hiding nothing from the reader, and "he did not, at the outset, doubt at all his ability to produce what, in a little speech designed to introduce a reading aloud of the *Confessions*, he described as ['the faithful narrative of all that has happened to me, and if I dare say so, the history of my soul']"<sup>28</sup> (Olney 102). However, having written his *Confessions*, Rousseau was compelled to publish two more volumes, experimenting with new forms: *Rousseau juge de Jean Jacques—Dialogues* and *Les Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire*. Although in many passages of the *Dialogues* Rousseau falls back into narrative, its primary mode is a dialogue. A dialogue between characters named "Rousseau" and "The Frenchman" about "J. J." That all of them converge into the person of the author—Rousseau's theme—is hardly a question of doubt. The third book takes the form of a meditative sketch, a form better suitable to evade time than narrative would ever be able to.

In his *Confessions*, Rousseau starts his narrative time and again, as if searching for the origin that could justify himself. His major task is to explain his uniqueness, the fact that he alone is different from all others, but he finds it hard to fulfill his intent in a language that must be equally shared and understood by others. Here lies the exceptionality of Rousseau's project, because if "St. Augustine may have seen his life as, in a certain sense, an exemplary one (...) he never imagined himself, his life, or his work as unique, or, in the strange Rousseauvian, full-blown Romantic way, as exemplary *because* unique"<sup>29</sup> (Olney 115). While Augustine saw his conversion as part of a line of conversion narratives, Rousseau cannot find any models to describe what he uniquely is. Whatever mistakes and wrong deeds he

<sup>27</sup> Tom Driver, "Beckett by the Madeleine," *Columbia University Forum* 4 (summer 1961): 23.

<sup>28</sup> "Discours projeté ou prononcé pour introduire la lecture des *Confessions*," *Œuvres Complètes*. Edited by Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, 4 vols. Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1959. 1.1185. Olney's translation.

<sup>29</sup> Emphasis in the original

has committed, Rousseau tries to reassure the reader in an anguished narrative that they have not sprung from his heart, from his true self, and therefore they cannot maculate his being. As in Augustine's, Rousseau's *Confessions* also aims at reflecting the mythic history of humankind. But whereas Augustine tries to make his temporal experience coincide with the Holy Scriptures, so that his body, subdued and purged of profane considerations, may become the means for his soul to manifest, Rousseau claims a memory of origins that prevents any tainting of his soul by whatever he may have experienced temporally. This memory of humanity's mythic state is only possible because, Rousseau claims, he alone has retained that primeval state of innocence. Philosophy and autobiography become circular in Rousseau.

More than that, the driving force of his whole project, which asserts the contradictory claims of his uniqueness while proclaiming his knowledge of the mythic state of humanity (of which he is not a representative), lies on his exposure of the "heart," that is, of his emotions, desire, and memory. Indeed, Rousseau revels in the evocation of emotion, desire, and memory in an attempt to create in the reader the same feelings that he felt at the time of the original event and which he feels again while recounting it. In that way, emotion becomes a justification for his acts. Since his heart is pure, there can be no condemnation. "[T]hough he denies it vehemently, the three autobiographical texts are apologia in the traditional sense of a defense of himself, his life, and his ideas" (Olney 121). Not accidentally, the first of his autobiographical texts is entitled *Confessions*, which implies not only an act of introspection to examine the origins of his self, but also an implicit bestowal of power to the reader, who after reading his book may "know" him. Further, because he could not elicit the desired reader-response from his first book, Rousseau felt compelled to attempt the two other forms. But every new form carried in it the same contradictions, Rousseau seems incapable of detaching himself from his original feelings, doomed to repeat over and over the same experience without ever understanding it from the vantage point of a temporal distance. Rousseau remains throughout a Man of Feeling, repeating "the same emotional experiences without the possibility of their ever taking their place in a retrospectively determined pattern or of assuming the significance that detachment might confer upon them" (Olney 124). As Rousseau attempts to carry out his initial project, namely of presenting his unique self as a term of comparison for the others, writing one autobiography after another, the texts begin to collapse internally, unable to justify his acts on emotions that apparently nobody approves.

In fact, not knowing how to sustain the unity of narrative self, and without receiving the acclaim for his *Confessions* that he expected, Rousseau sets out to write the *Dialogues*, where he fragments himself into various voices, which nevertheless remain univocal.



Although each character assumes a different position concerning the theme "J. J.," the voices of characters, narrator, and author become so enmeshed in one another that the narrative becomes unstable. In fiction, an unreliable narrator often serves as a warning that the author does not agree with the narrator, but in the *Dialogues* (and in some more recent autobiographies) there is no consistency in doing so, nor irony. Try as he must, Rousseau never accommodates the form that will allow him to plot his characters, theme, and intention. If in the *Confessions* he proposes to be "an-other" for the reader, in the *Dialogues* Rousseau starts doubling himself. The final result of this promiscuity of voices is a clear portrait of Rousseau in much the same lines as he has given in the *Confessions* and as he is going to produce in the *Reveries*. The symmetry of voices found in the *Dialogues* already looks forward to the circularity of the *Reveries*.

Failing to deal with the facts of his life that he recounts and to learn from experience, in the *Reveries* Rousseau tries to find a timeless voice and progressively escapes into descriptions of states whose ontological status as memory or as imagination remains blurred. Actual experience and its specificities of time and space, regrets and desire, give way to generalities, contemplative states where narrative cannot take place any more since it moves away from memory and desire. In short, Rousseau failed "as none before him dared to fail, and, then, [closed] out the possibility of anyone surpassing him by failing better or worse or in a new way" (Olney 417). After Rousseau, it becomes evident that the self cannot be said in any transparent way. As Olney says, it is as if almost all words used by Rousseau played a pun on him and said something different from what he intended, but then "what will Rousseau offer his readers for reading but words?" (205). And indeed, he multiplied his words desperately searching for a way to express his intentions and what he believed his nature to be like.

It is exactly Rousseau's fragmentation of self, his contradictions, and the perception that in the end he could not communicate "from one heart to another without the cold intermediary of words" (157) that give his work a place of standing importance in the development of the autobiographical genre.

Olney chooses Samuel Beckett as a representative of the ultimate deconstruction of the pronoun "I" in the twentieth century. In one work after another he deconstructs the pronoun "I," denying it ontological unity in time or even physical unity (as the narrator in *Krapp's Last Tape* and the Mouth in *Not I*, respectively). What holds the self together is not memory, as St. Augustine clearly believed, despite envisioning the possibility of many concurrent truths, but narrative. Olney asks:

Is this not the very nature of the autobiographical act as established by Augustine in the Confessions and as practiced by Beckett in his late fictions-cum-dramas-cum-life-writings-a perpetually renewed attempt to find language adequate to rendering the self and its experience, an attempt that includes within itself all earlier attempts and that draws up behind it all these earlier attempts in this latest quest? (9)

Although Olney reads Beckett's work as autobiography, a reading shared by many critics,<sup>30</sup> I think it is important to bear in mind that his work is fictional. Autobiographical elements may be present but Beckett can freely play with the fragmentation of the self without the implication that he is fragmented *in the same way*. At least, he retains a body,<sup>31</sup> whether he identifies with it or not, a certainty which some of his characters cannot claim. Undoubtedly, Beckett's representation of the fragmentation of the self goes to the core of language itself as our fundamental representative system but one may question what kind of meaning can be derived from such a disembodied account of experience in the real world of exchanges. If the question of fragmentation cannot be avoided, neither can our urge for narrative, or meaning. In fact, this is a double-binding problem since memory cannot be dissociated from narrative. If "all parts of the mind are not equally accessible to each other at all times" (Dennett), and memory is only accessible through narrative, any attempt to hold the past, to understand it, to use it to explain the present, just to mention a few uses of memory, is necessarily contingent. There can only be narrative integration. In fact, in his discussion of the status of the subject in various disciplines, Paul Smith argues with Lacan that "[s]ubjectivity is always a product of the symbolic in an instance of discourse" (22). Having explained that the symbolic for Lacan is, "in fact, simply an array of differentiated elements which carry meaning (20), Smith concludes that

Lacan leaves room for a consideration of subjectivity as contradictory, as structured in divisions, and thus as never the solidified effect of discursive or ideological pressures. Far from being such an in-dividual, the "subject" is a divided and provisional entity.<sup>32</sup> (22)

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<sup>30</sup> See Gendron 47

<sup>31</sup> See Eakin (*How*) for some interesting problems for life-writing arising from severe bodily impairment.

<sup>32</sup> Emphasis in the original.

Indeed, whereas for Paul Smith the individual is "ideologically designed to give the false impression that human beings are free and self-determining, or that they are constituted by undivided controlling consciousness," the subject may be described as "the series or the conglomeration of *positions*, subject-positions, provisional and not necessarily infeasible, into which a person is called momentarily by the discourses and the world that he/she inhabits" (xxxv). The question, however, is how to account for a subject who is capable to resist the ideological instead of simply following ideological scripts. The theoretical emphasis on the *subjected* status of the subject has foreclosed the theoretical possibilities of a theory of resistance. This conceptual shortcoming invites for epistemological revisions that can deal with effective political strategies of resistance.

Desirable as it may seem, narrative integration in autobiographical writings need not, or may not, necessarily mean objective "truth." If the self has become unstable as it is crossed by social, psychological, economical, historical, political, and linguistic forces, it does not follow that we can dispense with meaning. And if meaning is intrinsically connected to narrative and memory, plotting is unavoidable. Therefore, the question is to find the language to express this fragmentary self. If it has become difficult to integrate the self by means of a hermeneutical procedure based on the Scriptures, as St. Augustine attempted to do, and if the autobiographical act cannot start with the wish of avoiding the traps of language, as Rousseau wished, then every life-writer must struggle to find a "form to accommodate the mess," to use Olney's borrowing of Beckett once more. Rupture, crisis, and discontinuity must be accounted for, both in the act of writing and, I daresay, at the moment of reading. In this sense, Judith Revel's comment on the charges made against Foucault because of the epistemic discontinuity in his thought contains an important hermeneutic procedure. She claims that "rupture is itself a significant element because it carries the history of its internal split, just as it brings the nonlinear, the disorderly, the disparate to the dignity of the sense"<sup>33</sup> (68). If fragmentation cannot be avoided, at least there remains the possibility of opening up meaning to new combinations, not with the aim of reaching narrative closure but of raising new questions and increasing understanding.

Above I have quoted Jean Starobinski's hypothesis that crisis is the departing point of autobiography. In fact, what he says is that "one would hardly have sufficient motive to write an autobiography had not some radical change occurred in his (sic) life—conversion, entry

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<sup>33</sup> "[L]a rupture est en elle-même un élément signifiant parce qu'elle marque l'histoire de sa brisure interne, tout comme elle élève à la dignité du sens le non-linéaire, le désordonné, le disparate." [My translation.]

into a new life, the operation of Grace" (78). If autobiography has been the literary form most attuned with the "idea of a unique and autonomous self" (Couser *Altered* 13), it is evident that this self is in crisis. And what is in crisis is the Cartesian self of Western thought,<sup>34</sup> that is, the self-sufficient subject founded, in autobiographical studies, on the life writing of white Western men. In this sense, Paul John Eakin's asserts that even though "there is a legitimate sense in which autobiographies testify to the individual's experience of selfhood, that testimony is necessarily mediated by available cultural models of identity and the discourses in which they are expressed" (*How* 4). In fact, actual autobiographical narratives surpass the idea that autobiography is in some way an account of the development of a self, a belief which has contributed to what Eakin calls the long held myth of autonomy, according to which

we are conditioned precisely not to recognize the relational dimension of selfhood; possessive individualism, functioning as the dominant social "text" to which we are held "accountable," masks the contribution of the "practical social processes going on 'between' people" (137) toward making us what we are: "we fail to register the fact of our involvement with others" (142).<sup>35</sup> (*How* 63)

Indeed, dis-centered selves cannot partake in this "death of the subject" proclaimed by theory since they are busy relating to others in social and historical contexts that they cannot ignore lest they are to be doomed to silence. Stating "[his] belief that all identity is relational"<sup>36</sup> (*How* 43), Eakin emphasizes the importance of "the story of the story," which not only determines the genesis and execution of the autobiographical account but also in a way determines its structure. Asserting that autobiography is an interactive genre, Gros Ventre author Sidner Larson ratifies Eakin's move "from questions of the unreliable narrator to

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<sup>34</sup> Or the "individual," according to Paul Smith.

<sup>35</sup> In this excerpt, Eakin quotes from John Shotter's "Social Accountability and the Social Construction of 'You.'" In *Texts of Identity*. Edited by John Shotter and Kenneth J. Gergen. London: Sage, 1989. 133-51.

<sup>36</sup> Eakin's insight in fact is a derivation of the feminist critics, who were the first to acknowledge that identity is built in relation to "the chosen other" (Mason qtd. in Eakin *How* 47). However, he claims that positing an alternative model for women's life writing might incur paradoxically into the error of reinforcing the Gusdorf model of the autonomous subject as opposed to the life narratives written by "women, peoples of color, working class and poor people" (Wong "Native" 125). Studies of women's life writing have created a set of binaries that are as suspect as the ideas of self, autonomy, and narrative. The three most prominent of these, according to him, "are the individual as opposed to the collective, the autonomous as opposed to the relational, and, in a different register, narrative as opposed to non-linear, discontinuous, nonteleological forms" (48).

relations between text and reality" (77). If, says he, the interaction between life and text is complex, it is nonetheless real and affects the way we experience meaning. According to him, Native American autobiographies have the potential of addressing the real and painful consequences of post-traumatic stress disorder in Indigenous communities. This is done not by addressing transcendental "truth," but by claiming the pragmatic autonomy to define themselves from the inside.

In that sense, although much has been written about Native life stories, especially in the field of anthropology, this "story of the story" is still largely unexplored. Native American autobiographies rely on different models of identity formation that can only be appreciated if incorporated into the larger narrative of different cultural assumptions and narrative practices. As James Ruppert neatly summarizes in his study of mediating practices in Native American writing: "different kinds of narrative have to do with different ways of knowing" (29).

## **NATIVE AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY : "A LONG AGO HISTORY"**

Life writing brings significant theoretical concerns, since it is arguably posited on the authority of "a promise to tell the truth" (Adams 9) and, as such, is supposedly verifiable. Immediately the difficult terms that emerge from this statement is the idea of truth and fabrication. But if we are not to "see the past as comprised of thing-like psychic stuff" (Freeman, "Burden" 12) we need to think of memory and its arrangement into a narrative continuity as a creative act rather than an archeological retrieval in the Augustinian sense. Indeed, recollection implies not only the transformation of images into words, but also an emplotment that serves to give meaning to the present. However, this narrative act is not entirely made up. In this same article, citing Nehamas,<sup>37</sup> Mark Freeman argues, that "it is emphatically not a contradiction in terms to speak of "real" or "true" stories; the contradiction exists, he maintains, only for those who privilege those putatively pristine patches of reality that (are thought to) exist prior to our narrative designs" (18).

Sidner Larson stretches this point a little further when he questions Georges Gusdorf's assertion that autobiography cannot show individuals "from the outside in his visible actions but the person in his inner privacy, not as he was, not as he is, but as he

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<sup>37</sup> Nehamas, A. *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985.

believes and wishes himself to be and to have been"<sup>38</sup> (Gusdorf qtd. in Larson 70), exiling thus the autobiographical act to a purely subjective perspective. According to Larson, by validating an objective world where meaning is the province of "absolute truths," Gusdorf is saying that people do not have the right to attribute meaning and value to their own experiences, as if "events [had] only single, inherent meanings, rather than several meanings or perhaps no meaning at all, and [as if] meaning [were] discernible only by certain people" (Larson 70). In fact, Larson calls for the pragmatic uses of actual experience, so that life writing serves the purpose of "making some sort of usable sense of [one's] life (71).

Life writing shares with imaginative writing a more symbolic nature than it would appear at first sight, for they both share the narrative quality that gives them shape. Indeed, autobiographical writing does partake with other forms of imaginative writing the possibilities offered by narrativity. However, as Albert E. Stone argues,

Though free to combine impressions and images of the past in order to express present needs and even future expectations, the autobiographer is bound to that past in ways the novelist (even the historical novelist) is not. Like other historians seeking adductively to formulate plausible explanations and descriptions of past events, an autobiographer offers an interpretation of the surviving records of his or her own past. (4)

If, on the one hand, life writing is an interpretation of the past to fit a present need, on the other, it is clear that subjective as this past may be, it is, in a way, a shared experience with others, that is, it remains referential. As Stone further emphasizes, "all autobiographies possess permeable boundaries. They are indeed centrifugal cultural works. They resist closure and the nonreferentiality of art, while remaining art" (4). These "permeable boundaries" refer not simply to the generic borderland between fictive and factual accounts of experience, but may also be extended to the very conception of self that can only be identified as it relates dialogically with others. The way meaning is negotiated between the writer and the others with whom he or she relates vary greatly and can be more or less explicitly thematized in different autobiographies. The possibilities are evidently vast but it remains to be investigated how these negotiations occur within specific cultural frames.

Consequently, the purpose of rendering one's life is not to state an absolute historical truth but "to understand it from the vantage point of the present" (Freeman, "Burden" 20). It is

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<sup>38</sup> Gusdorf, Georges. "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography." *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Edited by James Olney. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988. 45

in this sense that Mark Freeman argues for an understanding of life writing as a "poetic construction," even if in this enterprise the autobiographical author does not have the same freedom as the fictional writer. He concludes saying that

the truth about one's past, and of one's self, derives not from crafting a narrative shorn of disconfirming experiences. Nor, one would hope, does it derive from persuasion, from the willful exercise of narrative authority. It derives instead from attending carefully, and imaginatively, to the movement of the past. (25)

In another article, "Charting the Narrative Unconscious: Cultural Memory and Autobiography", Freeman explores an important idea for this work, as he "[focuses] on the way in which cultural texts and 'textures' become woven into the fabric of memory" (193). Freeman suggests that the self is formed not only by personal experiences but by a cultural horizon shaped, first, by "non-conscious elements of tradition" (198), then, by "'memory,' [which] in this context, becomes a curious amalgam of fact and fiction, experiences and texts, documentary, footage, dramatizations, movies, plays, television shows, fantasies, and more" (199), and, third, by one's personal relation of identity with the recorded event in question. Therefore, as he develops his notion of a "narrative unconscious," the emphasis of a recorded account shifts from the self and its personal experiences to a world that predicates "[one's] existence as a social and cultural subject" (200). Freeman gets close to the Native American autobiographical narrative mode and its embedding of multiple voices when he discusses Gadamer:

Gadamer (...) is critical of both the modern autobiographical subject and the modern autobiographical enterprise. "Self-reflection and autobiography," he maintains, "are not primary and are not an adequate basis for the hermeneutical problem, because through them history is made private once more. In fact," he continues, "history does not belong to us, but we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity," Gadamer maintains, "is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life"<sup>39</sup> (p. 245). As Gadamer goes on to note. "Our historical consciousness is always filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the

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<sup>39</sup> Gadamer, H.-G. *Truth and Method*. New York: Crossroad, 1982.

past is heard. It is present only in the multifariousness of such voices" (pp. 252-253). ("Charting" 204)

As this long quote suggests, when transforming his or her personal memories into a narrative, the autobiographical self is, consciously or unconsciously, reflecting not only personal impulses and desires but also a collective memory shaped by history and culture. Freeman is going to call these other voices "counter-narratives" (206) because they interact with the way the autobiographical self thinks about his or her past and attempts to make it functional by acknowledging these multiple sources in the fashioning of the self. This is especially important when we consider that American Indians are, in general, "dealing with the aftermath of destruction" (Larson 71). Larson emphasizes the need of defining meaning by themselves and stopping being defined from the outside, a situation that only contributes to their suffering, dictated by outside oppression and its consequent internal oppression (alcoholism, abuse, domestic violence, etc). Stories and storytelling are also a part of the search for meaning as they help interpret experience and constitute identity.

In this sense, not only do stories have a different function in Native communities but also they are also frequently thematized, as authors abundantly resort to metalanguage in their tellings. Stories are part of the subjective meaning making process, and, in Native American communities, perhaps more than in any other group, they play an important ethical role in keeping communities together. Consequently, as Larson warns us, it is important to "keep ideas grounded in actual experience." If they are, "certain 'truths' do emerge, and they are usually less transcendental than pragmatic" (71). In the Western world, stories tend to be classified, for example, as fictive or factual (e.g. story vs. history), serious or humorous, belonging to a certain genre with its governing laws (e.g. novel or essay), written or oral (with different degrees of reliability). Accordingly, an autobiographical account in these terms would mean an account of one's life containing an identity narrative, that is, "[a] personal story of individuation as a subject's development and movement out into the world" (Audrey Levasseur<sup>40</sup> qtd. in Eakin *How* 74).<sup>41</sup> However, many autobiographies defy this narrow definition, not least, Native American autobiographies. As author Thomas King puts it: "The truth about stories is that that's all we are. 'You can't understand the world without telling a

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<sup>40</sup> Eakin is quoting here from the student's paper from the fall of 1992.

<sup>41</sup> This reliance on an objective world existing "out there" has also been challenged by modern Western science and philosophy. However, it continues to shape much of the contemporary everyday life of the Western world. So much so that Native Americans are commonly referred to as possessing a "magical" view of the world.



story,' the Anishinabe writer Gerald Vizenor tells us. 'There isn't any center in the world but a story'"<sup>42</sup> (32). Stories are what enable us to make sense of the world, to organize its symbolic meanings, if not into a coherent whole, at least into a functional whole. Therefore, stories can be accessed by means of their function instead of their truth-value.

The social function of stories reflects the social nature of language as first described by Saussure when he distinguishes *langue* and *parole*. Language is not simply a code that switches words in a system, as translation studies make very clear, but the implications of this when dealing with oral cultures, or cultures nurtured by oral storytelling, is not always apparent for literate cultures. As Jeannette Armstrong tells us, language is transformed in the body of the speaker before it is actualized in performance and in an exchange with an audience. In order to ensure survival, people have to learn the language of the land.

My ancestors say that N'silxchn [the Okanagan language] is formed out of an older language, some words of which are still retained in our origin stories. I have heard elders explain that the language changed as we moved and spread over the land through time. My own father told me that it was the land that changed the language because there is special knowledge in each different place. All my elders say that it is land that holds all knowledge of life and death and is a constant teacher. It is said in Okanagan that the land constantly speaks. It is constantly communicating. Not to learn its language is to die. We survived and thrived by listening intently to its teachings—to its language—and then inventing human words to retell its stories to our succeeding generations. It is the land that speaks N'silxchn through the generations of our ancestors to us. ("Land" 175-176)

Learning the language, then implies acquiring a whole set of ethical relations. These relations include the symbolic sounds that activate meaning in a series of concentric circles surrounding the speaker at the present moment of the utterance. But this first circle reaches other spheres which "may be thought of as the 'past' or the 'future,' with everything always connected to the present reality of the speaker. The Okanagan language creates links by connecting active pieces of reality rather than isolating them" ("Keepers" 318-319). Therefore, the perception of reality changes considerably from one language to another, in this case from Okanagan to English. Armstrong goes further into her explanation of the way she perceives language. She says:

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<sup>42</sup> Coltelli, Laura. *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak*. Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, 1990. 156.

Reality is very much like a story: it is easily changeable and transformative with each speaker. Reality in that way becomes very potent with animation and life. It is experienced as an always malleable reality within which you are like an attendant at a vast symphony surrounding you, a symphony in which, at times, you are the conductor. ("Land" 191)

This suggests interdependence between language, presence, and context in the act of storytelling. The moving back and forth from one sphere to the other aims at establishing nurturing connections that create the ongoing reality surrounding the speakers. Storytelling is a weaving of many voices which acquires ever new shades according to the speaker.

In his comparative study of North and South American indigenous life narratives, Brazilian anthropologist Oscar Calavia Sáez refers to the interweaving of voices in oral life narratives observed in ethnographical accounts in Brazil as "citational style." It is worth quoting at length on this presence of other voices in Native orality since its use can be seen elsewhere in Indian storytelling:

Although the discourse is controlled by an "I," the enunciator may be lending his voice to a long series of other voices. This happens when the narrator/singer performs a piece inherited from others, especially a dead relative; when they explain the probable thoughts of the audience, in whose mouth they place comments that may occasionally be hostile to what they are doing; when they talk—sometimes about themselves—, under the name of a dead enemy or, less dramatically, of a stranger whom they have met during their traveling. Finally, the citation need not be simple. It may unfold like a cascade, when the speaker cites someone who cites someone who cites someone. This bypass of the I organizes a tortuous collection of language plays. (187)<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> The original reads: "Embora o discurso seja regido por um 'eu', o enunciador pode estar emprestando sua voz a uma longa série de outros. Isso acontece quando o narrador/cantor executa uma peça herdada de outro, especialmente de algum parente morto; quando explicita os pensamentos prováveis da própria audiência, em cuja boca o narrador põe comentários eventualmente hostis do que ele está fazendo; quando fala —às vezes de si mesmo—, sob o nome de um inimigo morto ou, menos dramaticamente, de um estrangeiro que conheceu durante suas viagens. A citação, de resto, não precisa ser simples. Pode se desdobrar em cascata, quando o emissor cita a alguém que cita a alguém que cita a alguém. Esse desvio do eu organiza um tortuoso conjunto de jogos de linguagem." [My translation]

This illustrates a typical device used by Native storytellers which consists of giving voice to multiple views and alludes to the function that language has when it incorporates absent as well as present voices, such as those of the audience. Therefore, the "author" of a story is not the isolated teller but a whole community that shares its many tellings. As Jeannette Armstrong puts it:

Through my language I understand I am being spoken to, I'm not the one speaking. The words are coming from many tongues and mouths of Okanagan people and the land around them. I am a listener to the language's stories, and when my words form I am merely retelling the same stories in different patterns. ("Land" 181)

At this point, a note of caution is necessary. In this chain of storytelling that constitutes language, especially when we are dealing with a "cultural Other", the autobiographer may be seen as a part of the telling of a culture, but in no ways should he or she be considered merely as a representative of his or her cultural environment. Indeed, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's reminder that "all experience is cultural through and through"<sup>44</sup> (qtd. in Eakin *How* 35) must be allied to the uniqueness with which each self dynamically processes experience and information coming from a variety of different sources.

With this, I do not mean that culture, or ethnicity, for that matter, is determinant, but simply that it implies the presence of a community with a shared experience that may inform the writer in ways that are specific to the group. Yet, Eakin's observations on Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* can be extended to most autobiographical narratives which are read as autoethnographies.<sup>45</sup> He states that "she makes clear that she refuses race as an interpretative category that could provide the key to her self and story. 'Don't fence me in' seems to be the subtext of Hurston's identity narrative" (79). And, Eakin continues:

Hurston herself, I think, helps to explain why the relation between "I" and "we" is so problematic in this text, why the ethnographer could find "Negro" culture to be a coherent object for fieldwork observation while the autobiographer

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<sup>44</sup> Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. 57.

<sup>45</sup> Eakin observes that the "auto-ethnographic cast" of minority groups is expected in a way, "for one of the perennially stated motives for writing one's life is the conviction that one's own experience is somehow representative of the experience of one's social community or group." (*How* 76fn)

could absolutely disavow any simple connection between that environment and her own identity: "I maintain that I have been a Negro three times—a Negro baby, a Negro girl and a Negro woman. Still, if you have received no clear cut impression of what the Negro in America is like, then you are in the same place with me. There is no The Negro here" (172).<sup>46</sup> (79)

Taking the cue from Hurston, which parallels the cry of many Native Americans writing against the homogenizing tag "The Indian," life writing is about the singular self. Undoubtedly influenced by Adriana Cavarero's and Emmanuel Lévinas's emphasis on the importance of the other for the construction of one's identity, my own use of "self" should be understood in face of the inadequacy of other related terms, such as "individual," "subject," "ego," or even the idea of "cogito." In fact, the self cannot be conceived without the other, since the singularity of the speaking voice is the outcome of a relational practice. The embodied (sentient) being is social and finds its identity and otherness in the reciprocal exchange of a life-story, a biography. Memories reach back to private and public events blurring the boundaries of psychology and history, but the weaving of these elements is unique. The self must not be reduced to a mere representative of his or her ethnic group. Rather, the collective endeavor here is to be found in the reading process, as Stone appropriately puts it:

Even when these records are simply private memories, they become in a true sense public property. The reader is invited to reality-test as well as participate in such recoveries. The process of reinventing a plausible and satisfying history is therefore very much a collective enterprise. Writer and readers tacitly conspire to reenter, revivify, and finally understand a singular past which has been consciously remembered and less consciously revised or "forgotten," faithfully reproduced in certain respects but extensively reimagined in others. (4)

In his reading of Elizabeth Colson's *Autobiographies of Three Pomo Women*, Greg Sarris stresses the need to raise questions in order to illuminate the story and attempt to understand what it can possibly involve. This revealing of the story, in Greg Sarris's reading, should not be confined to the occasion of the text's production but should also be extended to the moment of its reception. He says "as a reader, I cannot assume knowledge and authority to speak for others and their relationships. Rather, the objective is to open dialogue

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<sup>46</sup> Hurston, Zora Neale. *Dust Tracks on a Road*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1991. [1942]

with the text such that I can continue to inform and be informed by the text" (*Keeping* 87-88). Having said this, he provides many examples of questions that could have been asked by the interlocutors of autobiographical subjects but which were never raised and therefore precluded the critic/ethnographer from realizing his or her own assumptions related to the text in question. The result is the emergence of an authoritative discourse that fails to see the indigenous Other as part of a much larger structure that includes the relation with the reader.<sup>47</sup> Sarris is careful, however, not to assign fixed or exclusive positions to the autobiographer, on the one hand, and the ethnographer/critic, on the other, in terms of "insider" (Indian) and "outsider" (non-Indian). Such a rigid dichotomy would preclude a fundamental, and sometimes problematic, aspect of all Indian writing: dialogism. This is seen not only in the presence of the mixedblood and in the interface generated by the contact between different cultural practices, including narrative practices, but also in the dual composition of the first autobiographies, which were orally delivered, and sometimes translated, to an authoritative Other, such as a religious minister or an ethnographer.

In contemporary American Indian autobiographical accounts, dialogism is present in the cultural dialogue different narrative forms engage in the same work. Indeed, mixedblood authors display a great awareness of the forces interacting at what Mary Louise Pratt calls "the contact zone," which is further qualified as "a space in which the colonised respond and resist, collaborate and adapt, communicate and imitate" (Barker et al. 7). This Other of Western discourse inhabits a discursive zone that has the potential of appropriating the representational modes used to silence and subjugate the Native voice and using it to

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<sup>47</sup> In the same essay, "Reading Narrated American Indian Lives: Elizabeth Colson's Autobiographies of Three Pomo Women," besides considering Elizabeth Colson's work, Sarris also examines the work of four prominent non-Native critics of Native American autobiographical writing: Arnold Krupat, David Brumble, Gretchen Bataille, and Kathleen Sands. In examining each critic's approach to Native American autobiographical narratives, he asserts that "Krupat, Brumble, Bataille and Sands have all thus essentially positioned themselves so that questions of Indian history, culture, and language cannot inform their work" (90). And he convincingly concludes that "what all these scholars do not seem to see is that while purportedly defending Indians and enlightening others about them, they replicate in practice that which characterizes not only certain non-Indian editors' manner of dealing with Indians but also that of an entire European and Euro-American populace of which these editors and scholars are a part. The Indians are absent or they are strategically removed from the territory, made safe, intelligible on the colonizer's terms" (90). Evidently, Sarris (and others) recognize the contribution given by these scholars to the criticism of Indian literature. Nevertheless, it is evident that by placing themselves as outsiders, they still reinforce many prejudices commonly held by not questioning the assumptions concerning their own positionality. On the appropriation of Indian literary discourse by non-Native literary critics see also David L. Moore "Decolonizing," and Ward Churchill's essay "In the Service of Empire: A Critical Assessment of Arnold Krupat's *The Turn to the Native*" in his *Fantasies*.

dialogue with the dominant culture. This dialogue, however, must be understood as part of a broader movement of cultural resistance, which is also social and political. The Native authors considered here occupying this hybrid space, intent not only on asserting who they are but also on refusing to accept the space assigned to them by the term "Indian."

Based on specific instances produced at the contact zones of the Peruvian Andes and in opposition to ethnographic texts written by the "European metropolitan subjects [to] represent to themselves their others (usually their subjugated others)," Mary Louise Pratt proposes the term "autoethnographical text," which she defines as "a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them" ("Transculturation" 28). The concept is helpful as it offers ways of engaging with the dynamics of culturally different narrative forms interacting in a work. For the different audiences, the result is often defamiliarizing as it involves being able to read culturally different codes. As Pratt reflects at the end of her essay "Transculturation and autoethnography,"

Autoethnographic art involves an assertion not of self-as-other, but of self-as-another's-other, and of self as more-than-the-other's-other. Reception of such art either in terms of assimilation and co-optation, or in terms of purity, authenticity or naivety, suppresses its dialogic, transcultural dimensions. (45)

Seen as a statement in a space marked by conflict, the autoethnographic text must respond to a world order that insists on keeping the indigenous invisible by its refusal to see him or her. Appropriately, Mary Louise Pratt wonders whether these interventions can effectively work, since it is doubtful that the metropolitan center will stop framing these cultural manifestations under the "neutralizing" romantic idea of the "doomed Indian." "Perhaps," writes Pratt, "its most profound effects are on the consciousness of the community that produced it." And she concludes: "The victory concinues (sic) to be in survival, a fact with which metropolitan social theory has yet to come to grips" ("Transculturation" 45).

But it is not only social theory that needs to respond to these manifestations. Literary theory has also "to come to grips" with those texts, which require new ways of reading that take into account this engagement in the contact zone. So far, Native American life writing has been relegated to the analytical practices of an ethnographical discourse that, despite its changing approach, still owes much to its nineteenth century foundational praxis of

objectification (and subjugation) of the other,<sup>48</sup> as a brief overview of the history of Native American life writing can illustrate.

Life writing is a relatively new form in Native America. Obviously, personal experience has always found many ways of being shared although, as one of the authors in Swann and Krupat's collection of autobiographical essays puts it, the practice of "blithering on about [one's] own life and thoughts is very bad form for Indians" (xii). Nevertheless, registers of personal experience is part of the context of the transmission of culture, such as when someone performs an act that has implications for the community. In such cases, someone else usually takes up the task of telling the group about one's actions. Although the emphasis is laid on actions, performance, and the effects that these have on the audience, more than anything else, indigenous cultures privilege responsibility towards the collective, which is shown through the way oral narratives incorporate their own criticism and theory as part of the telling. Besides, many cultures in pre-Columbian America had material forms of register, such as pictographs, beading, or codices, colored manuscripts. Leslie Marmon Silko says that almost the whole collections of Indian books found by the colonizers were destroyed in 1540 to justify conquest.

They burned the great libraries because they wished to foster the notion that the New World was populated by savages. Savages could be slaughtered and enslaved; savages were no better than wild beasts and thus had no property rights. International law regulated the fate of conquered nations but not of savages or beasts" (*Yellow Woman* 157).

This is an important reminder, especially when dealing with the history of Native autobiography since it is too easy to forget that autobiography, as Western culture understands it, did not exist among indigenous groups because of cultural values and different forms of transmission of those values. Autobiography is a product of the contact zone and should not be seen as an acquisition of a civilized form. Its adoption occurs mainly through adaptation, that is, tools to be used in new contexts.<sup>49</sup> As Silko explains, very soon it

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<sup>48</sup> For an excellent discussion of how ethnographical discourse still positions the non-Western other in an evolutionary scale in museological practice, see Annie E. Coombes's essay "The recalcitrant object." More popularly, this discourse is reproduced in the popular media as palatable and safe exoticism for a consuming Western market that prevents the resisting message from being effectively received at the other end of the communication field.

<sup>49</sup> Discussing the language ideologies that enforced the widespread imposition of English as a tool for deculturation, Terence G. Wiley points out the case of the Cherokees, who promoted bilingual

became clear to the Pueblo Indians, where she comes from, that written documents could protect them. Because the king of Spain had granted the Pueblo their land, they enjoyed a relative protection in relation to other tribes. "The land grant documents alerted the Pueblo to the value of the written word; the old books of international law favored the holders of royal land grants. (...) No wonder the older folks used to tell us kids to study: learn to read and to write for your own protection" (*Yellow Woman* 170). Or as the protagonist of Mourning's (Okanagan) *Cogewea* retorts, "I may surprise you yet, James LaGrinder! even if I am a 'squaw' as you call me...I may use the pen!" (34)

Although critics have divided the development of Native American life writing in different ways, for the reasons expounded above, the most coherent is presented by Swann and Krupat in the Introduction to their collection of autobiographical essays by Native American writers. The first known Indian autobiography was written in 1768 by Samson Occom (Mohegan), a Christianized Indian. Although it is a very short piece, it contains very interesting points, because in it the author revises his childhood and conversion. But he does not stop there; as he goes on to describe his work among Indians and search for the reasons why he is not paid as well as the other missionaries who cannot do as good a job as he does. After examining the choices he has made in life, his narrative turns into a denunciation of the unfair treatment he receives from the missionaries. Clearly Occom uses the form of the conversion narrative, which he knew well, since he was largely involved in the raising of funds for the first Indian college (Dartmouth College), for his own political agenda, that is, that Indians should receive equal treatment despite being and *wanting* to remain Indians. His autobiography was followed by William Apess's book-length account of his life in 1829. Although it was published during his lifetime, it did not receive much attention. Again, Apess (Pequot) also dedicated his autobiography and much of his writings to highlight the inconsistencies of Christian discourse and practice. In fact, both writers use their life narratives as an act of resistance by calling attention to the difficulties faced by their respective communities in face of the encroaching white culture that prevents them from pursuing their traditional lifestyles.

The second period of autobiographical writing was spurred by popular interest due to the so-called Indian wars. Called as-told-to or collaborative autobiographies, these life

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competence as a means of resisting white encroachment. Literacy "both in English *and* in their native languages" (77, emphasis in the original) was seen pragmatically as a tool for survival. Learning English could help them overcome their disadvantageous position in treaty making. "At stake," summarizes Wiley, "was the negotiation and retention of their rights to continue to occupy their ancestral lands" (80).



writings were carried out mostly by editors, who either had a genuine interest in the Indians' stories or were simply profiting from interest in the confrontations taking place far away from the general public. These were the autobiographies of Indian warriors, who saw in the enterprise an opportunity, in the words of Black Hawk (Sauk-and-Fox), "to make known to the world, the injuries his people have received from the whites—[and] the causes which brought on the war on the part of his nation" (qtd. in Swann and Krupat x). The "autobiographies" of Black Hawk, Wooden Leg (Northern Cheyenne), Yellow Wolf (Nez Perce), Geronimo (Chiricahua Apache) and others were heavily edited and served the Romantic agenda of "good but gone" of their editors.

The third period emerges again from the dynamics of the general context of the relationship between the Indian tribes and the federal policy towards "the Indian problem." At the end of the century, with most of the territory already occupied by Euro-American immigrants, Indians were more and more confined to reservations, their numbers dropping at astounding speed due to wars, but mostly due to the intentional widespreading of contagious diseases. Fearing the disappearance of whole cultures (but not of their subjects), a new generation of ethnologists set out to record myths, customs, life stories, objects so as "to preserve, in the museum or the library, traces of lives and cultures that could not (so it was then believed) have a continuing existence anywhere else" (Swann and Krupat x-xi). Nineteenth century ethnological practice consisted mostly in going to the field to save "knowledge" or "information" without considering the meaning of those exchanges for the people with whom they made contact or their reasons for engaging in such a project. It is in these collaborative, or as-told-to, autobiographies that we see most clearly the strategies so well known to "[a]nyone familiar with the history of Native literatures in the Americas (...) — translation, re-interpretation, appropriation, romanticizing, museumization, consumerization, and marginalization" (Blaeser 54).<sup>50</sup>

At the turn of the century, a new generation of Indians was already returning from boarding schools.<sup>51</sup> Literate, independent (in terms of writing), and respectful of their own

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<sup>50</sup> For a good discussion of how this process takes place, see Sarris's already mentioned essay, "Reading Narrated Lives: Elizabeth Colson's *Autobiographies of Three Pomo Women*," and, in a different context, Pratt's *Imperial Eyes*.

<sup>51</sup> Off-reservation boarding schools began in 1878 under the guidance of Army Captain Richard H. Pratt, who was responsible for keeping a group of Apache prisoners at Ft. Marion, Florida. After the prisoners were allowed to return home, Pratt retained some of them, and eventually was allowed to found Carlisle Indian School in Virginia. The school motto was "Kill the Indian and Save the Man." The main idea was to strip them of their cultural heritage passed through word of mouth by the family and instill Christian values and a Western way of life. With techniques similar to

traditions they were able to establish a distinct Indian voice, even if still cloaked in Western literary conventions. The best known life writers of this period were Charles Alexander Eastman (Santee Sioux), Luther Standing Bear (Lakota), John Joseph Mathews (Osage), Helen Sekaquaptewa (Hopi), Polingaysi Qoyawayma (Elizabeth Q. White; Hopi), Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (Zitkala-Sa; Lakota), and Mourning Dove (Okanagan), among others.

Closer to our own time, autobiographical writing reached an unimaginable number of practitioners. Among the most prominent are the poets, fictional and song writers who acquired visibility after 1968, such as Leslie Marmon Silko. This rapid increase in the number of autobiographies is directly related to the diversity of functions they can perform for American Indian communities. In the editorial article for a special edition on American Indian autobiography, editors Michelle Raheja and Stephanie Fitzgerald list the following uses:

as a powerful means of constructing tribal identities; a form of cultural preservation; a mode of surveillance in the hands of reservation and government agents; a springboard for thinking about issues of sovereignty, nationalism, and historiography; and a therapeutic tool to help deal with historical and personal trauma. (1)

In keeping with this new context, many scholars are now beginning to look for "cultural, political, personal, historical, and linguistic contexts that inform indigenous subjectivity" (Raheja and Fitzgerald 1). Although there is not an "Indian subjectivity," many issues keep emerging in Native American life writing. In this sense, Kimberly M. Blaeser strongly argues for a criticism and theorization that takes the terms provided in the works themselves. Although Western theory has been useful to illuminate certain aspects of indigenous literature, Blaeser claims that the Indian voice has been conspicuously absent from these bi-cultural interpretations. Quoting Owens's character Uncle Luther, Blaeser warns "[w]e got to be aware of the stories they are making about us, and the way they change the stories we already know."<sup>52</sup> In the context of autobiography, it is urgent that criticism strives to find the terms and the questions that can inform an adequate engagement with the text.

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brainwashing, Carlisle became a model after which similar schools were built across the United States. They were discontinued in the 1930s, but subsisted on reservations under the control of missionaries and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

<sup>52</sup> Owens, Louis. *The Sharpest Sight*. Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1992. 91.

Indeed, it is only recently that autobiographical studies have engaged with culturally diverse definitions of the self. Clearly, as Eakin's brief discussion of Silko's *Storyteller* reminds us, the popular reception of autobiography as "a story of individuation" fails to account for "another culture's practice of identity narrative" (74). More than that, it obscures the dialogue that should take place between reader and text, between autobiographer and the totality of social practices that have informed the composition of the autobiographical text. In the specific case of Native American life writing, the implications of Pratt's concept of transculturation for autobiographical studies have remained largely unexplored. She uses this term "to describe processes whereby members of subordinate or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture" ("Transculturation" 31). This should open for us the opportunity of investigating how different codes inform one another. So far, the danger has always been that of seeing this culturally other work as "immature in form," failing to recognize the complex relation between culturally diverse narrative codes. It is never too much to emphasize that this happens in an unequal space where access to economic and political power has had dire consequences for the dominated group. However, as Pratt emphasizes

While subordinate peoples do not usually control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extent what gets absorbed into their own, and what it gets used for. Transculturation, like autoethnography, is a phenomenon of the contact zone. ("Transculturation" 31)

As part of a complex discursive relational network, sustained by existing social and local practices, Native American autobiographical writing is a practice of the contact zone. Any reading of these works need to take into account the modes of insertion of this contact zone into the wider economy of exchanges, lest it becomes a space of in-differentiation, hiding the distance between cultures and "the actual experience of economic, social and political disempowerment" (Coombes 110). The consequences of an undifferentiated reading would be failing to account for the specificity of these works and reaffirming the usual racist stereotypes prevailing elsewhere in society.

According to Susanna Egan, this act of retrieval and reimagining as it is carried out in the contemporary autobiographical narrative is, as Stone's formulation of the autobiographical act as "an interpretation of the surviving records [the writer's] own past" suggests, a "writing engendered by a crisis that is not yet resolved" (Egan 4). And, she continues:

The urgent present tense of this [contemporary autobiographical] writing is particularly significant for its contestatory or resistant strategies that untrammel the subject from discursive helplessness. Paul Smith's work is illuminating here. He finds that current conceptions of the subject have produced a purely theoretical subject removed from political and ethical realities and sets out to discern a new subject. (4)

Driving the writing of a life, then, is the desire to change, to emphasize future possibility and survival, which in this case refers to the self as embodied in writing, flesh, community, and politics. In fact, constituting a life through writing consists in an act of resistance, a performative act, intent on affirming one's right to be, on one's own terms. The historical process of placing a heavier weight on discourse, which Olney identifies in the Western historical development of autobiographical writing, is also, reflected on the new hermeneutic processes we use to read it. In fact, the emphasis on the imaginative task brought to work in our reading is not unlike the activity that a writer applies to the construction of his or her self through writing. Literary scholar Christopher B. Teuton, for instance, argues that Native writers are "always at least a couple critical steps ahead of the work of scholars in our [literary] field" (209), thus suggesting that interpretative strategies and critical terms may be drawn from the work themselves, both in nonfictional and creative works.

## **UNASSIMILATED IDENTITIES AND OTHERNESS**

Intrinsically connected to the process of constructing a literature which unequivocally aims at subverting the image of the Indian imposed by the white European colonizer and their descendents is the crucial question of cultural identity, of what it means to be an Indian in today's society. As the quote of Anne Waters at the beginning of this chapter suggests, this is not an easy positionality, as it involves a history of violence and disappropriation which demands a stronghold that can guarantee survival for the individual and for the future generations. Building this stronghold means strengthening the ties that connect the individual to a long cultural tradition through storytelling. As Jace Weaver contends in his book *Other Words*, when N. Scott Momaday and Paula Gunn Allen speak of *racial memory* and *memory*

*in the blood*, they are not alluding to some genetic determinism but to the stories incorporated by previous generations which are passed down and which help construct one's sense of identity (7-8). As Paula Gunn Allen writes, "No Cherokee can forget the Trail of Tears...."<sup>53</sup> meaning that experience is carried culturally from one generation to another through the stories that remind Native Americans of who they are. This does not entail that experience or expression is homogeneous, as not all Native Americans are Cherokee, for instance, but that Native Americans cannot fail to address the histories of colonization that keep affecting them as the structures of power have not been dismantled yet. Jace Weaver reasons that Native American literature can be considered "resistance literature," as defined by Barbara Harlow,<sup>54</sup> since American Indians have been exiled from their homelands *and* subjugated by an "occupying power," which "significantly intervened in the literary and cultural development of the people it has dispossessed and whose land it has occupied" (Weaver *Other* 12). The fact that many of them write in English and are mixedbloods or that their audience is mostly composed of non-Natives evidently has an impact over any attempt to define what Native American literature is. However, the issue is greatly tainted in the United States by an essentialist discourse that questions authenticity and belonging in terms of the racial discourse of blood and, worse, blood quantum. Whereas Native literature in English is assumed by some to be American literature written by Native Americans, thus relegating it to an assimilated discourse, most indigenous writers emphasize their choice for English as a tool to protect their communities and worldviews. English is used to speak for "the People," meaning here evidently, the community of the writer/speaker.

Therefore, it is quite expected that the question of identity assumes a central role. Indeed, as North-American Indians strive to establish their identity beyond the American dream, Native writers start to recenter their identity from an Indian perspective. Whatever form this "Indian perspective" takes, it is clearly present in most of the Indian texts, which give continuity to a long oral tradition but nonetheless incorporate aspects of the Indian experience in contemporary American society, and place for the first time the non-Indian as outsiders, or the non-informed element, thus questioning the representation of the Indian constructed in the means of mass communication, such as the television and the cinema, in literature, and even in the federal policy towards "the Indian problem". Consequently, the diversity of the contemporary production requires a more detailed examination of the different strategies and worldviews created by Indian authors to redefine the North-American Indian

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<sup>53</sup> Allen, Paula Gunn, ed, *Spiderwoman's Granddaughters*. (New York: Fawcett Columbine America, 1989), 168.

<sup>54</sup> Harlow, Barbara, *Resistance Literature* (New York, Methuen, 1987), 2.

identity. Whereas Native American writers defend their right to define identity in their own terms based on generational links, relation to community and place,<sup>55</sup> more and more they find themselves cornea into abstract definitions of identity that disregard the social network that links them to community by emphasizing “blood quantum” or the presence of their ancestors in the “tribal rolls.”

Indeed, the intricacies of the legal apparatus both in the United States and Canada which defines who is a status Indian and who is not, depending either on tribal enrollment or on receiving this status from one’s parents, serves the purpose of legally ruling out Indians in a foreseeable future, even if they still have Indian blood in their veins and their culture is alive. As Thomas King puts it, taking the situation in Canada to illustrate this point:

The French, I’m sure, feel that they constantly have to reaffirm their right to exist, but they don’t have to deal with laws that try to get rid of them. There are no legal divisions for status French and non-status French, the concept of the pure laine (sic) being a social construct, not a legal one. Consequently if a French woman marries an English man and her children marry Italians and Greeks and their children marry Australians and Germans and maybe even Indians, they don’t, by law, lose their claim to being French. (148-9)

So in Canada—and the situation in the United States is not much different—as King explains, Indian legal identity cannot be asserted solely in terms of their own culture, but it depends on inheriting the right status. Notice that Thomas King, for instance, discusses the question of identity in terms of nations and not of race. Further, he clarifies the difference between legal and cultural survival:

And because there’s no legal distinction, the French can go on creating more French no matter whom they marry. All they have to do is maintain their language and culture, and they will never lose status, while Indians can disappear even with their languages and cultures intact. (149)

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<sup>55</sup> Anne Waters contends that the question of identity has philosophical interest exactly because of all the racist political agendas that have focused on external criteria of identification rather than on “sustained notions of kinship and geography.” “Indian identities,” she continues, “also spring from tribal sovereignty, community resources, and self-identification” (“That” 73).

This situation has led to a great discussion of who has the right to claim Indian identity and who does not. The implications are many and are outside the scope of this work but this quick reference is enough to illustrate the many divisions that this law can generate inside the communities, especially when practical economic resources are at stake, such as land, tribal membership, legal and health-care rights, casino grants, or artistic rights. More importantly, however, is the fact that American Indians often feel that, despite all their internal differences coming from a multiplicity of Native American nations, they have to write against the images and distortions arising from stereotype and prejudice. Having a 500-year history of being identified from the outside as a homogeneous group, Native American writers have been addressing the oppressive construct of the “white man’s Indian.” As Kateri Damm says: “Unfortunately, the erasure of another’s identity can be a very damaging and oppressive action based on ignorance, racism and racial power relations which create an environment in which non-Natives feel justified in questioning another’s identity” (14). As Thomas King demonstrates, this definition from outside is carried out not only at the individual level but also in laws, which since the 19<sup>th</sup> century until recently have entailed other consequences at the cultural level, such as the prohibition from carrying out their own religious ceremonies and the forced removal of thousands of children from their families so as to erase their “Indianness” in boarding schools and foster homes. Therefore, despite their differences, Native nations have a shared experience that unites them. Kateri Damm argues that:

Perhaps [these bonds of shared experience exist] because Indigenous peoples share an understanding that we have been and still are forced to conform to other peoples’ images of us. That in our own countries we are expected to agree, reach consensus on a variety of complex issues such as constitutional amendments, self-government, Aboriginal rights, and ‘freedom of expression,’ even though we are distinct peoples spread over large, vastly different territories. (15)

Referring to the impact that this outside image has on Native people, Jace Weaver borrow Dennis McPherson and Douglas Rabb’s use of the concept of the “outside view predicate,”

a notion derived from the Western philosophical schools of British conceptual analysis and European existential phenomenology. Coined by Phyllis Sutton

Morris, the term means definitions “which, when applied to ourselves, imply an ‘outside view’ in either a literal or figurative sense”<sup>56</sup> (Weaver *Other* 5).

According to these authors, the concept involves more than simply being seen from the outside, since it implies being determined by others’ expectations, abdicating from becoming “what you have within yourself to become” (McPherson and Rabb qtd. in Weaver *Other* 5). In order to circumvent this tendency, American Indians are intent on imagining themselves—not the way a “wannabe” does, because he or she can simply “imagine” an identity without having to carry the burden of it in the real world—, but, for real Native Americans, this act of imagination is a political act that refuses outside determination. As Weaver explains, this move is fundamental lest Native Americans capitulate to the image that the dominant society has of the imaginary Indian.

In a world marked by blurred frontiers, the presence of the mixedblood creates a problem for a legal definition of who belongs to a certain community or not. In his discussion involving the Mashpee legal battle for tribal recognition in 1976, James Clifford problematizes a possible definition of identity that defies Western linear categories which do not allow for negotiations and ignores a complex history of Indian-Euroamerican relations. The author, for instance, discusses the concept of culture inherited from its eighteenth century concept meaning, “a tending to natural growth” (337), which “retained its bias toward wholeness, continuity, and growth” but “precludes sharp contradictions, mutations, or emergences” (338). He conceives that the relationship between the two contending parties, the Mashpee and the Federal Government, in this specific case, possesses a dynamic which at times made it unwise for someone to assert their identity as Mashpee, whereas now fighting for federal tribal recognition does not entail such undesirable consequences as before. However, Western legal practice cannot deal with cultures that “disappear” then “reappear.” Therefore, any definition of culture which requires continuity through time runs the risk of shortsightedness, failing to account for the particularities of a given community. Historically, sharp definitions have served to define a violent politics of termination and broken treaties. Any sense of “purity,” such as defined by official policy makers, ends up excluding not only individual Indians but also denying ancestry, community or background to generations of Indians who have had contact and exchanges with the various ethnic groups since the colonial conquest.

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<sup>56</sup> Dennis McPherson and J. Douglas Rabb, *Indian from the Inside: A Study in Ethno-Metaphysics* (Thunder Bay: Ont.: Lakehead University, Centre for Northern Studies, 1993), 21-22.



Therefore, we need a definition of culture that goes beyond a simple assertion of “us” and “them” with the mixedblood in-between as “cultural broker” to include the notion of open-ended dialogue and exchange. Louis Owens emphasizes that

Euroamerica remains involved in an unceasing ideological struggle to confine Native Americans within an essentialized territory defined by the authoritative utterance “Indian.” Native Americans, however, continue to resist this ideology of containment and to insist upon the freedom to reimagine themselves within a fluid, always shifting frontier space. (*Mixedblood* 27)

What is needed is a concept of culture that does not define territories with exchanges between them defined in terms of “brokerage” or “cultural tourism”<sup>57</sup> but one that leaves room for mobility and self-assertion. One which does not lock Indians in dead-end positions. After all, as many Native writers explain, being a mixedblood is not necessarily a comfortable position as uneven power relations create an inner cleavage that demands an active engagement with the terms of that identity. Taking her lead from Fanon, Jana Sequoya Magdaleno asserts that “blurring the identity of the colonized”<sup>58</sup> is a systematic process carried out with the aim of “[achieving] domination at the personal level” (282).

As anthropologist Clifford Geertz emphasizes in his book *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Edward B. Tyler’s classic ethnographic definition of culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (qtd. in Greenblatt, “Culture” 225) is excessively broad to hold any descriptive value. Instead, he proposes a semiotic definition of culture, “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning”<sup>59</sup> (15). This view of ethnography leads to an interpretative concept of culture that relies not on a structuralist view of the social system but rather emphasizes the symbolic description of a culture in accordance with the way its participants interpret the “webs of significance.”

<sup>57</sup> The terms come from Louis Owens (*Mixedblood*).

<sup>58</sup> Fanon, Frantz. *A Dying Colonialism*. Trans. Haakon Chevalier. New York: Grove P, 1965.

<sup>59</sup> The page number corresponds to the page in the Portuguese translation, which is the one in the bibliography. The quotation in the original was taken from a review of the book published on the Internet and corresponds to page 5 of the English original. The online source is accessible at: <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0465097197/104-5788793-8711951?v=glance&n=283155> Accessed on 28 December 2005. With the exception of the quote above, I have read the translation.

The advantage of this approach to a literary construction of the self is evident, as it enables a reflection on how reader and text inform one another while aiming at understanding the transcultural dialogue between the writer and his or her point of insertion in the larger community. Geertz's method of analysis consists in what he calls "thick description," that is, to render events as closely as possible to their social and concrete context so as to infer the symbolic meanings ascribed to them by their participants. The possible danger of adopting this method in literary analysis resides in losing sight of a broader view of power relations outside the text and how it predicates the text. In order to make full use of Geertz's contribution, Stephen Greenblatt proposes "an awareness of culture as a complex whole [which] can help us to recover that sense [of the stakes that once gave readers pleasure and pain] by leading us to reconstruct the boundaries upon whose existence the works were predicated" ("Culture" 226). In this sense, literature is seen as part of a major cultural dialogue, so that "a full cultural analysis will need to push beyond the boundaries of the text, to establish links between the text and values, institutions, and practices elsewhere in the culture" (226).

Félix Guattari points to the need of greater refinement of this position when he introduces the concept of singularity as a counterpoint to the ego-centered notion of individuality as the center of a conscience. In the first chapter to his book *Micropolítica*, "Cultura: um conceito reacionário,"<sup>60</sup> Guattari provides three definitions of the word culture. The first is the one mostly identified with the idea of "high culture," a debatable concept representing the "best" that has been produced and thought which, despite its elitist and segregating bias, is still taken into account in everyday discourse. The second definition of culture, which he names B, as opposed to the previous one, A, is the ethnographic concept derived basically from E. B. Tyler. The third definition, Culture-C, refers to the distributional apparatus exerted by the several state and media institutions that regulate the flux of "cultural goods," and determines who has access to what. When Guattari questions the concept of culture saying that, in its various assumptions, it is reactionary because it implies the separation of the different semiotic fields of expression and therefore alienates the individual, he is emphasizing that the production of subjectivity does not emanate solely from the individual, but crosses him or her as it emanates both from outside sources (extra-individual sources) and infra-human nature (bio-physiological processes as well as perceptive and representative systems). But Guattari goes further by suggesting that, just as language does, "*subjectivity* circulates in social groupings of different sizes: it *is essentially*

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<sup>60</sup> "Culture: a reactionary concept"

*social, and it is assumed and lived by individuals in their private existences*<sup>61</sup> (33). Consequently, even if this process of subjectification can lead to alienation and oppression, on the one hand, it also opens a counter possibility, namely, “a relation of expression and creation, in which the individual reappropriates the components of subjectivity, unleashing a process that I would call singularization”<sup>62</sup> (33). Guattari’s definition presents the advantage of going beyond a definition of the self viewed solely as an expression of the individual, while allowing room for the act of self-creation, integrating the social and subjective self into the broader fields of language, biological constitution, the media, the immediate social group, technological production, and capitalistic society.

One of the great concerns related to the affirmation of identity nowadays has to do with what became known as the “identity wars.” The crystallization of identity around ethnicity can be as dangerous as that based on national categories, both ideological constructs of the nineteenth century, which easily tends to be transformed into exclusionist radicalism. As Eagleton observes, the so-called cultural wars have obfuscated much of the socio-economic debate and the vision and force of the social classes, leaving the way open for the invasion of a capitalistic mass culture. Indeed, if identity sometimes poses as resistance, more often than not it is a sign of resistance that occurs not at the margins of the all-consuming capitalistic market but it is incorporated in the very system that foresees this interplay as merchandise. Nevertheless, despite the danger, we cannot abdicate the concept of cultural identity lest we all want to become part of this undifferentiated market. Native Americans are very clear about that when they claim a different approach to life than that offered by mainstream culture. As writer Steve Russell says, “we will *not* be assimilated”<sup>63</sup> (qtd. in Waters xxxiii). This very strong assertion must be understood in the context of survival, since assimilation is an aseptic term to hide the theft of land resources and the right for self-determination, the consequences of which are measured not only in terms of “wealth,” meaning here property, but also in the astounding rates of suicide, endemic diseases, alcoholism, domestic abuse, racism, car accidents, not to mention their subjugation to the chaotic power relations maintained by the federal Indian law system.

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<sup>61</sup> “A *subjetividade* está em circulação nos conjuntos sociais de diferentes tamanhos: ela é *essencialmente social, e assumida e vivida por indivíduos em suas existências particulares.*” [Emphasis in the original; my translation.]

<sup>62</sup> “uma relação de alienação e opressão, na qual o indivíduo se reapropriada dos componentes da subjetividade, produzindo um processo que eu chamaria de singularização.” [My translation.]

<sup>63</sup> Emphasis in the original.

Native Americans' identity claims are further reinforced by a different view of knowledge, science, community, ethics, life sustainability, spirituality, and pragmatic approach to life. The cognitive dissonance can be viewed, for instance, in how categories of thought differ from one another. Categories are culturally bound to local ways of relating and understanding one's place in the world. They can vary greatly in scope from linguistics to ethnicity, or from physical gender to sexuality, or from time to taxes. As historian Nancy Shoemaker emphasizes, "the pretense that change occurs in stages stems from our own cognitive predilection for turning abstract matter into tangible categories" (61). Stating in her essay that theoreticians usually stress differences between Indian and non-Indian systems of categorization, she is intent on showing the possibilities open for further investigation which go beyond the mere recognition of these differences. In that way, for example, she considers that when the first colonizers arrived in America there must have been enough similarities to allow for minimum understanding. Reasonably, she argues that, because many categories are grounded on metaphors related to the body, ideas such as "up" and "down," which refer to a corporeal experience of space, are easily understood across cultures. However, the possibility of understanding does not preclude the fact that there are cultural differences and that they need to be taken into account. She cites as an example the fact that both Indians and Europeans can measure distance in terms of the amount of time it takes them to cover it. However, Europeans tend to prefer more abstract measurements, such as miles.

Whereas Nancy Shoemaker is concerned with how categories work and with the possibility of understanding how different societies make use of them, Maori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith stresses the socio-political-economical implications of these cultural differences during the colonial period and now, and the way Western categories were impinged on indigenous peoples. She gives particular attention to the categories of space and time, which are "encoded in language, philosophy and science" (50). In practical terms, the appropriation of space by mathematics served "[to construct] a language which [attempted] to define, with absolute exactness, the parameters, dimensions, qualities and possibilities of space" (50). As a result, "the indigenous world view, the land and the people, have been radically transformed in the spatial image of the West. In other words, indigenous space has been colonized" (51). The examples given of the ways this has been done range from the way land is used passing through the renaming of indigenous traditional sites<sup>64</sup> up to confining the indigenous peoples into reservations. Still according to Linda Smith, this view of

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<sup>64</sup> (See note 171).

space as divorced from time has generated a view of the world “as a ‘realm of stasis’, well defined, fixed and without politics” (52).

Not so obviously, the ideas brought by the colonizers regarding time differed in great measure from those of indigenous societies. As Linda Smith argues, “time is associated with social activity” (53), and the way our daily lives are organized. According to her, this is what links the otherwise separate events of the industrial revolution, the Protestant ethic, imperialism and the rise of science. Prominent in the enforcement of a “work ethics” was the role played by missionaries, who worked systematically to introduce Western education, and a new relationship to the land and employment, resulting in changing relationships to community, history, knowledge, subjectivity, spirituality, etc. Stemming from these lineal views of time and space is a notion of history centered on the idea of progress. Accordingly, “progress could be ‘measured’ in terms of technological advancement and spiritual salvation. Progress is evolutionary and teleological and is present in both liberal and Marxist ideas about progress” (Smith 55).

Most importantly for the study of autobiography, though, is the fact that Smith sees the concept of distance as the concept which links Western ideas concerning the individual and community, time and space, knowledge and research, imperialism and colonialism. Distance is felt not only in the separation created between the individual and the community or the land, but also in relations of power and in the separation implied by the concept of “objectivity.” As Paula Gunn Allen states

traditional American Indian literature is not similar to Western literature, because the basic assumptions 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. This difference has confused non-Indian students for centuries. They have been unable or unwilling to accept this difference and to develop critical procedures to illuminate the material without trivializing or otherwise invalidating them. (“Sacred” 3-4)

In a similar vein to Smith’s argumentation, Paula Gunn Allen demonstrates how different assumptions most Indians have in relation to the categories of space and time bear on the reception non-Indians have of traditional Indian literature. To exemplify it, she relates a myth of creation, showing how this is conceived in terms of movement, as opposed to stasis, and is an act of co-creation, where all the creatures are invited to participate dynamically. In this way, traditional Indian societies do not subscribe to the hierarchical

Judeo-Christian view of creation, which separates one creature from the other based on their relative distance to an outside creator. In terms of time and space,

the American Indian [tends] to view space as spherical and time as cyclical, whereas the non-Indian tends to view space as linear and time as sequential. The circular concept requires all “points” that make up the sphere of being to have a significant identity and function, while the linear model assumes that some “points” are more significant than others. In the one, significance is a necessary factor of being in itself, whereas in the other, significance is a function of placement on an absolute scale that is fixed in time and space. (“Sacred” 7)

The implications of these differences for a conception of the self and for autoethnography, to borrow Pratt’s term, still needs to be further explored. As Kimberly Blaeser reminds us, the point is not simply to assert differences, but to recover the original voice of Native Americans and to listen to what they are saying without changing their words or taking them out of context. In part, the best way to approach this question lies in giving priority to the present, to the actual moment of life writing and the hermeneutical process implied in its reading. As Kateri Damm concludes quoting Rayna Green,<sup>65</sup>

... “identity” is never simply a matter of genetic make-up or natural birthright. Perhaps once, long ago, it was both. For people out on the edge, out on the road, identity is a matter of will, a matter of choice, a face to be shaped in a ceremonial act. (25)

While a student at Stanford, Momaday wrote an essay called “The Morality of Indian Hating,” which, according to himself, is very political in character as it denounces the attack effectuated on Indigenous peoples (*Man* 57). This attack is not merely physical; its impact is felt over all aspects of Indian life, most especially on the values that have sustained these communities for thousands of years. Although Momaday regrets the historical bias of his essay that stresses more than he would have liked the past tense, in his Afterword he can only conclude that “[his] convictions have grown stronger.” And this time he points to the present and the task before Native Americans:

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<sup>65</sup> Green, Rayna, ed. *That’s What She Said: Contemporary Poetry and Fiction by Native American Women*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984. 7.

I believe that what most threatens the American Indian is sacrilege, the theft of the sacred. Inexorably the Indian people have been, and are being, deprived of the spiritual nourishment that have sustained them from many thousands of years. This is a subtle holocaust, and it is ongoing. It is imperative that the Indian defines himself, that he finds strength to do so, that he refuses to let others define him. Children are at greatest risk. We, Native Americans in particular, but all of us, need to restore the sacred to our children. It is a matter of the greatest importance. (76)

Following Momaday's lead, the next section examines the connection between language, stories, ethics, and healing as a key factor sustaining Native American life writing. In fact, indigenous autobiographies are an attempt to indicate through lived experience ways to revert the "holocaust."

### **HEALING: "*LOGOS BOETHÓS*"**

Native Americans authors often express their need of healing when they write their autobiographies. The idea of healing implies immediately the presence of a disease and its cure. In the Western world, disease is directly connected to bodily unbalance, so that when a part, or parts, of the body's function is impaired, the whole cannot perform properly. Nancy Bonvillain explains that "[f]or most traditional Native Americans, good health is thought to be a state of balance and harmony, both within the body and between the body and its surroundings" (13). Therefore, healthiness comprises the state of physical, emotional, and spiritual balance in harmony with those Others that surround the person in question. This Other here must be understood as "all our relations," that is, including the whole social, historical, and natural relations surrounding the individual. Accordingly, Bonvillain's definition of illness extends beyond the body to include "disharmony with one's family, or community, and it may result from an unbalanced relationship with spirit beings and with other forces of the universe" (15).

In Native American stories, this idea of healing is often thematized as characters move from a disrupted world marked by separation and false boundaries to embrace once again traditional ideas of wholeness.<sup>66</sup> This round world includes new contexts, that is, the idea of wholeness is not founded on any mythic world before any dramatic change occurred but holds in it the idea of change, adaptation, and survival. The idea of maintaining tradition as a living body that shifts and grows is embodied in the character of the trickster, or coyote, so important in Indian cultures. The trickster holds no stasis but embodies transformation, shifting realities, and the capacity to "rise from [its] own wreckage to begin again" (Acoose 37). Although coyote is always playing mischief on others, it is the first victim of his own tricks. This capacity for a good laugh, present even in the most serious rituals, teaches the audience not to get stuck up in old assumptions when there is a need for a new approach. Whereas coyote, the trickster-healer, may be a reminder of one's own foolish behavior, it may also open up the "sense of possibility, ability to seize the main chance and enjoy a trick" (Danielson 29). In spite of always falling into its own trap, Coyote holds community together by ensuring continuation, fresh outlooks, and new starts. In his analysis of Silko's novel *Ceremony*, B. A. ST. Andrews explains the idea of healing in Native fiction emphasizing the connection between the natural and the supernatural. Accordingly,

its characters seem both real and mythic: able to transform themselves into animals, to mingle freely with the spirit world, and to commune with all presences. Amerindian thought imbues every rock, tree, creature, and wind with a metaphysical as well as a physical dimension. Healing—given this profound, round definition of matter—is a complex and powerful notion, and language is at its soul and center. Perhaps Amerindian thought may be said to bridge the dualistic between science and art in a most sophisticated and holistic way. (86)

Therefore, illness manifests itself in all levels and a proper cure must likewise address these levels. And this is done by proper ceremonies which create a new understanding. Needless to say, ceremonies are actualized in language and may take the form of a story, as Silko's novel well exemplifies. In it,

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<sup>66</sup> I think, for example, of Silko's *Ceremony*, Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, Welch's *Fools Crow*, King's *Medicine River*, Bell's *Faces on the Moon*, Hobson's *Last of the Ofos*, Hogan's *Solar Storms*, Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Owens's *Wolfsong*, or Power's *Grass Dancer*. The examples were taken at random and the list could be easily extended.



healing is multidimensional. First of all, the afflicted person must be dealt with, second, the land itself manifests the illness, so the drought must be dealt with. Third, because the illness of one tribal member contaminates the whole tribe, the cure must be all-inclusive. Fourth, the mind and body of the sick person—Tayo, in this case—can be cured only by simultaneously healing the spirit. One isolated part cannot be healed; the whole must be healed. (Andrews 88)

Andrews shows that, to be effective, cure must go beyond the individual. It is only when Tayo recognizes that the source of his evils is to be found in the illusion of separation that he can find the proper balance in the delicate web of life. Through the ceremony Tayo begins to untangle the stories that divide, the lies that create powerlessness, that justify the theft of the land, that create feelings of (racial) worthlessness, that cleave his own self in non-Indian and non-white, that separate the people from the land. Differently from dominant Western medicine, which concentrates its healing powers on the individual, Native American philosophy "holds 'the People' as the center and the individual as its radius" (Andrews 90). Consequently, individuals must strive to find their own place in a spiral of stories that connect people and land. Interestingly, the evil that afflicts Tayo in the novel is referred to as "witchery." This word has a long history in the Western world as witches were burnt since at least medieval times for their contact, real or imaginary, to sources of knowledge not sanctioned by those in power, be it the church, the State, or science. In Silko's novel, however, "the witchery" is a force that has always existed, that cannot be destroyed but only controlled temporarily through the concerted ordering effort of all the people. This force stands for unbalance of earth, peace, and relations, as represented by stories. The novel is fraught with stories of all kinds that must be seen as part of a single web and must be ordered. These are stories of war, death, theft, draught, racial inferiority, exclusion, dispossession, displacement, disease. What Tayo must learn through the ceremony is that these relations occur in a much vaster context that is nurturing and full of love. These stories of hurt are not new, in the sense that they follow a pattern intent on making people forget the other stories, stories that include, that talk of growth and adaptation, that unmask the illusion of the separation of races, in short, stories that create peace and harmony.

But how can stories heal? How can they heal forces that lie beyond the individual? If signifier and signified cannot be fixed, neither can stories. Each story is an act of co-creation in a web of relations. Evidently, not all stories are good, since there are stories telling of war,

disease, domination, destruction, disappropriation, dislocation, and death. But without the right story, or rather, without stories that attempt to clear the way towards physical, spiritual, ecological, economic, and political balance there can be no healing. As Silko's narrator in *Ceremony* says "[stories] aren't just entertainment/Don't be fooled/They are all we have, you see/ All we have to fight off/Illness and death. You don't have anything/If you don't have stories" (2). The best stories are those that guarantee survival in its broadest sense, so that communities can be sustained physically and culturally, with all the necessary conditions. In the Preface to her collaborative work with three Yukon elders in a time span of more than fifteen years anthropologist, Julie Cruikshank reinforces this aspect of narrative: "One of the many things these women taught me is that their narratives do far more than entertain. If one has optimistic stories about the past, they showed, one can draw on internal resources to survive and make sense of arbitrary forces that might otherwise seem overwhelming." (*Social* xii)

Despite the opposing meanings of witchery in European and American history and that given by Silko, one more connected to alternative kinds of knowledge and resistance and the other related to evil and destructive forces, respectively, it is clear that both refer to forces beyond the objective world. This is not to imply the existence of the devil or any other personification of evil, but that destructive balance occurs at all levels, from the conscience of individuals and their physical bodies to institutional lies that justify theft, war, mass destruction, and ecological exploitation. Stories address this witchery in that they demand an active engagement on the part of the individual to untangle the limitations and paralysis created by lack of discernment. This rearrangement of stories provokes changes in the individual so that he or she can contribute his or her part to create wholeness again. As V. F. Cordova explains, talking about the metaphysical construct guiding Native American artists:

there is essentially, an orderly universe. It is an active, moving, living universe, and that motion occasionally exhibits chaos. The chaos, too, is essential: it is a readjustment, a resettling of the universe. Chaos is temporary; order is dominant. Humans are disturbed by the chaos — the unknown, the unpredictable. It is the role of the artist to find the underlying stability in chaos in order to help his viewers understand chaos as well as order. ("Ethics" 252)

Therefore, Native American writers create from a perspective that equates aesthetics with ethics. In dealing with differences in the way knowledge is perceived, it is important not to fall into the dualism between science and "magic thinking," but to perceive that Native Americans

see all manifestations as arising from the same source. And that this source is made available through language. This is possible because there is a different conception of language that lies at the heart of Native Americans philosophy. Andrews's observation quoted above that "[p]erhaps Amerindian thought may be said to bridge the dualistic between science and art in a most sophisticated and holistic way" (86) can be now complemented by philosopher Anne Waters's presentation of Gregory's essay in the same volume that reads:

The metaphoric mind invented the rational mind, Cajete tells us, which invented language, the written word, abstraction, and dispositions to control rather than be of nature. The rational mind invented the anthropocentric philosophy and science that legitimizes the oppression of nature and its elder brother, the metaphoric mind. The metaphoric mind reveals itself through symbols, and kinesthetic sensual abstraction. Stories of Native science come from metaphor and reflect human nature. Native science deals with "systems of relationships and their application to the life of the community." Western science seeks prediction and control, yet Native science, for Cajete, seeks meaning and understanding to find the proper ethical and moral path to follow in order to understand our responsibilities to Nature, which we depend on, and whose energies and animating power are invoked. The symbols of Native science attempt to represent the universe itself. This is consistent with Burkhart's claim that in Native epistemology, what is true is what is right.

"As co-creators with nature, everything we do and experience has importance to the rest of the world. We cannot misexperience anything, we can only misinterpret what we experience... what we think and believe, and how we act in the world impacts with literally everything."<sup>67</sup> Thus Native science represents an inclusive and moral universe. (xxii) [Note added]

Anne Waters's reference here to Cajete's explanation of Native science, clearly indicates that Native science searches for an understanding of the universe through language in order to attune action to proper behavior. In other words, the imaginative engagement with the natural world, which provides the symbols and the guidance for a moral action, can only be done by a comprehensive metaphorical view of the universe. Myth and fact are not two opposing ways of looking at the universe in a linear continuum, but simply two different and complementary ways to explain each one's place and function inside the whole. Consequently, stories attempt to approach this orderly view of the universe and guide the individual to balanced action.

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<sup>67</sup> Cajete, "Philosophy" 52.

The presentation of a distinct Native point of view does not imply a secluded universe where epistemological differences prevent interaction with Western points of view. On the contrary, Native American fiction has emphasized the need to incorporate these visions, provided that this addition does not efface the Native voices. The plural is used here precisely to emphasize that Native Americans cannot be represented by "the Indian voice," as if they comprised an undifferentiated monolithic ensemble, in the same way that generalizations of Western thinking serve only as a register of general trends. It would be a mistake to reduce the variety and richness of both systems in essentialist positions. As Christopher B. Teuton suggests, the "issue of culture-sharing has little to do with cultural purity/impurity and more to do with the production and aims of knowledge within a colonial context." (205). Therefore, such general inclinations have to be pointed out if we are to understand this basic chasm that manifests itself in Native American fiction and in autobiographical writings by Native American Indians. It is not by chance that the mixedblood, the one endowed with the perspective of both cultures, often appears and is thematized in Native American fiction. As mixedblood Maori writer Keri Hulme says about herself, belonging to two cultures makes "a person (...) intrinsically a mongrel [who] can never be truly committed to one way alone" (qtd. in Damm 18). Although she envies those who can legitimately say that they belong to one side only, she also feels that they miss something and "are limited because again the advantage and the joy is being able to be on both sides of the fence (and there is one), to have more than one set of ears, to have more than one set of eyes"<sup>68</sup> (18). In many cases, it is the fact of belonging to two cultures that equipped many writers to speak from an informed position, so that now they are able to rectify false representations in English.

The question of language is important here, for it is not simply a matter of marginalized groups using the language of the center to be heard. These groups are at the zone of contact, and as such they try to subvert the way the dominant culture sees them by enriching its vision with new ideas. This includes language. As Janice Acoose tells us, Indigenous peoples have survived because their cultures and languages are deeply embedded in the land, that is, they are connected to "the Mother" as opposed to "non-Indigenous peoples' language and writings which are rooted in a patriarchal hierarchy" (35). Difficult as it may be, the task of the Native writer is to "put the mother back in the [English]

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<sup>68</sup> Peek, Andrew. "An Interview With Keri Hulme." *New Literature in Review*. 20 (Winter South 1990). New Literatures Research Centre. University of Wollongong. 3

language!"<sup>69</sup> (Maria Campbell qtd. in Acoose 35). Therefore, the choice of language is dictated by a desire of being heard by mainstream society and by a desire to transform the language itself, so that it can manifest a more balanced relationship with the land and its peoples. Moreover, if English is not regarded as the source of revitalization in terms of the values it carries (a position occupied in Native American literature by Native storytelling and languages), at least it may be used as a means of reappropriating stories through their reinsertion in new contexts. As Paul Beekman Taylor argues in his essay "Silko's Reappropriation of Secrecy," Native American languages and stories have long been appropriated in libraries, films, and museums as artifacts, just like medicine bundles and other culturally important integrant parts of Native cultures, without, or maybe precisely because of that, proper understanding of their organic lives. Incorporated into the "Euroamerican's public economy" (33), these stories must be retrieved so that they can continue to live and revitalize Native American cultures. "Furthermore," he continues, "the Indian's recycling of European language and literary forms enriches the Anglo mainstream with the particular value of Indian experience" (33). This act of reappropriation does not signify taking the stories already stolen from anthropological records and making a second disclosure by making them public again, but recreating myths instead, so that stories become alive in new contexts, whose meaning will only be understood if one is able to read the signs. Consequently, this form of using tribal (and secret) stories in no way parallels the cannibalism of modernist literature,<sup>70</sup> but requires readers to be able to read the world as storied and sacred. As Taylor argues, Europe's crave to desecrate the "inviolable secrecy of God's being" (37) from the twelfth-century onwards led to a search where nothing remained sacred and everything was open to the curiosity and gain of the explorer. "It is little wonder," Taylor says, "that the Euro-American habit of thought secularized the pursuit of happiness."<sup>71</sup> In such an environment, secrecy is either a secular inconvenience, a banal social and psychological game, or a hidden cause behind natural phenomena that must be divulged"<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Lutz, Harmut, ed. *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Contemporary Canadian Native Writers*. Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1991. 49.

<sup>70</sup> One needs only to remember how much literary modernism's experimentation with time discontinuities owes to writers' recently acquired knowledge of other cultures' differences as a result of the anthropological research of the nineteenth century, as attests the overwhelming influence of Fraser's *The Golden Bough*.

<sup>71</sup> Although the phrase comes from the U.S. Constitution, Taylor equates this pursuit with the ideology of progress which forms the basis both for Manifest Destiny and the dialectical materialism of communism.

<sup>72</sup> This claim in a way summarizes the Western understanding of myth, which limits its expression to a pre-scientific explanation of natural phenomena, without being able to fully participate in the

(38). Secrecy in the white world is prominently manifest in "the white's technological and sexual perversity" (Taylor 42), whereas Native stories aim at restoring the vitality of nature's life-sustaining role. Contextualizing his discussion on the example of Sterling from Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, Paul Taylor further explains that the

white's secrets are the perversity of his social experiences in sex, violence, and drugs, (sic) He also has a morbid curiosity about the secrets of the private lives of others, represented by the stories he once read. This is because, on the one hand, such secrets are entertainments and "innocuous" facts he can easily dispose of, and on the other hand, he has lost his innate sensitivity to real secrets his ancestor spirits guarded. (48)

When Linda Hogan considers the many instances where Western science has disregarded the consequences of the fact that "animals have intelligence, language and sensitivity to pain, including psychological trauma" (*Different* 118), she is urging us to consider an obvious fact that we have been desperately trying to hide from ourselves, namely, "cruelty is cruelty" (119). Having called for an ethical relation to life, Hogan claims for the proper language to address issues of vital concern for ourselves. Language, she explains simply, is a system of signs and symbols used to communicate, but, she warns, "there are communications that take place on a level that goes deeper than our somewhat limited human spoken languages" (120), whose message is sometimes "more honest, more comprehensible, than the words we utter" (120). The second point she makes about language is that

when issues become obscured by distorted values or abstract concepts, we lose a clarity that allows us to act even in our own best behalf, for survival not just of ourselves but also of the homeland that is our life and our sustenance. These responses stand in the way of freedom from pain. They obstruct the potentials we have for a better world. It is a different yield that we desire. (121)

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hermeneutic processes of nature since Western readers are unable to understand the profusion of signs life imparts everywhere.

Consequently, the cry to "put the mother back in the [English] language!" alludes to the need of making this language of life emerge, present in Native American languages and stories.<sup>73</sup>

Linda Hogan summarizes this search for a different language saying that

We are looking for a tongue that speaks with reverence for life, searching for an ecology of mind. Without it, we have no home, have no place of our own within the creation. We also want a language of that different yield. A yield rich as the harvests of the earth, a yield that returns us to our own sacredness, to a self-love and respect that we will carry out to others. (122)

The life-bearing earth referred here is that known to the Andean peoples as *Pachamama*, the source and sustenance of all life, profoundly displaced after what they call *Pachakuti*.<sup>74</sup> How the task is to be done, still remains to be seen. Taylor argues that the "Indian's appropriation of English offers that language the ontological and epistemological particularities of the American Indian experience and fuses different realities into a new idiom." However, he continues, the "profit of the offer depends upon the Euro-American's willingness to discern, understand, and collaborate with things that do not conform to his habitual strait sense of "reality" (53). In her Foreword to philosopher V. F. Cordova's book of essays Linda Hogan strikes a similar key: "Because our histories, experiences, and ethical thought systems are different from those of Western thinkers [Cordova] speaks about, the inner architecture of our thought is not easily understood" (vii). Attempting to bridge this difference through philosophical discourse, V. F. Cordova "has gone beyond Euro-Western philosophy into the heart of the indigenous knowledge system and philosophy *as far as the limits of English will allow*" (vii, emphasis added). Rather than seeing it as a limitation, Native American writers are striving to find the proper language to empower readers into Native hermeneutical designs while revitalizing Indians and potentially transforming non-Indian readers. Dale Turner (Teme-Augama Anishnabi) expresses a similar idea in his defense of the need for Native intellectuals to engage with Western intellectual legal discourses to defend indigenous rights. Turner claims that word warriors, as he calls indigenous intellectuals trained in mainstream culture but sufficiently connected to a heterogeneous and unofficial body of

<sup>73</sup> As Jeannette Armstrong explains in relation to her Native Okanagan language cited above.

<sup>74</sup> Walter Mignolo explains this Aymara word in the following manner: "*Pacha* could be interpreted as the energetic confluence of space and time, and therefore the radiation of life. *Kuti* could be interpreted as a violent turnabout, a "revolution" in Western terms. Andean people described as *Pachakuti* what happened to them and their way of life with the arrival of the Spaniards" (*Latin* 165).

"indigenous philosophers," are a small but important group who is responsible to protect indigenous philosophies and revert the political relationship to the Canadian state.<sup>75</sup> However, this engagement is not restricted to the legal and political realms but demands that word warriors "assert that [indigenous peoples] possess different world views" (5).

While Native American novels are dealing with the difficulties that have emerged from this encounter and proposing solutions that include the perspective and the terms of those usually silenced by mainstream culture, Native writers have also engaged in autobiographical writings as a means to "[deal] with the aftermath of destruction." This destruction is found both inside and outside the communities, as Native lives are assailed by domestic violence, poverty, malnutrition, fetal alcohol syndrome, and other chronic diseases that affect Indigenous peoples at astounding rates.<sup>76</sup> Sidner Larson postulates the need to address internal oppression as well, saying that "[f]acing such realities and taking responsibility for them is crucial if Indian people are to reach the next stage of their own critical process, and it is through autobiography that some of the most urgent reminders of this come clear" (72). According to him, writing his life enabled him to recognize the supportive forces that have shaped his experience, giving him the strength to overcome harsh realities. Comparing the writing of his life with hero stories, he concludes that the process is bound to "[culminate] in returning home after an arduous journey" (76). In this sense, he continues, "[w]riting oneself is a ceremony by which the individual, incorporating internal discourse as well as outside influences, can constitute and preserve such experience, a way of tracking and articulating the life of the mind that also helps achieve temporal unification of the past and future with the present" (76). This temporal unification is not equivalent to "the unified self" across time but a creative compromise with the meaning of the lived experience at the moment of writing.

The benefits, as it were, of searching for a usable past is not restricted to the writer, though. In her autobiographical essay "The Two Lives," Linda Hogan says:

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<sup>75</sup> Although Dale Turner is discussing the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian state, the point being made here, namely, that indigenous intellectuals have to find ways of expressing in Western discourses different systems of knowledge, holds true for the U.S. as well.

<sup>76</sup> See Ward Churchill, p. xii, for comparative statistics of the rate of incidence of diseases, suicide, car accidents, and alcoholism among Indian and non-Indian populations in the U.S. See also Andrea Smith's book *Conquest* for how the politics of conquest has been affecting indigenous bodies in the whole planet as a result of, among others, mining, the forced sterilization of women of color, nuclear waste deposits and tests in indigenous lands, poisoning of waters and land, and the aftermath of child sexual abuse in boarding schools.



I tell parts of my stories here because I have often searched out other lives similar to my own. They would have sustained me. Telling our lives is important, for those who come after us, for those who will see our experience as part of their own historical struggle. I think of my work as part of the history of our tribe and as part of the history of colonization everywhere. I tell this carefully, and with omissions, so as not to cause any divisions between myself and others. I want it to be understood that the opening paragraph, the news of November 13, 1984, is directly connected to this history, to our stories, to the continuing destruction of Third World and tribal people, and the exploitation of our earth. (233)

Although she certainly feels the need to understand her own experience, what drives her to write her life is the attempt to connect the various strays of the web connecting events. The uniqueness of someone's life in Native America is taken for granted; there is no need to stress it through personal autobiography. What matters is how this individual, formed by a mixture of traits genetically received from his ancestors, gets inserted into "the group that produces and nurtures him" (Cordova "Ethics" 252). In that way, Linda Hogan does not proclaim that she will reveal herself so that others may know her, as Rousseau initially intended to do, but she will try to connect historical events as they are happening now to create awareness, to sustain the future of "those who come after us." Her telling has gaps, announced gaps, so that she does not add to the hurt. Her stated intention is to provide healing, awareness, and pathways to ethic action.

Her autobiographical book, more poetic than essayistic, also provides the same justification. The title of her introduction already points to the connection between life, land, and body: "Geography." Addressing Indian and non-Indian readers, she begins with the difficulty of recognizing a road that she can point to others. Her life is certainly not exemplary, but it bears the marks of many silences, of wounds deep enough to reach the backbone of body, history, and earth. She writes, "In my life, the wounds of history, illness, the split second of an accident, have turned me to the spirit in search for healing, wherever it can be found. And in that turn is the fact of the body, not only in the world, but as a process of the world" (*Woman* 15-16). Her story, her own body, is intrinsically connected to the history of the continent, internally reflecting the historical landscape of the land: chemical poisoning, silence, child abuse, animal exploitation, accident. Interestingly, she never allows the reader to regard her as Other, or as a victim. Her introductory conclusion is that "[t]his is a book about love. It didn't begin that way. I sat down to write about pain and wrote, instead, about healing, history, and survival. The work revealed to me that there is a geography of the human spirit, common to all peoples" (16). Linda Hogan wishes she could hold a light to future generations, to show a map of healing, but finds no maps that can indicate the road to

her. She explores the geography that has formed and imprinted her own history, a center of many concentric circles that includes other lives, other communities, other geographies.

Cherokee poet Jimmie Durham refuses to communicate anything to the reader, and by "anything" he means allowing the reader to get inside him. His story is full of contradictions that he claims are irresolvable because they are part of a history that cannot be put nicely. "For us, history is always personal," he says, and adds: "History is directly involved with our families and our generations; tied with sacred white cotton string to the sweet and intense memories of our brother or sister is the desperate and intense hope of each generation to change this history" (159). Part of his refusal to "resolve" his story is due to his awareness of a white readership willing to penetrate his pain. While Linda Hogan wonders "why others want to enter our lives, to know the private landscape inside a human spirit, the map existing inside tribal thoughts and traditional knowledge" (*Woman* 14) and believes it must be because Others want to "find out answers to questions minds and bodies new to this continent haven't yet even asked," Jimmie Durham provides a less generous view:

I do not want to entertain you in any sense of the word. I would hate it if you all came to understand me. And I'd really hate it if I wrote something like those "sensitive and honest" novels some black writers are doing, so that any white person with a few bucks could spend a quiet evening entertained by our sorrows, and gaining in power by "a better understanding" of our predicament, our dreams. (163)

What he gives his reader, instead of motivations and pain, is a brief overview of his anger toward history, a history that is always personal and affects all Indian country. The contradiction of writing his life and refusing the reader the right to see him is, in a way, a statement of his place in that history, a place that is not only his but illustrative of all Native America. Answering his own question of whether it is good to write about one's troubles, he says, "Paul Smith, a Comanche guy with a weird story, said, 'In this century the story of any Indian is a typical Indian story, no matter how different.' Which means to me that in this allotted century of lives in dispersed parcels we are still the people, with a common thread" (158). This connection between personal history and collective experience, is present in most Native autobiographies as they seek to clarify the sources of destructive and abusive behavior, especially as most of them come from disrupted tribes.

In her essay "Keepers of the Earth," Jeannette Armstrong relates a conversation between her father and his mother that she witnessed as a child. Looking down at the valley and observing the movement of the town her grandmother said, "The people down there are dangerous, they are all insane," to which her father answered, "It's because they are wild and scatter anywhere" (317). These words, spoken in Okanagan, made her afraid, because the terms used in her Native language for "insane" and "wild" "describe deeds of the newcomers that make no sense to [an Okanagan person]" (317). Describing this Okanagan view as similar to the experience of someone witnessing a holocaust, she says,

As a Native American, I have felt that [social] crisis as a personal struggle against an utterly pervasive phenomenon. My conflict has been to unremittably resist its entrapment, while knowing that it affects every breath I draw. Through the lens of that perspective, I view the disorder that is displayed in our city streets, felt in our communities, endured in our homes, and carried inside as personal pain. (317)

As an Okanagan person, Armstrong resists passing judgment on the psychology or philosophy of the newcomers, but seeks out ways to transform this "insane" behavior which strikes all kinds of lives and people's relation to the land, which is our only source of survival. In a very provocative little book, Jack D. Forbes describes this destructive behavior as a catching disease, which he names *wétiko*. This mental illness, characterized by greed, sadism, cruelty, envy, violence, organized crime, exploitation of other lives, a kind of cannibalism that enslaves other people for profit, is pervasive in white society, though not exclusively and admitting exceptions.<sup>77</sup> His analysis is poignant and also includes the "secret carriers" of the disease, that is, those who are simply not *wétikos* because they are not in favorable conditions to be one, but given the chance they would also become infected by the same kind of psychosis. Admittedly, this is a very radical thesis but consistent in the sense that it describes the forces and values (conscious or unconsciously) governing human behavior.

After diagnosing the disease and exposing its symptoms and manifestation in the history of continuing imperialism, Forbes proposes some ways to address it. "Quite clearly," he says, "there are many 'fronts' on which one can become engaged if one's goal is to help bring about a just world" (135). One of them is to develop a "critical consciousness," in

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<sup>77</sup> As Old Betonie, the Navajo healer of Silko's *Ceremony*, warns: "Nothing is that simple,' [Betonie] said, 'you don't write off all the white people, just like you don't trust all the Indians.'" (128).

accordance with Paulo Freire's method described in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that will allow the oppressed people to perceive their dehumanized condition and search for social changes. However, he believes that any critical method within the framework of materialism falls short of the goal "[b]ecause one must take 'critical awareness' beyond the limits of purely human situations in order to fully grasp the milieu in which we humans actually have our existence" (136). Even though he considers the need to address social-political justice as essential, he claims for a spiritual basis if these efforts are ever to be successful. Without "spiritual regeneration" on the part of those involved in solving the problem of *wétikoism* there will always be the possibility of new *wétikos*, as the outcome of most political revolutions exemplifies. His understanding of "spiritual regeneration" is not limited to Indian spirituality, or any other religious creed. Instead, he claims for individual transformation based on the teachings of many visionaries coming from different traditions.

If healing is connected to spirituality, a very dangerous word in our skeptic world dominated by materialistic philosophy and/or religious fanaticism, we need a definition that allows us to resolve the dualism between materialism and transcendentalism. Having studied the practices of self in Western thought before the emergence of Christianity and the "Cartesian moment," Foucault proposes a series of interesting concepts that can be applied here for a better understanding of the idea of spirituality and how it can provide healing. The first of them is the concept of spirituality itself, which he defines as "the sets of researches, practices and experiences (...) that constitute for the subject and its being, rather than for knowledge, the price to pay to have access to truth"<sup>78</sup> (19). According to him, at least in Western thought, spirituality has three characters. First, that the subject needs to pay a price to have access to truth, because as he is, the subject is incapable of truth. Second, that this price is the very transformation of the subject through *éros* and *áskesis*. Third, that as a consequence of this transformation, the access to truth implies what he calls the effect of "return" of truth over the subject. He states that in ancient spirituality, philosophy and spirituality were identical or nearly identical, whereas after the "Cartesian moment," knowledge is accessible to the subject and its benefit results of an accumulation of knowledge and social or psychological effects. However, the conclusion of this process is that

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<sup>78</sup> "O conjunto de buscas, práticas e experiências (...), que constituem, não para o conhecimento, mas para o sujeito, para o ser mesmo do sujeito, o preço a pagar para ter acesso à verdade" (*Hermenêutica* 19). Hereafter, all translations from Foucault's *A Hermenêutica do Sujeito* are mine. (I have kept the masculine pronoun in accordance to the original.)

As it is, truth cannot save the subject anymore. If we define spirituality as a group of practices which postulate that the subject, as he is, is not capable of truth, but, as it is, that truth is capable of transfiguring and saving the subject, then we can say that the modern age of the relationship between subject and truth started on the day when we postulated that the subject, as he is, is capable of truth, but, as it is, that truth cannot save the subject.<sup>79</sup> (24)

Therefore, instead of investigating the knowledge of the subject and the development of the knowing, that grounds modern philosophy and theology, ancient spirituality was more concerned with a series of practices, which Foucault identifies as the "care of the self," that could transform the subject in subject of truth. These practices aimed not at the "soul-substance" but at the "soul-subject" (71). In that sense, to "occupy oneself with his self" does not mean that the soul uses the body as an instrument "but, most of all, the position, singular, transcendent, as it were, of the subject in relation to everything that surrounds him, to the objects that he possesses, as well as to the others with whom he relates, to his body, and, finally, to himself"<sup>80</sup> (71).

These practices of the care of the self include rites of purification, meditation, concentration of the soul, retreat, resistance. Above all, this transformation of the subject requires the guidance of Another who is bound by a "word ethics," called *parrhesía*, that is, the commitment to speak from the heart without hiding anything. It is through this "word ethics" that the practice of taking care of each other is going to be established and knowledge of the self is going to be developed. Knowledge of the self does not imply psychological knowledge, or even knowledge of the world, but knowledge of the place one occupies in a thoroughly rational world, which is that of a divine Providence. Foucault explains this divine Providence, which is not the equivalent to the Christian Providence, as that

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<sup>79</sup> "Tal como ela é, a verdade não será capaz de salvar o sujeito. Se definirmos a espiritualidade como o gênero de práticas que postulam que o sujeito, tal como ele é, não é capaz de verdade, mas que a verdade, tal como ela é, é capaz de transfigurar e salvar o sujeito, diremos então que a idade moderna das relações entre sujeito e verdade começa no dia em que postulamos que o sujeito, tal como ele é, é capaz de verdade, mas que a verdade, tal como ela é, não é capaz de salvar o sujeito."

<sup>80</sup> "[M]as, principalmente, a posição, de certo modo singular, transcendente, do sujeito em relação ao que o rodeia, aos objetos de que dispõe, como também aos outros com os quais se relaciona, ao seu próprio corpo e , enfim, a ele mesmo."

which has placed us there where we are, which has situated us, hence, within a particular, necessary and reasonable chain of causes and effects, which we have to accept if we effectively wish to free ourselves from such chain, by way—the only one possible—of a recognition of the need for this chain. Therefore, knowledge of the self and knowledge of nature are not in alternative opposition, but absolutely connected.<sup>81</sup> (339)

Foucault explains that this knowledge that allows the subject to understand his position in relation to everything else is liberatory because it helps the subject to establish the connection between the contingencies of the individual's life and a broader understanding of the movement of the world (340-341); and second, it is liberatory because it allows the individual not to lose sight of himself while part of a set of determinations and necessities that he can understand (341).

This relationship between knowledge and the subject, as developed in the first and second century in the Hellenistic and Roman world, is useful for us to understand Native American relation to knowledge. According to Brian Yazzie Burkhart, there are four principles of Indian knowing, to which he quickly adds the remark that "principles in the traditional philosophical sense have no place in American Indian thinking" (16), rather they are ways of being. The first principle, which he calls the principle of relatedness, is that knowledge serves to guide our actions, and that these actions must take into account everything that surrounds us and how we are related to them. The second principle is the limits of questioning principle, since the questions we ask determine the answers we get and how these will impact in the world. The third is the meaning-shaping principle of action, that is, the world is not made of cold facts, and our action is only related to it by causal interactions. Rather, "[w]e participate in the meaning-making of the world. There is no world, no truth, without meaning and value, and meaning and value arise in the intersection between us and all that is around us" (16-17). The fourth principle is simply the idea that the universe is moral. These principles imply that knowledge is not accessible to everybody, since there are things which need not be known. In other words, "right action determines truth, and not vice versa" (17).

These principles are evidently at odds with Cartesian thinking, where the split between subject and knowledge is taken for granted. However, as Foucault tells us, Western

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<sup>81</sup> "Providência divina que nos colocou lá onde estamos, que nos situou, pois, no interior de um encadeamento de causas e efeitos particulares, necessários e razoáveis, que precisamos aceitar se quisermos efetivamente nos liberar deste encadeamento, sob a forma – a única possível – do reconhecimento da necessidade deste encadeamento. Conhecimento de si e conhecimento da natureza não estão, portanto, em oposição de alternativa, mas absolutamente ligados."

philosophy has already conceived the relation between subject and knowledge differently. In the period studied by him in his 1984 course, the question is not "how to say the truth about oneself"<sup>82</sup> (*Hermenêutica* 435), as demands the practice of confession, as established in written autobiographical discourse by Saint Augustine, but the relation between subject and truth aims at "becoming a subject of truth-saying"<sup>83</sup> (435). For Foucault, *parrhesía* requires a conformity between the subject who speaks the truth and the subject that acts as this truth requires (491). Truth is not a universal, but provided the subject is ready for it, it provides a principle of ethical action.

Therefore, the aim of truth in ancient philosophy was not reduced to knowledge, but was intent on preparing the subject for rightful action. This preparation involved a series of practices of *áskesis*, practices that endowed the subject with what the Greeks called *paraskeué* (equipment), or *instructio*, in Latin. "Well," explains Foucault, "*paraskeué* is what we could call a preparation—at the same time open and finished—of the individual for the events of life"<sup>84</sup> (387). And, he continues, this equipment is nothing else than *lógoi* (discourses), discourses that come to help the individual when he needs. Therefore, the whole purpose of the practice of *áskesis* is to equip the subject for unexpected events of life, so that truth emerges as a principle of action. These discourses that are registered in the spirit of the subject as principles guiding his action in times of need are referred to as *lógos boethós*, which could be translated as "discourses that aid."

This long excursion into Foucault's unprecedented reading of Greek and Latin philosophy in the first and second centuries had the purpose of bringing to light two aspects of the relationship between subject and knowledge that help us understand the relationship Native Americans establish first with knowledge itself as a principle of action, and second with the use of stories as providing sources of knowledge that can help individuals perceive their place in the world and the rightful action. Native philosophy, of which stories are part, remains pragmatic, connected to an ethical relation with the universe, that is, in terms of equality with all other beings. Western thinking has developed a slightly different path, as it turned memory into an instrument of confession before someone holding power over the individual, and as it separated knowledge from the individual and his or her surroundings, establishing hierarchical otherness.

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<sup>82</sup> "Como poder dizer a verdade sobre si mesmo."

<sup>83</sup> "Tornar-se um sujeito de veridicção."

<sup>84</sup> "Pois bem, a *paraskeué* é o que se poderia chamar uma preparação ao mesmo tempo aberta e finalizada do indivíduo para os acontecimentos da vida."

Native American life writing should be understood in this context. Whereas Western autobiography has explored the unreliability of the writing self, Native Americans have been looking for the ethical and pragmatic consequences of exposing their private lives. Exposing their personal and collective crisis, Native Americans reclaim authority to reinvent themselves, to define themselves from the inside, to become empowered by the word so that they can be heard by mainstream Western society, but mainly help each other recognize their place and value. In this sense, their words become *lógos boethós*, discourses that can create a web of relations across the extensive territories of Indian country. As Mary Louise Pratt has pointed out, ethnographic art may not be heard or may be subtly transformed in romanticism, or entertainment, as Jimmie Durham says, but it certainly has the potential of changing the consciousness of the groups that produce it. Perhaps survival is the only hope. A hope I hold for all of us.





## CHAPTER TWO

# **P** *REPARING THE SHUTTLE: TRADITION AND RENEWAL*

By speaking my Okanagan language, I have come to understand that whenever I speak, I step into vastness and move within it through a vocabulary of time and of memory. I move through the vastness into a new linking of time to the moment I speak. To speak is to create more than words, more than sounds retelling the world; it is to realize the potential for transformation of the world.

— Jeannette C. Armstrong, “Land Speaking”

Ama once said that space is full and time is empty; I think now I understand this. We are surrounded by matter, but time disappears from us. Or maybe, as Ama says, there are other worlds beside us all the time and every now and then we cross over and enter one, and every so often, too, one passes over and enters ours.

— Linda Hogan. *Power*.

When the weaver sets the loom and prepares the shuttle, she or he is engaged in a process that will pull threads together in an ordered way, interlocking them so that what at first was raw material in form of twisted fibers becomes interlaced as fabric. The purpose of the weaver may vary, of course, but most probably an intention can be discerned in the formation of the pattern, the arrangement of colors, or the use the final piece is intended to have. Like Saint Augustine’s description of the narrative process as the reciting of a psalm, weaving is also a temporal process in which the shuttle is taken back and forth adding layers to the overall structure. However, a careful weaver does more than simply apply his or her hands at following linearly with the shuttle through the warp to add each new row. When the weaving begins to take form, a design can be discerned, so that what was at first a process is now the material result of it, a patterned web. And, if the weaver deserves his or her art, the result is beautiful.

Likewise, when life writing is considered, the question of writing, or—as the classical metaphor goes—weaving, needs to be understood in relation to the way this life is being narrated by the autobiographer her- or himself. The processual model of memory exemplified by the weaving metaphor emphasizes exactly the juxtaposition of layers that can be discerned one after the other as they are recalled. This process of recall is not unlike the way historiographical discourse was organized as a discursive genre throughout its development as a discipline, even if main causes have been attributed to different agents, such as nations, aristocratic rulers, or economics. In this Chapter I discuss how historiographical discourse has been organized as a Western discursive genre and the interrogation about what history could possibly be from a Native American perspective. Before that, however, a few words must be said about the possible topologies and directions of time. The important point is that whereas all historiographical discourse is an investigation of the past, they all presuppose a certain attitude towards the future, as implied in what Krzysztof Pomian calls “chronosophy”<sup>85</sup> (Pomian V), which is the topological idea imbued in different conceptions of time. If time is conceived as circular, then events will recur at the end of a cycle *with a difference*. If, on the other hand, time is regarded as a linear chain of events, it will nevertheless follow in a certain direction, ascendant or descendant, positive or negative. Finally, Pomian identifies two other ways of conceiving time in its relation to an attitude towards the future which refute the possibility of any given trajectory. The first denies any sense of direction in the way events succeed each other because they are understood as simply coming one after the other, without adding anything that would make it possible to identify an underlying connection giving them directionality. This “expression of a skeptical attitude in relation to the future”<sup>86</sup> (VIII), to quote Pomian’s words, corresponds to an equally questionable possibility of saying anything about the past. Without a clear sense either of the past or of the future, the present remains likewise doubtful. Finally, the last chronosophy also rejects the notion of trajectory itself but for different reasons. It situates the past, the present, and the future as identical in all senses, which is, in the last instance, the same as positing the atemporality of time.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> “*Chronosophie*” in the French original.

<sup>86</sup> “Expression d’une attitude sceptique à l’égard de l’avenir. » [My translation.]

<sup>87</sup> The atemporality of time is at the centre of the Christian debate dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century concerning the different time inhabited by God alone, who differentiates himself from his creation by always remaining the same and not being subject to change. Both this time of *aeternitas* and the *tempus* of changes differ also from the *aevum*, a time with a beginning and an end, where changes do occur but they are accidental, as it were, because they do not affect the substance of beings (Pomian 42).

Chronosophies, then, translate a certain attitude towards the future already implied in the way the past is conceived and described. These differences relating to a certain attitude as to what constitutes the past in historiographical discourse obviously play a role in the way history is construed. Most markedly, the contact between the European agents of colonization and the indigenous peoples of the so-called New World with all its dissymmetry of power was described by sixteenth-century European scholars, missionaries, and men of letters as the encounter of the developed world with peoples without history. Evidently, this Eurocentric view was ratified by a concept of history that could not perceive history as anything else but alphabetical writing. When Walter D. Mignolo rescues the dialogue that sixteenth-century philosopher Francesco Patrizi wrote in his *De historia dieci dialoghi* (1560) in order to elaborate on what history was, he does so in an attempt to demonstrate that Western historiographical discourse with its insistence upon the letter and the taming of the voice became the normative model under which alternative systems of recording the past were erased. In Patrizi's first book on history, he tells his interlocutors that history should not be a narrative of the past, but of the present and the future events. That although he understood the way history is *made*; he insisted that he did not know what history *was*. Mignolo continues his account of the dialogue by saying that

At this point Compte Giorgio, the third participant, intervenes by asking a seemingly rhetorical question: what else could history be but writing? Patrizi replied with another question: what if history was also painting (*pintura*)? (*Darker* 166-7)

Patrizi's question posits a different temporality based not on the Augustinian processual model of memory as exemplified by the recitation of passages already codified verbatim in language<sup>88</sup> but on memory as encoded on a painting that can be apprehended in its entirety at a glance. Like the finished weaving displaying a discernible pattern, a painting can be approached and narrated by following the visual input in many possible directions. The reading of the past is thus dependent on the voice of the present storyteller who knows how to read the inscribed signs. That this way of approaching collective memory was not

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<sup>88</sup> In his study on the materiality of reading and writing cultures, Mignolo shows how the detachment of the voice from the living body and its consequent alphabetical transcription in *biblia* slowly came to be associated with the unquestionable authority of the absent metaphysical voice as exemplified in the book that was the blueprint for all other books in the Christian world: the Bible (see *Darker*, esp. Chapter 2, 82-3).

satisfactory for sixteenth-century European observers of the Mexica codices and *amoxlli*, and the Andean *quipus*, or the North-American wampum belts, for that matter, can be easily understood, considering their incapacity to appreciate alternative epistemologies and ontologies. What matters most, however, is to understand how these different historiographical discourses based on the practice of storytelling as a living complement to the written material affect the way past, present and future are perceived, both in historiographical discourse and in life writing.

As narratives, life stories build design through the weaving of events as they are recalled in the act of narration. This does not mean that unity is a result of continuity at the factual level but that the text recounts a story which the author wants to tell about how he or she perceives his or her unique experience. Life writing can never articulate absolute plotting because there is no closure. And if, on the one hand, narrative is constrained by the aspect of time, since discourse can only unfold in time, on the other hand, life writing is also a discourse about the world, about a life, necessarily present in time, beyond the text. Again, a particular life story can only take place in the *now* of the telling as it necessarily refers to a past experience in the mind of the storyteller and in the physical and social body as memory and projecting itself through *narrative* desire into the future.

However, past and future are not simply linguistic projections as we are also time-creatures. Peter Brooks explains the grammatical “dissymmetry” between time and place saying rather simply that “man is ambulatory, but he is mortal” (22). Our bodies are born, undergo transformations through time, and eventually die according to their organic nature. As time creatures, we feel its effects but fail to register it as a “visible” category of thought. Perceptions of time are not readily accessible, not even when it gets projected into a cultural spatial order that divides, measures, and dissociates it from live bodies. Although immersed and limited in time, human life is subject to several timings and conceptions of time, a complexity mostly subdued by the absolute time of Newtonian physics that has dominated the realist novel (and industrial society). Just as time leaves its imprint in the physical world, the telling of a singular body’s story can only be made through time. “Temporality is a problem, and an irreducible factor of any narrative statement, in a way that location is not,” as Brooks goes on to explain, expressing his conviction that “narrative has something to do with time-boundedness, and that plot is the internal logic of the discourse of mortality” (22). In other words, life narratives strive to find the thread that confers meaning to a life.

It is my understanding that, while the category of time remains unexamined, autobiographies are going to be read as if they were realist narratives. However, just as it

can be seen in fictional literature, human life may be perceived in a variety of ways and not simply as a product of the paradigm shift brought about by Cartesian thought, a shift which entailed modernity's emphasis on individuals living in absolute time and spatial frames.<sup>89</sup> Many narrative studies deal with shifts in narrative time and the significance of these temporal markings for the construction of plot and character. Here I want to explore how singular life stories can conceive time in ways that bear meaning to these very lives, so that time is not seen as a mechanic clock marking the causal development of a life but as a narrative configuration constructive of meaning, and creating continuity between life and text.

In the present chapter, I discuss the writing of a life as a creative act where the past is narratively revisited in its relation to the present. Temporal categories are examined in terms of the importance they have for life stories, since approaching the autobiographical narrative, which is necessarily time-bound and, consequently, processual, in its present immediacy requires ways of dealing with the categories of past and future as the driving forces of the act of self-narration. This relation is not defined in terms of sheer causality, but it is motivated by the desiring self to reify "that which she already was"<sup>90</sup> (36), to use Adriana Cavarero's words. Here I am interested in the pragmatic uses of life writing as it radiates from the present need of healing. As Ellen L. Arnold says, "[f]or creation to occur, something, some other, must be desired, taken apart, consumed. Out of imbalance and the hunger it creates, life and history are born" (54). Consequently, life writing is an act that aims at attending to present necessities, dissecting that which hurts, creating a design that confers meaning to that life. Tempting as it may be, life writing cannot be approached as an account of facts that reveal causes and motivations, ignoring the bewilderment of uncharted territory. The aim is to explore how singularity is created out of what is already there, exposed. Memory and desire, the two categories of analysis usually associated to life writing are qualified here as tradition and renewal, highlighting, thus, the connection between self and history. History is defined here not as the univocal discursive formation of a nation, but as the stories communities tell and which define their relation to the land and the future. In that way,

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<sup>89</sup> Edgar Morin defines the Cartesian paradigm in terms of three principles: the disjunction which has separated the thinking subject from that which is understood, the reduction of the complex into the simple, and, finally, the abstraction that either reduces diversity to the same or juxtaposes diversity without conceiving unity. According to him, this "blind intelligence" fails to recognize the complexities of political human interaction which require the inclusion of, and the fight against, "incertitude, chance, and the multiple play of interactions and retroactions" (11-13; my translation).

<sup>90</sup> Emphasis in the original. In the translator's note, Paul A. Kottman explains that Cavarero suggested the use of the feminine pronoun "she" for the self instead of the English neutral "it" to reinforce the idea of the self as an extratextual entity. (xxxii).

memory and desire, or tradition and renewal, must be interpreted here not as dichotomous pairs in the sense that we would say, for instance, that past and future are at the opposite sides of the temporal spectrum with the dividing and ever shifting now at the center, but in the sense that they are already there, exposed in each other. Tradition and renewal, memory and desire, past and future, all unite in the conscience of the storyteller embodied in the here and now of the telling.

For that, I begin by “Unraveling the Thread of Time” through the examination of different chronosophies of time and their implication for the reconstruction of the past and the opening up of future possibilities. Rather than linear continuity or the reintroduction of the philosophy of history as practiced by Hegel, or even Marx, where the future is teleologically univocal, I invoke Deleuze’s idea of “minority,” which leaves enough open space for the interplay of forces to invent themselves in a “nonprogrammatic” way, expanding by juxtaposition instead of following a linear model of progress or development. As the character Ts’eh Montaña says in Silko’s *Ceremony*,

The end of the story. They want to change it. They want it to end here, the way all their stories end, encircling slowly to choke the life away. The violence of the struggle excites them, and the killing soothes them. They have their stories about us—Indian people who are only marking time and waiting for the end. And they would end this story right here, with you fighting to your death alone in these hills. (231-232)

But as long as remembering nurtures the main character, understanding of the points of indeterminacies is possible and liberating. As John Rajchman explains in relation to Deleuze: “Minor politics has another sense of time, of the future, of the vitality of the future” (50). It is in this sense of time that I intend to explore as it intersects with Native American ways of conceiving temporality. Being the very impalpable category that enables change and growth, time and its different conceptualizations can illuminate what is there as presence, memory, and desire.

In the second section, “Undoing Trauma,” I examine the necessity of reconstructing the past as an integral part of the present in which a performative act is enacted. Considering that the act of “taking stock” through a selective review of the past is usually unleashed by a moment of crisis, as stated in chapter one, a search for a meaning that allows for continuation already points to the idea that this restructuring is determined by a search to overcome the past, to open the venues to new futures. Although Native American life writing

deals with singular lives, as historical subjects, they manifest the ways the collective experience of historical trauma is imbricate in their evaluation of their own identities. Consequently, examining one's own past is already a way to point to new venues of being. This section discusses the writing of the past, but instead of focusing on the past as told by a Native American, someone in a different positionality from that of the official records, the emphasis will fall rather on the different epistemologies revealed in these Native American voices. In other words, the presence of Other discourses should not mislead us into assuming that they merely add data to the already known, and, consequently, shift the whole structure of our apprehension of the past slightly. Rather, the focus is not simply on where the discourses about the Other are created, but on the fact that different positionalities may hold different ethical views on the world we inhabit.

Whereas the first section of this chapter centered on understandings of time, the third section, "Spatial Design," explores time as it stands in relationship to place. If the history of Empires revolves around the idea of expansion over "new" territory through time, the experience of colonized peoples involves the loss of sovereignty over traditional sites, which have been occupied for generations. Not only loss but also denial of access, as land becomes territory, frontier, and fenced-in property. The rhetoric of progressive time justified the taking over of land based on the argument of a more efficient land use and corroborated a view of the Native Americans as inhabiting a "timeless" world. The evidence for this supposed "timelessness" was found in the different customs held by Native Americans, which were seen as "primitive," and in a different relationship to time, as seen, for instance, in the way different languages qualify temporality. Moreover, among most indigenous groups, time is not a commodity, to use a modern world, to be used effectively, but it is a presence defining a relationship to place. Based on this, I examine this land-based perspective and its implication for the construction of a sense of self and agency through narrative design. Whereas narrative continuity is usually revealed through plotting, Native Americans often defend a philosophy of language based more on a connection to the land than on the temporal aspect of narrative.

Finally, the last section of this chapter, "Weaving Relations," discusses the possibilities disclosed by the narrative act. The reifying act of constructing a singularity through narrative allows the autobiographer to define him or herself from the inside, escaping thus the pitfalls of being determined from the outside as a "type," and examines the implications that this philosophy of language have for an alternative concept of self to the Western vision. For that, I briefly mention how the self has been conceptualized in the

Western world and the epistemological possibilities being discussed in Native American writings.

### UNRAVELING THE THREAD OF TIME

Life is time-bound. Just as bodies carry in them the inscription and the omen of finitude, everything in nature and social practice, including discourse, knowledge, and power, undergoes unceasing transformation in the most elusive of categories. Yet only recently have the different ways that temporality marks social practices and subjectivity been brought to notice, as differences tend to be buried in a pervasive homogenizing chronometry based on calendars, clocks, timetables, and other sophisticated instruments of measure that preclude the subjective experience of time. Indeed, time is so often spatialized that more often than not it is viewed as being “out there,” happening, as it were, independently from the epistemic observer. Although over the centuries Western philosophers have been conceptualizing time both in terms of its relation to the movement of cosmic bodies and in its relation to an atemporal reality, it is only recently through “the turbulence of thought now evident in many fields of investigation” (Bender and Wellberry, 3) that the commonly held conceptions of time have been more thoroughly examined in their relation to social practice and narrative construction. According to the editors of a collection of essays on time, John Bender and David E. Wellberry,

the drive to comprehend temporal constructions as a function of narrative formation may now be assuming a historically specific urgency—and therefore a place of significance in this volume [of essays]—because the Newtonian coordination of time and space as abstract constants within a measurable framework grows ever more fragile as the theoretical truths of relativity converge during the late twentieth century with the subjective pressures of instantaneously digitalized communication over vast spatial, temporal, and cultural spans. Donald J. Wilcox has shown how the older world of multifarious narratively and rhetorically structured chronologies was displaced by the conception of absolute time as elaborated by Descartes and Newton in the seventeenth century and symbolized by the spread of the B.C./A.D. dating



system.<sup>91</sup> Operating under the hegemony of absolute time, narrative was increasingly reduced to heuristic status and, whether in the medium of the realist novel as it emerged in the eighteenth century or that of the nineteenth-century historicism, was itself subordinated to a grid of abstract coordinates. Now, with the destabilization of the Newtonian grid, narrative reasserts itself as problematic and we confront a future inhabited by multiple times. (3-4)

As this long quote suggests, not until the advent of Newtonian physics has time come to be regarded as an absolute measure independent from the observer. But this has not always been so. The most common calendar<sup>92</sup> used in the world nowadays, the Gregorian calendar slowly introduced in Catholic countries beginning in the year 1582, was an improvement made on the Julian calendar so that the movable date of Easter would not shift away from its present day season. Taken at face value, the present calendar is a mere projection on a timeline of the passage of time in accordance to the astronomical solar cycle. Evidently, the two are roughly in accordance, but whereas the year numbers follow one another on a linear, cumulative and irreversible timeline, years themselves mark the cyclical movement of cosmic bodies attributing to them a short time span that can be qualitatively assimilated to the present (Pomian III). Chronometries are, in fact, a mixture of cyclical and linear time in different measures. But before expanding a little more on the different conceptions of time and their impact on the way causality is perceived and history narrated, I would like to stress that my main interest in the discussion of time for the reading of Native American life stories lies in the difference Native American writers often point out between, on the one hand, the way time is used in oral narratives and is marked in Native languages, and, on the other, the ways time was conceptualized in Western historiographical discourse until the late twentieth century when it began to be widely problematized as narrative.

Many writers emphasize this difference between Indigenous thought categories and Western logic but it is very hard to go beyond generalizations, such as we find in Donald F. Fixico (Shawnee, Sac and Fox, Muscogee, Creek, Seminole), for instance, who opposes the Native mind to the linear mind by stressing Indigenous *circular* worldviews. Due to the violence of the process of conquest and the state policies of the colonizers of America

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<sup>91</sup> Donald J. Wilcox, *The Measure of Times Past: Pre-Newtonian Chronologies and the Rhetoric of Relative Time* (Chicago, 1987)

<sup>92</sup> The word calendar itself comes from the Latin *calends* (*kalendae*), indicating the first day of each month, when debts were due. Etymologically, thus, the word calendar is associated to tax collecting.

forcing Indigenous peoples to assimilate,<sup>93</sup> it is no wonder that the exact nature of the epistemological and ontological differences remains invisible for the majority of non-Natives. In a world dominated by Western logic, alternative categories of thought operative in minority communities still need to be unveiled. A very hard task as the Western Hemisphere continues to be, as Helen Jaskoski reminds us, using Pratt's concept, a *contact zone* "where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths"<sup>94</sup> (Pratt qtd. in Jaskoski *Leslie* 13). Pointing in the same direction, Anne Waters says that Euro-American institutions have failed to recognize Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, spreading "many nonunderstandings about Indigenous peoples into the context of Euro-American-embraced conceptual categories." Bleak as the situation may seem, Waters continues, "some accessibility [into Indigenous ideas about ways of being and relating in the world] is possible via language analysis and the semantics of contemporary speakers of Indigenous languages" (Waters "Language Matters" 98). It is in view of such differences that I intend to examine the category of time in Western historiographical discourse and the way Native American languages and storytelling traditions articulate their being in the world through life writing.

Maori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith contrasts the different conceptions of time held by Western peoples and indigenous peoples at the time of contact and afterwards by emphasizing how Western ideas of social activity are deeply connected to the transformations brought about by apparently disparate events, such as the industrial revolution, the Protestant ethic, imperialism, and science (53), which were later conceptualized in historiographical writing as progressive time. According to the upheaval of ideas emerging in the Enlightenment, humanity was in its course away from "irrationality," as manifest in obscure religious thinking, feudal political systems, and the general illiteracy of society, towards a more advanced stage characterized by technological progress and spiritual salvation (as laid by the Reformation). Therefore, the idea of progress became naturalized according to an evolutionary scale that measured any society based on European standards of how time and space should be quantified and used qualitatively.

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<sup>93</sup> Anne Waters mentions the following methods used to force conversion to Christianity (with the purpose of total assimilation and deculturation of Indigenous peoples): "torture, starvation, killing, burning, stealing land, children, wives, or family enslavement, confinement, denial of languages, threat of diseases, or rape and plunder of homes, burning of crops and people, and disruption of any vestiges of humanity, until Eurocentric theism, in exchange for life or survival of the community, was proclaimed and witnessed." (Waters, "Language Matters" 102).

<sup>94</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone" *Professions* 91 (New York: MLA, 1991), 34.

Alternative ways of relating to the land or living one's time were promptly qualified as "idleness," "ineffective land use," or simple "backwardness." Societies were described as living in "primitive" stages of development, justifying thus both the imposition of European standards of living and the denial of alternative societal developments through the erasure of other people's histories. This chronosophy which took a progressive and teleological view of history not only purported to possess the means to classify all histories under a totalitarian vision of humanity's history, or even the universe, but also brought in its wake a philosophical discourse about the being (Pomian 28). Indeed, such philosophy of history, present in Hegel and even Marx, claimed to explain the significance of all events described by historians by fitting them in an overall frame (Pomian 28). According to Krzysztof Pomian, this totalizing idea of the philosophy of history only lost its impact with the advent of the social sciences, which brought visibility to the problematic frontier between those facts that are visible to perception and those that can only be reconstructed through the elusive medium of language<sup>95</sup> (39). Instead of being perceived consensually by different observers, history began to be seen as a result of reconstruction models that failed to provide total explanation for the perceived discontinuities in the way economies, customs, geographies, demographics, politics, religions etc interact with one another. In fact, Pomian concludes, historical time cannot be said to have any given topological direction, as the rhythm and direction of changes will depend much more on the model used and the degree of definition of the chronological frame of reference (95). Consequently, "the traditional chronosophical question—is historical time cyclical, linear, stationary?—is simply deprived of any meaning. Because the three temporal topologies (...) are actually intertwined in one another"<sup>96</sup> (96).

The interplay of the different concomitant processes actually leads to a notion of time that admits different topologies of time *at the same time*. This is not the same as saying that societies living apparently independent from one another live their own times on different points on the same scale. This would mean a "universal time" with societies occupying different points according to their degree of progress. Such distancing of societies according to an European evolutionary scale is at the basis of the colonial enterprise, which assigned to conquered peoples earlier stages in an universal model of development in a way that justified

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<sup>95</sup> In his study of time, Pomian addresses the problematic status of history as narrative by means of its conception of time. Ultimately, he underscores the importance of theoretical models to define the selection and analysis of data used by historians and social scientists alike and the way these models reveal different topologies of time.

<sup>96</sup> The French original reads: "la question chronosophique traditionnelle — le temps de l'histoire est-il cyclique, linéaire, stationnaire ? — est simplement dépourvue de sens. Car les trois topologies du temps (...) sont, en réalité, imbriquées l'une dans l'autre." [My translation.]

their domination by European societies. Anthropologist Johannes Fabian identifies this denial of the co-existence of Europe's Others in the writings of anthropological reports as "the denial of coevalness," which he defines as "a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse" (31). This distancing between the researcher and the subjects studied are produced at the moment when discourses about the Other are being produced, as if the researcher him or herself were not contemporary of his or her informants but rather were speaking from a different temporality. This can be seen in the presence of certain adjectives or labels that characterize societies other than that of the producer of the anthropological discourse as living in a separate time frame. In this sense, words like "archaic," "primitive," "mythical," or "ritual" can be used to denote the necessary distancing between the producer of discourse and the referents of that discourse. As a social discipline, anthropology developed as a discourse on the Other, but always having the Eurocentric measure to mark a certain distance that would justify the colonial enterprise. Lately, much of the Western self-alleged superiority has been put into question, but not the denial of coevalness. In the words of Fabian,

The distance between the West and the Rest on which all classical anthropological theories have been predicated is by now being disputed in regard to almost every conceivable aspect (moral, aesthetic, intellectual, political). Little more than technology and sheer economic exploitation seem to be left over for the purposes of "explaining" Western superiority. It has become foreseeable that even those prerogatives may either disappear or no longer be claimed. There remains "only" the all-pervading denial of coevalness which ultimately is expressive of a cosmological myth of frightening magnitude and persistency. (35)

When Pomian asserts the co-existence of multiple topologies of time, he makes it clear that these times co-occur *in the same place*, that is, it is possible, for instance, to describe a certain local structure in terms of the cycles governing the demographic rate associated with the price of wheat, while making room for a political revolution that reinforces that cycle without being itself a part of it. In other words, the different times are concomitant and interact in the same system. Consequently, the notion of a secularized sacred time that would lead from the beginning of time through an evolutionary scale to a superior progressive state as epitomized by the Western world does not hold. Instead,

historiographical time is a composite of different topologies of time without any discernible direction at large scale.

In fact, the problematization of the topology of time directly affects the ways we can think the categories of past, present, and future. On a linear scale,<sup>97</sup> the importance of the “now” becomes greatly reduced as it shrinks under the overwhelming “presence” of the past, as that which is known, and the next pressing moment, to which we are inevitably drawn. However, a more appropriate question would be whether the past actually exists. According to historian Eelco Runia, there are historians who believe that it exists in such a way that we can even talk about our “relationship with the past” (“Spots” 305), whereas other historians assume that it is “their task to construct convincing views of the past by creatively *using* [physical] remains”<sup>98</sup> (“Spots” 306). Runia takes a third position by positing that “the past is incomparably more absent than the first group of historians is prepared to think, and—at the same time—incomparably more present than the second group of historians is willing to admit” (“Spots” 306). In fact, he argues, the ontological status of the past is quite disturbing since it keeps intruding in the present in unexpected ways, suggesting “that the past may have a presence that is so powerful that it can use *us*, humans, as its *material*”<sup>99</sup> (“Spots” 308), provoking effects where we least expect its presence. In this sense, the presence of the past is not the result of a set of metaphorical absences summoned by historians. Rather, the presence of the past “can at best be *kindled* by metonymically *presenting* absences”<sup>100</sup> (“Spots” 309). In this way, says he, the past is so much present, for instance, in names, that it eludes our consciousness of the fact that it is living here and now. It is not a result of the stories we create but of the storiness of stories, that is, its uninvited intrusion in the present forces us to recreate the stories we tell about nations, cultures, or ourselves. Because the past establishes connections with what we already have as presence by way of stories, the emergence of new information, sensations, or stories calls forth the need to restructure the whole story. Moreover, metonymy exerts its impact not on the level of *logos*—as metaphor does—but on the level of *pathos*, so that it impacts on our structure of feelings instead of our reasoning capacity. Thus, metonymy, or the presence of the absent, acts as a sort of

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<sup>97</sup> When Pomian discusses the chronosophy of success that has dominated historical discourse until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he emphasizes not only its linearity, but also its cumulative and irreversible character (58).

<sup>98</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>99</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>100</sup> Emphasis in the original.

revelation “in what stories and text contain *in spite of* the intentions of its authors”<sup>101</sup> (“Spots” 315). Runia sustains that the past travels unnoticed with us “because it coincides with our culture” (“Spots” 315) in such a way that it takes the form of “common knowledge,” of that presence that makes us feel, think and act in ways that might be at odds with the idea we have of ourselves, but nevertheless forces us to rewrite our stories about ourselves (“Spots” 316). Metaphor, on the other hand, invites interpretation as it suggests that something “out there” is comprehended. Drawing much from Giambattista Vico’s *Scienza nuova*,<sup>102</sup> Runia concludes that the presence of the past is manifest in the here and now in ways that “in presence ‘time’ is traded for ‘place’” (“Spots” 316). In the introductory article to the Forum on Presence, Runia specifies “places” as “institutions” that “can be ‘visited’ on the plane of the present”<sup>103</sup> (“Presence” 1).

It is important to notice that by discussing metonymy as “a metaphor for discontinuity, or, rather, for the entwinement of continuity and discontinuity” (“Presence” 1) Eelco Runia is taking a step further from the tradition inaugurated by Hayden White’s *Metahistory*, which is a landmark in the problematization of the gap existing between what happened in the past and the way it is plotted. Nonetheless, Runia emphasizes that the emphasis given to representationalism, as he calls it, has in a way emptied the most important discussion of what happened in the past, and diverted the actual debate from the “horrors” of the past to the words. History should, after all, concentrate on meaning, which he understands as the

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<sup>101</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>102</sup> Actually, Eelco Runia develops Vico’s translation of time into space in his other article “Presence.” Vico’s “topics” differ radically from the more common *topoi* of ancient discourse, which connect certain ideas to a ready-made system of metaphors. Rather, “topics” “refer to the ‘places’ where arguments can be found, to systems of discourses, to areas of appropriateness” (Runia “Presence” 13). A further distinction should be made here: the translation of time into space theorized by Vico, and reworked by Runia, is not the equivalent of transforming the elusive category of time into a cartographic representation of the past. Instead, Runia explores how time is inscribed in the presence of space.

<sup>103</sup> Michel Foucault’s investigations of how institutions exert (inconspicuous) power over individuals is not totally unrelated to Runia’s arguments, especially as Foucault explores the discontinuities that emerge from the multiple realities that refuse to be contained in one episteme. According to Judith Revel, Foucault realizes that “rupture itself is a significant element because it marks the history of its internal fissure” [“la rupture est en elle-même un élément signifiant parce qu’elle marque l’histoire de sa brisure interne; my translation] (Revel 68). However, whereas Foucault is interested in the way power maintains its grip over *subjects* (see Edward Said’s essay “Foucault”), Runia, following Vico’s lead, is mostly arguing for a theory of presence that would allow proactive agency, that is, the kind of agency that is not bound to “repeat the past” (and maintain its power structures in whatever disguise) and dares “stumble happily forward into *terra incognita*” (Runia “Presence” 7).

need to reflect on “trauma.” “In this sense,” says Runia, “exploring trauma—and its belatedly born twin brother, agency—is the substantive philosophy of history of modern days” (“Presence” 4). The discussion on the limits of representationalism unveiled the mechanisms used by the “old-fashioned substantive philosophy of history” (“Presence” 6), but failed to deal with the presence of discontinuities, such as the “return of the past,” the persistence of commonplaces, the presence of what we do not expect to be there. By bringing metonymy to the forefront of his philosophy of history, Runia is calling attention to the fact that there is more in what is in front of us than we are prepared to see. “[T]he past *is* present in the present,” it travels uninvited with us and surely “the past *does* spring surprises on us”<sup>104</sup> (“Presence” 28). Therefore, examinations of the past are not simply representations but they do reflect a present order that keeps affecting the lives of real people. In this sense, awareness that Western historiographical discourse has produced hegemonic paradigms, on the one hand, and silences that now and then erupt producing discontinuities, on the other hand, invite for a reexamination of the past as that which *is*, both at the phenomenological level of the relationships between self and Other and at the subjective level where it demands restructuring of the self.

By overturning the idea of time as linear and progressive, the past becomes open for revision. This does not imply merely adding more information to our idea of the past in order to get a complete command of all the factors at play at a given moment, but it calls for the opening up of different questions and different epistemologies. As Elizabeth Grosz says in a collection of essays aptly named *Becomings*, “we must problematize the notions of identity, origin, and development” (18), so that the past is not reduced into a ghost that we carry along preventing the “present itself to be fully self-present” (18). As long as “one remains committed to determinism,” she continues, the open-endedness of the future is denied. In order to overcome the dominant causal and statistical modes of knowledge, Grosz suggests the need for “other modes of knowing, other forms of thinking” (21) that may allow for more appropriate ways of opening up the future for the new and, more importantly, for the “creation of heterogeneous terms” (27) that will permit the creation of singularities along different paths of development and in new directions. In the same collection of essays, John Rajchman addresses the reason why thinking time and its potential for “becomings” is such a pressing question. According to him, the question of “other futures” concerns politics (42), because inquiring about the ontological status of the past, such as causal succession or conscious memory, posits the present as undetermined, provisional and experimental. Further, he

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<sup>104</sup> Emphasis in the original.

retrieves Foucault's "history of the present," defined as "a history of the portion of the past that we don't see is still with us. Thus it involves a concept of historical time that is not linear and is not completely given to consciousness, memory, commemoration" (47), but Rajchman complements the concept with Deleuze's reading of Foucault where he perceived an openness towards that which is not predictable but is, nevertheless, "knocking at the door" (47). This attentiveness towards what might become demands a politics non-identifiable with the nation-state but predicated on diversity, that is, to use Deleuze's term: *minority*. Minority politics "is never a given identity; it is always a becoming, a becoming-other" (49). The whole project demands the setting up of a sort of pragmatism that is local, never global. The question is how to listen attentively to what the present is giving off now. I believe that unless we listen to what the other of the hegemonic center is saying, the whole negotiation towards new futures may become a play on words that never fully recognizes the other outside its own epistemological frontiers. Walter D. Mignolo provides important clues to answer these questions by investigating—and asserting his own political project in accordance to—a lineage of thought that aims at changing the logic of the hegemonic system and not just its content.

In his book-length study *The Idea of Latin America*, Mignolo argues for the presence of *heterogeneous historico-structural nodes*, an expression he borrows from Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, meaning the interaction of historical processes occurring at different places at the same time (Mignolo *Latin* 48). The expression is a response to the Hegelian conception of history as a linear succession of events that erases local histories by being inscribed in the rhetoric of progress. In a poignant analysis of how the indigenous peoples of the Americas have been named, silenced, divided, possessed, and dispossessed of their own epistemologies, Walter Mignolo unveils the hidden logic of coloniality, which lies at the basis of the rhetoric of modernity. The crux of the problem is that we still have to access the different epistemologies that the rhetoric of modernity has incessantly tried to subdue under its own hegemonic interpretative paradigm. By changing the locus of observation what is attempted is not to produce "different interpretations within the same paradigm" of modernity but to argue for "multiple paradigms [which are] at war at the other end of the colonial difference" (48). The control of space through the rhetoric of modernity and its emphasis on the linear progression of events, as laid out by the hegemonic center, allied to the violence of the colonial process, had—and continues to have—as a consequence, the control of knowledges, land, and peoples as expendable resources.

While it may be argued that time has no substance that would allow us to store, save, share or divide it, clearly a great deal of energy has been devoted to control time as a



collective resource whose measure of usefulness is translated into the greatest commodity available to human beings: the limited time-span of our biological bodies. The time of our lives is sold out in endless timetables that define the schedule of trains, buses, working hours, entertainment, vacations, traffic lights, and even the speed with which we make ourselves available to interact with one another. Communication systems worldwide aim at speeding our response-time, so that we make the most of each time unit, buying, and selling human productive forces according to the value attributed to each individual's time. The paradigm of progress, defined in temporal terms, transforms time in money, and individuals in the fuel that feeds the unstopping historical process towards newness. In his discussion of the persistence of the colonial matrix of power, Walter D. Mignolo resorts to Jamaican scholar Sylvia Wynter's study of the "celebration" of the "discovery" of America through the history of the Africans forced into slavery to build the "New World" (Mignolo *Latin* 103-106). Wynter focuses on the Atlantic economy in order to dislocate the reference of America as either Latin or Anglo, reinstating, thus, the necessary third component that composes the triadic ethnic population of the continent: Africans, Indians, and Europeans. From the point of view of the two first ethnic groups, the conquest of the continent cannot be subsumed under the paradigm of newness since it has meant slavery, genocide, displacement, and silence. The logic of modernity under the rhetoric of progress has implied "the forced appropriation of labor, the exploitation of natural resources, the exploitation of human labor, increased militarization, the control of gender and sexuality, and the control of knowledge and subjectivity." No wonder, then, that "*those who have been silenced are calling into serious question the epistemology of colonial difference that sustains the uneven distribution of power*"<sup>105</sup> (Mignolo *Latin* 103). The colonial expansion seen from the perspective of the hegemonic center and its paradigm of newness has assigned dead positions to de-centered subjects who only fit the endless march towards progress either as mechanisms of hindrance (to be eliminated through violence if necessary) or as exploitable human resources (to be used up). According to Mignolo, the hegemonic paradigm should be displaced by the paradigm of co-existence, where different knowledges and subjectivities carried in other languages may determine different political relations, economies, social orders, and ethics (106).

To conclude this first section, I would like to say a few words on the dichotomy posited between progressive time and "static" time. If, on the one hand, the notion of time as cumulative, irreversible and linear has been postulated in terms of an abstraction that

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<sup>105</sup> Emphasis in the original.

detaches time from the observer through its conversion into an autonomous spatial category that shrinks the present under the pressure for “instantaneity” and an increasing globalization of the cultural and economical frontiers (Lallement 7-8), the notion of a noncumulative structural view of time, on the other hand, as deprived of movement, possessing only duration, proves to be a long-held illusion that denies the temporality of other praxes (Munn 98-9).<sup>106</sup> By denying cultural specific notions of time and the way they are imbricate into social praxis, the history of Europe’s Others could be subsumed under the Western historiographical discourse that legitimated conquest and the possibility of co-existence under alternative modes of relating to time and its correlative—without which time cannot be thought: space.

In the next section, I discuss the consequences of contact as expressed by some Native American authors and the ongoing struggles they face to undo its traumatic effects on all of us. The implied idea is that the *Pachakuti* affects not only those who had to bear the burden of physical and cultural genocide but also the Earth and all living beings that depend on the establishment of ethical relations to maintain the harmony of the whole. It is suggested that survival needs to be assured through undoing trauma, a feat that demands an epistemological change that creates harmony through ethics.

## UNDOING TRAUMA

The rhetoric of modernity with its emphasis on expansion has had dire consequences for the populations living outside the imperial centers. According to the logic imposed by the conquerors of America, those living under different paradigms were subsumed under an order of nature that had to make room for the civilizing process under the auspices of Europeans. In a first moment, this civilizing process was spurred by the religious zeal that aimed at Christianizing the “barbarians,” while appropriating the material resources necessary to further the imperial goals. These resources meant in practice the appropriation of gold, where it could be found, and land, together with what constituted the means of survival for the local populations, such as the forest or the game which sustained the livelihood of indigenous peoples, not to mention the physical assault on their bodies as a way

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<sup>106</sup> This is, for instance, the case of Whorf’s view of the Hopi language, which he describes as expressing only duration and, therefore, as “timeless” (Munn 98).

to make room for the incoming colonizers, to satiate their sexual appetite, or to promote conversion. In a second moment, the colonization process took a more secular turn, even if it never abandoned the religious approach, as the unofficial discourse of “Manifest Destiny” in 19th Century United States or the several missionary societies existing to this day attest. Beginning in the 18th century, coinciding with the Enlightenment in Europe, the concept of culture was used to subsume communities under the concept of nation, an abstract ideology uniting many groups possessing a distinct identity. Traditional differences and dissent within the boundaries of nation-states were erased, redrawing the boundaries of the new independent states of America under a hegemonic discourse that required everyone to adopt the values and goals of modernity. In that way, a whole hierarchy of cultures emerged according to which some cultures were considered “primitive.” Witness Thomas Jefferson’s unequivocal warning, saying that Native Americans had the choice of becoming civilized, that is, of adopting the customs of the colonizer and forgetting their traditional ways of living, or else they would have to be removed beyond the Mississippi:

[O]ur settlement will gradually circumscribe and approach the Indians, and they will in time either incorporate with us as citizens of the United States or remove beyond the Mississippi. The former is certainly the termination of their history most happy for themselves; but in the whole, it is essential to cultivate their love. (qtd. in Wiley 76)

In other words, Indians were given the choice to either face cultural genocide, which would save them from extinction, or be removed, which is what actually happened to the civilized tribes, that is, those that had assimilated by adopting private property and agriculture, for instance.

As Walter Mignolo argues in *The Idea of Latin America*, the rhetoric of modernity cannot conceive the paradigm of co-existence of knowledges and subjectivity. In its stead, it privileges certain loci of enunciation assigning to all other positions the condition of *damnés*,<sup>107</sup> that is, the position of “all those who have to deal with the colonial wound in all its manifestations” (106). Clearly, the “universal man” is a product of this perspective. Not only that but also the laws that maintained that privileged center were generated under this very same rhetoric of modernity. Whereas many people will gladly support the “three competing, and at the same time complementary” (82), political ideologies of modernity—conservatism,

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<sup>107</sup> The term comes from Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York : Grove Press, 1952.

liberalism, or socialism, underscores Mignolo, very few will defend modernity's necessary hidden component: coloniality. "[C]olonialism works to cover up its own ideological trail by erasing and displacing that which differs from the ideal or opposes the march of modernity" (84). In that sense, it is evident that the presence of Native Americans hindered the occupation of land necessary for the settlement of those who were to form the new nation. In her analysis of the development of the national identity in the United States, Lúcia Lippi Oliveira reviews the work of the 19th Century ideologues demonstrating how the idea of democracy in the United States was posited on the availability of land.<sup>108</sup> Needless to say, all the land conquered by the new nation was not "virgin land," but occupied by a host of Indian tribes. The forms of incorporation include conquest through battles and/or treaties, massacre, removal, and, not least, judicial action.<sup>109</sup>

Although the history of the contact between Native American tribes and the American colonies and, subsequently, the American States still needs to be unearthed, much Native American activism has been directed to the present day condition of indigenous peoples in America and elsewhere. The issues demanding their action range over almost every aspect concerning Indian lives, from repatriation of bones and artifacts kept in museums and similar institutions to the exploitation of Native American spirituality by "white shamanism," passing through fishing, hunting, and land rights, water contamination and commodification, nuclear waste contamination, including the aftereffects of nuclear testing on Indian communities, access to sacred sites, forced sterilization, domestic violence and alcoholism, boarding schools, mining, astounding rates of poverty, etc. As I hope these examples have made clear, colonialism is not a fact of the past, serving only to explain how the world became structured as it is, and to be left as such. The same logic that induced imperial powers to search for "new" lands, thus establishing the "paradigm of newness" (Mignolo *Latin* 104-106), subsists in the way many peoples of the world live under domination, or under the logic of coloniality.

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<sup>108</sup> See esp. Chapters V and VI, "Representações Geográficas da Identidade Nacional: O Caso Norte-Americano" and "A América e a Fronteira: Turner e Roosevelt," respectively.

<sup>109</sup> It is not within the scope of this work to review the laws that justified the appropriation of Indian lands and the unilateral break of treaties. Suffices to say that all laws dealing with Indians are under Federal jurisdiction. However, the fact that Indian tribes and reservations supersede State laws and borders has not prevented Georgia to expel the Cherokees and other tribes from its territory in 1839. In fact, Removal Policy was greatly reinforced under President Andrew Jackson to support his popular policy of "cheap money, cheap goods, cheap land." For informative overviews of the 1887 General Allotment Act, the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act, the 1953 Termination Act, and other federal resolutions, see Porter III, Dorris, or King "What Is."

While the need to redress those issues may seem clear from a safe distance, many of the terms that they touch upon still need to be developed. Hidden in these claims is a whole set of epistemological presuppositions that are far from being consensual. A recent newspaper quote may illustrate the point. Speaking of a coming conference by a major specialist on issues of ethnicity, racism and multiculturalism, the journalist writes that

the trap of Western monoculturalism is set upon the defense of a false universal. Whenever the minorities force the system's door, claiming for reparations, the dominant culture defends itself with pompous, empty, and misleading terms such as rationality and merit. Not that multiculturalism is against such elementary things. What is actually demanded is the elimination of the distance imposed by other means that are not rationality and merit so that the game of equality may restart.<sup>110</sup> ("Voz")

While this quotation addresses the important issue of a rationality that was clearly biased in favor of a certain hegemonic group, productive of large groups of people excluded from the modernity project, it leaves open another important question, namely what is meant by rationality and merit. According to the rhetoric of modernity, this "enlightened humanism" proceeds from the very hegemonic center that defines these values as valid for everyone. However, it disregards the enormous inequalities that emerge from this project, as if these were merely incidental and not constitutive. As Mignolo convincingly argues, what "many secular, scholars, intellectuals, World Bank officers, state functionaries, and journalists believe [is the incomplete project of modernity]" (*Latin xv*) represents for those silenced in the process simply the continuation of coloniality. Indeed, Mary Louise Pratt warns that this appeal to the Western modern tradition, as embodied by Locke, Rousseau, and Kant, represents an unacceptable erasure of the parameters of race, gender, and class from the democratic project. She believes the conflict is based on two misunderstandings. The first refers to the fact that the fragmentation of views in the fight for the common good does not emerge from anywhere, but, as the journalist quoted above explains, from the exclusion of this common good. In other words, the wrongdoings are not a fact of the past that should be

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<sup>110</sup> My translation. The original reads: "A armadilha do monoculturalismo ocidental passa pela defesa de um falso universal. Cada vez que as minorias forçam as portas do sistema, exigindo reparações, a cultura dominante defende-se com termos pomposos, vazios e enganadores como racionalidade e mérito. Não que o multiculturalismo se oponha a coisas tão elementares. O que se busca, justamente, é eliminação da distância imposta por outros meios que não a racionalidade e mérito para que se possa recomeçar o jogo com igualdade".

forgiven in favor of a harmonious social cohabitation, but they keep on affecting all spheres of social life. The second misunderstanding discussed by Pratt addresses exactly the monopoly of Western enlightened thought. She argues that

[to] reauthorize Western enlightenment as the only alternative for everybody entails an epistemological and empiric error, or rather an ethnographic error. When Western enlightened values are posited as the only way for everybody, the West is usually given monopoly over these values, as if they had never existed before in the whole human panorama. But who thinks of claiming that reason was invented only once, and in France? <sup>111</sup> (“Imaginarios”)

Just as the West has no monopoly over terror, slavery, exploitation, and other inhumanities, says Pratt, values like justice, freedom, rationality are also manifest in other societies. Pratt is not claiming that these values are universal. Instead, she is simply acknowledging that the idea of a common good is not a European invention but has multiple narratives of origin. To say that rationality, among others, has multiple narratives of origin entails different understandings of what rationality is. In the West, rationality has been understood according to a certain view of the universe predicated on logic and mathematics, from which a whole scientific discourse derives. In her essay “That Alchemical Bering Strait Theory,” Anne Waters discusses how she exposes fallacious reasoning in her logic courses. Aiming at developing students’ critical thinking, she uses examples that are closer to her American Indian students and, as such, is able to highlight logical problems in Western thinking, based on common problems such as false cause, false analogy, hasty generalization, appeal to authority, suppressed evidence, correct sign interpretation, definitional power, false composition and division, false dichotomy, and “slippery slope.” Reasoning from a different positionality helps exposing the many traps of Western rationality that lay hidden behind an apparent universality. She justifies her method and content by contending that doing Native philosophy of the Americas should be done by, for and about Native Americans. This does not imply a petty identity war in which each side is fighting for political gains, a reasoning Waters would denounce as a false dichotomy, but simply that many assumptions held by

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<sup>111</sup> My translation. The original reads: “Reautorizar a la ilustración como única alternativa para todos requiere un error epistemológico y empírico, o tal vez más bien etnográfico. Cuando se afirman los valores ilustrados occidentales como única vía para todos, casi siempre se le concede a occidente un monopolio sobre esos valores, como si no hubieran existido nunca en ningún otro momento del gran panorama humano. Pero ¿a quién se le ocurre argüir que la razón se inventó una sola vez, y en Francia?”

Western thinking do not apply, by extension, to everybody. Knowing can take different forms, and it can serve different purposes. As American Indians insist, these are not unrelated processes. They derive from the same ethical root that emphasizes inclusiveness, relatedness, and responsibility.

Vine Deloria, Jr. emphasizes the need for concepts to be grounded on experience without excluding evidence that “does not fit.” This means that all data emerging from experience is relevant, including, for instance, dreams or anything that lacks materiality. Or, in the words of Deloria: “The Indian does not believe that the world is wholly material, and allows for the existence of real but nonphysical things” (6-7). No evidence is disregarded as long as it is grounded on experience, without requiring arguments to be based on faith or belief.<sup>112</sup> Avoiding generalizations that cannot be empirically verified “reduces substantially the number and kinds of statements that Indians would be willing to make. But it substantially enhances the veracity of statements that are made” (Deloria 6). This kind of reasoning which accepts a wider range of data without excluding some based on the “superstition that certain things do not exist” (7) requires a capacity to deal and remember the origin of social practices so as to avoid “general statements [...] made using syllogisms containing concepts of which we have little knowledge” (7). Western understanding of experience, says he, is largely restricted by a kind of rationality based on cause-and-effect, but that description fails to take into account that not all phenomena in the world are ruled by it, as quantum physics demonstrates. How this applies to larger phenomena is not known yet, he continues. However, we should be wary of rushing into conclusions.

Building on José Ortega y Gasset’s claim that Europeans display a rather homogenous grain,<sup>113</sup> V. F. Cordova sets herself the task of identifying the leitmotiv that sustains what Ortega y Gasset named the common “psychological architecture” of the European and largely determines the content of their religions, science, law, art, social and sentimental values (“Exploring” 71). Because, Cordova reasons, ideas are culturally based, there has to be a source for the ideas that are pervasive in Western culture, such as, “human

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<sup>112</sup> Deloria concedes that there are expressions of faith in the tribal traditions “in that it calls for belief in an unsubstantiated event” (9). However, he suggests that they lack the same intensity of Westerner’s statements of faith as Indians do not ask others to believe in the same thing. There is no missionary impulse as differences are a given. “[W]hat is important,” Deloria argues, “is the fellowship and dialogue between the parties and not the competition to define truth — since truth is a matter of perception.” This does not entail that there was no criteria for truth in traditional societies, but that beyond the boundaries of community, others were entitled to live under different perspectives.

<sup>113</sup> See Ortega y Gasset’s *The Revolt of the Masses*.

dualism, monotheism,<sup>114</sup> the dilemma of freedom and determinism, individualism, idealism, and the concept of the Earth as mere 'matter.'" To these she adds other topics, including the concept of progress and the superiority of human beings over other life forms. Actually, all of these can be reduced to three points: description of the world, description of human nature, and the role of human beings in the described world (73). After arriving at the conclusion that there is very little Greek influence on Western philosophy to justify its foundational position in Western thought,<sup>115</sup> since much of what arrived to us was "translated" by Christian philosophers, Cordova extends her search back to Augustine, the "transition figure between the pagan world of Hellenic Europe and the Christian one that followed it" (77). Although much of his assumptions about the world were later secularized in the Enlightenment, he provided a new definition of human beings that has not yet been displaced in our scientific age. As way of examples, Cordova cites individual salvation, the Big Bang theory, the Earth as "*material stuff*" to be used by humans, "self-consciousness" as a new name for the "soul," the separation of disciplines of the body and of the mind, globalization as a way of spreading McDonald's and churches in non-Western worlds, the extension of scientific naming carried out in Latin, among others. Even if Cordova's essay provides only a general gloss over the philosophical legacy of the West, it nonetheless pinpoints important differences between the world she inhabits and the Apache world of her father. For the "Western man" who owns the world, "this is not his real home; it is a simply waystation, a holding-pen, that he must occupy on his way home" (89). However superior, because made in the image of god, and therefore the only one endowed with reason, he is alone.

Before proceeding to describe what the Apache world of her father is like,<sup>116</sup> I should like to stress my argument in pointing out these differences between the Western world and the indigenous world. As Cordova claims, the legacy of Western philosophy is certainly complex and heterogeneous, even if we are justified when we use expressions like "the Western tradition" or "Western thought." Likewise, Native American societies differ greatly

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<sup>114</sup> Vizenor observes that monotheism "takes the risk out of nature and natural reason and promotes absence, dominance, sacrifice, and victimry" (Vizenor "Aesthetics" 11). Indeed, Jace Weaver argues that this "dominion theology" that presupposes that humanity is called to dominate all over creation is particularly troubling to Natives who see themselves as part of creation, where, if human beings have any "special place," is that of the youngest. "The earth and all the rest of creation are thus elders who care for humanity, from whom it can learn, and whom it must respect" ("Notes" 14).

<sup>115</sup> At least, says Cordova, most courses on Western philosophy begin with Greek philosophy as the foundational stone over which Western thought is based and which is retrieved in Renaissance after the long obscurantist Medieval period of the European "Dark Ages."

<sup>116</sup> See the next section, "Spatial Design."



from one another and certainly possess as complex a view of the world, and the role of human beings in it. The aim here is not to subdue all internal differences under a dualistic perspective, Westerns, on the one hand, and Natives, on the other. Rather, it is important that we recognize that—under the specificity of the encounter between Europeans and indigenous peoples—the nature of these differences assumed a vital importance as Europeans claimed authority over the paradigms of existence affecting life in all its aspects. The differences impact directly or indirectly on the bodies of indigenous peoples but go beyond that as they affect all existence and cultures on this planet. More than that, these differences must be bridged if new paradigms are to be created to enable an open-ended dialogue and the epistemological changes we need to survive globally.

Since the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, minority groups have been struggling to acquire greater visibility in the national forum.<sup>117</sup> However, as the misleading term multiculturalism might not make clear, the question is not simply a matter of having the right to Otherness in a multivoiced society (still very much defined by its WASP heritage), but of asserting political rights which undermine the very ideological basis of America. In the case of Native America, there is an ongoing struggle for land retrieval that goes together with their fight for sovereignty in all fields. As Native feminist Andrea Smith asserts, social differences demand that social consequences be redressed, lest the same structure of power that creates inequalities remain intact (“American Studies” 315). The case of literature is not different. Talking about the disruptive powers that Native American viewpoints entail for “the literary status quo as well as the powers of the state,” Craig Womack warns us against the assimilationist ideology that “merely [emphasizes] that all things Native are, in reality, filtered through contact with Europe, that there is no ‘uncorrupted’ Indian reality in the postcontact world we live in” (5). As Anna Lee Walters asserts:

Scholars or authorities from academia, from outside tribal societies, do not necessarily know tribal people best. There is an inherent right of tribal people to interpret events and time in their worlds according to their own aesthetics

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<sup>117</sup> Although the most visible face of the Civil Rights Movement is the African-American struggle for the end of segregation and its subsequent fight for inclusion at all levels of society, it should not be forgotten that the 1960s also saw the emergence of other activist movements. In relation to Native Americans, the period was marked by the birth of the American Indian Movement (AIM) in 1968, the publication of Vine Deloria Jr.’s *Custer Died for your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* in 1969, and the occupation of Alcatraz in that same year by a group called Indians of All Tribes, Inc., the Trail of Broken Treaties Caravan in 1972, and the siege at Wounded Knee in 1973.

and values, as a component of American history, even when this interpretation is different from that of mainstream history.<sup>118</sup> (qtd. in Womack *Red* 9)

Craig Womack also emphasizes that “there is such a thing as a Native perspective” (*Red* 4) and that part of it “[has] to do with allowing Indian people to speak for themselves, that is to say, with prioritizing Native voices” (*Red* 4). These voices should not be restricted to those literary texts authored by Native Americans after the “Native American literary Renaissance,” but should include:

a literary criticism that emphasizes Native resistance movements against colonialism, confronts racism, discusses sovereignty and native nationalism, seeks connections between literature and liberation struggles, and, finally, roots literature in land and culture. (Womack *Red* 11)

Native American scholars working in the literary field are reconceptualizing many of these differences by foregrounding a tradition of thought deeply imbedded in Native American oral literatures and community practices. Christopher B. Teuton argues for an ethical literary criticism that recognizes oral narratives as capable of “objective analysis and critical thought” (195). Unfortunately, there is an ongoing belief among leading Western scholars, including Walter J. Ong and Arnold Krupat, who have theorized about orality, that privileges the technology of writing as the means providing the “necessary critical distance” allowing for self-reflexivity (195). Building on Krupat’s argument that

Traditional cultures abound in philosophical thought, powerful verbal and visual expression, and deeply felt relations to the divine or supernatural. But traditional cultures neither conceptualize nor linguistically articulate the generalized abstract categories of philosophy, literature, and religion[,]<sup>119</sup> (Krupat qtd. in Teuton 195)

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<sup>118</sup> Walters, Anne Lee. *Talking Indian: Reflections on Survival and Writing*. Ithaca, NY : Firebrand Books, 1992. 86.

<sup>119</sup> Krupat, Arnold. *The Turn to the Native: Studies in Criticism and Culture*. Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, 1996. p. 17.

Teuton criticizes how contemporary American Indian critical thought is understood as a hybrid product inasmuch as it is seen as “*Western in origin*”<sup>120</sup> (196). What is at stake, he argues, is not a question of purity, since American Indians see no problem in adding tools to their work, but the fact that they are “drawn into engaging with and justifying [themselves] to the dominant society”<sup>121</sup> (Graham Smith qtd. in Teuton 197). In other words, there is a certain constellation of power in the academic context that privileges the colonizer and co-opts indigenous scholars into reproducing their own oppression.

Absent from most scholarly work on Native American literature produced until the mid-1980’s are the critical terms that can illuminate indigenous critical thought as practiced in Native American oral traditions. Indeed, Teuton offers a classification of the academic production dealing with American Indian creative works divided into “three critical modes of interpretation” (200) that do not follow chronologically. He links the issues raised by each mode to a tacit question. Briefly, “[m]ode one criticism has its roots in ethnographical and anthropological discourses” (200), so that it centers in questions of identity and authenticity. The tacit question is “Who and what is an Indian?” (201). The second mode attempts to review distortions of representation of Native peoples and cultures. Developing concomitant to mode one, this kind of criticism is still very reactive, as it appeals to “idealism” and or “essentialism” to provide a “counternarrative” to popular and academic discourses about Native Americans. This kind of criticism privileges the question “Who can say who and what is Indian but an Indian?” (201). Whereas modes one and two developed throughout the ’70s, ’80s, and ’90s, mode three criticism began to emerge in the 1990s with a clear aim in view: to foster academic work that is accountable and in dialogue with American Indian people, communities, and nations. Process-oriented and speculative, this mode foregrounds the question: “How are we Native people and nations to become who we want to become?” (201). In other words, it focuses on American Indian discursive practices in order to develop the “conceptual, theoretical, and methodological discourses to be used in the study of Native American art, culture, and politics” (201). Native intellectuals engaging in this kind of criticism are hardly consensual, but are committed to building culture “by imagining the place of critical scholarship within Native communities and by providing the terms that may be used to create a space for the articulation of Native epistemologies within academia but are accessible and informative to mainstream audiences” (204). Committed to “tribal

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<sup>120</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>121</sup> Smith, Graham Hingangaroa. “Protecting and Respecting Indigenous Knowledge.” In *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*. Edited by Marie Battiste. Vancouver : University of British Columbia Press, 2000. 209-224.

sovereignty”, says Teuton, this mode three criticism “aims at decolonizing Native American critical studies” (204).

The inclusion of an ethical dimension to theory goes beyond simply seeing it as *applied* theory, since it entails social responsibility and a methodological approach based on a dialogue among artists, critics, and Native communities. Many Native scholars are revising the “Native American intellectual patrimony,” as Robert Warrior called it, both fictional and non-fictional, exactly to identify and define the ways this social practice has been working to sustain communities. It should come as no surprise that part of this genealogical work is developing critical terms to deal with “commonalities, differences, and ‘new knowledge from new places’” (Teuton 206). While Native American critical thought and literature aim at producing nonreactive and intellectually sophisticated discourses to deal with “intellectual trade routes,” another expression created by Warrior in his book *The People and the Word*, and to build the basis for what Weaver calls “communitist” literature<sup>122</sup> and Vizenor “survivance,”<sup>123</sup> what is key here is to understand that none of these concepts “are intelligible outside the context of Native community, history, politics, and needs” (Teuton 208). This is not a matter of intellectual separatism, as some Western scholars interpret it, but of understanding that Native American intellectuals have a “different agenda” that must be addressed. So, “intellectual sovereignty” is a response to the needs of community. More than simply an attempt to denounce the discursive practices of Western discourses that have marginalized and, consequently, de-centered non-European subjects, Native American scholars are establishing themselves at the center of a theoretical and critical praxis that

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<sup>122</sup> Jace Weaver’s own definition goes “Communitism is related to Vizenor’s ‘survivance,’ Warrior’s ‘intellectual sovereignty,’ and George Sioui’s ‘autohistory.’ Its coining, however, is necessary because none of these terms from Native intellectuals nor any word from the Latin root *communitas* carries the exact sense implied by this neologism. It is formed by a combination of the words ‘community’ and ‘activism.’ Literature is communitist to the extent that it has a proactive commitment to Native community, including what I term the ‘wider community’ of creation itself” (qtd. in Womack “Single” 84; emphasis in the original). [Weaver, Jace. *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community*. Cary, NC : Oxford University Press, 1997. ix.]

<sup>123</sup> Vizenor opts for the word “survivance” as a metaphor of presence obviously related to the verb “survive” but bearing an active suffix that means “state or condition” or “action.” In “Aesthetics of Survivance,” he writes that the “native stories of survivance are successive and natural states. Survivance is an active resistance and repudiation of dominance, obtrusive themes of tragedy, nihilism, and victimry.” And he explicates that “[t]he practices of survivance create an active presence, more than the instincts of survival, function, or subsistence. Native stories are the sources of survivance, the comprehension and empathies of natural reason, tragic wisdom, and the provenance of new literary studies” (11).

draws from—but is not equivalent to—hybridist and postcolonial theories. Clearly, speaking of a *nationalist* agenda does not imply having a *political* agenda that encloses literary and non-literary texts under an interpretative frame that reduces and simplifies works. Conversely, it also does not mean that speaking of a *nationalist* agenda is *not* a political struggle.<sup>124</sup> However, whereas both Teuton and Mackay admit that this critical approach has not yet produced the most refined readings of Native works, they defend the theoretical and critical insights it has generated and the maintenance of the commitment of the participants in the discussion. Teuton moves a step further when he proposes that many critical concepts have been constructed performatively by Native American writers and have “the potential for developing alternative interpretative strategies and critical terms” (209), as he shows in his reading of Momaday’s concept of “vision” in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*.

The importance of establishing new conceptual tools and redefining the field of Native American studies resides precisely in the need to confront “terminal creeds,” as Gerald Vizenor calls “those beliefs that terminate plots, foreclose on human possibility, and serve the will to dominate by imposing inflexible and exclusionary definitions on people and cultures” (Cox 109). Terminal creeds exclude the possibility of dialogue and co-existence and thereby bar the ability to undo trauma. As long as rationality is understood as univocal and linear, there is no way to displace the dominant logic that keeps producing erasures of other voices, since the dialectic underlying Western thought in a way presupposes the subsuming of the Native voice under Western theoretical approaches. If to address trauma means to revise the past, and concentrate on meaning, as Eelco Runia pointed out, then one must keep in mind that this process is a political step that is as painful as it is necessary to overcome isolation and the discourse of “individual pathology.” In that sense, empowering individuals to narrate the violent processes of colonialism addresses communal needs and helps develop responsibility. As Ned Blackhawk states, “[f]rom Maine to California, Indian communities confronted threats to their existence with outrage, improvisation, and tireless resolve” (213).

Native American scholars, such as the group of authors participating in the recent collection of essays *Reasoning Together: The Native Critic Collective*, are deeply committed to their communities as they try to discuss collectively—through writing—how language and literary studies can be a tool of empowerment for communities. Their aim is not to reinstate

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<sup>124</sup> The struggle for sovereignty is at the heart of much Native American effort to rebuild their communities. For an interesting discussion of how struggles for sovereignty and Native feminist politics intersect, see Andrea Smith “American.”

old dichotomies—Indian and non-Indian, scholar and artist, women and men—but to recognize commonalities among Indigenous communities and to explore what Audra Simpson calls “the profound difference of difference—the ‘difference’ of indigenous moral and philosophical orders, their matrix of connectedness, and their complexity, all of which lay before and now lie within, settler societies” (483-4). When addressing “the difference of difference,” the most common pitfall is the articulation of difference in terms of either race or culture. In relation to the first term, Audra Simpson emphatically explains that, because this difference is within the domain of “nationhood,” one must not forget that what is at stake is political recognition and not race, as some would have it. In this context, race is part of a particular discourse formation of the West that endows itself with the authority to differentiate “according to scientific and state-driven norms” (484), emptying indigenous struggles. As for the second way of depoliticizing the discourse of difference, in his review of Maureen Konkle’s book *Writing Indian Nations*, Chadwick Allen affirms that the author “offers an astute analysis of the ways in which dominant strains of contemporary scholarship on American Indian history and American Indian literatures work to displace indigenous people’s historical and ongoing political struggles by restricting the conceptual field to the realm of ‘culture’” (204). According to the reviewer, Konkle attempts to move beyond cultural and psychological categories of analysis “and to resituate Native writing within a framework of contested political relations among sovereign nations” (204). This move is a good example of how indigenous scholars are working to transform the field by reinstating Native experience and Native community as the subject and object, respectively, of Native theory (Teuton 209). “In fact,” says Ned Blackhawk, “indigenous intellectuals remain at the forefront of efforts to build a larger consciousness of the Americas, one grounded in recognition of commonalities across political boundaries” (214). These efforts, which Blackhawk sees emerging in the whole hemisphere, attempt to move beyond colonial gestures defining “authenticity” or securing “totalizing narratives” within national boundaries.

At stake is not simply the attempt to write history from another positionality but within the same epistemological framework. Undoubtedly, seeing history from the point of view of those for whom coloniality is a *felt* experience, to use Dian Million’s term, is an important step when addressing the consequences of historical trauma. It should by now be evident that removal policies, massacres, and the uprooting of children from their families, for instance, were possible because the discourses used to justify them were generated and supported by people incapable of seeing the conflict from the perspective of those who were suffering it. While the hegemonic discourse emphasized “progress” and “civilization,” the real effects of those policies meant, in mild terms, physical, psychological, mental, and spiritual disruption

for those subjected to them. Therefore, the retelling of events, as they were experienced by those who were silenced, allowed for the “humanization” of the indigenous Other in the eyes of many Westerners. However, this move can be considered a simple first step taken by the West, since it does not imply the construction of a counterhegemonic practice. The Native was reduced to the same. Benjamin C. Hutchens’s comment on the totalizing power of Western metaphysics is illuminating here. In his introduction to the work of Emmanuel Lévinas, he states that

[Lévinas] is emphatic in his affirmation that [Western] metaphysics is primordially interested in totalization — the reduction of any difference to sameness — with the aim of enhancing its power of rationalization. Under ideal circumstances, knowledge is perfectly adequate to reality. The totalizing tendency of Western metaphysics becomes manifest as a theory of power with two aspects. On the one hand, when our knowledge is adequate to reality, everything is reduced to sameness, which gives rationality its epistemological mission. On the other hand, when we discover the metaphysical principle of difference which allows us to understand the unknown, we reduce the difference by other means; this strengthens the principles of knowledge that give a goal to metaphysics. Epistemology and metaphysics are, therefore, enmeshed in the conditions of the inevitable progress of totalization.<sup>125</sup> (30-31)

By reducing diversity to different expressions of the same inside a singular whole, Western rationality has avoided considering other ways of reasoning that have different goals. I take it that Jace Weaver’s comment on the way indigenous peoples relate to the land can be taken as a good example of what it means to have a different goal underlying a certain epistemology. In the introduction to a collection of essays on “Native American Perspectives on Environmental Justice,” as the subtitle of the book *Defending Mother Earth*

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<sup>125</sup> My translation. The original reads: “[Lévinas] é insistente em sua afirmação de que a metafísica interessou-se primordialmente pela *totalização* – a redução de qualquer forma de diferença à uniformidade – com o objetivo de aumentar o poder de racionalização. Sob condições ideais, o conhecimento é perfeitamente adequado à realidade. A tendência totalizante da metafísica ocidental surge na forma de *uma teoria de poder de duplo aspecto*. Por um lado, quando nosso conhecimento é adequado à realidade, tudo é reduzido à uniformidade, o que dá uma missão epistemológica à racionalidade. Por outro, quando descobrimos o princípio metafísico da diferença que nos permite compreender o incompreendido, reduzimos a diferença à uniformidade por outros meios; isso fortalece os princípios do conhecimento, que dão um objetivo à metafísica. A epistemologia e a metafísica são, então, envolvidas nas condições do progresso inelutável da *totalização*” (30-31).

goes, Jace Weaver states that Natives learned how to adapt to the environment to guarantee survival. This does not mean that they were guided by an abstract ecological principle, but simply that they tried to ensure the necessary resources for themselves and their descendants. This pragmatic principle, however, has a spiritual dimension that the Western world—with its emphasis on land as private property—was unable to understand. “As [Jeanne] Rollins<sup>126</sup> alludes, this way of life led to an understanding of nature as an organic entity. The environment in which traditional Natives live is impassive and dispassionate, but it is also alive and nurturing” (Weaver “Notes” 9). So whereas the land is not particularly endowed with goodness or badness, it is felt as a home, a sacred place that supports all life on the planet. In many places of America, the Earth is referred to as “mother,” the provider to whom we should return our gratitude. As George Barnaby says, there is “no word in our language that means wilderness, as anywhere we go is our home”<sup>127</sup> (qtd. in Weaver “Notes” 19). Consequently, removal policy or assaults on the environment impact indigenous peoples as acts of violence against their societies and the people themselves (Weaver “Notes” 15).

Aymara intellectual and activist Fausto Reinaga uses the following terms to explicit the difference between Western and American Indian thought:

The “vital breath” of Western thought is reason; reason of “rectilinear time.” From Socrates to Kant and from Hegel to Marx, reason marches in a straight line. This thought organizes Occident. And Occident arrives at the atomic bomb... Thought in the New World is not “genocidal reason”; it is “cosmic reason,” vital reason... Thought in the New World is Maya-Inka, that is to say, is Indian thought.<sup>128</sup> (qtd. in Mignolo *Latin* 51-52.)

“Cosmic reason,” “vital reason,” or, in the words of Gerald Vizenor, “natural reason” all point to a kind of rationality that embraces a relationship to “all our relations,” that is, a cosmic vision that sees the human being as part of a living network of beings that, though connected with spirit, have different embodiments, different natures, different ways of being. In this cosmological view, humans are responsible for the balance of the community, which depends on its connection to the whole.

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<sup>126</sup> Jeanne Rollins, “Liberation and the Native American,” in Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, Eds., *Theology in the Americas* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976), p. 204.

<sup>127</sup> Dene Nation, *Denedeh: A Dene Celebration* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984), p. 59. Weaver adds that other Native languages also lack the Word for “wilderness.”

<sup>128</sup> Fausto Reinaga, *La América India y Occidente*, 1974.



In short, Native Americans claim a kind of rationality, “Indian thought,” that differs in several ways from Western rationality. For one thing, the idea of progress towards an overarching (and often unstated) goal is absent. Second, emphasis is laid on the community instead of on the individual. The right for singularity and self-expression is taken for granted, but because people are not alone their personal pursuits do not supersede the welfare of the group. Maybe, as a direct consequence of this, rationality cannot be separated from ethical contexts. Responsibility is not separated from the known and the knower. Fourth, there seems to be a collective effort for remembering data, events, particularities so that nothing is discarded in favor of generalizations. Discordant facts must be taken into account even at the price of hindering conclusions. Another difference between Western rationality and Indian systems of knowledge concerns method. Whereas Western epistemic favors operations such as causal enchainment, dialectics, generalization, the construction of simplified models, Indians avoid totalizing conclusions and resort rather to storytelling as a means to ground thinking into specific experience and situational contexts. As said before, this often engages the whole group in oral contexts, even if this can also take the written form in more contemporary contexts.<sup>129</sup> The sixth difference I perceive between the two systems was perhaps best expressed by Hutchens when—always drawing from Lévinas—he states that Western rationality aims at making God intelligible, that is, “Western rationality tries to rationalize the being of God so that it becomes only another being among beings”<sup>130</sup> (29). However, it is not only God that Western rationality attempts to control, if not to subdue. The list also includes “the individual agent, the historical past, the progressive future, the non-Western cultures, and any cultural tradition that is of mythological or superstitious nature”<sup>131</sup> (29). Indian thought, on the other hand, considers that not everything is to be known, since not everybody is prepared for the responsibility it takes to know.

The purpose of the above discussion was to envision how rationality can take different forms and methods. An attempt to make a sweeping generalization would be the most obvious pitfall in any understanding of rationality. It should be evident that these characteristics suffer variations since neither Western philosophy nor American Indian thought is a monolithic bloc. Furthermore, it is important that any statement made should be

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<sup>129</sup> As exemplified by the native critics collective *Reasoning Together* (edited by Craig S. Womack *et al.*)

<sup>130</sup> My translation. The original reads: “A racionalidade ocidental busca racionalizar o ser de Deus para que esse se torne apenas um ser entre seres” (29).

<sup>131</sup> My translation. The original reads: “o agente individual, o passado histórico, o futuro progressivo, as culturas não-ocidentais e qualquer tradição cultural que seja mitológica ou ‘supersticiosa’ por natureza” (29).

grounded in actual contexts. The importance of establishing general tendencies, however, lies in laying bare the efforts of Native peoples to make visible an-other paradigm built by the people and for the people. Placing the people at the center means that the collective history of conquest and colonization from the point of view of the people who suffered it must be addressed in their own terms.

In the next section, "Spatial Design," I examine the ways stories are present in space. Thus, the landscape is experienced as a living narrative of which the storyteller is part while being an active agent for the unfolding of the story. Spatiality and presence, then, are in clear contrast to narratives that emphasize temporality and absence. Whereas the former define a practice grounded in survivance and metonymy, chance and suggestiveness, the latter suggest the tragic mode or termination.

### SPATIAL DESIGN

Linda Hogan's second novel, *Solar Storms*, tells the story of Angel, a seventeen year-old teenager who finds the name of her great-grandmother amidst the many papers that trail her history through one foster family after another. She writes her a letter and receives back a short note saying, "Come at once" (23), accompanied by the money for her journey back home. The novel, dedicated to Hogan's adopted daughter, who served as a model for Angel's mother, the frozen-hearted Hannah, begins with a Prologue where Angel remembers her great-grandmother's voice describing a give-away ceremony held in her honor, so that she would find her way back home<sup>132</sup> However, the narrative begins properly in Chapter One with Angel's crossing of the waters that will lead her to Adam's Rib in the north country. Perhaps the most impressive thing about this beginning is exactly this search for a beginning. Neither does it start with Angel's comeback, nor with the feast held for her return. Angel's coming of age story begins with the history of the waterways that in the north are broken by land, in an ancient pact, which, like the pact between humans and animals, is now broken. The story that we are about to be told is not simply the story of the impact of

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<sup>132</sup> Angel quotes her great-great-grandmother's words, "I always called you the girl who would return" (31). The phrase is repeated with variations throughout the novel. Interestingly, the idea of homecoming is frequently thematized in Native writings, always within the framework of revitalizing tradition in new contexts.

trappers, missionaries, and traders on this living geography, but it is also the resulting story of this contact as inscribed on Angel's face. Her scars, which she vainly tries to hide and whose source is unknown to her, are the very exposure of her anger and fear. Angel's body and the land her ancestors have occupied for generations are connected by a common history, a history marked by the interconnectedness of beings and the scars of colonization.

In her Native memoir, Linda Hogan states that her tribal identity “has always been chasing [her], to keep its claims on [her] body and heart” (*Woman* 27), as if she were the container through which it breathes. Much as she would like to think “that there is a consciousness of the value of life inherent in all people,” she feels that the Native and European worldviews are completely apart, “they are parallel worlds taking place at the same time, bridges only sometimes made, allowing for a meeting place of lives” (*Woman* 27). This different consciousness as perceived by Linda Hogan finds echo in other writers who attempt to define it in terms of the relationship human beings establish with the Other,<sup>133</sup> that is, when contrasting the two worldviews, they usually do so in terms that emphasize their relative position in connection to the whole of creation, rather than to a fixed position in a scale of beings. When Viola F. Cordova succinctly describes the Apache world of her father, she points out that human beings are neither alone nor irrelevant in the order of the universe. She writes:

The world that I live in is not the world of my father. The Earth is not Mother. She is not the producer and sustainer of all things. I am not ensconced in the warm egg that floats shell-less in a vast and infinite universe which springs out of the Milky Way and the infinite darkness that represents, not emptiness, but potentiality. I am, at most, a nerve-end of the universe, and, at the very least, an oxygen-absorber. I have been told that I am but a fluff of cosmic dust afloat in an empty universe or that I am a sinful and flawed creature awaiting salvation. My father would have said that I was, as long as I existed, a factor in the course of the universe, and that my every action had a consequence on the whole. I was like a pebble dropped into a pond making ripples far beyond my immediate entry. I was not, however, a mere and singular pebble but a handful of pebbles: I was everyone that had ever existed in my genetic group. Most of all, I was what the Mother meant me to be. (“Exploring” 88)

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<sup>133</sup> I recall here Mark Freeman's definition of the Other, quoted in the Introduction to this work, as “whatever is outside the self—whether people, nature, art, God, or what have you—that enters, inspirationally into the construction [of the self]” (“Culture” 113). Native Americans usually refer to the Other in relational terms through the expression “all our relations.”

The traditional world of her father is an organic whole where every being affects its surroundings in specific and far-reaching ways. Therefore, she continues,

As a human being, I have a greater responsibility toward the Mother than all other beings. I alone have a greater memory, and a language, and these allow me to remember the consequences of my actions. The memory of those consequences force [sic] me to be aware of my actions. None of my actions are meaningless. I am a factor in the universe. I am accountable for my actions. ("Exploring" 88)

As creatures endowed with specific capacities such as memory and language, Cordova suggests, human beings should ground action in ethics, that is, behave in a way that guarantees the survival of the whole for the next generations. This kind of action rooted in ethics is probably what Linda Hogan refers to when she talks about the pact between human beings and animals. Just as water and land have a pact<sup>134</sup> (*Solar Storms* 22), which produces havoc when it is broken, so should human beings cater for all the living world. One could ask exactly what form this pact takes as Hogan invokes it, since she alludes to the fact that this bond has been broken many times. The most obvious case is illustrated by the central plot of *Solar Storms*, which places Angel's homecoming in the historical context of the Native Americans' protest against the construction of a hydroelectric dam up north.<sup>135</sup> To join the newly formed resistance groups, Angel undertakes a canoe journey with her grandfather's ex-wife (Bush), her great-grandmother (Agnes), and her great-great-

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<sup>134</sup> Noteworthy, Hogan uses the words "pact," "bond," "agreement," and "covenant" interchangeably (see *Solar Storms* 22 and 35). The last term is one of the innumerable religious references she makes throughout the novel. The word "covenant" instantly evokes the early Puritan belief that God had made a "Covenant" with those He had "chosen" to be saved from the curse of Original Sin by the power of His "Grace." By displacing these Western narratives of origin, Linda Hogan is able to show their impact on Native American lives and establish a new set of meanings associated to them, thus deconstructing the narratives of colonization in a clear strategy of survivance.

<sup>135</sup> Linda Hogan loosely draws from the organized resistance raised in the early seventies by indigenous movements against the James Bay dam project in Quebec, Canada (*Solar Storms* 53-55). The social impact over Native populations, such as the higher rates of STD (sexually transmitted diseases), mercury poisoning, alcoholism and other social pathologies associated with the impact of the dam over the Native population, such as "spousal abuse and suicide, especially among young women" (Scudder 55), is also dealt with in the plot. (See also Sam-Cromarty on the impact of the James Bay hydroelectric dam on the lives of the Cree.) The action of the novel probably takes place in 1973, after the siege of Wounded Knee by the AIM, and shortly before the end of the Vietnam War (*Solar Storms* 156).

grandmother (Dora-Rouge), which is at the same time an inward journey that will reconnect her to the land. The discovery of the bond between land and humans, replicated in other relations, occurs at many levels, and is perhaps our best entrance door to understand how time can be seen as inscribed in space. And to borrow Linda Hogan's expression still further, I would go as far as saying that this bond between space and time, or, in other words, the inscribed human and nonhuman signs that transforms land into storied space, turns space into something more than a set of coordinates. It becomes sacred space.

As stated before, many indigenous groups to the Americas refer to the relationship they have with the Earth as akin to that between mother and child. This is clear in the word Pachamama, which contains the word mama: Mother. This peculiar expression comes from the Andean people, but by now it is common knowledge that most Native Americans would describe their connection to the Earth in similar terms. This relationship has often been described by Western science either as a case of personification, a figure of speech, or as an instance demonstrating the animistic logic of indigenous peoples. The first, personification, implies that the Earth with all its power, diversity, and nurturing character would be reduced to the same, that is, a person. In fact, when alluding to the Earth as Mother, what is being highlighted is the functional homology, that is, a similar function derived from a common source.<sup>136</sup> Jeannette Armstrong states that the Okanagan word for "our place on the land" and "our language" is the same, meaning "that the land has taught us our language." In other words, "to know all the plants, animals, seasons, and geography is to construct language for them" ("Keepers" 323). Language would then be the means whereby human beings interact with Others and assume their place in this web of relations. This language that gives voice to

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<sup>136</sup> Critic Robert M. Nelson uses the term homology to explain the relation between the prose narrative of Tayo's story in Silko's novel *Ceremony* and the "embedded texts" containing myths, clan stories, jokes, etc, that serve to give "authority" to the story we are about to read and that inserts it in the "long ago story of the people." The term, as he explains, comes from biology, where it refers to "two or more analogous entities [which] are derivatives of some preceding entity, the way that for instance siblings are related and share some characteristics because they have a parent (or two) in common" ("Kaupata"). As I use the term here, it serves to underscore the way nature, culture and language engender and revitalize one another in Native communities. As Gregory Cajete points out, "Native community is about living a 'symbiotic' life in the context of a 'symbolic' culture, which includes the natural world as a vital participant and co-creator of community. That is to say, the life of the indigenous community is interdependent with the living communities in the surrounding natural environment" (*Native* 94). Thus, to relate to the Earth as Mother implies more than a rational understanding; it implies a relationship that is derived from the interconnectedness perceived between environment and the oral tradition that serves as a vehicle for the transmission of Native culture. "Communities," continues Cajete, "mirrored the stages of creative evolution and the characteristics of the animals, plants, natural phenomena, ecology, and geography found in their place through a rich oral tradition" (94).

other life-forms is not equivalent to naming and assuming control over them, but it is a language that recognizes the contribution that the soil, the water, and the air have as constitutive elements also of the human body. In Okanagan, says Armstrong, the root word for both “our language” and “our body” is the same. Knowing how to live in the land and to celebrate it is a guarantee of survival, not to know it “is to be dis-placed” (“Keepers” 323). The particular bond that is formed between the land and the people is better defined in terms of responsibility, a connection that is both celebrated and respected.

Animism, the second way that Western science has interpreted the relationship Native Americans establish with the Earth as Mother, is classically used as a term to describe the way indigenous peoples engage with the animate world, that is, “ostensibly ‘inanimate’ objects like stones or mountains are often thought to be alive” and may “be felt to ‘participate’ in one another’s existence, influencing each other and being influenced in return” (Lévy-Bruhl<sup>137</sup> qtd. in Cajete “Philosophy” 50). According to Gregory Cajete, “Native science<sup>138</sup> continually relates to and speaks of the world as full of active entities with which people engage”, which is a way to remain open “to [the world’s] influence and creative possibilities toward deeper understanding” (“Philosophy” 50). “The word ‘animism,’” says Cajete,

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<sup>137</sup> Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien (1985) [1910]. *How Natives Think*, reprinted edn. Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press. Quoted in Abram, David (1996). *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. New York: Vintage Books, 51.

<sup>138</sup> As Cajete points out in his book-length study on Native epistemologies and achievements, the word “science” itself does not exist in any Native language, nor do any of the words that we use to refer to disciplines of knowledge, such as “philosophy” or “psychology.” The expression “Native science,” he suggests, “is a metaphor for a wide range of tribal processes of perceiving, thinking, acting, and ‘coming to know’ that have evolved through human experience with the natural world” (*Native 2*). Touching the whole range of human experience with the natural world, Native science may be best defined by drawing its boundaries, says Cajete. Therefore, it may “include metaphysics and philosophy; art and architecture, practical technologies and agriculture; and ritual and ceremony practiced by Indigenous peoples both past and present. More specifically, Native science encompasses such areas as astronomy, farming, plant domestication, plant medicine, animal husbandry, hunting, fishing, metallurgy, and geology—in brief, studies related to plants, animals, and natural phenomena. Yet, Native science extends to include spirituality, community, creativity, and technologies that sustain environments and support essential aspects of human life. It may even include explorations of questions such as the nature of language, thought, and perception; the movement of time and space; the nature of human knowing and feeling; the nature of human relationship to the cosmos; and all questions related to natural reality” (*Native 2-3*). As we can see, Native science is an ancient and culturally -specific way of engaging with the acquisition of new knowledge and its transmission through generations, in a way that guarantees the self-sustained survival of the next seven generations.

perpetuates a modern prejudice, a disdain, and a projection of inferiority toward the worldview of Indigenous peoples. But if, as the French phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty contends, perception at its most elemental expression in the human body is based on participation with our surroundings, then it can be said that “animism” is a basic human trait common to both Indigenous peoples and modern sensibilities. Indeed, all humans are animists. (“Philosophy” 50)

Seen from a Native perspective, any interaction with the world must be understood in terms of an active engagement of the senses and the descriptive and creative language that will “story” the world.

The opposition described by classical science which postulates the world as knowable, controllable, and predictable while ascribing to indigenous thought a kind of “participation mystique”<sup>139</sup> in the world—whereby a consciousness is projected onto “inanimate” objects—is currently being reevaluated by some anthropologists. Indeed, as British anthropologist Tim Ingold asserts, “the long establish convention,” according to which “animism is a system of beliefs that imputes life or spirit to things that are truly inert [...] is misleading on two accounts” (10). His first argument concerns the fact that what is at stake here is not a belief about the world but a way of being in it. In other words, animacy is not a projection of human qualities onto things but a way of responding with a sense of wonder “to an environment that is always in flux, never the same from one moment to the next” (10). Secondly, awareness of, and openness to, the continuous transformations in the surrounding world enables the perception of “the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence.” Animacy, he continues, “is not the result of an infusion of spirit into substance, or of agency into materiality, but is rather ontologically prior to their differentiation” (10). Inhabiting the world, thus, implies a continuous movement which intertwines with other trajectories along pathways that intersect with one another and redefine the whole web of relations. Movement, says Ingold, is not to be understood as displacement in space but rather as the possibility of becoming, “of renewal along a path” (14). Consequently, the movement of life is associated with a characteristic way of moving along a trail, be it the movement of the sun through the sky, the whisper of trees touched by

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<sup>139</sup> This expression by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl comes from the same passage quoted above.

wind, the arrival of storms, the fluttering of birds, or the rolling of a rock down a cliff. From this perspective,

[w]e are not required to believe that the wind is a being that blows, or that thunder is a being that claps. Rather, the wind is blowing, and the thunder is clapping, just as organisms and persons are living in the ways peculiar to each.<sup>140</sup> (Ingold 16)

The logic operating here, says Ingold, is not one that opposes agency and materiality but one that privileges movement through over movement across, habitation over occupation, medium over surface.<sup>141</sup> In this sense, the animic cosmos is a place of continuous movement, a relational medium where humans creatively interact with all other beings. This openness to the world brings a certain vulnerability, an astonishment “that comes from riding the crest of the world’s continued birth,” says Ingold (18). Astonishment should not be mistaken for weakness, since

this attitude of unsurprised astonishment [...] is also a source of strength, resilience and wisdom. For rather than waiting for the unexpected to occur, and being caught out in consequence, it allows [those who are truly open to the world] at every moment to respond to the flux of the world with care, judgement and sensitivity. (Ingold 19).

Because there is no attempt to predict and control response, the element of surprise is also absent here. Differing from Western science which “[seeks] closure rather than openness,” Ingold explains, “scientists are often surprised by what they find, but never astonished. Scientists are surprised when their predictions turn out to be wrong” (18). It is revealing that

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<sup>140</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>141</sup> Anthropologists Nurit Bird-David and Bruno Latour use the term “relational epistemology” to refer to the “absence of the ontological dualism of nature and culture, and body and mind, that are characteristic of Western thought.” This epistemology “rejects the positivist view of objects or actors as closed and separated from the world of individuals, existing in themselves prior to any participation in ecosocial and semiotic networks of interactions” (Domanska 348). [See Bird-David, Nurit, “‘Animism’ Revised: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology,” *Current Anthropology* 40, Supplement (February 1999), 77; and Bruno Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications,” *Soziale Welt* 47:4 (1996), <http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9801/msgOO019.html>]



the disparity between thought and life, that is, the emphasis on control and predictability in a way depends on the element of surprise to assure “those who have forgotten how to be astonished at the birth of the world [...] that events are taking place and that history is being made” (19). Indeed, Ingold observes,

[f]ollowing the Popperian programme of conjecture and refutation, science has turned surprise into a principle of creative advance, converting its cumulative record of predictive failure into a history of progress. (Ingold 18-19).

It is this sense of astonishment, I repeat, that defines the Native American openness to the world without converting it into knowable dead matter. Or, to express it differently, it is constitutive of a worldview that can relate to the Earth as mother. This relationship is not the result of a projection of personhood, or “spirit,” into matter but a recognition of the domain to which human beings belong and the only medium where human life is possible. Like women, this medium is fraught with potentiality, mystery, becomings, and ever new life possibilities. Linda Hogan expresses this idea in *Solar Storms* through the voice of her protagonist and narrator, Angel, in the following manner:

The people at Adam’s Rib believed everything was alive, that we were surrounded by the faces and lovings of gods. The world, as described by Dora-Rouge, was a dense soup of love, creation all around us, full and intelligent. Even the shadows light threw down had meaning, had stories and depth. They fell across the land, and they were filled with whatever had walked there, animal or man, and with the birds that flew above. (81)

By describing the world as a “full and intelligent” ongoing creation and by transforming the surrounding space of the traditional people of her novel into “a dense soup of love” inhabited by gods, shadows, animals, and people, Hogan poetically conceptualizes space as a medium, even including those beings that move between terrestrial and celestial domains, such as birds, and the shadows that project meaning by moving in accordance to the many forms traveling in the domain of light.

Space thus conceptualized sediments time, as scars that expose both the register of past wounds and the proof of healing.<sup>142</sup> Storied space incorporates time for those who know how to read it. In the Introduction to her book *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt briefly describes how drawings signed by an Amerindian named Felipe Guaman Poman de Ayala and made some four decades after the fall of the Inca Empire to the Spanish are spatially organized according to the Andean symbolic space. Although it incorporates some Western conventions, Guaman Poman subverts the official history of the Spanish conquest through the spatial ordering that structures the images (5-7). Ironically, these drawings, which were found in 1908 in the Danish Royal Archives of Copenhagen, were only properly “read” “[i]n the 1970s, [when] scholars developed more sophisticated ways of interpreting textual representations, both fictional and non-fictional” (7).<sup>143</sup> Just as these old manuscripts follow conventions that must be properly read by those who are acquainted with the social practices underlying them, other storied spaces also contain stories whose proper reading requires the collective memory, or relational epistemology, necessary to unveil their secret coding. So it is that in Hogan’s novel, *Solar Storms*, which I am using here to exemplify how this relational epistemology may be understood to work in terms of the matrix space-time, the protagonist slowly learns to decode the many layers inscribed in space.

The novel may be described as a return-to-roots novel, in which the first person narrator learns about the traditional values that the old people cultivated and the ruptures produced by history. At the same time, this coming-of-age story follows Angel’s search for healing, the recovery of collective and personal traumas experienced by the northern tribes, by means of a journey, a new beginning represented by water: “I was traveling toward myself like rain falling into a lake” (26). Indeed, Angel and her three grandmothers decide to travel north on canoes to join the protests against a massive hydroelectric dam which will flood the living habitat of many indigenous people, animal and plant species, bringing along the transformation of the People’s way of life. As they are planning their trip, Angel discovers how time gets inscribed onto the surfaces of maps. She observes Bush studying the old maps drawn by the first cartographers of the land:

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<sup>142</sup> Looking at Angel’s scars, Bush tells Angel, “Some people see scars and it is wounding they remember. To me they are proof of the fact that there is healing.” (Hogan *Solar* 125)

<sup>143</sup> For more detailed instructions on how to follow the symbolic spatial structure of preconquest Amerindian manuscripts, see also Silko’s essay “Books: Notes on Mixtec and Maya Screenfolds, Picture Books of Preconquest Mexico” (*Yellow* 155-165), Mignolo’s *Darker* (especially Chapter 2), and Pratt’s essay “Transculturation.”

Obsessed with the faded squares of paper that represented land, she tried to unravel all earth's secrets. I saw that she searched for something not yet charted. Besides, like a compass in this northern place of underground iron, the maps were not reliable. (122)

Puzzled at first at Bush's interest, Angel soon becomes interested too. "I was intrigued by the fact that history could be told by looking at paper" (123), says Angel. By looking at it, a "deeper map" slowly unveils before her, a map that tells the stories of frozen animals, that registers the absence of the northern lights in the same years that the tribes were invaded by French fur traders, who brought tuberculosis and smallpox on the people. As she examines the geographical lines, the changes effected by the dwindling beaver populations over land and water, ignored by mapmakers, dawns on her. For the one who can see the people, the animals, and the carnage absent from the view of cartographers, a deeper dimension is revealed, because "[maps] were incredible topographies, the territories and tricks and lies of history" (123). Through it, Angel and her grandmothers see the vain attempts the government's surveyors made to take, control, and subdue the living motion that refused to be ordered in that way. As Dora-Rouge tells Angel, the "earth has more than one dimension. The one we see is only the first layer" (123). Indeed, as the four of them set off on two canoes, the old maps soon prove to be inadequate and Dora-Rouge, the eldest among them, starts to guide them by reawakening the stories that connect them to the unseen people no longer inhabiting those places "but present all the same" (169). As they discard the time markers provided by watches and calendars, they reconnect to the stars, to the "place inside the human that spoke with land, that entered dreaming, in the way that people in the north found directions in their dreams" (170). Sleeping brings Angel the memory of forgotten things, of healing plants, in the same way that the old ones would follow routes shown to them in dreams that would lead them to the prey that would satiate their hunger. "These dreams they called hunger maps," her grandmother tells her, a connection to the land that used to be so strong "that you could even strike a bargain with the weather" (170). Angel feels "newly found, opening," as she remembers being fish, as she learns the language of the land, and feels she can hear "the voices of the world, of what was all around [them]—the stones, the waters flowing toward their ends, the osprey with its claws in fish, even the minnows and spawn" (181). She hears Dora-Rouge's stories of an ongoing creation, and the things they taught about doing work, about kindness and love, "there were even stories to show a way out of unhappiness" (181), remarks Angel. After tuning themselves to the rhythms and ways of the living world, they discard the old maps and follow intuition, memory,

inner maps. "Maps," says Dora-Rouge, "are not our invention. [They] are only masks over the face of God. There are other ways around the world" (138). During her journey, Angel undergoes a transformation of consciousness that operates at many levels. As they enter a sort of timelessness, that is, a total disconnection with the sense of time provided by the modern world, they develop a sense of wonder that invites their participation in the life-making process. Not only does the growing familiarity with their surroundings teach Angel how to survive in that environment, but she also acquires the ability to dream about the healing plants that must be saved from the flooding. This is not simply a spiritual journey, nor a mere voyage that will lead them to the protester's place. Angel and her grandmothers are intent on salvaging what they can for the future generations. "I wondered," says Angel as she packs for the journey, "about this particular destiny, if it was really ours. Maybe there were others to be pursued. Maybe destiny was a limitless, open road" (148).

Through the many stories of Dora-Rouge, Angel learns about the landscape, the particular ways of being of animals, the plants that provide healing, and the people who inhabited those regions. Her old hands "were full of memory," Angel recalls. "Through her I could see into the past. I saw the deep past, even before the time of Dora-Rouge" (168). Obviously, those stories might be simply seen as retellings of facts that happened either during Dora-Rouge's lifetime or before, in which case she would have heard them and be simply passing them on to Angel, so that the stories would survive and continue their own life. In a way, this is how it works, but some Native writers imply another dimension that goes with storytelling. In the previous Chapter, I have discussed at some length Foucault's understanding of truth-saying, which I would like to recall here. As Foucault elaborates the concept, he emphasizes the fact that truth is not a quality of what is out there in the world, now recognized as objective knowledge, but a condition that transforms the subject as he or she becomes capable of expressing that truth in words or acts. Said differently, stories are not "intellectual baggage" that is transmitted verbatim from one generation to another, but they are intertwined in the very "texture" that composes one's life. In this sense, stories must be actualized at each telling according to the experiences incorporated by each teller and the dynamic of the interaction between teller, audience, and context.<sup>144</sup> Moreover, these stories

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<sup>144</sup> From the narrative point of view, Walter Benjamin's discussion of the storytelling tradition points more or less in the same direction, as he argues that the storyteller must be able to assimilate and elaborate on his or her own experience in order to share it through the story. Interestingly, he notices the downfall of the epic side of truth in European society, which signals the growing incapacity of extracting wisdom from experience (201). The shift from storytelling to novel writing, with its emphasis on the psychologizing of narrative, underscores an increasing distance from the world of action to a world from which the character feels alienated. The fundamental difference

are connected to place, as aptly explained by Dutch scholar Lea Zuyderhout. According to her experience with the Blackfoot community, proximity to a certain place, be it a mountain or a bend on a road, created the occasion for the retelling of stories associated to that place. According to Gregory Cajete,

Story enables individual and community life and the life and process of the natural world to become primary vehicles for the transmission of Native culture. The culture's vitality is literally dependent on individuals, in community with the natural world. (*Native* 94)

In this sense, stories are carried by individuals and the community, but, above all, they are felt as a living presence connecting the people to a certain landscape.<sup>145</sup>

Greg Sarris exemplifies this connection between place, story, and identity by elaborating on one of his exchanges with Mabel McKay, the famous Cache Creek Pomo basket weaver and medicine woman.<sup>146</sup> Many of his essays explore the difficulties inherent in

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between the two approaches is basically the language adopted by each philosopher and the respective context of their argument, since Foucault is re-elaborating the concept of truth based on his reading of (pre-Christian) philosophers in the first and second centuries of our era, while Benjamin focus primarily on the consequences of trauma affecting the European consciousness after the First World War.

<sup>145</sup> A note of caution should be inserted here. As said before, Native Americans, in general, feel bounded to a certain landscape. This is best expressed by Jace Weaver when he notes that “[t]he Cherokee, like other Native peoples, are spatially rather than temporally oriented. Their culture, spirituality, and identity are connected to the land—and not just any land in a general sense but *their* land. The act of creation is not so much what happened *then* as it is what happened *here*” (“Notes” 12; emphasis in the original). Despite this, Native Americans retain a connection to their homeland that allows them to remain spatially oriented even far from it. In his collection of autobiographical and literary essays entitled *I Hear the Train*, Louis Owens humorously recounts his experience of meeting a group of Native teenagers in Paris, who, despite their lack of experience abroad, were able to perfectly orient themselves in the new environment. Owens attributes this at-easiness to an inner sense of belonging that Natives carry in themselves wherever they go (108).

<sup>146</sup> Sarris knew Mabel McKay as a kid growing around Santa Rosa and was soon spellbound by her. Later, he wrote her biography, *Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream*, which “turned out to be a mixture of biography and autobiography, a bi-autobiography of sorts, a story that tells the story of [his] hearing her stories (“From a Place” 308). His theoretical writings are also greatly influenced by these exchanges as he explores the difficulties involved in cross-cultural (mis-)interpretation, suggesting how readers/listeners may become suspicious of their cultural assumptions when dealing with culturally different contexts. For him, becoming aware of these differences may

understanding her stories, as they demand that the hearer be able to make sense of them based on his or her own life. "As Mabel said to [Sarris]: 'Don't ask me what it means, the story. Life will teach you about it, the way it teaches you about life'" (Sarris "From a Place" 304). In his autobiographical essay, "From a Place Called Santa Rosa," Sarris reports of a day he was driving with Mabel and they stop to look at a landscape. Not just any landscape, but one profoundly significant for Mabel, as her own life is connected to that location. As it turned out, the place not only connected Mabel to her own past and the history of her grandparents and the whole events that affected their community, but it also held stories that, once brought up by Mabel, proved to have deep implications for Sarris's own life as well, since the people from that place had also become part of his life in ways far beyond his comprehension. When she finished her story, Mabel ironically asked him about the questions concerning her doctoring practice that he was asking just before she started telling the story:

"Now what did you want to know about crystals?" she asked.

I didn't answer her. I didn't have to. I got her point. The herbs, her songs, all aspects of her doctoring ceremony were sacred, not just objects to be talked about, separate from Mabel's whole life. They were a part of her and, as a result, a part of me too. Like the girls from Sulfur Bank, and the story I just heard. They were not things separate from my own life. I was a part of them just as they were a part of me, and in ways I might not fully understand. I couldn't treat them any lighter or different from the way I treated my own life. They were my life. The story, the girls, Mabel. An occurrence at Sulfur Bank lived on, found itself on Grand Avenue in Santa Rosa, made itself anew in the place there, in the lives of all of us, whether we knew it or not. I knew it.<sup>147</sup> ("From a Place" 303)

In short, by telling this specific story Sarris is able to raise some key aspects of storytelling in what concerns interpretation and the way we generally relate to stories. First, stories are embedded in a context that is neither linear nor separate from the people involved in the telling, since they usually illustrate a point that is situational but with far reaching implications for the specific relationship affecting teller or audience, or both. In fact, what is at stake goes far beyond the particular situation as the speaking partners are connected to a place that keeps affecting their lives. In the case of the specific story told by Mabel, we witness a

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unleash a true dialogue in which the text and the reader/listener may inform and be informed by one another.

<sup>147</sup> Emphasis in the original.

complex web of relations that includes a whole community and an ongoing story that reaches domains which they do not always fully appreciate, such as their common history of displacement, the interfamily ties formed by friendship and solidarity, a family curse extending to the whole community, and all their lives as part of the story. The story lives on, as Sarris says, in the people. Thus, interpretation is less a matter of grasping an idea intellectually than it is a process that binds the individual to community. “And,” we might conclude with Cajete, “when a story’s fully received, it induces a powerful understanding that becomes a real teaching” (*Native* 95). This teaching is not purely subjective, insofar as it consolidates the transmission of Native culture. To claim that “[C]osmology, the lived story of a place, kinship, and environmental knowledge, forms the foundation for the expression of Native science in Native communities” (Cajete *Native* 95) is to emphasize the interdependence granted to these aspects in the Native epistemological approach to the world. Native science, or storytelling, as I am emphasizing here, depends on learning how to read the signs that abound everywhere. In that sense, nature and culture are not opposites but form a continuum that—properly read—ensures survival. To enter this process of meaning-making requires more than setting events into their proper place on a time-line. It is crucial that the one who engages in the interpretative act is able to follow the implications of the story that irradiate web-like from the specific occasion of the telling to ever-wider levels of understanding.

In the beginning of this Chapter, I have quoted from Linda Hogan’s novel *Power*, in which the first person narrator says, “space is full and time is empty” (55). Indeed, space is full of “matter” that, properly storied, may conflate in the present moment, giving it depth of meaning. N. Scott Momaday provides a brilliant (and extensive) explanation, which I would like to quote at length.

Much has been said and written concerning the Indian’s conception of time. Time is a wonderful abstraction; the only way in which we can account for apparent change in our world is by means of the concept of time. The language in which I write and you read upon this page is predicated upon a familiar system of tenses—past, present, and future. In our Western understanding of time we involve the correlative of distance. The past is away in that direction, the future in that, and the present is just here, where I happen to be. But we speak of the passage of time; times come and go, the day will come. We remain in place and observe the flow of time, just as we sit at the cinema and watch, fascinated, as images fly before our eyes. The plane of time is shattered; it is composed of moments, ad infinitum, in perpetual motion.

“He loved melons. Always when we went in the wagon to Carnegie, we stopped at a certain place, a place where there was a big tree. And we sat in the shade there and ate melons. I was little, but I remember. He loves melons, and he always stops at that place.” When my father spoke to me of my grandfather, who died before I was born, he invariably slipped into the present tense. And this is a common thing in my experience of the Indian world. For the Indian there is something like an extended present. Time as motion is an illusion; indeed, time itself is an illusion. In the deepest sense, according to the native perception, there is only the dimension of the timelessness, and in that dimension all things happen. (*Man* 52-53)

From this perspective, Western time, which has become secularized as the ineluctable chain of progress, is almost devoid of a present moment, as it shrinks under the weight of the past and the pressing future moment. As a category of thought, time is devoid of substantiality, and with the exception of its amazing interaction with space and matter at subatomic level and/or at light-speed, time has been understood mostly as a totally independent dimension. At least, the bulk of Western civilization is still operating under the Newtonian concept of time. By contrast, Native Americans interact with the surrounding world from a spatial-oriented perspective, as they perceive space as fully inhabited by all sorts of beings, human or nonhuman, that infuse the whole with meaning, as they relate to one another dynamically. Connecting to this space as storied space makes for a stretched present that extends itself in all directions.

This way of approaching time, or rather “timelessness,” as empty in opposition to the “fullness” of space has profound implications for life writing, as the linearity of time is not the Ariadne’s thread that carries narrative desire. “What is it that initiates the search for one’s own history?” asks Viola F. Cordova (Kathleen Moore *How* 24). Her answer goes in the sense of “confront[ing] [her] difference through a clash of value systems and ways of acting in the world” (25). In the next section, “Weaving Relations,” I explore narrative desire as it might unleash the act of self-narration.

## WEAVING RELATIONS

Typically, autobiographies have been analyzed both in relation to the way they are plotted and in terms of their referentiality. Narratologist Peter Brooks defends the idea that plot is the central element of narrative, since it is constitutive of character, and is what we



would simply term the “story.” Referentiality, on the other hand, is what takes us beyond the text and lead us to question the relationship between life and text. In this section, I would like to briefly raise some aspects related to narrative in general and their probable implication for life writing. Largely based on Western theories of narrative, this first part should be only a stepping-stone for what I take to be a more illuminating discussion for my purpose here. Taking the lead from the groundbreaking work of Adriana Cavarero, in the second part of this section, I discuss the desire for one’s story as it impinges on narrative. In other words, Cavarero shifts the stress from narrative to life. In Chapter One, I have already hinted at some pragmatic purposes that might be involved in Native American life writing. Bearing those arguments in mind, I expand those motivations in terms of their implication for the narrative desire motivating Native American life writing. Building on these two Chapters, Chapter Three examines the autobiographical work of Silko in terms of its articulation of desire.

In his study of narrative plot, Peter Brooks explores the way desire engenders plot, which he posits as the carrier of narrative design. Indeed, for him all elements of narrative, such as “point of view,’ ‘tone,’ ‘symbol,’ ‘spatial form,’ or ‘psychology’” (4) are subordinated to the linking thread it represents. In this way, plot is constitutive not only of fictional writing but also of “secret lives,” “for if ‘secret lives’ are to be narratable, they must in some sense be plotted, display a design and logic” (5). Plotting is also the very basis of historiographical discourse, which

replaces theology as the key discourse and central imagination in that historical explanation becomes nearly a necessary factor of any thought about human society: the question of what we are typically must pass through the question of where we are, which in turn is interpreted to mean, how did we get to be here? (Brooks 6).

Thus, in general, narrative articulates temporal processes that are organized according to a narrative design. As such, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye elaborates a typology of fictional discourse based on the four classical genres of the Western literary tradition: comedy, romance, satire, and tragedy. Taking his lead from Frye, historiographer Hayden White analyses the way historiographical discourse is plotted, associating the way temporality is constructed with Frye’s four narrative modes. However, as Runia has effectively shown, this emphasis on narrativity has emptied our capacity to deal with meaning, that is, trauma. Obviously, what is being proposed is not a return to the nineteenth-

century belief on the objectivity of events, but an attempt to understand what other forms historiographical discourse—and by extension life writing—may take that will reinforce the author's need to say.

Life writing is a referential narrative, like Western historiographical discourse, leading roughly from the beginning of the autobiographer's life<sup>148</sup> to the moment of the autobiographical act. As such, life writing is inserted in the temporality of the Western tense system, which posits a kind of development, a linear chronosophy, as it were, that will lead from point A to point B. Clearly, a linear temporality does not necessarily imply a linear narrative, as the writer may freely go forward and backward in time without ever breaking the linear timeline of his or her life. According to this view of narrative, which is grounded in time, the way autobiographical writing is plotted reveals the tensions and anxieties, as well as the hopes and desires, which move the narrative onwards. The need of plotting is also revealed in the way closure is projected by the autobiographical narrative. As one cannot write one's own death, autobiographies must necessarily remain open for both writer and reader. Nonetheless, it attempts to project cure and, as Brooks states in relation to the tale "Hawthorn Blossom," it "transmits a kind of wisdom that itself concerns transmission: how we pass on what we know about how life goes forward" (9). This is not to suggest that the autobiographical writer is in the comfortable position of delivering his or her wisdom from a privileged position. Rather, because of the narrative structuring operation they perform to deal with their crisis, they are attributing meaning to time, which is the basic element of all Western narratives of individuation. As Brooks says, "[u]nlike philosophical syllogisms, narratives ("All-Kinds-of-Fur," for example) are temporal syllogisms, concerning the connective processes of time" (21). Thus, Brooks affirms the primacy of time over space, which is based on the familiar tense system of language and is of utmost importance for narrative construction. More than that, time is also the very determiner of human life, as we

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<sup>148</sup> The beginning of a life is not to be equated with birth, the primal scene that is never remembered but must be narrated back to us. As autobiographers show us, the beginning of one's life may take several forms, even extending some generations back. Cavarero follows Hannah Arendt's radical change of perspective when she places accent on birth rather than death. She quotes: "speaking in terms of existential modalities, the difference between, or the opposition of, Politics and Philosophy, is equivalent to the difference between, or the opposition of, Birth and Death; or in conceptual terms, to the opposition between Natality and Mortality. Natality is the fundamental condition of every living-together and thus of every politics; Mortality is the fundamental condition of thought, in so far as thought refers itself to something that is as it is and is for itself" (28) [Arendt, *Philosophy and Politics: What is Political Philosophy?* from the Library of Congress, Washington DC (Box 40, p. 024446), cited by Simona Forti in *'Vita Della Mente' e Tempo Della Polis* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1994), p. 127.]

are obviously time creatures. This is best exemplified by Paul John Eakin's conclusion of his discussion of the physical anchoring of the self in the body. Based on his analysis of anthropologist Robert F. Murphy's autobiography, he says that

If Murphy's self is damaged by the tumor, as it is, it is also true that every self is damaged, in a larger and deeper sense, by living in and as a mortal body: thus the body teaches as its final lesson, "there's no cure for life" (229).<sup>149</sup> (*How* 42)

In a way, narratives project the very end of their subject, but an end made meaningful by the patterns created by the narrative thread. So, if autobiographies process the already lived, their meaning can only be understood at the very end, as the reader attempts to disentangle the narrative. Necessarily, autobiographies lack closure. Quoting Brooks once more:

Narrative thus seems ever to imagine in advance the act of transmission, the moment of reading and understanding that it cannot itself ever know, since this act always comes after the writing, in a posthumous moment. (34)

The only possible way of understanding plotting and the desire driving it is by retracing the narrative as it unfolds in the hermeneutic act. Desire, thus understood, should not be reduced to a thematic element of the autobiographical writing, since it is the very shaping force that drives the narrative onwards toward the end. An end, it must be said again, that can only be projected, as it has not been lived by the writer of the autobiography. Most often than not, narrative desire is translated simply in terms of the need to say, "desire to be heard, recognized, listened to" (Brooks 53). Returning to Pratt's concept of the autoethnographical text, narrative desire becomes the need to create dialogue by refusing silence.<sup>150</sup> This refusal of silence is a political act that operates at the level of the self and the community, as they are immersed in historical processes that authorize a certain discursive practice in detriment of others. In that sense, Paul John Eakin argues that the Western

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<sup>149</sup> Murphy, Robert F. *The Body Silent*. 1987. New York: Norton, 1990.

<sup>150</sup> Evidently, the attempt to bridge the world of "my 'here' into your 'there,'" to borrow Richard Kearney's expression (173), is not that easy, as Pratt demonstrates, for the contact zone is a place of contested power. Silence can be a tool of empowerment when narrative (and weapons) turns against oneself. In such case, silence is a strategy of survivance that is sometimes overcome by speaking to those who know how to listen, as did Guaman Poman, for instance.

narrative of individuation, as practiced by the canonical writers, “reflects the conjunction of a model of identity as individuality and a concept of history as an irreversible, never-to-be-repeated sequence of actions” (*Touching* 96), differing from other cultures exactly in reference to the concept of person and time. In the previous section, I tried to show what these different ways of conceiving both time and “personhood” in Native thought consist in by emphasizing the importance of cosmology, a living sense of place, kinship, community, and responsibility toward the natural world. Now, I would like to look at what kind of autobiographical discourse may emerge from these ways of knowing and relating to oneself and the Other. In other words, “What if [we were to say with Francesco Patrizi that] history was also painting (pintura)?” (Mignolo *Darker* 166-7). Not really an attempt to project the end of one’s life according to a figure, but a provisional, ongoing act of creation that is grounded on the web of relations grounded on spatial presence.

Let me take, for instance, not an autobiography yet, but a novelistic retelling of a life to show how life stories may articulate desire. Debra Magpie Earling based the story of her novel *Perma Red* on the life of her aunt Louise, killed at age twenty three. Bearing the same name as Earling’s aunt, the protagonist is a teenage girl whose wildness and beauty inadvertently draw many men to her and along with them the promise of new worlds: on the one hand, the riches of traditional Indian knowledge and connection to land and place, or, on the other hand, the escape from hunger and the misery of reservation life, even including escapades into a bohemian white society. Expectedly, this fictional biography also incorporated autobiographical elements as the creative process developed and the character’s story gained an inward perspective. According to feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero, biography and autobiography get intertwined in a story that desires to be told. This desire for narration evinces a desire for identity, but an identity that reveals not the essence of someone but the singularity of someone’s existence. In that sense, quoting Jean-Luc Nancy, Cavarero writes that “for the one who exists, what matters is existence, not essence”<sup>151</sup> (20). In other words, the desire to tell one’s story reveals a desire to create meaning from the uniqueness of one’s experience, going beyond the universality of a name.<sup>152</sup> More than being the story of a Flathead Indian Woman in the 1940s Montana, the

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<sup>151</sup> Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Inoperative Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991. 1-43.

<sup>152</sup> Notice here the difference from Rousseau’s goal when he declares his desire to reveal his uniqueness. He bases his difference from all other human beings not on his acts, but on his feelings, which would reveal his “uncontaminated” essence. Rousseau’s project is grounded on his theory of innocent souls that become corrupted once they relate to the existing social environment.

novel tells the story of Louise, thus rescuing her singularity from the generality of a “type.” From the beginning of the novel, the reader is made aware that Perma refers to the name of the Indian reservation where most of the story happens. However, the unflattering expression “Perma Red” appears late in the novel, as Louise shows awareness of the fact that she is called “Perma Red” behind her back. In this case, the red of the name alludes perversely to Louise’s sexual life, even though it could possibly also refer to her “Indianness.” Most important, however, is Louise’s resolve not to be determined from the outside: “Louise understood the meaning of the name, a label that said she was Indian and nothing more. She came from Perma and she could never change her life standing. She wouldn’t let her name claim her” (229). Rather than referring to a desire to escape the poverty-stricken reservation, since her wildness is associated to her continuous breakouts from school and resistance to assimilation into mainstream society, her statement asserts her determination to be more than a name, a label impersonally attached to someone, which prevents the emergence of someone’s uniqueness, transforming her singular existence into an essence, a sociological type. Louise fights terminal creeds. In this sense, the story of someone’s life can never be equated with total individuation, beyond the necessary relational aspects of all identity, nor be subsumed under the representativeness of a type, denying singularity.

In this sense, Cavarero provides groundbreaking guidelines for the study of the autobiographical genre by defending the thesis that self-narration is a familiar act which happens all the time and not simply in the self-conscious act of actively soliciting memory for an all-encompassing pattern.<sup>153</sup> According to her, “[e]very human being, without even wanting to know it, is aware of being a *narratable self* — immersed in the spontaneous auto-narration of memory”<sup>154</sup> (33). In this familiar experience of the narratable self what matters is not the actual contents of the narrative but the desire for narration, that is, the desire to tell one’s story which is different from anyone else’s. Therefore, Cavarero shifts the emphasis from narrated self (text) to the recognition of one’s “sense-of-self” that, though imbricate, is neither coincidental with the text nor separate from it. She stresses that the narratable self is not simply a product of the life-story, “a construction of the text, or the effect of the performative power of narration” (5), that is, the narrated text. Rather, the narratable self is

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Nature, in that sense, is not part of the social continuum but an escape from relationship, since it is seen as an empty space.

<sup>153</sup> Mieke Bal also stresses this notion of narrative memory as a routine act performed conscious or unconsciously with the potential for becoming memorable acts according to their affective value. (See “Introduction.”)

<sup>154</sup> Emphasis in the original.

the conscious or unconscious impulse of personal memory that incessantly keeps telling one's life episodes. The self, says Cavarero, "coincides rather with the uncontrollable narrative impulse of memory that produces the text, and is captured in the very text itself" (35). Most importantly, there is never a coincidence between text (narrated self) and life, but they are irrevocably linked by a sense of familiarity that recognizes the narratable self as an "actuality" instead of simply a "potentiality" (35). This narrating impulse that is actually captured in the text results in a narrative that is necessarily discontinuous, but familiar nevertheless. This sense of recognition is at the basis of Cavarero's argument because what matters is not so much the actual content of the story but the recognition of the self as narratable in the here and now. Again, at stake is one's sense of identity, the search for meaning spurring the desire for narrative. "Put simply," states Cavarero

through the unreflecting knowledge of my 'sense-of-self' [dell'assaporarmi], I know that I have a story and that I consist in this story — even when I do not pause to recount it to myself, 're-living' through the memory some episodes through a sort of interior monologue. I could nevertheless not know myself to be narratable unless I were not always already interwoven into the autobiographical text of this story. Such an interweaving is indeed irreparable, and comes irremediably to the self as a reifying experience. (35)

In that way, Cavarero shifts the emphasis from the autobiographical text as a product to be seen as coincidental or not with the life lived to the narrative impulse of memory that recognizes the presence of a story that is unique, regardless of actually being told or not. Thus, the narratable self recounts life-stories that, independent of the form they take, reifies "through the story, that which she already was"<sup>155</sup> (36). The self whose story is exposed generates and is generated by that specific life-story, which guarantees his or her singularity beyond a name. Indeed, Cavarero stresses that it is the desire for one's story through the continuous act of memory that enables the construction of an identity. However, this life-story must take place within a "familiar self-sensing recognition" (37). If life-stories are narrated in political scenes of exhibition and exchange, they must nevertheless be recognized by the narratable self, lest the self fails to connect with his or her own memory, a prospect which entails the loss of one's identity with very painful consequences as clinical cases of memory loss evince. The actual text that results from the narrative impulse of memory of the narratable self does not produce "all the reality of the self, [it] is nothing but the marginal

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<sup>155</sup> Emphasis in the original.

consequence, or symptom, that follows [the desire of having an exposed uniqueness that awaits her narration]" (Cavarero 86). Consequently, the content of the text is deemed less important, according to Cavarero, because the scene of action is always mutable and contextual, which makes a search for a compact and coherent identity unnecessary. In life writing, interiority cedes way to the exhibitiv act of exposure, since "[t]he self — to the extent to which a who is not reducible to a what — has a totally external and relational reality" (63). Absent from this act of self-exposure is the narcissistic impulse, since the person gives her or himself to be seen; it is an exposure that reveals frailty and contingency, the desire for recognition of one's uniqueness.

Strictly speaking, novels and autobiographies are two Western individuation narrative genres stemming from completely different historical moments, even if, as Greg Sarris points out, "[t]he notion of autobiography as fiction, or interpretation, is nothing new. The autobiography, whether narrated or written, is not the life but an account or story of the life" (*Keeping* 85). Because novels are fictional accounts, writers enjoy relative freedom in their creation of plot, the confluence of story and discourse that exposes the intentionality of the narrative, which largely determines the construction of character. As Cavarero—recalling Hannah Arendt—says, the Homeric hero is "a champion of action in whom the impulse to self-revelation is heightened"<sup>156</sup> (Cavarero 22). In other words, action is that part of the plotting that reveals character, even if the construction of character in novels has acquired a psychological dimension that it did not have in Greek epic narratives. Although autobiographies are language mediated, which entails as a consequence the manipulation of narrative elements, such as tone, narrative distance, perspective, or even "truth," the author of an autobiography is bound by referentiality, that is, it admits no absolute plotting. According to Cavarero,

for the one who acts, "the meaningfulness of his act is not in the story that follows," nevertheless a story always results from the succession of his active revelations — his life-story.<sup>157</sup> He is not its author; he is, however, the protagonist. The story that results from his actions is, in this sense, an impalpable plot that goes in search of its tale, of its narrator. (24)

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<sup>156</sup> Emphasis in the original. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago : Chicago University Press, 1958. p. 130.

<sup>157</sup> Emphasis in the original. The quote comes from Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958. p. 186

By emphasizing that the (auto)biographer cannot totally manipulate the story as an artifice, Cavarero suggests that meaning can only be revealed through action, by the results left behind at the end of the trail. For Arendt, says Cavarero, autobiography would be “an absurd exercise” (24), since the writer cannot master the meaning revealed by his or her actions. However, Cavarero departs from Arendt here in saying that what matters most in the telling of one’s tale is the relational status of identity that “always postulates *an other* as necessary”<sup>158</sup> (24), since for the other, who listens to or reads the story, meaning does not expire with the action, given that “the story conserves the identity of its hero in time” (25). Whereas acting is fragile, the story keeps the appeal of the uniqueness of the event as it appeared to the narrator, preserving thus the contingency of identity. Indeed, for Cavarero, the essence of a person can only be known after life, when there is nothing behind but a story that “death rescues from change” (27). For the autobiographer, on the other hand, what counts is not the essence but the centrality of the desire to expose the narratable self as “the complex *relation* between every human being, their life-story and the narrator of this story” (41). Therefore, the unity of the text, that is, “the thematic of identity as *unity*”<sup>159</sup> (41), can only be achieved through narration. As Cavarero explains, “the identity of a unique being has its only tangible unity – the *unity* that he/she seeks because it is *unique* — in the tale of his/her story”<sup>160</sup> (39-40). Rather than simply overturning the whole movement of interiorization, “which characterizes the modern concept of the self” (41), and returning to “the pre-modern or to a nostalgic recovery of ancient Greece” (41), Cavarero proposes that we move with Arendt toward “the anomalous notion of a self that is expressive and relational, and whose reality is symptomatically external in so far as it is entrusted to the gaze, or the tale, of another” (41). In this sense, autobiography is not to be seen simply as a self-reflexive act, consisting in the construction of a self through narration, but prior to that it is the manifestation of a desire for the unity of one’s own identity in the story. As such, the story has no substantial reality, but “belongs only to desire” (41). What asks for recognition is not the “unity of identity,” since memory inevitably produces discontinuous and fragmentary texts, which, unreliable as they might be, are nevertheless recognized as one’s story. The central point driving the narrative is exactly the desire of the narratable self whose story, contingent as it is, cannot be mistaken for anybody else’s. In this sense, Cavarero warns us against theories positing the centrality of the text by saying that

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<sup>158</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>159</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>160</sup> Emphasis in the original.



by swallowing life, the text also risks swallowing the unrepeatable uniqueness of the existent. Omnivorous texts, hungry for life and ready to offer themselves as more dignified replacements of an all-too-human corporeality — this is how the texts adored by much of the more refined post-modern theory seem to be. I will not dare declare here, as Donna Haraway does, that ‘if they are only texts, give them back to the boys,’ but we are rather prudently keeping our distance through the theme of desire. We are dealing with a desire for unity which asks the narration of another above all to be recognized as desire.<sup>161</sup> (42)

Indeed, this desire for narration can only occur in relation, since the very experience that marks our entry into the body requires the narration of another. This suggests that just as our lives are an incident in other people’s lives,<sup>162</sup> they are also embedded stories that form the “long ago story of the people.” Certainly, not a part of the authority granted to history, but the rescuing of the singularity whose political space is sometimes denied.

In short, the desire for full articulation of the self, eliminating unconscious material, linguistic untranslatability, or desired silence, is thus excluded here. The telling of one’s story remains linked to a desire of the narratable self as part of the narrative impulse of memory that asks for the telling of a story. This should not be mistaken for a desire to reveal the essence of one’s self (what I am), yet this desire remains attached to the expression of a uniqueness (who I am) that is always contingent, fragmentary, contextual, and, above all, dependent on political scenes of exchange.

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<sup>161</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>162</sup> As Carolyn Steedman rather grimly concludes in her autobiographical piece “Landscape for a Good Woman” (*Past Tenses*). Raised as a terrible weight on her mother’s life amidst the poverty of an English working-class household, Steedman tells the reader that “I was also an episode in someone else’s narrative, not my own person, my mother’s child, and brought into being for a particular purpose” (36). This insertion of herself into her mother’s narrative (and purpose) will eventually lead the grown-up historian Steedman to see herself as immersed in the much larger story provided by history. Also there she shows some grievances, as the larger history could not account for lives such as hers, lives that do not coincide with the “central story.” Significantly, she denies her own story as history, not because what she says is not true, but because she consciously engages in the professional writing of history as “the rhetoric of denial.” “The way to show this,” she asserts, “is to proceed by making a contrast, between the telling of life-stories and the telling of history” (47). This does not mean that the historian Steedman cannot see her own life as part of a larger context. The problem is how the emotional structure of a child can bear the weight when she feels that “I knew it was all my fault” (31). No wonder, the adult Steedman chooses to quote Frederic Jameson’s famous expression as an epigraph for her book: “History is what hurts.” [Jameson, Frederic. *The Political Unconscious*. Methuen, 1981, p. 102.]

Finally, it is the stated objective of this work to identify how memory and desire can be indicative of healing in the autobiographical narrative of Leslie Marmon Silko. In the next Chapter, I suggest ways of looking at Silko's *Storyteller* as informed by a different epistemology, as laid out in Chapters One and Two, which can help us go beyond some dead-ends of Western terminal creeds.



## CHAPTER THREE

# **W**EAVING STORIES: LESLIE MARMON SILKO

I felt ripped away from generations past.

My writing emerges from a similar act of imaginative archeology. (...) There has been no name for the secret gaps in our history. The pain that accompanied it was too dreadful to discuss and the means for overcoming it continues on a parallel course; it is the desire to become whole and complete and aware of one's passage from those most ancient mythic roots to the present moment.

— Roberta Hill. "A Soul Like the Sun."

A few years ago, I understood my stealing of paper, when I could have taken more Hostess pies and candy bars, as a desire for something beyond survival. Now, I know the burying of paper as another strategy in silence and survival, for what is more characteristic of survival—for the poor, the endangered, the abused—than silence? Finally, with a closet full of paper, there are still the books, the short stories, the poems—alphabetized by author and categorized by genre—to tell me who I am and to cover my own silence with their literate noise. And as I read I anticipate, through the common properties of the writer, the stories I wait to tell.

— Betty Louise Bell. "Burying Paper."

Born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1948, of Laguna Pueblo ancestry, Leslie Marmon Silko is a prominent novelist whose work has aroused great interest in the academic field and amidst the general reading public. She is also acclaimed as a Native American women writer, given that her writings is profoundly marked by these positionalities. Her literary production also includes essays, poems, short stories, prefaces to single or multi-authored books, interviews, letters, and, obviously, her autobiographical book. This Chapter, which is dedicated to Silko's life writings, is divided in two parts, structured in the following manner: in the first, I contextualize her work highlighting her concerns and textual strategies, as they seem relevant for the discussion of Silko's life writing. Implicit here is the understanding that the autobiographical piece is part of a larger work that informs and is informed by it, as Olney states (xv). The second part concentrates on her book *Storyteller*, identifying how it brings to the fore a conception of self that is healing. It is not the purpose of

this analysis to search for a coherent textual (Native) selfhood. Instead, I focus on Silko's desire to establish a collective future and the way she gives form to this need to say. Implicit in the idea of survivance, as posited by Vizenor, is the necessity to overcome some trauma that has endangered the survival of one's self and of one's community. Survivance bears the mark of a creative act of reinvention that avoids victimry and nostalgia for the past. In this sense, Silko's determinacy to overcome silence is reminiscent of similar acts routinely performed by modern Native Americans who must confront the dominant discourse which refuses to recognize their historical singularity and their presence. In that sense, the choice for the autobiographical mode is a way to overcome invisibility, in that the attention shifts from "type," meaning "Indian," to the singular self that requires ethical recognition from the Other. Greg Sarris underscores this demand for recognition when he questions the public's interest in Mabel McKay's art while they fail to recognize how her basketry is inwoven with her life, the forces that shape it, and the relationship she establishes with her audience.

What is not asked—perhaps because the answer has been successfully swept into the corners of a political unconsciousness and thus assumed in a vague way—is what happened and continues to happen that allows one group of people to discuss the artifacts of another people separate from the people themselves? (*Keeping* 53)

In that way, Sarris points to the fact that there is a discrepancy between the interest on the artifacts, or the material culture of a people, on the one hand, and the almost absolute lack of interest in the forces that shape these same people's lives, on the other. In the case of Mabel, she is the inheritor of a *Pachakuti* that continues to shape the lives of the Pomo people as the presuppositions of the colonizers continue to hinder a proper understanding of who they are. "Yet," writes Sarris, "Mabel still talks" (*Keeping* 52). As a gifted basket-weaver<sup>163</sup> and powerful medicine woman, Mabel McKay managed not to conform to her audiences's expectations towards her and skilfully turned her interlocutors presuppositions upon themselves. One of the strategies she used, according to Sarris, was to ask the audience what they understood out of what she had just told them. By doing that, their

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<sup>163</sup> Mabel's basketry and medicine practice was completely guided by the Spirit and Dreams. Although she learned some basic skills from her grandmother, she claimed that everything she knew was taught by the Spirit. Pomo baskets are suffused with power, and some of them demand regular tending to the rules. This may take the form of periodically feeding the basket with water and a particular song that goes with it, for instance. Also the kind of power that they have varies enormously. Some baskets are even said to be dangerous to look at (Sarris *Keeping* 60).

epistemological limitations to account for culturally different ways of understanding the world become clear. “I have heard the stories,” says Sarris,

I have heard the old-timers talk about the past. Many of their parents and grandparents fought wars and escaped slavery. Among the Pomo these stories about Kelseyville and Bloody Island and about Mr. Hildreth and Mr. Shores, both notorious Indian slaveholders, do not die. [...] Of course, for the Pomo, the wars continue today; born of the old wars and subsequent separation, their wars are of the dispossessed taken away from their ancient lands, cut off from many of their traditions, and relegated to the margins of society where their struggles against invisibility are undermined by poverty, disease, and inadequate education. If Mrs. Hudson<sup>164</sup> sympathized with the people who created these beautiful baskets, it is virtually impossible for the spectator today, viewing the baskets in state and local museums quite removed from the Pomo themselves, to see them as much more than autonomous pieces of art. This autonomy eclipses the possibility of understanding the forces—those in which the spectator is immanently involved—of history. (*Keeping* 54-55)

As Sarris well illustrates, these forces of history are not dissociated from the physical reality of the survivors. On the contrary, every aspect of their lives is shaped by it. In this sense, the desire to tell one’s story is the desire to overcome trauma, to refuse determination from the outside, to align oneself to nurturing relations, and to foster survivance as a power stance. At the level of community, this desire is expressed in terms of a struggle for sovereignty. Writer Gloria Bird (Spokane) echoes Linda Hogan’s concerns about displaying herself to the curiosity of others by writing her autobiographical essay. Yet, she does not forsake the opportunity “to counter some of the misrepresentations of ‘Indian’ that are legitimized in academia and pop culture about Native peoples” (65). What is at stake is far more than “misrepresentations,” since

as a Native writer I am intimately involved in evaluating the aftermath of colonization and its impact that cannot help but shape my life and my own perceptions of the world. The competing stories of the indigenous peoples’

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<sup>164</sup> Mrs. Grace Hudson belonged to one of the earliest settler families in the Ukiah Valley, California. While her physician husband also shared in her interest for Indians, she eventually became a famous basket collector. Their home hosts a museum nowadays where Pomo baskets and Hudson’s own paintings are displayed.

sense of tribal histories and the privileged, legitimized perspectives on national history are on a collision course. (Bird 64)

It is this desire to recover traditional stories and values and to use them to subvert the oppressive dominant discourse that is at the basis of most autobiographical writings authored by Native Americans. Reference to this tension may take several forms, from overt denunciation of myopic policies toward American Indians and the environment to fictional reconstructions of “whole worlds.”<sup>165</sup>

In the next sections, I explore the way Silko gives shape to this desire for narration. The first section, “There were Stories,” is dedicated to Silko’s work and its innovative character at the level of both form and content. Part of that section, too, is the central importance place has in Silko’s work. As stated before, place means the conjunction of landscape, relationship, and storytelling, so that place means here more than simply location. It entails a whole philosophy of language. Silko grew up in the Laguna Pueblo, one of the many villages in the Southwest, which were invaded first by the Spaniards and later on by the Anglo-Americans. Despite the early contact, the Pueblos were relatively lucky in that they have never suffered removal from their traditional lands, which allowed them to maintain their traditions provided they accommodate some innovations to suit the newcomers. The second section, entitled “And They were Woven,” introduces an analysis of the way Leslie Marmon Silko juxtaposes fictional and nonfictional stories, as well as pictures in her book *Storyteller*, and some commentaries on the implications of this move for a conception of the self that may bring healing.

### THERE WERE STORIES

The Pueblos occupy a vast region covering parts of the states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado. They form a complex interrelated range of cultures, sharing a way of

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<sup>165</sup> I assume the ambiguity here. As I use the expression here, “whole worlds” refer to representations of worlds complete in themselves at the fictional level, and to worlds that are free of injury, unbroken, or healed in the sense that Native writers point to alternative ways of living in the world, thus refusing to assume any position of victimry.

living, a cosmology, and a landscape, but differing from one another in terms of their migration stories, and linguistic families (Trimble 2). Curiously, these differences related to cultural aspects and linguistic distance do not overlap, as some languages, such as the Hopi, spoken by the Pueblos are more closely related to languages further away into the continent than to their neighboring village. Roughly, the Pueblos are direct descendants from two of the four main prehistoric Southwestern peoples, the Mogollon and the Anasazi (Trimble 6). Although the Anasazi have abandoned their traditional homelands,<sup>166</sup> they continue as a people in today's Pueblos. Among the many living traditions of the Pueblos is pottery, utilitarian and now decorative, as well. I use the word living not only because they are still mostly made according to ancient techniques and designs, but also because new forms have been added to it. Despite their need to accommodate changes forced onto them by the successive colonial invasion of the Spaniards, first, and the Anglo-Americans later on, the Pueblos managed to retain a compact traditional structure, due in large part to the fact that they have never undergone removal from their ancestor's lands, as have most of the other tribes of the current United States, especially those east of the Mississippi River. However traditional the Pueblos may still be, change is highly valued. As Silko has her fictional character Betonie say in *Ceremony*: "things which don't shift and grow are dead things" (126). One of the innovations introduced in pottery is the figurative rendering of a traditional scene assembled around one major figure: the storyteller. Created for a commissioned work in 1964 (Bahti 9), the figure of the storyteller usually portrays a set of tiny figures attached to a bigger one. The smaller figures resemble children nested on the shoulders, lap, or legs of the storyteller, whose mouth is always open. Not so commonly found, but also possible, is the presence of a book in the storyteller's hands. This suggests the major role played by storytelling among the Pueblos.

Indeed, Leslie Marmon Silko was raised in an environment that placed great value in stories, both oral and written. Her first novel, *Ceremony*, is dedicated to her two grandmothers and her two sons, which hints exactly at this transmission of stories from one generation to another. In fact, the whole novel is infused with the importance of storytelling at various levels. Silko creates a series of narrative frames that go back to Thought-Woman, the spider, who created her sisters and together they created the whole universe. Thought-Woman functions as the final source of authority for Tayo's narrative. By devising a series of

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<sup>166</sup> According to Trimble, archeologists still do not know why the Anasazi, who absorbed the Mogollon, left their villages of Chaco Canyon by the late 1200s, Mesa Verde and the San Juan River drainage by 1300, and many other traditional places by 1450. What is certain is that they have not "disappeared," but simply moved (6).

embedded narratives that dialogue with each other, Silko is able to control in great part the hermeneutical act by suggesting that some narratives are conducive to healing whereas others are destructive, and by suffusing the narrative with metacommentary aiming at teaching readers how to read the culturally different narratives that cross one another. Critic James Ruppert highlights the importance of this process of mediation between two culturally different reading practices, showing how it occurs at the level of the storyline and of the implied reader's reading ability. This mediation process that aspires to change readers by teaching them how to read the world differently may be seen as a strategy to counter hegemonic silencing narratives that so far have relegated traditional Native American narratives to ethnographical data that separate the stories from the people and their lives. By rescuing these stories from Euroamerican appropriation and inserting them into a living context, Silko in a way repatriates sacred stories and shows how they get inserted in the present.<sup>167</sup> The insertion of stories within stories is not limited to two narrative lines, the Western novel, on the one hand, and the myths, on the other, running parallel to one another. Whereas in the beginning of the novel the mythic stories are set apart from the main prose narrative by a visual device, namely, they are written as if they were poems centered on the page to look like vertebrae, or the backbone of the people (Nelson "Rewriting"), soon in the narrative this distinction gets blurred as the war buddies' stories or an imagined witch contest assume the same form of the mythic material. Just as the protagonist of Hogan's novel *Power* says that "there are other worlds beside us all the time and every now and then we cross over and enter one, and every so often, too, one passes over and enters ours" (55), in *Ceremony*, the mythic world also interacts with Tayo's narrative. These are not parallel

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<sup>167</sup> Although the novel has been highly praised for its narrative strategies, a few voices raised in outrage against the fact that Silko published sacred stories, assigned herself the authority of Thought-Woman, and ended up transforming these stories into entertainment for a Western audience that can, from then on, feel entitled to an insider's perspective (Sequoya-Magdaleno). It is important to notice that Magdaleno's criticism is the third leg of this debate. Paula Gunn Allen, who also comes from the Laguna Pueblo and is Silko's cousin, was the first to question the inappropriateness of Silko's act ("Special"). Robert Nelson's response to Allen was that, since these stories were published before by Franz Boas as ethnographical material\*, Silko was in fact repatriating them and bringing them to life again. Besides, he continues, Allen's accusation sounded very odd after she herself published a marketable feminist book of myths that seem to come right for the New Age taste ("Rewriting"). Magdaleno dismisses Nelson's first argument by reasoning that the fact that those stories were made public before does not authorize Silko to violate them once more by disclosing them a second time. About Nelson's second argument she says nothing. However, this does not invalidate the appropriateness of her discussion of Silko's novel as part of a broader discussion on the problems involving the assertion of one's Native identity in the US. The question is far from settled. \*[Boas, Franz. *Keresan Texts*. Publications of the American Ethnological Society, 8. New York: American Ethnological Society, 1928.]



narratives which function simply as a structuring device, mirroring one another. If we think about it, if we let stories become alive in us, Silko's narrative seems to suggest, then we begin to realize that stories are not as self-encapsulated as the material object "book" may lead us to think. They form a continuum with our life experiences. For the Pueblo people, as Silko explains in a brilliant essay, "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Perspective," storytelling is a way of life (59); they serve to build identity and to make sure people do not get astray. Storytelling occurs at all times and is infused with extraneous information which is worthwhile being repeated time and again to ensure that people will remember it. Among these imbedded information, for instance, there are descriptions of trails, reminders on how to cook a specific food, or even the history that goes with words. The consequence of this loading of the narrative with other narratives is that stories become so enmeshed that there is no beginning or ending to them, but just one ongoing story that connects everything. Instead of a linear narrative, Silko explains,

the structure of Pueblo expression resembles something like a spider's web—with many little threads radiating from a center, criss-crossing each other. As with the web, the structure will emerge as it is made and you must simply listen and trust, as the Pueblo people do, that meaning will be made. ("Language" 54)

This requires a great deal of attention on the part of the audience, as many levels are evoked at once. The juxtaposition of stories—either inside the same narrative or as an ongoing telling that never ends—invites the audience to make sense of the stories by connecting them in ever new ways. As Silko says, "There is always, *always* this dynamic of bringing things together, of interrelating things"<sup>168</sup> (64). Stories help to build a sense of identity because they help the individual understand where they fit in the world. So they will say that they come from the family, clan, or people "of [those] stories" (57).

This way of structuring language as an ongoing story that emphasizes interrelatedness and continuously invites more elements in constitutes, according to Silko, one of the contributions "Native American cultures bring to the English language or at least to literature in the English language" (56). Implicit in this idea is the fact that the first generations that attended the compulsory boarding schools had to do a tremendous feat. They were the ones "who began to make English speak for us, that is, to speak from the

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<sup>168</sup> Emphasis in the original.

heart” (61). As Silko explains in relation to her Aunt Suzie, who was one of the major influences on the young Silko, this generation was probably the last one to pass a whole culture by word of mouth. Aunt Suzie realized the importance of writing down the stories for the future generations, and to make language, in this case, English, work for that end. At stake is not the preservation of some abstract category as “culture,” as if it were an artifact to be kept safe, but the belief that stories have the power to hold people together when, after a strong emotional trauma, there is a temptation pulling individuals away, “[urging them] to run off and hide or separate themselves from others.” In such case, both the individual and the group are endangered, continues Silko, since “[i]nherent in this belief is the feeling that one does not recover or get well by one’s self, but it is together that we look after each other and take care of each other” (59). Thus, storytelling has a central function in the maintenance of balance among the Pueblos, and I would add for Native Americans in general, and a definite pattern, which is best described using the image of the spider’s web.

This same structure that one sees at work in *Ceremony* assumes greater complexity in Silko’s second novel, *Almanac of the Dead: A Novel* (1991). Whereas the first novel is relatively short and is clearly constructed as a coming-of-age novel that provides the riverbed for Western readers unused to the way storytelling operates in the oral tradition, the second novel is by far more demanding. For one thing, the soothing provided by the happy ending of the first novel’s ceremony is missing here, as well as a central character and plot. As Paul Beekman Taylor argues, “In effect, the title holds a secret” (44), for the word almanac points to a genre distinctive from the novel and with a much older history. Centered on Tucson, Arizona, the action radiates from and towards the city, spanning a period longer than the 500 years of colonization. Bearing more than 70 characters, who are mostly addicts, perverts, corrupt politicians and arms dealers, outcasts, or greedy speculators, the book is written in six parts, divided in 19 books, further compartmentalized in 209 “chapters.” The chapters build many parallel storylines that barely cross one another as the narratives appear scattered throughout the novel, changing the pace of the narrative frequently. Although some stories are more developed than others, there is not one central character or story to hold all of them together. Rather, what Silko does is to disempower the Christian teleological narrative, and its secular counterpart, by rewriting the story of resistance according to a fictional fragmented fourth Maya codex in possession of some of the characters in the novel.

According to Taylor, “the Arabic-Spanish *almanakh* is a translation into local dialect of Greek *ephemerides* ‘daily with the sense ‘a diary, a record of days’.” Considering that this record of the stars was used by Columbus on his voyages, Taylor continues, “Silko’s

*Almanac* is a palimpsest, or a 'writing over' the almanac that steered the European destroyer to the plunder and rape of the 'New World'" (45). In short, the whole novel builds an apocalyptic scenario,<sup>169</sup> showing the hidden forces that shape it and that can be overturned once they are properly named and exposed. Learning the ways and language of the oppressor is certainly the best weapon against them, especially as they ignore the history of the people and the force of the land. "While the white's own almanacs are manuals for reading natural signs, Silko's entire novel is a scathing indictment of the Euro-American's inability to read signs — other than those that indicate streets, cities, and nations — whether desert rocks and hills or the decay of the appurtenances of his culture, the signifying emblem of which is the city of Tucson" (Taylor 46). By exposing the many perversions hidden under a white hegemonic discourse, says Taylor, death is invited in, and, he continues, "[w]hite perversions are crimes against the earth and, in failing to respect the earth as mother, whites bring about their own destruction" (49).

Interestingly, by means of a great variety of characters a whole range of historical experiences can be brought to the present reality of the novel, such as the Vietnam War, American slavery, and crimes committed against the Indigenous peoples and the Africans slaves in the Americas. Besides, not only are the people carriers of history but also the animals and the artifacts that appear in the novel (Taylor 50). Thus, Silko manages to produce a powerful counternarrative that exposes what Mignolo calls the hidden component of modernity. Most importantly, however, is the fact that the narrative is completely set in the present, showing how these forces interact *now*. In the same way, resistance movements, which follow the logic of minority politics, as Deleuze terms it, are not solely located in the past, that is, at the time of the famous "Indian Wars" in American history. The most

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<sup>169</sup> Forbes description of the *wétiko* disease is, in fact, totally applicable to the character constellation of the novel, where only a few characters show some redeeming features. The novel abounds with descriptions of violence and perversion, making it a very different reading experience from *Ceremony*, which becomes smoother as the narrative threads disentangle into a recognizable pattern. For David L. Moore the challenge of facing the novel's epic vision can be met by assuming Arrowboy's witness stance. According to the story, Arrowboy sees the magicians and their evil doings, and, as a consequence of his witnessing, they lose of power. This insertion of the audience into a mythic vision helps to bring focus to the novel and, in a way, reduce the reader's perplexity ("Ghost" 91). Put differently, Silko manages to write a thoroughly fragmented text that empowers the reader "to read *differently*," as Taylor says about one of the characters of the novel (48, emphasis in the original). So much so that the full impact of the novel's violent descriptions only struck me much later after reading the novel, at the moment when I read some quotes outside their original context, that is, when the focus shifted from the pattern to violence itself.

conspicuous example is given by the Zapatista uprising which the novel in a way prophesizes.<sup>170</sup>

Silko's third novel, *Gardens in the Dunes: A Novel* (1999), revisits the 19<sup>th</sup> century by following a young girl, Indigo, and her elder Sister Salt, from the fictitious Sand Lizard people. Captured by the Indian police, the two sisters are sent their separate ways. The younger girl is sent to the Sherman Indian Institute in Riverside, California, where she is expected to acculturate and later work as a servant in white people's houses. Considered too old to abandon her Native ways, Sister Salt is sent to the Agency at Parker, Arizona, from where she soon escapes. However, she stays nearby doing laundry work for the men building the Parker Canyon dam. Eventually, she also earns money by having sex with them. Starting with the Ghost Dance Movement<sup>171</sup> and spreading it east through Indigo's syncretic view, the

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<sup>170</sup> The Zapatista Resistance Movement came into light two years after the novel was published.

<sup>171</sup> The Ghost Dance Movement was based on a Dream Vision experienced by Wovoka, or Jack Wilson (Paiute 1858-1932), according to whom, were Native Americans to dance for the Spirit, the buffalo would return, and the whites would disappear. The Ghost Dance quickly spread over a large area among the different tribes eager to get rid of their white oppressors. Thousands of Indians would dance for days on a trance to reach the Spirit. Although Wovoka, also called the messiah, preached peace and correct behavior towards whites, the spiritual movement was severely repressed by the police and federal troops.

Silko refers many times to prophecies talking about the disappearance of the whites. In one of these, in *Almanac*, the character Calabazas remembers the words that the great warrior Cochise said before his death: "Guns and knives would not resolve the struggle. He had reminded the people of prophecies the different tribes had. In each version one fact was clear: the world that the whites brought with them would not last. It would be swept away in a giant gust of wind. All they had to do was to wait. It would be only a matter of time" (235, qtd. in David L. Moore "Ghost" 94). Another reference she makes is in her essay, "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Perspective," where in a less radical vision she states that "old stories say, well, if you wait around long enough, not so much that they'll go, but at least their ways will go. One wonders now, when you see what's happening to technocratic-industrial culture, now that we've used up most of the sources of energy, you think perhaps the old people are right" (67). Finally, similar views are expressed in some of her essays in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*. The reason for bringing these comments here is to add a bit of perspective to the visionary prophecies of Wovoka, since it is common to find explanations of the Ghost Dance Movement written under the auspices of the "disappearing" syndrome of Euroamerican historiographical discourse, like the famous speech of Chief Seattle and its innumerable Internet versions. The novel subverts the vision of the Ghost Movement as a local nativist movement which helped to bring about the fate of Native Americans in the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre. As observed in the Wikipedia, "[t]he physical form of the ritual associated with the Ghost Dance religion did not originate with Jack Wilson, nor did it die with him" ("Ghost Dance").

The word ghost is obviously a mistranslation, which unfortunately generated a great amount of fear among the white population, who feared an Indian uprising. As David L. Moore aptly reminds us, the practice of giving pejorative names to Native Americans sacred places was a common

novel is mostly “devoted to the physical, psychological, and spiritual journey that Indigo must take before she gains the knowledge of plants necessary for survival and has the opportunity to return to the old gardens to be reunited with her sister” (Ruoff 10). As it turns out, Indigo escapes from the Sherman Indian Institute in Riverside, California, just to discover a luxuriant garden belonging to a rich childless couple, the Palmers, where she is seen playing hide-and-seek with her new friend, the Amazonian monkey Linnaeus. At first, Mr. Palmer, an amateur scientist and dealer in exotic flowers, considers sending the child back to the government school, but seeing his wife’s fondness for the child, decides to assume responsibility for the girl during a trip that they have already planned. He believes that the presence of his wife and the girl will help dropping the customs officers’ suspicions over him and his smuggling of native plants. In their journey throughout the continental US and Europe, Indigo and Hattie will share an interest in plants and many different forms of pre-Christian mystic movements, which Indigo immediately associates with her experience with the Ghost Dance. In fact, the child will confidently interpret them as a sign that the Messiah and his family had passed there on their flight from the police. After their return, Hattie fulfills her promise to Indigo and takes her back to her sister, who, meanwhile, has managed to run back to their place in the dunes with two friends and her newborn baby.

Deceptively easy in terms of structure, Silko’s narrative manages to produce a constructive dialogue between peoples in the Americas, Europe, and Africa. Excluded from this dialogue are those who use the trade in life as a way to support their greed for profit and disregard for other peoples, cultures, and spirituality, as illustrated by Edward Palmer and Big Candy, Sister Salt’s lover and father of her baby. On the other side of the character system are those who have not lost the capacity to engage with the living world as an ongoing creation. By conceiving a set of characters who are prepared to experience community with the sacred through mystical visions, such as Hattie’s Aunt Bronwyn, who believes in the power of the Sacred Stones and springs (Bath, England), their Italian friend, *professoressa* Laura, with her interest in Old European artifacts (Lucca),<sup>172</sup> or a group of poor

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practice among cartographers. Witness the site names Devil’s Lake in North Dakota, Lucifer Falls in New York and on the Flathead Reservation in Montana (“Ghost” 92), and Cuzco in Peru.

<sup>172</sup> Remarkably, the artifacts here are infused with life, as both Laura and Aunt Bronwyn are described as having a real love for them, that is, they can relate to the stories that give them life, as opposed to Edward, who thinks they are crude and belong in a museum. The four of them (the three women and the girl) are also united by their fondness for gardening, which stands for love of nature (*Gardens* 281). Probably, it is this sensitivity that the two women living in Europe display that leads Ruoff to affirm, “Aunt Bronwyn and Laura are American and European equivalents of [Indigo’s]

workers, who have a collective vision of the Madonna on a wall (Corsica), Silko is able to deconstruct the layers of ideology that have obscured Europe's worship of the Great Mother, or the Black Madonna, and the enduring presence of carved figures with clear displays of fertility and/or motherly affection.

Silko's approach to Europe's pre-Christian heritage is obviously a way to deconstruct, and find alternatives to, the logic of coloniality. Communalism across cultures and the plurality of dissonant discourses dismantle the apparent binary system of the hegemonic discourse that insists on the logic establishing the colonizer/colonized matrix as the only relational possibility. Indeed, Indigo is the naïve protagonist that carries much of the narrative, but she is not molded by the colonial discourse that insists to see her as an apprentice to the servant's position. Since she cannot go immediately back to the gardens of her childhood to meet her sister and disappeared mother, she seizes the opportunity of her journey to learn about plants and the new agricultural possibilities that she may bring back home when she is finally able to return. Like the traditional Yellow Woman of the Laguna stories, Indigo is taken away from her homeland by an outside force (the colonial zeitgeist informing the Palmers) only to return empowered "through a complicated process of resistance and assimilation" with new stories, seeds, and new alliances that will guarantee the survival of the community (Nelson "Leslie" 255). Since the narrative does not center on the idea of growth and subsequent assimilation of the Indian child into the hegemonic system of values, this coming-of-age story turns to Hattie as the *locus* of a transformed consciousness.<sup>173</sup> In fact, as the narrative progresses Hattie experiences new possibilities beyond those offered by the male-dominated environment, which have led her to a barren marriage out of fear to live her own sexuality and motherhood and which proscribed her the chance to carry out her studies about the female spiritual principle in the early church. However, Hattie's new consciousness must be achieved not by absorbing Indigo's indigenous connection to the living world, but by slowly learning to awaken herself to a new set of ethical relations to the earth and the people. Indeed, writes Deborah A. Miranda,

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Grandmother Fleet. Both are deeply committed to nature and antiquities, which differentiates them from most other people" (13).

<sup>173</sup> Avowedly, Silko based the fictional Hattie on the character of Margaret Fuller, the 19<sup>th</sup> century journalist and activist associated with the transcendentalists (Ruoff 12). However, Hattie is so dominated by the Puritan principles of American society, that she dismisses the comparison when a colleague mentioned it to her. She accepts the intellectual compliment but cannot see herself as assuming the liberal lifestyle of Margaret Fuller, who "shocked polite society with her endorsement of free love and her premarital pregnancy" (102).

Silko sets up an unusual relationship right from the start, one in which Indigo nurtures and teaches Hattie and in fact “de” civilizes Hattie, or opens Hattie to the possibilities of her own indigeneity. And finally, at the end of *Gardens*, Indigo and her sister take Hattie in and care for her when the white woman has been beaten, raped, and left for dead — ironically, while bringing blankets and supplies for the winter to the two sisters, in an effort to help them. (145)

Given the centrality accorded to indigenous self-assuredness in their relation to the plants and their connection to the Spirit, it is not surprising that it is Hattie who will prove mostly open to the possibilities offered by Indigo and Sister Salt. The male characters, Edward and Big Candy, who forsake humanly and nurturing relations in exchange for money or power, end up following the suicidal scripts they have written for themselves. However, whereas Edward is hoaxed into taking morphine, which only makes his mind plunge even deeper into his illegal schemes for money and eventually causes his death (427), Candy is saved by a rolling thunderstorm as he nearly dies of thirst in the desert while recklessly pursuing his stolen money. The realization that he had stranded off the good path and had, among other things, abandoned Sister Salt and the baby while privileging his own pursuit of money ends up tipping the balance of the debate among his ancestors’ spirits in his favor and saving him (443-444). Rain falls.<sup>174</sup> From this perspective, it becomes possible for Silko to revise the whole history of colonization so as to claim a connection to, and responsibility towards, the land that the newcomers fail to understand fully. Again, Silko exposes the lies of Western domination, but this time she forges an alliance between those not identified with the Western hegemonic discourse of domination. This is not to say that “Indians are better,” as Miranda timely warns us (146), but that emphasis lies on discovering the roots of one’s own indigeneity, that is, on a paradigmatic shift that can only occur slowly as the layers of the homogenizing discourse that has emphasized domination and control of nature and peoples are uncovered. In other words, in *Gardens* Silko continues to imagine possible alternatives to the colonial archive that gave rise to the dark world of *Almanac*. By imagining a commonality

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<sup>174</sup> In *Sacred Water* Silko explains that “the people used to say that a person had passed on; they seldom used the word ‘died’” (16). She remembers that a plate was passed on the table to which everybody would add a pinch from their own plate to feed the beloved spirits. Because there was so much love and respect in these actions, she learned that “there is nothing to fear from the dead. They love us and they bless us when they return as rain clouds” (17). In Pueblo culture, the much needed rain falls as a blessing received through the intermediation of the dead ancestors and the Kachinas. In this way, rain is associated to the renewed bond between the ancestor’s spirits and the People.

beyond the dialectics of colonialism, says David L. Moore, Silko is imagining a future for the white audience in America ("Ghost" 96).

Different in tone, style, and structure, Silko's highly innovative novels share the same goal of introducing the reader to new epistemological approaches by foregrounding Native perspectives, while displacing the dominant discourse of colonization. Using mythic contexts and experimental approaches to storytelling, Silko makes her novels speak to one another in complementary ways. David L. Moore argues that, while *Almanac* is an expanded vision of the mythic structure underlying *Ceremony*, *Gardens in the Dunes* shows a more lyrical approach, and therefore a different alternative, to the complex world portrayed in *Almanac*. Certainly, all of them "share a fundamental affirmation of Native survivance and critique of colonialism" ("Ghost" 92). Whereas both *Ceremony* and *Almanac* display the web-like structure described by Silko in her essay on "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Perspective," *Gardens* partakes of the same vision that allows Silko to decolonize discourse by exposing the lies that subscribe to the hegemonic paradigm. By briefly discussing these novels here, I wanted to highlight how Silko experiments with different narrative strategies to ground a worldview based on alternative ways of relating to the surrounding world and on the central values that responsibility to the living world assumes for the sustenance of the next generations.

In addition to the three novels discussed above, and *Storyteller*, Silko has also published four other books. *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace: Letters between Leslie Marmon Silko & James Wright* (1986); a collection of essays, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (1996); a book of poems *Laguna Woman* (1974); and a privately published "narrative experiment with photography," *Sacred Water* (1993).

James Wright and Silko corresponded over the final year and a half of Wright's life. Although they have met only twice, their collected letters show a profound connection and admiration for each other. The letter exchange started in 1978, when, shortly after reading Silko's *Ceremony*, James Wright wrote to her. After a few attempts at praising her book properly, he finally expresses how much Silko's work means to him with the following words: "I think I am trying to say that my life means more to me than it would have meant if you hadn't written *Ceremony*" (3). To praise it as one of the five or six best American novels was not enough to describe the effect provoked by the novel on him. Edited by Wright's wife, Annie, after his death, the letters are filled with tenderness as they reveal common worries about issues such as teaching, or the necessary arrangements they had to make so that



Silko's letters would reach Wright while he was traveling through Europe. The two poets also share stories about their projects, the life around Laguna, or even their personal family lives. But even in these private letters, what comes to the fore is Silko's ability as a storyteller. James Wright expresses it wonderfully when he writes:

Your last letter was extraordinarily beautiful, as your letters always are. I have known a few people in my life who had a similar gift for storytelling, the natural gift, the gift of one who is native to life itself, so to speak, and that gift seemed to me to always be a sure sign of a large and generous intelligence. I knew a boy in the army like that, many (how many) years ago. But I don't think I've ever known anyone else besides you who was so able not only to embody this gift but also (this is the crucial thing) to give it, so precisely and so naturally. Your letters are always a joy to me.<sup>175</sup> (31)

Storytelling again emerges as a way of life, a way of dealing with experience at various levels and reaching for the words that can communicate. Indeed, these letters do not simply show the profound feelings between two people who have barely known—and yet feel very much for—each other. On these pages, a reader is also present, a reader who responds to and triggers the stories that touch the heart. This reader is both Silko and Wright, taking turns at exploring the subtleties of the world around them, a world that is ordinary—containing roosters, sadness, timetables, and students' reports—and mysterious at the same time. A world where one should avoid confusion, as Silko says, where one is united to another being by a love that is too great to be confined by time or death. After visiting him in hospital in New York, where he was dying of cancer, she writes, "It is not easy to avoid confusion. What I wanted to do was to stay in New York, move in with Annie, and sit with you and talk with you. But that would be confusing one present time with another present time" (104). One present time is the one in which they have only met twice, at a conference, when they were introduced to each other, and in this last visit at the hospital. The other time is one that defies boundaries, and which she defines as a sort of "grace," trusting that loving has no end. And in this time and space, about which she has learned with her beloved ones at home, they will continue together, as in storytelling. "In this place," she writes, "in a sense, there has never been a time when you and I were not together. I cannot explain this. Maybe it is the continuing or on-going of the telling, the telling in poetry and stories" (105). In this last letter, which James Wright never received, Silko tells him about the rain and the owl she has seen

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<sup>175</sup> Emphasis in the original.

a few nights before. Again, Silko moves from her affirmation of the bond uniting them to a simple story about an owl that was big enough to carry off the cats that the coyotes did not catch and how owls make her think of him. By doing this move and returning to the fact that she misses his letters and, though she does not mention it, knows that he will be “passing on” soon, she shows how he is part of her life and place even across time and distance. She uses stories to show how this connection is cultivated and how the stories will continue being told. This does not, however, prevent the pain of separation, but in a way serve to place it inside a wider connection of meaning. A connection that is as fragile as the delicacy of lace.

Published ten years after the letters, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* contains six original essays, and fourteen essays already published in magazines, newspapers, and books. A traditional figure in the Pueblo storytelling tradition, Yellow Woman goes to the river one day, and there meets a Kachina. Although Kachinas are usually considered benign spirits that act on behalf of the people by bringing rain, they may also be evil. The Pueblos know more than three hundred Kachinas, represented by wooden dolls, each one with its own story.<sup>176</sup> In the story of Yellow Woman, either the Kachina kidnaps her or she elopes with him, since the supernatural being can transform itself and appear in the shape of a very sensuous man or as Buffalo Man. When she is finally able to come back, she is pregnant of the Kachina, which ensures that it will protect the village. The story is told with variations, modern and traditional, as Silko shows in *Storyteller*, where it becomes a symbol of the feminine power to ensure survival for the community by breaking taboos. In this liminal space between river and water, natural and supernatural, Yellow Woman breaks boundaries and inventively appears in modern landscapes. In the essays contained therein, written in part while she was working on *Almanac*, Silko explores topics as varied as the Mayan manuscripts, the presence of writing in pre-Columbian times and the vitality of the oral tradition, old prophecies, the importance of writing to protect sovereignty, photography, police violence, the Zapatista uprising, and the connection between the people and the land, among other issues.

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<sup>176</sup> In fact, Kachinas may be seen as an entity, a principle, or a concept. Speaking of the Hopi, one of the many Pueblos, Nabokov explains that “[t]he clouds that gather around the [San Francisco] Peaks are the physical embodiment of Kachinas who serve as messengers between this temporal world and the timeless cosmic forces” (138-139). He further explains that Kachinas are always mindful of keeping the community together, as they remind the people that they should “hew to the Hopi Way, chastising in endlessly amusing fashion those who fall short.” And most importantly, “[t]he company of Kachinas also includes dead Hopi. Hence, the clouds *and* the Kachinas *and* their ancestors have shared inner identities that flow back and forth through one another” (139). [Emphasis in the original.]

What I would like to highlight in relation to these essays is not so much the fact that Silko displays a wide range of interests and an all-inclusive worldview, but the fact that all these topics are grounded on a Laguna perspective, that is, they find their source and continuance in the stories and worldview of the Pueblos. Though Silko prefers to adopt the stance of the subversive writer rather than of the combatant militant—as the members of the AIM do—her analysis of the situation lived by Native Americans since the arrival of Europeans is very critical, as is her statement that evil is not external to the Americas, since there were witches, as Silko calls the evil doers, here before the arrival of the Europeans. What was unknown to the tribal Americas was the degree of cruelty and destruction practiced by the newcomers. In the essay “Tribal Prophecies,” Silko writes that “[s]eventy million people throughout the Americas died in the first one hundred years, from 1520 to 1620” (*Yellow* 147). Comparing some of the practices of the first explorers to those used by the Nazis against the Jews, Silko nevertheless reinforces the old prophecies that predict better times for all the indigenous peoples, as the ways of Europeans will disappear. Reinforcing once again the old prophecies, Silko is in fact demonstrating how her novel *Almanac* fits in this overall pattern. The violence and disrespect for all living things is not her creation, she seems to say, but a self-destructive lane that will be countered by the unstoppable numbers of people going north and the massive movements of the Earth that will create calamities. Dark as it may seem, her evaluations of the current world is tempered by a much softer undercurrent represented by the Laguna ways and the stories that teach of balance, ethics, and relationship to all beings: water, air, earth, animals, plants, family. The beauty of the spirit sought by the old-time Pueblos was acquired by a healthy and harmonious way of life that found peace inside oneself. In this sense, personal eccentricities are not remarkable, as emphasis is laid on collective survival rather than on fitting societal models of behavior. It is within this perspective that Yellow Woman acquires importance for Silko, because she is able to act in favor of her people, despite disapproval or criticism. This independence of spirit revealed by Yellow Woman was crucial for the young Silko marked as different for her slightly lighter color, but also for the grown-up woman, since remembering the stories, “the old people always say, (...) will help you be strong” (*Yellow* 71). Thus, the stories of Yellow Woman get intertwined with Silko’s other stories of Thought Woman, or Spider Woman, stories of uranium mining in Pueblo land, the composition of *Almanac*, the American border, or her relationship to photography.

Published much earlier, *Laguna Woman* is a very short book of poems, which were later incorporated in *Storyteller*. Besides 18 poems, the book also contains 2 designs made by Silko, 3 by Aaron Yava, and Silko’s picture taken by her father. Both the 1974 and the

1994 editions of *Laguna* are very rare and apparently all books were signed by Silko. In this little book, Silko defines herself as “one Laguna Woman,” in other words, not as a representative of a group but someone identified nevertheless with her Laguna Pueblo surroundings and upbringing.<sup>177</sup> In this sense, it is not coincidental that the Spanish word for village, Pueblo, translates as people. Place and people form a unity, even if it is not homogeneous. In an autobiographical note, Silko states her difficulty growing up as a mixedblood, not fully white nor traditional Indian (197). Having a white great-grandfather defines her family status as slightly different from the traditional community. What is noteworthy here, however, is Silko’s assertion of identity as a singularity that refuses to act as a representative for her community. Rather, she talks as *a* Laguna woman.

In 1991 Silko decided to put together a small booklet with pictures and texts about water. The limited first edition was completely handmade by Silko herself, who took the pictures, printed them on a laser-copying machine to enhance its abstract effect, glued, and sewed all the copies. *Sacred Water: Narratives and Pictures*, as it is titled, was later republished by Silko’s amateur press, aptly named Flood Plain Press. Silko describes the book as a narrative experiment, where images do not explain or illustrate the text but “become part part (sic) of the reader’s experience of the text” (*Sacred* 80). According to the “Author’s Note” at the end of the second printed edition, which was edited to allow easier access to the text, her experiment with pictures and text was made for the sheer sensual pleasure of cutting and gluing paper, to avoid the control of the big publishers, and to make room for the flow of process instead of an impersonal correctness. In her answering letter to one of the professors who kindly wrote to her pointing out her spelling mistakes, Silko asserts her intention to allow for the free flow of chance, which, like oral literature, cannot be controlled and homogenized (*Sacred* 83-84). Chance, or the openness of meaning as manifest in orality, is also the key element that Silko points out in her relation to photography, once they are not intended to be subdued by the text or the other way around but form a balanced structure. As an example of this harmony between text and picture, Silko comments on Chinese ideographic writing saying that, because ideograms are pictures, one is not subjugate to the other. Indeed, Silko explains that “[t]he old Chinese saying that a picture is worth a thousand words, is misunderstood by Westerners” (79). Since ideograms are pictures, image and the paradigmatic multiplicity of possible meanings conveyed by language become one. However, “Westerners came to misinterpret the old Chinese saying

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<sup>177</sup> The author’s notes for the first and second edition of *Laguna Woman* are reprinted in her collection of essays *Yellow Woman* under the heading “Old and New Autobiographical Notes,” pages 196-200.

because they wanted to believe that a photograph was a fact, that a photograph ‘revealed’ ‘reality’ and could not lie” (79). The black and white pictures feature rainclouds, rattlesnakes which live in water and which are respected for being the carriers of the prayers of the people pleading for rain, rocky riverbeds, poisonous algae, and cleansing flowers. Each picture is followed by a short narrative prose always dealing with the importance of water for the Pueblos, who live in a desert area, and for life in general. Having lived in Ketchikan Alaska, where the average rainfall was 180 inches (Silko *Preface xi*),<sup>178</sup> Silko cannot fail to notice that despite the enormous amount of rain falling on the region, every drop is necessary; “otherwise, the water levels of the rivers and lakes decline so much that the spawning salmon and steelhead trout can’t make their way up river. Dry summers cause the berries to be scarce and the black bears get hungry and come out of the forest to eat garbage and small pet dogs” (*Sacred* 57). From her experience learning to watch for the signs of rain, passing through many stories that link the People to water, and finally talking about her experiments with flowers that de-pollute water and plutonium contamination, Silko shows how humans have desecrated this life-giving element that comes from Mother Earth. At the same time, water is the timeless element that cannot be contained in dams, pipes, and reservoirs, the element that shows that all control is illusion, and the element that carries the fallout of history across borders in the form of strange algae, chemical pollutants and heavy metals, and the cruel killing of toads and rattlesnakes. “But,” concludes Silko, “human beings desecrate only themselves; the Mother Earth is inviolable. Whatever may become of us human beings, the Earth will bloom with hyacinth purple and the white blossoms of the datura” (76).<sup>179</sup> More than a tribute to water, Silko’s little book *stories water*, indicating the subtle ways that a proper relationship between water, animals, plants, and human beings can ensure survival of the whole.

With this brief overview of Silko’s work, I intended to foreground some of the strategies she deploys to subvert the dominant Western discourse that insists on presenting itself under the paradigm of newness, denying coevalness, and otherness, to other discursive formations. Under the hegemonic theoretical and critical discourse of the West,

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<sup>178</sup> 457.2 cm.

<sup>179</sup> In *Sacred Water*, Silko writes about her personal attempts to counter destructive elements to water by natural means. When her rainwater pond is threatened by “a strange red algae with the texture of mucous” (68) that inadvertently causes animals to drown and kills aquatic vegetation, she discovers that rocks acted as a kind of filter, besides providing a ramp for fallen animals. Later she discovered that water hyacinth, usually considered a pest, had the power to clean water of the algae and heavy metal contamination, such as lead or cadmium. The Pueblo sacred night-blooming datura, on the other hand, “has the power to purify plutonium contamination” (75).

Native American literature has been examined as “raw material” for metropolitan critical studies (Weaver *Other* 25). The problem with theories and criticism produced by the hegemonic centers is that many times they fail to see American Indian literature in its own terms by inserting it in the “metanarrative of Western dominance” (25) and ignoring “the wild memories and rich diversities of tribal and postindian literature”<sup>180</sup> (Vizenor qtd. in Weaver *Other* 25). It is within this context that Silko’s contribution assumes a prominent role, since she displaces the alleged centrality of the West by inserting it as part of her Native Pueblo worldview. Moreover, Silko provides new terms for analyzing her literature, as she introduces the reader into new epistemologies, enhancing, thus, their capacity to read the world from a different positionality than that provided by the hegemonic discourse. In this sense, Leslie Marmon Silko empowers her readers by showing how the narratives of the West confuse power with domination and control, which she calls “magic” or “witchery,” since it has no other objective than to enhance one’s sense of self. According to her, real power stems from an alignment with the harmonic forces of nature, a correct understanding of one’s place in the world, and a strong sense of community based on ethic relations. In short, Silko’s fictional and nonfictional work is devoted to show the vitality of the oral tradition in their communities of origin, the importance of storytelling as a way of life, the subversion of the Western myths of superiority, conquest, and progress, and the dismantling of binaries such as oral versus written, Indian versus white, myth versus reality, authenticity versus change, modern versus traditional, center versus margin, photography versus storytelling. Bearing in mind how Silko interweaves form and content, I shall now proceed to what I take to be her central life-writing piece: *Storyteller*.

### AND THEY WERE WOVEN

Remarkable in Silko’s nonfictional work is the fact that the reader is always aware of a voice, that is, all of Silko’s discourse is clearly embodied in a Laguna woman. The presence of this embodied voice can be perceived through the contextualization of the teller as part of

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<sup>180</sup> Vizenor has coined the word “postindian” to differentiate it from the homogenizing representation of Native Americans under the label “Indian.” Vizenor, Gerald. *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994. 77, 80.

a community. To create context, Silko uses a series of narrative techniques that derive partly from the oral tradition and partly from Silko's juxtaposition of stories and pictures. The metacommentary characteristic of oral performances that include deictic pronouns and comments alluding to the storytelling situation are incremented by Silko's insertion of information concerning the tone of voice of the storyteller and the situation that gave rise to the telling. Also, the inclusion of photographs of family members and the landscape surrounding Laguna<sup>181</sup> offers the reader a reference point concerning the place associated to a particular story and an image of the many tellers that participate in the transmission of culture. Finally, Silko's careful arrangement of the stories that dialogue with one another form a polyphonic whole that enhance and give continuance to the telling. Most importantly, whether she writes about the legacy of uranium mining in New Mexico or the presence of a rich landscape grounded in myth, she consciously inscribes the story in a Laguna perspective, showing how modern and traditional storytelling form a continuum with the living world.

*Storyteller* may be described as a written performance of the diversity of the oral tradition and of the way it serves to build a cohesive community. According to critic Robert M. Nelson, critical reviews have described it as a "collage," a "montage," or even an "assemblage" ("Leslie" 251). Linda Krumholz affirms that "*Storyteller* is a distinctively 'readerly' text: the many stories, poems, and photographs are gathered into an apparently random 'scrapbook' form" (64), and Elizabeth McHenry qualifies the book as a confluence of three narrative genres: "autobiography, fiction, and ethnography" (115). Helen Jaskoski reports that critical work tended initially to concentrate on the individual stories, especially as some short stories had been published before. According to her, Danielson and Hirsch were the first to subordinate the reading of the individual pieces to the context in which they appear, trying to unify the different stories by identifying common concerns among them, and it was Arnold Krupat and Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez who first read it as autobiography. (*Leslie* 126). However, for anyone expecting a linear account of a life, *Storyteller* may be baffling as a narrative of individuation for its lack of a central unified voice. The book is composed of twenty-six black and white pictures and sixty-seven stories. Some of these are family stories, as Silko recalls them or as they were told in the family, while others are Western short stories, traditional Laguna stories, contemporary scenes, and poems. Dedicated to the many generations of storytellers that kept the stories going and to the telling

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<sup>181</sup> With the exception of two photographs of Tucson Mountains, Arizona, close to Silko's ranch, where she lives now, all the other landscape pictures were taken at or around Laguna.

which continues, *Storyteller* in a way denies common authorship as Silko gives voice to other family members, who were responsible for teaching the young Silko about the importance of stories, and friends, who share storytelling with her as a way of life. As McHenry points out, the result is “distinctly nontraditional” (102), since it features a mixture of genres, no numbered divisions between its component parts, except for a four-leafed symbol to suggest some separation between the stories, an unusually positioned table of contents at the end, and an off-sized format. However, these features should not be mistaken for “experimental literature,” says McHenry. “Rather, it is more accurate to consider that Silko’s nonlinear form of narrative appears as it does because she sees it as the only appropriate vehicle of expression that will contain the transcription of her fragmented and collective experience” (102).

Though Silko received academic training, first in Law, and then in creative writing, believing it to be a more effective way of defending Native rights, *Storyteller* emphasizes her art as part of a traditional communal activity. The mixture of genres, the presence of family and friends both in photographs and as part of the commentaries, the pictures of the landscape that form part of the stories, all suggest that stories are the common heritage of the community. Whereas the short stories were clearly crafted by Silko, as they appear in *Storyteller* they are embedded in a context with which they dialogue, reinforcing or qualifying each other, and becoming part of a whole together with the more traditional stories. As for the latter, it does become clear that these stories are not meant to be repeated verbatim, but they admit variations according to the occasion. In one of the so-called gossip stories in *Storyteller* (Krumholz 70), Silko writes of meeting Nora and how the two of them commented upon the differences between Silko’s published poem “Laguna Coyote” and the way Nora’s Grandpa used to tell the story. What the conversation brings to the fore is the context in which the stories were told and how reading the printed poem engenders a new telling, as Nora takes the occasion to retell the story to her own children (110). Thus, the printed poem attests to the vitality of the oral tradition, since it provides the occasion for a new telling to the kids at home. The transformation of medium from orality to writing engenders some changes, though. As Silko tells Nora, the written story is shorter because it is addressed to a different audience who is not used to the way stories are told among the Pueblos.

“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.  
People who aren’t used to it get tired.” (110)



In the same way, when she tells a Coyote story to her own kids at home, Silko fills it with details and accents that are left out in the written story. In a video about Southwestern storytelling produced by Larry Evers, Silko explains the differences between her telling of the story to the children and the way she writes that same story. According to her, the telling is much longer, and “it takes a lot more space and it's a lot more fun too” (*Running*). However, when that same story appears in *Storyteller*, named “Toe’osh: A Laguna Coyote Story,” which she wrote after meeting Simon Ortiz at a Writers Conference in Wisconsin, only the bare elements necessary for a Coyote story remain, forming the backbone structure that characterizes it. Experimentation, thus, can be seen as the transformation of the material to get to the essence of the message. Although form is obviously carrier of meaning, it is seen only as a result of what the writer is willing to express. In this case, the many stories that compose the book form a whole defining storytelling as a way of life, which shapes the storyteller as part of the process.

This might become clearer if we analyze how Native Americans relate to art and to the dynamics involving the development of the Native American artist. Philosopher Viola F. Cordova explains that most Native American artists are self-taught, that is, they have no special training in techniques, it is simply a way of being. An artistic craft is not learned formally by means of instructions, but children are encouraged to spend much time seeing how experience is transformed into an artistic creation. Cordova illustrates her point with her own experience. According to her, she had a grand-aunt who

liked to do embroideries, and I watched and experimented. She pointed out frogs hidden under strawberry leaves along a ditch bank. She taught me the joys of observation in long, ambling walks culminating with a popsicle while we dangled our feet in an irrigation ditch. I watched her observations turn into embroideries. (“Ethics” 253)

The consequences of learning from observation is that Cordova never learned the names of particular stitches or techniques. They simply appear because they are the appropriate stitch for a particular circumstance. As Gregory Cajete explains in relation to the necessary procedures to create a traditional ceremonial or spiritual artifact, emphasis is given to the essence of what one is trying to convey, so that form and medium are subordinate to the “aliveness” of a work as an aesthetic criterion. “Indigenous artisans select the features of

what is being depicted that convey its vitality and essence and express them directly in the most appropriate medium available.” Thus, the focus is not on a set of techniques, a theory, or a school of thought but on “getting to the heart, the spirit, of an event or entity” (*Native* 46).

In the case of Leslie Marmon Silko, artistry is evidenced in the way the stories and pictures are articulated to become a “whole,” the summing up of parts that creates not a univocal “I” but a singular storyteller who gives continuity to tradition while renewing it. This insertion of the “autobiographical ‘I’” into a wider web of discourses around Laguna is particularly relevant when we consider that the different “spheres of discourse” (Krumholz 65) subsume the Western short stories into a much broader discursive field represented by Silko’s own Laguna tradition. In that way, says Krumholz, “Silko shifts the reader’s discursive ground in two ways: she resituates the subject in the text and she redefines the power and position of the dominant discourse” (65). The critic expands this idea by underscoring how this “recasting” of the “I” as “‘the storyteller,’ one who finds her identity through her role for and in the community,” shifts the traditional location of the Western “‘I’ (as central and clearly differentiated) for author and reader,” since both have to assume different positions as they go from one sphere of discourse to another (65). The different spheres of discourse allow the reader to understand “competing cultural and ideological discourses” beyond simple binaries, because

rather than constructing the contemporary American discourse as a monolithic dominant discourse that is set against the Laguna Pueblo (or Native American) discourse, Silko presents the contemporary American discourse as an already multicultural, multilingual, ‘mixed’ discourse” (66).

In other words, Silko does not establish a relationship between dominant and “marginal” discourse as a dichotomy within a hierarchical pattern,<sup>182</sup> but incorporates the dominant discourse as only one type among many others. Rather than assuming the weaker position that validates a stronger, more powerful discourse, Silko invites the reader to consider Laguna Pueblo values and philosophies as inclusive and life supporting. Krumholz writes:

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<sup>182</sup> Many Native writers have pointed to the maintenance of this hierarchical dichotomy in some current literary theories. According to them, theories that aim at decentering dominant discourses by denouncing their power structure are still working within the same paradigm and experience that ironically reinforces their authority. See especially David L. Moore’s “Ghost Dancing” on hybridism and “Decolonizing” on dialectics, and Thomas King’s “Godzilla” on postcolonialism. See also Said’s essay “Foucault” on power.

Although the preponderance of economic and political power in the United States is clearly still controlled by white Christian men, Silko's strategy begins with the assumption of a more equal power dynamic in the cultural, discursive, and spiritual realms. In many ways this fulfills the deconstructive impetus of "border" discourse as well, since the point is that there is no "pure" United States culture or language to begin with. (67)

In that way, *Storyteller* simulates the multiplicity of discourses present in the Laguna context, where traditional storytelling, jokes, gossip, short stories, family stories, passing through the occasional visit of archeologists and linguists who come to collect stories and artifacts and to record language without an ear for the story, concur to produce a center of meaning on its own. Silko's text suggests that only an exterior regard based on the economical and scientific paradigms can mistake this center per se for the margin.

It is important to mention that Silko's technique of the fragmentation of the narrative into different spheres of discourse and the multiplicity of voices is neither a matter of assimilation of the literary conventions of the West nor a matter of acquiring literary maturity, as implied by the jury who awarded the Pulitzer Prize to N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* in 1969, stating that Native American Indian literature had finally achieved literary maturity and sophistication. In his analysis of the way the literary establishment received Native American works, Louis Owens remarks that in their conception whatever was produced before was immature and showed a lack of command of literary expression. Invisible to them was the deep relationship that this literature held with Native American expressive forms and experience. Another way of looking at it would be to consider that Euro-Americans finally acquired the reading abilities necessary to understand Native American storytelling (Owens *Mixedblood* 58-62). Robert Dale Parker explains the coincidence of form between Native American literary expressive means and modernist poetics by retracing the origins of the European avant-garde to "Africa and, broadly, [to] so-called non-western art" (10). Despite this apparent borrowing of form—in whatever direction—the interweaving of voices in *Storyteller* does not exert the same function as in modernist novels, where

these stylistic elements suggest isolation and fragmentation of the individual psyche, the indeterminacy of truth, and the absence of any coherent cultural or religious meaning. For Silko, on the other hand, the fragmented narrative and

multiplicity of voices represents an accretive, communal, and dialogic creation of meaning and truth in which meaning and truth are conscious and negotiable constructs, neither fixed nor indeterminate, but restricted by moral limits conveyed in stories. (Krumholz 69)

Thus, the juxtaposing of different spheres of discourse suggests a complex whole that is ultimately moral and needs to be continuously brought back in balance.

The idea that chaos and order are component parts of the universe is evidently not new, but receives extra emphasis in Native philosophy once it is the duty of the artist to show that chaos is only apparent. As quoted before, V. F. Cordova explains that the universe is a living entity where readjustments are occurring all the time ("Ethics" 252). But the temporary chaos brought by the temporary unbalance brings dis-ease, demanding thus the artist's higher vision that can recognize the pattern behind the apparent disorder. It is in this sense that the artist is considered a scientist and a healer, since he or she brings the world back to order through the power of his or her words. Speaking about the participation of all branches of experience in what Westerners would call philosophy, Brian Yazzie Burkhart defends the idea that literature, religion, science and philosophy are all one in Indigenous thought, since they all ground knowledge on lived experience. In this sense, he argues,

American Indian philosophy is concerned with the right road for humans to walk in relation to all that is around them. We have also seen that what is right is true and what is true is right: the universe is moral. It is in this way that stories, ceremonies, and prayers speak the truth. (23)

The leveling of science, literature, philosophy and religion in Native American thought entails the fact "we cannot truly separate the medicine from the magic nor the philosophy from the poem" (23). According to the Navajo, continues Burkhart, there are twelve levels of knowledge and Western knowledge works mostly only in the lower levels. However, there is no general knowledge in American Indian thought, "everything is singular and held in particular experience;" knowledge is "of a lived and practical nature" (23) and failing to understand how it is grounded in the lifeworld entails "the loss of this world for Western society" (24). The consequences are easily seen all around where life is constantly disrespected at the social level, through inequalities, violence, unhealthy lifestyles, or

psychological brutalization, and at the level of human interaction with the whole universe, since human beings are dependent on a balanced whole.<sup>183</sup>

This Indian epistemology that both Cordova and Burkhart express in essay form is at the heart of Silko's fictional world in *Ceremony*. There Tayo must learn how to bring the universe into balance by understanding the role played by stories justifying destruction, as represented in the novel by war, nuclear weapons, land theft, separation, and violence. Just as in Silko's other fictional works, language assumes a prominent role as it is the means of healing. No wonder the novel is titled *Ceremony*. The whole novel is a ritual carried out by Betonie, the Navajo healer who functions as one of the many helpers of the protagonist and, consequently, as an authorial voice for Silko in *Ceremony*. Betonie's unorthodox healing ritual is imposed on the Western novel model, which must accommodate for a reader-oriented perspective. In this way, language assumes a ritualistic role directed at healing the reader by putting the stories in their right connection. Before examining the ritual use of language as a healing practice and as a textual strategy in *Storyteller*, a note of caution is necessary. Just as Betonie explains that ceremonies are alive and undergo changes, Robert Dale Parker defends the idea that there is no Native American aesthetics grounded on transcendent (essentialist) formal characteristics, as nonlinearity, for instance. Rather, he posits the need for historical readings that will describe the ideas that Native American literature invents, or, in other words, he defends a criticism that aims at describing not *what* Native American literature is, but *how* it is (see esp. Chapter 1). Ritual, then, is not a frozen formula coming from time immemorial and bearing no connection to our 21<sup>st</sup> Century, but a way of empowering words in ever new ways and contexts.

Drawing from Danielson and Hirsch,<sup>184</sup> who were the first critics to discuss *Storyteller* as a whole and to divide it in thematic sections, Krumholz defends the idea that the book presents a double structure: narrative and ritual. Following the narrative structure, which is built upon conflict, one of the first stories is about Aunt Susie, Silko's grand-aunt on her father's side, who exerted a great influence as a storyteller on the young Silko. Aunt Susie went to Carlisle Indian School and later attended Dickinson College in Carlisle,

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<sup>183</sup> In fact. Burkhart's argument ascribes similarities in results and methods between Native American epistemologies and phenomenology, as laid in Husserl's *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*.

<sup>184</sup> Hirsch, Bernard A. "The Telling Which Continues': Oral Tradition and the Written Word in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*." *American Indian Quarterly* 12.1 (1988): 1-26. Rpt. in *"Yellow Woman"/Leslie Marmon Silko*. Ed. Melody Graulich. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993. 151-83. For Danielson's article, see the bibliography.

Pennsylvania. After she came back to Laguna, she resumed her life but kept on with her studies, especially on history (*Storyteller* 3). She would work long hours, writing in English for the future generations many of the stories she had heard. Silko stresses the changes affecting the transmission of knowledge and the difficulties of rescuing stories from loss. According to Krumholz, this perspective of an endangered culture “disrupted, encroached upon, and subsumed under a white system of values and power” (72) is progressively marginalized in the book as the Native perspective assumes the main stage. Again, this Indian perspective is based on an Indian reading of the world, observations about language use, the relationship to land, which is enduring, the inclusion of stories framing their interactions with whites, whether soldiers or scientists using Indians as scouts or informants, the continuity of spirit, and a sense of humor that displaces tragedy, victimry, and closure. The idea of a culture dying together with the last “unassimilated” elders proves false as the communal effort of preserving a whole culture from generation to generation continues as it has always been. As Momaday keenly observes in regard to the oral tradition, “for as many times as the story has been told, it has always been but one generation removed from extinction” (*Man* 10). Silko echoes this principle in this beginning about Aunt Susie, thus framing her own string of stories as simply another bead in the long story of the people. This move from the menacing perspective of extinction through assimilation to a reaffirmation of the vitality of the Laguna tradition is already hinted at in the beginning of the book, as Silko writes:

And yet her writing went painfully slow  
because of her failing eyesight  
and because of her considerable family duties.  
What she is leaving us—  
the stories and remembered account—  
is primarily what she was able to tell  
and what we are able to remember.

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.

I remember but a small part.  
But this is what I remember. (6-7)

In this passage, Silko introduces her own sense of identity as part of a community. As in the introduction to her book of poems *Laguna Woman*, she does not posit herself as a representative of her group but as a constitutive member who includes her experience but does not limit the whole to it. Philosopher Burkhardt expresses this same idea by offering a contrast with what he calls the Cartesian bias with its emphasis on the individual. According to an American Indian perspective, he says, Descartes's most prominent bias is not the dualism between the mind and the body, but "the idea that knowledge can only be acquired and manifested individually, in or by the individual." The *cogito, ergo sum* of Western thought would become in Native philosophy "We are, therefore I am" (25). Likewise, no matter how adroit Silko's personal weaving of the different spheres of discourse is,—in contrast to the Rousseauvian project—what her whole book does is to assert a personal view of identity as that of someone placed within a community, which is centered at Laguna though not restricted to an enclosed or parochial view of the world.

The dynamics between the stories offers an interesting standpoint to understand what is meant by a large perspective. In her study of Silko's short fiction, Jaskoski analyses the eight short stories contained in *Storyteller*, both individually and in dialogue with one another. Featuring Native protagonists and highlighting storytelling as a form of power, they differ in tone, style, and attitude. However, in all of them reality proves fluid, provisional, a matter of interpretation. As in the Yellow Woman stories, what counts is the story, the capacity to master events by interpreting them from a power instance that refuses to be subsumed under victimry or terminal creeds. This may take the form, for instance, of refusing to accept external notions of authenticity, since the whole Pueblo culture is syncretic, inclusive, and cumulative, as in "The Man to Send Rain Clouds." Or the insistence of the protagonist of "Storyteller," the title piece, that she is guilty of the storekeeper's death under the ice, thus asserting her agency, command of the story, and capacity to deal with the subtleties of the harsh tundra landscape. In "A Geronimo Story," the whole narrative, initially dominated by the hurried orders of an American army in the pursuit of the Apache enemy, gradually slows down as the Indian scouts turn the futile search into a leisurely hunt far from home. In all cases, whether whites appear or not, whether they are menacing or ridiculed, there is always the negotiation of culture, the incorporation of outside views and ways, or even the ambiguity of language allowing for a certain degree of indeterminacy. No word is final as long as the storytelling continues. This is not an attempt to reduce everything to discourse and

consequently failing to recognize the weight of material conditions. Native Americans are usually very wary of keeping their words grounded, since they do not fail to recognize the pragmatic consequences of words. However, the capacity to recognize concurrent patterns underlying an event and to transform this vision into language through imagination is a power stance that rectifies one's position and allows for positive agency.

The traditional stories evoke—in writing—elements of the oral tradition, giving the reader unused to this kind of telling a taste of what forms it may take. In that way, Silko employs short lines, as in poetry, to suggest inflections and pauses of orality, italics showing how the story allows for extra information such as food preparation, the origin of a certain word or phrase, elements of discourse, features of the landscape, parenthesis to indicate asides, or framing to indicate who is talking to whom and what triggered the telling of that particular story. The storyteller's voice may be not Silko herself, but Aunt Susie, for instance. Although Silko remembers and tells, her telling never assumes the same form of Augustine's remembering-and-telling, those twin verbs which often appear, with variations, in his *Confessions*. In Silko, as in the tradition of storytelling, there is no pretension that language can account for the events as they happened. Meaning is negotiated communally, through the various tellings that remain provisional. The apparent loss of reliability is superseded by the incorporation of new contexts, the understanding and experience of the teller, and an attentiveness to the interaction between teller, audience and story. Because no story gains the status of the "definite version," the communal role is enhanced. As she explains,

But sometimes what we call "memory" and what we call "imagination" are not so easily distinguished.

I know Aunt Susuie (sic) 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. There were even stories about the different versions of stories and how they imagined these differing versions came to be. (*Storyteller* 227)

To illustrate the possibilities and the power of stories, Silko uses modern contexts for the Yellow Woman stories, revitalizing the same affirmative stance for young women living in the modern world that it had for the young Silko or her foremothers. Besides the Yellow Woman stories, the book also contains other stories that break the boundaries between those long ago stories and modern creations. This is the case, for instance, of the Coyote stories, such



as the one retelling of the witch contest that created whites, which first appeared in *Ceremony*. One important feature characterizing many of the traditional stories is their lack of an ending or an univocal interpretation. Some stories give the impression of breaking off in the middle, requiring the reader to revise his or her own experience of the world to be able to provisionally understand the story. I quote Mabel McKay again, because it neatly summarizes the task required of the reader: "Don't ask me what it means, the story. Life will teach you about it, the way it teaches you about life" (Sarris "From a Place" 304). Consequently, traditional stories are more properly presented as an ongoing activity, which incorporates innovation, such as new contexts and medium, and provides new possibilities of reading and acting in the world.

Besides the short stories, the family stories, such as that of Aunt Susie, the gossip stories, exemplified by Silko's conversation with Nora, and the traditional stories of Yellow Woman and Coyote, in traditional or new formats, Silko also includes poems in the collection. Bearing the same jagged line of some of the other stories, the poems also prove to be diversified in content. Whereas some have a more intimate tone, talking about incidents in her personal life, others refer, for instance, to the love relationship between the deer and the hunter. In any case, the poems lack the untroubled tone that tells the reader about events taking place around Laguna or involving Silko's family. Most of the poems' persona is probably Silko herself at different times expressing loss and pain, as she evokes divorce, abortion, hunting, death, winter. Mostly, the poems do not have the lightheartedness of the prose personal episodes, as seen in the poem "Deer Dance/For Your Return," dedicated "for Denny." Here, the lover is the hunter, the one who must kill the beloved. Love and death go together in a relationship that is not severed by death, as it continues renewing itself in a bond of love:

Losses are certain  
in the pattern of this dance  
Over the terrain a hunter travels  
blind curves in the trail  
seize the breath  
until it leaps away  
loose again  
to run the hills.

Go quickly.

How beautiful  
this last time  
I touch you  
to believe  
and hasten the return  
of lava-slope hills and  
your next-year heart  
Mine still beats  
in the tall grass  
where you stopped.  
Go quickly. (189-190)

The poem is closely followed by an explanatory note saying that the Laguna Pueblo consider that the deer give themselves to the hunters out of love for the people. A ritual Deer Dance is performed annually to thank the deer spirits and to guarantee their return soon. Remembering the appreciation shown by the people, the deer will then once again be willing to come home with the hunters (191). In fact, the poem and the note form an ensemble that links them to the following stories, dedicated to her deceased grandfather Hank C. Marmon. In this sense, the poem and the note not only tell the reader of a ritual performed among the Laguna Pueblos, but re-enact it as

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. (Hirsch qtd. in Krumholz 71)<sup>185</sup>

Thus, by means of the juxtaposition of complementary stories, Silko uses the power of language to reinstate balance in the world, allowing the loss of meaning to be overcome in ritual. According to Krumholz, “[r]ituals are formal events in which symbolic representations such as dance, song, story, and other activities are spiritually and communally endowed with the power to shape real relations in the world” (68). Rituals reaffirm the concentrated power of language to reimagine connections that ordinary life obscures. As Linda Hogan explains in her essay “Who Puts Together,” the ability to fuse past and present, external and internal,

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<sup>185</sup> See note 184, p. 3.

word and object, “by means of the visual imagination” (175), bears “the potential to restore us to a unity with earth and the rest of the universe. *Accumulation, repetition and resonance* all unite to tie us, seamlessly, to the world”<sup>186</sup> (177). Because words as uttered in ritual are more than simply expression, they are “a materialization of consciousness. And deeds are the manifestation of words” (176), rituals have the potential of transforming the consciousness of the patient by leading him or her “on an imaginative journey and returning him, restored to himself” (173). This journey, says Hogan, is mythic, as the present returns to an original source, where “myth, history, and personal experience [merge] into one shape, to reassemble the divisions of the self” (174). This power of language to concentrate “repetitions of images and symbols of the universe that are fragmented and need to be reunited again into one dynamic system” (175), contained for instance in the Navajo Night Chant, which structures Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*, has a healing potential that is most fully experimented in the oral tradition. The creative artist or healer, who has absorbed and transformed the dis-ease inside him or herself, can release the world back into shape. In healing rituals, this capacity to concentrate language releases great amounts of energy in the consciousness of the patient, thus allowing for the desired physical healing.

Besides displaying a narrative structure, Krumholz also suggests that *Storyteller* functions as ritual on three levels: as a theory of reading, as a discourse, and as a rhetorical strategy (69). As a theory of reading, it is suggested that reading is itself a subjective mode that leads to a restructuring of the world by the reader. Evidently, as Krumholz herself admits, this process is not always effective, as the reader may resist entering the liminal space offered by the text which allows new experience to be absorbed. Thus, for ritual to be effective as a theory of reading, the reader must be willing to change his subject positions within the reading experience, so that transformation can occur. “As a discourse, ritual implies an unmediated relationship between language and the world,” since, differing from Western narrative theories, “in Native American concepts of language, the word itself has a material reality that gives it direct power to transform the world” (70). This material reality of the word might be best understood by observing, as Jace Weaver does, that “Native societies are synecdochic (part-to-whole) rather than metonymic (part-to-part), as in the Western world” (*Other* 44). In other words, there is a greater tendency in Native societies to make referential use of language and to ground it in actual contexts that lend power to the words. In this way, “the creative and transformative power of language connects linguistic acts to the transformative processes of ritual” (70). Finally, as a rhetorical strategy, Krumholz

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<sup>186</sup> My emphasis.

defends the idea that “ritual functions as a vehicle or process for the transformation of the reader’s imagination” (70), as manifest in the structure of the book, in which the order of the stories and their interaction gradually move the reader’s focus from the narrative perspective of an endangered culture to a enduring worldview that remains as strong as ever. Not surprisingly, in the mirror structure suggested by Krumholz, the initial “Survival” section is balanced off by the “Coyote” stories, thus shaking off victimry and tragedy with a good laugh, so characteristic of Native rituals. Thus, survivance and health get reaffirmed in the end. The “Yellow Woman” stories of the second section get replicated in the “Spirits” section, reaffirming “changes and the role of stories in change” (72), and the third and fourth sections, “Rain” and “Drought,” “create a ritual within a ritual that demonstrates the fragile balances needed to maintain productive relations with and in the world” (72).

The importance of reading *Storyteller* as a ritual of initiation lies exactly in its potential to transform the consciousness of the reader. At stake is a shift from “‘reading’ the world [to] ‘reading’ oneself in the world,” says Krumholz (72). For the critic the crucial point is Silko’s redefinition of spirituality—occurring mainly in the “Spirits” section of *Storyteller*—, which has profound political implications as it redefines social power. Whereas mainstream discourses deride spirituality as either superstition or blind obedience to religious dogmas and rules, Silko’s redefinition of spirituality is empowering and bears the potential to transform the reader and the world. First, it enables strengthening the connections between people, between people and the natural world, and between the living and the dead. Consequently, the past is also redefined, as it is “a living and tangible presence” (73). Second, spiritual knowledge is valued as one more way of knowing, thus challenging the authoritative view that knowledge and truth is “scientific, empiric, and objective.” Third, the merging of ritualistic and sacred discourses within other modes of discourse precludes textual rigidity, since “[s]tories are spiritual processes of creating and revising meaning in which meaning is fluid, shifting, relational, and in process.” Finally, “spirituality redefines power. Insofar as power is located not in technological, economic, or military domination but in the spiritual realm, the ‘dominant’ society does not, in fact, dominate. This conception of power does not substitute for a material analysis of power but complements it” (73). This presentation of spirituality does not shield one from the pain of loss or change, however. Rather, it suggests that as long as one remembers and is able to see the interconnectedness balance can be achieved. Or, in the words of Krumholz, “whether one experiences pain or pleasure, the cycles are beautiful because they weave our acts and our lives into the deep mesh of interrelationships that sustain the world” (75). Thus, she concludes, the connotation of power as dominance, objectification, and manipulation is false. For Silko, and may I add, most Native American

Indians, power stems from “spiritual knowledge, profound interrelationships, and respect and responsibility for all things” (82). The change expected from the reader is political and moral, since a change in consciousness must be followed by the ensuing ethical action. Again, this does not preclude the incorporation of technologies, stories, or even gods, as the Pueblos have always proven to be highly syncretic in their dealings. But, as Silko herself states, “[I]ike all human beings they are concerned with their continued survival as the people *they believe themselves to be*. What is essential to all Pueblo people is that generation after generation will continue to remember and to tell one another who they are, who they have been, and who they may become” (“Indian” 7).

In short, Leslie Marmon Silko’s autobiography is a unique artistic feat in terms of the particular weaving of stories, photographs, and the overwhelming presence of the peculiar Laguna landscape. Just as the photographs attest to the Pueblos’ incorporation of new techniques that serve, paradoxically, to reinforce the presence of memory through the images of the “old ones” and the huge mesas surrounding Laguna, the juxtaposition of new and traditional stories, poems, short stories, family stories and gossip invites the reader to assume different subject-positions in a subtle ritual of initiation, thus, empowering the reader. Without ever asking the reader to identify with a character, Silko skillfully dissolves generic boundaries, creates intertextuality, and reinstates a new order that displaces the authority of the master discourse of domination. To “[lure] us back to our humanity,” citing Krumholz once again (80), Silko reinforces the vitality of Native American values: connection to the land, responsibility towards the community, a sense of time which is enduring, sense of humor, boldness of character on behalf of survivance, and the capacity to expand “cosmic reason.” Most importantly, however, Silko’s work is not a celebration of Indianness, but rather an invitation to incorporate a broader perspective to the Western values and knowledge that have justified and still maintain the conquest of imagination and life up to these days. In this sense, Silko—as well as most contemporary Native American Indian writers—is just one more storyteller among many passing on to the future generations a tradition that can heal.



## CONCLUSION

# T HE WEAVING GOES ON

Like the slaughter of the buffalo, the removal of Native American children to boarding schools was a calculated act of cultural genocide. How would the children hear and see, how would the children learn and remember what Pueblo people, what Native Americans for thousands of years had known and remembered together?

But the calculations failed. Eventually the children were returned to their beloved sandstone and expanses of blue sky; again the place soaked them in, and they were reunited with what continues and what has always continued.

— Leslie Marmon Silko, “The Indian with a Camera”

I have a naïve faith that somehow, at some time, all the stories in me will get told.

— Leslie Marmon Silko, *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace*

In the Introduction to this dissertation I have set out to demonstrate that Native American life writing can provide healing because it evinces a different conceptualization of self. In order to do that, it was necessary to establish a few premises on which to build my argument. The first of them concerns the term Native American, or Indian. Rather than striving for the “politically correct term” what I tried to emphasize is that it is a name without referent, because there is no Indian essence that applies to all members of the innumerable tribes and nations that form the archipelago of scattered reservations in Indian country, or to the thousands of American Indians who have relocated to urban areas as a response to the several ill-targeted policies of termination by the federal government in the 1960s. Although identity questions remain of utmost importance for everybody, we have witnessed the transformation of the problems affecting Native subjects into questions of race and racial purity or authenticity, when the question should be addressed in terms of sovereignty. Native identity is not a bag of genes or cultural artifacts, which people carry around and which serves to define a sensibility beyond the contested territory of political scenes of exchange. Whenever someone claims an Indian identity, what is at stake is a historical relation manifest

in a whole cultural legacy connected to family, community, relation to land, life, the body and a system of values different from that of the dominant society. At a very deep level, Native Americans can go as far as denying the very right of existence of the United States and the fallacy of its institutions by denouncing the violence and the oppression underlying its narratives of origin and its founding myth of democracy.

Another key definition for the development of this work is that of self. In spite of its psychological ring, I chose the term for lack of a better one, as the term individual is charged with an ideological turn which is at the crosscurrent of indigenous communitist values. As Paul Smith aptly demonstrates, the term subject, on the other hand, is no less problematic, as it is heavily crossed by different disciplinary fields that end up limiting theoretically its capacity for agency. As such, I have opted for a working definition of self as formulated by Mark Freeman, drawing from the work of Emmanuel Lévinas, and Adriana Cavarero, because—broad as it may be—it has the advantage of emphasizing the relational aspect of all identity, which is of utmost importance, especially when dealing with the Native American view of identity.

When studying the history of contact between the different tribes and the expansionist imperial powers that successively tried to conquer Indian nations, it becomes clear that dialogue was nearly impossible as the newcomers failed to understand the complexity of the cultures (and languages) they were meeting for the first time and trying to subdue. Various strategies were used in this process, from open war, passing through the deliberate spreading of epidemics, conversion, forced deculturation, and removal to abduction of young Native Americans to be sent to boarding schools. Ironically, a few generations later the moment was ripe for young Indians who have met in Western institutions of knowledge to subvert the dominant discourse by claiming a different heritage. Still fighting against considerable odds, they managed to reclaim their right to be who they are. The struggle has been going on at many levels, since it is necessary to question laws, to acquire the right for practicing their own religions, to retrieve their territories guaranteed by treaty, to address the high rates of suicide, alcoholism, diabetes, tuberculosis, car accidents, among Native Americans, to expose racist policies that allow for forced sterilization of and nuclear tests among indigenous communities, to revitalize languages and traditional knowledge, and to protect the Earth and all its inhabitants. These issues must be addressed together if real progress is to be made. American Indian writers have striven to address different audiences, Native and non-Native, in their writings so as to raise their awareness both to the interconnectedness between these issues and their private and community lives, and to show alternatives to the hegemonic paradigm that risks taking all life in this planet in its

wake. In other words, Native writers had to build a readership capable of operating at different levels of discourse.

In Chapter One I have made a brief incursion into the main Western narratives of origin of autobiographical studies, centering on two foundational moments: St. Augustine's and Rousseau's *Confessions*. As the title of their autobiographical books already hint at, their autobiographies are based on the process of individuation where the self aims at justifying his acts based on his interior processes of self-reflection. Whereas Saint Augustine both confesses his faith and confesses his wrongdoings to God, thus seeking remittance of sins, Rousseau confesses his life in order to seek social approval by claiming knowledge of his motivations. Although there is an important move being made there, from an act of self narration based on the external authority of God to an exploitation of one's inner feelings as the source of authority, there is clearly a pathway travel that goes in the direction of the secularization of the process of individuation through psychological continuity. As we approach our own time, this continuity is set in doubt as the points of indeterminacy of the narrative prove to be more than a matter of skill. The difficulty is at the heart of human language itself and cannot be overcome within this model established on continuity and total adequacy between language and reality.

Initially, Native American life writing was greatly influenced by Western models, as the autobiographical genre itself did not exist among Indian tribes. However, what becomes clear since the first Native American pious narratives were written is both the attempt to use them to justify the master narrative of conquest, on the part of the first colonizers, and the fact that Native Americans have evinced a tendency to make a more pragmatic use of language by addressing actual concerns. Rather than a matter of assimilation, this adoption of a Western genre can be seen as a process of transculturation whereby a community loads the narrative with a double code, enlarging and subverting the "master code" and consequently reaffirming the values of the invaded community. What is at stake is evidently the right to be who one is without being determined from the outside by policies of "blood quantum," a determinism based on racism, or on other absolute values, such as "authenticity," which is the same racist ideology that mistakes change and revitalization for "contamination." Finally, I discuss what I mean by healing. For that, I discuss the notion of healing as drawn from Native American literature itself, knowing that its sources lie ultimately in healing rituals variously developed among Indian communities. Needless to say, rituals reaffirm the concentrated power of language to bring order into chaos, for instance, by helping the sick person to understand his or her illness from a broader perspective and thus foster healing. In terms of life writing, healing is effected when the whole is brought back into



balance. In order to make this clearer, I make approximations between the Native American notion of healing and Foucault's reading of pre-Christian philosophers, who worked with the notion of "discourses that aid." By a series of practices and discourses, these philosophers aimed at becoming subjects of truth, that is, they transformed themselves in people whose ethical actions were in total accord with their words. I associate these two very different traditions because both emphasize the need for thorough awareness of one's position in the world and the ensuing ethic action required by that understanding.

In Chapter Two I have explored in what consists the differences between Native and Western systems of thought—granted that they are neither two unified blocks nor a product of any intrinsic characteristic of these communities. These differences lie rather in the long intellectual, material, philosophical and religious traditions held by these two communities and represent simply major trends. Knowing that simply to describe Native American's notion of time as circular in opposition to the Western linear view of time said actually very little about the meaning of this chronoscopy, I have investigated the philosophical and historical development of these concepts. Accordingly, the Western system of time measurement has slowly distanced itself from natural markers, such as the phases of the moon, for instance, to become more and more aligned with an abstract notion that obscures its origins and becomes identified with the progressive philosophy of history in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, a whole hierarchization of cultures was created in order to justify dominium, subjugation, and exploitation of resources and people worldwide. Time seen as progressive, cumulative and irreversible creates the illusion that human race is heading towards some teleological goal, like the locomotive of a train that pushes its progress by leaving behind the rails that will later be crossed over by the railroad cars it carries. Given the ideology that posits the West as the model for all other nations, I follow Walter Mignolo who identifies the origins of this idea in modernity, when side by side with its emphasis on rationality and more democratic systems of government—as compared to what Europe had experienced before—a hidden component can be identified: the logic of coloniality. Thus, the rhetoric of modernity is questioned since it becomes clear that the horrors of history were not mere accidents along the way but simply a necessary and constitutive component of the rhetoric that justifies conquest of resources and peoples and is still operating nowadays.

Alternative systems of knowledge emerge out of this discussion together with a revision of how they were ignored by the West, especially through its insistence upon the letter. The importance of this discussion for Native American literary studies is highlighted when the value given to ethics and community in Native cosmologies is taken into consideration. At stake is the collective survival of communities and their traditions. Part of

this different system of knowledge is the centrality of place for Native Americans. Not only they are a people, but also they are the people of *this* place. This greater accent on place and their connection to a particular landscape as the living tissue of life is the basis for the transmission of culture, since survival depends on learning the language of the land. Connection to all forms of life builds a complex web of relations that give meaning to experience and guarantee the survival of the group. In the end, the shift from a culture, or cultures, centered on the idea of time as progress, to a culture, or cultures, where the importance of time is subordinated to a relation to land, entails some consequences for the study of life writing. Whereas autobiographies are generally self-reflexive, the terms upon which this reflection is done are not exactly the same. A narrative of one's life centered on time will produce a self that is best described by a chain of causes and effects, so that the final result is determined by causality, explaining, in a certain way, what is. On the other hand, an autobiographical account that irradiates from a certain place is not a narrative in search for resolution but a performative act that reorders the whole web of relations. Narrative thus serves to produce a sense of recognition of one's "sense-of-self" in the here and now, and to establish a relationship in political scenes of exhibition and exchange. Although contingent, contextual and fragmentary in terms of a narrative thread, these life writings create the possibility of agency by reviewing trauma, denying victimry, subverting racist discourses of failure, and reasserting community values.

In the last Chapter I have analyzed Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* to show how it can bring healing for its readers and enlarge cross-cultural understanding by mediating knowledge across boundaries. All of Silko's work, fictional or non-fictional, is nurtured by a very strong Laguna oral tradition which requires that the Western reader acquire a new epistemological outlook on the world, one based on accretive web-like structures of meaning. By loading her narratives beyond the psychological and sociological basis of the Western novel genre, Silko empowers the reader to move beyond restrictive discursive binary modes and make room for a multi-centered world, in which the Western master narratives of termination, progress, linear time, racism, and displacement are subsumed into larger modes, becoming only one among many other discourses, and, consequently, losing its enthralling power as the only possibility for humanity.

What I have set out to demonstrate in this work is how much Native American life writing is nurtured by a very rich oral tradition that owes its existence to the experience of generations in relation to specific landscapes of this continent. As I began reading American Indian fiction some years ago I soon became aware that the novels, short stories and poems foregrounded a notion of identity that extended far back beyond the colonization of America.

The traditional stories that sometimes informed the main story suggested different epistemologies and ways of being in the world. Interestingly, the first Native American autobiographical writings that I have read, by Samson Occom and William Apess, were remarkable in their command of the Western expectations of the genre but failed, nevertheless, to fit perfectly into the mould by their emphasis on their discontentment with the political situation that made American Indians powerless in face of the dominant white society. Their discordant note was based on a political evaluation of identity that refused to be silenced. I identified this same sense of identity that insists on its specificity in more contemporary indigenous life writings. However, critical studies of indigenous autobiographies were limited by a history of the genre that insisted on the exoticism of the genre among Native Americans, thus never looking to what Native writers were adding to their writings. Emphasis was given to issues of authenticity, lack of chronology, inconsistency of form, or their relational aspect, a characteristic Native American life writing presumably shared with other ethnic and women's life writings in opposition to the independent character of canonical (white male) autobiographies! In short, there were no critical studies delineating in any way the terms defining what kind of identity was at the base of Native American texts. My choice was to investigate the categories usually applied to the analysis of autobiographies: identity, self, community, time, place, bi-cultural perspective, memory, representativeness. It was my understanding that a pure textual analysis would fail to integrate all components of the text and to deal with the specificities of the text. As I hope to have proved, Native American life writing is part of a much broader corpus of Native American Indian literature and shares many of its concerns. Although I have just pointed at some possibilities of categories of analysis, I believe I have established a firm ground for future studies of Native American texts, in general, and autobiographies, in particular. In this sense, my choice for Silko's *Storyteller*, as a fitting example for the way Native American Indians understand the self, was based on the fact that her work exemplifies the most radical departure from the canonical autobiographical mode as a chronological retelling of a life, while remaining throughout deeply embedded in a Native perspective.

There remains the question of healing for the readers. How much can Native American life writing actually heal? In fact, it is my argument, that, as long as we are willing to learn new paradigms and review the prevailing disease of contemporary society with its emphasis in the mechanization of life, hope is given to us. As Roberta Hill suggests, our illnesses may in fact be caused by a social order overcome with grief. "Hearts are not

pumps,” she says (39), quoting from Joseph Chilton Pearce’s studies<sup>187</sup>. It is my opinion that we are in dire need of revising the Western paradigm of newness, not only because it is based on subjugation of diversity, but also because it is suicidal in that it denies the survival of our communities worldwide and our dependence of and responsibility towards the whole web of relations. In other words, we all depend on the existence of, and are responsible for the maintenance of, healthy rivers, air, animals, plants, forests, and the Earth. As long as we keep poisoning our bodies, minds, hearts, and instincts by overloading them with disconnected information and do not apply ourselves to a wise collective effort for the survival of the whole, we are all *wétikos*, destroying the whole planet and ourselves with it. In *Storyteller* Silko shows how the connection to land, community, and storytelling can provide a string of *logos boethós*, the “discourses that aid” in times of need, and help us in this special moment when we need to transform ourselves so that we can escape victimry and recover our potential to save ourselves and steer away from the collision course in which we have become enmeshed. Thus, as Silko shows, there are enough alternatives to the dominant economic mode, as long as we learn to replace the old rhetoric of modernity and the paradigm of newness, and are prepared to replace it for the paradigm of co-existence. The alternative presented by Silko is deeply revolutionary, as it contributes to subvert the prevailing spiritual, economical, and political values of dominant society. Silko’s alternative is built upon long lived traditions that aim at the cohesion of community, the co-existence of heterogeneity, responsibility towards the Mother and all our relations, and, not least, a sense of wonder. May we live in a world as beautiful and powerful as that evoked at the Navajo Night Chant used in healing ceremonies:

Happily I recover.  
Happily my interior becomes cool.  
Happily I go forth.  
My interior feeling cold, may I walk.  
No longer sore, may I walk.  
Impervious to pain, may I walk.  
With lively feelings, may I walk.  
As it used to be long ago, may I walk.  
Happily may I walk.  
Happily with abundant dark clouds may I walk.

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<sup>187</sup> Pearce, Joseph Chilton. *Evolution’s End: Claiming the Potential of our Intelligence*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.

Happily with abundant showers may I walk.  
Happily with abundant plants may I walk.  
Happily on a trail of pollen may I walk.  
Happily may I walk.  
Being as it used to be long ago, may I walk.  
May it be beautiful before me.  
May it be beautiful behind me.  
May it be beautiful below me.  
May it be beautiful above me.  
May it be beautiful all around me.  
In beauty it is finished.  
In beauty it is finished. (Qtd. in Bierhorst 308)<sup>188</sup>



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<sup>188</sup> Source, Matthews, Washington. "Navajo Myths, Prayers, and Songs." *University of California Publications in American Archeology and Ethnology*. Vol. V, 1907. p. 54. [A posthumous work, edited by Pliny Earle Goddard.]

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