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“STORIES AND STORYTELLERS: NATIVE AMERICAN  
APPROACH. LESLIE MARMON SILKO”

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# CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	3
INTRODUCTION.....	8

## CHAPTER ONE:

<b>STORY AND STORYTELLERS: CHANGING ROLES IN FOLKLORE AND LITERATURE. ETHNICITY IN THE UNITED STATES.....</b>	<b>26</b>
1.1. ASIAN AND ASIAN AMERICAN STORYTELLING, FOLKLORE AND CULTURE.....	32
1.2. EUROPEAN STORYTELLING AND EURO-AMERICAN FOLKLORE AND CULTURE.....	49
1.2.1. Greek tradition.....	49
1.2.2. Irish tradition.....	53
1.2.3. German tradition .....	55
1.2.4. Icelandic Sagas and Norse/Scandinavian mythology.....	58
1.3. CHICANO LITERATURE AND STORYTELLING .....	60
1.4. AFRO-AMERICAN STORYTELLING AND FOLKLORE .....	70

## CHAPTER TWO:

<b>STORY AND STORYTELLERS IN NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE.....</b>	<b>100</b>
2.1. NATIVE AMERICAN STORYTELLING AND LITERATURE: CRITICISM AND RENAISSANCE.....	102
2.2. NATIVE AMERICAN STORYTELLING: ADAPTING TO NEW TIMES.....	117
2.2.1. Adapting forms, style and content.....	117
2.2.1.1. Language .....	120
2.2.1.2. Style.....	128
2.2.1.3. Protagonists .....	131
2.2.1.4. Content: traditional stories and storytelling.....	138
2.2.1.4.1. Creation Myth.....	138
2.2.1.4.1. Trickster .....	139

2.2.1.4.3 Goddesses.....	140
2.2.1.4.4. Culture heroes .....	143
2.2.1.4.5. Monsters .....	143
2.2.2. Native American Women: Storytelling and Ecofeminism .....	145
2.2.3. Storytelling in Contemporary Native American Communitie .....	155
2.2.3.1. Native American Tribes.....	155
2.2.3.1.1. Great Plain Indians.....	161
2.3.3.1.2. New Southwest Indians .....	168
2.3.3.1.3. Other Tribes and Beliefs.....	171
2.2.3.2. Contemporary Storytelling and Storytellers.....	174
2.2.4. Native American Storytelling in non-Native American culture.....	183
2.2.4.1. The Influence of Native American Stories in American literature. Some examples. ....	189
2.2.4.1.1. James Fennimore Cooper .....	190
2.2.4.1.2. Washington Irving .....	196
2.2.4.1.3. Henry David Thoreau.....	200
2.2.4.1.4. William Faulkner .....	203
2.2.4.1.5. Jane Austen .....	209
2.2.4.2. Native American traditions in movies and media .....	214
2.3. CONTEMPORARY NATIVE AMERICAN WRITERS AND THEIR APPROACHES TO STORYTELLING.....	224
2.3.1. Scott Momaday.....	225
2.3.2. James Welch.....	240
2.3.3. Simon Ortiz.....	247
2.3.4. Louise Erdrich .....	258
2.3.5. Gerald Vizenor .....	276

<b>CHAPTER THREE:</b>	
<b>LESLIE MARMON SILKO</b> .....	287
3.1. BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: SILKO AS A STORYTELLER.....	288
3.2. YELLOW WOMAN: SELF DISCOVERY.....	295
3.2.1. "Yellow Woman " and Storytelling .....	296
3.2.2. "Yellow Woman " and Nature .....	301
3.2.3. "Yellow Woman" and Sex.....	305
3.3. <i>CEREMONY</i> AND THE IMPORTANCE OF TRADITION.....	311
3.3.1. <i>Ceremony</i> and Storytelling .....	313
3.3.2. <i>Ceremony</i> , Nature and Women .....	329
3.3.3. <i>Ceremony</i> and Politics.....	337
3.4. <i>ALMANAC OF THE DEAD</i> AND VISIONARY STORYTELLING.....	341
3.4.1. <i>Almanac of the Dead</i> and Storytelling.....	342
3.4.2. <i>Almanac of the Dead</i> and Nature .....	354
3.4.3. <i>Almanac of the Dead</i> as a Visionary Novel.....	364
<b>CONCLUSIONS</b> .....	375
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	382
<b>APPENDIX</b> .....	400
<b>INDEX</b> .....	409



# INTRODUCTION

The oral-literary tradition is a cornerstone of every tribal society. It is the vehicle through which wisdom is passed from one generation to the next and by which sense is made of a confusing world.

Michael Dorris — “Native American Literature in Ehnopohistorical Context”

Throughout history there have been multiple and varied definitions of what story and storyteller mean. However, they all coincide at certain points. It seems to be clear for most authors that oral stories are the base of our present society, as we know it today, and storytellers were our first teachers.

No matter how developed a society is, it could not have evolved without the help of stories and storytellers, because stories are part of our lives. With no written possibilities, the only chance to transmit knowledge was oral stories. Our ancestors transmitted what they knew through tales that passed on from generation to generation with little modifications because storytelling is a form of history and it is a form of immortality too. They have existed since the first humans sat around many years ago and told tales that they used to educate, to establish norms of behavior and even to advise and provide information which was necessary for everyday life or to simply entertain. Many of the present standards related to the care of nature, community, education, tradition and even health were established thanks to stories, because storytellers assumed the role of custodian of old beliefs and norms in order to transmit them before they got lost on the way. That is the reason why they were a really important part of many cultures, from Irish folklore, to German, Indian, African or Latin American cultures. They were our grandfathers and grandmothers, or particular persons with abilities to engage with and make people listen to them.

The study of story and storytellers has usually been a discipline with multiple sources but it has been folklorists and anthropologists who have followed it with more interest. They usually agree on most aspects, except those related to the treatment of data. Some, such as Robert A. Georges consider that folklorists usually tend to concentrate on historical perspectives and cross-cultural approaches, while anthropologists study stories from individual societies with the main aim of establishing



or determining the relationship between that story and the social structure of the people who tell it, or even their behaviorist implications (314).<sup>1</sup> The truth is that storytelling has existed for centuries and there are written records that demonstrate that they were extant among unlettered European folk, and non-western primitive societies. Indeed, Georges recognized the importance stories had within society, stating that they could show the cultural reality or distort it, and that stories could work as instruments of control or criticism or even reinforce and weaken the structure of a determined society. However, for him, the current study of the concept of story is erroneous because they are “nothing more than a written representation of the message of complex communicative events that ... I shall refer to as ‘storytelling events’” (317). For this reason in his essay he establishes a set of postulates to understand the various aspects involved in the storytelling process and the way they interrelate, a model where these interconnections are explained and a comparative study of both story and storytelling.<sup>2</sup> Besides, he states that storytelling is a social experience in which all the participants have a role and assume social identities: one is the storyteller and the others are listeners. These identities are “selected from multiple social identities of the social personas of the participants in the storytelling event” (Georges 318). These participants also operate according to some status relationships — for instance, the storyteller must formulate, encode and transmit a message following socially prescribed rules that the rest of the participants also know and understand. Georges also establishes that storytelling events have social uses and functions. Among the former, he includes entertainment, teaching, explanation and description of phenomena; and among the latter, he includes “justification and reinforcement of kinship groupings,” the perpetuation of social class distinctions or the validation of competitive social factions (318). In the final postulate, Georges establishes that every storytelling event is unique, occurs only once in time and space and with some particular circumstances, although they may share some similarities (318).

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<sup>1</sup> Robert A. Georges is Professor Emeritus in the Mythology and Folklore Program at UCLA.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, he compares any storytelling event to any other act of communication in which there are always encoders and decoders, as well as face to face communication. There is also a coded message which is transmitted through visual and audio channels so that there is always a continuous response by the encoder and decoder (317).

Alan Dundes studied the concept of folklore in depth and connected it to the study of literature and culture too.<sup>3</sup> For him, there are only two steps in the study of folklore within both disciplines that he calls “identification” and “interpretation.” The former basically consists of finding similarities and the latter depends upon “delineation of differences” (136). In his opinion, a literary critic who does not understand or has no knowledge of folklore can be wrong in identification and in interpretation, but in his opinion, but the same may happen to an anthropologist who only knows basic tools of his discipline

In general stories, from the most literal point of view, can be considered oral tales that people tell aloud so that others listen to and transmit them to their relatives, friends, and others who surround them, so that they become part of their culture and traditions, and folklore is part of this oral tradition. Most definitions in dictionaries refer to this word as a narrative account of events that can be real or imagined, or a narrative that is intended to entertain, interest, instruct or complete a structure with characters or a specific style.

Similarly, the word storyteller has been literally defined as one who tells and writes stories or anecdotes. For Franz K. Stanzel everybody is a storyteller as long as we tell others what we have lived in a day, or what we have done at certain moments:

We are all storytellers, even if we never write a short story or a novel. Every day we make an effort to shape our experience of reality in conversations, reports, and above all, in recollections, whether articulated silently or aloud — we try to give that experience a coherence, sense, wholeness, and meaning. When we thus shape our experiences by relating them, we transform and fictionalize them. (203)

This means that telling stories is not out of the ordinary, we all do it because we use our language to tell others about us and this is also storytelling. But these are only literal definitions. There are others which involve other feelings. For instance, Isabel Allende, one of the most important contemporary Latin American writers of novels and short stories, has recognized her deep relationship to stories and her close contact to storytellers in her essay “The Short Story.” Indeed, she defines storytelling as “an organic experience like motherhood or love with a perfect lover. It’s a natural passion

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<sup>3</sup> Alan Dundes (1934-2005) was a folklorist at the University of Berkeley and his work was central to establish folklore as an academic discipline.

that determines your existence. It is always an exhilarating feeling. One's own private orgy" (28). She adds:

We are all united by the same secret vice, our love of stories. But there is nothing to be ashamed of. Mankind has been trapped in the web of storytelling since our hairy grandparents sat around the fire in the long winters of the stone age. We are the privileged ones that get to weave the web. (21)

She also considers storytellers should make unbelievable things believable and maintain the listener's attention over any possible interruption. She provides as the best example her own grandmother, defining this way one of the most important features of a storyteller: being able to create the right atmosphere but accepting that "the world is weird and the storyteller's job is simply to narrate the events, not to deliver messages or find explanations. In each story, my grandmother would put the whole soul" (24). That is, the storyteller should be able to evoke with words many feelings so that the audience does not get bored. Apart from passing facts before forgotten, their main aim was to entertain and to provide their listeners with enough information as to understand the story. This sounds indeed very similar to what contemporary media, such as television, does with us and our children, although obviously cultural richness does not seem to be the same.

In the case of Native American contemporary authors, as well as in that of other ethnic minority writers in the United States, it is really difficult to separate what anthropologists and folklorists study or to define story in a scientific way. It is quite difficult to differentiate between the historical perspectives, the cross-cultural approaches or to separate stories from social structures. It is indeed hard to separate the texts from the authors and the oral background in which they grew up and which constitutes the base of their works and to separate these texts from the contemporary society in which they also live and the mainstream education they have also received. In fact, it could even be said authors such as Scott Momaday, James Welch, Louise Erdrich, Simon Ortiz, Gerald Vizenor, and Leslie Marmon Silko in Native American literature, or Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston, Frank Chi, Rudolfo Anaya, Tomas Rivera and Zora Neale Hurston, in other minority groups use these oral stories and knowledge to refer to contemporary issues that affect them as individuals and their communities and to denounce them if necessary. So, although much has been written

about this, a new perspective needs to be presented. It will be necessary to understand that Native American culture in particular, and the American one in general, would not have been the same without the presence of the oral stories told by these traditional storytellers and which some contemporary authors have more recently included in their works as a way for everybody to know and understand them. Stories and storytellers played, play and will continue to play a fundamental role in not only Indian tribes, but also outside the Native American world. They are more than present in contemporary times and closely related to movements, events or situations that at first sight would be unimaginable for us. The traditional stories have evolved as much as traditions have and it is important to pay attention to both. Now stories acquire new hints and the works of contemporary authors show it, and this needs to be studied in depth. Harold Scheub stated: "Story is all we have, it is the only means that we have of recalling our past and deliberating on it. It is our only avenue to history, to the meaning of existence, to our relationship with our fellows, our gods and nature" (22). This summarizes the essence of this thesis, as storytelling will be connected here to all these aspects mentioned in the quotation. Stories are the only way we have to recover our past and think of it, in order to improve and understand both our present and future. It is a way to history, to know about our ancestors and learn from them. Stories provide us with the means to live and relate with those who surround us, those who look after us, and above all, they are a way to understand and respect old beliefs and our relationship to Mother Earth, and this is going to be my contribution, to help readers understand that beyond scientific definitions, stories are part of our lives and can be studied as such. They are also a way to show history, politics, nature, feminism, Ecofeminism, eco-criticism and even become anticipatory of more contemporaneous events.

Leslie Marmon Silko is one of these writers who fight for the recognition of Native American literature and oral traditions. In her novels she is able to deal with traditional storytelling without ignoring contemporary issues and masters the inclusion of oral stories into her works while anticipating events that are current affairs, such as terrorism, immigration, environment, illegal drug and organ dealing, feminism, and Ecofeminism, among others. In her novels *Ceremony*, *Almanac of the Dead* and her short story "Yellow Woman," she deals with oral and new topics and does it in a natural way that lets readers learn about the circumstances surrounding Native American people

and their culture, even when these readers are non-Native American, as I am. She includes traditional Native American characters such as the trickster, manitos, or goddesses such as Corn Mother or Yellow Woman; traditional oral stories such as Laguna Creation Myths and monsters and at the same time she is able to deal with issues of interest for her community, such as racism and environmental and cultural protection. Laura Coltelli states that Silko referred to childhood and to her first understanding of words as the time she realized that she was predestined to write about ancestral tales (*Winged* 144), and this is what she actually did. She also adds that Vizenor stressed ‘the visual’ and that the best stories are those based on visual memory (*Winged* 156). For her, Ortiz emphasized on seeing, speaking and listening to the stories, although the most important part for him was “living that [storytelling] process” (*Winged* 104). According to Coltelli, Momaday considers that storytelling is an essential element “of self-definition as a grand literary form that should be represented in the American canon” (*Winged* 95). That is, some of the most important contemporary Native American writers emphasize the relevance storytelling has in their works and in their inspiration.

Native American literature written prior to these authors, more specifically between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was considered literature of transition between the oral tradition that existed prior to Europeans arrival and the beginning of the Native American Renaissance, deeply studied in this thesis. The works written in the nineteenth century were basically written in English because this was the language taught in missionary schools and the main genre used was autobiography, as this was also the most common genre in European tradition. Early Native American writing showed the experience these early authors lived and the struggles they went through in order to find their voices within American culture. In 1929, Oliver La Farge’s *Laughing Boy* dealt with the struggles of a Native American Navajo boy to reconcile his culture with the education received in the boarding schools where he studied. Although focusing on problems that Native authors would recover later on, the novel was considered by Native writers as one written by a white man who talked about Indians (Hobson 2).<sup>4</sup> It was after the so called Native American Renaissance that writers started to express their feelings when treated as inferior even to human beings. They wanted to

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<sup>4</sup> The novel received the Pulitzer Prize that year.

change the idea mainstream society had of them and discovered that writing as a powerful tool that could help them change attitudes and stereotypes. Indeed the image of Native Americans had been defined during the early nineteenth century due to the Indian Removal Act signed in 1830 that authorized President Jackson to remove Native Americans living in the territory east of the Mississippi River and forced them to go to less desirable lands in the west, as the controversy that had arisen due to the legality of this law confirmed negative feelings and tensions on both sides. Mainstream society started to believe that it was indeed necessary to set Native Americans apart so that they would not interfere in the expansion of their society, culture and economy. It would take a long time until this idea dissolved, and it could even be said that it has not actually disappeared completely, although contemporary Native American authors are strongly fighting to get it. Arnold Krupat considers that the image of Indians standing for savage nature in opposition to civilized culture has been extensively documented and this plays an important role in the attempts to include Native American literature within the canon of American literature. He states:

That Indians ‘removed’ west of the Mississippi with the encouragement of President Andrew Jackson and the acquiescence of the Congress have ever after been taken as ‘of’ the West, indicates the degree to which symbolic, one might say ideological, constructs persist in the face of what would seem to be empirical evidence to the contrary. ... Euroamericans persist today in seeing Indian as primarily inhabitants of the Western plains or southwestern deserts. ...It is the war bonneted horseman of the plains in buckskins or the near-naked pueblo dancer who continue to constitute the American public’s sense of the Indian. (7)

We must also bear in mind that American literature and history are formed by minority literatures and histories, those of the groups of people who have lived and permeated their knowledge. It can be stated that American culture is multicultural and full of references to other cultures and peoples. As Robert A. Lee states in *United States, Re-viewing American Multicultural Literature*, there are multiple founding encounters. From Columbus or Hernán Cortés to the African slaves who first arrived in Jamestown in 1619 there have been multiple waves of people who have provided the country with constant cultural references. He mentions European immigration as “each the bearer of a culture on its own right yet each to be made over into new hyphenation with America” (39). He refers to English, Irish, Scots, Germans, Slavs, Italians, Scandinavians, Jews, Russians or Polish people, to whom others like Chinese, Japanese,

Filipinos, Koreans, and Vietnamese, would be added to form a multicultural society. Most of these societies developed their culture through oral means and stories and storytellers performed a relevant role that American literature could not ignore. Many Americans are unaware of the strong Native American subcultures that exist and influence this country at present. There are still many stereotypes related to Native American, Asian-American, Chicano, and Afro-American people that hide their real relevance in the formation of North American culture and their cultures are treated as past. Indeed, most of these minority groups have suffered from ignorance and mistreatment and this is reflected in the literature of contemporaneous writers through stories and storytelling. However, it seems erroneous to think in that vein as it has been proved that although treated as equal, these minority groups are independent and that even Native American tribes, usually considered the same and with no cultural, language or even physical differences, are unique and should be treated as such. Some of the theses dealing with these topics and published until now present Native American literature from different perspectives.

In 1997, Henry M Potts, dealt with the commitment to community shared by Native American authors such as Momaday, Welch or Erdrich which is shown in their works in “Native American Values and Traditions and the Novel, Ambivalence Shall Speak.” The study explains there are reasons why Native American authors should reconsider using the novel to express their communities’ values and traditions, and some of the reasons why they should continue doing it.

In 1999, Blanca Schorcht’s “Storied Voices in Native American Texts, Harry Robinson, Thomas King, James Welch and Leslie Marmon Silko,” examined Native American literature from an interdisciplinary framework. It suggested that contemporary Native American writing is based on Native oral traditions and these stories deal with specific oral stories from their respective communities, so that oral storytelling becomes intrinsic to the novel and the stories presented help them connect past and present. She deals with these authors individually and shows their main connections to storytelling.

In 2009, Olena Gorelova’s “Post Modernism, Native American Literature and Issues of Sovereignty” explores the question of how to read and interpret tribal narrative and

modern Native American literature and whether Post Modernism is the right alternative to interpret it or not.

In 1993, Carol Jeanne Batker's "Ethnic Women's Literature and Politics. The Cultural Construction of Gender in Early Twentieth-Century America" dealt with the heterogeneity of gender politics early in the century by detailing how ethnic women's fiction contests the political discourses of ethnic women. She deals with issues in Native American, African American and Jewish American women writers and with texts that illustrate the importance of grounding gender in a particular historical moment, as ethnic women use discourses to empower themselves.

However, I strongly believe that they do not seem to pay special attention to the features all ethnic minorities in the United States share and the use contemporary authors make of stories to denounce issues they consider unfaithful for their communities or to show their pride for their backgrounds. Indeed, most of them focus individually on the different ethnic minorities but none deals with all them, in order to compare and appreciate their similarities and differences. It could be stated that no ethnic minority is completely isolated from the mainstream society in which they are inserted, but also that they share certain features among each other, such as the importance provided to communities and the relevance of being in contact with them in order not to lose touch with their culture and the traditions. Working with Leslie Marmon Silko, it is also important to notice that she was a visionary writer who seemed to go ahead of her time and wrote works that focus on the needs of her community at present. Taking into consideration all this, this thesis has three principal goals:

1. To prove the relevance of traditional stories in Native American communities but also in the multiple ethnic minorities that populate the United States, to demonstrate that a complete understanding of a nation's culture cannot be made without complete knowledge of all the elements that form part of it. This will also show the relevance these ethnic minorities have in contemporary American culture and their uniqueness. The study of the concepts of story and storyteller in Asian, European, Chicano and African communities will also prove that despite uniqueness, they also share certain features, that they can be compared and that their cultures and traditions are also present nowadays, because contemporary



authors of these ethnic minorities do not forget where they come from and what storytelling was for them, reflecting it, especially in contemporary literature and using these works to denounce the situation they live in.

2. Second, to demonstrate the relevance of traditional storytelling in the works of contemporary Native American writers, who are able to present a new perspective of traditional stories and prove that these can also be innovative and adapt to current conditions and to get a powerful function in today's world, such as social and political criticism, historical restoration and challenge to rigid belief system. To explain the way authors such as Momaday, Welch, Ortiz, Erdrich and Vizenor exemplify in their novels how traditional storytelling has adapted its forms, styles and contents to new times, and the way traditional storytellers and storytelling sessions have evolved in current times and become an important source for American culture. The relevance of storytellers in the life of ancient and contemporary Native American people will also be proved, especially focusing on the figure of the female storyteller and the way her role as woman and as storyteller has changed over the years and the reading that can be made related to new movements such as eco-criticism and Ecofeminism as well as on the appearance of Native American culture in American media, literature and culture.
3. To establish that Leslie Marmon Silko's works are an example of all mentioned above, that she is closely connected to her community and storytelling, showing it in her novels *Ceremony*, and *Almanac of the Dead*, and the short story "Yellow Woman." To demonstrate Silko's commitment to the defense of oral traditions and cultural heritage as a way to evolve and keep Native American culture alive. This is indeed, not so far from the versions exposed in other ethnic minority works, and even by other contemporary Native American writers. This will also explain Silko's relationship to Ecofeminism and the version of this movement offered in her works.

Contemporary Native literature is full of references to mythological and historical Indian figures and stories which bring the reader back to Indian times. However, Native authors, like Chinese-American, Chicano, and Afro-American, also fight to manifest their liberty to use both their ethnic and Western forms, to be able to satisfy the

expectations that their communities had placed on them but at the same time managing to address North American audiences too. It seems clear that they live in different times and this means that they have to adapt to them, while retaining the essential part of their cultures and traditions. In order to demonstrate this, this thesis takes into consideration a pluralistic perspective. I have chosen scholars from different ethnic minorities but also Americans, such as Bonnie TuSmith, a first generation of Chinese-American who grew up in Manhattan and who knows from experience that American society in “anything but homogeneous” (viii), and whose main hypothesis is that among the various cultures of ethnic Americans, “communal values continue to inform the culture's worldview” (viii) and that in order to survive it was required “a willingness to cross cultures in a hurry” (viii).<sup>5</sup> Arnold Krupat, an American born in the Bronx, has also dealt in depth with Native American literature, and published multiple works dealing with it. He considers that American culture has had, has now and will continue to have some relation to Native American culture, “although this relation has most frequently been one of avoidance” (3).<sup>6</sup> He thinks that up to now many commentators on American culture have managed to proceed as if there were no relation between Native American and Euromerican traditions, but now it is impossible to ignore or pretend that the Other is “simply silent or absent” (3) because anyone who ignores or resists this fact does so “at the risk of guaranteeing his or her irrelevance to any attempt but to understand the world, or to change it” (3-4). His opinions about Native American literature, the canon and contemporary Native American authors are present in this thesis. Similarly, I have also dealt with the works of authors such as Robert Nelson and his study of contemporary Native American authors, Maria del Mar Garcia Lorenzo and her study of the Harlem Renaissance, Henry Louise Gates and DuBois, dealing with Afro-American

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<sup>5</sup> This is the main hypothesis in her work *All My Relatives*, a study of the different ethnic minority groups that live in the United States and their literature.

<sup>6</sup> He has written and published many works dealing with Native American culture and literature, such as *Woodsmen, or Thoreau & The Indians*; *That the People Might Live: a Theory of Native American Elegy*; *Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History, Literature*; *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon*; *Red Matters*; *All that Remains: Native Studies* and is editor of anthologies such as *Native American Autobiography: An Anthology and New Voices in Native American Literary Criticism*, and *Here First: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*. He has also written various essays and articles on journals.

literature and traditions, Karl Kroeber, Jace Weaver, Kenneth Roemer, Susan Brill de Ramirez, Laura Coltelli, Adam Velie, Paula Gunn Allen, among many others who have investigated and written about Native American oral tradition, Leslie Marmon Silko and ethnicity in the United States.

The theoretical basis on which this dissertation lays its foundation is Ecofeminism, which connects women and nature and studies the mistreatment both received from patriarchal societies.<sup>7</sup> Charlene Spretnak's "Ecofeminism: Our Roots and Flowering," summarizes some of the most important concerns this movement was committed to when it first appeared in the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> According to her,

Ecofeminism grew out of radical, or cultural feminism (rather than from liberal feminism or socialist feminism), which hold that identifying the dynamics — largely fear and resentment — behind the dominance of male over females is the key to comprehending every expression of patriarchal culture with its hierarchical, militaristic, mechanistic, industrialist forms. (3)<sup>9</sup>

She considers that cultural feminists who had been exposed to Marxist analysis in the sixties and those who had studied theory and social ecology in the seventies brought a framework of dominance theory. They rejected the Marxist assertion that domination is only based on money and class but considered that the most universally dominated class was women. "Experiencing and naming the inadequacies of classical dominance theory, which ignores nature as well as women, such radical/cultural feminists moved in the direction of Ecofeminism" (Spretnak 3). This would be the first path into Ecofeminism. A second path is exposure to nature-based religion, usually that of the Goddess. In the mid-seventies cultural feminists discovered a religion that honored the female and "we were drawn to it like a magnet" (Spretnak 3), especially because that Divine was near and around us, related to animals, totems, plants, caves, fertile plains, waters that give

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<sup>7</sup> A term coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*. According to her, we have very few chances of surviving as a species unless we come into terms with environment and stop destructing it.

<sup>8</sup> Charlene Spretnak is a very well-known American author and Ecofeminist, co-founder of the Green Party movement in the United States. She has largely written about ecology, politics and spirituality.

<sup>9</sup> Throughout that decade few Ecofeminists in academic settings used this term to define themselves although they were engaged in theoretical endeavors that also linked women and environment. Early publications include Ruether's *New Woman/ New Earth* (1975) Mary Daly's *Gin/Ecology* (1978), Griffin's *Woman and Nature* (1978) and Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980).

life and animals that become teachers. The third path into Ecofeminism comes from environmentalism, because many women with careers in politics, technology, science or environmental organizations and initially connected to feminism, encountered books, articles or lectures dealing with Ecofeminism and changed their minds, as they enroll in environmental studies and discover “a depth not present in their textbooks” (Spretnak 4). For them, “we’ll find that many people connected with nature on a deep level through a ritual moment of awakening, or perhaps several of them” (Spretnak 4). For Spretnak,

Today Ecofeminists address the crucial issues of our time, from reproductive technology to Third World development, from toxic poisoning to the vision of a new politics and economics — and much more. We support and join our sisters fighting for equal pay, for battered women’s shelters, for better childcare, and for all the efforts to stop the daily exploitation and suffering of women. (5)

Land is usually celebrated as feminine and Ecofeminism criticizes how both land and women are abused. The movement is based on the same standards of equality between genders and makes strong associations between women and nature. Throughout history nature has been considered female and the physiological characteristics of women make them be more strongly related to it than men. Women’s relation to birth, child care and menstruation remind of the elements of Nature and this qualifies them to speak on nature’s behalf. Indeed, Carolyn Merchant identifies the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the turning point in the “death of nature.”<sup>10</sup> She considers that there are two images of women associated to nature; the nurturing mother who provided for the needs of mankind in an ordered and planned universe; and the wild, uncontrollable nature that could render violence, storms, droughts and general chaos. She stated:

The metaphor of the earth as a nurturing mother was gradually to vanish as a dominant image as the Scientific Revolution proceeded to mechanize and to rationalize the world view. The second image of nature as disorder, called forth an important modern idea, that of power over

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<sup>10</sup> Carolyn Merchant is a very well-known American Ecofeminist. Her work *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) presented a perspective of the Scientific Revolution that challenged the idea of science as a marker of progress. On the contrary, it considered that seventeenth-century science could be one of the causes of ecological crisis, the devaluation of women and the domination of nature.

nature. Two new ideas, those of mechanism and of domination and mastery of nature, became core concepts of the modern world. (2)

Traditionally Native women's position in society came from the social and economic structures that prevailed and which exposed them to a set of environmental problems. Ecofeminists considered that the same social and economic structures caused environmental damage and therefore, women could share this experience and were more ready to speak on the defense of nature. Ecofeminism focuses on these links but also criticizes them. For them, these connections devalue both women and nature. They consider that patriarchal structures are based on dualistic hierarchies (male/female, human/animal, culture/nature, white/non white, among others). Until these oppositions are dismantled, humanity will remain divided and abusive systems will continue manifesting their powers.<sup>11</sup> Karen J. Warren studied this in depth and dealt with the philosophy of Ecofeminism and the importance of oppressive conceptual frameworks.<sup>12</sup> She considers that Ecofeminist philosophy is concerned with conceptual analysis and argumentative proof about "women — other human Others — nature interconnections" (Warren 46). She analyses these conceptual frameworks and considers that some are oppressive. She differentiates five main characteristics that may be applied in this doctoral dissertation. The first is *value-hierarchical thinking*, or "Up-Down" thinking. This establishes that what is Up has higher value than that which is Down. In this vein, men, whites, mind, and culture are Ups while women, color, nature and body are Downs. The second characteristic is that these conceptual frameworks encourage *oppositional value dualism*, or disjunctive pairs in which one of the members has higher value than the other, for example male, white, rational and culture are better than female, black, and emotional. The third characteristic is "power-over" power, such as the power of parents over their young children, the judges over defendants, tyrants over citizens or rapists over victims. Some of these relations are justified, but most of them

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<sup>11</sup> Karen J. Warren states that just as there is not one feminism, there is not one Ecofeminism or Ecofeminist philosophy. For her, ecological feminism has roots in a wide variety of feminisms ranging from liberal feminism to Marxist feminism, radical, black and Third World feminisms. What makes Ecofeminism different is its insistence that nonhuman nature and naturism or the unjustified domination of nature, are feminist issues. Ecofeminists also extend their critiques to other isms, such as sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, ageism and anti-Semitism to nature and naturism (4).

<sup>12</sup> Conceptual frameworks are a set of "basic beliefs, values, attitudes or assumptions which shape and reflect how one views oneself and one's world" (Warren 46). Some are oppressive because they function to explain, maintain and justify relationships of unjustified domination and subordination, and when it is patriarchal, it functions to justify the "subordination of women by men" (Warren 46).

are not and this implies subordination. The fourth feature is that these conceptual frameworks create and maintain privileges when you belong to the Ups, such as driving a car or going to school, to name just a few. And finally the fifth and most important characteristic is the *logic of domination*, that is, a logical structure that justifies domination and subordination. According to Warren, it is offered as a moral stamp of approval for subordinations, since “if accepted, it provides the justification for keeping Downs down” (47). In Western societies, the oppressive frameworks that have justified the domination of women and non-human nature are patriarchal as women have usually been identified with nature, body and the realm of physical while men have been identified with culture, reason, and the realm of the mental.

Apart from considering there is a strong connection between female and natural oppression, Ecofeminism is also concerned with the “the liberation of all subordinated Others” (Gaard 5). Attending to the main focus of this thesis and considering that the Others implies ethnic minorities in the United States as well as women and nature, and that all forms of oppression seem to be connected, the best definition for Ecofeminism would be “the position that there are important connections between how one treats women, people of color, and the underclass on the one hand, and how one treats the nonhuman environment on the other” (Warren xi). Indeed, many Ecofeminist theories argue there is no primary form of oppression but all oppressions are related and reinforce each other. Depending on one’s position in society, there is one form of oppression that seems more pressing in one’s everyday life. This means that while sexism will be the strongest oppression form for some women, for others it will be colonial oppression, racism, homophobia or violence. One of the forms contemporary ethnic minority writers have to fight against this oppression is through storytelling, so Ecofeminism and storytelling do not seem to be so far from each other. This is the idea interpreted here in the different chapters and their corresponding subheadings.

Chapter One, entitled “Story and Storytellers: Changing Roles in Folklore and Literature. Ethnicity in the United States” revises the concepts of story and storyteller in different ethnic minorities that form part of American culture. It deals with Asian American, European-American, Chicano and Afro-American culture, traditions and folklore and some of the most important contemporary authors belonging to these groups, such as Ami Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston, Frank Chin, Rudolfo Anaya, Tomas

Rivera, and Zora Neale Hurston. It provides a deep analysis of oral tradition in their works, but also of the new uses these authors make of these oral tales to refer to topics such as sexism, racism, immigration, politics or economy and are connected to Ecofeminism, among many others.

Chapter Two, entitled “Story and Storytellers in Native American Literature,” goes deeper into Native American oral tradition and focuses on different aspects related to it. Firstly it pays attention to the concept of Native American literature, its criticism, Renaissance and inclusion within the canon. It also deals with the adaptation of Native American storytelling tradition to new times through form, style, contents, and protagonists. It focuses the role of Native American women as storytellers and the reading of some contemporary works from the perspective of Ecofeminism and Eco-criticism and on contemporary storytelling in contemporary Native communities. It deals with how the figure of the storyteller and the storytelling itself have evolved and adapted to new formats and exigencies, such as those imposed by the use of new technologies or the need of reaching new audiences through elements such as the comic. In order to prove that Native American culture is not only for Native people but that it has expanded and reached American mainstream culture, it also focuses on the way Native American storytelling is reflected in American media, literature, and movies, showing stereotypes and trying to break with them. All mentioned above is reflected in the last part of this chapter with the study of the works of contemporary Native American authors, specifically Momaday, Welch, Ortiz, Erdrich and Vizenor.

Chapter Three, entitled “Leslie Marmon Silko” will provide some biographical information about the author, which will refer to the novelist as closely related to oral traditions and movements such as Ecofeminism, as well as a deep study of her short story “Yellow Woman,” and two of her most important novels, *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead* from different perspectives. “Yellow Woman” will be studied in relation storytelling, the concept of nature and Ecofeminism, and sex. *Ceremony* will be studied from storytelling perspective, from the references it makes to women and nature and from a political view. *Almanac of the Dead* is studied as a storytelling novel, related to nature and as a visionary novel.

No doubt American literature can no longer be considered simply American and that many other ethnic groups form part of it and have provided it with extraordinary richness that must be taught and taken into consideration, as this dissertation is doing in the following chapters.





# **CHAPTER ONE**

# STORY AND STORYTELLERS: CHANGING ROLES IN FOLKLORE AND LITERATURE. ETHNICITY IN THE UNITED STATES

The truth about stories is that that's all we are  
King — *The Truth about Stories.*

Oral storytelling is one of the oldest forms of communication used by most communities, from Asian and Indian to Australian and European ones. It was used to transmit ideas about their religion, to transmit knowledge or above all, a belief system to people. Most of these groups of people had their own words to refer to the storyteller and to the stories themselves. They had their own forms to address the audience and keep their attention and they also had their own writers, who have always tried to put those oral performances into written form and to transmit what their ancestors meant while referring to old tales that involved monsters, gods or any type of mythological elements to contemporary readers.

Oral tradition is therefore, an important source of knowledge for most societies and an issue that must be studied in depth. The culture of the United States is not an exception and based its roots on the oral references and material imported from minority or ethnic groups that formed and still form part of the country and which brought their traditions (also those connected to oral folklore) to the country in which they arrived as immigrants, slaves or where they were born in later generations.

The study of these American minorities had been forgotten or underestimated until the 1960s when there seemed to be an ethnic revival. The Civil Rights movement made white Americans realize that there were other American citizens living in the country, the African Americans.<sup>13</sup> After them, most ethnic communities began to emerge and to

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<sup>13</sup>A hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation, Afro-Americans in the Southern states still lived in a high unequal world, suffered from racism and segregation. In the 1960s a series of civil activists started to use non violent protests and civil disobedience to bring about a change. Among the leaders Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., Andrew Goodman and Malcolm X pointed out. Their actions became well-known all around the country and they achieved some successful measures, such as The Civil Rights Act (1964), which forbade segregation in public places and racial discrimination in employment, and education, and The Voting Rights Act (1965). The movement declined after the 1960s and King's and Malcolm X's deaths, but were a model for other group advancement.

demand attention, such as Native Americans, Asian Americans, Chicano or European Americans. They started to identify themselves as members of a community that also had rights and needs and, above all, as people who had a lot to say in American culture. Their cultural background was so important and relevant for the formation of American culture that it could no longer be ignored, even though this culture was mostly based on oral traditions and no written records. Indeed, it is important to know and learn about all the societies that form a country in order to understand it completely, to learn about its society and comprehend the positive and negative aspects that are present on it, as well as the contributions they have made to the complete development of the country. So, the study of minority groups could not be simply left aside.

Fortunately, in the last decades, ethnic groups are acquiring more and more relevance, as Walter Ong says, probably because ethnic diversity is not considered such a bad thing nowadays or probably because the minority groups are growing and more attention is paid to them in seminars and literature courses (1). Ong considers that literature is essential to understand experience and consciousness and the study of the literature of other cultures is useful to open “new vistas both in the exterior world and into the human heart” (3). However, the study of literature in the United States has been homogeneous and centered on the European and English writings. It is, according to him, really important to pay attention to minority literatures in order to enrich the mainstream and help people understand the sense of total culture in the country and make it more real (3). Indeed, the powerful images and themes that have emerged thanks to the growing relevance of ethnic literatures have prompted a rework of the traditional roles that immigrants and minority groups had in the United States. What is more, ethnic writers seem to have started to enter the world of the Others and perform a role of mediators, presenting a search for personal and communal identity in which this between-world becomes the subject of much of their ethnic work. However, this has not been an easy step, since the interest in ethnicity as a methodological approach to study American literature appeared for the first time in the 1970s, when MELUS (the Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States) was founded with the aim of integrating ethnic works into the literary American literature, traditionally restrictive

and delimiting.<sup>14</sup> From this moment on, until the celebration of the eighteenth annual MELUS conference in 2004, it has been a long way with multiple obstacles, although most of them have been fortunately overcome.

It is also important to realize about the need of looking at these ethnic groups as unique. Ulf Hannerz refers to this in his article “Some Comments on the Anthropology of Ethnicity in the United States.” He considers that at present the anthropological study of American ethnic groups provides more emphasis to the unique cultural wealth of the minority group, “with the implication that its distinctiveness gives it the right to determine its own future or to be treated as equal of any other group” (430). This is an attitude that should be applauded, according to Hannerz because it contributes to a full picture of what the life of a minority group is like. However, he also believes that when dealing with the impact of ethnic studies of the relationship between anthropologists and American society, we must take some points into account. The first one is that anthropologists are usually willing to accept the WASP definition of ethnicity, while if we are to use concepts of ethnicity analytically “no people is any more or any less ethnic than any other people, although their relationships to the common society arena might differ” (431).<sup>15</sup> Indeed, he also believes that if we accept the anthropological definition of ethnicity, the recent ethnic studies do not deal with it all, but they are general studies of the culture of the groups which the American majority has chosen to call ethnic (432).

Despite their uniqueness, ethnic minorities share certain features and it is also important to identify and understand them. Commonality is one of these characteristics. Most ethnic writers present the individual within a communal context, unlike Eurocentric heroes who are more individual and models of success. Gerald Vizenor’s idea of commonality is a clear example. He relates the individual to the local community or to the world in his novels. Children whose parents have died or who have

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<sup>14</sup> MELUS was founded in 1973 and its main objective is to expand and study literature in the United States through the study and analysis of Latino, Native American, African American, Asian and Pacific literatures.

<sup>15</sup> This is definition states that “ethnicity is a quality which is absent among Anglo-Saxons; which ...increases among Americans of European descent as you pass over the map of Europe from the northwest to toward the southeast; and which is very strong among people of non-European ancestry” (qtd. in Hannerz 27).

been abandoned are usually taken on by some other members of the community, for example. Other signs of community activity are more difficult to discern, such as storytelling and healing, also included not only by Vizenor, but by most ethnic writers in their works. "Healing is another community endeavor shown in some detail. Individual shamans-human, dog, and bear practice of their art often by touching or licking the spot and making it 'well'" as Hume notes (134). This means that community promotes healing and although some novels present the figure of scientists, shamans do more with stories and humor. The same happens with storytelling. It helps people not to feel victims and it has a heartening effect on them, so that they feel sympathy for others and keep in touch with them, returning to their origins. Many contemporary ethnic writers are exploring aspects of their culture's oral traditions and they do it through narrative structure, theme or subject, so that the art of storytelling and mythmaking plays an important role in the texts. Indeed, as Bonnie TuSmith states "Partly from the built-in structure of the oral performance and partly from the worldview, these authors seek to convey through their medium, ethnic literatures tend to have a communal ethos. The point is: oral performances are communal" (184-5). However, it is also important to notice that although they are using oral storytelling and mythology, they are also able to adapt to the circumstances of the country they live in and the new times they are facing. Or to say it in other words, although they adapt to the impositions of mainstream society, they are also able to keep traditions like storytelling alive, include them in their works and be successful.

With their works, contemporary ethnic writers are able to denounce specific political and economic forms of oppression, especially racism. They are also able to promote their vernacular languages and include them within the narrative structure and language of the text, managing to challenge prevalent assumptions in American culture, and to present an alternative vision of their groups in order to finish with the stereotypes placed on them by mainstream societies. It is difficult to find ethnic groups which are totally isolated and ignore any possible alterations coming from surrounding societies which are usually dominant and stronger, but contemporary ethnic writers do not intend that anyway. Their feeling of commonality seems to prevail over the possible impositions and this is what they want to demonstrate in their writings. They want to show that their traditions are an important part of their work but that they also feel

proud of it and of being able to cope that with current circumstances. This is what this chapter will try to prove, with a broad description of some of the basic aspects of storytelling in the different minority groups that form part of American society. The revision of the concepts of story and storytellers in Asian, European, Chicano and African cultures will help readers have an idea of how they have influenced American writers who belong to these ethnic groups and how this has also been reflected in American culture. It will also help readers realize that it is necessary to have a complete knowledge of all the elements that form part of the a nation in order to fully understand it, because as Arnold Krupat says, we will never know about American culture and society if we do not pay attention to the others (235).

## 1.1. ASIAN AND ASIAN AMERICAN STORYTELLING, FOLKLORE AND CULTURE

In Central Asia, storytellers were usually accompanied by a musical instrument and received the name of *ozan* (some of them also composed the stories). They told stories or *dastans*, which became a central part of the literature of this area of the world. These stories had different roles within the community and they even became a source of identity for the people who told and listened to them. There were many types all over Asia and the main ones were about the struggles and fights to be free from a group that oppresses them, especially those coming from China. They all included a hero, which received the name of *alp*, and who had to fight to liberate his people, helped by a group and interrupted by a number of traitors that he usually defeats, as his ultimate goal is victory. Indeed, as their activities are usually uncommon, *alps* are sometimes compared to natural phenomena, so he may be a fast runner, or his hair can be as bright as the sun, or his body as strong as a tree, to name just a few of his features. These are characteristics that resemble or which are drawn upon shamanism, because this is the dominant system of Central Asian countries, until the Islam appeared.<sup>16</sup> *Dastans* are usually unalterable, that means that they never changed their form or content, but they may be revised. But, apart from *danstans*, all the events that happened in the place had their own versions as songs or poems which were also told orally. For instance, the *suyunju* told good news, and the *yar-yar* was sung at weddings, the *koshtau* was sung when an *alp* is going on a campaign, the *estirutu* was sung after an *alp*'s death, the *yogtau* was sung in burials. All together, told in a sequence, constitute the structure of the *danstan* or *jir*.

There have been different scholars interested in the study and compilation of *danstans*. The first book to be fully recognized was *Dede Korkut*, which had been put into paper at an unknown date but which had survived in oral form from the ninth to the

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<sup>16</sup> Shamanism refers to a kind of religious practice in which the person involved reaches a state of consciousness through which he is able to get in contact with spirits and interact with them. The person who goes through all the process receives the name of shaman. Native American culture also includes this figure, who becomes a relevant person within the tribe, being able to heal people, among other important tasks.



tenth century at least.<sup>17</sup> But there are many variations depending on the country, and it seems that one of the most popular storytelling traditions remained in China. There were two types of storytellers in this country, those considered “artists of the bazaars,” who belonged to the lowest social class and performed their tales in the streets and markets; and those who belonged to the highest rank and were narrators of history, tellers of love and terror stories, among others. Storytelling could also be classified in two forms, depending whether they included music (*pingtan*) or not (*tince*). Both were similar to speaking style, although with different cadence and with comments, poems, descriptions or anecdotes inserted in the middle. Besides, there is a variety of source materials for these tales, from religious to philosophical influences and even Confucian morality.<sup>18</sup> There are also different types of tales, for example those related to the creation of the world, like “The Origin of the World” or “The Goddess Nu Kua Creates Human Beings;” or to natural phenomena like “The Herd Boy and the Weaving Girl.” In general, one of the most popular Chinese creation myths refers to the universe as being a simple egg. Inside it, heavens and earth were mixed together and perfectly settled in harmony (the Ying and Yang) with Pangu. After eighteen thousand years, Pangu felt suffocated and broke the egg, forming heavens and earth. Pangu was considered a monster and the different parts that form the universe were created out of him — the wind, the sea, the flowers, or even the stars, the moon and the human beings.

One of the most popular tales in Chinese folklore was “The Monkey King,” whose “story is told in full literary form in *The Journey to the West* (Wong and Hines 20-1), or “The Moon Lady” and “The Queen Mother of the West” myths. As the myth says, the Monkey King was born out of earth and was known as the Stone Monkey. He joined other monkeys and although they all wanted to enter a cave to lead the heavens, only the stone monkey did it and he became the Monkey King. He started a journey afterwards in which he learnt the secrets of martial arts and immortality, becoming more and more miserable. He returned home to teach his friends all he had learnt but he encountered

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<sup>17</sup> *Dede Korkut* became one of the most popular epic stories told about *Oghuz Turks* or Turkmen. It is a dastan or legend and contains stories full of morals. There are several dates related to its publication and its origins.

<sup>18</sup> Confucius (551-479 b.c.) was a Chinese philosopher who developed this ethical and philosophical system. It basically consisted on the development of three virtues that human beings should have: *Ren* or the obligation of altruism and humaneness, *yi* or the dispositions to do good actions and *li* as series of norms that establish how a person must behave in a community.

multiple conflicts with the rest of monkeys. Those ultimately asked Buddha for help, who eventually encases him for five hundred years.<sup>19</sup> Moon Lady tells the story of Chang O. According to the myth, Chang O and her husband Yi were immortal but were banished to Earth. Then Queen Mother of the West gives him the elixir to share it with his wife, but she cannot wait and steals it from her husband. He has to chase her to the moon, where she is forced to live afterwards. According to the myth, one night, during the celebration of the Moon Festival in Chinese culture, the woman grants secret wishes to humans.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, Indian folk tales were part of Asian folklore and traditions. Most of them dealt with animals that were ranked according to their wisdom and plants which had distinctive characteristics. There are some classical collections that have remained up to the present, such as *The Panchatantra* basically didactic tales, *The Mahabharata* the longest of all poems and written texts based on oral stories; *The Ramayana*, one of the most recognized texts in India, and *The Jakkatas*, which told the birth stories related to Buddha, and how he became a major figure (Wong and Hines 6).

Many Asians migrated to the United States, and they, together with their descendants, were labeled Asian Americans or Orientals. Once they moved, and although they were voluntary emigrants and not slaves as African American people or and they had not been removed from their homes as Native Americans, many of their customs were lost on the way. Asian Americans were stigmatized as model minorities in the early 1960s and nowadays they have to combat the stereotype of being successful in America, among many other ones. Besides, there is a wave of anti-Asian sentiments that this image has engendered and there is also the classic mystique of the “exotic and inscrutable Oriental” (TuSmith 33). Despite this, contemporary Asian America works allude to the classics or the folklore they inherited from oral tradition and this is really

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<sup>19</sup> This character would become an important source of inspiration for Native American authors such as Gerald Vizenor, who created his own version in his work *Griever: A Native American Monkey King in China*.

<sup>20</sup> The Mid-Autumn Festival or Moon Festival is still the one of the most important festivals to Chinese people. Every year, when the festival comes, Chinese go home no matter where they live, for family meetings. They believe that full moon is a symbol of peace, prosperity and family reunion. When the moon is supposed to be at its brightest and fullest, on Mid-Autumn night, the festival takes place.

important in the development of their works, as they would include folklore and oral tradition on them. Although they were not slaves their integration within American society was not as easy as it seems and the maintenance of keeping their traditions alive helped them feel at home. Sometimes, they have even been accused of being too ethnic, as the anthology *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, rejected by editors because it was too ethnic oriented.<sup>21</sup> TuSmith, however, believes that been too ethnic is not something to be condemned by but to be celebrated, as she believes it means they are not sufficiently assimilated into European American culture and “Given the little known histories of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Asian Indian, and Southeast Asian populations in the US, writing from an ethnic perspective can only be a step forward – an educational process for both the writer and his or her audience” (33).

This does not mean that these contemporary authors do not pay attention to the developments of current society. On the contrary, they understand that folklore and traditions are portable, changing, and that some of them have been developed in the United States but keeping their essence, while others have been adapted to the circumstances of the mainstream requirements and remain adopted by this nation. Therefore, it could be stated that Asian American folklore includes the history of Asians in the United States and Asian folklife. It is “the totality of Asian material cultures, religious traditions, performances, celebration, social relations, and so on, used to produce individual and collective Asian American identities and communities” (Lee and Nadeau xxxviii). Consequently, Asian American culture is based on the oral traditions of stories told in family circles or about the family, which included romantic tales that drew the listener back to the homeland or even tales about the struggles they had to go through as they settled in a foreign land. It is a bridge between Asia and America because old people used tales to transmit cultural information, pride and ethnics to new generations of Asian Americans. They wanted them to learn how to resist vices and how to transform themselves into valuable members of a community and above all, into valuable human beings. These tales also inspire new groups of people to maintain their links to their countries and teach them to behave as if they were there. Besides “storytelling is not just an essential form of folklore, disseminating cultural knowledge

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<sup>21</sup> It was edited by Fran Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan among others in the 1970s and it meant the categorization of Asian American literature for the first time.

and social experience from generation to generation; it is also an important process of identity construction for such marginalized groups as Asian Americans” (Lee and Nadeau 303). Thanks to the recovery of traditional stories, contemporary Asian American writers are able to identify themselves and to reveal against the stereotypes that the United States has placed on them.

There are several ways in which Asian American writers want to show the relationship between Asia and America. There are texts which are based entirely on Asia, those which focus on the transition between Asia and America, literature about their lives in the United States, texts which refer to the return of the protagonists, in groups or as individuals that belong to different generations, to their native lands, and groups of texts which make no reference to Asian American experience at all. Folktales also deal with different topics such as religious practices, ethnical principles, folk beliefs, stock characters and “more prevailing concerns of the respective Asian traditions from which are drawn” (Green vii). Indeed, Thomas A. Green divides these folktales into four main sections: “Origins” which include tales about the creation of the world, humans and animals; “Heroes, Heroines, Tricksters, and Fools,” which refer to some character-types that appear in Asian American folktales; “Society and Conflict,” which include tales about social issues and the supernatural, which concentrates on “traditional tales of the dead, the magical and the monstrous” (viii). Many of these tales have survived in Asian American literature, and become also a part of American literature and culture, as many contemporary Asian American writers have become quite relevant in today’s North American literature. However, they have also included other important topics that help them adapt their writings to today’s society. For instance, they include topics related to the relationship between men and women, which may reveal great differences and contrasts when it is compared to the Euro American model and to what seems to be appropriate in actual society. Indeed, most Asian American women struggle against traditional patriarchal attitudes and the patriarchal constructions of kinship and gender. Women are usually considered subjects to their fathers, husband and sons, while boys mean economic and social improvement for the family. This is something contemporary Asian American writers such as Amy Tan or Maxine Hong Kingston, show in their works, and female writers above all, try to fight against. They also deal with mother-daughter relationship and with how American-born

daughters reconcile with their Asian mothers once they are told about their dramatic past. This reconciliation is not limited to the mother, but also implies reconciliation with their Asian origins, culture and community as they are also ultimately able to adapt them to their American lifestyle. Because of the language barriers that faced Asian American immigrants, the relationship between parents and children who were born as a second generation in American is not always a positive one. This second generation of Asian Americans usually reject their parents' social expectations and most contemporary authors depict parents who are representations of static societies and who are complex figures because they are not only individuals, but also an example of people who have broken away from their origins and moved to the United States where they do not even know the language. This is also why these authors include topics related to racism and the lack of visibility of Asian American people in the mainstream society. So, it seems that the need to find their own mythology and heritage, Asian American people in general and writers in particular had to adapt to several elements. First, they had to reject the dominant impositions of American culture and also those that were originally coming from Asia. Then they could remake them and adapt them, so that the result would be feeling their own identity, which incorporates both American and Asian elements. It could be stated that "Asian American folklore and folklife is the consequence of transplantation, accommodation, transformation and (re)invention of cultural traditions, material and ideological, of the Asian Americans subjects and communities in the United States" (Lee and Nadeau xxxix). Contemporary Asian American writers have tried to do it and some of them seem to have been quite successful, although it took them great efforts. Eulalia Piñero Gil summarizes this as follows,

The anxiety of recuperating a past, which is in most cases fragmentary, contradictory and mythologized, is a difficult process of exploration within the confusion of stereotypical images, ignorance and the ghettoization Asian American communities have endured. (60)

Amy Tan tries to challenge misconceptions and stereotypes usually related to Asian-Americans and she presents in her novels the typical conflicts of living in one society and being influenced by it while the expectations of another society and culture also oblige you to follow some rules and demands. In her famous novel *The Joy Luck Club*, she is able to deal with traditional oral storytelling but also with current topics such as

mother-daughters relationship or the constraints of Asian women in a society that is patriarchal and abusive. Traditionally Chinese women have been subordinated to male members of the family. During the imperial period and until the beginning of the twentieth century, the relationship between members of the same family followed Confucian teachings. These established the male patriarch as the only arbiter of the family unit and all family members were subordinate to him. These teachings also established that a husband could have concubines and women depended entirely on them. Only male sons were welcome at home because they meant economic and familiar prosperity, while daughters were seen as less of an asset because they would belong to another family in the future. This idea encouraged sexism and inequality that the Communist Revolution attempted to address. They attacked old ideas, habits customs and culture and tried to provide women with the same rights than men. However, when the Chinese Communist Party established its power, women's rights were forgotten and although they entered workforce, they were also obliged to have children and maintain traditions. They were even blamed when attacked or raped and with the policy of one-child-per couple, girls were abandoned, unregistered or aborted. More recently, because of the increasing unemployment rate, many families send their daughters to work abroad, as they are unable to maintain them. Nowadays, parents want their children, especially their daughters, to study at universities and work, and although they still depend on their families to marry, they wait longer to do it, but above all, they continue to be the vehicle to transmit Chinese culture and traditions to the following generations.

In *The Joy Luck Club* Tan depicts the conflicts between four Chinese women and their daughters and the difficulties surrounding dual cultural identities, which are even stronger when language barriers are also an impediment for understanding. In the novel daughters are ashamed of their mothers when they speak in English because it is really bad English, but also feel unable to understand them when they speak Mandarin because for them, their mothers speak nonsense. They speak two different languages not only literally, but also culturally. Besides, mothers in the novel seem to be silent both because they do not speak English but also because of the patriarchal and oppressive society in which they were born and grew up. They want their daughters to have a better life and pursue the American dream, but their expectations on them are so high that they

ultimately separate them. When June, one of the daughters, is asked to participate in the Joy Luck Club, once her mother has died, she rejects it and considers it a shameful Chinese custom. Besides, when she is asked to go to China and look for her half sisters to tell them about her mother's story, she feels unable to do it because she does not know anything about her mother. At this point, the other three mothers realize that their daughters are like June. They have failed when trying to pass their cultural and family legacy to them. They wanted their daughters to live American lifestyle in order to avoid the sexist Chinese culture, but at the same time they did not want them to forget Chinese customs because for them, anything that is Chinese is better. This creates a gap between mothers and daughters that is difficult to trespass. Reconciliation arrives when another daughter, Waverly, complains because her mother told her that she did not look Chinese, because she was all American inside. Then she realized that she had no identity on her own and when she ultimately tells her mother that she is marrying Rich, something she thought her mother would never accept and understand, she comprehended that she had misunderstood most things about her mother. At the end all the daughters learn that their mothers had acted attending to the social constraints in which they had lived and when they are able to understand the meaning of the stories their mothers told them, they realize about the wisdom and tradition they are transmitting. This vein Tan is mixing new and old topics, and potentiating the image of Chinese women as storytellers who transmit culture and knowledge to their daughters. What is more, she includes traditional Chinese myths such as that of the Moon Lady in the novel but deconstructs these myths in order for the reader to understand that they no longer transmit the same illusions than in the past. She remakes them and adapts them to the requirements of Asian American society, showing that societies, as traditions, must evolve and adapt to new circumstances and lifestyles.

Maxine Hong Kingston also reproduces these issues in her works. Indeed, she is one of the best known Asian American writers and her novel *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Childhood among Ghosts* won the National Book Critics Circle award in 1977. It tells the story of five women in five different chapters, integrating experiences and talk-stories which can be considered spoken stories combining Chinese history, myths and beliefs which her mother used to tell her. Kingston is able to transmit oral stories to readers who may not know anything about Chinese storytelling, but at the same time,

she is able to denounce with her novel certain aspects related to Chinese people in America and above all to the role of Chinese women in Chinese and American societies. This means that with her work she is able to adapt traditional oral tales and provide them with new meanings that help other readers understand and apply them to current circumstances.

In the first chapter, “No Name Woman,” Kingston refers to her own dead aunt, whose existence was ignored by her until she started to menstruate and her mother told her the story as a warning tale. Her aunt had been rejected by her family after having an illegal son and committed suicide by jumping into the family well with her son. As Kingston was not allowed to talk aloud about her, she decided to invent a story about the way she gave birth surrounded by pigs and about the identity of the father. She even imagines her aunt as a lonely ghost who wanders and begs for the presents she was not given when her baby was born. However, this story goes beyond this. If read from a Western perspective, feminists would validate the idea of Asian American women and their oppressed status. When Kingston wonders about the possible identity of the baby and the reasons why she became adulterous, she depicts a patriarchal society which tells women to obey men above anything else, and that is what in her opinion, her aunt did: obey a man who ordered her to have sex with him, as she had previously obeyed her husband or any other men, because “Women in the old China did not choose” (*The Woman Warrior* 2). Even more, she considers that the man who obliged her belonged to the same community in which she lived because of the close relationship between the members of this community. Indeed, she even thinks of the possibility that the same man started the raise against No Name Woman’s house, asserting this vein the hypocrisy of Chinese men and society. The oppression patriarchal communities exercise over women is something feminists and Ecofeminists have been complaining about and that will also be a topic of discussion for other ethnic minorities women writers such as Louise Erdrich and Leslie Marmon Silko. However, at the end of the chapter Kingston wants to provide a kind of optimism regarding this issue and imagines or wants to believe that her aunt was not obliged to have sexual encounters with that man but just wanted to have an affair, something that will give her some kind of liberty. She wants to believe that her aunt was more than just a victim and that her mother exaggerated some of the events in order to impress her and prevent her from doing the same.



In order to show the strength of Asian American women, Kingston imagines in first person that she is the woman warrior Fa Mu Lan in the second chapter, "White Tiger." Here she subverts the stereotypes in the first chapter and creates a girl who is powerful and able to save her country and family. She focuses on the ancient Chinese legend in order to let readers know that girls do not only grow up to be wives and mothers but they are also able to fight and help their communities.<sup>22</sup>

Kingston wants to embody this mythological character and tells the story of the girl who took her father's place in battle as if it were part of her own life. However, in the second part of the chapter she describes her life in America and how different it is from that in the legend and in China. Women are still treated as inferior beings and parents prefer to have boys rather than girls. She is invisible in the United States because she is Chinese, but at the same time she is invisible in her own community because she is a girl. So her condition as daughter of a Chinese immigrant and girl impose on her severe difficulties. Kingston struggles to overcome her alienation as a Chinese girl and as a girl alienated from her own Chinese culture and "In order to transform the non-heroic reality of her life, she becomes the woman warrior in her fantasy. Kingston's mythic journey is finally the affirmation of her identity as a Chinese Woman in a dual culture which continually negates it" (Donaldson 106). That is, she would like to be a strong individual in the face of misogynistic Chinese folk traditions, and her awakening comes when at the end of the chapter she learns the best way to fight all traditional beliefs is with her own words. In the novel she states "She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the woman warrior, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman" (24), which symbolizes her determination to fight stereotypes placed on her and other Chinese woman. Indeed, this "she" refers to her

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<sup>22</sup> Kingston's talk story about Fa Mu Lan derives from the classical folk story about Mu-lan, written in the fifth or sixth century by an unknown poet, however it differs from this ballad in certain aspects. For instance, Mu-lan fights in place of her father when he is drafted into the emperor's father, whereas Kingston details Fa Mu Lan's education as a woman warrior and her brother replaces her father. Kingston's heroine fights against the emperor while Mu-Lan fights for him. However, both return home after war and assume their female role within society. In the story Kingston tells, Fa Mu Lan follows a bird up to the mountains, where she is taken by a couple who teach her how to become a warrior. She spends most part of her training in the mountain of the white tiger, where she starves and has hallucinations. When she returns with the couple, they teach her how to fight and how her family is living without her. Her brother and her future husband have been arrested by the baron who controls their lands and lives and she decides to avenge them. When she is ready, she pretends to be a man and forming a group of warriors, they defeat the baron.

mother, Brave Orchid, the protagonist of the following chapter, "Shaman." Again, Kingston centers on family relations and describes her mother as relevant woman who became a doctor after losing two children in China and who turned into a well-known midwife. Although the chapter mixes the author's own imagination with the tales she has been told by her mother, it subverts the idea Western society has of women too. Chinese women appear as highly educated and more emancipated than even their Western counterparts.

The importance of storytelling and the transmission of knowledge from mother to daughter are also emphasized here, as Kingston explains that her mother used to tell her traditional stories. Indeed, readers are told that her mother becomes a shaman when she returns from school and can treat ghosts and to heal at the same time. Similarly, it is also explained that Brave Orchid used to tell her daughter that all Americans were ghosts and had to be feared and that she worked in the fields and in the laundry. This turns her mother and herself into tricksters too, or as TuSmith explains, Kingston has created an autobiography and is a creative artist who has used narrative ambiguity purposely to create a story and "in this case the ethnic woman writer assumes the role of a literary trickster" (47). Indeed, TuSmith considers that this ambiguity captures "her multivariate ethnic reality" and turns Kingston into a "literary trickster in the best American tradition" (51). Kingston's characters attempt to formulate Chinese American identity apart from the Orientalist stereotypes perpetuated in the mass media, as Tan did. Her characters turn to their families and ancestors for help with self-understanding. Thus, storytelling is also important in her work as she remembers Chinese American history in forms that foreground orality and does it by soliciting ancestral help, "by tapping into the resources of familial oral stories" (Adams 87). These oral stories and talk-stories combine autobiography and memoir, as well as history and mythology because the narrator in the novel emphasizes that she is unable to separate these genres. Indeed, "the multiple and at times contradictory stories she tells in her memoirs of a girlhood amongst ghosts are often read as hard Chinese history by American reviewers" (Adams 87).

Mother-daughter relationship is also important in the novel. Kingston tells about her own childhood at school and about her relationship with her mother from the mature point of view of distance at the end of the novel. As she was a child she had a quarrel

with her mother, who ignored her while she was trying to explain a list of things about her feelings. At the end of the chapter and the novel Kingston is able to understand her mother and her talk-tales and she is able to combine them to create new stories, like the poetess Ts'ai Yen, who brought back the Chinese hymn "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," which names the final chapter.<sup>23</sup>

It could be stated then, that Kingston's *Woman Warrior* exemplifies the struggle of women to survive and consolidate their value within a patriarchal society that disdains them. The novel can be read from an Ecofeminist point of view as Kingston contributes to the formation of a new Chinese American woman who was oppressed by patriarchal tradition but also because she focuses on the Chinese American image as "Others" and the unfair treatment Chinese Americans have received from mainstream society, above all because of sociopolitical factors.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston depicts the lives of different women, and almost all of them are described as voiceless in a society that marginalizes them and which follows Confucian principles regarding marriage and their role as objects that belong to their parents, their husbands and their sons. In all the sections there is always a feminine character who plays a feminine role, offering a model of feminine identity. They are represented, for instance, by No Name Woman, whose main punishment was the silence of her own family, who deliberately forget her and decide never to speak about her again; and by Moon Orchid, who goes to the United States to look for her husband after years alone in China, and whose main objective was claiming for her rights towards him, but remains silent and accepts her husband's disdain, turning into a crazy woman. Kingston presents women as victims who depend on men in a society that considers that it is better to raise geese than girls. They are not only oppressed by the mainstream society but also by their own patriarchal communities. Kingston castigates patriarchy presenting a hypocrite society that punishes her aunt's adultery but which remains silent when Moon Orchid discovers her husband has a new wife and rejects her. However, Kingston tries to rebel against Confucian doctrines and creates a new Chinese

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23 Kingston's poetry is discussed by Eulalia Piñero Gil. In *How To Be the Poet*, Kingston looks for a different autobiographical mode to explore her private and public life. As Piñero Gil states "it entails for Kingston the opportunity of expressing her creativity which encompasses the inclusion of her own artwork in her new books. Thus for the artist writing poetry entails a spontaneous and holistic self-expression that transforms the page into a sort of canvas" (qtd. in Ludwig et al 24).

American woman who demands equality and a voice. For instance, when she tells Fa-Mu-lan story, she creates a character who says “I am the female avenger” (*The Woman Warrior* 45), who continuously criticizes Chinese proverbs. She also gives voice to her mother, Brave Orchid, presented as an intelligent woman who became a prestigious doctor in China, although she had to completely change her life when she moved to the United States, becoming a laborer subordinated to her husband. However, she is also presented as a non-traditional woman, non-traditional wife and non-traditional mother. She passes on traditional culture but also wants her daughter not to be subordinated to anyone. Indeed, her behavior is quite contradictory: she tells her daughter not to tell No One’s story, although she did not follow that advise herself. She tells her daughter that women are wives and slaves, but also tells her the tale of woman warrior to encourage her to become different. This is the kind of women Ecofeminists want, strong and independent ones able to overcome patriarchal impositions. Indeed as Spretnak stated at the beginning of this doctoral dissertation, Ecofeminist do not only fight to defend nature and women in their most basic aspects but they support all women who fight to get equal pay, equal rights at work the distribution of childcare, and any other issue that stops the daily exploitation and suffering of women and this is what Kingston does in the novel.

Kingston also offers the Ecofeminist perspective of the “Others” in the novel. By “Others” she refers to all Chinese American people, excluded from American society and from their original communities. They are outsiders in both cultures, always permanent guests who must earn their living and work hard in the United States, but also outsiders to their Chinese civilization that considers them American. Kingston strongly criticizes the politics regarding Chinese American recognition as citizens in the United States and presents the so called “paper sons” phenomena. When the Chinese Exclusion Act was abolished in 1943, the children of Chinese people living in American were allowed to migrate to the country. However, most of them left their wives in China, so their children could not come to America. Therefore, the phenomena of pretending to be the sons of a Chinese in America emerged and they all had to be in silence because if they were discovered, they were sent back to China. In 1987, Marlon K. Hom translated and published *Songs of Gold Mountain: Cantonese Rhymes from San Francisco Chinatown*, which is a collection of Cantonese poems written by Chinese

immigrants affected by this exclusion act. According to Eulalia Piñero it is the first compilation of poetry to express the agony and despair Asian Americans suffered during their detention at the Angel Island Immigration in San Francisco Bay (1910-1940) and the first collection of published poems “that criticizes the American principles of justice and democracy” (58).

In the novel *Kingston* deals with this and states that all Chinese families had unspoken secrets. She writes: “The Chinese I know hide their names, sojourners take new names when their lives change and guard their real names with silence” (*The Woman Warrior* 18). Kingston presents a first generation of Chinese immigrants who are voiceless because of their inability to speak English, but also a second generation who are outsiders and do not find a place in American society. For them, educated in American school system, their ancestral land is too far away and they only know about it because their parents tell them. China is distant country, remote and full of mysteries and taboos Chinese American children do not understand. However, they are not assimilated into American culture either, as Kingston describes when dealing with her own childhood at school.<sup>24</sup>

Another perspective of Asian American culture in general and Chinese American in particular is offered by Frank Chin and his work *Year of the Dragon*, which tells the story of a Chinese American family who live in San Francisco’s Chinatown. The protagonist is Fred, who feels frustrated because of the permanent abuse he suffers from his father, Pa, an authoritarian patriarch. Fred had to give up his dreams of becoming a writer when his father became ill, and had to continue with the family business, becoming a tour guide. However, he is constantly mocked by his father because he had left school to help him. Besides, Fred hates the image white people have of Chinese people and feels unable to make them understand that there is a huge difference between

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<sup>24</sup> She has often referred to the first years at school as the “silent years” because during that period she found it difficult to speak up, probably because she could not speak English fluently and because she did not understand the American school system. Indeed, in a section of *Woman Warrior* she describes she often painted usual drawings and colored them in black, something that troubled her teachers and parents, as they believed she was a strange girl. However, they misunderstood what Kingston was actually trying to said, because for her, it was a black curtain that was about to open. She states: “Before I could read or write or even speak much, an idea came to be of black curtains that hang something wonderful – some amazing show about to open. All my life I’ve looked for those black curtains; I want to part them and see what is on the other side” (*Through the Black Curtain* 5).

Chinatown and China and that the residents of Chinatown are also American citizens. He is also angry against his brother Johnny, who instead of leaving Chinatown, decides to participate of the family business. The story gets its point during the celebration of Chinese New Year. Fred's sister comes back home with her white husband Ross. They have been promoting a cookbook, and Fred feels really upset because of that. Fred's biological mother also arrives from China, as Pa wanted her to be with him. This also creates a conflict with Pa's new wife Hyacinth. At the end, it becomes clear the Pa has been trying to separate his family into two, favoring the Chinese part.

The protagonist Fred feels the inability to be in the middle of two cultures. He feels the contradictions of the two cultures and backgrounds in which he finds himself. He rejects being considered both Chinese American and Chinese or as TuSmith says "Chin views his 'Chinaman' as a 'New Man-one who is neither Chinese nor a clone of white American' (3).<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Chin believed that history was a valiant part and vital part of the American West, but that Chinese American people had forgotten about it in their eagerness to be accepted and assimilated into the white majority. For him the cost of this acceptance was too strong, and especially for a Chinese male "who finds himself trapped by a stereotype supposedly lacking in assertiveness, creativity, and aggressiveness" (McDonald ix) and who is "passive, obedient, humble and effeminate" (McDonald ix). However, in *The Year of the Dragon*, Chin wants to present another image of the Chinaman. For him, they are masculine and heroic, although the pioneers had to deal with racism and rejections. Fred considers himself a Chinaman, a man who is not Chinese but who does not want to be categorized within the label Chinese American and the stereotypes this implies, although he does not always achieve his proposal, as he continues with the family business. In order to present him as a Chinaman, Chin uses vernacular language. A mixture of "obscenities, street slang, Cantonese-English bilingualism, black English, mindless/racist songs, and comic wordplay" that "catapults us into the blood and gut reality of one ethnic American household" (TuSmith 38). That is, the conflict in the family and the continuous problems among the characters is "rendered through a variety of Chinese American

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<sup>25</sup> "Chinaman" is the term Chin uses to distinguish himself and his characters from the assimilated Chinese Americans. It is also used in the title of another famous play by the writer *The Chickencoop Chinaman*.

vernacular speech pattern” (TuSmith 38).<sup>26</sup> In Fred’s case, he also uses first person pronouns to assert his American individualism and his individual rights (McDonald xviii). For TuSmith, Fred is a community-based character who is defined by the community and by Chinatown, because although he is not afraid of the world beyond Chinatown, ultimately the communal values oblige him to forget his dreams of becoming a writer and continue with the family business (43).

This mixture of linguistic elements crashes with the American dialect used by Ross and his constant refinement. Indeed, the author included this character within the play in order to show the wrong idea that Americans have of Chinese American families, as he does not seem to understand the continuous conflicts they are living. He makes comment referring to the superiority of Chinese culture, showing the Confucian stereotype and the miscommunication between European American and ethnic American cultures.

In general, some other authors, like Elaine Kim, consider that Chin’s protagonists are alienated and incomplete and that Chin has not achieved his goal of creating a new Asian American male identity and language although TuSmith disagrees with that (qtd. in TuSmith 44). For her, Chin is able to capture the tensions and complexities of the ethnic reality thanks to his Chinaman’s word strategy: “The protagonist, Fred, is a powerful depiction of an Asian-American man’s experience in contemporary American society. Within the contours of the play, Chin has accomplished his goal” (TuSmith 46). She considers that it is a mistake to associate alienated with incomplete and “by looking for protagonists who can overcome the devastating effects of racism on Chinese American men, Kim is establishing standards that are unrealistic and inappropriate for literary works” (TuSmith 46) and concludes saying “Asian American literature should not be required to have integrated, optimistic protagonists to be considered seriously” (TuSmith 46). In relation to language, TuSmith also believes that Chin has been able to use it correctly in order to show a worldview and that his mixture of Chinese, Chinese American and American speech patterns in dialogue suggests the “potential richness of ethnic literature” (46).

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<sup>26</sup> An instance: “Lemme take your picture! You fucking bok gwai low got a face carved out of rotten potato cured in dogshit, runover with a towtruck driven by Hellen Keller in a puke fit on pills...” (141).

In general the three authors are able to reflect a heritage they do not want to lose but that they also have to adapt to current necessities and readers, something similar to what authors belonging to other ethnic minorities in the United States do. All together they confirm an important part of American culture that cannot and must not be ignored by mainstream critics and readers. Indeed, one should not forget that these traditional oral tales and stories remain quintessential in American culture in popular video games that transmit Asian folklore to Asian American and American youngsters, to provide just an example.



## **1.2. EUROPEAN STORYTELLING AND EURO-AMERICAN FOLKLORE AND CULTURE**

Storytelling was a source of knowledge in many European countries. From the early troubadours who sang love songs to the most modern storytellers, there have been multiple ways of trespassing cultural heritage all over Europe. Many European countries like Ireland have had a long oral tradition, thanks to their Celtic heritage, while others, like Denmark and Germany can simply show the amazing talents of such important storytellers as Hans Christian Andersen or the Grimm Brothers. They all showed quite varied types of storytelling traditions that deserve attention and research, as they would also later influence North American literary tradition in many ways.

### **1.2.1. Greek tradition**

One of the oldest mythologies and probably one of the sources of contemporary folktales is that of Greek origin. The people in ancient Greece shared stories about gods, goddesses and heroes they believed in. These stories were used to explain natural phenomena that they could not explain scientifically, and were spread orally from generation to generation. They have been kept alive up to this point because we have inherited them through literature and other arts. Indeed, the term myth comes from Greek and it can be considered “a tale that is indicted by the etymology of the word: for the early Greeks, a *mythos* was a word or story, synonymous with *logos* and *epos*; a *mythologos* was a “storyteller” (Graf 1).

According to Greek mythology, the first being in the Universe was Chaos, a mass of matter. Then Gaia (the earth) and Erebus (a realm below earth) appear. The union between Night and Erebus created Day and Aether (air). Then Gaia gives birth to Uranus (heaven) and generates mountains, hills and the sea. However, the union of these elements also created Monsters like the Cyclops and Titans like Cronus. Cronus becomes the most powerful Titan and as he knows that one of his children would destroy him, so he eats all of them from his wife’s womb. However, she conceives Zeus, who defeats his father and forces him to vomit all his children. Zeus and his

brothers challenge the Titans and they start to govern the universe and heavens. Prometheus, one of the Titans' sons but allied to Zeus, is in charge of creating humankind and the beasts in the earth, but he also gives them the fire by approaching a torch to the sun and then to earth. Zeus becomes angry with him and condemns him to be continuously devoured by an eagle. To punish mankind for the fire, Zeus orders the creation of the first woman, Pandora. She is given a box full of evil and suffering which men should not open. Pandora opens it and evil escapes into world. It could be said that this is a myth about the first woman in the world who is bestowed with the honour of being a gift provider.

These myths and stories would be similar to those heard in other civilizations, such as the Indians, Egyptians or Africans, although with different names. Moreover, Greek mythology is full of gods and goddesses that perform different roles within the Olympus and that relate in several ways to the humans. This is what Fritz Graf states "a myth makes a valid statement about the origins of the world, of society and of its institutions, about the gods and their relationships with mortals, in short, about everything on which human existence depends" (5). Their achievements and stories were told among humans and transmitted to them through oral performances. They were used to help and understand supernatural events that could not be explained in a logical way at that time. The stories remained most unwritten and were passed to other generations. They were transmitted orally by travelling poets who could sing thousands of lines and stories or who improvised on stories that already existed. However, most people recognize Greek tales because they were written down afterwards in poems such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Nevertheless, it is important to notice that much folktale material presented in isolated chapters or episodes have their source in mythological cycles found in Greek literature.

Odysseus is a typical tale character and his adventures among the sirens...in the land of lotos-eaters, or in the land of the Cyclops ... are identifiable in many oral traditions, Greek and otherwise. The Homeric epics, Aesop's fables, dramatic poetry, Herodotus' History, Hesiod's Theogony, and later works ... provide folktale motifs in abundance. (Haase 422-3)

It is precisely Homer one of the most famous collectors of stories in Ancient Greece. He collected the oral stories told about King Odysseus and his brave men by plenty of

storytellers who also travelled overseas. Homer put together all these stories and wrote them down in a collection that he called *The Odyssey* and which narrated the story of this hero. He and his men returned back home to Ithaca after winning the Battle of Troy. Although it would have taken them a month to be back at home, Odysseus had to deal with multiple difficulties, and he was travelling for nearly ten years. During all this time, he had to fight terrible events, most of them including monsters like the Cyclops, so important in Greek mythology, or the events with the Sirens.

Another important part of Greek mythology which has developed up to the present and which has remained in literature has to do with the role of women, and that of Graces and Fates. The formers were known as the goddesses of beautiful and graceful behaviors. There are different versions of their origin, but it seems they came from the union between Zeus and Eurynome, one of the Oceanids (the offspring of the Titans and Thetys). Other versions state that they were born from the union between sun God Helio and Aegle (Caviness 582). The Greeks honored the Graces in social activities like banquets and dancing events and they appear in different myths, above all those which deal with the personification of charm and favor. The Graces were similar to the Fates too, although they “determined the course of human lives” (Caviness 582). They could assign evil or good to men or decide how long a person can live. Both Graces and Fates “watched over the events of gods and mortals but were remote from them” (Caviness 582). These female figures would be quite similar to those appearing in Native American literature, for instance. Indeed, the role of goddesses would be relevant in works of authors such as Leslie Marmon Silko, and somehow they looked like those of Greek origin.

Something similar happens with male characters. For some scholars, trickster tales are closely related to Ancient Greece too, and present Hermes as an example of trickster figure in Ancient Greek mythology, providing him with the features that characterize this Native American character. William Doty wrote in the article “A Lifetime of Trouble-Making: Hermes as a Trickster,” that this character presents six trickster traits: he is marginal, erotic, creative, comic and has something to do with thievery and hermeneutics (46). He is the connection between the living and the dead and while doing so, he makes it playful. Besides, it is Hermes who steals the cattle from Apollo and retrieves Demeter’s daughter from the underworld. He could be considered a

transgressor but it is important to point out that he steals for the sake of a good cause, so that a mother and a daughter could be together. “The act of stealing could be interpreted as the making of an ethical connection between the daughter and the mother. That is to say, Hermes steals to heal” (Liang 129). This is what trickster figures do in Native American folklore and mythology too.

All these myths reflect a patriarchal society in which women are defined in relation to men and where men are all heroes and warriors. Indeed, it could even be stated that a myth like Pandora’s, which is supposed to be a myth about women’s gift labor, turns into a narrative of male superiority about a woman who is to blame for all the trouble in the world. Or even, more, that she was created as a curse and revenge for Prometheus’ theft, so that women appear as just exchanges or objects that men use depending on their interest. Mythology is a powerful tool and teaching children through patriarchal myths can be considered one of the reasons why women have usually been limited in power, authority or why are usually associated with fewer positive features. However, Ecofeminism seems to challenge classical theology and religions shaped by the world view of patriarchy, including the Greek one. According to Rosemary Radford Ruether, there are two levels on which this relation between sexism and ecological exploitation can be made: “on the cultural-symbolic level and on the socio-economic level,” (22) and for her the first is an ideological superstructure that reflects and ratifies the second. She states that as this system of domination is shaped socially, “ideological tools were constructed to ratify it as a reflection of the ‘nature of things’ and the ‘will of God/the gods.’ Law codes were developed to define these relations of power of dominant men over women, slaves, animals and land as property” (23). She provides as one of the examples Greek creation stories, which were constructed to ratify this design of society.

In ...the Greek creation stories this primal battle against the mother that suggested an earlier alternative world is concealed. These stories begin with the presupposition of patriarchal dualism as the foundational nature of things. For the Greek philosophical story, told by Plato, the primal dualism of mind divided from matter was the first state of things. (Ruether 23)

Plato considered that the soul controls the passions that arise from the body and cultivates the intellect too. Similarly, Ruether considers “Christianity imaged the soul in relation to the body as male controlling power over female-identified body and passions

that are to be controlled” (24). Ecofeminism challenges this conception and Platonic idea of soul and body, considering that the dualism soul/body must be rejected as well as the assumptions of the “priority and controlling role of male-identified mind over female-identified body” (Ruether 28). Ecofeminists consider that humans are latecomers to the planet and therefore we are not created to dominate and rule the earth. Similarly, women should not be controlled by patriarchal systems either, challenging traditional structures as the Greek one.

Therefore, it could be stated that Native American, African, Asian and European cultures are more closely related than what we should expect just at first sight and as the following chapters will also try to define.

### **1.2.2. Irish tradition**

Another important storytelling tradition in Europe is that related to Celtic people, and which has remained in Irish literature and folklore. Storytelling sessions were an important part of Irish life, and received the name of *celidh* or *ceili*. The “event ... constitutes an evening’s entertainment” (Crusted 218). It seemed that it began when a group of visitors sat together around a peat fire and talked and listened to the rest about topics related to characters in the town, episodes about local history or interesting topics. Glynn Crusted says “among the visitors at such events was the last *shanachie* of the district, the last of a long tradition of professional story tellers and local historians” (218). The storytelling sessions with this professional storyteller were more formal, with the appropriate timing, gestures and stresses as well as the most appropriate setting, which was just a cabin lighted with a candle or with peat (Crusted 218). Indeed, it was a really honored profession in Irish history with a tale on its own. It seems that the *seanachie* or storyteller worked for the King of Ireland because he went to him to tell him stories that would help the King forget his troubles. The King would keep him alive as long as he was entertained.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See “A Story to Tell: The Culture of Storytelling and Folklore in Ireland” Deidre Sheridan Englehart.

Deirdre Sheridan Englehart makes a revision of Irish folklore and storytelling tradition in the essay “A Story to Tell: The Culture of Storytelling and Folklore in Ireland” (2011) and how to use it to teach children. She revises the history of Irish folklore and states that medieval folk literature was very rich in Ireland. Everything was transmitted orally until the seventh century, when Christian monks began to record the oral tradition and grouped in literary cycles. Those cycles received different names like the “Mythological Cycle,” which includes stories about a mythological race called the Tuatha de Danann.<sup>28</sup> These stories were about old pagan gods, their relations with humans and the opposition between evil and good. A second cycle was called the Heroic Cycle or Red Branch Cycle and compiles the stories about the Milesians, relatives of present day Irish people, mainly history-based tales.<sup>29</sup> A third cycle was named the Fenian Cycle and told tales about the Menian army and Finn Maccumhail, a folk hero in Ireland’s history.<sup>30</sup> Finally, the Cycle of Kings involves a collection of tales about Irish Kings from the ninth to the twelfth century.

Englehart also refers to the multiple elements which stand out, primarily because they have remained up to the present and appear in many sectors of our current literature. She refers to famous tales such as “Fate of the Children of Lir,” characters of the Leprechauns, Fairies and Pookas, the multiple versions of Cinderella (which even include a male protagonist in some Irish versions), ghosts and giants. “Fate of the Children of Lir” belongs to the series of *Three Sorrows of Storytelling* and dates back to the Mythological Cycle. It tells the story of a happy king who lives with his wife and four children until the woman dies and he remarries another lady, who turns out to be a terrible woman. Jealous of her husband’s relation with his children, she wants to kill them, although eventually she turns them into swans and sent them to live in far places at different stages of the year. There are multiple endings for this tale which has turned so important and famous in today’s literature.

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<sup>28</sup> This is a mythological race in Irish folklore and literature which derived from the pre-Christian gods. Although the stories were written down when the country was already Christian, many of them have survived and represented these people as mortal heroes, queens and kings.

<sup>29</sup> Milesians are people descendant from Mil Espaine, that is, the people who invaded Ireland coming from Spain and were directed by this King with the same name.

<sup>30</sup> Finn Maccumhail is a legendary figure in Irish mythology, a hunter and a warrior. He also appears in Scottish mythology and the Isle of Man. He acted with a group of independent warriors, landless men who received the name of *fianna*.

The Leprechauns were solitary fairies who made shoes for fairies, becoming rich and supposedly hiding their treasures inside trees. They had different physical appearances depending on the area, but became very popular in their folklore, the same as the *pooka* or animal spirits that turned out an important element of Irish culture. It also took several forms although primarily that of a goat. They became some of the most feared fairies in the world because they only went out at dark and because of the terrible shapes they had.

All these figures appear in current American literature, as heritage of the Irish people who migrated to the United States. Indeed, Irish authors of widely recognized success in America like James Joyce, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Beckett, W.B. Yeats or Seamus Heaney, to name just a few, deeply influenced contemporary authors and were also, at the same time, deeply influenced by Irish oral tradition.

### **1.2.3. German tradition**

Germany is probably the source of the fairy tales; it is the land of important customs and traditions that have passed all around the world thanks to the works of authors such as the Grimm brothers. Many of their folk and fairy tales have become widely known in the rest of the world and imitated by many authors.

The traditional German oral story received the name of *Märchen*, the diminutive form of *Mar*, which means story or tale. The word *märchen* is usually translated as “fairy tales” although many times it does not include actual fairies. They are divided into two categories, the *Volksmärchen* or folktales, which derive from popular oral traditions and which always include the same type of structural features: a simple plot with mythic or moral relevance, archetypal characters and a time and setting which are not specified. They were successfully collected by the Grimm Brothers, who made them worldly recognized and appreciated; and a second category, that of *Kunstmärchen* or “art tales”, which were *märchen* invented or changed by authors such as Goethe or Hoffmann. The second element of German folklore imported to the rest of the world is that of *Sagen*, or legends about supernatural events and characters in local areas.

In the introduction to *German Literary Fairy Tales*, Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, Clemens Brentano, Franz Kafka and Others, Gordon Birrel says that some decades ago the fairy tales were neglected in Germany both by folklorists and parents. The former believed that fairy tales were just “a late and degenerate form of myth” (xiii), and parents decided to abandon them due to their subjects, usually related to violence and terror. It was not until the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, when German Romanticism was at its peak, that “the folk fairy tale was first acknowledged as oral literature of the highest order” (xiii). The folk fairy tale was then recovered from chimney corners and nurseries and became widely recognized in the country. According to Birrel, “the Romantics understood that the folk fairy tales does make a coherent statement about the nature of things, they were the first to perceive that the images and situations of oral literature carry an archetypal significance” (xiv). He also states that once these oral folktales were adapted into a literary form, they adopted two categories too. The first group is derived from the fairy tales that the Grimm Brothers wrote down, “the tales of those young heroes and heroines who set to make out their fortune, aided by magical assistants and challenged by equally magical opponents, none of whom arouses even the slightest trace of supernatural dread or curiosity” (xvi). The second group is based on the kind of folklore known as *Sagen* in German, “local legends of the supernatural” (xvii). These narratives are about terror, fascination or delight that human beings feel towards other beings who are not supposed to exist in an ordinary universe, like “demonic temptresses, vengeful ogres or helpful elves” (xvii).

Probably, the most influential figures of German origin in American literature were the Grimm Brothers. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were the first to put into written form the folktales they had heard all their lives around them. Completely conscious of the need of keeping these traditions and stories alive, they started to collect them and write them down, until they finally published *Children's and Household Tales*, currently known as *Grimm's Fairy Tales* in 1812. These tales were not intended to be for children, at first, but just the compilation of those oral stories that had survived generation after generation in oral form and that had filled the culture of their country. The different editions of the book continued adding more tales to the original ones, until a total of two hundred and eleven tales in the last one, including so well-known ones as



*Cinderella, The Frog Prince, Hansel and Gretel, Rapunzel, Snow White or Rumpelstiltskin.* They have been exported all over the world, including American literature and cinema. Although sometimes they have been considered children literature, fairy tales are present in the culture of American and are used for multiple purposes, from entertainment to education. At first, in the nineteenth century, fairy tales adapted to American literature included only versions that emphasized morality and they were adapted to the American setting and circumstances. However, it is in the twentieth century when the fairy tale becomes an important part of their literature and culture, and even more after its adaptation into films. Indeed, films seem to be the most powerful means to show fairy tales and the Disney factory the most prolific one. They used sources such as Charles Perrault or Hans Christian Andersen and avoided Grimms' tale, probably because not all of them had happy endings, as they wanted, or because indeed, the tales were not the most appropriate ones for children, as they sometimes include violence and prejudice.<sup>31</sup> It is not until recently that new directors and writers have started to make use of these tales and they have done it in order to break the Disney monopoly of traditional European fairy tales. They have started to draw on Grimms' texts and they have included storytelling to encourage a more interactive response on the part of the audience. Besides, they have Americanized the fairy tales using American actors widely known and adapting the versions to the setting and characteristics of American history. In general, on the one hand, the fairy tale continues to provide a considerable amount of characters and plots and a short cut to shared cultural knowledge and values. On the other hand, the revision of fairy tales keeps ongoing and is still unpredictable, whether it is made by individuals or by ideologies and consequently the influence of fairy tales on twentieth century North American literature for adults is considerable and diversified, ranging from the use of fairy tales as structure for novels such as William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and to

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<sup>31</sup> Sometimes Disney has altered the endings of original tales in order to make sure children do not go back home horrified. For instance, in the original tale, Cinderella's father is alive and she cries and grieves for her mother. She goes three times a day to visit her mother's grave, while in the other version her main objective is going to the ball. Besides, in the version provided by Disney, the stepsisters are ugly and terrible, while in Grimms' versions, they are described as delicate and beautiful. At the end of the tale, however, they are terribly punished in Grimms' version. At Cinderella's and the Prince's wedding, and when the sisters are going to enter the church, a bird catches one eye from each of them. When they get out of the church, the bird pecks out the other eye. This is their punishment for being so cruel. Similarly, in the original version of *Snow White* penned by the Grimm brothers, the wicked queen is punished for trying to kill Snow White. She has to dance wearing a pair of red-hot iron shoes until she ultimately dies.

writers occasionally experimenting with the genre, as E.E. Cummings did with his short stories written for his young daughter and entitled *Fairy Tales*.<sup>32</sup>

#### **1.2.4. Icelandic sagas and Norse/ Scandinavian Mythology.**

Apart from Greek, Irish or German oral traditions, Europe is full of other important ones, like the Icelandic sagas or Norse/Scandinavian mythology.

Norse or Scandinavian mythology and tales have somehow participated in the construction of American literature and culture. They came from Norse paganism and were originally transmitted in the form of odes, sagas and poetic epics and mainly through oral tales. Later on they would be recorded in some medieval texts and above all on two works called the *Eddas* in the eleventh century.<sup>33</sup> All the tales, stories and legends can be put together to create a cycle which starts with the creation of the cosmos and finishes with its fall, called Ragnarök. They believed that the cosmos was divided into nine realms and they were all linked by an enormous tree. The main realms were the realms of gods, the realm of mortals and the underworld. The realm of gods was divided also into two, as there were two main types of Gods, Aesir gods, who were the source of war, power and death, and the gods of war and sky; and Vanir gods, responsible for fertility. They used to be in constant war until they realized that none could ever win and decided to join their forces against the supernatural beings that also habited the cosmos, especially the Giants. The main Aesir god was Odin, the ruler and the god of battle, wisdom and poetry. His son Thor was considered the second most important god in Norse mythology. He had a hammer called Mjölner and was considered the god of thunder and warriors. Loki was the trickster god and was Odin's brother. He's beautiful and clever and a shape shifter too. Odin's wife and patron of marriage, children and household was Frigg. Njord was a Vanir god but went to live with Aesir gods to show that their relationship was true. He had twins Freyr and Freya,

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<sup>32</sup> These are some stories Cumming told to his daughter Nancy when she was a very little girl. They were published after his death in 1965 and included "The Old Man who said 'Why'," "The Elephant and the Butterfly," "The House that Ate Mosquito Pie," and "The Little Girl Named I."

<sup>33</sup> The *Prose Edda*, or simply the "Edda," is a treatise on Norse Poetics and it was written by Snorri Sturluson in the thirteenth century.

who represented love, sexuality and fertility. The giants wanted to capture Freya and because of that they have a continuous strife with gods.

Among the supernatural beings, the most important ones were elves, related to human beings; dwarfs, who were highly skilled able to make great treasures, and giants, associated to ice, snow and cold. Indeed, according to their mythology, the Norse creation story is closely related to these creatures. It seems that it all began in an empty space between heat and ice where Frost formed and became the giant Ymir. Then a cosmic cow appeared and revealed a man with three grandsons, one of them Odin. He killed Ymir with his two brothers and formed the earth from his body, the sea from his blood and the sky from his skull. So Ymir was the first human being and the world was created out from him.

Apart from the divine and mythological creatures, there were also many stories related to human heroes and kings, written most of the time in sagas. The sagas are prose histories that describe events that took place amongst the Norse and Celtic inhabitants of Iceland during the Icelandic Commonwealth in the tenth and eleventh centuries. However, they were written down in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It could be considered that they originated in the oral tradition of storytelling and although the authors are mostly unknown, they are quite well-known and appreciated among Icelandic people, especially because of their style and storytelling. The sagas usually tell the adventures of a hero or a family and include history and tales which have become the source of inspiration of more contemporary English authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien and his work *The Lord of the Rings*. In general, Norse gods, giants and heroes have appeared in multiple contemporary works, ranging from music to literary *manga* or television series and films.

### 1.3. CHICANO LITERATURE AND STORYTELLING

There are different ways of addressing Chicano/a people and literature, which Rodolfo Acuña includes in *Occupied America* (1988). The word Chicano, according to Acuña, refers to the working-class Mexicans and it was used by themselves as well as by the middle class against them until the radical movements of the 1960s, when the term became politicized to reflect a new consciousness and group solidarity (TuSmith 137). The label Hispanic was used by the government of the United States in the early 1970s to refer to Chicanos and Latin Americans, although for Acuña this is a misnomer as Mexicans are not Spanish (TuSmith 137).

Before writing appeared in English in the United States of America, Spanish explorers and missionaries were already recording their own tales. One of the most famous ones is *La Relación*, by Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, published in 1542, which depicts the adventures of this explorer after surviving a shipwreck off the Texan coast, and the eight years he spent traveling with other three explorers in search of the Christian settlements in the American Southwest. He lived such astounding events that when he ultimately encounters other Spaniards, his physical and psychological transformation was such that he was not recognized or believed. As Olmos points out, “Thus he is claimed today as a precursor and symbol of the cultural adaptation and transformation of Chicano culture that has also distinguished itself from Mexican and U.S. Anglo society” (14). Recent studies of American literature have begun to recognize the importance of the writings in Spanish of such early Hispanic figures, as well as the oral tradition of tales, songs, poetry and myths as a component of the literary tradition of the United States. During the mid-nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, they had to bear the continuous pressures of Anglo culture with Spanish-speaking communities in multiple local and regional publications that are being celebrated and recovered and re-evaluated at present.

In general, it could be stated that there was a huge change in Chicano/a literature after the 1960s. Indeed, the beginning of the twentieth century could be considered a period of ethnic consolidation for all Spanish groups in the United States, and the results of these efforts would ripen in the 1960s, when the struggles of Latino people became widely known and part of the national focus as they joined with other ethnic minorities,

including African Americans and Native Americans, to demand their voices to be heard. Previous to this decade, Mexican American literature relied on local audiences and performances, due to the socioeconomic and cultural conditions prevalent in the Southwest and California. Hispanic culture had survived thanks to oral transmissions from generation to generation and later on, thanks to the printing of books and periodicals. Most authors desired to safeguard traditions and conceived their activities in terms of oral performances to their audience, via community celebrations and other social occasions. However, since the second half of the nineteenth century, intellectuals had felt the need of addressing other type of audiences beyond their ethnic group, using references to well-known Western literary tradition. The problem was that the institutions and channels which disseminated and preserved the Mexican texts did not exist before the 1970s, unlike the oral cultural forms that circulated freely among individuals and groups. The Chicano/a Movement, which had started to function in the 1960s and which was a manifestation of civil right movements that united Mexican Americans from all over the country, was also effective in closing the gap between the world of printed literature and that of orality. Many of the texts of this era rely on formulas and rhythms of the oral tradition. Themes and language address every day concerns and speech patterns of Chicanos/as because they wanted to tell a story or a song as people would do.

According to Martin-Rodriguez in *Life in Search of Readers: Reading (in) Chicano/a Literature* (2003), with the help of journals like *Quinto Sol*, they preserved endangered or vanishing oral culture for future generations. Indeed, many of the literature of this period are characterized by fragmentarism, juxtaposition of apparently unrelated episodes and open endings (21-2). This is not because oral narratives rely more on an associative mode of organizing facts, but it is also due to a certain anxiety on these writers' part in imagining their readers and all the strategies they can use to communicate with them. Because the culture they have known has been mainly of oral transmission, their most important aim was to construct a mental image of their audience as readers.

Olmos refers to the literature that emerged from Chicano barrios or urban neighborhoods at that time, and considers it played an important role in the affirmation and articulation of values in direct contrast and opposition to US Anglo Culture. For

her, the type of narratives mostly dealt with, like autobiographical narratives, memoirs, coming-of-age stories and novels, counterbalanced mainstream images of youth and family life. The topics authors wrote about were usually “becoming “Americanized” versus loyalty to one’s ethnic group, ... dislocation and migration, the hardships of barrio life and the struggle for personal and communal identity” (15). She also considers that Chicano authors constructed new myths drawing on centuries-old traditions, in order to counter those of the larger society. She refers to “the promotion of the mythological Aztlan, the legendary ancestral home of the Aztecs in the U.S. Southwest, which became a symbol of Chicano cultural origins, unity and self-determination” (15). However, they have also referred to old stories, usually told orally, and include them in their novels. That is the case of *La Llorona*.<sup>34</sup> This figure would appear in different novels such as those by Rudolfo Anaya.

Contemporary Chicano authors are also worried because of the injustices suffered by Hispanic people within the United States and with topics such as immigration and deculturation. Families leave rural homes to move to urban in the United States and work itinerantly from farms to farms throughout the Western side of the United States. This means that new generations learn new ways while old people long for what they have left behind and that the working and life conditions of workers in farms are tremendously hard. Chicano female writers also deal with the oppression of Chicano women not only because of their race but also because of their gender, even within their own community. Writing becomes an essential factor for the survival of traditions and also to redefine it and adapt it to new conditions in the new country and above all to let readers know about the situation of Chicano people in the United States in general, and of Chicano women in particular.

It is also important to refer to the language Chicano/a writers used at that time. Most of them used standard English, although some others used Spanish or a combination of

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<sup>34</sup> *La Llorona* is an important part of Mexican storytelling tradition on both sides of the United States and Mexican borders. It is also known as the weeping or waiting woman “she is a ghost said to haunt the river banks and lake shores” (Perez xiv). She is a ghost who was supposed to have murdered her own children in an act of revenge and grief, and was condemned to wander the earth in search of her children, becoming very similar to other tales from other mythologies, such as “Fate of the Children of Lir,” an Irish one. According to Domino Perez, “*La Llorona* traditionally serves as a cultural allegory, instructing people how to live and act within established social mores. At times, she is simply a spooky bedtime story” (Pérez ix).

both of them, “Referred to linguistically as code-switching (or deprecatingly as Spanglish (Olmos 16), so that the combination of the two languages reflects the spoken idiom of millions of Chicanos. For Olmos “the linguistic variation, however, does more than simply reproduce Chicano linguistic modes, in the hands of a skilled author it can become a highly creative technique, revealing multiple levels of meaning and creating new expressive forms” (16).

Some contemporary Chicano authors have focused on the importance of storytelling and worked with oral formulas they have included within their novels, but without forgetting social and political petitions for Chicano people, that is, without ignoring that their works are useful to let people know about their situation. One of the most famous writers is Tomas Rivera, and his novel *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, or *Y no se lo Tragó la Tierra*, exemplifies this. Contemporary Chicano writers wanted to create archetypes of cultural survival that fight despite the pressures of mainstream society. Among these archetypes, the ‘*campesino*’ figure stands out. It represents the exploited labor force used by American society to maintain a high standard of life but exploiting underpaid worker, who no matter how prepared could be, were always considered ignorant and ready to accept the worst conditions because they were trapped in their own stereotypes and had no access to education or training. This archetype is clearly represented in Rivera’s novel. Indeed, it is considered a landmark of Chicano literature and tells the story of a community of workers who migrated to the United States in the 1940s and 1950s to work in different farms, as Rivera’s family did for years. They had to face the threats of farmers who made them work even harder. The novel portrays the harsh conditions of migrant life and the migrants’ hope to find a settled life and work so that they and their children can access to better conditions, education and fight against racial oppressions. Rivera creates “a memorial to and partial reconstruction of the forgotten history of a people’s oppression and struggles” (Saldivar 77) and educates others about the circumstances they face so that they will not happen again.<sup>35</sup>

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35 Antonia Sagredo analyses the crisis in American agriculture and the rural emigration to the cities and metropolitan areas, as well as the situation of the farmers and the existence of two new groups of people, the “homeless” and the “jobless” in big cities, and the New Deal legislation in “Crisis Agraria y Exodo Rural en Estados Unidos en el Primer Tercio del Siglo XX y la Legislación Reformista de New Deal” (2001).

This novel is made by a collection of short stories, vignettes, internal monologues and conversations and they are tied together by an unnamed narrator, a boy who goes through different stages; from poverty, to illness, to confusion about his identity and history. All the stories are subjective and involve characters that change continuously with no chronologic references, so it is difficult to determine whether it is a novel or a collection of stories. Thanks to the presence of the nameless boy, who remembers all the stories, it is accepted as a novel. According to Martin-Rodriguez, the characters are nameless and their utterances are anonymous “as if to accentuate the possibility of their being anyone and anyone’s” (23), and because their lives are more identifiable in terms of their belonging to a community than in terms of their individual lives. The narrator is born in the middle of poverty, absence and loss and within the Mexican American struggle for political and social justice. He represents the rest of characters too as he fights to discover his identity and that of his community too. He exposes the trouble Chicano children face at schools and the way they are treated by white people.

It’s always the same in these schools in the north. Everybody just stares at you up and down. And then, they make fun of you and the teacher with her popsicle stick, poking at your head for lice. It’s embarrassing. And then when they turn up their noses. It makes you angry. (...*And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* 70)

Education is, indeed, one of the main reasons for Americanization and deculturation. Children are told to abandon primitive conditions that held them back from success in America so that they can be adopted into mainstream society. If they do it, they will have no options because they will become outsiders in the two worlds. Besides, Chicano children like the nameless boy in the novel, face continuous problems because of racism and imposed alienation. The narrator explains that he got into a fight because the other children pressed him and the teacher just tells “The Mexican kid got into a fight and beat up some of our boys” (...*And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* 72). With this, they are already discriminating the Chicano boy and establishing the Otherness he complains about. He is not considered one student more in the school, but an outsider who beats white children. He will never belong to this society that American schools want to teach them and that they idealize. It does not exist for boys like him, or for other people in the novel. However, when they learn that by writing they are able to expose their feelings and let other people understand their situation, things change. The nameless narrator goes through his community’s stories and develops awareness about their situation and



place in the world, unaccepted by society and marginalized. That is why he says “When we arrive, when we arrive. ... I really should say when we don’t arrive because that’s the real truth. We never arrive” (...*And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* 110). Sometimes, it is considered that Chicano literature is a kind of bildungsroman, because authors use it to create stories that help them escape from their lives and understand their community and the world that surrounds them. Characters in the novel do the same, like Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man*. It is the case of the nameless narrator in Rivera’s novel too.

Another well-known Chicano writer is Rudolfo Anaya, and his novel *Bless Me, Ultima* one of the most important Chicano bestsellers. It tells the story of Antonio Marez. When he is six years old, the old healer Ultima comes to live with him and his family to their small house in Guadalupe, New Mexico. She has a strong bond with the boy as she was supposed to be the only person who knew what lay in Antonio’s future. With her, the boy learns about plants and trees and also more spiritual matters. When the boy witnesses the death of Lupito, a soldier who had just returned from WWII, he starts to wonder about sin, death and hell. He is impatient to understand moral questions that trouble him and when he is told about the legend of the golden carp, Antonio wishes there was a god of forgiveness. Ultima tries to teach him lessons about moral independence and goodness, until one day, the boy witnesses the murder of Ultima’s owl, and her death after that, as the bird was her spiritual familiar or guardian. He would soon realize about Ultima’s words, at the end of the novel. So it could be said that the novel is about the psychological and social development of a Chicano boy who has to change his view of life and religion once he meets Ultima and learns from her that there is something more in the world than Catholicism. Ultima provides him with an indigenous perspective of the world that will help him when he does not feel satisfied with the church’s or his family’s explanations of things and she tells him stories and legends that help him understand his people and their history and consequently, himself.

Unlike Rivera, Anaya wrote less experimental prose and based his narrative in legends and myths that were inspired by Chicano folklore but that would also be accessible to readers from different cultures. In this vein, he is dealing with traditional oral storytelling but also adapting it to new circumstances and audiences. Myth becomes an underlying presence in the elements that surround Antonio and also provide him with

cultural background that helps him develop as an individual. In the process he comes across many different types of myths because some are related to Native American culture, while others are more general and refer to nature, and pagan beliefs. One of the most important ones may be that of the golden carp because with it, Antonio realizes that there are more beliefs than the Catholic one and that they are all equally valuable.<sup>36</sup> There are also myths that provide the reader with knowledge about Mexican-American culture and that are usually based on the Aztec mythology, such as the presence of the gods Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, who represent the opposing forces in which Antonio finds himself, the knowledge he receives from school and his own heritage and cultural background as a Chicano boy. At home, Antonio speaks only Spanish and follows the expectations of his parents, who are Chicano. At school he must learn English and interact with children who do not belong to his community or who do not share his culture, being forced to experience the American educational system, which does not accept his culture as he would like. Antonio will learn to mix the two opposing cultures and find a balance. Similarly, these two Aztec gods represent opposition too, as Quetzalcoatl is considered the god of the priests, of learning and knowledge, associated with farming and the cycle of life and death, while Tezcatlipoca is associated with night, hurricanes and earth. Antonio needs to find a balance between his religious beliefs and his family expectations as these two gods need to find a balance to rule the world and not destroy it. It could be said then that Anaya's decision to incorporate Aztec's myths in his novels show the importance that these still have in Mexican culture. He wants to show how Chicano children need to reconcile all the opposite beliefs they have, those established by the schools in which they study and those they experience at home. At the same time, he is also explaining to readers a bit more about Mexican culture and incorporates history and cultural background to all the conflicts he describes in the novel. For Martin-Rodriguez the idea that the novel is a mirror for memory satisfies the need to see one's own experience in print and the desire to participate in the retelling of well-known stories (35). This is what happens in this novel. Many readers may not

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<sup>36</sup> Traditionally, Aztec legends established four ages of the world or suns before the present world and all of them had been destroyed by apocalypse. The fourth world received the name of "Water Sun" or "Atonatiuh" and according to the legend, the world was flooded with water and everybody was transformed into fish. Only a man and his wife survived the flood and became the parents of a new generation of people that would populate the fifth world. One god, however, feeling sorry for people, asked other gods to turn him into a carp to, so that he could protect people. He was turned into a golden carp that became the lord of all the waters in the valley.

know anything about small towns and rural experiences and folklore Anaya depicts, but they “very well may have had a vicarious one, via stories heard from their elders, for instance. ...this possibility would ...prove that those readers to be familiar not with the experience itself but with the telling of the experience” (Martin-Rodriguez 35). This would make them particularly receptive to a novelistic version of the story, because they would recognize the experience of the oral narrative with which they were acquainted. “It would be easy for these readers to adapt their experiences as listeners to the reading process” (Martin-Rodriguez 36).

Nature is also an important element within the novel and is more especially represented by Ultima. With her, Antonio is able to learn about plants and animals and she teaches him anything he needs to know about natural world. Olmos offers an alternative analysis of the myths that appear in the novel and refers to the archetypal myth criticism, a term usually related to Jung’s theory of archetypes. This author considers that the repetition of certain symbols in dreams reflected a more universal and collective unconscious and studies several patterns that he will call archetypes and describes them in relation to mythology. Among these archetypes we find the Shadow, the archetype of inherent evil; the Anima, the feminine principle that has multiple manifestations, including the Earth Mother, the Good Mother and its opposite the Terrible Mother; and the Wise Old Man, who represent the enlightener, the master and teacher. These archetypes also appear in the novel. The Virgin of Guadalupe is the spiritual protector of Antonio’s mother; the Terrible Mother, the frightening female figure corresponds to La Llorona, the mother who kills her children and wanders after death looking for their souls.<sup>37</sup> Ultima could be considered the archetypal feminine principle, the intuitive, loving, life-affirming protector and nurturer, the Good Earth mother. That is, she is related to Mother Earth and nature. Indeed, it could be stated that the healing power of myths in the novel is directly related to the communion with the land and this is represented by Ultima and ultimately by Antonio too. Ultima guides Antonio in his spiritual awakening and uses her power to do good actions. Her physical appearance is related to nature, because although she is wrinkled and old, the color of her skin, her hair and her teeth is brown as the earth and her fragrance is like the odor of

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<sup>37</sup> Anaya would also refer to this important Chicano story in the novel *The Legend of La Llorona* (1989).

herbs. She is connected to animals, especially the owl, which is usually related to spirits and the darkness, relating her to Ecofeminism too. Indeed, the novel shows a society which is mostly patriarchal and where men play the most important roles, becoming protectors of family and society. However, Ultima challenges these conceptions and is depicted as one of the most powerful and important character in the novel and for the development of other characters such as Antonio. She does not follow the idea that women who stay at home but is depicted as an agent who can alter people's destinies, so that even men consult her about societal problems. The patriarchal perspective is offered by those who still condemn her practices and call her witch and consider that women should not be allowed to have such relevance within a community.

Reading the novel from an Ecofeminist perspective, Ultima exemplifies the communion between women and nature they talk about.<sup>38</sup> Throughout the novel she teaches Antonio of the power of land, the ancient understanding of oneness and the view of all living beings as equal. When Antonio meets Ultima for the first time, he realizes about this,

I saw for the first time the wild beauty of our hill and the magic of the green river. My nostrils quivered as I felt the sound of the mockingbirds go and the drone or the grasshoppers mingle with the pulse of the earth. The four directions of the llano met in me, and the white sun shone on my soul. The granules of sand at my feet and the sun and the sky above me seemed to dissolve into one strange, complete being. (*Bless Me Ultima* 10-1)

With her, Antonio is able to accept that there is a pagan god related to nature that is even more powerful and less harmful than the Christian god he used to believe in. He had to choose and chose the natural world that Ultima showed to him. She is, indeed, the only powerful woman in the novel, as the rest of female characters play conventional expected roles in a patriarchal community. Antonio's mother, although able to exercise control over the boy and guide him to become a priest, is restricted to the house where she spends most of the time. Despite being tremendously religious, unlike Ultima, she is unable to take action in everyday world. Antonio's sisters are

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<sup>38</sup> Susan Griffin, poet and Ecofeminist, expresses women's relation with nature: "We know ourselves to be made from this earth. We know this earth is made from our bodies. For we see ourselves. And we are nature. We are nature seeing nature. We are nature with a concept of nature. Nature weeping. Nature speaking of nature to nature" (223).

similar. They have been educated to become good wives and mothers, but nothing else is expected from them. They are the clear depictions of women's invisibility in a patriarchal community where they have little to say or do. Like Chinese women in *The Woman Warrior*, they remain silent. Taking into account the depiction of these female characters, it looks like Ultima is even more powerful.

The strength of Chicano women is also presented in other novels, especially those written by female writers such as Sandra Cisneros. Her novel *The House on Mango Street* exemplifies the importance of Chicano women for their communities and also the oppression they had to face not only for being Chicana, but also for being women in a patriarchal society that dismiss them and restrict their freedom and who silence their voices for the sake of preserving tradition, culture and the stability and security of families and communities. Opposing these traditional values, Esperanza, the protagonist of the novel, decides to break with all these impositions and “not to grow tame like the others who lay their necks on their threshold waiting for the ball and chain” (*The House of Mango Street* 88). She decides to study and when she starts writing, she recognizes the situation and fights against it, showing people the limitations of Chicano women in their society in order to try to leave it behind. Writing helps her face all this, so again it can be said that the novel is a type of bildungsroman novel in which the protagonist develops emotionally, physically, and psychologically. She reflects on the stories she heard as she grew up and decides to develop her own identity rather than accept the roles that she has been imposed as a second-class participant.

These authors and their characters exemplify the importance of maintaining traditions alive and the relevance oral storytelling still has in Chicano communities, but they also prove that literature can be useful to teach non-Chicano people about their culture and about their problems, providing these oral stories with new meanings that everybody can understand.

## 1.4. AFRO-AMERICAN STORYTELLING AND FOLKLORE

Afro-American storytelling is a strong heritage that dates back hundreds of years and which was used by people to establish their identities in usually unfriendly settings. It helped them hold the communities together in hostile situations and during hard times. It also helped them to answer questions, to explain history and life lessons that would be passed from generation to generation basically through oral transmissions.

African American storytelling goes back to the period of slavery. When Africans were transported as slaves to America from their native lands, they brought their culture with them. Those who survived the terrible Middle Passage were deprived of any traditions since they could not speak their language or worship their gods.<sup>39</sup> They were radically abstracted from their cultural communities, dispersed from plantation to plantation states and countries. They even lost the capacity to speak their own languages and in an effort to 'domesticate' them, their owners forbade the usage of African languages, and even that of the drum. Despite this, they did not forget the stories they had heard since they were children. These stories, mostly about their mother land, helped them maintain a continuity with their past and establish a link with their future generations, as they would survive and would be written down by writers who lived many generations after theirs. It could be said that they kept their oral tradition alive because they could ignore the influence of the white dominant culture that surrounded it and that they could do it even when they are based on oral traditions. And this is precisely what characterizes Afro-American folklore, it was predominantly oral. Because slaves did not enjoy a formal education, their stories survived by being told and passed. They were not written down, at least not at the beginning. The importance of orality is evidenced in the important role that the Griot or storyteller had in ancient Africa. This character recorded the traditions or the history and customs of the people and also worked as a counselor to the king, passing his knowledge to other members of the family.

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<sup>39</sup> The Middle Passage was the name that the crossing from Africa to America received. First the ships went from Europe to Africa. The owners exchanged iron or other materials for slaves. These slaves were transported from Africa to America, and finally the ships made their way back to Europe. The slaves were placed below the decks of the ship and lived in terrible conditions from six to eight weeks. They had no space and no sanitary conditions and many of them died before arriving at their destination.

Some writers tried to write these stories down but it was difficult to create the same impact on a reader than on a listener. Indeed, the African American storyteller always tried to stimulate their audiences. The versions that slaves offered of their own history were usually enhanced by the way they were delivered. Their stories were mixed with chants, mimicry, rhymes and songs, animated dialogues and voices that change to represent different animals. Therefore, it was not until the twentieth century that a new generation of literate writers could put into written words the oral tradition they had inherited from their ancestors. The period, known as the Harlem Renaissance, would be one of the most fructiferous in Black literature. It can be defined as a cultural movement that peaked during the 1920s and 1930s. It was also called the ‘New Negro Movement,’ a term coined by Alain Locke. He defined the figure of the New Negro in his study with the same name and based his ideas of the new Negro on the concept of the new Negro as the revelation of the old Negro as a mythical figure that was constructed to suit the purposes and conscience of white people. In a nation that considered itself holders of newness as a fundamental idea, and “whose truly national character was thought to be the New Man (Adam), emerging figures such as the New Negro or the New Woman suited as well as challenged the essential components of race and gender of such American myth” (Garcia Lorenzo 158). Michelle Ann Stephens also defined the New Negro Movement as

... a black American social identity that traveled well beyond the confines of the United States, to serve as a metaphor for a rising black, cultural and intellectual consciousness informed by international political events, which swept through the Americas and spilled over into metropolitan Europe. (214)

The Civil War brought the end of slavery and after it, the African Americans started to fight for their rights in all aspects of social and political life. This also included the cultural life, although the literary movement arose some years later. By then, most African Americans had moved to the northern parts of the country, where the new industries provided more opportunities and where they could run away from the racism that still persisted in the south. The waves of African Americans who departed from the agrarian and racist south towards the urban north was a social phenomenon known as the Great Migration and although they relocated in several northern industrial cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia or Detroit, they predominantly moved to New York, the place that received the largest number of black immigrants. They mostly lived in

Harlem, which became an Afro American suburb. Most of the African Americans living there had been slaves themselves, and the youngest generations also had members of their families who had lived through this period too, their grandparents or even their parents. From this moment on, Harlem had a massive migration of African Americans, and they developed the community in several ways. As Maria M. García Lorenzo explains, “By 1920, a quarter million of African Americans were living in the Harlem district, which became the black capital of the world” (157). In the nineteenth century, many white Americans who lived in abolitionist states considered themselves non-racist. The immigration to the northern states of African Americans raised the issue of racism as one that had to be faced. Harlem’s intellectuals and artists considered there was a need to revise civil rights and artistic canons alike and demanded dignity for African Americans in the United States. “The summing of social, economic and intellectual energies transformed Harlem into the headquarters of the ‘New Negro’ spirit” (Garcia Lorenzo 158).

The Harlem Renaissance was basically a celebration of African American oral heritage because the new authors were proud of their origins and wanted to show it throughout art in general, and literature, music or dance in particular. It was “an explosion of talent, vigor and race pride” (Garcia Lorenzo 158). Self consciousness and racial pride were the main concepts at that time. African Americans living in Harlem rejected the old stereotypes placed upon black people, “especially the romanticized views propagated by the plantation system to legitimize the unlegitimizable. Harlemites energized black social discourse and creativity to unexpected extents” (Garcia Lorenzo 157). Indeed, these phenomena achieve such a success that even white people, intellectuals and benefactors were attracted to this community and economically supported the works of the Harlem ideology.

The Harlem Renaissance also meant the rise of multiple talented people, not only belonging to the literary world, but participants of all types of art, like music and the celebrated Louis Armstrong. The New Negro turned to African and African American folklore for the authenticity and authority of a usable ethnic past. “The nineteenth century of Africa as a primitive land, a site of shame and self-hatred for many black Americans, was transformed for many black artists into a symbol of ambivalence or pride by many developments (Bell 102). Thanks to this movement, Afro-American



writers started to be well-known by white publishers and readers, and those would start to ignore the racist thoughts they had had up to then. Indeed, authors like Zora Neale Hurston, Toomer or Hughes would become recognized and praised. For Jones, during this period, folklore and oral tradition was no longer quaint and restrictive, “but the core of complex literary influence. . . . This new attitude provided the base for contemporary African American writers, who make use of folklore cognizant of its multiple and complex linguistic, social, historical, intellectual, and political functions” (9).

According to Houston A. Baker, in the recent criticism of Afro-American literature, there have been two distinct generational shifts that have involved ideological and aesthetic reorientations. Both have been accompanied by shifts in literary-critical and literary-theoretical paradigms. For him, the first shift occurred during the mid 1960s and “It led to the displacement of what might be described as integrationist poetics and gave birth to a new object of scholarly investigation” (3). For Baker, the dominant perspective during the late 1950s and early 1960s might be called the poetics of integrationism. The author refers to Richard Wright’s essay “The Literature of the Negro in the United States” (1957). Wright was quite optimistic about the future of Afro-American literature and considered that it would soon become undistinguishable from the mainstreams of American arts and letters. He based his optimism on the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown versus Topeka Board of Education* (1954), in which the court ruled that the doctrine “separate but equal,” was inherently unequal. For Wright this meant a future of equality between black and white Americans that will also be represented in literary domains. Wright states: “When Afro-American writers have achieved such equality and homogeneity they will stand at one with the majority culture” (3). However, although Wright is very optimistic that self-consciously literate products of Afro-American that signify a division between cultures may disappear soon, he is not so optimistic with what he calls “Forms of Things Unknown” (4), defined as “the expressive products of black American masses. For blues, jazz, work songs, and verbal forms such as folktales, boasts, toasts and dozens are functions of the black masses’ relationship of identity with the mainstream culture” (4). When these forms disappear, or “when conditions have been realized that enable them to be raised to a level of self-conscious art, will one be able to argue that an egalitarian ideal has been achieved in American life and art” (4). Arthur P. Davis is an example of Afro-

American critic who has repeatedly considered that oneness of all Americans and a “harmonious merger of disparate forms of American creative expression are impending American social realities” (4). He bases his ideas on his view of history and society from an ideological standpoint and assumes that Afro American and their traditions have always moved toward a unity with American majority culture. He thus predicts “an eventual disappearance of social conditions that produce literary works of art that are identifiable (in terms of structural peculiarity) as ‘Negro’ or ‘Afro-American’ literature” (4).

After the arrests, bombings and assassinations that comprised the white South’s reaction to the non-violent protest by hundreds of civil right workers from the late fifties to the mid sixties, it was more difficult to feel that integration was an impending American social reality. The new generations decided to analyze “the nature, aims, ends, and arts of those hundreds of thousands of their own people who were assaulting American’s manifest structures of exclusion” (Davis 5). The Afro-American masses demonstrated through violent acts that they wanted to establish social and political sovereignty in America. Their acts signaled the birth of a new ideology that received the name of Black Power, as it was designated by Stokely Carmichael in 1966. It was a call for black people to unite, recognize their heritage and build a sense of community. Their aim was not a community of integrated Americans, but “rather a present, vibrant group of men and women who constituted the heart of Afro-Americans” (Davis 5). Unlike Wright and other integrationist critics, these new critics believed that the perpetuation of “Forms of Things Unknown” would help the creation of a new black nation.

For James Edward Somethurst, one of the major legacies of Black American Movement and the political movement to which it was bound, the Black Power, is that they have inflected how African American literature, art, culture, politics, and identity have been understood both inside and outside the African American community (302). For him, Black American Movement literature and art put a new emphasis on performance, which often blended different artistic genres and media. At their events the audience may find it difficult to determine what was it seeing and hearing in terms of the traditional understanding of the arts because even poets mix media and genre, especially using jazz and black popular music as well as oral performance (308).

Maria M. Garcia Lorenzo refers to the role played by other writers such as DuBois during the Harlem Renaissance. She states that Black American literature has existed since slavery time, but in a slow process of self awareness. It was not until this period that African American literature lived a moment of revival, of cultural and political self consciousness, and some publications contributed to this, such as DuBois *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), which explored the essence of the race and stated the legitimate demands of his people or claimed ambitious and egalitarian aims. He wanted to account for the African American position in literature and society with the expression double consciousness, which meant “the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others....One never feels his two-ness-an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” (qtd. in Garcia Lorenzo 159). This meant that two-ness was an obstacle for black people to find their own self-consciousness, and “an instrument of awareness about their actual condition in American society” (159). Du Bois intended to merge both selves into one without losing any of them, having a viewpoint about the racial question quite integrationist (159). This would change from the 1980s onwards, when his double consciousness would no longer dominate black literature. Although it would still be hovering behind the scene, it would no longer be a feature for the writers emerging from the late 1960s. “From stories of racial oppression in which emphasis is placed on black versus white, African American fiction is now turning inward to explore the dynamics within the ethnic culture” (TuSmith 69). The movement lasted until the 1930s, when the Big Depression turned priorities from arts to economy and after that, much has been talked about African American literature and the term applied to refer to it.

Although the African American storyteller-writer appeared during slavery, it cannot be stated that all the stories and tales told were uniquely based on African tales. The African American folk tradition is communal, this means that it is the expression of a group and not of an individual and thanks to it, the different communities maintain connections with their past, and change them to adapt them to present situations. Regarding concepts, styles, or base, the African American oral tradition conserves African philosophy and traditions, but they have also been adapted to the different circumstances that they must face in North American life. This is why it cannot be ensured that all the stories are based on African tales. When there is a comparison of

slave tales with those guides to African tales that exist, it is revealed that a high number were brought from African, but also a similar percentage of tales were common in both Africa and Europe, so that means that although slaves may have brought the tale type from Africa with them they could have been reinforced by their contact with white people and other types of tales they learned in American or that had Euro-American influence. This means that although African American literary tradition was based principally on the tales that they had heard from their ancestors, these stories were also influenced by the white people, and even by the slaves' own inventiveness. Indeed, Darwin E. Turner goes a little bit farther and mentions the fact that in order to gain reputation and respect from the American public, many Black writers chose patterns and styles more commonly accepted by these readers. He provides as examples Phyllis Wheatley, who adopted a style similar to Milton's and Pope's, according to Turner; or even Hurston, whose style is similar to that of John Erskine (141). For him, this happens even among contemporary writers such as James Baldwin, similar to D.H. Lawrence. For Turner, however, this is not always negative. He believes that by attempting to imitate or rival the practices of respected white writers, these Blacks have blackened the models, and "By adapting their models, these Blacks transcend any allegation of copybook imitation; instead, they have expanded Black American literature" (141). As a consequence, according to him, "the mere fact that they have utilized styles and forms of European and British tradition should not imply that these writers are significantly different from their Black American contemporaries and predecessors" (141). Turner goes even further and defines Black American Literature as "any literature created by a person of African ancestry who has been reared in the United States or who has lived here sufficiently long to be identified with Black culture" (140).

Gayl Jones also referred to this. For him, modern African American writers began to shape and modify their literature using models from European and European American traditions, but with their own distinctive oral and aural forms. When the African American writers trusted the literary possibilities of their own verbal and musical creations and to employ self-inspired techniques, "they began to transform the European and European American models to gain greater artistic sovereignty. Contemporary African American writers often recognize no boundaries. The territories of so-called 'art forms' and 'folk forms' interpenetrate" (1).

Bernard W. Bells studies this in depth and quotes LeRoi Jones' words. According to this author, from Phyllis Wheatley to Chesnutt, black writers have tried to imitate the standards of middle class novels and this means that except some notable works, the rest are mediocre. Bells considers this an exaggeration and states: "But like Jones's ideological indictment of black literature, contemporary reports of the death of authenticity, authority and agency of the author in African American novel are not only premature but also grossly exaggerated" (9). A little further in his work *The Contemporary African American Novel Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches*, Bell says:

In so far as African American novelists are the cultural heirs of Western and African narrative traditions, we can more clearly and coherently understand the folk roots of the African American novel by looking first at some of the ancient forms and functions or oral literature, especially narrative, in Africa. (73)

Henry Louis Gates seems to be of this same opinion. He considers that we learn to read some texts by reading others and it is not difficult to become influenced by them, because "texts have a curious habit of generating other texts that resemble themselves" (xxii). Following this, he states that black writers and critics of black literature, learn to write by reading literature, especially the canonical texts of the Western tradition. For this reason, black texts resemble Western texts, among others. However, for him, these black texts black formal repetition always repeats with a difference "a black difference that manifests itself in specific use of language. And the repository that contains the language that is the source— and the reflection— of black difference is the black English vernacular tradition" (xxii-xxiii).

In relation to African American writers and their approaches to story and storytelling, it could be said that the publication of Phyllis Wheatley's collection of poems in 1773 meant the first publication of an African American work by a writer who had been a slave and who lived in the American colonies, apart from being a woman. It was the first but not last successful work by an Afro American person and initiated the development of Black literature. Although her poems were basically about Christianity and current relevant figures, she also focused (but briefly) on the topic of slavery, towards which she had encountered feelings and oral tradition, which was also important in her poems. Phyllis learnt to write and read thanks to his white master, and

he helped her to publish her works. After her, many other writers of African American origin have focused on oral tradition and have understood and referred to the importance stories had in their writings. They have tried to represent African culture and characters in their novels.

For Bell, from the early petitions of enslaved Africans in 1773 for permission to buy their freedom and return to Africa, to the neoslave narratives of authors such as Margaret Walker, Ernest Gaines, Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison, or Charles Johnson, the literary tradition of African Americans has been characterized by “an emancipatory-life-enhancing social and cultural movement and by striving in the rhetoric, politics, and poetics of representation to reconcile the double consciousness of Americans of African descent” (9). For him, we have witnessed the complex rhetoric, politics, and intertextuality of the representation of African American character and culture in the tradition of African American novel (9). However, this has not been an easy process.

One of the problems when studying Afro American literature is that the courses that study it do not establish literary origins and influences before slavery, so they only study literature in the context of oppression. Besides, African is not considered to have contributed to worldwide literature or American literature because it was oral and not written tradition. Similarly, African linguistic influences on English language are not included in the study of English, although African language has deeply influenced English spoken in some areas of the continent, especially in the South of the United States. Another important stone in the process of studying Afro American literature is that it is studied in isolation, despite the parallels in themes and genres with other literatures, and it is manipulated and controlled by white editors and publishers, so that Afro American writers do not get promotion for their works unless it is profitable for them. However, despite African American literature has often been read in isolation and as literature written during periods of oppression, there are some common patterns that can be perceived in the writings of both older and more contemporary African American writers.

Liberation or the survival against oppression is probably one of the most common topics in the first African American writings, but also among many other American works. It is a recurrent topic. Similarly, some themes recur in the works of more than

one generation of Black Americans, especially themes related to Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts poetry. So in the 1920s, 1960s and 1970s, there is an emphasis on liberation, alienation, reaction against oppression, satiric portrayals of foolish Blacks and pride in Black people with the slogan “Black is beautiful” (Turner 145). For Turner, some themes are distinctively Black American, such as the discovery of Africa as a source for race pride, use of Negro heroes and heroic episodes from American history, the treatment of Negro masses and color-consciousness topics (145).

Afro-American authors, especially Afro-American women writers, also deal with topics related to women, and their strength while preserving culture and traditions. Traditionally black women had freedom within the confines of their community, freedom from sexist categories, but they were abused by white colonizers, were economically exploited and had to become servants of white women and nurses for their babies. They were categorized as mammies, concubines, conjure women and mulattas, broadly speaking. In works written by men, mammies appear idealized and resembled the figure of the earth-mother, who had to nurture children and are always ready to help others, especially white people and children. This is the case of works such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Mothers could also be destructive and repressive in order to express maternal devotion. So motherhood could be represented by women who cared for and loved their children and others’ children, and by just the opposite, similar to other figures in different ethnic minorities such as La Llorona in Chicano tradition. The concubine or prostitute was also another predominant image of Afro-American women. They were supposed to be sexual and lack morality, as they attracted their white masters and even enjoyed the experience of a supposed rape. Obviously, this seemed quite distant from reality. The conjure woman was that who was a professional witch and doctor who knew about voodoo and black magic, who has supernatural powers, prepared herbs and could foretell the future, similar to shamans in Native American culture. Mulatta were the result of sexual abuses and alienated from both cultures. For white women they represented their husband’s infidelity and for their mother they were reminders of their oppression. They are normally represented as more beautiful than their white mistress, and consequently hated by them. They are in the middle of the two cultures and surrounded by luxury and freedom they will never get, being isolated from both communities. Despite these archetypes, none of them seem to

be more common than the other in the works of Afro-American women writers. These authors mainly concentrate on survival, search of freedom and present strong women who struggle to achieve dignity. As Claudia Tates states, a dominant theme is “the quest-theme – a character’s personal search for a meaningful identity and for self-sustaining dignity in the world of growing isolation, meaningless and moral decay” (3). Maybe the most representative speech related to women’s role was delivered by Sojourner Truth at the Women’s Convention in Akron (Ohio) in 1851 and entitled “Ain’t I a Woman?” Here she stated that men at the convention, told women needed to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches and to have the best place everywhere, to which she replied:

Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a Woman? ... I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! ... I could work as much and eat as much as a man ... And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman? ... Then that little man in black there, he says women can’t have as much rights as men, ‘cause Christ wasn’t a woman! Where did your Christ come from? ... From god and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him. ... If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.<sup>40</sup>

The importance of oral storytelling is also one of the main topics in contemporary African American literature, and some of their main themes cannot be ignored as the main part of some of these novels’ plots. Afro-American authors use them to denounce political and social injustices, so that they mixed new and old topics in their works. African American folktales are the most common type of tales in their literature and there is a wide variety of them. Besides, they will be later inherited by Afro-American writers.<sup>41</sup> This means they managed to preserve the culture of their ancestry amid the

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<sup>40</sup> This text is part of the Internet *Modern History Sourcebook* and has been copied from the Fordham University, The Jesuit University of New York’s webpage.

<sup>41</sup> Folktales are the stories slaves told about their experiences and memories from their native lands. They were primarily used as a way to preserve their roots and in this way, transmit them to their followers. Indeed, like myths or legends, folktales were useful to show what the society considers important for daily life. However, unlike them, folktales do not always have a religious side or do not have a base on historical events, but they are stories that people tell and which involve unreal characters and situations. They deal with different topics, from animal tales, that is stories which included mythological animals, to



repressions of a mainstream culture that oppresses them and struggle for justice and equality and to change the conditions of all Afro-Americans, breaking with traditional stereotypes, but they do it including old folktales in their works, so that they do not forget where they come from either. These contemporary authors become reputed storytellers whose troubled characters seek to find their identity and their community's identity in a society that impedes such discovery. They want to show that they are part of the history of American literature and that they play a role in American society and their best weapon to do it is appealing to their own cultural richness.

One of the most relevant characteristics of African American folktales is variety, that is, the same story could take different forms depending on the storyteller and the version he provided according to its preferences or necessities. Folktales demonstrated, therefore, the rich and diverse folklore tradition that Africans brought with them and the different backgrounds they had. The same story could include a god or a deity in a society or a trickster figure in another depending on what the teller considered more important for the current situation and the source it came from. As Bell states, instead of stories falling into clear cut categories, the same story may be told in one society about a god or deity, in another society about a trickster figure, and in another one about a legendary hero. For some people, it may be considered sacred truth and by another secular wisdom. Despite the mixing of forms and the shifting of tales from sacred to profane, Bell considers "most West societies make some distinctions between sacred narratives, which they regard as true and less serious tales with an entertaining and educational function" (74).

All folktales have a special and important aim and they were somehow summarized by Barbara Wilcots. For her, the purposes of African American folk culture are rich and varied.

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tall tales, freedom tales, religious based tales or even folk songs. They included also mythological figures like that of the trickster, so popular among Native American people too.

The folk tales, proverbs, and legends preserve the collective history of African Americans in the South, keeping alive their legacy of survival. The songs and sermons resonate with folk wisdom, embodying the fundamental beliefs that sustained slaves through bondage, and represent the southern values by which many yet live (8)

All together, the varied forms of African American folk culture define the collective character of the African Americans in the South. Most African American writers included them in their writings, becoming a main source of inspiration for them. Tales are brief, exciting, single incident narratives about the trickster, who can be sometimes moral or amoral, back preacher, about the “bad nigger” and the “super- bad” hustler. Indeed, folktales can be explained attending to their main topic: animal tales and the trickster tales; tall tales; freedom tales; religious tales, sermons and testimonials; folksongs and spirituals; and worksongs.

Most African tales included animals like the rabbits, bears, turtles, snakes or foxes and in many cases characters adopted some of their characteristics. These animals are quite relevant in African folklore and African American writers decided to include them in their novels. Like Native American folklore, African American ones are populated by animal figures who are fabulous or monster like and which combine power coming from humans and animal agility, probably to represent what slaves actually wanted to become in order to escape from their owners. One of the most popular animals within African folklore is the rabbit. Although for most people the rabbit is probably one of the weakest animals, African slaves considered it the wisest too. It is able to escape from dangerous situations in many occasions, and for this reason one of the trickster figures of African origin takes its form, the Bruh Rabbit, also known as Brer or Buh.<sup>42</sup> For

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<sup>42</sup>The Brer Rabbit appears for the first time in a collection of stories told by Uncle Remus, a fictional character or storyteller of many stories of African American folktales. These stories were compiled by Joel Chandler Harris in 1880 in the work *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings: The Folklore of the Old Plantation* and in *Nights with Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit*, although until then they had been passed from generation to generation mainly by oral transmissions. Indeed, there are multiple stories in which this character appears. For instance, the most famous story is that in which he appears with Tar Baby. Brer Rabbits gets stuck to the Tar Baby, which was left in the road by Brer Fox. Most times, Brer Rabbit's main aim is to get rid of his enemies, especially Brer Fox and Brer Bear. After him, Charles Chesnutt also devoted to the trickster figure, and imitating Uncles Remus, he created Uncle Julius in *The Conjure Woman* (1899). Uncle Julius is also a slave who entertains his owners and other white people telling them tales about slaves and slavery which often included the trickster figure in the form of small animals who can trick bigger and more dangerous ones and even about humans who take the form of trickster characters as well. Moreover, using these tales, Chesnutt is also able to define and criticize the situation of slaves and create a political discussion about it, or so he pretended.

slave tellers, this animal represented them and their situation. Although it is weak in front of dangerous animals like the bear, it is also fast and smart, able to escape from it. This is similar to the slaves themselves: they seem to be weaker than their owners but they will be able to surpass their situation and survive it. It is constantly using the brain to overcome obstacles and with their example, the teller is also encouraging the listener to understand that there are ways to overcome obstacles in their lives too, above all in reference to slaves. Most of the animal tales that become famous and popular in African American literature had their counterparts in African mythology. For example, the Rabbit, as told before, represents the slaves own position and is essentially a trickster, as Anansi the spider in African mythology. Like the rabbit, the trickster that it represents also fails in some of his tasks, as slaves also do, and in this way he becomes more human too. He is not always evil or good. It is an interesting facet of black American storytelling that the stories were as complex morally as the conditions that the storytellers found themselves living in. By creating this imperfect hero, the storyteller seems to be telling the listener that he may be getting too overconfident about the prospects for change.<sup>43</sup>

Apart from the Brer Rabbit, other important trickster-animal characters are Anansi the Spider and the Signifying Monkey. Anansi the Spider is quite similar to the Brer Rabbit's tales. Like them, Anansi Spider's tales also arrived at the New World thanks to the tales told by slaves who came from Africa and he became a representative of survival and resistance for them. Because he is powerful, he is able to win his opponents with trickery and cunning and this becomes a model of behavior for slaves. Besides thanks to tales like those referring to Anansi or Brer Rabbit, those slaves were also able to keep a link with their native land. Apart from a trickster, Anansi, like Brer Rabbit also plays the role of a culture hero sometimes, acting in behalf of his father, the sky

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<sup>43</sup> One of the first African American writers to present the trickster figure in literature was Charles Waddell Chesnutt. His story "The Goophered Grapevine," which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1887, features a white northern couple who moves to the South and meets former slave Julius McAdoo, an adept storyteller. McAdoo regales the Northerners with 'conjure tales,' or supernatural folk tales, designed to entertain them and influence decisions they are making. Chesnutt's conjure stories are often tragic, providing indirect commentary on the injustice and cruelty of the slavery system. *The Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison also illustrates some characteristics of the trickster tales, in this case through the narrator's grandfather. The narrator is unable to understand his grandfather's tales and attitudes, until he leaves the place and goes to live in New York.

god named Nyame. In African traditions, the trickster often appears as a mythological figure that is rival of the sky god, tricking him. Playing this role, Anansi becomes similar to the Yoruba trickster god Eshu. According to the African folklore, Anansi can help stop fires by bringing rain, is responsible for creating the sun, the stars, and the moon, for teaching human beings the use of agriculture. His mother is Asase Ya and there are some records of his wife, known as Miss Anansi or Mistress Anansi.

The Signifying Monkey is another important animal and trickster figure coming from African folklore and included in African American novels. It derives from the Yoruba mythological character Esu Elegbara and it seems that this trickster character brought a monkey at his side. They were mediators between humans and gods and used tricks to do it. Henry Louis Gates studied this figure in depth and defined Esu Elegbara as a real trickster, like the Signifying Monkey himself:

Each version of Esu is the sole messenger of the Gods (in Yoruba, *iranse*), he who interprets the will of the gods to man; he who carries the desires of man to the gods. Esu is the guardian of the crossroads, master of style and of stylus, the phallic God of generation and fecundity, master of that elusive, mystical barrier that separates the divine world from the profane. (6).

For him, the Signifying Monkey is closely related to the vernacular and is a character that is able to manipulate and trick elephants and monkeys. However, he goes a little beyond the Signifying Monkey as a simple trickster figure of African American origin and studies the concept of signifying deeply, arguing that black vernacular tradition uses figurative language and prefers it over literal interpretations. Indeed, “signifying” includes the use of this figurative language as well as the use of indirect speech, or even “The Dozens,” which is a game consisting on exchanging insults.

Tall tales are just another form of folktales. A tall tale is usually a story of a fictional character who has exaggerated adventures and lives extraordinary moments. He is usually intelligent and strong and tells his own stories in first person, as a storyteller. They are used basically to explain the unexplainable and sometimes to understand why white people behave in certain manners. Besides, the main objective is humor and entertainment, or teaching through comic situations. They play an important role in African American tradition as well, used both to entertain and to explain mythological

events. One of the most famous tall tales has to do with the slave John Henry, who also became a folk hero. He is also closely connected to the building of the Railroad in Ohio, as he was a worker in this project, from where he could ultimately escape, becoming a model to the rest of slaves.

John Henry was a black tall-tale rival to Paul Bunyan and Stagolee. He is the legendary expression of the black man's strength in the new Industrial Age. Henry's story is in all likelihood based on real events associated with the building of the Big Bend Tunnel of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad in West Virginia in the 1870s. It is a celebration of African American potency and strength in the face of continued mockery and oppression. John Henry is the black Herakles. His tragic vision has through the ballad bearing his name, become a standard of American folklore. (Leeming and Page 181)

According to the legend, John Henry worked as a steel driver and as he was trying to outwork a steam drill with only his hammer and steel bit, and although he could manage to beat the machine, he died. In this way he became a symbol of the fight of human beings against machines. Indeed, as Scott Reynolds Nelson states "there are almost two hundred recorded versions of the ballad of John Henry. It was among the first of the songs that came to be called 'the blues' and was one of the first recorded country songs" (2).<sup>44</sup> The opposite version to John Henry was that of Stagolee, defined as:

. . . the epitome of the bad (in every sense of that word) "nigger." He is the tall-tale post slavery urban representation- usually comic-of the black man who refuses to accept a second-place position in society- a version of the beloved outlaw so popular in other segments of American society as well (Leeming and Page 172).

Stagolee is categorized as a "badman", a violent man who usually breaks the law and causes troubles to those around him. There are multiple versions of his story and most of them are usually exaggerated and tragic. The most famous ballad in which he appears is the one in which he kills Billy Lyons because he had stolen his Stetson hat that "gives him trickster or shape-shifting capabilities" (Leeming and Page 172).

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<sup>44</sup> Many writers have paid attention to this character, among them white novelists such as Roark Bradford in his novel *John Henry* (1931). Other African American writers, such as Margaret Walker or Sterling A. Brown, have written poems in which they include this legendary character.

However, his crimes are not always unpunished, although there are also multiple versions about it:

But Stagolee does not kill with impunity. Sometimes the deputies the sheriff attempts to form into a posse are so intimidated by the famous badman they refuse to help with arrest. But almost universally the sheriff kills Stagolee or apprehends him. He is taken to court and sentenced to death. At this point the variants show the greatest difference in their treatment of Stagolee. (Bryant 14)

Some of the versions are so exaggerated and unrealistic that they become tall tales, as the one which states that Stagolee went to hell and “overwhelms the devil himself” (Bryant 14).<sup>45</sup>

Freedom Tales are also very popular in African American literature and as most of them, also comes from African sources. Their main aim is to show people the oppressing events black people were living in the fields and above all, to show hope, because although it was not easy, escaping from that situation was not impossible. Indeed, there are multiple stories, both invented and real, that relate how some famous slaves tricked their masters and ran away. In this way, they are presenting less fictive cases than those of animals; they are humans now escaping from white oppressors. Because of their similarities, most of them can be considered part of a cycle, known as “John Cycle.” Houston E. Baker, made a definition of this type of literature, which he called the “trickster slave”:

In black folklore, the tales surrounding the exploits of the trickster slave are known as the “John Cycle.” John or Jack, or whatever name the protagonist may assume, is usually presented as a lazy, affable slave who has a somewhat relationship with his master and is incessantly engaged in some contest with him. Although there are stories which present him as the loser and show him in the throes of punishment, in most cases he emerges victorious, sometimes even gaining his freedom. (24)

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<sup>45</sup> Some authors have made use of the “badman” to characterize their protagonists, such as Richard Wright. He created Bigger Thomas, one of the best known bad niggers. With him, Wright wanted to demonstrate that if whites continuously oppress and manipulate black people, characters like Bigger Thomas may appear, with the consequences and dangers that he could cause to white people. Indeed, he killed his beloved and benefactors and bullied all those around him. Other authors which have used this character are Rudolph Fisher, Ama Bantemps and Zora Neale Hurston.

According to Baker, because most of these tales appeared after the Civil War, the narrators could refer to the slave's tricks with some kind of freedom and safety. Besides, because they were told after the war, the situations the slaves found were not as difficult as those before the war, that is, the relationship between owners and slaves was more relaxed and the tales were somehow romanticized.

Beyond their wish- fulfillment value, trickster slave tales also seem to represent a romanticizing of the slave experience, from a black antebellum perspective. the tales appeared immediately after the Civil War, and a general romanticizing of the "Old South" began. .... In the "John Cycle," masters are tolerant and kind and the slave is allowed rights that could not have been "inalienable" in a slave system. (26)

Other authors such as Lucinda H. Mackethan, differentiate between the "John Cycle" and the "Jack Cycle." For her, John was a slave who constantly tricked his master gaining his freedom. He participates of the stories included in "John and Old Master" cycle (914). On the contrary, for her, the "Jack Tales" come from the Appalachia, and refer to stories "imported from the British Isles by early Scots-Irish settlers of the southeastern mountains" (914) and hero Jack "succeeds through trickery rather than industry" (914). It seems, anyway, that this trickster slave, whether named Jack or John became quite popular among listeners and readers and many authors decided to include this figure of slaves who outwit their masters with tricks within their works.<sup>46</sup>

Religious tales, preacher tales, sermons and testimonials are also important types of folktales. The church has played an important role in African American culture, because apart from the family, it was the only institution they had, and this is also reflected in their literature, oral transmissions and folklore. As Leeming and Page stated:

The myths of African Americans have generally reflected the condition of black Americans, first as slaves and then as people rejected by the melting pot. The Africans brought to America as slaves naturally brought religious traditions with them, and they also tended to reinterpret the

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<sup>46</sup> For instance, Charles Chesnut's *The Conjure Woman* is one of them and "celebrates many levels of deceit: the conjure woman and the slaves of the tales are able to outwit the master in order to improve their lives, although normally the tricks end in tragedies pointing up the horrors of slavery" (Mackethan 914). Similarly, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* "revived the trickster in the shape shifting character of Rinehart" (Mackethan 914). More recently, Ishmael Reed has created PaPa Labas in his novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1973) who is "modeled on Legba, a West Indian variant of the African trickster deity Esu" (Mackethan 914).

rituals, myths, and other religious traditions of their owners to fit their own needs and their own heritage. So, for instance, Christian baptism could be related easily to African initiation rites, and the new Christian God, like the old African ones, could be a god who “possessed” the worshiper. (58)

There are different types of tales related to the church, such as preacher tales, sermons and testimonials, all of which wanted to teach and entertain. For instance, sermons became a way of transmitting the Christian God’s words to men, and in Afro-American literature, the sermon was considered “de word” of God revealed to man and in its imagery, “the black sermon is uniquely powerful. ...They present a vivid picture of a personal God and ‘chosen people’ is long that is often startling in its grace” (Baker 29-30). Most sermons deal with biblical topics and venerate “cultural heroes like the Hebrew children Shadrack, Meschach, and Abednego, whose faith saved them from death in the fiery furnace, and Moses, who was chosen to lead his people to freedom” (Wilcots 9). They are clear in their form too, “use of dialect, the expressive language of metaphor, and the rhythms of folk oratory to celebrate the black preacher as poet” (Wilcots 9).<sup>47</sup>

Folk songs are also folktales. An important part of African American literature has to do with music and the songs which slaves sang during their hard work in the plantations. They can be divided into two different forms depending on their content. Indeed, Baker separated them into “heading sacred and secular. In the first category we find the black spirituals, and in the second, the work, levee, river, boating, sea, and jubilee songs” (31).

A really important part of African American culture is directly related to spirituals, which Bell defined: “Spirituals, like changed sermons, are inspired by the Bible,

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<sup>47</sup> One of the most famous sermons was related to the creation myth and one of the most famous tellers of sermons in African American tradition, James Weldon Johnson. He created a version of the Creation story of the Genesis and composed the national anthem of African Americans “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” The former made “use of black language patterns, particularly those that had evolved in the context of the inspired improvisational sermon” (Leeming and Page 60). He included all his sermons in the form of poems in the book *God’s Trombones* (1927). Other important authors who used sermons in fiction are James Baldwin in *Go to Tell it to the Mountain* (1953), and *The Fire Next Time* (1963), Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), Lawrence Dunbar’s *An Ante-Bellum Sermon* (1896) or Zora Neale Hurston’s *Moses Man of the Mountain* (1939).



informed by the group experience, and characterized by occasional rhyme, improvised graphic phrases, and dramatic lines delivered in a call-and-response manner” (83). It seems they are not easy to differentiate as there are multiple variants from African origin, but as Bell says, they are inspired by religion. Baker considered:

Despite the fact that they grow out of and employ the vocabulary, prophecies, and stories of a Protestant tradition, there is nothing in the history of American religious and secular music to equal the poignancy and lyricism of the black spirituals. The songs, in fact, are almost unique in the history of America. (31-2)

Although they are mainly based on biblical issues, spirituals were also a way slaves had to express their sorrow and their need of freedom. Indeed, these songs reflected the life they had within the plantation and were somehow used as a way to encourage them to resist in order to survive. Spirituals reflected the slave’s love of God and their identification with the Bible, their desire for freedom and their mourning because they have lost their culture and people. They also want those who oppress weak people to be judged by God and deal with “their covert and overt rebellion against their masters (call to rise up as well as calls to ‘steal away)’” (MacKethan 19). Some of them are, therefore, identified with biblical sources, like “Go Down Moses,” “Mary Don’t you Weep” or “Steal Away;” others like “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen,” “I Know Moonrise,” or “Motherless Child” are used to express sorrow and pity; and a third group, which includes “No More Auction Block,” “Deep River,” and “God’s Gonna Set Dis World on Fire,” try to present the world of salvation and apocalypses.

Many Afro-American authors have made use of spirituals and included them in their novels as a way to maintain a link with their native culture and folklore. Indeed, many authors have studied their connotations and the possible meanings they could have, apart from their evident religious implications. Du Bois, for instance, was the first to consider them lamentation songs used by slaves to communicate. He said “the songs ‘tell’ in word and music of trouble and exile, of strife and hiding: they grope towards some unseen power and sigh for rest in the End” (qtd. in MacKethan 9). Others, like Lovell went a bit further and considered that spirituals were not simply employed to tell about freedom in heaven but also in earth, that is, they were a call for rebellion also in the fields (MacKethan 9). According to Leeming and Page, spirituals became “a part of general American folklore when *Slave Songs of the United States* appeared in 1867,

and when the *Jubilee Singers* from Fisk University in Tennessee took the songs on tour in 1871” (58).<sup>48</sup>

Work songs were used as a way to alleviate the hard suffering of slaves and also a form to follow a rhythm in the work fields. They were usually calls that a slave started and that was repeated by another one in a different part of the plantation and then by another, until all of them could hear it. It was a way to help each other in the distance and to comment on the hardships of the labor. Among work songs, two have remained important in African American literature: the jubilee songs and the blues. Jubilee songs were sung on celebration days and “comes from the chief drummer - known as Juba - who pounded out the rhythms” (Baker 34), while the origin of the blues is not so clear. They represent the “junction of many streams of black folk song and experience” (Baker 34).

It seems to be clear, then, that Afro-American tradition is full of references to African tales and oral stories and that contemporary authors used them to make reference to current topics and to denounce those issues they do not agree with. Maybe one of the most representative Afro-American writers is Zora Neale Hurston, and her work *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, one of the best examples of the use of oral tradition in more contemporary African American works and the influence this had on American literature. She wanted to portray rural African-American communities, folk heritage, customs, spiritual beliefs and dialects and dealt with the issues of searching a sense of community and personal and cultural identity. Above all, she offers one of the most realistic portrayals of rural Afro-American people, especially women and their roles

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<sup>48</sup> Fiction authors have also used them. For instance Martin R. Delany included spirituals in his novels *The Huts of American* and *Blake*, Margaret Walker did the same in *Jubilee*, Sherley Anne Williams's in *Dessa Rose*; Toni Morrison in *Beloved* and Arna Bontemps in *Black Thunder*. Richard Wright is also associated with spirituals *Uncle Tom's Children* because one story in the collection “Down by the Riverside,” takes its title from a spiritual, and the story “Long Black Song” ironically refers to hopeful lyrics of “I’ll be there.” Ralph Ellison also refers ironically to spirituals in *Invisible Man*, when the protagonist hears the orchestra at his school play Dvorak’s New World Symphony and he translates it into a spiritual melody, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” James Baldwin’s novel *Go Tell It to the Mountain* (1953) conducts an intense examination of African American religion, using the lyrics and rhythms of the spirituals and Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) “connects the spirituals to the potential of the African American aesthetic vision in one of the Harlem Renaissance’s masterworks, yet he felt that their power was dwindling, part of the ‘swam song’ of black folk life that he, as an artist, must try to capture in a new form. (MacKethan 20)

within the communities. And she did all this while at the same time denounced issues related to slavery, work in the country, women's subordination, and including traditional oral stories that link her work to that of her ancestors.

The novel deals with Janie's story, as she comes back to Eatonville after two years away. Her neighbors wonder and gossip about where she had been and Janie tells her friend Pheoby Watson her story. This means Janie turns into the storyteller of her life story and gives voice to her feelings. She goes through different stages in her life that are related to the men she was with. First she married Logan Killicks, following her grandma's advice to marry a wealthy man despite not loving him. He makes her feel miserable because he treats her as a pack mule. Then she meets Joe Starks and falls in love with him, abandoning her husband and moving to Eatonville with him. Initially their relationship is good but although they become really wealthy, her monotonous life with Joe turns her into a sad woman who is even forbidden to relate with other town people. Twenty years after, Janie leaves him after insulting each other in public. Joe becomes quite ill and ultimately dies. The third stage in her life corresponds to her relationship with Tea Cake, whom she meets some time after Joe's death and who is younger than her. They marry and move to Jacksonville and then to Everglades, where they work during the harvest season and relax during summer time. A terrible hurricane burst into Everglades two years after that and as they were trying to escape, a rabid dog bites Tea Cake and he gets ill and quite violent. As he was trying to kill Janie, she kills him to save her life. She is put on a trial for murder, but all white and male jury find her innocent and she returns to Eatonville, starting a new period in her life. People there gossip about her new situation and when she finally tells Pheoby her story, she feels in peace with herself.

The first and only storyteller in the novel is Janie but she is not a traditional African American storyteller because she does not tell traditional tales about animals or tricksters, but on the contrary she tells her own story and she does it because her neighbors demand it. Indeed, the only two occasions in which the reader realizes that the novel is art of the story Janie is telling are the beginning and the end of the book. However, with the story of her life, Janie is also telling the readers about other aspects of African American history, for example related to slavery, life in plantations or racism, which connects the story and the author to Ecofeminism, as they deal with all

sorts of oppression and life in plantations could be considered such. Janie's grandmother is quite precise in the novel:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so far as Ah can see. (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 14)

Here she does not only deal with racism as a form of oppression but with women as inferior to white people and to black men. A bit farther in the novel, she explains her own experience as a slave in the plantation and the way she had to run away and hid herself and her baby because the master was angry against her. She had had a baby with him, and the baby was not completely black. That was her fault. Hurston offers then a clear perspective of female oppression in plantations and way women were mistreated not only for being black but also for being women. The idea of women as a mule has also been developed by Ecofeminists such as Griffin. She writes: "We are the mules. Offspring of the he-ass and the mare. We cannot procreate our own kind together; nature did not create us: we were bred for domestic labor. Though we work hard, our very name signifies obstinacy and stupidity." (74) Here she refers to one of the roles of women within society, although she still offers some kind of positivism when she states that women have feelings and think on their own: "And we know we are not logical. The mule balks for no apparent reason. For no rhyme or reason. *We remember weeping suddenly for no good reason*" (74).

While Janie is telling the story the reader also realizes about other forms of storytelling which were very common among African American people. For instance, social life in Eatonville centered on the porch, where people sat and talked about their day, but also told stories and sang to have fun. "In between times, they told stories, laughed and told more stories and sung songs" (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 45).

Indeed, the porch is essential African American storytelling and Hurston provides it an important role in the novel. According to Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon, William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, show that the house porch has historically set in Southern culture as an escape from the stultifying heat of summer and it becomes synonymous with summer socializing. It is a place where individuals can sit to watch the community go by, to welcome people and

storytelling. But apart from this, according to Donlon, the porch is a transitional space between public and private where individuals can negotiate an identity within a community of shared customs, “largely through the stories they tell” (95). She says “Facilitating yet limiting access to others, the porch inextricably links community storytellers to each other, while restricting the degree of intimacy and power they can realize” (95). According to her, the novels confirm the power of storytelling porches can be double-edged. If the individuals are able to resist the authority of the dominant community, “the overpowering constraints of the porch can virtually quash an individual’s identity” (95). If it is used productively, the storytelling porches can create a space where individuals tell stories to display power in the face of an established social order.

It is also important to notice that Janie wanted to participate on these meetings, but Joe had forbidden her to do it. She had been deprived of the possibility of taking part in an important social event in the town. It is not until she gets rid of her husband and starts to reaffirm her independence and her own life that she feels able to participate in the conversations with people in the porch. She participates of the storytelling events and recovers an independence that she had lost. This will be reinforced when she moves to Everglades. There, she does not only listen to tales and stories but she begins to create and tell stories herself and with practice she becomes good at it. This is essential in her life too because storytelling sessions are a crucial part to the community life and participating is also relevant for the definition of the individual as part of this community. She needed to belong to a community and achieves it with her ability to tell stories, experiencing spiritual kinship and self and cultural identity.

It is also important to pay attention to the stories they told in the porch too, as Hurston also tried to include some relevant elements of traditional oral folktales in the novel. For instance, people told tales related to Big John de Conquer and his works “How he had done everything big on earth, then went up tuh heben without dying atall. Went up there picking a guitar and got all de angels doing the ring-shout round and round de throne” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 157). With the stories, Hurston also exemplifies African American concept of god. Here God is not the Christian god but a different force which is similar to the sun, the moon, the sky or the sea, also divine for them. Spiritual life is presented through folklore and mythology, as in Native American or Chicano cultures.

Setting the novel in Eatonville, Hurston is already making a political claim. It is the first of all black towns in the country and with this the author seems to be asking for more. It could be seen as a paradise for Afro-American people as they live and develop in a place which is far from the racism of the white world, where they can be majors, doctors or simply themselves. However, there are some limitations too, as although they do not have to struggle against racism coming from white people, they do face gossip, sexism and jealousy, as in any other town in the world. Eatonville is also a city opposed to the rural areas where Janie grew up and spent the first years of her life. It is the place where she loses her innocence and discovers her ability to deceive and where she learns to be herself. Because it is a city, it implies walls and buildings that seem to imprison her. In fact, she feels both physically and metaphorically confined by Joe in this place and needs to leave it behind in order to feel free again. Indeed, Eatonville is totally the opposite of the rural areas where she was happy as a child and where she became happy again with Tea Cake, in Everglades. Although ultimately she returns to the city, her attitude as a mature woman is completely different and now she will not let anybody imprison her again. It will turn into the place where she found her voice on the porch, where she decided to fight against Joe's abuses and where she would become independent.

Later on, by moving the story to Everglades, Hurston is able to offer a different version of Afro-American people, working on fields as slaves had done previously. Hurston offers readers an insight on the life of workers and describes the way they danced, sang or played blues, told stories and met after work. This was denied to slaves, but they always found ways to do it. Janie describes: "All night now the jooks changed and clamored. Pianos living three lifetimes in one. Blues made and used right on the spot. Dancing, fighting, singing, crying, laughing, winning and losing love every hour" (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 131). When Janie is there and recalls her life in Eatonville, she thinks of Everglades as the place where she could find herself and be free to tell and listen to stories. "Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself is she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest. Because she loved to hear it, and the men loved to hear themselves, they would 'woof' and 'booger-boo'" (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 134).

The stages Hurston puts Janie on are basic to understand her evolution. She first decided to marry a man she did not love because of her grandmother's experience as a

slave. Janie's mother was the product of a rape by the plantation's master, and her grandmother was even hit because the baby she had was white. She does not want her granddaughter to live like her and advises her to marry a wealthy man that can protect her. But Janie's concept of love differs much from this, and although she follows her grandma's advice, she feels miserable when she realizes that for her husband she is no more than a pack mule. Then she married Joe Stark, who considered himself able to rule over anyone and anything in Eatonville, who thought he was God-like and says "I god" (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 35). Among the things he thought he could control, he included Janie and even forbade her to speak with other common people. He was jealous of anybody getting around her and he obliged Janie to tie up her hair. Indeed, this is one of Janie's most characterizing features. Her straight hair was envied by black women while black men felt attracted towards it, probably because it symbolized white beauty model. When Joe realizes about that, he decides "She was there in the store for him to look at, not those others" (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 55). He is often compared to Joe the Grinder as his relationship with Janie resembles that of Jody's legend. In black folklore, Jody becomes a metaphor for stagnant and fleeting adulterous relationships. Traditionally he possesses the verbal abilities and sexual prowess to seduce lonely and vulnerable women but lacks however, the money and much of everything else to keep these women after their husbands come back. Joe, like his namesake is able to seduce Janie with his words too but does it promising to turn her into his wife and that she would be envied and admired by everybody else. However, although he achieves that, he is unable to subjugate Janie completely and despite all his public humiliations, she is able to turn the situation and win him with words. When he insults her in public, for the first and last time she responds him and wins:

Naw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n you kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brah, but' tain't nothin' to it but you' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout me looking' old! When you pull down you' britches you look lak de change uh life. (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 79)

Hurston provides Janie with the skill in the "dozen," a "black folk game of verbal agility in which participants attempt comically but seriously to out-insult each other. ... This folkloric device permits Janie to outperform Jody at his best skill, talking" (Ferguson 190). He is unable to control her and this makes him furious. However, Janie

feels free to say what she thinks for the first time and this will mean a beginning in her life. That is why she chooses a different man, a man who respected her and treated her as equal, Tea Cake, at least at first. Indeed, he is often compared to the African mythological figure of Stagolee. Just after they married he steals her two hundred dollars and wastes them on a night drinking and getting into trouble. He tells Janie that he just wanted to feel what it meant to be rich and promises that he will pay her back all the money he had spent gambling with the twelve dollars he had not wasted. As Stagolee he refuses to be secondary in society and “imbued with a heroic nature resistant to societal conventions, Tea Cake exhibits a freedom of spirit so assured of its own self-worth that he consequently cannot deny a similar feeling to the woman he loves” (Ferguson 192-3). However, he also behaves “bad” as Stagolee does. Indeed, he usually hits his wife in order to feel superior to her. He explains “Janie is wherever Ah wants tuh be. Dat’s de kind uh wife she is and Ah love her for it. ... Ah didn’t whup Janie’ cause she done nothin’ Ah beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 148). In this behavior, he again resembles Stagolee who, “when compared with the traditional epic hero, does not always act in regard for his people and his woman. His exploits are often performed to exhibit his virility” (qtd. in Ferguson 194).

Both Joe and Tea Cake want to exercise control over Janie and in both cases they are unable to do it. Indeed it could even be said that nature stops them. Jody becomes ill and dies and Tea Cake, who thinks he can survive the hurricane because of his mastery of the muck, is forced to flee it and struggles to survive the floods. He is bitten by a rabid dog and dies. What is more, with the depiction of both characters, Hurston also seems to be criticizing capitalism. Those characters that worry about material things are punished at the end of the novel, like Joe, Tea Cake and Nanny.

Although the two men form part of an important side of Janie’s life and somehow determined it, Hurston creates a powerful woman who decides not to be an emotional slave of the men she has married. She is able to attain personal identity embracing her culture and not transcending it, and above all, it could be said that the novel presents Janie’s search for herself. Her psychological development through the novel seems clear and could be described as an awakening, similar to that of other characters and to what Ecofeminists referred at the beginning of this dissertation. Indeed, she is closely related to nature in this vein. At the beginning of the novel, readers can see the connection



between Janie and trees. She “saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, and things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 8). Her sexual awakening is related to the pear tree in her garden, an event she observed with curiosity and that she related to love. “She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage!” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 11). Her evolution as from girl to woman transforms her also psychologically. She is sure what she does not want in her life and when Joe continuously mistreated her, she realized “She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be. She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 72). That day she starts to do what he never allowed her to do, speaking and participating in porch conversations. When she meets Tea Cake, she associates her feelings again to the blooming of the tree and states “He could be a bee to a blossom- a pear tree blossom in the spring” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 108), meaning that she was sexually attracted to him. And again she does what she wants to do, marrying him. And although their idyllic relationship was not always such, when he dies, she decides to keep him in memory, and tells the story to feel free and in peace, returning to Eatonville because she wanted to. Indeed, because Hurston placed Janie on the road to independence and self-realization, the novel has been considered feminist and was not well accepted by male critics of the time. As Boyd stated: “Whether Hurston saw it that way or not, she certainly used it to convey her view that women were the equals of men in every way – and that their inner lives were infinitely rich and worthy of exploration” (13).

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston presents a particular view of Afro-American women as independent and females who look for oneness that ignore the impositions of patriarchal societies. Hurston creates a woman who decides to live on her own and as she pleases after being subjugated to three different men who wanted to control her in different forms. When Janie decides to marry the man she wanted, she gains confidence to deviate from the traditional role imposed on southern women. When

she leaves her first husband and marries Joe, she ignores traditions and does what she pleases. When she finally escapes this marriage too, she goes a bit further ignoring societal norms and acts in small ways to regain her self confidence, as letting her hair down. Then she decides she is not willing to look for another man now that she is a widow and has recovered her freedom. She wants to return to the natural world and finally, when she returns to her hometown after burying Tea Cake, she does not act as a traditional woman again. She refuses to be subordinated to society and decides to continue with her life ignoring traditions. Through her, Hurston discovers the manipulation of society that imposes rules and conventions on women but not on men, and how they can be turned down by women like Janie, who embodies natural features and decides not to be oppressed by men or the communities, like Ecofeminists think.

All ethnic literatures in the United States of America share certain features that distinguish them. Oral tradition, storytelling, mythology, folklore are terms that define them and their importance within the context of American literature. Contemporary ethnic writers do not forget their origins and expose them in their novels, grounding their texts in the traditional stories they had heard as children, in their families and that were usually trespassed from generation to generation. They also form part of the culture of the United States, a country of multiple diversities. Asian American, European- American and Chicano writers are not very different from Native American and Afro American ones in terms of storytelling and oral traditions, as the following chapters will demonstrate.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

## STORY AND STORYTELLERS IN NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE

Storytelling. At base that is what American Indian authors and poets are doing — storytelling.

Weaver — *Other Words*

Native American people have used stories, myths and folklore for centuries. Oral tradition filled their needs in different sectors and good songs and stories fostered their culture and tradition. Storytellers played one of the most important roles within the community and tribe, being in charge of the continuity of their history and therefore, of their own continuity as tribes.

As Jace Weaver states, storytelling is the base of what American Indian authors and poets are doing. Stories and storytelling were and continue to be a basic pillar of Native American culture and have influenced Native American authors as well as non-Native American ones, and this means that it is alive and evolving. Indeed, these authors include innovations in form, content and style that reflect this evolution. They have adapted their works to current circumstances and can be attached to new movements. Storytelling ritual has also gone through tremendous changes to fit to new tendencies, problems and methods, including new technologies. Above all, Native American literature has turned from being considered literature for children into one of the most relevant and prolific in the American literary panorama.

For all this, this chapter will provide a broad description of Native American oral storytelling from varied and different perspectives that will go through a depiction of how it has been historically regarded, how the works of contemporary Native American writers include oral tradition but still remain innovative and functional in today's world and how these adaptations have been produced.

## 2.1. NATIVE AMERICAN STORYTELLING AND LITERATURE: CRITICISM AND RENAISSANCE.

Despite the importance of traditional oral stories and the figure of storyteller for Native American communities, Native American oral tradition has not always been praised or well-considered by colonizers. Indeed, for decades Native American literature has been treated as tales for children because of the way the stories were told or just because Native people actually used stories to educate their children and to establish certain norms of behavior and basic knowledge about Native culture and traditions. They did it because it was the best way to preserve them. Anglo-Saxon educational system implied ignoring most of the traditional cultural elements of Native American people and making them learn their system and language without paying attention to their folkloric heritage. Getting involved in the American educational system meant losing most traditional values related to respect for nature and belief in the value of stories and spirits. This is something Native American people have learnt from their ancestors and that they were not and still are not ready to lose.

This feeling of superiority of Western communities and literature towards Native American literature was also based on the fact that the latter was not written down, and for them, any customs or literary versions that came from Europe were thought to be superior to those which could have evolved from other cultures, even when those cultures were ancestral, like that of Native American people. This perspective, known as Eurocentric has been extensively debated by plenty of critics. Ib Johansen states and summarizes,

In the Western world we frequently come across the misconception that what makes Western civilization superior vis-à-vis other (non-European) cultures — and in particular vis-à-vis Native *American* culture — has to do with the importance of *writing* in our part of the world, i.e. with the fact that we are (or regard ourselves as) *masters of the written word*. (91)

Scott Momaday also referred to this in long conversation with Rupert Costo held in 1970. He considers that for a long time, Native culture has not been valued “in terms of the modern dominant society” (10). He considers there has been acculturation as a one-way process in which “the Indians ceases to be an Indian and becomes a white man” (10). For him, this has been always a political and diplomatic objective, even if people

do not want to admit it. This means that it seemed European and American authorities felt the need of changing Indian ways and teaching Native people their culture, but not the opposite, that is, they did not consider it necessary to learn about Indian traditions and culture. It was, as Momaday says a one-way process that he considers it should turn into a two-ways one.

However, it is difficult to understand a group of people or a certain minority when no attention is paid to their folklore and traditions, and this has been the case of Native American literature. Native American criticism has been irrelevant for most critics until the first half of the twentieth century because until then it had been studied by anthropologists. It was not until Franz Boas developed the discipline called “ethnography” that critics started to pay attention to what Native cultures had to say about themselves “both as individuals and as members of non-western cultures” (Nelson 265). For Robert Nelson, Boas and his followers were also the pioneers in transcribing oral stories into written ones and after him, they started to consider it “authentic Native American literature” (266), although the first versions of translations had already been offered by Spanish priests and French Jesuits, and in the nineteenth-century Henry Rowe Schoolcraft and other collectors of oral literature had offered three versions of a text “a representation in the tribal language, a literal translation, and a more literary translation” (Roemer “Introduction” 5). The second development in Native American criticism had to do with the creation of what is known as “ethnopoetics — literally, the study of the poetic of an ethnic group — as a site where disciplines of ethnography and literary criticism intersect” (Nelson 266). For this author, other scholars like Kroeber, Ramsy, Dell Hymes or Tedlock learned how to recover all the original aspects of oral performances that were lost once they had been transcribed. They offered sophisticated combinations of bilingual representations inserted within a context. For Kenneth Roemer, there was a huge variety in translations. For instance Fran Boas’ “huge blocks of prose punctuated by pause lines and parenthetical numbers indicating five-line units” or Antony Mattina’s attempts to use “Red English” representations to include the grammar and diction of English-speaking storytellers, or Dell Hymes’ and Tedlock’s use of “narrative verse forms and typography to represent dynamics” (“Introduction” 23). Anyway, this “ethnopoetics” was a cultural phenomenon followed by the Native American Renaissance around mid-century, when Native American literature started to

be studied as a discipline on its own. After that, Native American authors started to adapt native forms to cultural values imposed by Western literature and audiences.

Although anthropologists still occupy much of the territory in the study of Native American literature and storytelling, the growing importance of Native American literature has created a wide body of criticism and now it is studied in classrooms, conferences and even the Internet. Indeed, in a recent conversation that Gerald Vizenor held with Janna Knittel he gave his opinion about European literary critics and non-Native American critics of Native American literature and about the new developments in critical theory addressing Native American literatures, demonstrating in this vein that they are still recurrent topics and that they still raise controversy. Regarding the former, Vizenor thinks that the most important thing for critics is to understand that native writers have a difficult task in turning oral into written literature and keep metaphors and other literary devices alive. This is difficult for everybody because according to him, some Native critics do not understand Native literature either, and some Native writers do not understand Native stories: “They are writing more toward New York expectations of publishers than they are experimenting with or trying to discover a relationship to imagistic story and impermanence and playfulness, teasing” (36). For him, an outstanding non-Native American critic of Native literature is Alan Velie who published the first critical study of Native American novelists called *The Four Masters of Native Literature: Silko, Welch, Momaday, Vizenor*. For Vizenor “he took each author and discussed their work in traditional literary theory, but it was good, very straightforward. He looked at narrative, structure, and syntax” (36). Although Velie was strongly criticized for his interpretation of Welch’s *Winter in the Blood*, Vizenor thinks that Velie was “a Shakespeare scholar from Stanford and he wasn’t phased by the critics of the critics” (36). He was good in applying a really useful, critical and thematic interpretation of different authors instead of making a category of “Indian Literature,” which for Vizenor means “nihilism and tragic” (37). Vizenor explains “They were works of literature. That’s the first time that happened” (37). Apart from Velie, in this conversation Vizenor also referred to Arnold Krupat, who “had high integrity as a critical interpreter” (37), and to Louis Owens, who “had a really broad knowledge of literary theory” (38), and who would also use the new theories of post-structuralism, postmodernism and deconstruction. He thinks that Owens was good at realizing that



words and scenes change in Native stories, and was “very good at bringing this together to show that Native writers were working in the influences of oral sources and practices with literary style and technique. He was the first to do that” (38).

In relation to the second question about the new developments of critical theory addressing Native literatures, Vizenor explains that he has been trying to find a new critical interpretation of Native literature. He intends to get out of the separatist approach to Native literature, that is, the author should not be a critical presence in reading the text, he should be a visionary presence, because he had to imagine. He wants to get “the visionary power, which I call ‘transmotion’... something across that we understand as ordinary motion or movement in a narrative” (39). He tries to draw the reader into a story that is in motion and then wants to let the reader become the storer in a sense, recognizing the creative power of the author and this visionary transmotion, and to be carried along “with its impermanence, its chance, its enlightenment, its play, its tease” (39).

What is true is that stories and ceremonies from Native American oral traditions contained highly sophisticated grammatical and style structures that were not attended by these first ethnographers and anthropologists when they started to collect and preserve written records of oral tales and stories. This was because of two main reasons: firstly they probably considered that oral forms were inferior to written ones and secondly they most likely could not even differentiate them because they were really strange for Western people. Franz Boas and other researchers only recorded these stories from several native traditions and translated them into English, ignoring the complex features that were typical of the originals. More recent researchers, such as Dell Hymes, Jerome Rothenberg or Paul Zolbrod have analyzed and translated them again, but this time they have also incorporated the poetic and rhetorical characteristics of oral literature as Nelson states above.

The question was also what Native American literature is, as this was a controversial topic as well. Some critics seem to have it clear, like Roemer, who considers that Native American literature is “immensity and diversity” (“Introduction” 2). For him, when we refer to the body of oral and written literature we could even use plural, especially when dealing with oral literatures, because before Columbus arrived, there were thousands of

narratives, songs, ceremonies and speeches and all of them could be subdivided into other categories such as creation, trickster, hero or animal stories. For him “cultural and regional variety multiplies the genre diversity ... and all this was (and still is) a dynamic cultural diversity” (Roemer “Introduction” 4). He goes a bit further and considers that diversity also includes how the literatures are experienced and that most the time students who encounter Native American literature are limited and misled because these encounters often hide the role of mediation by translators, editors or publishers and they hide the tremendous diversity of written and performance forms used over the past five centuries and that represented oral literature (Roemer, “Introduction” 5).

Other critics are not so optimistic about what Native American literature means. For example, Michael Dorris considers that the term Native American literature does not exist basically because for many people a “National literature” can only emerge when there is a coherent group of people, who share some consciousness and which can be identified in terms of their language or tradition. This is impossible for Indian people because as he says “if there had ever been a North American language called ‘Indian,’ the mode of communication within a society called ‘Indian,’ there would undoubtedly be something appropriately labeled ‘Indian literature.’ But there *was* not, and *is* not” (147). Dorris states that this happened because when Europeans arrived in North America, they ignored the cultural pluralism of people there and considered all of them in the same terms. For him, without any knowledge of the cultural context, of the position and role of the storyteller, of the roles played by men or women, a reader or a listener finds it very difficult to penetrate to the core of literature (150). Besides, he also states that apart from the difficulty that coping with the diverse and large traditional Native American oral literatures entails, many “other types of writing as well are often included within the genre” (152). He refers to the multiple volumes of fiction about Native American people that were written by non-Native people and which have spread many stereotypes as “Wild West shows, cowboy and Indian movies, boy scout ceremonies, and cigar-selling statues” (152). For him, it was not until some appreciated contemporary Native American writers such as Momaday, Silko, Welch or Ortiz started to be praised that the term ‘Native American Literature’ came into sense because they “fulfill a rather non-traditional artistic role; rather than primarily interpreting or bringing

out a fresh vision of society for their context communities, they are interpolating and translating their communities for other culture” (154).

Jace Weaver refers to Michael Dorris’ words about this shared consciousness and says that “more than a decade later it seems there is indeed such a thing as Native American literature, and I would argue that it is found most clearly in novels written by Native Americans about the Native American experience” (26). She considers that despite the fact that Indian authors write from diverse tribal and cultural backgrounds, there is a remarkable degree of shared consciousness and identifiable worldviews in the novels of American Indian authors, “a consciousness and worldview defined primarily by a quest for identity” (26). She states that for her the single thing that defines Indian literatures the best is the sense of community and commitment to it that she calls “communitism,” a neologism that she has coined and which is formed from the combination of the words “community” and “activism” or “activist”. For her, literature is communitist to the extent that “it has a proactive commitment to Native community, including the wider community” (43). She considers that in communities that have been colonized, to promote communitist values means “to participate in the healing of the grief and sense of exile felt by Native communities and the pained individuals in them” (43). For her, writing is the best form Native writers have to recover identity and culture because

Native writers speak to that part of us the colonial power and dominant culture cannot reach, cannot touch. They help Indians imagine themselves as Indians. Just as there is no practice of Native religions for personal empowerment, they write that the People might live. (44-5)

P. Jane Hafe is quite critical regarding this topic. She considers that Indigenous people have survived colonization, although they have been inevitably influenced by Western impositions, as the use of English as the main vehicle of communication suggests. She also states that it is not her wish to become essentialist or imply that only Native American people should study and write about Native American literature and culture, although she is sure that academic training “analogous to any other field is necessary” (28). She considers that many people could write about Indians effectively although many others are a bit confused with the romantic and villainous image that has been shown about Indigenous. She goes a bit further and catalogues scholars who deal with native topics in three ways: the first type is the one she calls “dilettantes” or

“tourists,” and that she defines as those who publish articles or present conferences about Indian Americans without understanding the “diversity of tribal cultures or contexts” (30), just because they have encountered the text in a course. The second type is those who “re-colonize” literature “through theoretical applications that may work in the intellectual abstract, but have little to do with the tribal contexts that produce the literature” (30). Some of them, according to Hofen, spend their lives studying Native people and literature without ever meeting them, and this leads to continuous mistakes. Finally, a third type corresponds to those scholars who are worried about being accurate and who are aware of “the political implications of their work” and she considers them their allies (30). She believes that contemporary Native American writers and scholars have a real task because thanks to their writings, people will be able to understand Native culture and will learn what they are and what they are not. Hofen and other native scholar are aware of their responsibilities: “We are aware that studying Native peoples in the academy goes beyond intellectual enterprise. We are aware that what we write and what we present will shape how others perceive Indian peoples. Too much of our energy is spent explaining what we are not” (Hofen 38). For her, contemporary Native people “are not trapped between worlds. As twenty-first century indigenous peoples, we are survivors” (39) and should honor those critics which have laid the foundations for ethical criticism of American Indian literatures.

Indeed, time has proved Native American literature is as valuable as European one, although it was based on oral tradition. In fact, this is what makes it so extremely interesting and special. Native American people have been moving and trying to adapt to new situations, which in many cases were extremely hostile. As Karl Kroeber states,

Indians did not sit around telling traditional stories because they were archetypal. Some stories were told for amusement and relaxation, but a majority was active applications of tribal historical experience to specific current issues, communal as well as individual. Storytelling served to enable the group to evaluate whether old procedures and ideas were still the most effective, or needed to be altered to suit new circumstances. (2-3)

Storytelling was for them one of the most or probably the most important part of their culture (Kroeber 6). Although they “delighted in jokes and funny tales... many of their stories dealt with very serious social, moral, environmental, and psychological problems central to their immediate well-being” (Kroeber 6). It was their main form of

communication and their literature. That is why storytellers were so important for the community. The storyteller was at the center of the community and his/her activities are considered essential to create a sense of identity and self awareness and storytelling was a weapon to survive, both physical and culturally, since they are oppressed by the modern world and the cultural impositions of white people. Besides, this statement about the irrelevance of Native American literature also seems absurd if we pay attention to the importance it has acquired recently with a group of new Native American authors who take old storytellers as a source of inspiration and who form the so called Native American Renaissance.

In the last decades there has been an outpouring of contemporary Native American literature which has been defined as Native American Renaissance. The term was coined after the publication of the novel *House Made of Dawn* by Scott Momaday but the group would include other writers such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, James Welch, Gerald Vizenor, Joy Harjo, Louis Owens, Thomas King, and Simon Ortiz, among others. Most of them were born after World War I and started to write after the 60s about Native American subjects. Their relevance is admired by many literary critics who classify Native American Literature among the best developments in North American literary production since 1968.

Some scholars seemed reluctant to use the phrase Native American Renaissance because it could imply that the productions before that time were non-significant or not based on community or tribal roots, as James Ruppert explains (173). However for him, the term is quite useful because it is true that between 1968 and 1977 there was an unprecedented increase of work by Native American writers and that literature changed after that. People became interested in Native Americans and authors were inspired and encouraged as it was possible to be successful and remain true to their heritage. Some reasons for this rebirth could be the Civil Rights Movement which focused attention on Native Americans or the counter-cultural perspective of youth movement which encouraged people to investigate and pay attention to minorities, an increasing desire to explore Native perspectives as social criticism and to the Indian “takeovers” at the BIA in Washington and at Wounded Knee in 1973, which highlighted the activism of American Indian Movement (AIM) or to the National Endowment for Arts and a program of support for literary magazines dedicated to Native writers, and to a

community of Native writers which emerged at that time and which formed a network of writers who shared common values and interests (Ruppert 173).

Since the colonial contact, Native languages and the oral traditions communicated through these languages were in danger of extinction. Native American people were no longer allowed the right to maintain their languages or practice their oral traditions, and many of them disappeared, or at least nearly disappeared. During the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, most Native authors were educated in European and American values and therefore, they published most of their works following Western standards. Although their topics were basically native, their style was mainly based on European forms and the typical features that made oral tradition so special were nearly eradicated. However, with the Native American Renaissance the incorporation of native stories and poetic elements whose origin was basically oral meant the return to the most typical Native American tradition. In the past oral traditions were used to pass cultural knowledge through stories and in this way teach new generations. Now, these authors will continue with the same ultimate purpose, but this time the cultural knowledge will be transmitted through writing. Consequently, they would be able to create a particular contemporary Native literature. These authors have demonstrated that criticism prior to the 1970s were completely wrong, that they are not lost between two world but are proud of their origins and try to reconstruct the vision that American readers have about Native people and oral literature. As Ruppert states “Their works may grow out of Western literary forms, but they are forms being used for Native purposes that may vary from negating stereotypes to emphasizing cultural survival” (x).

Indeed, the 1970s witnessed the appearance of multiple paperback reprints and publishing companies that would focus on Native American writers, such as Harper & Row’s Native American Publishing Program (1971), which published Simon Ortiz’s, Reynolds Price’s and James Welch’s works. Works by Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, Paula Gunn Allen, Michael Dorris or Sherman Alexie would get international reputation and win major awards. As Roemer states, these critics and scholars needed sessions, conferences and publishing programs that started to become important since the 1970s, when the Modern Language Association and the Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures fostered national discussions at MLA conventions. At present there are organizations that support the field of storytelling and oral literatures,

such as the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers, gatherings such as Native American Literature Symposiums, and journals and newspapers which include discussions of contemporary Native authors; even the most important companies like HarperCollins, Norton or St. Martin's publish works by these authors and they also find support from several university presses. As Roemer defines it, Native American literature has gone "from ignored to required, from dry bed to mainstream" ("Introduction" 3).

However, there is still much debate about the necessity of including Native American literature within the canon of American literature, about the relevance that Indian writings have had, have and will continue to have in the North American context and the importance of Native American writers in the formation of a national culture.<sup>49</sup> The distinction that considered that Native American literature was not literature because it was based on oral principles does not seem to be an excuse any more. This distinction did not have the same connotations when Greek literature was concerned, as epic oral literature coming from Greece was indeed considered literature. This is why many critics have considered the necessity of reevaluating what canon means and the possibility of including Native American writers and texts within it.

Arnold Krupat states that Americans usually wonder about two main tendencies, the western and Europeans they no longer were and the Indians they did not want to become (97). This is the reason why they do not seem to have any interests in including Native literature within their canon. For him, in order to include Native American texts within the American canon, there should be not only an opening, but a complete restructuring of what the canon is. This opinion is also shared by Harold H. Kolb Jr. He considers that the non inclusion of American Indian literature into the canon is just a reflection of the political tendencies in the country and the interests of the ruling class, apart from the fact that this reflects the total cultural illiteracy and unawareness of the nation (39). He considers that although the canon is not fixed, it usually tends to develop and include white literature. He divides the canon in three levels. In the first level, he includes authors which are a "must"; in the second level authors who "should

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<sup>49</sup> The canon can be defined as a "body of texts having the authority of perennial classics or great books" (Krupat 12) or as the name for "that body of texts which best performs in the sphere of culture the work of legitimating the prevailing social order" (Krupat 12).

be generally acquainted with” and finally, in the third level, there are authors who are good samples “based on interest, community happenstance.” Of all Native American writers, only Momaday would have the privilege of being in the second category, the rest belong to the category of minority authors.

Although there are some Native American authors who are well recognized, such as Michael Dorris, Louise Erdrich, D’Arcy Mckrikle, Silko or Welch, there are still problems to accept them. This would mean breaking stereotypes and learning Native American culture from their own point of view, not the western one, something not everybody is ready to accept. The Secretary of Education William Bennet (1985-1988) had complained about the possible reevaluation of the canon of “great books” after Alice Walker had been included within it, alluding that it would be “culturally subversive, a sign of moral and intellectual bankruptcy” (Simard 243). Simard seems to agree with him and considers that her inclusion means the beginning of the end of American canon and that Western culture and civilization are in serious danger. However, he does not believe it because he is an anarchist, but he considers that her inclusion within the American canon was done for the wrong reasons and in the wrong manner, and this is basically because “the ideological foundation of the canon is itself fraudulent” (243). Although it is quite straight forward, those concepts such as verity, greatness and goodness are not absolute qualities, yet “the American literary canon is founded on just this assumption” (243). He states:

Our canon of instructive texts is not simply those that are the ‘best’ in any absolute way, but those that are the best in conveying, sustaining and confirming the dominant social order of the moment, something far more mutable than the rubric *American* might suggest. (243)

For him, literature should not only be the tool used to show social matters but it should become the text of society, which explains and supports the sociopolitical reality or fiction (243), and because of that he considers that the national literature should be viewed “as the text of the country it its multifaceted, multicultural, multiethnic, multiexperiential reality” (244). However, in his opinion Native American literature has usually been undervalued and although it could be included within the canon, the problems of authenticity it suffers make it impossible. For him the issue of authenticity within literature has basically to do with “authentic text, authentic translation and authentic author” (244). However, even recognized authors such as Momaday have had



to explain their real origins and have been accused of not being real Indian. Indeed Momaday himself was strongly criticized because of his definition of what a true Indian was (244). What is more, there are authors who claim to be Indians while they are not, as well as problems related to translation and to the Native American oral background and language. He concludes making an announcement about the need of paying attention to Native literature:

American history, literature, and society must now all be revised in the light of their inconvenient but very real complexities; essential to such an effort is the acknowledgment of her first citizens, their enduring roles, and their formidable contributions. Only then can we fully embrace those who came later — and continue to come—to our hemisphere, continent, and country, those who comprise our national texts. (248)

For Jace Weaver, a manifestation of the theoretical domination by America-European is the attempt to establish a canon of Native literature or to subsume it to a national literature and establish its worth within the national canon. She states: “Almost always, that which is considered for canonization is the traditional orature of the People” (22). For her there is still much at work in relation to the discussion of canon and orature and “limiting consideration or admission to the canon to orature is a way of continuing colonialism. It once again keeps American Indians from entering the twentieth century and denies to Native literary artists who choose other media any legitimate or ‘authentic’ Native identity” (23). However, Weaver also thinks that insisting on a genuinely heterodox canon which includes American Indian literature, as Krupat does, may have undesirable implications because it may become an instrument of control “as Eurocentric standards of judgment are employed to claim into the national canon only those works of which the *métropole* approves, those which best legitimate the existing social order” (23).

For Kenneth M. Roemer, things are not so negative in his essay “Contemporary American Indian Literature: The Centrality of Canons on the Margin.” He thinks that there is a heightened Native American consciousness at present and that Native literature is getting a place within American literature. Native American authors are more visible, respected and accessed by specialists, although the problem still lies on nonspecialists who may be “overwhelmed by the abundance of titles” (“Contemporary” 584). That is why he believes that a canon of Indian writings could help teachers identify

a number of respectable and recognized Native American texts. The collection of these titles will depend on how editors can communicate ethical, critical and aesthetic issues, so that nonspecialists may be able to analyze and teach Native American texts with intellectual rigor. He provides as an example the responsibility editors have to explain certain topics when they choose collections of oral narratives, autobiographies or liturgies, as they are quite unknown for English professors. On the contrary, English teachers are indeed quite familiar with contemporary Native American literature, as this has been deeply influenced by Euro-American authors, also familiar to English teachers. This is why most examples of Indian literature found in anthologies include works by contemporary writers. He goes a bit further, considering that this contemporary native literature is similar to modernism because there are continuous examples of “economically, racially, and sexually alienated protagonists; provocative examples of modernist and postmodernist literary experimentation; and profound attempts to define the American landscape” (Roemer, “Contemporary” 585). These are elements which can be also present in twentieth-century American novels and the reason why these “texts may seem to teach themselves” (Roemer, “Contemporary” 585). However, he wants to make it clear (like many contemporary authors did too) that there are certain distinctive features in contemporary Native American literature, which may be crucial for its study. These features are the relevant role of oral traditions, the distinctive sense of place, and the concern with the details of daily hurting and healing, and the multiethnic character of the experiences portrayed (Roemer, “Contemporary” 585-6). He thinks that if nonspecialists and students are not informed of the close relationship existing between these features and contemporary Native American novels and poetry, then

... it is probable that the most accessible genres in the Native American canon will remain admired but marginalized forms of American literature, whereas they should be perceived as essential expressions of the late twentieth-century American literature that generate fundamental questions challenging all contemporary American writers and readers. (Roemer, “Contemporary” 586)

Roemer believes one of the most important characteristics of Native American contemporary texts is the relevance they provide to oral storytelling, which has also been the focus of numerous studies; however, not all contemporary authors approach it in the same manner, because not all authors have received the same cultural

background. Roemer (quoting Coltelli) believes that in order to be considered a recognizable and acceptable Indian author a Native writer does not have to restrict him or herself to Native American setting, images, language and values. These authors do not want Native American literature to be segregated in the American literature and this is a way of doing it.

However, provided the importance oral storytelling and tradition has in this doctoral dissertation, the most coherent opinion regarding Native American literature and the canon has been recently expressed by Ishmael Reed in *New York Times*, in an article entitled “Cure the Canon of Literary Agoraphobia” (2015). Here he exposes that fiction can take you into the experience of others, where “you might find difference but also, commonality” (Reed). In his opinion, Anayas’ *Bless Me Ultima*, explores tragedies experienced by Chicano families in the Southwest. Victor Cruz, Nancy Mercado and Pedro Pietri, among others, explore Puerto Rican life. Silko, Welch, Harjo, Vizenor and Donald Two Rivers take readers beyond Hollywood stereotypes of Native Americans. Shawn Wong and Frank Chin tell us about the Chinese working class on the railroads and gold mines. They all do the same. Those that want to ban ethnic studies or do not consider them worth to be included within the canon are not aware, in his opinion, that at the age of fourteen, T.S. Eliot was inspired by Omar Khayyam or Ezra Pound studied Chinese poetry written in Chinese characters. Both Khayyam and Chinese character would probably be located in Ethnic studies. For him,

The current literary establishment suffers from a kind of literary agoraphobia. They can only view multicultural literature in one at a time tokens. They seem afraid to recognize anything other than something called ‘Eurocentrism,’ or ‘Western civilization,’ bunker terms that I have never heard uttered by the scores of European intellectuals, scholars and artists whom I have met on numerous trips to Europe beginning in 1955. (Reed)

Regardless the multiple opinions about the inclusion of American literature within the canon, the importance Native American writers and other ethnic minority writers have and will have to define their culture and history is unquestionable. They have been able to transmit oral culture in their writings and this has made it available to Native and non-native readers. What is more, oral traditions are not only valuable for Native American culture, but it is the base of all literatures, including the literature written in the United States. American society was formed out of the oral literary traditions

imported from what they considered minority groups, and this is what contemporary critics have been trying to explain for the last two decades. It is not only that Native culture was based on oral roots, and that these oral roots have helped them to maintain their culture alive despite Western impositions as most critics like Nelson, Matchie or Kuprat state. It is also that American culture would not have been the same without the influence of these traditions coming from ethnic groups that they had considered inferior precisely because of their lack of written records. It is necessary to learn about these people, about their stories, their myths, their traditions or folklore because this would help North American readers to learn about Native American people as well and to understand that part of their culture is also based on theirs.

## **2.2. NATIVE AMERICAN STORYTELLING: ADAPTING TO NEW TIMES.**

Native American storytelling has evolved and undergone births and rebirths but still provides an important base for contemporary culture, not only Native American. Contemporary authors have been able to cope with the difficulties that transforming oral into written literature entails and those related to adapting to a wider audience which also includes non-native readers, and they were successful. They have adapted their works to overcome language trouble, modified style and contents to new times and movements. Storytelling process has also changed itself and new forms are trendy nowadays which include the use of new technologies and the presence of a new type of storyteller that differs in form but not in the ultimate purpose from traditional storytellers. This is what this subheading deals with.

### **2.2.1. Adapting forms, style and content.**

Contemporary Native American authors have always relied on oral literary forms. The values of old ancestors persist in today's native literature because Native American novelists look back at their old people to find a way of inspiration and a guide for their own works. They have always admired and imitated the old storyteller figure, so present in their childhood, and the stories they were told. While creating fictional storytellers, contemporary authors are influenced by their previous knowledge. Storytelling plays an important role because these authors have to keep the essence of which they are in order to tell the rest of American society who they are and why they are so important. For Kenneth Lincoln, Indian writers look back to "storytelling and "winter count" historians telling tribal time by imaging events on animal skins. Poets recall visionary singers and healers who draw the people together in ceremony. Dramatists remember ritual priests and cultural purveyors of daily tribal life. Essayists reach back to political leaders and orators in council (41-2).

However, although oral tradition was of extreme relevance in their works, they also used European and American forms. Indeed, by writing in English but at the same time experimenting with European literary forms, these authors have been able to increase their number of readers while retaining many of the most essential features of their ancestors' oral tradition. Michael Dorris believes that contrary to stereotypical ideas, contemporary Native American writers are completely aware of the place and time in which they live. There is a new generation of Native American people who use English as their main vehicle of communication because they need to adapt to the culture that surrounds them, but this "English is accommodated to the special needs of their individual tribal histories and realities. In their literature, whether oral or written, this transformed English is adjusted to accord with their particular traditional aesthetic" (156). Speaking English is useful for them in their daily lives. They can deal with common problems related to paperwork or work in general. They can participate of American social life too, but without leaving their own language behind. Writing in English also helps authors be internationally recognized and read and reach a larger audience that understands what they want to mean when they write about their tribes and culture without using a dictionary, among many other benefits. Though Native American writers, journalists, politicians and artists may use the English language, as Rostkowski states, "the language that they use is infused with the survivance of Native American cultures" (xv).

This does not mean that they suffered no trouble in doing that. Indeed, American Indian storytelling was so significant precisely because they had never used written language. This meant that contemporary native writers had to adapt these oral forms into written literature. As they had been deeply influenced by storytellers and because they respected them and considered them of vital importance for the community, their mission also included being able to transmit with letters what they only told orally. In this vein, they would also help preserve myths, stories, legends and folklore in general, that had until then only been told aloud.

These contemporary Native American writers have found, therefore, multiple difficulties in dealing with the need of translating old traditions into modern times and ancestral topics into current ones, or to be more concrete, in translating oral literature into written literature. As Anna Secco states in her essay "The Search for Origins

through *Storytelling in Native American Literature: Momaday, Silko, Erdrich*,” one of the most important problems contemporary Native American writers have to face has to do with the two poles in which this literature is divided: “the oral tradition of the People and the written tradition of the white man” (59). She believes that “the problem of translating ancestral idioms and languages into English has increased the tension inherent in this polarity and has become of crucial importance for the Native American writer today” (59). She mentions the fact that contemporary writers fear betraying the oral tradition they have inherited from their ancestors while they are writing their novels. This is a conflict that they have to resolve and which is many times terribly hard for them (59). She also states:

Orality, thus, manifests itself as a ‘primaveral mystery’ that eludes all rational logic and objectivity. The Native American writer is confronted with the old fear of loss and emptiness which is heightened by a sense of impotence when oral tradition dictates the structure and flow of the written word, experimenting with orality means being caught up in the ‘vertigo of the past,’ being aware of another presence which, as Momaday writes, expands further and further beyond definition. (61)

It could be said that contemporary authors are interested in showing the quality of oral communication in their stories and combining oral and written traditions is what Bonnie TuSmith considers a “cross-pollination process” (25). They are mainly concerned with making words come alive “to see words change on the page, to get the story across ... to transcend the limitations of literary language” (TuSmith 25). However, unlike many other critics, TuSmith thinks that a way of getting this goal is to use vernacular speech patterns in the narratives. She points out, “By doing this the author generates an ambience of folk culture that, through communal voices, conveys a sense of shared experience and destiny” (25). At the same time they are also trying to validate their ethnic culture against the standards imposed by Euro American literature. The vernacular language can be defined, then, as a native language of a country which is different from the literary language or as the non standard everyday speech of a community or region. Both terms (‘native language’ and ‘everyday speech’) are important for ethnic writers. However, she also considers that although sociolinguistic standards establish that all languages and dialects are good and that there are no linguistic grounds that determine that English is better than any other language, the “long-standing and class-bound stigma of ‘substandard’ status and racial inferiority has

affected native writers, and because of that they tend to look for literary forms that are more harmonious with the cultural context in which they write (26). The same happens with Native American authors, and they, like the rest of ethnic writers, use certain techniques, that TuSmith catalogues into: “juxtaposition, circular structure, linguistic register changes, deliberate ambiguity, communal voice, and repetitions” and whose product requires “active audience participating in a listening posture. Approaching the text with an open mind helps” (26), to make their works look more oral oriented.

That is, in order to overcome the difficulties of including oral elements within written texts, contemporary authors use a series of techniques which help them maintain their oral roots but at the same time adapt to the new Western impositions and be more accessible to non-native readers. Indeed, it is very important to remember that these contemporary authors had also to face a second trouble, the fact that non native readers have a complete lack of awareness of what Native literature meant. Now the process seems to be inverted. In the past Native people had to learn, assimilate and accept Western society, and now contemporary authors want their audiences to learn about Native cultures in order to participate of their literature. In order to make this process easier and also to solve the problems that the transition from oral into written forms may cause, they tried to adapt some oral forms and maintain them in their writings.

#### **2.2.1.1. Language**

In relation to language, Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez is quite concise. She believes, like many other authors such as Dorris or Warrior that we need to examine language, evolution and people in order to learn about Native American culture. We must know something of the culture’s history, of their relations with people of their own tribes and Euro-American people, as well as learn something about the current setting of culture (*Contemporary* 34). De Ramirez thinks that we must understand other people’s words in order to understand their culture and frameworks and not try to put them under our own perspective (*Contemporary* 32). In this vein, language is the basic tool.

However, Indian languages have not been paid too much attention in this sense. When one thinks of English literature, we tend to think of literature which is written in the English language. However, it is not the same for American Indian literature as there



is no American Indian language. Native Americans speak more than fifty language families and hundreds of different languages. They may even be incomprehensible for the different tribes and this is why it is not until the last thirty years that the formal principles of Native languages have been studied scientifically, that dictionaries and grammar books have become available and that scholars have started to worry about what storytellers and authors actually wanted to say or meant with their words. According to Krupat, the first invaders of America considered that the verbal productions of Native orality were simply satanic. Because they had no written counterparts, they did not accept these oral performances as literature. These early travelers, missionaries and settlers recorded Indian mythology and stories and translated them as curiosities or evidences of superstitions, but they provided no literary value to these texts. Later on, the Bible would be translated into Algonquian, and during the Puritan period no attention was paid to Native songs or stories, and even less to their language. It was not until the eighteenth century that scientists started to feel some interest for Indian culture and language but they catalogued them as they did with rare species of animals or natural phenomena. In the nineteenth century the Romantic Movement started to focus on literature and language not only in their written versions, but also in the speech and songs that they called ‘folk.’ This meant just a short step “to hear Native expression as ‘naturally’ poetic as constituting a literature in need of no more than textualization and formal — ‘civilized’— supplementation” (Krupat 101). In the nineteenth century easterners who were interested in Indian matters were more concerned about the preservation of their lives and lands than in the preservation of literature and language (Krupat 102). However, with the anthropological development, there was also a growing interest in the cultures that were disappearing and the need to preserve some records and “a part of this exercise is what has been called ‘savage ethnography’ was the collection of many volumes of myths, tales, and ritual chants” (Murray 69). According to David Murray, these volumes failed basically because despite the efforts to present a faithful recording of Indian life, readers are not presented to it as literature (69). For Sophie McCall, in the first decades of the twentieth century, the discourse of the Vanishing Indian sparked several projects to research Aboriginal oral traditions, but as Murray also states, these projects were only examples of savage anthropology because they produced Romantic images of the Native “elegiac in mood” (19). For her, writers created the ‘Vanishing Indian’ which became a resonant image

for Canadian and American writers as they believed that the vitality of spoken Aboriginal language would enrich the new literatures of North America “as if poetic originality would spring from Aboriginality” (19). Therefore, as it was stated at the beginning of this chapter, it was not until the 1930s that some anthropologists started to worry about Native American language. Among them, Franz Boas and his followers, who recorded different Native people searching knowledge, regardless their inaccurate translation. They looked for authenticity and provided a text usually transcribed from a native language, with an interlinear translation, which translates each word exactly, then another looser translation into more fluent English and notes explaining the contexts. They also included some musical transcriptions using Western notation. As Krupat says, “The full value of what Boas and his students recorded would only begin to be revealed in the 1950s and after, when developments in anthropological linguistics would permit their translations to be modified for accuracy and to yield new translations of more apparent poetic value” (109). After World War II there is a first effort to study Native American language, and what this implied (songs, poetry or narratives), and after Native American Renaissance, there has been a deep study of the different characteristics that Native American authors have inherited from oral performances (in relation to language) and which they have applied to their writings.

Gerald Vizenor has written and dealt with this topic as well. In *Native American Literature*, he wonders about the problems that Indian language has had for authors who wanted to include oral based performances in their works. These problems are usually related to translation, and the varied difficulties writers have to deal with. He states that Native American Indian *survivance* is “heard in creation and trickster stories, dream songs, vision, and other presentations in thousands of native oral languages” (*Native* 42). Many of these oral narratives have been translated and published but this raises a main trouble “written translation, even when the languages are similar, is not a presentation of oral performances, and even the best translations are scriptural reductions of the rich oral nuances (*Native* 42). Vizenor considers that it is impossible to translate an oral performance and pretend the written version will be exactly the same. It is unfair to believe that any songs, dreams or creation stories will remain the same, with the same features, once it has been put into written word, because “the stories that are heard are not the same as the silence of the written word” (*Native* 43).

Despite the accuracy and abilities of the translator, it is impossible to copy the metaphors, the rich content of songs and stories told orally and define not only its semantic form, but also its implicit meanings. He states:

The translations of tribal stories are obscure maneuvers of dominance that contribute to the simulations of *indianness* over the distinct tribal memories and stories. Moreover, translations are scriptural, and the sudden closure of oral literatures favors written texts over *heard* stories; the eternal sorrow of lost sound haunts the scriptural translation of tribal stories. (46)

This topic has been the subject of deep analyses by other authors too, such as Harry Brown in “Uncomprehended Mysteries: Language and Legend in the Writing of Zitkala-Sa and Mourning Dove.” In this essay, Brown establishes that the first person who attempted to translate Native language into English was Roger Williams. He was the first to write a practical guide for communicating with Native Americans of New England, entitled *A Key into the Language of America* in 1643. It was considered one of the first efforts to translate Native language, however, like his predecessors, Williams also tried to convert Indians. For instance, in the chapter dedicated to Gods, he also wrote the English versions, although the British gods have nothing to do with Indian gods. There is therefore, a problem of untranslatability. This is why Brown wonders “How can translation, perhaps our only means of preserving Indian stories, really preserve them when the act of preservation itself changes them?” (65). According to Brown, contemporary scholars are more and more distant from Native oral traditions because they know that there is continuous and inevitable hermeneutic distortion of ritual stories (65). Although some scholars are more open minded and adopt a different approach to oral tradition, abandoning the insistence on cultural purity and accepting a more fluid and adaptable hermeneutic model. They believe that the role of the storyteller is more important than the linguistic context and this varies stories to fit the audience. According to Brown, their model is not a distortion of the original, but just an adaptation of tradition to fit to new social and historical demands. He says, “change represents the life, not the death of the tradition, and untranslatability represents not a barrier to understanding but rather the liberation of the storyteller to make new meanings from old stories” (67). That is, different authors have different versions of the relevance of accuracy while translating Native texts or oral performances into English, although the difficulty the task entails is not ignored by any of them.

Sophie McCall explains in *First Person Plural. Aboriginal Storytelling and the Ethics of Collaborative Authorship* that in 1997 the Supreme Court of Canada determined that the courts of law must admit oral traditions as evidences. For McCall this means that the use of oral traditions offers aboriginals a chance to contest colonial and racial assumptions about the Vanishing Indian or the Noble Savage. However, she also believes that despite the legal recognition of oral traditions, “profound difficulties of transcription and translation remain” (137). She considers that if we examine the content of traditional narratives in isolation from the circumstances that surround it, we miss the point that storytelling is embodied in a performance, a “series of situated telling, a moment or event in which interlocutors mutually shape meaning through communication” (138). What is more important, McCall considers that the interaction between teller and listener constitutes the story itself and “performing, translating and writing oral traditions are dependent upon the contexts of (re)telling” (138).

Other critics, such as David Murray, do not find translations so negative. He thinks that when we are dealing with Native American literature, we are always distanced from it as we are also dealing with mediation and translation. When we encounter Indian literature, this is steps removed from us, in “that it is in textualized form and is either translated by someone who is some distance from the tribe and oral situation” (69). However, he also believes that the main mistake is to assume that this is less authentically Indian, because this means we are assuming that there is only one way of being Indian and “that was to be traditional, oral and communal” (69). So we must accept that because these texts are translated they are not less Native American.

All this controversy finishes when it is stated that language was of extreme relevance for Native American people, as all critics seem to agree with that. Oral culture provided extreme importance to the ability to articulate experiences and believed that “if an event — something we first perceive with our senses — can be put into words, it can be incorporated into our lives,” (TuSmith 110). Native people believed that words even had the ability to cure and can be used as a medicine that helps people improve physically and spiritually. When people lose their ability to speak they are also losing their ability to relate, they become annihilated and need to recover this capacity again in order to become integrated within the society in which they live. In this context, contemporary Native American authors feel the need to keep the importance of their

languages within their novels and this would be a symbol of their approach to oral traditions too. As Roemer states, when critics discuss of Native American writing authors they refer “to important concepts of language and of place/time that have grown out of communal oral traditions. Traditional Native American word concepts move far beyond describing, communicating, and explaining to encompass generative powers of creating and interconnecting” (Roemer “Introduction” 16). As stated above, they use some techniques to help achieve it.

W.E. DuBois refers to the term ‘double-voicing’ as one of the characteristics of oral transmissions that is adapted into written texts. He considers that oral Native American folklore uses two types of registers, lyrical and colloquial. Lyrical voice is used in formal situations such as ceremonies and invocations and the colloquial voice is used in less formal situations, like while storytellers are telling stories and teaching younger generations. This is more representative of the myth and legends which were transmitted orally. Both registers were combined in the native verbal art and formed what these authors named ‘double-voicing.’<sup>50</sup> Because the oral traditions were functional and adapted to the different situations and with different purposes, they had to use different registers and sometimes they even used both of them at the same time. Native American writers would continue this tradition but it will fall out of use during the European invasion. It would not be until the Native American Renaissance that native authors reused this technique with incredible success.

There is also a second use of double-voicing in contemporary Native American literature. Most Native American writers have to face the challenge of writing in English, the language of the colonizer, about the colonial relationship and discourse but without perpetuating it. When these writers use and write in English, they usually risk walking on what Dee Horne calls ‘colonial mimicry,’ which is according to her, a tactic that colonizers used to impose their authority and rules on the colonizers, but which Native authors had to challenge (13). This challenge is called ‘subversive mimicry’ (12). This means that these authors critically interrogate the elements that they imitate and in the same way they assert their differences. For Horne, one of the forms subversive mimicry takes is that of a double voice on the part of the colonized. She

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<sup>50</sup> The term originally appeared in the book *The Souls of Black Folk*, and referred to the problems Africans had when they had to reconcile their origins with the European education they lately received.

refers to the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, who defined the concept as ‘hybridization.’ This means that contemporary Native American authors can create double-accented and styled texts in which one sentence or word may have different meanings belonging to two languages or belief systems, so that by including this technique writers are able to challenge colonial discourse without participating in its rules of recognition. Besides, according to Horne by using subversive mimicry Native American authors redefine the narrative practices and challenge the traditional idea that contact between cultures is “one way process — the imposition of one culture over another” (16). This is an important aim for which authors like Momaday, Silko or Erdrich have been fighting. They really want to make people understand that Native American literature is not inferior and that their culture is as valuable to be studied as any ‘major’ one.

Horne also includes double voicing within the term multiple-voiced narrative (19), and considers that because many readers are often unfamiliar with the cultural elements of American Indians, there is a gap that makes many subtexts and intertexts get lost. However, thanks to double-voice “embedded within a multicultural voiced narrative” (Horne 19), the readers are able to understand these cultural differences while at the same time they are able to imagine the effects of colonization not only from the colonizer’s perspective, but also from that of the colonized.

Horne is also quite categorical regarding contemporary Native Americans and their use of language. She considers that contemporary Native Americans and writers have had different experiences with colonialism and all of them consider that American Indians are still being colonized, but fight against it. In challenging colonial invasion and discourse, they use varied alternatives in which “American Indians are not seen in relation to colonizers but in terms of decolonized relation which are ever-shifting” (Horne 22). They use different strategies “to dance along the precipice of colonial mimicry” (Horne 22). These strategies include narrative ones, which go from the use of trickster discourse, to the challenge of cultural boundaries to the presentation of Native American people as no longer been the construction that colonizers have created (Horne 22). They create alternative hybrid works in which they support oral traditions and engage “readers in transcultural dialogues” (Horne 23).

Silence is another important technique used by contemporary writers. In oral tradition, language is combined with stories, and these silences involve even more than what is told, “they are a living dynamic practice that includes and interactive a special relationship to specific places” (Porter 39). This relationship is expressed through rituals and ceremonies that have the power to heal or the opposite and “integral to this is a reverence for the fundamental creative and transformative power of language, symbol and thought” (Porter 39). This is what opposes oral and written traditions. N. Scott Momaday tells us, “language bears the burden of the sacred, the burden of belief” and silence is “the dimension in which ordinary and extraordinary events take their proper places” (qtd. in Porter 40). So language was not the only means oral storytellers had to reach a climax in an oral performance (although it could have the major role within the representation); silence was also important. Native writers who want to imitate this create works which are similar to conversations, interactions between the text, the writer and the community. This means that contemporary novels that want to follow the principles of oral storytelling follow some rules which are only understood and known by some specific tribes. Porter states: “storytelling in the oral tradition established a dialectic relationship between text and interpretation” (44) and it is vital to understand Indian artistic expression which is culturally specific, oriented around specific beliefs and landscapes as well as around ceremonies which are sacred. This to which Porter refers is closely connected to the way Native American authors address the readers, as storytellers also do with their listeners when they are telling their stories. There is a kind of dialectic relationship among them and readers become an important part of the storytelling process, the same listeners are when these stories are oral.

Another important oral feature used by contemporary Native writers is the use of mythic language, that is, the use of traditional oral formulas while they are writing their texts in order to reflect orality too. As Robin Ridington stated: “the true story of these people, [Indians] will have to be written in a mythic language ... it will have to combine stories of old people coming together with other people, and those that tell of people coming together with animals” (qtd. in Kuprat 12). This means that Native American literature must be read and understood in different terms, in a rather mystical way, so that mythic language also makes reference to myths in general, as most contemporary writers make use of old folktales and stories that they include in their plots. This is clear in works such as Homer’s *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, which include passages of mythological

events or with many other works in Ancient Greece, because as studied before, a lot of folktale materials included chapters that came from mythological cycles or Greek oral literature. Besides, the same happened with other civilizations too. Asian American authors also included oral tales originally coming from myths in their native countries, or German authors like the Grimm Brothers did something similar too.

#### **2.2.1.2. Style**

In reference to style, it is relevant to notice the importance of using multiple perspectives or the creation of a community of voices. This means that many contemporary Native American writers are using multiple perspectives and storytellers, which provide the reader different points of view of the same tale. The main objective is presenting similarities to oral tradition, in which a story can also be told by different people and in different forms depending on the teller.

As stated above, the special relationship established between writer-reader or storyteller-listener is also a unique characteristic in the style of contemporary Native American works inherited from oral storytelling tradition. During the storytelling process there is always an impressive bond between the storyteller and the listener, in which the latter becomes an active participant “whose presence is necessary to the telling-creation of the story. The storyteller and listener interact throughout the process in a conversation that reflects the inherent interrelationality of storytelling” (De Ramirez, *Contemporary* 6). The same process is established between storyteller-reader in written novels. Consequently, the reader will be able to participate in the process actively, more than “is possible in more strictly textual forms of writing in which authorial control is given” (De Ramirez, *Contemporary* 6). De Ramirez also believes that because most contemporary Native American writers have been influenced by their respective tribal oral traditions, they largely put all this storytelling practice into process.



This storytelling process in which the audience or listeners are present while the story is being told demonstrates a conversive interaction that continually, cyclically, and repetitively turns its focus from storyteller to story to listener to descendants to other relatives and other persons, peoples, animals, things; and in this process, the listener's relationship to these "others" is emphasized such that the listener becomes part of the story herself. (*Contemporary* 31)

The storytelling process requires imagination both on the teller's and listener's side and Native American people really admired those storytellers who were able to evoke freedom with words, while retaining the essence of storytelling, that is, the fact that these stories were actually their tribe's history and also a way of trespassing knowledge. The storyteller should be able to provoke the listener while being inventive and innovative. The audience should also see new meanings in old stories. Contemporary Native American writers should also be able to do the same. The dialogic relationship between the writer and the teller is also a very important feature that distinguishes Native American autobiographies.<sup>51</sup>

The concept of time and linear sequence is also relevant in the analysis of contemporary Native American novels, as it has also been inherited from oral traditions. Oral storytelling did not easily differentiate between past and present, as storytellers told tales about the past but to an audience which was sitting in front of them at that moment, so they had to adapt circumstances and verb tenses to the current situation. Because the oral traditions of the past are also incorporated into contemporary fiction, the distinction between present and past also seems to be insignificant in these novels. There is not a linear understanding of time in most novels. Authors prefer to use a non linear time sequence; indeed most times it turns into a circular one imitating the tribal beliefs of the sacred circle. It is also a way of refusing to accept Western linear concept

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<sup>51</sup> For Krupat autobiographies are the type of literary texts in which the self is shown and in his opinion, Native American autobiographies offer what he calls dialogic models of the self. This means that the main achievement is not getting special voice separate from the others, but "the achievement of a particular placement in relation to the many voices without which it could not exist" (133). Because there is an encounter between two persons and two cultures, Indian autobiographies become dialogues (133), not only dialogues between persons but also between cultures, or persons and cultures, providing images of the writer but also of the society that surrounds him/her (134). Although they should be monologues by only one single speaker, there is always a grade of dialogism and of the presence of other voices (141). J.B. Patterson's *Life of Black Hawk* (1933), L.V. McWhorter's *Yellow Wolf: His Own Story* (1940), William Ape's *A Son of the Forest* (1829) or Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* (1981) are referred by Krupat as examples of autobiographies in which there is a strong presence of dialogue and different voices.

of time and demonstrate, in this vein, that they can overcome or have survived their impositions. This also happens in other ethnic works. For instance ...*And the Earth Did not Devour Him* also presents a non-linear understanding of time and its lack of chronological order even makes it difficult its understanding as a novel.

Kuprat considers that because of the relation between contemporary Native American texts and oral traditions, the most recent and complex Native works differ extraordinarily in their procedures from those of the text-based culture. One of the main differences is precisely the use of non linear time sequence, although for him this is quite positive and even not so strange in current American life, in postmodernist fiction and even in poetry, television or music, in which print culture is losing relevance, or at least the relevance it had five hundred years ago, showing that “a wide public has lost interest in attempts to represent the world realistically in causally connected, continuous linear narrative” (55).

Besides, another important feature that defines contemporary Native American novels' style is the interconnectedness between different worlds. This means that both the spiritual and the physical worlds appear linked in the works and animate such as animals and inanimate objects coexist and form part of the same environment. This is also a feature inherited from oral tradition that contemporary Native American writers use in their written works in order to reflect their origins. Many Native American traditions state that there are different layers of reality that are interconnected and which cannot exist without the other, and this is the reason why many Native American works should be interpreted at various levels. This multiplicity is shown through the stories that form part of the work, and which reveal several aspects of the folklore and of the culture of the tribes, such as healing stories, creation stories and stories of power. The main character is usually in charge of discovering which reality he is dealing with, the spiritual or the physical one, and transmits it to the reader, the same the storyteller does for the listener.

This a quite enriching characteristic of contemporary Native American works, as they present a number of realities which have various meanings, or as Ruppert says “the narratives or stories establish a palpable reality. Moreover, we can see events as having meaning in a number of fields of discourse simultaneously as well as on a number of

levels of reality” (25). For him this is quite representative of novels in which the texts evokes multiple realities, and stories out of the interpretation and understanding that the writer wants to bring (25).

### **2.2.1.3. Protagonists.**

An important issue that distinguishes contemporary Native American novels is probably their protagonists. Most current works seem to set a certain type of main character who is closely connected to oral traditions and who will make use of this cultural background in order to find their places in their tribes and a reason to live. According to Alan Velie, the first generation of writers belonging to Native American Renaissance mainly used Indian characters who were terribly suffering for different reasons. Although they employed humor and topics were usually compassionate, most of the protagonists were heavy drinkers or poor, tormented people who did not know who or what they belonged to, or because they had participated in terrible events like the Vietnam War (264) and above all World War II.

Main characters in novels by authors such as Momaday, Silko, Welch and Erdrich were usually alienated from the society in which they lived and also from their own tribes. In most cases, they are both repelled and attracted by their native culture, usually because they are mixed-blood people who did not actually know which part they belonged to, or who were also economically and socially disintegrated. Most of these characters grew up within white society, since they had been sent to boarding schools where they were taught that Native Americans are illiterate and that the stories they were told in their childhood were just tales for children with no scientific base. When they return to their home tribes after this teaching experience, they are completely disoriented and do not know if they have to believe or not. They can be compared to mulatta characters in Afro-American literature. Because they are also mixed-blood, they are rejected by both white and black people. They live surrounded by the luxuries of white people that they will never get, and they are never fully accepted by Afro-American communities because the color of their skins is a reminder of oppression. They usually tend to isolation, as Native characters do, especially those who are also

mixed-blood. However, their isolation is also related to their participation in events such as World War II and the realization they turned into nobody once this had finished.

It is estimated that about forty-four thousand Native American men took part in World War II. This meant more than ten percent of the Native American population during the war years and one-third of all able-bodied Native men ranging between eighteen to fifty years of age. For them it was necessary to go to war as they understood they would defend their lands, for liberty and life. The war also brought jobs for them in weapon and war industry, providing new opportunities for Native Americans. Thousand of Indians were taken away from the reservations and many adapted to the cities and the non-Native American lifestyle. During the war they were praised because of their courage and strength and because of their contribution to victory. They recruited Navajo Indians, for instance, to encode messages using their language as a battlefield code that Japanese people would never break. It was considered that Navajo was an unwritten language of great complexity and difficulty because of its syntax and tonal qualities, unintelligible to anyone who had not been exposed to it or was not Navajo. They received the name of Navajo Code Talkers and were praised after war.<sup>52</sup> Maybe this was also one of the reasons why learning and studying Native languages became important after World War II, as it was explained before. However, after the war finished, they returned to their daily lives and apart from the horrors lived in war, they had to deal with the ignorance of those who had considered them as equal during war. This is clearly reflected in the works of Momaday and Welch but it also reflected in other minorities literatures, such as in *Bless Me Ultima*.

Commonly, the Native protagonists will initiate a good relationship with an older person in the tribe whom they admire and trust and who will be aware of the old ways but who will also understand that life is passing and that things and beliefs must evolve. This person will help the protagonists overcome their alienation and participate in society. They will understand many of the things that had caused them trouble in the

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52 When a Navajo Code Talker received a message, what he heard was a string of unrelated Navajo words, so he had to translate it into Navajo and then its English equivalent. Then he used only the first letter of the English equivalent in spelling an English word and added the Navajo words 'wol-la-chee' (ant) and 'be-la-sana' (apple) and 'tse-nill' (axe) to stand for the letter 'a'. So it was really difficult for others to decipher the messages.

past and will realize that they have a role to play too. In general, and as Michael Novak says,

people who are uncertain of their own identity are not wholly free. They are threatened not only by specific economic and social programs, but also at the very heart of their identity. The world is mediated to human persons through language and culture, that is, through ethnic belonging. (qtd. in TuSmith 4)

It is when they realize they belong to a community and to an ethnic group that they stop feeling isolated. With this sort of characters Native American authors want to denounce the terrible consequences that colonizers' oppression on Native American tribes have had for contemporary people and the result and effects of the participation of Native people in 'white issues' such as war, the consequences of consumerism and the no recognition by Western societies of the historical and cultural value of Native traditions.

It is also important to notice the strong sense of community among Native American people, something Native American writers also wanted to emphasize. These contemporary protagonists are alienated but unlike twentieth century counterparts, they overcome these literal and figurative diseases by shaping their vision and motion to a particular landscape. They recover their identities by seeing themselves becoming part of the landscape in which they live, so that the cure for alienation depends on their wish and capacities to enter into identity with the landscape and the place where most of their lives takes place. This fits to new movements such as Ecofeminism, which emphasizes the need of being in communion with nature in order to feel and be free. Similarly they need to become identified with the tribal traditions that surround this place and which formed part of these lives once. This means that when the protagonists go through a series of ceremonies, or events, they will realize how important their background is for them. They will learn that in order to be part of their tribe, they must learn and accept the oral traditions, the stories, the myths and in general, the culture that surrounds them and which is so valuable for Native people. Once they have accepted this, and once they have identified themselves with the landscape in which they were born, they will feel they belong to this land and that their roles are relevant and necessary for their culture to survive the attacks of the dominant Western and American impositions.

Another important feature defining Native American protagonists is that no matter how isolated they are there always seem to be a sense of community surrounding them. They are not physically alone, despite their interior isolation. Native American novels and authors tend to advocate for communal values, which seem to be completely necessary for their survival as a people. Because of that, their protagonists are supported by a collectivity behind them. These characters represent, somehow, their own creators. At first they are mediators, as they are mixed-blood and have lived both experiences. They feel lost because they are not sure which their roles are. However, when they understand that they are not victims but participants of both cultures, and consequently privileged persons they will feel happy and valued.

#### **2.2.1.4. Content: traditional oral stories and storytelling.**

Native American culture is well known for its rich oral tradition and for the multiple and varied number of stories, myths and legends that fill its folklore. Their importance lies in the functions they had within the different communities, from entertaining to explaining. Every time a story was told, culture was kept and trespassed to other generations. Listeners learnt about questions such as leadership, honor, or even the strong connections between earth and people, about the place where they lived and their own history and relationship with animals and nature in general. These traditional stories are now included in the works of contemporary authors.

The relevance of storytelling these authors present in their works in order to help character is also the source of multiple studies at present. They are mostly related to the implications of conversive language and the importance of the transformative power of storytelling. Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez explains and quotes the words of different psychologists and mental health workers in the essay “Writing Intertwined Global Histories of Indigeneity and Diasporization: An Ecocritical Articulation of Place, Relationality and Storytelling in the Poetry of Simon J. Ortiz.” She explains that the studies are going beyond “the disciplinary bounds of the literary anecdotal” (“Writing” 177), and that psychologists and psychiatrists are studying the relevance of storytelling to help individuals see themselves and their situations anew. Some psychiatrists like

Amit Bhattacharyya explain that patients have to understand what he discovers of himself and his environment in order to get an insight of himself and get the power to survive and modify his life. This is basically “the construction of a life story” (qtd. in de Ramirez, “Writing” 177). Others like Peter Harper or Mary Gray consider that the creation of stories has always been used by all cultures to provide hope, meaning and understanding in life, to help people create coherence in their own worlds. The lack or decline of active storytelling in Western cultures “provokes egocentrism and alienation, which is an endemic problem worldwide” (De Ramirez, “Writing” 177).

Contemporary Native American writers include these oral stories in their works to help their protagonists overcome this alienation in different ways. Their novels include mythological stories which become relevant to determine identity and place. Although for non Native readers this may be difficult to understand, Native American readers know that myth and reality are fused and become a unique source of knowledge. When this story appears, the characters’ identities emerge. Protagonists know that this is a spirit power and they discover who they really are. As Ruppert states, “The mythic mode of identity production might be discovered essentially passive or static because while the protagonist must discover this sense of identity, he or she does not create it. It has existed previous to the act of searching” (27). Traditionally these stories have their own purpose or end and they are “communal in character, forming identity, explaining one’s place in the cosmos, creating a sense of belonging” (Weaver 15), but new authors use them for other purposes too because with the inclusion of these traditional stories contemporary authors are also able to denounce, emphasize or explain current issues and in this vein they provide stories with a new and real meaning. Besides, using these stories, they are also telling their readers that it is time to take action, to fight for what they think it is theirs and not to wait for things to come to them.

Before explaining these traditional stories and their traditional meaning and how contemporary authors include them in their novels (explained in the next subheading), it is also important to understand the differences between the different concepts that form part of this folklore, that is, the differences between tales, myths and legends.

Leeming and Page make a compilation of the most important myths, legends and tales of America, going from Native American, African American, Asian American and European American to contemporary stories and characters. That is, they study deities, dogmas, icon or monsters of any folklore determining what has become American culture today, from creation myths in Native literature, to European American influences (with icons such as the Virgin of Guadalupe), to Anglo visions (with examples such as the myth of the melting pot) or African, American and Asian American influences. They also defined the concepts of myth, legend and tales. For them, mythology deals with topics related to religion and the origins of the world and “they are populated with deities and heroes who more often than not have supernatural powers” (2). Legends are between mythology and fairy tales and “these tend to be based on actual events and persons, and over time, are carefully tailored, often exaggerated, and serve to express some group aspiration (4). Finally, folktales are between legends and stories and include “fables, fairy tales, animal tales, and the elaborate jokes called shaggy dog stories” (4-5). However, sometimes the concepts of myth and folktale are considered the same. Myth and folktale are used interchangeably because it is a matter of time rather than content. If the incidents related happened at a time when the world had not assumed its present form, then the story is considered a myth; if the characters appear in modern times, it is a folktale.

The importance of myths, tales or legends, lies in the fact that they help to maintain a culture, whatever it is. Mythic or legendary figures help to build a tradition that maintains the folklore of the country. Jeanne Rosier Smith stated:

Mythic and folkloric figures ... play a crucial role in building and transforming culture; these figures are especially likely to appear when the culture's values or prosperity are threatened, either internally or externally. Myths, then, as they appear in literature, can be read as part of an effort for human and cultural survival. (3)

Myths help explain the origins of the world and are the base of the narratives and stories that people tell. Most of the characters that appear in Native American literature have as reference classical tales from oral tradition. So if readers know about the original stories, they will be able to understand written contemporary literature too, since authors recreated and adapted these myths for their own purposes. Therefore, it is



completely necessary to understand the myths in order to learn the stories that retell them.

Robert Sayre differentiated between myth, history and present experience in Native American literature. For him, myth refers to the literature of the Origins and it still survives in current Indian languages. History refers to real events, like battles or migration movements and present experience is “the condition of people trapped in the waste and futility of city and reservation” (*Ethnicity* 8). He also establishes a possible chronology to differentiate them and “they closely approximate three periods of Indian life: The Old (before Europeans); The Change (in times of contacts with Europeans and just after), and the Present (when most Americans have decided all the real Indians are dead” (*Ethnicity* 8).

American mythology can be divided into different parts or cultural areas but they all share tales and characters. Indeed, one basic characteristic of Native American folklore is that most of the stories, myths or legends have been continuously retold by the different tribes and storytellers, so we may find different versions of the same one. That is, the Native American people do not share a single body of mythology. The different tribal groups developed their own stories about the creation of the world, the appearance of the first people, the lives of deities and heroes. However, despite this great variety, certain mythic themes, characters and stories can be found in many of the cultures and the idea that spiritual forces are in strong relation with the natural world (clouds, animals, plants) is shared by most of them. This is also part of the source of the richness of Native America literature but also a trouble contemporary writers and readers have to deal with, because, as stated above, it is necessary to learn about the source of the story we are being told in order to fully understand it as readers. This is more complicated if we find multiple versions of these same stories or myths. Some of the most important ones are depicted below.

#### **2.2.1.4.1. Creation Myth.**

One of the most important myths in Indian literature is related to creation. Each tribe seemed to have their own myths related to their own creation that explained natural events and this helped them understand how they were formed and how they came into

their current situation. All these myths had as a main source oral storytelling and tried to maintain a kind of independence, as each tribe had their own beliefs, religions or languages. For Leeming and Page, creation myths are the most important ones for both Native and non-Native people because they are statements of their relationship with the cosmos. With a creation myth, a culture becomes strongly related with the universe. If this relation did not exist, this significance in the universe would be “random and meaningless.” Indeed, as they believe, “the Sky Father, the Earth Mother, and the trickster-helper of any given creation, are concerned with the creation, preservation, and destiny of a particular culture” (11-12).

There are multiple variations of the Native American creation myth, but they all share specific points, mainly regarding the close relationship established between men and nature, and the fact that human beings were created as companions of all other creatures, not as their master, so that people, animals and all things that grow and evolve are equal. This means that like other Native American oral narratives, creation myth stories also share some basic features, as describing how the world came to being. Besides, all the tribes try to include themselves within the stories, that is, they identify themselves as the center of the world, the place where the world was created and started to work. Leeming and Page collect four different creation myths corresponding to four different tribes. *Zuni: The Separation of the First Parents* was a story told by the Zuni Indians of the American Southwest. We find that “the Mother is actually the earth and the Father is the sky. In addition, the Mother’s breath is the warm wind, the Father’s the cold; the Mother’s breasts are the helds that give crops, and the Father’s breath brings the rain that causes the germination of the seeds in the Mother” (12). The second myth they relate is *A Cherokee Earth-diver Creation Myth* which includes “a female sun as well as the earth-diver motif and the belief in animistic origins” (13). The third myth is entitled *Tewa, Emergence Creation Myth* and relates a new version of the same myth told by people in Rio Grande Valley in New Mexico. There are new characters such as the Mole, Spider Woman and the War Twins appearing (13-4). Finally, Leeming and Page refer to the *Hawaiian Creation Myth* which “contained a sacred poem called the Kumulipo, which contains animistic elements as well as aspects of the emergence motif” (15).

At present Native American authors include them in their works as a way of introducing a philosophy of life for their characters, but conveyed through symbols. Maybe they know that these creation stories are symbolic but believing them gives them something to be guided by; they are oriented by these myths and feel a sense of their place. Besides, Creation Myths are not unique in Native American culture. They also exist in Christian, and other religions. They can be compared to Greek, Asian, Chicano or African Creation Stories. With the inclusion of Native American Creation Myths in their works, maybe they also show that they are not so different from other cultures.

#### **2.2.1.4.2. Trickster**

The trickster is one of the most relevant figures in Native American literature and folklore. It exists in the different tribes and it acquires different personalities depending on the varied tales in which they appear. It is defined as “the best-known archetypal figure in American Indian mythology” (Leeming and Page 20) as well as African and European cultures. It is depicted as a strange character, promiscuous and amoral and who takes different animal forms, depending on the country. For instance, it takes the Spider form in Africa, the Rabbit form in South America, or Coyote form in Native American folklore. In other ethnic minorities, trickster figures also adopt animal forms, such as in Afro-American one, in which trickster usually becomes rabbits, bears, turtles, snakes, foxes, or especially Anansi the Spider or the Signifying Monkey. The latter ones are also present in Native mythology and even the Signifying Monkey can be compared to the Monkey King in Asian American folklore. In Greek mythology, Hermes was also considered a trickster. In all cases, the trickster is also the supreme creator’s assistant, becoming a hero or a god. Besides, he can also be a shaman and can change shapes depending on the circumstances. He is also sensual, erotic and creative.

Harold Scheub also defined the trickster in *Story*, as a culture hero, as a transformer, divine and profane and “he is sexually aggressive, the eternal phallus, symbol of procreation.” Scheub also considers he is a mediator between gods, humans and animals and “recreates the world through illusion, and frequently a concrete residue is formed that will shape all of human life and society to come” (271). For Scheub, the trickster is

also strongly related to the storytelling process “not easily defined, not readily categorized, forever untamed, not given to capture in charts and diagrams. As he has throughout history, he eludes scholarship and eludes those who would examine and thereby seize him” (271).

The traditional trickster is a manitos related to Indian folklore. Many critics have studied this figure because tricksters represent the border. They are liminal figures who live between two cultures and are characterized by the lack of boundaries and the ability to transform themselves, defining culture and ambiguity. They teach through comic examples reinventing the narrative form. Words are their main vehicle of communication and fabricate stories which become legends and believable illusions. They are shape-shifters, as well as teachers and healers who “often pause(s) in his wandering to instruct his people in the medicinal uses of plants” (Stokey 23).

Many contemporary Native American characters play the role of trickster in the works in which they appear. Contemporary authors provide them with different personalities depending on their intended meaning. They become mediators between cultures, heroes, villains or transformer, used to emphasize Native aspects that are unrecognizable by white cultures or to focus and denounce the Western oppression that makes Native American life more difficult.

#### **2.2.1.4.3 Goddesses**

The role played by women in Native American culture was clearly represented by the figure of goddesses in Native American folklore. There are continuous references in their mythology to the creation of the world, and in all the versions, goddesses play a fundamental role. They are also essential in many daily events and somehow can be stated that they are quite similar to Greek Graces, as in this mythology, women also played an important role.

If creation long ago was instigated by a male figure or one of no particular gender, the actual working out of creation, especially in its relation to human society, is more often than not dominated by the female figure, whether Spider Woman, Thinking Woman, Changing Woman, White Buffalo Woman, or one of many other such beings. (Leeming and Page 15-16)

Spider Woman is probably one of the best known. In the creation myths, she appears as the Goddess of the Earth and the creator of some of the first living beings. She worked with Tawa, the god of sun, and together they created First Man and First Woman. This goddess appears in Navajo folklore. The Grandmother Spider was said to bring light to the world. According to the legend, there was no light in the world because the sun was living on the other side. The animals thought they had to steal some light and bring it back so that people could see. Some tried it, like Possum and Buzzard but they got nothing. Then Grandmother Spider decided that she would try and made a bowl of clay. She walked to the place where the sun was and took it, placing it in the bowl. She came back home following her own web and going from east to west. She brought light and the sun to people, who could live after that.

In Hopi mythology, Spider Woman is a powerful earth goddess and creator who is the mother of life. With Tawa, the sun god, Spider Woman sang the First Magic Song which brought the earth, light and life into being. Then she created birds, fish, and other creatures by shaping Tawa's thoughts. After that she came to the earth and divided human beings into different groups, teaching them how to live and how to pray gods. She disappeared and people worship her now.

The Navajo also recollect the story of Changing Woman, who is one of the most important deities for them and who continues playing an important role in the life of present day women. She "continues to enter the world in the female puberty rites so central to the lives of the Athabascan-speaking Indians" (Leeming and Page 16). According to the myth, when First Man and First Woman were created, several monsters devoured everybody except them and four others. One day, First Man found a little baby at the Governor's Knob. She would become Changing Woman. When she grew up a ceremony was held, so that she could have children. After that she lived alone and became pregnant of The Sun, giving birth to twin warriors: Monster Slayer and Child Born of Water. They would destroy the horrible monsters that still wandered the

earth. After some time, The Sun asked Changing Woman to live with him in the west, and as she felt alone, they went to live together. However, she was lonely and longed for mortal company, so Holy people designed a body for her and “by rubbing skin from her breast, her back, and under each arm, Changing Woman then created the clans who would become the Dineh, the people — the Navajo” (Leeming and Page 18). According to the myth:

Changing Woman was the personification of the Earth and the natural order of the universe. She represented the cyclical path of the seasons birth (spring), maturing (summer), aging (autumn), and death (winter) — and was reborn each spring to repeat the cycle. The various dresses into which she changed corresponded to the changes in the seasons and gave her the other names by which she was known: WHITE SHELL WOMAN, TURQUOISE WOMAN, Abalone Woman, and Jet Woman. (Lynch 37)

The Buffalo Woman myth tells how the Lakota first received their sacred pipe and how they learnt the ceremony that explained them how to use it. According to the myth, the White Buffalo Calf woman helped people when they were starving. Two young men met her as they were looking for food in a high hill. She told one of them to go back and tell his people to build a lodge. She told them some prayers to make it holy. They did it, and some days later she also asked them to make an altar of red earth. She gave them a pipe and told them how to pray and how to raise it to the sky, “hold it to the earth, and hold it in the four directions” (Leeming and Page 18), “this way the earth, the sky, and all living creatures are knit into one family, held together by the pipe” (Leeming and Page 18).

Buffalo Woman also explained women their importance within the tribe and taught them how to make fire and cook. She also told children their role and asked all of them to take well care of the pipe. She returned four times more, the last one as a White Buffalo which “remains to this day the most sacred thing alive, and there is great rejoicing whenever one is born” (Leeming and Page 19). And once she disappeared, buffalos came into earth to feed people and the pipe she gave to them has remained as “the source of the Lakota’s knowledge of how to live and how to pray” (Leeming and Page 19).

Female goddesses are not unique of Native mythology. They also appear in civilizations as ancient as Greek one, in the figure of Fates or Graces. They also adopt other shapes in other ethnic minorities, such as La Llorona figure in Chicano literature (although their meaning may be different).

Contemporary Native American novels, short stories and poems refer to the figure of women as creators and the relevance they have for tribal development. They are usually compared to these goddesses and also strongly related to nature, as this is also considered feminine, as it will be studied afterwards.

#### **2.2.1.4.4. Culture heroes.**

Most Native American tribes include culture heroes or heroines within their mythological accounts. They seem to be characters that help humans in different but very significant ways, such as providing food, helping them develop certain abilities and activities which are of extreme relevance for their survival (as growing seeds or using fire) and who also help them end with the monsters that prevent their tribal development. Their birth is quite significant as they seem to be born from non-human parents and this provides them with certain skills that common humans do not have as, for example, “rapid growth from birth to adulthood, and supernatural powers” (Lynch 46). Some culture heroes are Manabozho (Algonquian, Anishinabe) and Warrior Twins, of the sons of the sun. They can be compared to folk heroes in Afro-American tradition that usually appear in tall tales, such as John Henry. Although their origin may be different, tall tales present characters who become role models and heroes that help people. Human heroes also appear in Icelandic sagas.

Culture heroes appear in contemporary Native American works as essential to fight Western impositions and also as consequences of them. They fight to overcome the oppression they are in but also sometimes feel immersed on consumerism, disdain and ignorance of their own culture.

#### **2.2.1.4.5. Monsters.**

Native American folklore is also full of legendary monsters and figures which have been reflected in the works of many contemporary Native American writers. Windigos, Skinwalkers, Ogres, Flying Head are just a few examples of the various characters that play this role. One of the best known is probably the first one. Windigos are cannibalistic beings who personify winter famine. It is usually portrayed as a giant with bulging eyes, jagged teeth, moving as a whirlwind and stalked to the northern woods during the winter. "People who became CANNIBALS out of hunger were said to have 'turned windigo' and were driven from the band or killed"(Lynn 132). These sorts of monsters also appear in other ethnic minority literatures: Cyclops and Titans in Greece and elves, dwarfs and giants in Icelandic culture are just some instances.

It could be stated that apart from the literal figure of monsters, contemporary authors also use this mythological figure to represent Western culture and colonization and the consequences their relation with Native American traditions had for the latter.



### **2.2.2. Native American Women: Storytelling and Ecofeminism.**

Traditionally, trying to determine Native American women's relevance within their corresponding tribes has been a difficult task. Most documents that chronicle the experiences of Indian and white people were written by male European writers who controlled the historical records and were interested in male facts, such as wars and trade but who did not pay much attention to women and their roles. Because men and women lived separately, male foreigners who visited the tribes had little contact with women and therefore, little knowledge or access to their rituals and works. This seems to be one of the main reasons why little has been known about Native North American women and their functions within the tribe. In fact, it was usually believed that they had no social input, no opportunities to choose their spouses and no respect, and that they were inferior to men and only necessary for sexual contact and for maternity. This inferiority of native people in general and native women in particular, was explained in the first colonial texts. Native women were described as monstrous in their aspect and with a sexual behavior that was out of what it was considered normal (Trexler 2). They were marked as Others for two reasons, they were non-European and they were women. They were described as "the epitome of sexual aberration and excess. Folklore saw them, even more than the men, as given to a lascivious venery so promiscuous as to border on the bestial" (McClintock 22).

All this seemed completely erroneous, according to chronicles written afterwards. Generally speaking Native women were not simple housewives or did not simply look after their children. Their functions included building, fighting as warriors and working as farmers or craftswomen. They were in charge of animals and of gathering materials and food. They also participated in the hunting process, not only accompanying men, but also skinning, cutting or cooking the animals. They played a role in the political structure of the tribe and made relevant decisions. Their presence in social, political and economic life of the tribe could be considered even more prominent than that of European women. Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, for instance, wrote about the period he spent living with Native American people performing what he considered female tasks, such as picking up the crops, being a trader, carrying heavy loads, digging and carrying

firewood, watering to the dwellings and “other important needs” (71). Cabeza de Vaca does not make any reference to sexuality and presents Native women more as mothers than as women (85). Daniel Maltz and Joalyn Archambault summarize these roles and the power of women in Native American tribes with four main arguments concerning the relation between gender and power. The first argument refers to egalitarian gender relations in societies in which “hierarchical relationships in general are noticeably weak” (232) such as in Plateau, Basin tribes or in parts of California and the eastern Subarctic. The second argument refers to female power in societies “that allocate comparatively high degrees in informal or even formal power to women (Iroquois, Cherokee, Hopi, Navajo) (232). The third argument shows societies in which male power is culturally limited although they are characterized as dominated by male authority, such as the Arctic, Northern Athapaskan, Plains, or Greek tribes (232). And finally, the fourth argument refers to societies that may not use gender as a major dimension for the distribution of power and prestige such as Tlingit (232). Therefore, although it is difficult to make generalizations because of the multiple and varied tribes and communal societies, it seems that women’s activities were central for all of them.

Because of this distribution of work among the members of the tribe, and because of the time Native women spent with their children, one of the most important tasks they had was precisely that of transmitting oral knowledge to their children, being storytellers. As Kenneth Lincoln says, women act as the promoters of spiritual education for families by “storytelling, singing, dancing, playing, talking and praying.” (43) He adds that they have taught their children that everyone and everything has a voice, including animal stones, the sun, the moon or the earth (43). It seems that the traditional imagery we all have in mind about a grandfather telling a story to his grandchildren while sitting in an armchair did not actually exist in Native American tribes. Not even the armchair did. Most of these stories were told while they worked, and only on some occasions in winter nights did all the tribal members sit in communal houses to tell old tales. This was a kind of ritual.

However, it was not only because of the distribution of work that Native women assumed the role of storytellers but also because of their own nature as women that they did it. For Native American people, women symbolized creation and perpetuation and this is what storytelling does, creating and perpetuating. In Native American mythology,

most female characters are related to the creation of the world, the gift of life and the survival of the tribes. Spider Woman, Changing Woman, Yellow Woman and Buffalo Calf Woman are some examples. They all symbolized the Earth, were creators of the first human beings, controlled the natural order of the universe, the path of seasons and taught different skills to human beings, such as cooking or making fire, among many other things. Attending to this mythology, they were essential in the formation of the tribes and without them, the world would have been very different. If one follows this definition of Native goddesses, the same criteria could be applied to Native women. They seemed completely relevant for the formation of their children, for the transmission of knowledge and for the maintenance of traditions and culture. Without them, tribal life would be very different and many oral stories would have been lost. In native tribes, the figure of the mother was essential to find one's identity and its lack could mean your loss too. As Paula Gunn Allen says, "Who is your mother?" is a serious question in Indian country and the answer is equally important. The answer enables the questioner to place the respondent correctly within the web of life in each of its dimensions: cultural, spiritual, personal, historical. Failure to know one's mother is failure to know "one's significance, one's reality, one's relationship to earth and society. It is being lost" (*Sacred* 209).

This connection between women and nature that native tribes establish is closely related to a movement that emerged in 1974, Ecofeminism, which connects feminism with ecology. Land is usually celebrated as feminine and Ecofeminism criticizes how both land and women are abused. American communities have been considered patriarchal too, as some colonial and European reports stated, although many contemporary Native American women writers have been interested in demonstrating that the role of women within the different communities is as important, or even more, than that of men, and some of their ideas are somehow correlated to the ideals of Ecofeminism as well. Their works present women who are strongly linked to nature and they relate this to storytelling too. Ecofeminists also connect the oppression of women and to all other oppressed groups and consider that any attempt to liberate women and those oppressed groups will be unsuccessful unless it includes the liberation of nature too. Because of the Western concept of women and nature, anything connected with women seems to be devalued. Greta Gaard states,

Drawing on the insights of ecology, feminism, and socialism, ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorized oppression such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. (1)

It seems that Ecofeminists are not so far from reality, attending to the evolution of Native American women's treatment and that of nature and other "Others." The first reporters considered Native women something similar to slaves and although this was not true, it allowed Christian people to have an excuse to believe that this had to change and that Native men had to be reeducated. In the last one hundred years and above all because of European colonization, Native American women have lost most of the rights they enjoyed prior to colonization. Not only that, but also in the last decades they are experiencing sexism, violence and racism from Native American and non-Native American men. Legislation did not favor Native women either. In 1876 an act was passed that deprived Native women of their status if they married a non-Native American man. This limited women's political and social rights and subordinated women to men's position. In 1951 the Indian Act denied vote to Native American women and left women with no rights and in a position similar to objects owned by their husbands, because a patrilineal system was established. If women married men from other tribes, for instance, they immediately started to belong to this tribe and their children too. In 1960 The Bill of Rights guaranteed equality to everybody, no matter sex or race and at least in papers, Native American women recovered their status. However, at present one in three Native American women are assaulted or raped and more than a half of them suffer domestic violence. The worst of all is that if they are assaulted by non-Indian men nothing can be done. Reservations have their own courts and police to defend their land but cannot act against this sort of things. In 2014 a new law was passed that allowed Indian tribes to prosecute crimes of domestic violence, but this did not include crimes committed by men who are unknown by these women. Last summer the Violence Against Women Act was also passed and this would allow tribal courts to prosecute non-Native Americans who assault tribal members, but the House Republican opposed the measure because they considered that it meant too much tribal independence. This is all data but the truth is that these women have lost their freedom, they are physically and psychologically abused and this is something Native American writers such as Leslie Marmon Silko or Louise Erdrich try to denounce in their works.

Similarly ecological problems have also demonstrated that Ecofeminists are not out of reality. The changes in American culture and environment increased because of Euro-American contact. Epidemic diseases and the disappearance of native flora and fauna are changing the landscape in which Native American people live. Removal policies in the nineteenth-century reduced the scope of Indian lands and reservations were placed in unwanted and remote sites without many resources. Although the pieces of land were allowed to be separated into individual ones, the different and subsequent acts passed by Congress removed mineral, forests and regulated the access of Native people to those areas, so most reservations became alienated and this increased their lack of resources to survive and unemployment among Native American people. In the 90s the government proposed high financial and economic benefits for the tribes that agreed to storage toxic and radioactive waste on their area and many accepted, above all those which were the poorest ones. Obviously the consequences for their health, environment and life were tremendous. Nowadays, radioactive pollution is probably one of the most serious problems for Native American people. Most of the energy resources in the United States are on Indian lands and nearly a hundred percent of uranium production takes place near or on Native American lands. Besides, most Native Americans are now employed in uranium mines being exposed to high levels of radioactivity and the levels of birth defects, respiratory diseases, miscarriages and cancer have increased at high speed. In the areas where there is uranium mining, such as Four Corners and Black Hills, "Indian people face skyrocketing incidents of radiation poisoning and birth defects. Many Native traditionalists are speculating that the 'mystery virus' that is afflicting people in Arizona may be related to the uranium tailings left by mining companies" (Warren 23). There is also nuclear testing and at least six hundred and fifty explosions on Shoshone land at the Nevada test site and according to Andy Smith, fifty percent of the underground tests have leaked radiation into the atmosphere (Warren 23). These have been main concerns of Native American women because they are the first affected by this ecological destruction. Cutting trees means that they have to walk farther to get products and firewood. If water is contaminated they are exposed to suffer from diseases because they are the ones that look for it and if cattle change or disappear, they are also in trouble because they do not only care cattle but are also owners. Women seem to be responding and participating in environmental movements because they are not only fighting to protect nature, but they

are also protecting their homes and children. That is why Ecofeminists think that nature protection is a female issue, as Warren states,

According to Ecofeminists, trees, water, food production, toxins, and more generally naturism (i.e., the unjustified domination of nonhuman nature) are feminist issues because understanding them helps one understand the interconnections among the dominations of women and other subordinated groups of humans ('other human Others'), on the one hand, and the domination of nonhuman nature, on the other hand. I call these interconnections women — other human Others — nature interconnections. (2-3)

Luckily, Native American women represent the future too. Through storytelling they are able to keep Native culture alive and thanks to them and their insistence on maintaining traditions alive, Native traditions have not disappeared under white and patriarchal oppression. Leslie Marmon Silko stated that "Human identity, imagination and storytelling were inextricably linked to the land, to Mother Earth, just as the strands of the spider's web radiate from the center of the web" (*Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirit* 21). With that she is strongly connecting storytelling and nature, and if nature is linked to women, one may think she is also linking women and storytelling. Nowadays, an incredible new generation of Native American women is demonstrating that traditions can be kept alive without ignoring new times and that one can be truly Native American but also be immersed within white society and be ready to work on any subject. A very recent article on the magazine *Marie Claire*, discovers a generation of native women who fulfill these requirements.<sup>53</sup> Evereta Thinn (30 years old) is a Navajo who works as Administrator at a Shonto School District. She decided not to be a shy Indian who keeps to herself and wrote an article about living in "two worlds," in the traditional and modern world and states: "Knowing who you are as a Native, know the teachings from your elders and engraining them as you go into the modern world is how you maintain that balance" (SeeWalker); Alayna Eagleshield is 24 and belongs to the Lakota and Arikara tribes. She is a teacher and considers that there are three main issues concerning young Native Americans: the importance of language and culture, bullying and lack of education. She wants to recover Lakota language because "speaking your language is a guide to knowing who you are as Native American" (SeeWalker); Shawn

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<sup>53</sup> Written by Daniel SeeWalker and published online the 24<sup>th</sup> November 2014 with the title "Meet the Generation of Incredible Native American Women Fighting to Preserve their Culture."

Little Thunder (26), Juliana Brown Eyes-Clifford (22) and Kelli Brooke Honey (33) are recognized artists, musicians and poets. They all feel proud of their origins and play for young people in different reservations. They want to encourage people to do the same. Juliana writes and sings songs about “Mother Earth, social justice and about Native American culture” (SeeWalker); Sage Hongan (22) and Juanita Toledo have been models and now work on different areas. Sage encourages people to travel off their reservations and learn new things to bring them back to their people and Juanita works for the Community Wellness program on her reservation. That is, they all demonstrate that Native Women can be ready for white world and at the same time be able to keep their traditions alive and not only that, but also passing them to future generations, as storytellers did in the past.

In 2010, *El Pais Semanal* published an article about Wilma Mankiller, who had just died and who was the first woman who leaded Cherokee tribe. In a message sent after her death, President Barack Obama stated that she was the first female leader for Cherokee people and that she transformed the relation between her tribe and the Federal Government, becoming a source of inspiration for all Native women in America. For him, her legacy will continue inspiring and encouraging all those who continue her job (Alandete). David Alandete also quotes Mankiller’s words in relation to the role of women within Cherokee tribe: “Old people have a great understanding of history. They understand there was a time when women had a major role, a more important one within the tribe and there was more equilibrium and harmony between Cherokee men and women” (Alandete).<sup>54</sup> Mankiller was able to triple national funds and provide her tribe with schools where Cherokee culture would be preserved and with an extraordinary health system. Three years after leaving her job, she was awarded with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, because according to Bill Clinton and his wife Hillary Clinton, she leaded her people with great dignity. Therefore, this proves that lucklily Native women are getting more and more relevance within the national panorama.

Native American writers are also deeply concerned with nature and also with women and the figure of the “Others” and they reflect the consequences that the new economic, social and political systems have had on them in their works, as it was seen

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<sup>54</sup> My translation.

before. However, it may be said that the attitude of female and male contemporary Native American writers towards nature, women and Ecofeminism is not the same. It could be that male authors can be read from a more Ecocritical perspective while female writers get closer to Ecofeminism. Male contemporary authors tend to present male characters who become deeply concerned with the land and the need of coming back to it in order to recover their identities, and they are helped by female characters and animals in the process. They also criticize in their works the invasion of white society within native communities and the destruction this caused on the environment so that their works can be read from Ecocritical point of view.<sup>55</sup> This implies that their works can be examined from the perspective of its environment and landscape. Indeed, the term can be applied to any work in which “the setting is not a mere symbol for the character’s mood but an intrinsic element of the literary product, and in which style is not simply an arrangement of words but a reflection of the rhythm of the landscape” (Lupton 58). As Lawrence Buell, Ursula K. Heise and Karen Thornber state in “Literature and Environment,”

Ecocriticism begins from the conviction that the arts of imagination and the study thereof — by virtue of their grasp of the power of word, story, and image to reinforce, enliven, and direct environmental concern — can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems: the multiple forms of ecodegradation that afflict the planet Earth today. (418)

This is what contemporary Native American writers try to do. However, female native writers are more concerned with the role women play in the protection of nature and their close connection to the earth because of physical and spiritual relation to the land, so that their works tend to be read from an Ecofeminist point of view.

Paula Gunn Allen, for instance, has focused on the significance of women in Indian communities, not only as women but also as storytellers. In her work *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* she defends the role native women played and attacked the image that European explorers and colonizers showed of them. She focused on the conviction that Native American culture is gynocentric and

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<sup>55</sup> Ecocriticism is the term provided to the method of examining a literary work from the perspective of its environment or landscape. It was used for the first time by William Rueckert in 1978, in the essay “Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Ecocriticism” but it was recognized as a tool for literary criticism ten years later.



feminist and bases this argument on the presence of woman, represented as mother, grandmother, Spider Woman, Thought Woman or Yellow Woman in Native American tradition and folklore. Besides, according to Van Dyke, all Allen's work draws upon her own experience as a Laguna Pueblo woman and it "calls attention to her belief in the power of the oral tradition now embodied in contemporary Native American literature to effect healing, survival and continuance" ("Women" 89). She takes into account the importance of women not within native societies but also across the Native American panorama and through time. She considers that physical and cultural genocide of American Indian tribes is and was mostly about patriarchal fear of gynocracy. For Puritans, Catholic and other missionaries it was intolerable that women occupied prominent positions and decision-making positions and capacity at every level of society and it was necessary to destroy it. Indeed, in *Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women*, Allen compiles twenty four pieces, some stories that range from oral tales to examples of stories told by contemporary Native American authors, including a high number of well-known Native American women storytellers, such as Zitkala-sa, Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, Anna Lee Walters, Ella Cara Deloria, Linda Hogan LeAnne Howe, Misha Gallagher, Humishima or Mary TallMountain. She compares them to Grandmother Spider in Cherokee culture as they have the "same light of intelligence and experience" (*Spider* 1). Allen considers that the stories she includes in this work are the stories that she has read and cared about and that reflect the variety of Indian women's voices and experiences (*Spider* 18). That is, she is deeply convinced that the role of women as storytellers is essential for Native culture to survive and that those Native American communities are matriarchal and matrilineal and as Ecofeminists, criticizes patriarchal and colonial attempts to destroy tribal gynocratic societies and women-centered communities. As Elvira Pulitano states "Given the philosophical tenets of Ecofeminism, it seems obvious why an Ecofeminist approach would respond to the theoretical foundations of Native American women writers such as Allen, who keeps arguing for a subversion of patriarchal hierarchical systems by recovering the feminine view of traditional cultures" (47). She considers that Allen's essay "The Woman I Love is a Planet. The Planet I Love is a Tree," is the best example of the way in which the author merges gynocentric epistemology with Ecofeminist concerns.

Other Native American writers also show a deep interest in nature, women and oppressed people and in what white world made to them. Joy Harjo's poetry, for instance, shows complex social and political issues not only related to Native American people but also to oppressed people.<sup>56</sup> She also presents a huge connection to nature and Ecofeminism as her poems demonstrate ecological awareness and an intense love for others, human and non-human. She criticizes colonial oppression and deals with Native American struggle to survive and above all with storytelling as a prominent element in her work.

The approach to Ecofeminism is not exclusive of Native American women writers, however. Other ethnic minority writers also created characters and works that can be read from this perspective, as it was seen before. In Asian-American literature, Kingston's *Woman Warrior* exemplifies the struggle of women to survive and consolidate their value within a patriarchal society that disdains women. The novel can be read from an Ecofeminist point of view as Kingston contributes to the formation of a new Chinese American woman who was long oppressed by patriarchal tradition but also because she focuses on the Chinese American image as "Others" and the unfair treatment Chinese Americans have received from mainstream society, above all because of sociopolitical factors. Another example is provided in Anaya's *Bless Me Ultima*, as throughout the whole novel the author provides a description of Chicano gender roles. Here Ultima challenges all conceptions related to gender and is presented as the most powerful character within the novel, connected to nature and representing what Ecofeminists consider the strong connection between women and nature. Similarly *Their Eyes Were Watching God* also presents a particular view of Afro-American women as independent and looking for oneness by ignoring the impositions of patriarchal societies and strongly connected to nature. Even an Ecofeminist perspective can be used to define Greek myths, as it can also be seen here.

Therefore, Ecofeminism is not unique of one literary group, but it has been considered by most ethnic minorities that form part of American culture, as the oppression of women and these minorities is a recurrent topic in contemporary works.

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<sup>56</sup>Her poems "Early Morning Woman" or "Eagle Poem" show this ecological awareness and deep concern for environment and its care.

### **2.2.3. Storytelling in contemporary Native American communities.**

Storytelling process has changed and evolved adapting to new times and circumstances and the figure of the traditional storyteller has gone through a similar process in the last decades. Storytelling remains one of the most important sources of knowledge for Native people and they are still as relevant as they used to be before colonizers arrived. However, times change and so must customs. In order to understand the new uses of storytelling and the new figure of storyteller in the different communities it is also important to know these communities.

#### **2.2.3.1. Native American tribes.**

Before Europeans arrived in North America, many different and varied tribes of Native people already lived there. They had expanded along a vast territory but they shared similar aspects of their daily life. Acoma, Apache, Arahapo, Blackfoot, Cherokee, Cheyenne, Chippewa, Comanche, Crow, Navajo, Kiowa, Pawnee, Shawnee, Shoshone, Sioux people to name just a few of them, had already established their culture and beliefs in these lands. They had their own tribe leaders, their own stories, religions and customs, which were, somehow, very similar to each other. The groups of Native American people inhabiting the continent was so large and varied that most the time they could not even understand each other. However, although their cultures and histories were totally different, they shared the same feelings. All Native American tribes look back to “indigenous time on this ‘turtle island’.... unified in an ancient ancestral heritage” (Lincoln 82).

According to Walter Prescott Webb, the American Indians may be classified in three ways: “by the language they speak, by their physical or anatomical characteristics, such as color, cranial measurements, and texture of the hair, and by their ways and modes of life” (48). They may be also classified in different groups attending to their geographic location and their shared features:

1. Great Plain Indians, including Blackfoot, Arapaho, Cheyenne, Comanche, Kiowa, Lakota, Iowa, Pawnee or Chippewa tribes, among others
2. Pacific Northwest Indians, including Achomavi, Chemakum, Koskimo, Clayoquout tribes, among others.
3. New Southwest Indians, including Acoma, Apache, Navajo, Cochiti, Laguna, Hopi tribes among others.
4. Southeast Indians, including Apalachee, Cherokee or Chocktaw tribes, among others.
5. Great Basin Indians, including Comanche, Cahuilla, Washoe tribes, among others.
6. Plateau Region Indians, including Chinook an, and Yakama tribes, among others.
7. Alaskan Indians, which includes Eskimo tribes.
8. California Indians, including Kato Indian, Maidu, Miwok, Yuki or Yokut tribes, among others.



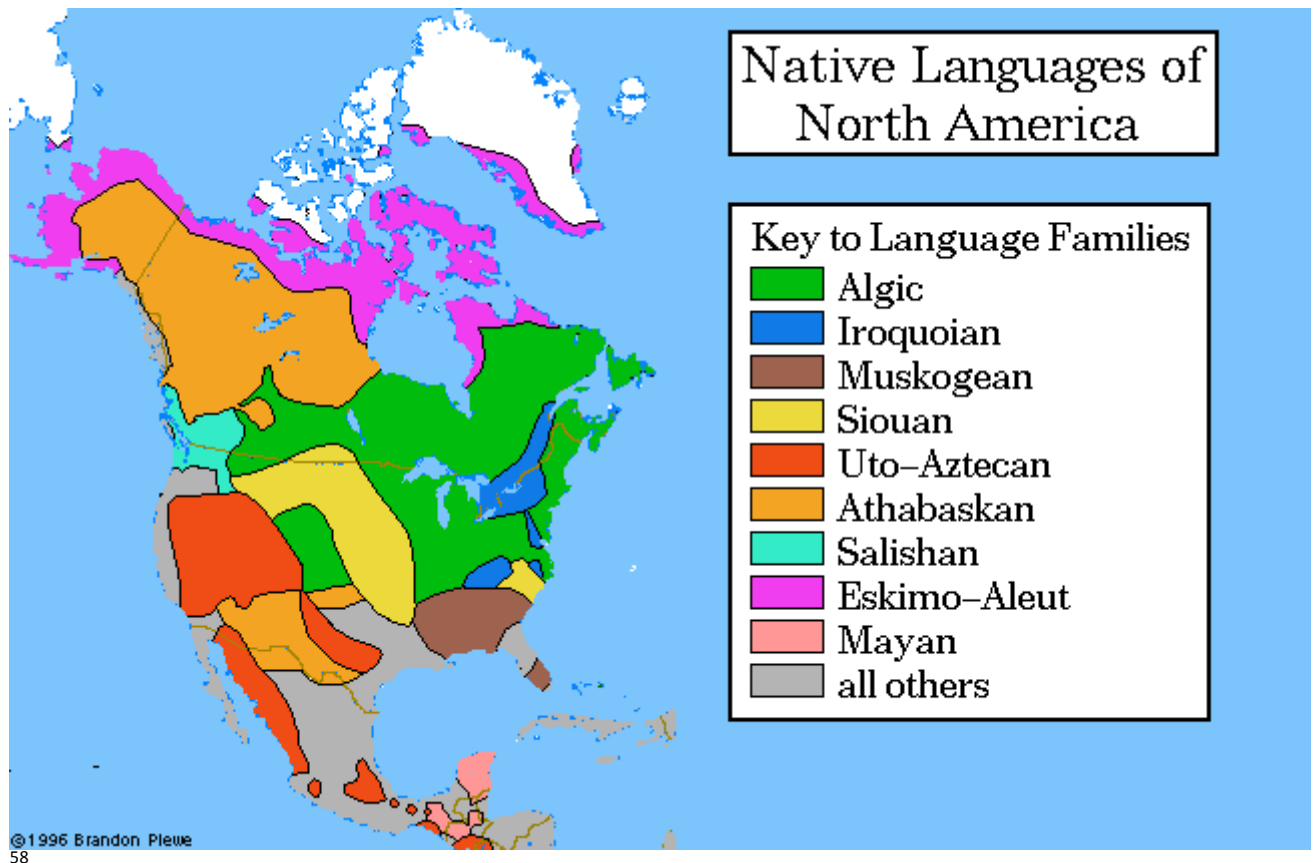
Today there are about three hundred federally recognized tribes in the United States, and about two hundred and fifty-five in Alaska. They cover fifty-two million acres, most of them west of the Mississippi. It is a small portion in comparison to the territory they occupied prior to the invasion. Indeed, except for the Navajo tribe, which occupies the largest reservation, most tribes are quite small. Moreover, although some reservations are restricted to one tribe, many others include several ones. Their relationship with the federal government has gone through different stages, although at present the last trusteeship involves protection of Indian property, their right to self-government and the provision of services they need to survive and advance. It is estimated that there are about two million Native American people but one-third to one-

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<sup>57</sup> Map extracted from <http://www.native-languages.org/culture-areas.html>.

half of the population does not live in the reservations. They have mostly moved to urban areas such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Oakland or Oklahoma.

It is estimated that about three hundred languages existed before the European invasion. Nowadays there only exist about one hundred and fifty-three languages, and it seems that sixty-seven of these native languages are extinct and that nearly eighty per cent of them are about to die, according to the Society for Indigenous Languages. These languages can be grouped into families but it is difficult to create a precise map since the territories were not countries themselves and therefore, the boundaries would not be real. This means that they could overlap and that as people moved from season to season and not all the tribes settled permanently, it is only possible to establish regions where the different language families were spoken, but these would be approximate. Anyway, the language families that existed included: Algic (Algonquin), Iroquoian, Muskogean, Siouan, Athabaskan, Uto-Aztecan, Salishan, Eskimo-Aleu and other smaller families such as Sahaptian, Miwok-Costanoan, Kiowa-Tanoan, Coddooan and Zuni. The languages are grouped depending on a series of linguistic similarities, phonetics, vocabulary and grammars. One of the most important features that distinguished all of them was polysynthesis, that means that a number of word elements are joined together to form a composite word that functions as the sentence does in Indo-European languages. So one sentence or phrase is expressed by a word unit, and each element has meaning usually as part of the sentence but not as a separate element. For instance “wiitokuchumpunkuruganyugwivantumu” would mean something like “They who are going to sit and cut up with a knife a black female or male buffalo.” They do not have gender distinction but nouns are considered animate or inanimate and most of them do not have plural or singular form either. Some of these languages have simple phonological structures, but others, like Navajo, are quite complex, with more than forty-seven sounds. Some sounds are considered common to all languages, such as those articulated toward the back of the vocal track, but they do not appear in all languages. Similarly vowels differ considerably as well as the arrangement of words into a sentence, being Subject-Object-Verb the most common one.



Sometimes it is difficult for non-native people to understand the close relationship that Native Indians had with land. Indeed, an important part of Native American identity is related to it. For most tribes, and consequently for most Native American people, all the elements that we could find in nature had a spirit and soul; animal, plants, rivers, mountains, even natural phenomena like the rain or thunder, were considered to be part of a greater universe, and therefore deserved to be worshiped. This also means that the spirit of all human beings derive from the land, in such a way that land becomes the owner of humans' life as well as that of all the elements or creatures that live on it. Moreover, one of the topics related to Native people is that spirituality is closely related to animals, calling this religion Animalism.

Most tribes had shamans who identified with any animals, most preferably bears or eagles, because they were within the top or hierarchical traditions. Nelson defines it “it makes more sense to think of oneself... as being closer in nature to an animal than to a plant, and closer to a plant than to a mineral” (266). For most of them, the Shaman or

<sup>58</sup> Maps drawn based on maps in *American Indian Languages: The Historical Linguistics of Native America*. *Oxford Studies in Anthropological Linguistics* and in *Collier's Encycloedia*.

Medicine man was also the one to communicate with spirits and the link with humans. Shamans had the magical power to cure by using herbs, and special tools and rituals too.

Besides, most tribes believed in many spirit-entities such as Great Spirit, the creator of life and of the human beings that is represented by sky, the heavens or the sun — they celebrated singing and dancing rituals to maintain his attention so that they could protect hunting and food. Although most Native Americans believed that his spirit had no physical form, some tribes gave it several shapes such as Old Man, Old Woman, Grandmother, Coyote, Rabbit, or Hare form, or even “breath or air, and sun” (Caviness 582). According to Alys Caviness, some people compared the Great Spirit to the trickster figure, and made him responsible for the good and bad events; other people “envisaged the spirit as a pair of beings, such as twins or siblings or a husband and a wife. Pairing the Great Spirit with a twin or sibling enabled people to explain the phenomena of good and evil , while pairing with a spouse helped explain the birth of humans” (582). In general most Native American people believed that the Great Spirit was “a powerful neutral entity that assigned lesser spirits with particular duties, for instance ensuring adequate rainfall or successful hunts” (Caviness 582).

Storytelling is a common practice among most of these tribes, although the differences are also frequent, above all in relation to contents, names or expressions. Trying to generalize about it is a hard work because it implies a deep study of multiple variants, although some authors such as Andrew Wiget establish several widespread, though not universal examples of constraining conventional structures for narratives.<sup>59</sup> He refers to: (1) *Verbal Framing*, that is, the presence or absence of opening and closing formula and the degree of complexity; (2) *Songs*, their presence, number and location within the story; (3) *Initial Particles*, the use of recurrent particles that correspond to traditional English adverbs to mark units of narrative, lines, groups or whether they are embedded or stocked; (4) *Vocalization*, or the modification of voice, timbre and pitch to distinguish characters; (5) *Specialized Vocabulary* to differentiate characters and mark genres; (6) *Repetition*, or the use of culturally significant numbers of structure narratives and (7), *Formulaic Expressions*, or recurrent syntactical units, from phrase to lines or

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<sup>59</sup> This means the storyteller, singer or narrator must choose whether and by what means he or she will accept or transgress these restraints.



group of lines (12). They are common features in the process of storytelling although the different tribes differ as it will be explained.

Despite their similarities, Native American tribes were also very different among each other. The next subheading delves into an explanation of some of the most relevant characteristics of several of the best known tribes. Not all of them are studied in depth, as not all of them are relevant for the purposes of this doctoral dissertation. This will also help readers understand the perspectives that the different Native American authors had about stories, legends or myths of Indian folklore, as it is clear that the conception of American Indian identity depended somehow upon the writer's identity and ultimately the writer's identity and knowledge was also shaped by the place and tribe where he lived and wrote.

#### **2.2.3.1.1. Great Plain Indians**

This group of Native American people was divided into two subgroups, according to their nomadic style of life. The first group was completely nomadic and moved from land to land behind the herds of the buffalo. They sometimes grew tobacco and corn, although their basic meal was meat. The second group was more sedentary, lived in villages and raised crops. The former includes Blackfoot, Arapaho, Assiniboine, Cheyenne, Comanche, Crow, Gros, Ventre, Kiowa, Lakota, Dakota, Nakota, Lipa, Cree, Sarsi, Shoshone and Tankawa tribes. The latter includes Arikara, Ioway, Manda, Omaha, Osage, Otoe, Pawnee, Ponca, and Sioux tribes. The Lakota, Dakota and Nakota nations are all part of the Oceti Sakowin, or Seen Council Fires and these nations have always called the northern Great Plains their home, but Europeans called these bands the Sioux. According to tribal history, the Oceti Sakowin came from the Black Hills, emerging from the Earth at a place that was called Wind Cave. They consider this place sacred and call it Paha Sapa, the heart of everything. Today, the Lakota still assert that they have the right over the Black Hills, which the government seized in 1868.

They usually had a clearly defined system or social organization. For them, the most important unit was the family, then the band and finally the tribe as a whole. This means that all families were divided into bands that belonged to the tribe. They were

residential groups and they had a leader, respected and chosen by all the members. Everybody could easily move from a band to another. When a child is born, he or she is not only born to parents or relatives but also to the land, so the tribal members' duties are to teach him or her that and the child's duty towards the tribe is equal to his or her duties towards the land.

Most Great Plain Indians lived in tepees, which they have kept to the present, although with some variations. For instance, Blackfoot people still build them with pines but, in the past, tepees were made from eight to twenty buffalo hides, and today, they use a heavy cloth because buffalos are making a comeback and a large number of hides are still to come by.

Women and men had different roles within the family. For instance, for Blackfeet people women were basically in charge of home care, cooking or cleaning, although they were usually the owners of the houses where they lived. Men, on the contrary, were in charge of hunting and providing their people with the necessary elements to have a relatively comfortable life. Both women and men participated in storytelling sessions, arts and even in the ceremonies. However, for Kiowa people the participation of women in ceremonies was completely forbidden, and their tasks also consisted on helping with animals. Men could help with children too, as it is reflected in some contemporary novels by Louise Erdrich, in which Old Nanapush played the role of mother and father for Fleur, one of the protagonists.

Most Great Plain Indians shared three main characteristics: the creation of secret societies, the use of medicine bundles, and ceremonies like The Sun Dance. The secret societies of the Plain Indians were clubs with different types of initiation rites, pre-war and post-war ceremonies, and which had varied purposes. For instance, for Arapaho people, the secret societies were age-graded, and that meant that boys of a certain age could join one society and finally graduate into others. For Chippewa or Ojibway people, the Midewiwin society or Grand Medicine Society was their main and most important club. It was very difficult to enter in this group and men and women had to have special visitations by a spirit to be considered. These members used *mide* or medicine bags because Chippewa people believed that all living and non-living things had spirits that could be tamed and used by humans to help people who were sick or to

win battles in a war. The Manitou or Manabozho, who is considered the culture hero of Chippewa people, was the one who provided medicine for the Medicine Society, so that all members could use it to cure diseases or for other purposes.

Medicine bundles were containers of different shapes and sizes that included objects that Native American people believed to have special magical powers. They formed part of their ceremonies and spiritual life:

Some were owned by individual Indians, and the owner might have seen the objects in a dream or vision during the vision quest. ... Medicine bundles belonging to the medicine men were used in healing ceremonies. Each secret society had its own medicine bundles. Other medicine bundles belonged to the whole tribe. (Waldman 20)

According to Carl Waldman, Cheyenne people's medicine bundle basically included a hat made from the hide of a buffalo and four arrows, as well as their most sacred object, a flat pipe, which was a "long tobacco pipe with a stem about the length of a man's arm" (20); Sioux people also usually included a pipe which was given to the tribe by a white buffalo calf. Blackfeet people usually included more objects, for example tobacco, pipe, paint, sweetgrass, beaver hide, war shirt, knife, lance, or other items. For them, these bundles had the power to perform some of their most important ceremonies and this power could be passed from one person to another when the time is right to do so.

Ceremonies were a very important part of Great Plain Indian's culture and religion. In general they had a traditional belief that supernatural powers of the sky, the water and the land surrounded them and that they were much more powerful than the powers a human could hold. For them these powers would be restored some day in the future and ceremonies helped get this. Indeed, one of the main ceremonies they performed was the Sun Dance ceremony, celebrated annually in the middle of the summer, when berries were ripening and which usually lasted four days. For them, the sun is the source of all powers as it is everywhere. This power could be transmitted to people through the form of a song and the medium of animals, and with this power they would be able to cure diseases, hunt or even win a war. The Sun Dance usually included the building of a circular lodge, placing a tree trunk in the center and a rawhide doll tied to the top, so that people could dance from the wall to the central pole, and back again while they

were praying too. The different societies performed varied rituals and most of them included the use of a medicine bundle which gazed toward the sun. However, this ceremony had variations depending on the tribe. For instance, Blackfeet people believed that animals could provide them with a list of the objects, songs, and rituals necessary to use this power. Then the objects should be gathered into a medicine bundle and they did what they had been told to do to avail themselves and others of the power. Arapaho people called this ceremony The Offering Lodge, and for them it was a renewal ceremony. It meant the renewal of nature in order to achieve future tribal prosperity. Indeed, young people considered it a test of endurance because they did not eat or sleep for days. For Blackfeet people, on the contrary, the conditions were not so extreme. For Kiowas, the ceremony lasted ten days while for Cheyenne people, it took eight days and it also included self-torture. Sioux people called it “Gaze at the Sun Dance,” and Ponca people “Mystery Dance.”<sup>60</sup>

Cheyenne people also enjoyed other types of ceremonies, like the Arrow Renewal or the Animal Dance. The Arrow Renewal had to do with the four sacred arrows that were passed to the tribe by their ancestral hero, Sweet Medicine. According to Waldman, Sweet Medicine made a pilgrimage to the sacred mountains, where Maiyun, the Great Spirit, gave him four arrows, two for hunting and two for war. They kept them in the medicine bundle together with other tribal objects, including the Sacred Buffalo Holt, made from the hide of a female buffalo. The objects symbolized the collective existence of the tribe. The Animal Dance was a ceremony that was taught to Sweet Medicine at the Sacred Mountain in order to teach people how to hunt and in this way, provide them with enough food. This ceremony lasted five days and it took place annually. Women were not allowed in any of these ceremonies.

Arapaho and Blackfeet people also participated in a quest ceremony, popular among other Great Plain tribes too. This ceremony was usually performed by young men who wanted to obtain supernatural powers or have a vision. In order to achieve it, they go alone to a hill top or an isolated place, normally in a mountain, and there they fast to become weak and call upon all the powers of the sky, the earth or the water. If they are

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<sup>60</sup> It seems that in general, the purpose of these ceremonies had to do with renewal and empowering such as the renewal of agricultural elements that help them survive. It also helped them heal their sick people and empower warriors who fight in wars.

lucky, they can come in a vision, normally involving an animal or a bird or any other natural element like a thunder which appears to him in human form and offers him some of its power. Those men who obtained powers could form groups and perform ceremonies to honor their benefactors. They all gained the Bear Cult, because this animal was considered important both for wars and to cure ill people.

Regarding the consideration of spirits, most Great Plain Indians also shared some beliefs. They usually believed in a good and Supreme Being, the Great Spirit, and in an Evil Spirit, although there also were some minor good and evil spirits. In order to reach the Great Spirit, they used an herb called sweet grass. It is said that this herb came to Native people through the dream of a little girl whose tribe was suffering from famine. She prayed the Great Spirit and this told her that a gift would be given. When she woke up, the fields were filled with this herb that they would burn. They prayed to the spirit and the sick got well and the tribe sustained. Sweet grass has been used up to now in a purification ritual known as smudging ceremony. Great Plain Indians usually gave him different names and attributes, depending on the tribe. However, in general, they believed there was an upper world in the sky and that this was ruled by the Thunderbird, which, together with the sun were the most powerful spirits. There were some variations depending on the tribes too. Blackfeet believed, for instance, that rivers and lakes have a special power and for this reason they try not to fish or navigate. Indeed, they believed that Underwater People inhabited these areas, and called them Suyitapis, who were the power source for medicine bundles, lodge covers and other sacred items. They also believed in the god Old Man, the name they gave to the Great Spirit.

In Arapaho mythology, the Great Spirit receives the name of Man-Above and is formless. According to them, he created the world with the help of a Flat Pipe, their most sacred object. For them, in the beginning of the world there was only water and Flat Pipe floated upon it. Man-Above asked Flat Pipe to create the world and this asked different birds and animals to dive in order to look for the earth. All the animals, including the duck, goose, muskrats or turtles died but “Flat pipe combined the specks of mud on their bodies and created the world” (Caviness 587).

For Kiowa people Taime, a doll, was said to possess the power of the Great Spirit, that they called *daw*. According to the myth, the *daw* was a power which was part of

Daw-Kee (“Power Man), which is a synonymous of Great Spirit. The difference among them is that “while the Great Spirit was above all things, Daw-Kee was within everything” (Caviness 587). Therefore, Kiowa people believed that Taimé symbolized the power of the Sun Dance, and without her, their Sun Dance would not have as a result an improvement in fertility or regeneration (Caviness 587).

Chippewa people also believed in underwater spirits that they called Manitous. According to Caviness, this concept was similar to that of the Kiowa people, as they believed in Gitchi Manito, “a neutral Great Spirit that combined spirit, mystery and magic” (588), and whose manifestations were or *pimadaziwin* (spiritual power), from a unknown source. For Ojibwa people these manifestations were crucial and invoked by the members of the Midwiwin society.

Sioux people believed that the Sun and the Moon controlled the universe and most of their stories involved the narration of their powers. For them, the Old Man, Waziya, lived on the Earth with his wife. Their daughter married the Wind and they had four sons, the winds North, East, South, and West. They also believed that as the world was being formed, Iktoma the trickster caused all the trouble he was able to.

The Comanche also believed the Great Spirit had created people but for them, white people already existed before them. According to tradition, a flood washed white people away and they turned into birds that flew away. Then a secondary spirit was sent and he created the Comanche, but as they were not perfect at first, he had to come again, giving providing them with intelligence and the knowledge to make everything.

Regarding storytelling, it is difficult to establish common characteristics because narrators provide with a large variety even within a single tribe. The most typical narratives dealt with creation stories, which usually involve powerful mythic beings, such as the trickster (which receives different names depending on the tribe, such as Napi or Old Man for Barefoot, Isaahkawuattee or Old Man Coyote for Crews or Iktomi or Spider for Lakotas); and typical hero stories, which seem to be similar at first but not the same, “while subsequent adventures are drawn from a stock of episodes freely assigned to any hero” (Wiget 65). These heroes express ideals of courage and valor and the tales show key lessons that want to promote understanding of the world. Its inhabitants are spiritually connected and animals and peoples share basic kinship and

therefore must respect each other. The act of storytelling took place during winter “from the first frost in the fall until the last thunder heard in the spring that the Coyote stories should be told” (Wishart 142), and storytellers had to struggle, usually through heritage. Although with variations among them, most Plain storytellers used repetitions of phrases to signal key actions within the narrative, used songs, intonation, pauses, body movement and hand gesturing and demanded the listeners to acknowledge the story by saying aloud *ée*, meaning yes, or motioning in any other way. As Wishart states, “Should the storyteller fail to receive such acknowledgments, the telling would immediately cease for the evening” (142). The storytelling event became more potent with the use of Native language.

For example, when told in the Crow language, the words of the story are understood as having the power to bring forth and manifest that which is being spoken. This pivotal notion is conveyed in the Crow term *dasshússua*, literally meaning ‘breaking with the mouth.’ That which comes through the mouth has the power to affect the world. The understanding of the creative power of language, coupled with the various techniques used by storytellers, encourages listeners to become participants within the story, traveling the same trails alongside Coyote or Scar Face. (Wishart 142)

Today, storytelling remains an important part of Plain Indians culture and revitalizes traditions and values. Important contemporary authors belong to these tribes, like Scott Momaday, who belongs to Kiowa tribe, James Welch (Blackfeet), Louise Erdrich (Chippewa), Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo) and Gerald Vizenor (Chippewa). They all feel proud of being Great Plain Indians, and show most of the traditional beliefs and ceremonies of their respective tribes in their works.

In general, the Plain Indians has been one of the most important symbols of American culture. Almost without effort, when someone imagines Plain Indians, we think of a man on a horse back and of the full-brown narratives of buffalo hunting and mounted warfare. However, we should not forget that real people are not only what we are shown on Hollywood movies, and that it is difficult to detach them from the Great Plains “for this difficult environment framed ongoing historical transformations” (Wishart 555). These transformations had to do with politics, social relations, economy and culture. Apart from the vision that we are offered on movies, Native Americans have worked to develop raiding, trading, agriculture, diplomacy, politics, religion and

multiple areas and thanks to these adaptive strategies “the Plains peoples worked to protect and enhance their political power and their ability to sustain themselves economically, and to maintain their cultural distinctiveness” (Wishart 555).

#### **2.2.3.1.2. New Southwest Indians.**

These tribes are located in Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado (the southern section). The Southwest Indians can also be subdivided according to the cultures they developed, although most the tribes were basically farming societies which also developed hunting and gathering. The first group was called Pueblo and was composed by the Zuni and the Hopi people, who raised maize and beans. The second group was formed by the Mojave, Yuma, Pima and Yaqui people, who took advantage of the irrigation systems in Central Arizona. The third group would be formed by the Navajo, Apache and Humi people, who hunted and farmed along the Western New Mexico and Eastern Arizona.

Despite minimum differences between them, most of the tribes shared some basic features. In general, Southwest people believed that the first people generated in a cavern below the surface of the earth. They climbed through two more caves, which were occupied by other living beings, until they reached the surface and emerged through a hole called *Sipapu*, from which the humans were born and where dead people return. They believed that this fourth world was sacred and parents told their children multiple legends about it. In their way to the surface, humans were sometimes helped by a pair of Twins, also called the Little War Gods, who taught the people many features of their culture, and how to carry ceremonials. They also helped to stabilize the surface of the Earth.

Southwest people were primarily religious people who performed ceremonies to get rain or to improve the growth of crops. They did not believe in a great spirit which could be compared to God, but their major gods are natural powers who were deified like Mother Earth and Father Sky, who were also the mother and father of human beings and other animals. They received multiple names and personifications (for instance, Mother Earth was usually represented as a spider and Father Sky as a bird).



This had also different versions depending on the tribe. For instance, the Zuni people called their Great Spirit Awonawilona, “All Father” or “Father Alone.” According to their legend, at the beginning of the world, there was nothing, only darkness and,

Awonawilona thought outward into space, and created primaveral mists. He made himself into the sun, the great father, and the darkness brightened with light. The mists thickened and became water. Awonawilona rested upon the waters and produced green scum. The scum hardened and divided, becoming Awitelin Tsta (Earth Mother) and Apoyan Tachin (sky father). From these two beings sprang all life: mountains, clouds, rain, trees, corn, and stars. (Caviness 589)

The myth continues saying that Awonawilona sent his sons, the Beloved Twin, into a cave, where the first people were living in darkness. The sons raised his father into the sky and there he warmed the earth and cut the mountain with magic knives. In this way, and thanks to a ladder built by the Beloved Twain, people could climb to the surface and split into different bands, which would become the ancestors of all human beings (Caviness 589).

The figure of the twins was also present in other tribes. For Pueblo people, they combine the positive god and the trickster as they sometimes behave bad and teas their grandmother. For the Apache, their culture heroes were similar to the Twin Gods of the Pueblos and were called “Killer-of-Enemies” and “Child-of-the Water.”

For all the Southwest tribes, the sun was not considered a God, but a symbol and therefore it was not worshipped or celebrated. However, all supernatural beings are believed to influence rain and the growth of crops and because of that they celebrate certain ceremonies where the snakes (The Great Horned or the Plumed Serpent) have a prominent role.

They also believed in Kachinas. Traditionally it was said that when men were weary during the migration to the centre of the Earth, these spirit-beings danced and made fun of their faces and sometimes insulted them. They let men copy their masks and although they came back to the underworld, men have kept their costumes and in the kivas, the ceremonial chambers to which they belonged, they perform the same dances, wearing the same type of masks in order to protect their harvest, bring rain, help sick people, provide protection or improve fertility. Besides, sometimes children received Kachina dolls, made from wood and that looked very similar to the masks that these men used.

Another important tradition among Southwest tribes had to do with naming. The naming of the new babies was such an important moment for the whole community that the parents could not choose it on their own, but they were helped by the tribe relatives or other relatives. This changed depending on the tribe, but for instance Hopi people could not name their children until they were at least twenty days old.

Storytelling is also an important part in the idiosyncrasies of Southeast Native Americans, but again it is difficult to trace similarities among the tribes that populate this area. They have certain features in common, such as the use of some stylistic and formal features that help manage the audience and create credibility. For example Zunis, like many other communities in this area, use verbal and temporal frames so that the listeners understood the story was credible although not always completely true. They could tell origin stories at any time of the year, and these lacked verbal frame, as well as narratives about events of recent past. However, myths always started with the same formula, for instance Zuni *telep:awe* always begin with the formula *Sonabchi, Sand ino:te* and the verbal formula *Le: sem: konikya* which establishes a frame around the narrative “that instructs the audience, who acknowledges by answering *e:so*, to understand that the story while believable, is not certifiable true” (Wiget 8).

#### **2.2.3.1.3. Other tribes and beliefs.**

The Pacific Northwest Indians lived along the Pacific Ocean. They are well-known for their hand-crafted totem poles, a pole placed in front of a home and which showed the generations and social ranks of the family. They lived basically from the sea, fishing seals, salmons or even whales, although they were also good dealers. One of their most important ceremonies was called Potlatch and involved dancing and gift giving. They took place as commemoration of different and varied events, from the raising of a new totem to the appointment of new members. The dancers painted their bodies completely and wore animal masks and feathers. They also celebrated the salmon and the bear ceremonies. In the former they celebrate the first salmon they have captured by cleaning and preparing it cautiously. They return the entrails to the water and eat the rest in a selected meal where only a selected group of people can participate, usually the members of the secret societies. In the latter, they do not kill the bears but, on the

contrary, they address the animal in kind terms. Most the time, there was a kind of competition among the families that held the ceremony, as they gave presents, threw things into the sea or prepared expensive items in order to show their prestige and power.

The Southeast Indian tribes were primarily farmers, hunters and gatherers. Their major source of income came from agriculture, especially through the growth of maize, beans and squash. The tribes were normally divided into clans and lived in permanent towns, large and appropriately conditioned. The clans were also divided into families, which were matriarchal, so women had an essential role. They made relevant decisions, participated in the hunting process and they were storytellers too, becoming the vehicle to transmit knowledge from generation to generation and to keep culture and values alive. Their society was military organized and quite conscious of the importance of the survival of their art, stories, herbs and natural medicines, to which they paid especial attention. In general, they believed in multiple god and goddesses but for them the earth, which they called 'The World,' was a kind of island in the middle of the ocean. The Sky was for them a rock that went up and down to allow the passage of the sun and the moon. For these tribes, there was also an Upper world above the sky, as well as an Underworld below it. The Sun and the Moon were their main deities; the former because it provided heat, light and life in general; the latter because it was associated to rain and fertility. Besides, the four cardinal points were also of great significance because for them, the world was held by ropes at these four points. Their main ceremony was called the *busk* or Green Corn Ceremony which lasted three days and were all members of the tribe were allowed to participate. It was a renewal ceremony, because they wanted to renew purity and harmony, and it was also a ceremony to celebrate harvest.

The Great Basin Indians lived between the high desert areas of Sierra Nevada and the Rocky Mountains. They were basically hunters and gatherers and their main local unit was a nuclear family, called 'kin cliques,' to which additional members could be added during some parts of the year. In general, they believed that animals were power beings, and some of them, which they considered sacred like the wolf, coyote or mountain lion, were believed to be the current animals' ancestors and the responsible for the seasons, the lands or the disposition of rivers. Their ceremonies could be individual or groupal

depending on the objective they wanted to reach. All tribes believed that boys became men through a process of initiation, so they looked for a spirit helper that could appear during a dream or a vision quest. In order to get it, they broke with their normal life and they did not eat or drink for days, and even used drugs, so that they could be exposed to stress and ultimately reach this spiritualism. Regarding group ceremonies, Great Basin Indians usually celebrated communal activities at the end of the season, like the Round Dance, which celebrates fertility, food supply or rain. Both in individual or group ceremonies, as well as in the rest of activities in the tribes, the shamans were of major importance. They were supposed to foretell the future, cure diseases or practice sorcery.

Plateau Region Indians also had special celebrations for children, both for boys and girls, when they reached adulthood. Apart from this, they also had whipping ceremonies for winter, to prevent boys from getting ill during this season. Like Great Basin Indians, they celebrated spiritual quests too, so that the participants could get supernatural powers through the participation of a spirit that would provide them anything they would need.

Storytelling was also a common practice for them. They dealt with two main types of stories too, myth and traditional stories which included traditional nature stories and contemporary stories. Traditional nature stories dealt with animals that took human forms and performed the role of actors, and contemporary stories usually dealt with monsters such as Sasquatch, also called Bigfoot or stick Indian. Creation stories were not frequent among them, unlike among Plain Indians, but they also had characters such as the trickster, which received different names depending on the region, and culture heroes, also named differently depending on the tribe.<sup>61</sup> They all shared a similar conception of the time when the stories should be told. Common stories which did not involve myths could be told at any time of the year or as occasion demanded. Myths were restricted to winter because they believed that telling them at any other moment of the year could imply bad luck. It was also unlucky for them to tell just one part of the story and individuals will not attempt to tell as story “if they are not sure they know the whole thing” (Wiget 39). On the northern areas and in the Plateau ones, elders might

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<sup>61</sup> North coast tribes gave the name Raven to the trickster and Plateau Indians called him Coyote. Culture heroes were called *wiget* among Gitksan, *q'waeti* among Quileute people, *xwan*, among Chehalis and Cowlitz people and *masp* among Quinault ones.

tell stories to children at night and some Plateau groups report travelling storytellers who would make their rounds in the winter, spending some time with their families and narrating stories in the evening. Most of these traditions are no longer kept although some grandparents still tell their children these stories at bedtime.

In general, although the tribes had different characteristics depending on the geographical area they belonged to, they named their gods in different forms, or carried out different ceremonies or behaved slightly different, they all had shared features and above all they all wanted to keep their cultures alive and they did it transmitting their knowledge through oral tales that were transmitted through generations and that have been kept until the present, as we will see in the following sections.

### 2.2.3.2 Contemporary storytelling and storytellers.

Traditionally, the act of storytelling in Native American tribes was an essential component of the story. In the past, the storyteller, no matter woman or man, had to gain the right to tell stories, usually inheriting it from their ancestors. It usually took place during the winter, especially when the stories included myths, and they followed a kind of ritual with some similarities, such as the repetition of some phrases, the use of body and hand movement to produce more intrigue, the use of songs associated to the narrative, and the requirement that the listeners nodded or showed involvement. Obviously, all the process was done with the only help of the storyteller's voice. Apart from using storytelling to spread knowledge it also recreated and revitalized landscapes and people, asserting identities and tribal affirmation. This storytelling process has gone through multiple variations, births and rebirths but continues to provide a foundational heritage. It has survived despite adversities and although it has been adapted to new circumstances, its core is same.

Stories are still used by Native American and non-Native American people to convey information, to promote important news related to health, politics, society or culture. Using storytelling to transmit educational messages is a traditional pedagogical method that many Native American tribes used and still use, as stories are probably the most appropriate form to do it. They include characters with different behaviors that make the listeners and readers think about a variety of problems and act consequently. These characters are used as role models and to show certain ideas that they want their people to learn and to understand. That is why traditional storytelling is still used in many fields in present day Native American communities. For instance, in 1998, the Center of American Indian Research and Educational received a grant from the National Institute for Nursing Research to design a community based health care model for American Indian families.<sup>62</sup> The main goal was including approaches that were culturally appropriate and that helped prevent primary and secondary diseases. They used traditional storytelling to do it, as they wanted a culturally relevant health care strategy. They firstly identified high-risk behaviors among Native American people over eighteen

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<sup>62</sup> Information extracted from: Hodge, Felcia Schanche et al. "Utilizing Traditional Storytelling to Promote Wellness in American Indian Communities." *Journal of Transcultural Nursing: Official Journal of the Transcultural Nursing Society* 13:1 (2002): 6-11. Print.

and then they developed a culturally appropriate strategy to improve wellness and health in the community. The program was addressed to American Indians and Alaska Native people, because due to external factors, their access to health care resources was limited. It was found that social isolation and depression were main disorders among them, and using stories was a good way to approach these people. For that, professionals were trained in order to be accepted by the community.

Storytelling was used as an educational and cultural tool that motivated Native American people towards a healthier lifestyle. They chose a member of the tribe who was trained to facilitate the educational sessions in talking circles that meet for twelve weeks at tribal clinics or buildings. The stories were selected as tools that promoted dialogue among the participants. They were stories that emphasized communal welfare, individual responsibility, language and environment, so they included character such as the sun, the twin brothers, the trickster figures of Coyote, Rabbit or Spiderwoman, and themes related to communal welfare and which promoted wellness. They also had in mind that stories varied depending on the tribes and that a character may be quite helpful for one tribe but dangerous for another. So there were twelve sessions. The first one always started with a traditional creation story, which focused both on genesis and on change. Then there were other stories that motivated healthy behavior and the last story reflected the continuation of knowledge and wisdom through tribal practices.

Storytelling is also used as a tool for communication, mediation and conflict resolution with young adults and homeless Native American people in areas such as New Mexico, Buffalo or New York. These programs use folktales and mythology because the heroes that perform them are usually taken as role models for youngsters. In schools and libraries, storytelling is used as a tool to motivate and encourage reading, as it is considered that this has strong benefits for children. Besides, it is also a way to teach moral values at the same time children are connected to books and traditions. This proves that storytelling can be used for more than just literary works. It means that storytelling is basic in Native American culture and that it can be used by other fields apart from the literary one. The importance that it has for Native American people is used by professionals to get close to them.

In a very recent interview with Tony Casey, the President of the National Storytelling Festival, Kiran Singh Sirah stated that the path to world peace may come by way of storytelling.<sup>63</sup> He has travelled around the world and touted the power of storytelling through the arts. In a very recent trip to Brazil, Sirah met Dr. Oscar Arias, twice President of Costa Rica and Nobel Peace Prize winner. The latter stated that “Peace is a process also known as art.” Sirah has taught how to incorporate storytelling in the training of captains at Fort Benning and is presently working with Frederick Douglass’ great granddaughter to collect the stories of everyone in Baltimore. His mission is to enrich the lives of people through storytelling and he wants to hear from everyone around the world, continuing with the tradition established by the founder of the International Storytelling Festival. Sirah stated,

When Jimmy Neil Smith founded the International Storytelling Festival, he was doing something about a vision to bring people together through non-violence, through community-building, through building relationships, connecting people to people and enabling people not just to hear stories, but to tell stories ... When we do that, what we’re doing is building the foundations for peace and a better world. (n.p.)

Sirah also believed that the Festival was an opportunity to bring people from different backgrounds together and they would learn not only from their stories but also from others’ stories. This was the way wisdom and learning was passed on through the generations, according to him, and also the only way they had to pass on information. Nowadays, Sirah said that they were making use of technology to make sure people all over the world hear these stories and had formed a digital partnership with Google’s Cultural Institute, a free online exhibition that explores the stories behind history’s most important historic and cultural moments. He said “You bring people together and you empower them to tell their stories and when we start doing that it inspires people to see the world in a different way.” If that gets the ball rolling, he sees a better world ahead. According to him the upcoming events before the October’s National Storytelling Festival this year includes a Storytelling and Palliative Care workshop, where the goal is to use stories as a way to construct a powerful narrative medicine that brings connections, care and comfort to palliative care patients and their respective caregivers. That is, this entire means that storytelling, though evolving, still maintains its essence,

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<sup>63</sup> Information extracted from International Storytelling Center Facebook Webpage



as it is used in many fields of society and always with the same aim, creating a better world and providing positive values that can be used to heal, to help or as Sirah says, to even reach peace.

Storytelling has also evolved in its form too. In *The Storyteller's Journey*, Joseph Daniel Sobol makes a study of some of the most recent years of American storytelling and examines what he considers the 'storytelling revival.' He interviews multiple storytellers and considers this revival as part of a cultural change in which the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling (NAPPS) has much to say.<sup>64</sup> For him, the NAPPS/ NSA emerged from the enthusiasm surrounding the first two national storytelling festivals and has developed to an institutional base that "puts out a directory of professional storytellers, storytelling events, groups and educational programs nationwide" (3). In these storytelling festivals around the country, we find an image of fireside folk-tellers projected onto a popular stage, framed by tents and spotlights and the most fashionable technology "all to satisfy mass hunger for a restored sense of rootedness" (2). Although the traditions of telling tales at home or at the community may be disappearing, new forms have appeared more recently, such as telling stories in churches, parks, hospitals or other cultural centers. There are also continuous conferences, festivals and workshops in the United States that promote traditional storytelling. One of the most famous and oldest ones is the National Storytelling Festival, held the first week of August in Jonesborough, Tennessee. It started in 1973 and it was at first an annual meeting that due to its success, spurred the creation of the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling in 1975 which continued to host the Festival. It's a three day festival which attracts thousands of people and storytellers from all over the United States. Indeed, many critics consider the Festival was the beginning of the storytelling renaissance. But there are other international festivals too, such as the Timpanogos Storytelling Festival in Orem, Utah. This has taken place for twenty five years and it gathers storytellers from all over the world. It includes musical performers and oral performers and it is held in August. It is also important to notice the relevance of these festivals in other places. For instance, the FEST Annual Conference is organized by the Federation of

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<sup>64</sup> The NAPPS trimmed its name to the National Storytelling Association or NSA in 1994.

European Storytellers since 2001. It started with a group of fifteen storytellers from different European countries, but it has expanded to the point of becoming an international festival which is hosted by different European countries every year. Besides, there are storytelling festivals in most states, storytelling organizations, a directory that identifies professional storytellers and a lot of web pages that deal with storytelling as an art. There are online discussions, pages that provide information about folktales, myths, and stories that could be used for research and pages that provide information about storytellers themselves. Many universities, such as Stanford or Berkeley, also offer masters in storytelling and some associations and museums hospitals, prisons, districts, among others, have included storytelling as an integral part of their programs.

Evolution in the storytelling process also implies a change of format too. In order to adapt to new times and reach a broader audience including youngsters, storytelling is now presented in comic format too. Indeed, at present, both Native American superheroes and Native American comic creators are in the spotlight. When comic books began to be a commercial success in the 1940s, Native Americans were only one-dimensional characters who usually meant a threat to white people. In the 1960s and 1970s Native characters started to have a more important role in the storylines and at that time Marvel published for the first time Red Wolf, a Native American hero. However, at that time, none of these heroes were central or main ones, but helpers and did not have their own series. Only recently Native artists have started to produce starring Native characters. In December 2015, for example, Marvel re-released Native American superhero Red Wolf. The company's aim is reaching a further audience and portraying a character who is Native American but who does not belong to a specific tribe. The story is set in American Southwest and he is a new street level hero who uses Red Wolf moniker. He will be able to deal with any circumstances at any places and any position he may be in but he will be also realistic and authentic. For Native American Jeffrey Veregge, one of the creators:

As Native American, I'm really excited to see that he can do things, he can figure out things and stand with Captain America, and hold his own in this universe. That's what's awesome about it. You have all these characters of different nationalities and ethnicities, but it's not all about their culture. It's about them being a hero. (qtd. in Leasks)

*Moonshot: The Indigenous Comic Collection Volume 1* has also just been released and it presents a unique and needed look into Native American storytelling. Created by Native artists, it tries to break with stereotypes about native people in comics and other types of books made by non aboriginal writers and designers. Moonshot celebrates differences among tribes and as James Leasks states:

Cree! Caddo! Anishinabeg! S'Klallam! Metis! Inuit! Tlicho! It feels silly to enthusiastically name them but they deserve to be named, and they so rarely are. If nothing else, *Moonshot* is a book that, as a basic level, gives voice to the under spoken truth that while many aboriginal people in North America are connected by traditions, stories and migrations, the idea of a single 'aboriginal' identity is a misguided creation by a colonial system that was neer meant to serve those it categorized. (Leasks)

The book comprises different stories which are quite varied. “Ochek” and “Coyote and the Pebbles” are adaptations of creation stories.<sup>65</sup> “Picho Nàowo” is a nice story in which Tlicho tells her grandchildren the importance of remembering one’s ancestors and “Copper Heart” teaches that if we continue as peoples, so do our stories. It is important to tell them because it means that they are alive. “Ayanisach” is a sci-fiction dystopia where an invading force that disrespects the land brings about ruin. It calls European settlers “dispectors” and also deals with stories about families and the preservation of culture through oral storytelling. “Strike and Bolt” also sets an optimistic future where aboriginal people have spread to the stars and “Preserver” speaks of the powers of storytelling and shamanism. Leasks states that although at first they all seem pleasant, affecting stories from a culture that is not wanting for myths, they are their stories and “seeing them continue is important” (Leasks). After reading “Ochek” and “Coyote and the Pebbles,” he reminded some similar stories he had been told as a child but that he had forgotten, because there are a lot of creation myths and Coyote stories, so it is easy to forget some of them. But then, he found them on the page, “in a form I’d never seen them before, told by people I’ve never met. In that moment, I felt my story and my culture. Not as an old story I’d forgotten, but as

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<sup>65</sup> In “Ochek,” a fisher sacrifices his life to bring summer and warmth to the earth and his son remembers him by looking at the sky at night. In “Coyote and the Pebbles,” Coyote, who is sometimes a trickster, sometimes a storyteller, and sometimes a guide, plays a role in the creation of the stars and is punished by other animals for this.

something alive and changing. Something that is out there, still, that I can touch” (Leasks). He thinks that it may sound a little thing but with all the images of aboriginal people, “these stories are a reminder that we are alive, that we are a line through to our pasts, and that we have never been broken. Ochek’s son remembers him by looking at the stars. Stories like this are at the same time reminders to us. We are alive” (Leasks).

In “Kagagi,” a graphic novel that is broadly distributed and published all across North America and which has been created by Jay Odjick, the hero is a sixteen years-old Anishinabeg boy with supernatural strength and able to fly who has to fight against a Windigo, who is an evil creature with the power to possess humans and turn them into cannibals. Proudstar’s series “Tribal Force” basically wants to create a universe in which heroes face the same challenges that many Native American kids face today, like “living with the effects of fetal alcohol syndrome and child molestation, problems that occur at higher rates in many Native communities than in the general U.S. population” (Jung). The story of Native American people has also been put into comic-style in works such as *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*, by Gord Hill, an accurate portrayal of Native American resistance to the European colonization of the Americas. It comprises events ranging from Columbus’ invasion to the Six Nation land reclamation in Ontario in 2006 and includes events such as the 1680 Pueblo Revolt in New Mexico, Geronimo and the Semiole Wars in 1860s or the rise of the American Indian Movement, among many others.

Sobol also mentions the fact that due to the development in our present society, the role of the storyteller has changed considerably in the last centuries. Once this role was placed on scribes, spiritual authorities and philosophers. In the Elizabethan Age dramatists were considered storytellers and in Victorian times novelists had the same role. Now it is not the poets, the grandparents or the philosophers the ones in charge of transmitting oral knowledge, but this role is played by the media nowadays, by filmmakers and television stars. However, for Sobol neither storytellers or stories are real because the atmosphere in which the storytelling act takes place and the audience that participate on it are not the appropriate ones (2). Moreover, he thinks that due to the increasing technological developments, storytelling has been regarded as childish because the technology which implies is primitive and irrelevant. However according to Sobol, in the last twenty years “a national — to some extent, even international —

community of performers has placed itself under the banner of a self-conscious storytelling revival” (2). For him, the storytelling revival of the 1970s and 1980s is not an isolated event, but it is part of “a longstanding pattern of folklore-based cultural revivals and it is based firmly on its predecessors” (5). That is, these new storytellers invoke old traditions. Sobol mentions some of these predecessors and they go from the fairy tales of Louis XV, which produced the works of Charles Perrault, Mme. D’Aulnoy and others, to the Hasidic movement related to Judaism, which gave important instrumental roles or such oral cultural expressions as storytelling, folk music, and folk dance in contrast to the rabbinic fixation on the written world; the German romantic movement (with authors such as the Grimm brothers), and the nationalist movements in Western Europe, which produced great collections of regional folklore in nearly every European country in the nineteenth century, as well as literary and musical works based on folk forms and themes based on the works of such major figures as Sir Walter Scott, Hans Christian Andersen, Joel Chandler Harris or even Oscar Wilde.

In a conversation that I recently held with Tchin, a famous contemporary storyteller and folklorist, he explained to me some of the topics related to the function of the contemporary storyteller and stories in Native American society at present.<sup>66</sup> Tchin considers that storytelling is still relevant in their society for education and entertainment and as a connection to the past and the culture. When I asked him what role storytellers played in their society and if this role has changed, he answered that the role of storyteller is “to keep culture alive and valued. Storytelling teaches us how to behave and how things in the universe came to be.” For him, storytelling has changed and evolved because storytellers have changed. He said “Each person brings their own style of storytelling to their presentation and new fun ones are constantly being created.” For him, the spiritual stories try to stay close to the original and in general are quite long in the telling and “Often times, the younger people today do not have the patience to listen.” When I asked him how storytelling helps people in their every day live, he

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<sup>66</sup> Tchin was born in Norkfold and is a nationally known and multi award-winning Blackfeet/Narragansett folklorist and storyteller. In 1978 he was asked by the by the Museum of Natural History in New York City to present some Native stories and he did it. He told me “They knew that almost every Native person is a storyteller, although not everyone will speak in public for strangers.” Shortly after that, he found out that there was some demand for knowledge of their culture and commenced writing letters to educational institutions, college, museums and corporations proposing them to hire him to do storytelling presentations and that is how he started working on this field professionally.

answered “You can say to a person ‘remember what happened to the bluebird when he tried to do...’ using a story to help a person through a difficult time, or just enjoy a good laugh.” He explained that they still teach children traditional tales that include characters such as the Trickster of mythological goddesses and added that when his children were small and growing up, he used to teach them lessons. Finally he also considers that contemporary Native authors bring interest and knowledge to a larger audience and encourage their curiosity to learn more about Native people and their ways. This proves that storytelling has to evolve and change because tempo vital is now different too.

The truth is that there new models of storytellers, those who wander through the countries earning their living by telling tales to varied audiences. This is the so called revivalist tradition, because they tell, adapt, re-imagine traditional folktales and tell them to audiences of all ages for different purposes. This has caused a great controversy too, as sometimes they charge high fees for their services, and use such a highly sophisticated material that many people consider that the essence of storytelling is getting lost. It is difficult to assume that a single storyteller will be able to create the same atmosphere than that of traditional storytelling circles in the different reservations, so some others think it is better to accept that there are also storytellers who entertain the audience and are paid for that, and that this audience is not only restricted to children but to businessmen, workers, housewives or any type of people. Besides, it is important to notice the new methods they use, the so called digital storytelling. This initially made use of recorded images, film, sound and text but it has evolved to videos, interactive and participatory projects with new experimental forms. Indeed, the new technological devices make it easy for storytellers to do it. With online communities, it is also easier for these new storytellers to create a cohesive group. They develop long distance classes, e-mailed stories and virtual story swaps. All this means that although the primary definition of storytelling may no longer exist, the new storytellers and storytelling models are the future. However, the essence remains the same, it still means transmitting a story from a storyteller to an active listener who will be able to learn from him/ her something that will never be forgotten.

#### **2.2.4. Native American storytelling in non-Native American culture.**

Much has been written and told about Native American people in films, news, literature and American daily life, in general. The problem is that most of what has been said has been influenced by the stereotypes that white people have posed on Native ones. Native people have demonstrated, however, that these stereotypes are simple clichés and that they feel proud of their origins, of their oral folklore and traditions, while at the same time, they are adapted to the current circumstances and to the new lifestyles.

When Columbus arrived in America, Europeans discovered that their dreams of founding a society that was as similar as possible to the one they had left behind, could be interrupted by the presence of indigenous people for whom they had no possible classification, people who did not exist in their idea of the world. The main images that have persisted and evolved through time are, according to Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., three fundamental themes. The first one is conceiving of the Indian in a generic way by generalizing the traits of one tribe to all Indians, “thus denying the wide variety of cultural, linguistic, and other differences among Indigenous Americans” (qtd. in Weston 10). The second one is describing Indians in terms of white society, rather than in terms of the way they see themselves. For Berkhofer, “they were viewed according to how they did or did not measure up to white norms” (qtd. in Weston 10). Finally “mixing examination of Indians and their institutions with moral judgments about them” (qtd. in Weston 10), that is, being unable to separate the study of Native American people and their society from their own opinions as foreign observers. In general, stereotypes often emerge when people of different cultures start to interact. The cultural misunderstandings, difficulties in language comprehension, in cultural ideas and philosophical beliefs potentiate the generalizations and this finishes in stereotypes.

Parting from these three statements, it could be said that the image of Native American people has embraced two contradictory conceptions: the good Indian or noble savage, and the bad Indian or the bloodthirsty devil. The noble savage was a European notion that dated from the time of Columbus. It referred to a remote time and place where people lived in a society which was pure and uncorrupted and that was destroyed

with the arrival of white people, and noble savages are romantically depicted as caught by the advances of colonization. The antithesis of this Indian was the bad Indian, who according to whites is uncivilized and savage, dangerous and constantly at war. The habits of the Native were brutal and cruel, living of treachery and thievery. They had to face positive and negative stereotypes such as that of being alcohol addict, gamblers, and protectors of nature, or people who only live in tepees. It has also been said that they pay no taxes or that they get important benefits from the government, that they do not reach important jobs or that only Native American people live in reservations, and obviously that Native American people only live in reservations and not in common places, among many other false ideas. They have been associated with traditional ways of life and beliefs, spiritual beliefs, oral traditions and particular languages.

Luckily it seems that this duality/opposition of the noble savage versus the terrible Indian is disappearing. Many Native American people have demonstrated that all these stereotypes are just that and that American Indians were, are and will be able to adapt to any circumstances without losing their sense of belonging to their tribes and to their people. They feel that the education they have received at home, the stories they were told in their childhood by their grandparents and relatives were really valuable for them at that time and for them at present.

Alison Owings collects a series of experiences with Native American people as she travelled around the different reservations. In the introduction she states that since Columbus, many misunderstandings about Native Americans have not abated. She refers to a cartoon reprinted in the book *Do All Indians Live in Tipis?* which shows Columbus arriving on an island and bright-eyed Native Man and woman looking at him. The man says “We’ve thought and thought, but we’re at a loss about what to call ourselves. Any ideas?” (xxi). From that moment on, many non-Native Americans still believe that Native Americans pay no taxes, are all rich because of casinos or live in tepees, and among many other stereotypes. The author believes that to summarize five hundred years of history, the newcomers tried to change the life and customs of people living there while the others only tried to help and coexist with newcomers (xxi). She travels and interviews different Native men and women about the clichés usually related to them, and her discoveries are showed in the book. For instance, she traveled with Darren Newell, a member of Passamaquoddy tribe and talked with him about common



clichés. They talked about the harvest and he explained the author that there is no formal ceremony related to it. People get out every day and pick. Despite what people believe, pregnant women are allowed to sit in the drum circle and play the drum. Puncturing another cliché, he said that the harvest does not begin on any celestial day, but he determines it depending on how ripe the crop is. He used to fence with clichés from non Native Americans. Some neighbors in drought years suggested he pray for rain, but he did not do it. However, he is completely conscious of the role Mother Nature has on their lives as this is something he has been taught since he was a boy. He said “We pretty much take what Mother Nature gives us. We try to help her along with what tools we have to have a good crop, but basically she tells us what’s going to happen” (4). He also told Owings that during his childhood, his grandparents taught him ‘old ways,’ especially during winter, including the tradition of storytelling. He would tell his son Ryan the stories he had been told and this is a tradition he likes to maintain.

Alison Owings also talked about other common myths with Elizabeth Lohan Homer. One of the topics they dealt with was life in reservations. Elizabeth Lohan referred to the idea that only tribal members live there. She explained that the impression was that tribes are somehow divorced from the rest of the country. However, according to her, “Most reservations today, like my own, the Osage reservation, are populated with people from all different races, creeds, colors and religions” (18). Few, if any reservations, she added, do not include tribal members (18). In relation to government handouts, she stated that non Native people are wrong again. According to her, Indians do not get free money from the government just because they are Indians. They receive federal subsidies, but there are provided to local people as well. She said that the only really TV series that she liked about Native American people was *Northern Exposure*. For her, it showed a complex, diverse, varied world, with different types of personalities and people with different interests, thoughts and ideas. For her “the real world, the way it really is for tribal people, is infinitely more interesting and complex than I think most people in this society appreciate” (19). She enjoyed *Northern Exposure* because there would be all the Natives sitting around in Levis and a cowboy shirt, talking about nuclear power and geoglobal politics. “That’s really how it is. Tribal people are intelligent. They’re part of the twenty-first century. You’re not trapped in some

nineteenth century doomsday scenario. It's a survival story, it's uplifting, triumph of the human spirit all of that" (19-20). She gets really annoyed when she is asked the dumb question "How much Indian are ya, anyway?" For her, it's like having one's entire identity questioned (20). And finally, about gambling, she said that it's a way they have to get money to pay for governmental services such as ambulances, electricity or telephone, services that other people have without having to pay for them (22).

Semiole tribe in Florida has recently been in the news for different reasons, demonstrating that not all Native American tribes are the same and that it is not the same to belong to one tribe or another. They are the richest Native American tribe thanks to businesses related to gambling, hotels and restaurants (they bought Hard Rock restaurants in 2006 for seven thousand, five hundred and twenty five million dollars). In 2012 they announced that they would no longer rent their lands to white people because they need them to build new houses for their community members, about four thousand people. So while some tribes are still fighting to recover their lands, Semiole people are telling white people to get out of the lands the U.S. government gave them after stealing their primitive ones. So times are changing and now it is Native American people's turn to recover their lands while white people demonstrate against it.

Joëlle Rostkowski also collects interviews with different notorious Native American people in *Conversations with Remarkable Native Americans* (2012). She interviews people ranging from Gerald Vizenor or Momaday to painters, artists or common women and men belonging to different tribes. All of them coincide in a basic idea: their native origins have determined their lives and have had a profound impact on their existences, but this does not mean that they have been unable to adapt to life outside their reservations. They have been successful in their different fields and able to reconcile their traditions and a more current lifestyle.

Rostkowski interviewed Sven Haakanson, director of the Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak in Alaska. He belongs to Sugpiaq tribe and became the executive director of the museum, but is also a skilled carver and a talented photographer. When he is asked about the opportunity to work in the museum, he answers that as a Native he never felt that he would have such an opportunity. However, very early, his elders made him aware of the importance of their cultural knowledge, language, memory and of cultural preservation.

For instance, his grandmother always spoke to him in Alutriq, although the use of this language was forbidden at school. He spent several years in travelling in Siberia, Russia, and had the honor to work with Native peoples who lived traditionally. He says

I was struck by the fact they had managed to preserve much of their traditions, in spite of colonization. ... So, when I was offered the opportunity to become the director of our new museum, I thought I was given the chance of a lifetime to accomplish something out of a dream, while at the same time serving my community as my father had instilled in me to do. (31)

Rostkowski also held conversations with important Native artists such as Tony Albeyta (Navajo). He is defined as a gifted artist whose serenity and self-confidence are remarkable. “There is something of the Navajo quest for harmony, wholeness (hozho) in his approach to life... And he asserts his Navajo identity as strongly as his desire to belong to the global art scene” (57). Albeyta describes himself as a contemporary Native American artist. He was born and raised in an urban setting in Gallup but has travelled all around the world. In his works he includes the Southwest, its colors, animals and plants, as well as the traditional deities of the Navajos, sometimes interpreted in an abstract manner (59). He says that he has always drawn to colors and worked with natural pigments, sand and oil paint in order to capture the essence of the Southwestern, landscapes and Native traditions, but he also enjoys working with black and white works, because he thinks “ I feel I can forge new paths in Native American Art” (60). He says that he creates from Native American vocabulary but that he is also inspired by the knowledge he has acquired from other parts of the world. He says “I define myself as an urban Indian and a traditionally inspired Navajo. I paint the colors and textures of my homeland by my exposure to other artist somehow is integrated into my work” (60). Therefore, he is an example of how traditional values are present in the life of contemporary Native American people, but that this is not an obstacle to be integrated in the rest of the world and be successful within it.

In recent article in *El Pais Semanal*, Carolina García describes Russell Means, a very well-known Native American actor and activist who always wore buckskin trousers and braid. He was in charge of defending the rights of Native American people in the United States and he even leadered the Native American Movement. At the same time he became an important actor thanks to his interpretation of Chingachgook in Daniel Day

Lewis' *The Last of the Mohicans* film. In the same newspaper, Lora Quero writes about a group of seven Native Americans who came to Santa Fe, Granada in 2001. They had been selected among thousands to show people in this small town their traditions and art. Quero relates that local children were quite surprised when they saw Native Americans for the first time, as they expected to find people painted and dressed as the Indians they had always seen in movies and not common men and women who used mobile phones and wore jeans. This proves that stereotypes create an image of Native Americans which is quite different from reality.

Like them, many other contemporary Native American people demonstrate that oral traditions and folklore are as inserted in their lives as the English language they speak and were taught as children. For them, being part of a native community is a matter of pride and has provided them a background and a knowledge that many others are not able to have. They have been nurtured by the stories they heard as children and they will continue to teach them. This is also reflected on contemporary Native American literature and the characters that appear in the different novels that will be analyzed in the next chapters.

#### **2.2.4.1. The influence of Native stories in American literature. Some examples.**

Native American stories, folklore and customs have been the source of many and varied researches in American culture. Hundreds of pages have been written about Native people, language, storytelling, or mythology, to name just a few of the topics. Anthropologists, literary critics, folklorists, or writers have paid attention to all of them and even referred to them in their analysis, investigations, or novels. Native culture has been, in general, an inspiration for many authors in the United States although the interpretation they have made of this culture has not always been the most correct one. This subheading will reflect that American literature and culture is not unique, but it has been nurtured by the legacies of the ethnic minorities that have populated the country for centuries, among them Native Americans.

Native American literature had a profound impact in the early and contemporary American and writers. They wanted to create a literature different from the European one, a way of telling stories that was not just a copy of European storytelling and this is why on many occasions, they made use of American Indian literary storytelling and style. James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, Mark Twain, Emily Dickinson, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, William Faulkner, Willa Cather or Ernest Hemingway, among many others, have found inspiration in native topics and traditional stories and mythology and included them within their most famous and praised novels. Besides, storytelling is also present in other European writers, and Jane Austen is also an example.

##### **2.2.4.1.1. James Fennimore Cooper**

Probably, one of the most well-known American novels is James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, and it could be stated that this work was deeply influenced by Native American culture and storytelling. It was published in 1826 and by that time, Cooper had already become a reputed writer in the American literary circles, thanks to the publication of previous works such as *The Spy*, *The Pioneers* and *The Pilot*. *The Last of the Mohicans* became an instant best seller, and turned the author into something similar to a national hero. However, the years he spent in Europe with his family after the novel's publication, and his involvement in European political affairs, would made

him unpopular back at home and his following novels became unappreciated and unrecognized.

In the first preface to the novel, Cooper said that he was just writing a narrative and that readers should not try to find an imaginary or romantic picture of things. In this vein, he was already warning the important readers of the time to stay away from the book, as it was recreating one of the bloodiest scenes in American colonial history. “His testimony regarding accurate representation, especially concerning American Indian tribes and their allegiances, is the singular focus of this first preface” (Peck 6). However, Cooper’s representation of Native American people, life and history was strongly criticized by some contemporary reviews. Most of the negative critics were based on an unreal representation of Native American characters. As Daniel H. Peck summarizes, in the May 1826 issue of the *London Magazine*, a review referred to the novel as the worst of Cooper’s performances; the American critic W.H. Gardiner also stated that the novel followed too faithfully the wild traditions of the missionary John Heckewelder and because of that, and according to Gardiner, Cooper had presented a false ideal view of the Indian character. Similarly, General Lewis Cass, an Indian fighter and agent said in 1828 that Uncas did not have a real prototype in the forests. In 1835, William Bird even published a novel, *Nick of the Woods*, which basically tried to debunk what he considered to be Cooper’s idealized characterization of Indians in the novel and in 1852, Francis Parkman, said that Cooper’s Indian characters were superficially or falsely drawn (6-7).

In *Skull Wars, Kennewick Man, Archaeology, and the Battle for Native American Identity* (2000), David Hurst Thomas also refers to Cooper’s unreal knowledge of Native American people. He states that in the decades following the Revolutionary War, Indians were key figures whose “Leathenrocking Tales” celebrated the American wilderness and the frontier life. For him, Cooper, like most writers of the period had little knowledge about the Indians and his writings often confused one tribe with another, customs, names and even languages (15). Similarly, the Indian’s imagery that Cooper used in *The Last of the Mohicans*, was especially powerful, “Appropriating the name Uncas...Cooper sanitized his protagonist into the archetypal Noble Red man, a principled and loyal friend of the Euroamerican frontiers-men” (15). For Thomas, in Cooper’s portrayals there is a point of nostalgia and romanticism, as he shows Indians

and their cultures as possessing innate, natural simplicity and virtue which is corrupted by European civilization and “Young Uncas became the Good Indian incarnate—admirable, yet tragically destined for extinction” (15). Thomas believes that like many other American authors, Cooper transfigured the Savage Redskin into something nobler than the image that had been showed by the western frontier. However for him, “Indians, of course, only achieved nobility once they no longer posed a threat to the white settler. With real Indians on the run, Cooper consecrated his imaginary Indians into convincing, if fanciful, American past” (16).

However, the novel was and has been equally praised. For instance, William Gilmore Simms wrote *The Yemassee* (1835), considered a counterpart of *The Last of the Mohicans*. The author praised Cooper for his “[inimitable] details of Indian art and resource” (qtd. in Pecks 7) and Honoré de Balzac ranked the novel among the seven works of the novelist which he said “are his unique and rightful claim to fame” (qtd. in Peck 7). In the twentieth century, W.C. Brownell defended Cooper against those who attacked him for creating the caricature of the noble red man. He considered that this does not exist in Cooper’s work at all and said that “Successful or not, his Indians, like his other characters, belong to the realm of attempted portraiture of racial types, and are, in intention, at all events, in no wise purely romantic creations.” Cooper's Indian characters, Brownell continued, “are as carefully studied and as successfully portrayed as his white ones. ... They are as much personalities and differ from each other as much” (qtd. in Peck 7-8). However, according to H. Daniel Peck, at present Cooper’s representation of Indian has come under a new form of criticism. Many contemporary literary critics consider that his representation of Native people is no different from the multiple racial stereotypes of the nineteenth century people and that Cooper himself did not differ much from those who thought that the best Indian was the one who was dead. Others, like James F. Beard, study Cooper in context and consider that he had an extraordinary knowledge of American Indians and that he was the first to interview Chief Indians and be against the policy of Indian Removal.

Cooper intended to show different aspects of Native American culture and traditions within the novel. One of the clearest ones is the close relationship native people had to nature and how this could be both a friend and an enemy. Cooper sets the novel in the American frontier, and this includes wild and virgin nature. It is a place full of

mountains, caves and waterfalls of extraordinary beauty but which also potential threats become for those who do not know it completely. Indeed, it is barrier that complicates the characters, their battles and their possibilities of survival. It is an unpredictable area, completely different from the flat battlefields in Europe, as Cooper himself describes in the opening paragraphs of Chapter I. Those who discover the place, learn about what nature would be without human being's intervention.

As it has been stated in previous chapters, nature was Native American people's greatest concern. They believe any beings are worth living and worshipped, because they all have a spirit and a soul. Land becomes the owner of human lives and their protector as well, and this is exemplified in *The Last of the Mohicans* too, especially in the contrast between characters such as Duncan Heyward, Hawkeye or Magua, as the way they treat natural elements is quite different. The former shows complete incompetence and continuous ignorance of the landscape, being disrespectful. The second one has grown up in the area, and shows a tremendous respect for landscape and the animals. He becomes the hero because of his relationship to nature. Magua uses his knowledge of the land to become the villain and to hide women in caves, hide himself behind the rocks or run away. However, at the end of the novel he dies. In most Native American myths of history, the white man is "wholly responsible for despoiling a New World paradise. Through his portraits of Chingachgook and Tameund, Cooper lends support to this vision and, indeed, allows it in the final word" (Milder 413). Indeed, many Native American authors have included the legend of the coming of white men in their novels, such as Leslie Marmon Silko in *Almanac of the Dead*, as it will be studied later.

Animals are also an important part of the love Native Americans feel for nature, and sometimes they become spirits or sacred elements within their mythology. Cooper also makes reference to them in the novel, especially through the scene of the killing of the colt, and the way some characters dress up as beavers, as both animals seem to have a very important role within Indian mythology. Regarding the first, Shirley Samuels, in "Generation through Violence: Cooper and the Making of Americans" says that the sudden and surprising sacrifice of the colt may be seen in mythic and sacrificial terms:



This way of reading emphasizes the ritualistic character of these frontier rites of passage, mythologizing the act of entering the wilderness, but ... ignores the specific transformations of identity involved in such violence .... these killings conflate domestic and wild, suggesting the conflation of animals and humans throughout the novel. (87)

She also considers that Cooper may be drawing on an old Indian Lenni-Lenape myth about the origin of the human beings. According to it, they emerged from a dark and precultural underworld to the earth's surface. A hunter chased a deer into the wilderness and returned to his people with the meat. Then they follow the hunter out into the world. As Samuel states: "In this Indian legend, the drawing of human beings into culture is accomplished by the pursuit and consumption of the natural. The killing and eating of the animal explicitly leads the hunter to a sort of nature worship, a worship of a personified Mother Earth" (89). This is somehow similar to the inclusion of the creation myth within contemporary Native American novels, such as those of Momaday, Erdrich or Silko.

The beaver appears in two important scenes of the novel too. Firstly, Duncan, unable to identify animal and human forms, seems to see a stranger Indian moving who turned out to be Gamut, who had been disguised by the Hurons who had held him captive. Samuel points out: "For Duncan to see Gamut as an Indian suggests that all the white man needs to take on an Indian identity is to be painted, as though the capacity of whites to improvise a racial identity consisting of superficial marks and remaining at the surface of the skin were set in contrast with the fixed racial identity of the Indian" (95). Later on in the novel, Chingachgook disguises himself as a beaver and hides in the same beaver dam that had confused Duncan Heyward in order to escape from the Hurons. Indeed, the beaver has a particular symbolic resonance for the Hurons in the novel. Magua uses the beaver to "initiate a hierarchy of discriminations between humans and animals, Indians and white," claiming that wisdom is what differentiates the beaver from other brutes, "between brutes and men; and, finally between the Hurons, in particular, and the rest of the human race" (Samuels 96).

Characterization in *The Last of the Mohicans* also resembles many of the features that distinguish Native American folklore, myths and oral stories. One of these oral myths establishes that human beings are surrounded by manitos or legendary monsters, which can protect or destruct human beings. For the Ojibwa, for instance, the manitos

are the ultimate source of existence, providing humans with food and health. In *The Last of the Mohicans*, Uncas is considered one of these manitos. He is the last member of his tribe and his death will also mean its death. Uncas' death also brings finality to the novel. For Terence Martin, in "From Atrocity to Requiem: History in *The Last of the Mohicans*," Uncas exemplifies the order in the middle of wild disorder. When at the end of the novel the emblem of the turtle on Unca's breast is discovered, Tamenund understands the boys' real importance. For Tamenund the return of Uncas signifies the fulfillment of a cherished tradition. He is aware of the dispossession of his tribe and believes that the white man who entered the land from the east may go off at the setting sun. Uncas lives "even more intently in the promise of the same tradition. According to his fathers ... the Delawares will return to the sea and take their lands again when the Manitou announces the proper time" (Terence 60). Tamenund has the final words in the novel, and as Martin says "Having spanned in his own life the entire history of his tribe, the sage of the Mohicans understands the meaning of Unca's death from a full and unique perspective. Yet he clings to a vision of the future now bereft of the hero who was to have brought it into being. Terence states: "The pale-faces are masters of the earth, and the time of the red-men has not yet come again" (60).

Culture heroes are also part of the mythology in Native American culture. In *The Last of the Mohicans*, Hawkeye is also considered a hero. He is closely related to nature and he is what he is because he has been instructed by nature, not by religion or books. In the novel, he is presented through a series of oppositions and paradoxes, especially in relation to other characters and to topics such as culture, race or geography. Hawkeye is the man between the Old and the New Worlds and moves between the Delawares and the Europeans. He is a 'woodsman' and a 'beaver expert,' who lives wild but who is neither savage nor civilized, but who is in strong contrast to other characters such as Heyward or Gamut. The former is an educated and brave man in the war, but who becomes completely lost when he is out of his civilized area. On the contrary, Hawkeye is strong and feels comfortable only when he is in nature. Besides, Gamut appears as the opposite to Hawkeye. He is spiritual and the representative of the Old World's religious beliefs and systems. On the contrary, Hawkeye seems even animalistic when he is compared to Gamut, as he does not care about religion, morality or ethics but only about pragmatic elements that help them survive. He provides the rest of white characters with

the necessary tools to survive, as culture heroes also do. However, his pragmatism also contrasts with the spirituality of his Mohicans friends, whom he shows a real respect for. This is why he is in the middle and does not belong to any of the sides.

The novel shows, then, many examples of how Native American elements are used by authors like Cooper in their novels. But this works is also used by some Native American authors. An example is King's *Green Grass Running Water*. Sometimes contemporary Native American authors involve historical events in their works so that readers have to reevaluate history and this novel is an example. Maggie Ann Bowers explains it saying that King's protagonists are similar to Vizenor's tricksters named after historical and mythologically important figures who are attempting to alter the lives of a group of Native Canadians. She says,

King's group of narrators (a shape-shifting group of 'old Indians') are attempting to 'fix up' the world. What in fact they are attempting to do is to revise history and myth in order to improve the lives of Native Americans. Their names are indicative of their links to cultural myth concerning Native Americans. Lone Ranger (the partner of Tonto, the 'Indian guide'), Robinson Crusoe (the opposite of his aboriginal man Friday), Hawkeye (the protagonist of *The Last of the Mohicans*), and Ishmael (the companion of the South Pacific Islander Queequeg of *Moby Dick*). (251)

According to Bowers, these tricksters, rather than altering history alter the way in which Native Americans perceive and are perceived. She continues, "They influence a video of a John Wayne-type 'Cowboys and Indians' film so that to the delight of Native Canadian viewers, the 'Indians' win (251). These stories also include the ironical tale of how the mythical figure Old woman gains the name of Hawkeye, from Cooper's protagonist, during the creation story. The tale tells of a a meeting between Nathaniel Bumppo, the real name of then character known as Hawkeye when he sides with the Mohicans in *The Last of the Mohicans*, and Old Woman. Bumppo, who in King's novel is kown as 'Nasty Bumppo' mistakes Old Woman for his Mohican companion Chingachgook because he looks like a Native American. When he is shot by Coyote, he gives Old Woman his name and then she is arrested for impersonating a white man. For Bowers " the story is an absurd topsy-turvy version of the original tale which Geminore Cooper's Hawkeye/Natty Bumppo adopts the identity of a Native American and thus becomes a hero" (252). For her, King's version of the story reveals a double standard of

the colonial position, “implies that Bumppo’s view of the people is highly racialised, and also enacts fictional retribution on ‘Nasty Bumppo’ when he is killed by the trickster Coyote” (252).

In general, *The Last of the Mohicans* is an example of how Native American beliefs, culture, stories or myths, among others, had a deep influence in American literature and how ethnic groups had and still have a great value and play an important role to understand American culture but also how this work is used by contemporary Native American writers to modify history and help readers reevaluate their vision of Native culture.

#### **2.2.4.1.2. Washington Irving.**

Washington Irving has been also deeply influenced by Native American stories. The former usually represented old native stories about supernatural forces in some of his most famous works, combining them with Dutch and German stories in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” or “Rip Van Winkle.” With this, he would be able to create unique stories about the merging of the supernatural and natural worlds.

One of Washington Irving’s best-known works is *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Canyon*, published between 1819-20, and which includes some of Irving’s most famous stories. They were originally written while he was spending some time in Europe and sent to his publishers in New York, where they were published in periodicals. The book became an instant success and would be imitated afterwards by other writers. Previous to this hit, he had already published *History of New York*, in which the authorial voice was the character Knickerbocker. He is an old gentleman with mental problems and who left some writings after his death. These writings would be sold afterwards to pay his debts. Knickerbocker was really interested in Dutch history and in the study of people as a type of cultural history. He always assumed his stories to be completely truth and he even affirmed that he had met people like Rip Van Winkle, one of his most famous characters. In *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Canyon*, this authorial voice turns to Geoffrey Canyon, a humble traveler who tries to look for the grandeurs of the past and travels to places of varied importance in Britain. He presents sketches about local

characters and situations to amuse his friends, becoming a storyteller. Indeed, he is able to tell tales that he is told, which he witnesses or tales about events that he imagines. This is one of his best qualities as storyteller as he declares that his kind of storytelling has as a main objective to provide pleasure and not only to educate. And this is why he is not bound by the limits of imagination.

Two of the most well-known short stories within the book are “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” “Rip Van Winkle” could be considered an extension of the *History of New York*, a more mature and critical version with observations made through the techniques of caricature and the study of vice. Here we are told about Rip Van Winkle, who is a well-known man in his community. The story is set in New York’s Catskill’s Mountains after American Revolutionary War. Rip is married to Dame and is appreciated by people and children in his town, but prefers solitary activities and has an immeasurable hate for doing anything profitable. This causes him lots of trouble with his wife, who is constantly nagging him. One winter day, in order to escape from his wife’s insults, he decided to go into the forest with his dog Wolf. There he listens to someone calling his name and he discovers that the speaker is a man dressed with old Dutch clothes who needs his help. Without even talking to him, Rip follows him, and reaches a hollow with the shape of an amphitheatre where there is a group of other men, playing nine-pins and with a strange appearance. Without speaking with them, and without asking them anything about their origins or names, he begins to drink some of the liquor he is offered and soon he falls asleep. When he awakes, it seems to be morning but his beard has grown, his gun is rotted and his dog has disappeared. He returns to his village but feels unable to recognize anyone. He finds out that his wife and friends have died and that they have lived a war, so that they are no longer subjects of King George III but that they have a new president, George Washington. It seems that he has been sleeping for nearly twenty years. Ultimately he starts to live with his daughter, who is now an adult, and returns to his lazy life. It seems the men he had been with were Dutch ghosts, and people started to tell his story.

Rip Van Winkle exemplifies the evasiveness and the lack ambition. He spends most his time playing with children, talking with village people and discussing topics with men in a club of the sages, where they tell stories. When he moves into the forest in

order to be away from his wife, he stays in Catskill Mountains (Kaatskill), a place out of civilization and where society seems to be replaced by ghosts, fairies and devil. The forest is full of people from Dutch origin who formed part of American past. However, these mountains are also closely related to Native American people and folklore. The eastern escarpment of the mountains receives the name of The Great Wall of Manitou, which received that name because the Indians of the Hudson Valley thought that their Manitou god lived there. That is, the mountains are believed to possess a Manitou or spirit that takes the form of a human being or animal that fights to get rid of dangerous elements or people. Irving himself explains this in the postscript of the story. Here he tells that the Kaatsberg or Catskill mountains have always been a region full of fable and that the Indians considered the house of spirits who influenced the weather, and sent good or bad hunting seasons. They were ruled by an old squaw spirit who was their mother and dwelt on the highest peak of the Catskills and who opened and shut doors at night and daylight. In old times, Indian traditions said there was a kind of Manitou who kept about the wildest recesses of the Catskill Mountains, and took a mischievous pleasure in wreaking all kinds of evil and vexations upon the red men. This Manitou could assume the form of a bear, a panther, or a deer and his favorite abode is a great rock or cliff in the loneliest part of the mountain which receives the name of Garden Rock, because of wild flowers that populate it. Near its foot there is a small lake where Indians would not hunt. He lets the readers know that Native American people in the area have a similar legend and this vein he also reminds them that they have an incredibly rich lore and consequently, also telling those who believe that America had no tradition of folklore while Europeans did that they are completely wrong.

Apart from this connection to Native American folklore, Rip also plays the role of a traditional storyteller. His principal occupation before sleeping in the woods was to speak with local people and children. After that day in the forest, he is able to escape through his own imagination, which is also a form of storytelling. When he returns to his town after those twenty years, he is free from any duties at home, and becomes the town storyteller. He tells his own story and this story is the one that helped him get free from his tasks as the man in the family. He becomes a character within the town and plays the role of traditional Native American storytellers.

The story also includes elements extracted from German folklore, as those mysterious characters who are little men and who populate forests where they usually disturb people. Indeed the story is very similar to the German folktale “Peter Klaus the Goat Herd.” This also tells the story of a goatherd. While he is following one of his goats he met a man who asked him to follow him. They ended up in a hollow surrounded by walls and where there were twelve other men, looking very serious and bowling. Klaus sat with them and eventually drank from a vessel he was offered. The drink rejuvenated them but soon he got tired and fell asleep. When he returned to his village the following morning, he discovered that everything had changed and that his daughter thought that her father had disappeared twenty years before. That is, the similarities between the two stories appear quite clear, and Irving was even accused of plagiarism.

“Rip Van Winkle” is also similar to many other stories coming from other different cultural backgrounds, from Jewish, to Christian or Asian American tradition, as well as Irish one. Marvin L. Colker explains some medieval versions of “Rip Van Winkle,” for instance. However he differentiates between abnormal sleep and other types of stories. He says that abnormal sleep, lasting twenty years is at the heart of the story of “Rip Van Winkle” but this theme of sleep extending from an unusual but specific duration may be distinguished from a number of sister themes, such as “the preter-natural lapse of time without sleep,” (133) or from tales “that do not reveal abnormal sleep but are indefinite in the extent of sleep,” such as “Sleeping Beauty” or “The Legend of the Sleeping Emperor” (133). For Colker, Rip Van Winkle is similar and associated to the Cretan poet and prophet Epimenides, who said to have slept in a cave for forty years or more, depending on the version. It is also related to the story of the *Seven Sleepers of Ephesus*, the story of seven men who slumbered in a cave, from the reign of the Emperor Decius (249-251) until the reign of Theodosius I (379-395) or of Theodosius II (408-450).” When the Seven woke up, they thought that they had slept only for a short time. “The story possibly originated with the discovery of several unusually well-preserved corpses. But whatever its origin, the story became widespread” (Colker 133).

In the story, Irving combines Indian and German folklore and tales and he does it with a main intention, that of showing to European critics that despite America is a new and modern country, they also have a real folklore and history, something Europeans had usually teased them about. Indeed, it could even be said that after him, American

literature was actually a reality, as he used short simple stories to make a point and created a new type of literature which was completely different from the British one and that would be imitated, praised and criticized. Irving and Cooper are just two examples of how Native American tradition has become a source of inspiration for American writers.

#### **2.2.4.1.3. Henry D. Thoreau**

Transcendentalists believed that anybody could learn about themselves and the world surrounding them by transcending or going beyond what they could see, feel, touch or hear. For them, people are naturally good and society and institutions, especially religion and politics, corrupt the purity of individuals. However, when they get rid of them people will learn to be independent and better beings, the source of moral authority and truth. Henry D. Thoreau was one of these Transcendentalists whose optimistic opinion about the kindness of human beings was strongly criticized. Their positivism regarding the lack of social norms was based on their real belief that if we all look inside ourselves we will be reflected upon and we will be able to accept our value and defects. This idea about the human being was also shown on his opinion about Native American people, widely known and studied and similar to the stereotype of the noble savage that Americans had posed on Native American people. However, it could also be stated he also played an important role related to Native American culture, that of storyteller.

It could be stated that Thoreau's opinion about Native Americans evolved as he got to know them in depth. He had been interested in Indians since the moment he was born. He was often considered the most Indian-like of classic American authors and during his lifetime many of his friends “compared him to ‘the Indian’ and exclaimed at his uncanny gifts for conversing with animals or finding arrowheads and former campsites” (Sayre, *Thoreau* ix). He considered that Native Americans were natural and spiritual and completely opposed to what civilization created, namely materialism and greed. This dualism was that of nature versus culture. For him, and because of his observations of nature, Native American people had spent their lives in Nature and developed a knowledge that was superior to white men's. According to Robert Sayre,



Red men were teachers. They were also custodians of the American past and Thoreau ... was eager to uncover their little-known history, seeking also a fusion of classical and native traditions, he endeavored to be a synthesis of savage and civilized man himself. (*Thoreau* x)

However, he was also determined by the white stereotypes of Native American life and “did not study Indians in all their variety and social relationships; he studied ‘the Indian,’ ideal solitary figure that was the white American’s symbol of wilderness and history” (Sayre, *Thoreau* x). Indeed, when he established real contact with real Native Americans, his notion seemed to change, especially when he met Joe Polis, his Penobscot guide in Main, who challenged all his preconceptions about Native people, living in a house, being literate and understanding and behaving according to the white civic rules and religious institutions. The concept of ‘savagism’ that he showed in his first works, such as *A Week at the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, turned different in his following ones.<sup>67</sup> Here he idealizes Native Americans as solitary and self-reliant, doomed to die and “who could not hold back Anglo-Saxon farmers” (Sayre, *Thoreau* xi). He will understand that this is not always like that in following works, such as *Walden*, and after different journeys and readings about the topic. In *Walden* he attacked civilization and portrayed his own experience living a pure and savage life. In “Allegash and the East Branch,” included in *Maine Woods* collection, Thoreau provides an examination of wilderness ideology but this time accompanied by Joe Polis, a sophisticated Penobscot Indian who was also an expert in his own culture and in his connection to nature. He complicated Thoreau’s conception of nature itself and challenged his constant duality between wild and civilized, since it could be said that Poli indeed embodied both, because he was literate but also a shaman.

Thoreau’s role as a storyteller has been less debated. He becomes a storyteller in some of his works because he includes the stories of others, reconstructs them and refers to Native American myths, traditional stories and customs. As a child, Edward W. Emerson considered Thoreau “as a born story-teller ... telling of woods and waters and the dwarfkin that peopled them” (38). He chose topics that referred to every day

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<sup>67</sup> “Savagism” was the nineteenth century men’s idea of Indian life and that all Americans of Thoreau’s time also held. Robert Sayre summarizes it into five main points: Indians were “(1) solitary hunters rather than farmers; (2) tradition-bound and not susceptible to improvement; (3) child-like innocents who were corrupted by civilization; (4) superstitious pagans who could not accept the highest offerings of civilization like Christianity; (5) doomed to extinction” (6).

phenomena, as Native American storytellers did. In *Walden* he includes a chapter entitled “Former Inhabitants,” and here “its various stories are gestures toward the reconstruction of prior worlds. By telling the stories of the former inhabitants, Thoreau reimagines (re-images) them for the reader, thereby witnessing for their existence” (Peck 145). Thoreau writes:

East of my bean-field, across the road, lived Cato Ingraham, slave of Duncan Ingraham, Esquire, gentleman of Concord village; who built his slave a house, and gave him permission to live in Walden Woods; - Cato, not Uticensis, but Concordiensis. Some say that he was a Guinea Negro. There are a few who remember his little patch among the walnuts, which he let grow up till he should be old and need them; but a younger and whiter speculator got them at last.... Here ... still nearer to town, Zilpha, a colored woman...in the war of 1812, her dwelling was set on fire by English soldiers ...Down the road...lived Brister Freeman, a handy Negro, slave of Swuire Cummings once.”(*Walden* 304-5)

For Daniel Peck, the important ‘fictile’ art practiced in Thoreau’s neighborhood is his own. “It takes the ‘broken images’ of the past and molds them in a new configuration — revising mythology. And this ‘fictile’ art ... is also ‘fictive,’ it is the art of storytelling” (145). He embodies narrative in story and myth, like Native Americans do. Besides, while he was writing he was isolated from the world and from information, a feature of storytelling. He had to redefine information only counting on Nature as an informer and even his own decision of abandoning society for a solitary life in the woods is related to the outline of a tale.

Thoreau also exercises storytelling in his Journal. This was the work in which he practiced writing and in which he described his daily walks, the work in which he developed his essays and where he wrote about his exploration of nature and seasons from October 1837 to November 1861. It began as a record of ideas but it turned into a notebook and then into one of his best works. He recorded stories that looked unconnected but which also include traditional elements in Native American and African American folklore, such as the figure of the trickster or the veneration of nature as a human being that needs to be protected. For instance, he provides animals with trickster-like features in some of his stories, as that of the rabid dog recorded in the 1850s Journal. It tells about a boy who was fatally bitten by a rabid dog and the danger the animal caused in town until it was killed by a Negro man called Cato, who becomes the hero in the story because he succeeded where white men failed. This is the same

Negro man to whom he referred in *Walden*, in the previous quotation, linking them and letting audience know that he has not invented the story but that it actually happened and became a tale to tell. Although the dog does not acquire human characteristics, as tricksters do, his behavior causes similar consequences among people in town, turning the established order and provoking disarray. In this vein he provided a mythological character to a story that could have been a simple one, as Native American and Afro-American storytellers did.<sup>68</sup> So, again Native American and Afro-American cultures have much to say in American literature and culture.

#### 2.2.4.1.4. William Faulkner

Much has been written about Faulkner's relationship and depiction of Afro-American people, customs and traditions, although little about Native Americans. However, it seems they were quite relevant in his work and that they also had a valuable place within his novels and short stories. It could even be stated that he wanted them to be the first inhabitants of Yoknapatawpha.<sup>69</sup>

Most scholars dealing with Faulkner's works paid no attention to the image of Native American people reflected in his short stories and novels, and although the topic of race in works has been constantly debated, few essays, articles or discussions base on Native Americans. It could be because in the South the subject of race mostly referred to white and black people and as Annette Trefzer stated, "This continued invisibility of Native Americans in Southern culture and fiction may be caused by the apparent absence of Native Americans from post removal South and the repression of this traumatic experience into the national unconsciousness" (69).

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<sup>68</sup> Thoreau could have learnt about Trickster stories from his black acquaintances in Concord, who could have told him such stories. Another possibility was that he read about that in the uncountable number of books about Native American people that he read during his lifetime.

<sup>69</sup> The word Yoknapatawpha is indeed a Chickasaw term that derives from the Yokona River, flowing in the South of Lafayette Country and literally means: land (Yokna) and split (patawpha), which is water that runs low through the land.

Faulkner was not an exception to the authors of his time; he presented a stereotyped image of Native American people and did not care about it much. Indeed, he admitted “I made them up” (Dabney 11). He did not show consistence in the names of tribes and dates, and did not seem to have a historical perspective either. Indeed, as Trefzer states, when it comes to Native Americans, Faulkner “seems to typify the attitude of most non-Indian about Indians: they prefer the mythical Indians of their own imagination” (70). He used Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians to fill out the history of his fictional county and despite his lack of detailed knowledge he includes them in a number of stories, above all in those in which he attempts to recover the history of Yoknapatawpha.

Faulkner’s presentation of Native Americans is not always a romantic one, anyway. In “Red Leaves,” he describes Indian’s as being slave holders, trying to imitate the white lifestyle. Here Faulkner suggests that both the white and the Indians share responsibility in the corruption of history, because both accept slavery and that seems to be why Native Americans appear as physically deteriorated too, as they have abandoned their lifestyle working in the lands and relying on nature. The difference however, comes through irony and the comic depiction of Native Americans. In the story, when discussing about the increasing number of slaves in the city, they tell:

“ Raise more Negroes by clearing more land to make corn to feed them, then sell them. We will clear the land and plant it with food and raise Negroes and sell them to the white men for money.”

“But what will we do with that money?” a third said.

They thought for a while. (“Red Leaves” 319)

Their concept of money and propriety is so different from white people’s that until they do not realize that they have nothing to do with the money, they will not feel they do not need slavery. In this vein Faulkner is showing the different value systems in both societies too. Indeed, it could even be said that by depicting this type of Native Americans who have left their innocence and adopted white’s customs, Faulkner wants to criticize white people. They have done it to the Indians and now they are taking advantage of it, because by trying to imitate white people, Natives have lost their essence and identities. Similarly, in *Go Down Moses*, Faulkner presents the two sides of Native American people. The protagonists Ike McCaslin learns that his grandfather Old Carothers bought the land where they live from a greedy Indian chief called

Ikkemotubbe, who had also obtained the land through not very legal ways. This implies Native Americans are not as reliable in relation to the land as it could be expected. However, Ike also teaches the other side, that of Sam Fathers, who is white, black and Native American. He shows Ike his pure connection to the land and with his help he will try to undo some of the terrible crimes that his grandfather and Sam Father's ancestor, Ikkemotubbe, had committed against the land.<sup>70</sup> With him Faulkner is depicting the opposite to what he showed in "Red Leaves." Here the main Native American character, Sam Fathers, is proud of belonging to three different races and although he is forced to live isolated, he remains integral and dignified. He resists the temptations of white society and keeps his identity and essence alive.

In "A Courtship" Faulkner also offers another version of Native Americans, this time related to humor. Here he describes a romance between an Indian woman, known as Herman Basket's sister, and two men, Ikkemotubbe and David Hogganbeck, a white steamboat pilot. Both ignore the woman because of their continuous rivalry and ultimately learn to appreciate each other. When the Indian lady marries another man, Log-in-the-Creek, Ikkemotubbe abandons the tribe and returns years later completely transformed into a dangerous and murderous man. It can even be said that it is a tall tale that includes humor, exaggeration and sarcasm. Indeed, here Faulkner makes a clear statement in relation to the land. He presents an Indian who refers to white people's regulations of the land and laughs at him when he tries to draw invisible lines to divide it, or when he thinks of white people killing their fellows to own the land. For Native Americans like this character, the land belongs to nobody, so he sees no point at dividing it with lines. For him, the land is free as America too. Paradoxically, however, this freedom has been denied to him by white people when they were dispossessed of their lands and forced to live in reservations. Besides, the story has been interpreted as happening before the corruption of Native American people because of the influence of white society, and Ikkemotubbe's radical change after being in touch with them seems to prove it. However, this is a bit difficult to prove attending to Faulkner's continuous mistakes regarding dates and his disinterest in this vein.

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<sup>70</sup> In the Appendix of *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner mentions Ikkemotubbe and defines him as "dispossessed American King" (225), connecting the Compson characters to Native Americans in relation to the land too.

It is also important to pay attention to Faulkner's relation to Afro-Americans, their depiction and the use of storytelling in connection to them. It could be said that Faulkner's attitude towards African American people is connected to the times in which he lived, as he was born at the end of the nineteenth-century in the South of the country and lived and experienced slavery in his daily life. He did not believe in equality among black and white people but unlike most of his contemporaries, he depicted them within his works and did not ignore their presence. He seems to have evolved from the most racist perspectives, which he had inherited from his family and friends, to a more sympathetic view of African Americans and their culture, and this is also reflected in his novels and short stories. What is more, he has always recognized his ability to tell stories was a legacy from the black people he lived with, including his "Mammy," whom he continuously depicts in his works, although adopting different names.<sup>71</sup> It could be stated that he was contradictory in his vision of African Americans, miscegenation, black freedom or female sexual oppression, to name just a few issues related to black people in his time. However, it can never be said that he ignored these topics as others did. Indeed, in the 1950s he made public attempts to make a compromise between northern interventionists and southern intransigence in relation to the Civil Rights movement and the role that African-American people should have in the United States and above all in the Southern states.

*Absalom, Absalom!* shows his concern with racial issues and also his close relation to storytelling. In an interview with Simon Claxton, Faulkner said: "I'm a storyteller. I'm telling a story, introducing comic and tragic elements as I like. I'm telling a story—to be repeated and retold" (277). The novel can be compared to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as they both highlight the commonality in the use of oral storytelling. They were written with a year of difference, so Faulkner and Hurston shared the same historical context and indeed were fed by the use of oral storytelling. Their attitudes towards

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<sup>71</sup> Caroline Barr, "Mammy Callie," took care of Faulkner since he was born and did the same with his daughter Jill. His real esteem for her is appreciated in the several fiction characters he modeled on her, as Mammie Cal'line in *Soldiers' Pay*, Dilsey Gibson in *The Sound and the Fury*, and Molly Beauchamp in *Go Down, Moses*. They are some of Faulkner's more memorable characters, moral and role models as mothers and teachers. He also dedicated *Go Down Moses* to Caroline Barr, writing: "To Mammy Caroline Barr: who was born in slavery and who gave to my family a fidelity without stint or calculation of recompense and to my childhood an immeasurable devotion and love" (Dedication of *Go Down Moses*)

storytelling were, however, different. Faulkner was white and using storytelling could mean “that they were playing into a white’s audience desire to witness ‘primitive’ African culture” (Ford 17). On the contrary, Hurston seemed to address white people on purpose and exploits “the phase of Negro’s life, which is ‘quaint,’ the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the ‘superior’ race” (Ford 17).

There has been disagreement about the number of narrators in the novel although it seems that there is only one narrator, a third person omniscient one that tells part of Sutpen story, and then other three storytelling event, with four characters who tell stories about Sutpen, Rosa, Mr. Compson, Quentin and Shreve. Apart from them, there are also layers of narrators, because their stories of Thomas Sutpen rest on the oral storytelling of the people from Jefferson. The extent to which the town's knowledge is rooted in oral storytelling can be only speculated but at the end a large number of nameless narrators participate in the oral storytelling that provides Mr. Compson and Rosa with knowledge that they will include in their narratives afterwards. Anyway, Quentin is the focal consciousness of the work and most information is filtered through him, because he is always present when the stories are told. Indeed he is described as having grown up listening to stories.

Quentin had grown up with that; the mere names were interchangeable and almost myriad. His childhood was full of them; his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, and entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn backward-looking ghosts. (*Abasalom, Absalom!* 7)

What is more, it could even be stated that Quentin and Faulkner resemble in their relation to storytelling and their feeling of community connected to it. This feeling of commonality is quite similar to Vizenor’s, although Faulkner is not Native American. Therefore, this shows that African Americans, Native Americans and Americans are not so different. Both Faulkner and Quentin feel the influence of written and oral traditions because both lived between the two worlds. The pressure Faulkner's family exercised over him and his close link with his Mammy and the black people that surrounded him and told him stories, that is, the oral tradition, looks like Quentin's own experience too. Quentin also finds himself between the boy who is preparing to go to Harvard in the South and the one who has to listen to old oral stories, that is, he represents the literate

and the oral cultures, the dominant and the marginalized ones. Ford also compares the novel with *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in this vein and states:

The ambivalence in the historical and critical contexts about regionalism mirrors the tension between oral storytelling and written narrative that exists in *Absalom, Absalom*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This oral storytelling drawn from folk culture fights against the written narrative and its assertion of mastery and finality. In Faulkner's and Hurston's novels, the fight is played out in the desire to create a paradise with a carefully controlled narrative versus the plurality of voices telling different stories that undermine the paradise.(46)

She finds many other similarities between the two works, above all between the characters of Joe Starks and Thomas Sutpen. They both have a definite plan when the novels start and both want to create dynasties that attest their power, but none of them achieves it because they build their project on the containment of racial crossing and “white too easily becomes black and black becomes white” (Ford 49). Sutpen does not want to accept his son because he has black traces in his blood, and although Starks does not worry about the inclusion of white people in the town, he still excludes black people to show his distinction from them and even prevents Janie from participating in community activities. Although she would like to participate of storytelling in the porch, he insists that she stays in the store away from these people. “The irony of both men’s designs is that they become the very things they tried to exclude” because “it is hard to create a paradise when in your attempt to get rid of the Other, you have to become that Other, as both Sutpen and Starks do” (Ford 49). Besides, Ford considers this is also related to storytelling. She considers that multiple tellers decentralize power, so oral storytelling in both novels undermines the construction of paradise (52).

Faulkner shows in his multiple novels a close relation to ethnic minorities in the United States. Annette Trefzer states that in canonical works whose power lies in their subtle engagement with American’s central philosophical, constitutional and moral dilemmas, “renewed attention to ethnic presences might help us gain new insights into American culture” (68). For her, Faulkner’s work is not an exception to this and “the recovery of silenced ethnic presences in Faulkner’s work — African, Arabic, Jewish, Chinese, Polish, Caribbean, Native American, and others — will reveal the unbounded openness of his texts as well as insights into how American culture is never merely



present but always produced” (68). Taking into account the aims of this thesis, it seems that Trefzer’s words are the most appropriate perspective to deal with his works here.

#### **2.2.4.1.5. Jane Austen**

Thoreau and Faulkner demonstrate that storytelling is not exclusive of ethnic minorities in the United States, but it is also present in some European and American works, and Jane Austen also exemplifies it in her work *Persuasion*. This means that European-American literary tradition and ethnic groups in the country are not so far away and that they may even influence each other.

Here readers are told about a simple plot story: the protagonist, a young Anne Elliot, was persuaded by a middle-aged friend and counselor, Mrs. Russell, to reject her suitor Captain Wentworth, a man she truly loved, because he was not considered appropriate or wealthy enough for her. Eight years later he reappears in her life as a heroic and successful man. By then, Anne’s father has wasted most of the family’s money and her two sisters remain as vain as superficial as years ago. The youngest one is married and has become a traditional mother and wife who usually complains about everything. Anne still loves Wentworth but unfortunately he seems to pay more attention to other two ladies. She is also courted by William Elliot, her father’s rightful heir and her only chance to recover her position, until she discovers Elliot’s wrong intentions towards her. At the end, Wentworth and Anne marry. This simplicity hides, however, an intense story and analysis.

The novel has often been paralleled to a traditional fairy tale, because of this plot in which there is a happy ending and because difficulties are solved at the end with the marriage of the heroine and her beloved. Cheryl Ann Weissman considers Anne a “Cinderella figure dominated by a vain and unloving parent (Sir Walter) and two selfish sisters” (87) who was persuaded by a well-intentioned godmother (Lady Russell) to reject her true love and “that submission to persuasion has proved to be the mistake of her life” (87). She considers Wentworth’s return and court to Anne’s sisters-in-law the actions of a “no Prince Charming” who is ever more misguided (87), and presents William Elliot’s appearance as second suitor for the protagonist as a fairy tale symmetry

because it means Anne could be restored to her home and compensated for the wrongs done her “by a grandmother’s error and a natural mother’s symbolic abandonment” (87). Indeed, Mrs. Russell is indeed considered a goddess in the novel or better defined as a “fairy godmother manqué” (Duffy 274). However, the depiction of Anne Elliot hides more complexity than this parallelism may offer. She is considered a virtuous young woman who contrasts with the vanity and superficiality of her sisters and father and who, although compared to Cinderella because of her social situation, has an inner life rich enough as to compensate the vanity of those who surround her, especially her father and sisters. She is presented as a reliable, perceptive heroine, benevolent, integral and intelligent, who is better considered for what she thinks than for what she does. Moreover, traditional fairy tales offer a version of reality that dispenses readers “from the pressures of the real world and change” (Duffy 274), while *Persuasion* deals with real events at the time it was written, and shows a quite realistic vision of life.

Leaving this parallelism to fairy tales behind, it could be stated that the novel’s narrative perspective and development is closely connected to the most traditional Native American storytelling. The novel offers several narrative perspectives and it could be said that Austen’s evolution in this sense resembles that of other writers in the eighteenth century—from the omniscient narrator who knows everything about the characters and the plot to the third person limited narrator, exemplified in this novel. Indeed, this helps the consideration of the novel as a storytelling event. Austen needs a variety of viewpoints in order to develop the story and as Barbara Hardy states, “there is always someone telling and someone listening. We move from the private to the public life through the constant narrative motion, utterances are joined with silences and events become reflections” (67). For instance, when Captain Wentworth is talking to amuse and charm the Musgrove sisters, Anne listens and remembers the time when she also talked with him and she listened as the sisters are doing now. Hardy states that “She compares the stories of the sea he had told her then with those he’s telling now to others, and feels the difference between the listening of the present and that of eight years ago” (67). Besides, all through the novel, Anne’s role as listener seems to be one of her defining features, until the end, when she decides to speak. At the beginning of the novel we are told “Anne, with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her with any people of real understanding, was nobody with

either father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give away; — she was only Anne” (*Persuasion* 5). However, her silences must be considered as powerful as her words and at the end, she reveals against this lack of voice, becoming a storyteller too. When she discovers Mrs. Elliot’s intentions towards her and his incorrect pretensions, Anne decides to tell Mrs. Russell, so that she stops considering him a suitable husband for her, and in this vein, she will not make the same mistake she made years ago rejecting her true love by following her advises. However, she decides to wait one day more to tell her because she had promised to spend the day with the Musgroves. Then Austen wrote:

One day only had passed since Anne’s conversation with Mrs. Smith; but a keener interest had succeeded, and she was now so little touched by Mr. Elliot’s conduct, except by its effects in one quarter, that it became a matter of course the next morning, still to defer her explanatory visit in Rivers-street. She had promised to be with the Musgroves from breakfast to dinner. Her faith was plighted, and Mr. Elliot’s character, like the Sultanness Scheherazade’s head, must live another day. (*Persuasion* 229)

This comparison to Scheherazade’ story has been considered an example of the importance Austen provides to storytelling and her close connection to it. Kuldip Kaur Kuwahara compares Anne and Scheherazade in their ability to tell stories and persuade people and also because of the story of “one day only” that connects them.<sup>72</sup> For her, the fact that Austen uses this story provides evidence that she has read and enjoyed Scheherazade’s art of storytelling in *The Arabian Nights*. For Kuwahara, “she conjures up the name of Scheherazade, the central storyteller ... to suggest both the passage of time and the delayed but perhaps inevitable discovery of the truth in *Persuasion*” (Kuwahara). Besides, she establishes a parallelism between the two stories too, as she considers that both are stories of deferral. Scheherazade has to tell one thousand and one stories to become happy and survive and Anne must wait seven years before getting the love she deserves.

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<sup>72</sup> In the novel Austen refers to the story of Sultan Ahahriar of the Arabian Nights. He was angry because of his wife infidelity and decides to take a virgin bride every night and kill her the following morning. This happens until he meets Scheherazade, who is able to break this cycle thanks to storytelling, as she captures the Sultan’s attention telling him one story every night and keeping his attention until the following day. After one hundred and one nights he is so embedded in her stories that he decides to marry her.

Sheldon Sacks deals with the role of novelists as storytellers and focuses on Austen and *Persuasion* as examples. For him, it would not be revealing to regard Austen's novels as embodying the same plot — “chaste fulfillments of an ancient fertility myth” (104), but see them as “different and crucial experiments in realizing stories of fulfillment in morally significant comic plots” (104). As an example he provides the end of chapter three, when Anne Elliot says “with a gentle sigh ‘a few months more and he, perhaps, may be walking here’” (qtd in Sacks 104). For him, as for most readers, this “he” refers to Captain Wentworth but according to Sack, we think so because we have been afforded the special insight, “consequent on reading stories realized as comic plots that enables you to recognize a fate still to be realized in a fictional future while you use that knowledge in the interpretation of present aesthetic experience” (104). That is, we know nothing more that Anne in this situation, but as we know that she is a sympathetic character in a comedy of fulfillment, we accept that all her suffering is just temporary and that it will end with absolute fulfillment. What is more, he considers that *Persuasion* is an example of Austen's ability to tell a simple story

in such a rich way that the middle sections ...create an illusion of progression, of a major stage in movement of Anne Elliot from a state of dignified suffering to a complete and significant fulfillment in her promised marriage to Wentworth, though in fact, when viewed from the point of view of an analysis of what many people mean by story — merely the material action alone — the crucial episodes ...are absolutely static. (105)

That means that Austen has learnt that no matter how static the plot is, it is part of the story because it conveys illusion of progression in time and space, that is “an integral part of a plot need not in fact add to the material progression of the story she is telling just so long as it is intuitively relevant to the power of that story” (Sack 105). This is a feature of traditional storytelling that Austen includes in her novel.

Going a bit further, it could be even said that once Anne decides to reveal the truth about Mr. Elliot to Mrs. Russell, she breaks with the silence she had been imposed from the very beginning of the novel and starts to deal with her own life as she pleases. She is no longer static and awakens as other female protagonists do and becomes what she wants to be. As Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she decides to think for herself and marry the man she loved. Janie had also been imposed a husband by her grandmother and silence by her second husband. Here Anne had rejected her real love,

and now she decides to admit it and speak, as Janie does when she becomes a storyteller. Anne never regrets her decision of rejecting him and she truly considered this was the best option at that moment. In this vein she allows readers to decide whether this was or not a good option. However, she still loves him and when she discovers he feels the same, does not doubt and ultimately turns Mrs. Russell's ideas. "As Austen brings together the pieces of the puzzle in her story, Lady Russell is included in the circle of happiness; she too, like the heroine and hero of *Persuasion*, must grow, develop, and change. It is an inner process expedited by external events in the narrative" (Kuwahara). Moreover, her change of attitude also implies a change in her physical appearance. The novel is usually connected to autumn because this season implies blooming and decay. This is closely connected to Anne in the novel too. At the beginning of the novel she seems to have lost her bloom because of the years of solitude. When the captain appears again, she recovers her splendor and most characters realize about it, including Mrs. Russell. This resemblance to natural elements and her awakening and discovery of real feelings and the need to tell them connect Anne with Ecofeminism too. Like female characters in ethnic minorities studied here, Anne achieves independence and freedom to marry and love as she pleases.

Although silence seems to be a feature that depicts Anne, the truth is that she can also be defined as a true heroine.<sup>73</sup> She behaves as it was expected from her when she rejects the Captain, when she has to listen to her sisters and father and when she has to help others. However, she also overtly complains about men domination of education or about female dependency. She states "Men have had every advantage of us telling their own story. Education has been theirs, in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands" (234). Because of this she has often been compared to Mary Wollstonecraft and her defense of feminine education and rejection of values imposed by a male-chauvinist society that considers women inferior to men and biologically connected to

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<sup>73</sup> Maria Teresa Gonzalez Minguéz deals with absence of voice in Austen's female characters in a lecture entitled "La Ausencia de Voz Femenina en las Novelas de Jane Austen." She explains that some of Austen's most popular heroines are characterized by their silence and Anne Elliot is one of them. Gonzalez states that with her silence, Anne is able to achieve much more than many other characters in the novel. Thanks to her eyes, ears and mind the reader gets to know about her family and the vanity that characterizes most of its member. Above all, thanks to her silence, contemporary readers discover women's trouble to show their feelings in public and the vacuity of society at that time. Austen is also able to show readers the hypocrisy of money and the importance of individualism, kindness and social relations.

features like constancy, something Austen also rejects in the novel.<sup>74</sup> They both consider that “female constancy is a result of social conditioning rather than inherent ‘sentimental talents’” (Brown 327). Her defense of her rights and the need to feel she is not subjugated to men connects her to Ecofeminist perspective of women too.

European writers such as Jane Austen are not so far from ethnic minority women writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Maxine Hong Kingston, Louise Erdrich and Leslie Marmon Silko. In *Persuasion*, Austen presents a female character that resembles those in these writers’ novel, who also fights to defend her rights, and who likes and uses storytelling to do it.

#### **2.2.4.2. Native American traditions in movies and the media**

Storytelling is essential in process of creating a movie because it is a form of communication in which tension is established in order to excite. It is a tension which is always resolved in a satisfying way at the end. Stories appear in everything surrounding us, from news to tabloids to television series or soap operas because “we are storytelling creatures who seek to report experience, clarify tangled emotion, define and amuse ourselves through narrative: jokes, anecdotes, myth, romance, parable, folktale, history, fiction” (Dunnigan 8). According to Brian Dunnigan, screenwriters and filmmakers are part of this transgressive and redemptive tradition and in many ways cinema, especially classical Hollywood, is closer to the energy and engagement of oral storytelling than other narrative media because “the screenplay is written to be performed before an audience” (11). The role of storytelling is taken from the screenwriter by the director and the editor and the storytelling appears framed with light, shade, colors and textures, among other things. According to Dunnigan, the Ur stories of our culture that are available to all are the folk or fairytales: their own formal and familiar patterns, rituals and roles. In his opinion, “They define the universal plot themes from (Cinderella’s) hidden worth being finally recognized to the theme of re-birth” (12). All these stories look for the happy ending and this is why the storyteller as the teller of the fairy tales is considered economical, elliptical and lacking psychological explanation or pedant

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<sup>74</sup> Her text *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) is considered the first feminist treatise.

expositions; as Dunnigan states “fairytale stories are true stories not the elaborated, over-determined literature of high culture” (12). For Dunnigan, these fairy tales and especially those of brothers Grimm, with confident protagonists and psychological motivation and preference for action over reflection drew their energy from oral tales and anticipated the directness of contemporary cinema (13).

In these contemporary movies, Native American people have been traditionally portrayed as people who do not speak much and who have magical powers in television and movies. They are also traditionally related to casinos and other benefits, to ceremonies, to shapeshifters and to warriors or beautiful maidens. They are presented as alcoholic, greedy people who speak strange English and who wear feathers. There are multiple examples of television series and movies in which Native people are treated equally, with no differences among tribes and themselves. As Sierra S. Adare states, since the inception of movies, and television, Hollywood and the dominant society TV viewers have ignored who First Nation peoples truly are “and thus have effectively eliminated the possibility that ‘Indians’ have something to say about the way ‘Indians’ are depicted on television” (28).

There are varied examples of Native American appearance in American television series such as *South Park*, *The Simpsons* or *X-File*, to name just a few. The way they portray Native culture, people and folklore differs but in most cases they are somehow stereotyped as shown below.

*The Simpsons* has introduced different topics related to Native American life in some episodes. For instance, it has referred to Native casinos in some cases. In “Bart to the Future” Bart is given a vision of the future by a Native American man in the back room of a casino. In this episode the Simpsons decide to go into a native casino called “Caesar’s Pow-Pow.” Firstly Lisa decides to wait in the car, as there is something in native casinos that troubles her, or so she says. While the Indian manager of the casino reveals Bart a vision about his future, he also decides to put an advert about it, demonstrating that traditional conceptions are sometimes challenged by economic pretensions in present-day Native communities. This is similar to *Family Guy*’s “The Son also Draws.” Here we find a negative vision of Indian casinos and the people who manage it. In this case the manager’s connection to his culture is also called into

question, as he looks like a Native American and wears typical native jewelry; he also wears a business suit and speaks with Italian American accent, which is something that only people who have lost touch with their culture do. Referring to this, Annette Taylor describes the impact of television in the image we have of Native American people, saying that television has eliminated distinctions among real Native American peoples in both the lower forty-eight states and Alaska. The overall message is “that Indians who retain cultural identity are doomed or assimilated. Indians always abandon their people” (qtd in Adare 27). In another episode in *The Simpsons* however, Homer is thrown into a native island, where people lived in peace and harmony, until he decided to teach them how to have fun and builds a casino that ultimately destroys the peace and tranquility of the native inhabitants. This follows the traditional idea of noble savage corrupted by the influence of white people.

The topic of the casino and Indian gaming is introduced in other television series. For instance, *South Park*'s “Red Man's Greed” shows how the relationship between Native American people and white people has changed due to the Indian gaming, because gaming allows Native people to make money and not depend on white ones and following the series, gaming also includes greed.

A stereotyped vision of Native American people is also offered in older but mythical American television series such as *Saved by the Bell*. In one of its episodes, entitled “Running Zack,” the character Zack has to give an oral presentation of his family tree. Looking at some pictures and remembering some old stories told in his family, he discovers that he has a distant Indian relative and asks his Native friend Screech (another important character in the series) to help him, as his first presentation was not accepted by the teacher because it presented a very stereotyped image of Indians coming from pop culture, painting his face with lip-stick and talking with a strange accent. This ignored the vast diversity of cultures among Native people. The teacher introduces Zack to “Chief Henry,” who wears American clothes and speaks perfect English and who ultimately helps the boy understand that Native people are not what television shows. He has studied at UCLA but has a strong knowledge of his culture and ancestors. He teaches Zack and the audience about Native culture and history.



The idea of the noble savage and that of the blood thirsty one is also present in some American series. The former appears in *Dr Quinn, Medicine Woman* in the character of Cloud Dancing. He is able to keep his calm and loyalty despite the terrible events that happen to him throughout the episodes. He shows a clear stoicism and most of the features that characterize the good Indian, begin always loyal to his friend the doctor. The latter also appears represented in different series, such as *Buffy, the Vampire Layer*. In one of the episodes, Buffy has to fight against the evil spirit of a terrible Native American man who appears after his land is invaded by a crew of builders. Buffy understands his reasons to fight and seems even to convince him, but at the end he is too evil not to be destroyed and the protagonist has to end with him.

*Los Soprano*, another successful and widely known American drama series also presents some stereotypes related to Native American people. The series is based on the Italian-American mobster Tony Soprano and the trouble he had to face in order to deal with the conflicts of his daily life and those of the criminal organization he heads. In the episode entitled "Christopher," Tony and his men were chatting when the topic of Columbus came up. According to the news, Indians were about to demonstrate against the Jersey Columbus Parade. The members of the Soprano crew believed this protest was an assault on their Italian heritage and spend the rest of the episode trying to silence protesters, stereotyped Native Americans: the warrior, the spiritual guru or the noble savage who turns into a casino tribal chairman. The stereotypes are even stronger in relation to this last character, who is considered only marginally Indian, and who has truly discovered his identity when he became a casino manager. Besides, throughout the episode there is a series of comical dialogues between various characters that represent different cultural groups. They discuss about which of those groups has historically suffered the most. This helps the audience to learn about American history.

Movies have also presented a very stereotyped version of Native American people and their customs. As Terry P. Wilson states "Films have proved an impressive tool for the transmission of cultural values and have had a particularly virulent effect on the perpetuation of minority stereotypes" (5). The representation of Native Americans in films was usually restricted to one genre, the Western.<sup>75</sup> This genre would last from

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<sup>75</sup> The Hollywood Western has historically been the most important source of entertainment for American culture and there have been more than seven thousand Western movies since the first one in 1903 and

1860 to 1890 and it was one of the most favorable among the masses, and served as “an everlasting source of myths on which a whole nation was built” (Vrasidas 66). According to Charalambos Vrasidas, because of the structure of the Western it was reasonable enough to stereotype Indians. He explains that when the settlers began moving west, one of the major obstacles they had to face were indigenous people. The frontier in the Westerns was usually a place where Europeans and Native Americans clashed and “it provided a setting where the enjoyment of violent conflict could be justified without questioning the moral values of society” (65). For him, “as a product of nostalgia, the Western led the civilization that attempted to replace those civilizations that were already in existence. The creation of a mythological West justified the seizure of land and the genocide of the Natives” (659). The traditional Westerns, epitomized by the films of John Ford, showed the image of the Native American as a fearsome enemy who killed white people. In these films a new character emerged as a hero, that of the cowboy who was able to kill and tame Native people and make them stop threatening their settlements.

A few decades later the attitude of American society started to change and Hollywood also noticed it, becoming more liberal as society was. From the 1950s a series of Westerns were produced dealing with another vision of Native American people, a more sympathetic one. It focused on the differences among tribes and their cultural rights, as for example John Ford’s *The Searchers*. According to Vrasidas, this was one of the most anti-Indian films ever made. The plot deals with the search of a little girl who was captured by Comanche after they had killed her family. In the film, the little girl, played by Natalie Wood, is received back into white society at the end of the movie, and Indian-hating Ethan Edwards, who is Natalie Wood’s uncle, also accepts the mixed race orphan originally adopted by his massacred brother and sister in law. With him, Ethan starts the search for his captured niece, which is the main story and the

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since the late 1940s many episodes of Western series have reappeared on television. In order to recover popularity and gain the audience again, producers had to repeat certain formulas, narratives and stereotypical characters. The consequence was that the Native American was presented stereotyped. One of the most important images was that of the Anglo-Saxon white triumphing over the inferior Native American one or treating the latter as a whole and not as individuals or as members of different cultural groups and ethnics.

title of the film. For Vrasidas, “Ford portrayed the insanity that resulted from being captured by the Natives and he deliberately justified the Killing of Natives” (67)

During the 1960s and early 1970s there was a change in the political and social attitude of the U.S. towards the Native Americans, mainly due to the Civil Right Movements. According to Vrasidas, films like *Tell Them Willie Boy* (1969), *A Man Called Horse* (1970) or *Little Big Man* (1970), indicated this shift, but “these films had done very little in breaking the stereotypes and restoring the Native’s image” (67). Indeed *Little Big Man* shows this change. Here the audience is presented a corrupted and expansionist American society that justifies genocidal policies against Native American people. In 1973, another critique to the treatment of Native American people was made by Marlon Brando, when he refused to accept the Oscar award and asked a Native American woman to read a speech that criticized racism and imperialism.

Later on, in the 1990s, famous films such as *Dances with Wolves* or the film version of *The Last of the Mohicans* became box offices hits, and being Indian or showing them in movies became very lucrative. However, for Ford, although they show a more sympathetic view of Native Americans, this does not mean that they are authentic (68). This also opened the doors to Native American independent movies who wanted to show a more contemporary version of Native American people. They were movies made by Native people that showed contemporary people and not their stereotypes. All these movies, those made by non-Native and those by Native directors, showed some aspects of Native American culture and people that would help the spectators learn a bit more about them.

This happens in the well-known *Dancing with Wolves*. The film shows many of the features of classical western genre, with characters and events which may be seen as stereotyped: a soldier (John Dunbar), cavalry, war painted Indians, arrows, teepees. However it does not actually introduce any other traditional stereotypes, such as that of the noble savage. Native Americans are resented as intelligent human beings whose life is completely civilized and who also follow codes of honor and morality.

The protagonist’s first encounter with Native Americans is quite stereotyped. He fears them because they are expected to be savage. The spectators’ expectations are fulfilled when Native American people kill and scalp a driver. However, as Dunbar’s

relationship with them evolves, we discover a different type of Native Americans: they speak Lakota language but not with the typical American accent but they are subtitled. Their speeches are wise and reasonable and the people themselves are full of wisdom and teach Dunbar multiple and valuable things.

In a very recent article in *El Pais Semanal*, Estrella de Diego refers to an exposition about the Far West that has just been inaugurated in the Thyssen Museum in Madrid.<sup>76</sup> It consists of a series of pictures and photographs that pretend to put an end to the stereotypes that western movies have placed on Native Americans and that have created the image most people, including Spanish people, have of them. De Diego explains in the article, entitled “Paseo por el Lejano Oeste,” that westerns are full of repetitive scenes that made viewers imagine a reality that did not exist and have shown a simple perspective of historic events; the perspective of the colonizers who had to move in circles because they were afraid of savage Indians who could attack them at any time. The pictures and photographs exposed will try to provide a general idea of the landscape colonizers found and the lands Native American people wanted to defend.

A very trendy and present day movie, *The Twilight Saga*, is an example of the incorrect use of Native stories and legends. One of the protagonists, Jacob, is a Native American boy, a Quileute who turns into a wolf, a shapeshifter. Many Native American stories and oral folklore tell of shapeshifters, which is also a characteristic of the traditional native trickster character. In the films, however, these native traditions are mixed with European mythology and popular fantasy, as the Quileute wolf shape shifter Jacob is compared to the enemy of vampires and is supposed to have supernatural powers. This means that vampires and wolves are forced to be natural enemies. Now fans equate all Quileute shapeshifters with wolves and the traditional oral story is mixed with non-Native fantasy that is easily manipulated to fit into European mythology, so that for the spectators it is difficult to differ if this is really true or not. For them, all members of this tribe are shapeshifters and all shapeshifters are wolves. In an interview with Chris Morganroth III, a Quileute who used to teach young generations oral stories about their tribe, Page Dickerson develops the reality and the false ideas that the movies show. Morganroth explains the origin of the Quileute people. According to their

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<sup>76</sup> It will be there from the third of November 2015 to the seventh of February 2016.

legends, before the beginnings of time the Spirit beings transformed themselves into animals and there were living beings in outer space, like the sun. After some time the Spirits had to choose what they would be and could no longer transform. After this, K'wati came into the area of LaPush and found that there were no humans. He went to the mouth of the river and there he found only timber wolves, so he transformed wolves into the Quileute people. However, according to him, K'wati is a supernatural figure in Quileute stories who transforms people or objects, but he was not a "sorcerer" or "witch king" as Meyer presents him. He was not a god but a transformer who was put on Earth to make things better. Besides, although Meyer's teen werewolves are not part of the Quileute legends she is inspired by tribal legends, because even nowadays, the wolf is often referred to as a brother of the tribe. In the films, "The New Moon werewolves aren't your average, hairy-faced cross between a man and a wolf. The boys 'phase' into bear-sized wolves with enough superpowers to kill vampires. And they developed out of a need to protect the people of Forks and LaPush from vampires." However, Quileute people have no such a legend, according to Morganroth III (Dickerson).

One of the most famous movies about Native people made by a native director is *Smoke Signals*, directed by Chris Eyre. The film is based on Sherman Alexis' story "The Lone Ranger" and "Torito Fistfight in Heaven". This story deals with two young Native Americans, Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire who travel to Phoenix from their reservation Coeur d'Alene in Idaho. Their main goal was to bring back the ashes of Victor's alcoholic father. They were not close friends at first but they are related by their tribe and ultimately by circumstances. Victor's father, Arnold, saved Thomas when this was a child from a terrible fire the fourth of July, in which Arnold's parents died. Some years later, Victor's mother recovers after being terribly drunk and finds her son smashing his father's beer supply against his truck and she decides to stop drinking. She also asks her husband to do the same but he is unable to cope with the situation and disappears. Several years after, Victor and his mother receive a letter telling them that Arnold is dead and asking to any of them to come to New Mexico in order to take his remains. Because he has no money to travel, Victor accepts Arnold's money and his condition of travelling with him, initiating in this way a road trip that would also mean the beginning of a close friendship and the search of meaning around which the novel is centered. Hillel Italie defines these two characters as opposites:

Like any good buddy-buddy movie, this one features friends as bantering opposites. Victor is tall and tough, Thomas short and scrawny. Victor is suspicious and moody, Thomas sweet and trusting. Victor's a stoic who'd rather not talk, Thomas a poet who won't shut up. For Victor the past means defeat. For Thomas, it means wisdom. (10)

It seems that this movie has removed some of the traditional stereotypes placed on Native American people. The main characters mock and embrace American Indian stereotypes and they do it with stories and flashbacks which show their oral traditions and that they are able to adapt to contemporary situations and changing times. The film avoids political correctness but presents a realistic picture of the contemporary and young Native American men who are proud of their oral stories and want to promote their cultural heritage and dignity. For John Mihelich the movie challenges hegemonic and stereotypical images of American Indians through portraying a complex, humanizing and contemporary image of American Indians (129). He says that Alexis is able to challenge these stereotypes using humor and satire, and presenting the lives of the main characters situated within a contemporary context (131). The characters are complex ones "who happen to be American Indians. ... In doing so, he promotes a more complete human image of contemporary American Indians to a popular American audience" (131). Besides, the movie develops an important part of Native American culture, that of storytelling in the character of Thomas, who is defined as a "storytelling geek." For Italie, "stories and flashbacks take much of the film. *Smoke Signals* is really a story about storytelling. Alexis works from the oral tradition, where stories can (and must) change" (10). Thomas is a storyteller who offers descriptions and stories taken from Alexie's books, being expressive and emotional. He represents the Native culture of oral tradition, while Victor opposes it, rejecting any memories and feelings towards his father. However, he will ultimately learn to accept oral traditions and his father's love. Therefore, it is not a movie about the plight of Native Americans or to show the crimes that have been committed over them. It is not to show sad aspects related to Native Americans such as alcoholism, prejudices or racism but to demonstrate that this is not the only side of Native culture that exists. They are rich in oral stories and want to show it to the rest of the world.

In general, American literature, movies or television have showed a vision of Native American people that did not correspond to the real one. Luckily, this is changing and nowadays Native authors are widely recognized and accepted, as well as movies, series

or other artistic representations by natives reveal their oral folklore, stories and break with traditional stereotypes.

### **2.3. CONTEMPORARY NATIVE AMERICAN WRITERS AND THEIR APPROACHES TO STORYTELLING**

Native American writers have acquired a great relevance in the last decades. Their writings are being studied in seminars and courses and although their inclusion within the American canon is still in debate and causes great controversy, their importance in American culture cannot be questioned.

These contemporary authors are closely connected to the oral tradition that they inherited from their respective tribes and their profound respect for oral stories and storytelling, which turned into the base of their production. They function as mediators between two cultures and are proud of having such a role, including communal elements in their works and principles coming from oral tradition. Despite being generations separated from their ancestors' culture they try to maintain what they learnt and was passed from generation to generations until getting to them. Although they have also modeled their writings to current circumstances and written their works in English. What is more, with their works they present a perspective of Native American people which is unknown by most non-native readers because of the stereotypes placed on them. Although they want to keep oral tradition alive and do it very well, they are also aware of the need of adapting it and moreover, they provide a new meaning to traditional stories that help them denounce political, social, economic and environmental issues. They include examples of contemporary Native American life of poverty, violence or broken families as well as problems with language, spirituality and land, so that their works can be read from the perspective of important movements like Ecocriticism or Ecofeminism. They deal with Native identity and survival in the modern world, how history has determined and influenced tribal politics and how these issues are related to Native sovereignty. This vein, readers are exposed to facts they may ignore and are asked to take action too in order to improve the lives of contemporary Native American people. Therefore, they are deeply involved in the life that surrounds them, but never forget what being Native American means, showing it in their novels and poems.



Following Vizenor's concept of survivance and his definition as "an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry" (*Manifest Manners* vii), it could be stated that this is what these authors do. They do not want Native culture to be presented as a victim of white oppression but they want people to know that Native Americans go beyond the simple subsistence and try to activate and refashion their culture into modern times, as other institutions like the Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) does.<sup>77</sup> What follows is a revision of some important contemporary Native American writers and the reflection of all said above in their works.

### 2.3.1. Scott Momaday

Scott Momaday was born on February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1934. He belongs to the Kiowa Tribe of Oklahoma but he also has Cherokee ancestry because of his mother's origin. He was also in touch with the Pueblo, Apache and Navajo reservations, as he lived there as a child. From all of them he learnt the necessary knowledge about his ancestors that he would later reflect on his novels.

He is a master of literature and his first novel *A House Made of Dawn* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 and inaugurated the so called Native American Renaissance. He has also written other important novels, plays and poems, like *The Journey of Taimé* (1967), *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), and *The Names: A Memoir* (1976) which are more autobiographical novels; *Angle of Geese and Other Poems* (1974), *The Gourd Dancer* (1976), or *In the Presence of the Sun: Stories and Poems* (1961-1991); *The Ancient Child* (1989) or the plays *The Indolent Boys*, *Children of the Sun* and *The Moon in Two Windows*, among others. As a writer, teacher, artist and storyteller, Momaday has spent most of his life trying to maintain oral traditions and other aspects of Indian culture that he believed to be of extreme importance for him and his followers.

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<sup>77</sup> This institution is inspired by the sentiment of survivance as the permanent exhibits are structured "around the central assertion of ongoing Native presence and one of the installations, included in the permanent exhibits *Our Lives*, prominently displays Vizenor's defense of survivance" (Rostkowski xiii). The museum presents visitors with a succession of survivance narratives that "testify to the falsity of dominant narratives that emphasize Native victimry and absence" (Rostkowski xiii).

Indeed, because of his good position as a writer connected with North American institutions, he has been able to introduce Native American culture into North American one and to denounce certain aspects related to this country that deeply affected Native American life and people, and showed this in his novels. Although he refused to be labeled as political activist, his writings participated of this activism because he provided emblematic representations “of Indian identities that challenge the simplistic stereotypes of Indians as either frozen in the nineteenth century or completely severed from their indigenous cultures” (Chadwick 205).

Some critics consider, however, that his position in Native American Renaissance is the result of timing and circumstances, as the period of his publishing career coincided with the Indian political activism and the increase in the attention on Native literature and people in magazines and critic’s circles. Inevitably “after winning the Pulitzer Prize, Momaday was looked to as a spokesperson for all Native America, whether or not he embraced that role” (Chadwick 205).

Momaday’s relation to oral storytelling and the importance he provides to Kiowa stories come from his grandfather and his father and the stories they told him, because they became the source of his inspiration, being “permanent in my imagination for the whole of my life. They are among the most valuable gifts that I have ever been given” (*The Man Made of Words* 3). He considers that storytelling is a way of discovering your cultural heritage and that a really special relationship is established between the storyteller and the listener because the latter has the command of language and starts a creating process that charms the listeners and helps him get inserted in the story too. He describes the power of language in a conversation held with Bettye Givens,

Language is so creative in itself, it is intrinsically so powerful that storytellers, people who use language, are in possession of a great power. When the storyteller tells his listeners a story, he creates the listener, he creates a story. He creates himself in the process. It’s an entirely creative process. (89)

In an interview held in Joëlle Rostkowski in 2012, Momaday expresses the relevance he, like a Native American, provides to words and tells about his role as storyteller. He explains for instance, that for him words are intrinsically powerful and that we must be careful with them. He says that “traditional rituals remind us that words can be sent as visionary spirits, as medicine. Traditional storytellers and singers know

that words can rid the body of sickness, capture the heart of a lover, subdue an enemy” (4). He also says that he considers himself a storyteller, novelist and poet because he understands that when you tell a story, it comes alive. For him, there are many ways to communicate with the audience, which include voice, rhythm and silences in which words are anticipated or held on to. In this conversation he also tells readers about the development of Native American literature in the last decades. He considers that Native writers have come a long way and that at the heart of American Indian oral traditions is a deep belief in the efficacy of language. He says “now that we communicate through the written word and mostly in English, this belief remains as strong as ever. Language is sacred. The writer recreates the world in words” (5).

Momaday’s most important project related to traditional storytelling culminated with the publication of *The Way to Rainy Mountain* in 1969, in which he makes a summary of some of the main myths of Kiowa culture, tales and legends that he compiled with the help of his father and the stories he remembered from his grandmother and the rest of natives that still lived in the reservation.

Jean Molesky-Poz explains in that there were two main reasons why Momaday decided to explore Kiowa tradition. The first one is his encounter with the Tai-me bundle, the sacred Sun Dance that the Kiowa tribe performs, and the second is the day he went to the Rainy Mountain cemetery to mourn his grandmother Aho, who had died some time before and who had introduced him to the Tai-me (612). In a way to prove his own ancestry and membership to the Kiowa tribe, he decided to recollect all the material he could, including written records of anthropologists or historians. In the work, Momaday explores “the manners in which traditions are conceived, developed and interfused as he recreates his Kiowa identity in three voices: the mythos, the historical and the personal” (612). Consequently, the first voice recounts parts of Kiowa origin narratives. The second part parallels or compares the chronological development of the stories told in the first voice and offers facts, descriptions and definitions coming from written sources such as the anthropological and historical works of authors such as James Mooney or Mildred P. Mayhall. In the third voice Momaday recounts personal memories that refer back to the first and second voices and that for some reason, he remembers, or associates or which are meaningful for him (612-3).

In general, the importance of these Kiowa stories he includes in his writings lies in the fact that they show the relevance of preserving culture and identity through the use of retelling and sharing the stories of a tribe, because in this way both the continuity of the narrative and of the culture are ensured. In this novel there is no hero, as the writer should be considered the main protagonist of the work. In this work, Momaday brings to light a culture that had not been paid much attention before and provides a work which will ensure that this culture will remain in the generations to come. He also provides importance to words and to oral stories, emphasizing that it was the main vehicle to transmit knowledge. He introduces stories which teach history and the background of a tribe and tradition that had not been interesting for people before him, so he becomes the hero. Indeed, sometimes it is considered that Momaday behaves as an alienated modern hero who returns home and find a land burnt and empty and a house full of women who have nothing to do with him. He feels such a huge distance from them that he needs to start a spiritual march.

However, this has also arisen some kind of confusion among literary critics such as Arnold Krupat, who believes *The Way to Rainy Mountain* could be read as an autobiographical work. He thinks that Momaday is one of the authors most committed to hegemonic monologue and to the mixture of lyric or epic, romantic and modernist art-speech in his texts. For him *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is one of the Native American autobiographies (177), divided into three voices that he parallels to a legend or story, a historical anecdote and a personal memory. For Krupat, Momaday tends to “poetry in its most extreme ‘epic’ sense” (178). He establishes or uses just one voice which is authoritative and able to subordinate all other voices and which rarely varies, as there is no humor, gossip or criticism (178). He considers that history is not interesting for Momaday as long as it is not related to myth, uninteresting if the facts involved are ordinary. Besides, Krupat criticizes his use of language and descriptions. For instance, he quotes the third or the three parts of the very first section of the novel:

I remember coming out upon the northern Great Plains in the late Spring. There were meadows of blue and yellow windflowers on the slopes, and I could see the still sunlit plain below reaching away out of sight. At first there is no discrimination in the eye, nothing but the land itself, whole and impenetrable. But then smallest things begin to stand Out of the depths — and each of these has perfect being in terms of distance and of silence and of age. Yes, I thought, now I see the earth as it really is; never

again will I see things as I saw them yesterday or the day before. (qtd in Krupat, 179)

Krupat uses this part of the book to show his disagreement. He considers that Navajo autobiographies usually show protagonists who remember lonely times and isolation when they are engaged in their vision quest. However, “I have seen no Native American autobiography that ever took such aloneness-with-the-landscape as definitive or instrumental in the shaping of a world view or personal self” (179). He also considers that certain expressions are not typical of Native American people, but of Western tradition, such as “as it really is” or “impenetrable,” both referring to the land. Native people would never wonder about penetrating the land, this is only typical of American people who talk about Native topics. Krupat states, then, that “everything in Momaday begs for an upper case letter; and every sentence in Momaday, since day-to-day temporal ‘agonies’ of no interest, is capable of the ‘yes’ of mythic affirmation” (180). He considers that Momaday’s writings are “assimilable to a tradition of elaborated prose celebrated in American literature at least from Whitman, Faulkner, and Thomas Wolfe to its degenerated continuation in Jack Kerouac” (180-1). What is more, he considers that although Momaday can achieve the representation of himself as a Native author who does not allow other voices apart from his own, in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, he can hear the voices of ethnographers such as James Mooney and George Catlin, who represent the nineteenth and twentieth century ethnographic science. He claims that although not explicitly, and obviously without being named, these two authors appear in his work by being paraphrased. Krupat provides the part in which he explains the Kiowa creation myth as an example (182-3). Finally Krupat is also quite critical in relation to Momaday’s definition of the word: “a word has power in and of itself. It comes from nothing into sound and meaning; it gives origin to all things. By means of words can a man deal with the world on equal terms. And the word is sacred”. Krupat says that this is not the real definition of the word for Native American people. Words may be sacred but do not come from nothing, this is a West category not a Native one, according to him. He summarizes:

What power there is in Momaday’s own words, for example, comes from their relation to the words of others—Mooney, Catlin, Euramerican artists, even Momaday’s own earlier words, as well as the words of a great many Kiowa people living and dead. What is fascinating to me is the way in which Momaday’s autobiographies attempt to assert the

independent word of the single voice while yet demonstrating, along with most Native American autobiographies, that words are always interdependent, that other voices always sound. (187)

*House Made of Dawn* opened the door for not only his recognition as a writer but for many other Native American writers. It deals with Abel's story, as he returns home after his service during World War II in 1945. He stayed in Walatowa, New Mexico, with his grandfather Francisco. However, after an incident in a bar with an albino man and his murder, Abel is sent to prison, released seven year later and sent to the Indian Relocation Program in Los Angeles.<sup>78</sup> There he would meet Bet Benally, who would ultimately help him recover his life and his relation to land.

Early critics considered that the novel used sophisticated techniques of narration and that the representation of alienation and the need to recover identity within a community were intriguing (Chadwick 205). According to Chadwick "these themes resonated with non-Indian audiences of the time, and they could be labeled as 'modern' and 'universal' rather than exclusively Indian" (205).

On the contrary, his background seemed to be an obstacle for him and the presentation he made of Kiowa, Navajo and Jemez Pueblo cultures was strongly criticized. Even his own publisher described the novel as "a grade-B movie script" (TuSmith 106). It was even said that the novel was not worth the prize because its structure was "abstract, obscure and ambiguous and its mood nostalgic, sentimental, bleak and pessimistic" (TuSmith 106). However, what seemed to be clear is that because *House Made of Dawn* combines the oral tradition of Indian cultures with modernist techniques, the novel confused critics, "After all, a Eurocentric tradition provided the only framework for critics trained in the American school system" (TuSmith 107). One of the major offenders of the novel was Charles Larson, who exhibited cultural limitations and an inability to go beyond Eurocentric cultural assumptions. Larson criticized Momaday because his novel was pessimistic and because it showed an image of himself as a man who was fixated on the past and who was in search of his own roots to find his identity (TuSmith 108).

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<sup>78</sup> In 1954 the U.S. government proposed a law that promoted and encouraged Native American move to cities and abandon of their lands and reservations in order to be assimilated into the mainstream American society and turn into urban workforce.

However, it is necessary to understand that the novel mixes old and new, the oral tradition of the author's Native American background with the Eurocentric literary tradition in American and therefore, although the author's training is basically European, the novel is stylistically Indian. This is also clear when paying attention to certain aspects related to Native American folklore and tradition included in the novel, and to the techniques Momaday used to deal with his native heritage but without losing connection with the Western and European models in which he had been educated. For instance, Momaday uses mythical words and myths in the novel in order to reflect oral tradition. This is a technique that contemporary authors used to adapt oral tradition to new times. When Abel is told the story of his tribe, he realizes that his grandfather had lived all the events explained in that story and now he was part of them because he knew them. This enabled him to visualize the story and continue his healing process. Besides, Momaday repeats continuous imagery, above all related to light and the word "running." Through the use of the word "light" and imagery related to it, Momaday shows the end of the destructive and terrible memories Abel has in his mind. He needs to experience an awakening and the rebirth of his spirit in order to be cured and the use of the brilliant yellow sun imagery represents this purification. He goes from slanting light, to splintering light, to reddish-gold light and this represents the different stages of his healing process. He finally describes an epiphany in Abel's memory with images that show the different degrees of light during the war which are replaced by brightness "He saw it swell, deepen and take shape on the skyline, as if it were some upheaval of the earth, the eruption of stone and eclipse, and all about it the glare, the cold perimeter of light" (*The House Made of Dawn* 25). Running is also one of the most important and recurrent motifs in the novel.

Far below, the breeze ran upon the shining blades of corn, and they heard the footsteps running. It was faint at first and far away, but it rose and drew near, steadily, a hundred men running, two hundred, three, not fast, but running easily and forever, the one sound of a hundred men running. "Listen," he said. "It is the race of the dead, and it happens here." (*House Made of Dawn* 180)

The novel begins as Abel is running and ends in the same way, remembering the race that Francisco had done when he was young. Moreover, there are continuous examples of people running within the novel. Abel remembers people running while he was lying on the beach, or the clowns running after a bull during the local festivals.

Running is also essential in two moments in Abel's and Francisco's lives. They run after their first eagle and bear hunts, respectively. Furthermore, running is essential at the end of the novel, of course, because when Francisco dies and Abel is able to recognize the importance he has now as the last member of his family, he decides to run towards his tribe and learn how to live within it: "He was running and under his breath he began to sing. There was no sound and he had no voice; he had only the words of a song. And he went running on the rise of the song. *House made of pollen, house made of dawn. Qtsedaba*" (*House Made of Dawn* 212).

In relation to style, *House Made of Dawn* is also a mixture of traditional Eurocentric conventions and a Native American story, and the treatment of time as a non linear sequence is a proof of that. As it has already been explained the main symbol of Native American mythology is the circle and *House Made of Dawn* is a reflection of this circularity. The novel does not recur to a linear sequence of events but on the contrary, it begins and ends in a similar way, with Abel running and with the word *Dypaloh* and *Qtsedaba*, which is a way of placing contemporary written narrative within the conventions of formal oral storytelling. The cyclical structure is obvious as the novel begins where it ends. This convention conveys the impression that the reader is participating in a storytelling performance or ritual because the two words are used to signal the points on a circle. Besides, incorporating some Western conventions, Momaday makes use of continuous flashbacks, usually triggered by a place or an object that brings memories to the protagonists and which make them connect the present and the past. Similarly, with this technique, Momaday is also emphasizing the importance of repetitions, as with flashbacks the protagonists remind events that they have already lived and which for some reason, are similar to those they are living at present, so that traditions and events are repeated and reveal their importance.

Another important characteristic of the storytelling techniques that Momaday puts into practice is the use of multiple storytellers. Momaday used different voices in his narrative. For instance, the stories that would eventually save Abel are told by the priest, Francisco and Ben. As the stories continue to be retold, Abel places himself within them and he goes a step forward in the recovery of his native culture. Their narratives connect past and present figures and in this way the stories provide a link between past and present. This technique also helps him reflect a valuable novel free from sentimentalism



or victim feelings. Momaday is creating a powerful work with powerful native characters who overcome the influence of white oppression and issues on them and who return to Native heritage in order to feel free again and his style has to reflect it too. Indeed, he creates a new version of the culture hero in Native American mythology. He is following a quest journey that makes him be in and out of the reservation depending on his emotional state and this reminds of the journey the Stricken Twins and other Native American heroes made. He moves in an archetypal circular journey “from community into chaos and back to community” but “the center remains intact (if at times out of focus), and Abel succeeds in completing the questing hero’s journey” (Owens, *Mixedblood* 64). Returning successful to the land is a way of showing non-Native readers that vision quest are useful and important for native people and that no matter how far, both physically and spiritually you may be from your people, returning to them is always important and it entails salvation. That is, Native culture and its influence on you is always a positive one, and this is maybe what Momaday is trying to explain in the novel. Transcendentalists like Thoreau also believed that and Robert Sayre, for instance, compares Thoreau’s manner of living at Walden Pond to adolescent vision quests that Native boys practiced in order to discover themselves and their relation to nature and god. The shape of the vision quest resembles that of the narrative in *Walden*: rejection of the town and civilization, time for meditation and visions, and renewal or a sense of being born again. Although Abel does not follow this process straightly, his end is the same, being reconnected to his people and therefore feeling to be alive again.

Regarding language, Momaday also shows in this novel the relevance words have for Native American people. When Abel returns from the war, he is unable to communicate and remains inarticulate, “while everyone speaks English, the words that he has are no longer adequate- they are no longer ‘tribal’ and therefore, no longer connected to the land or the people. His sojourn in the white man’s world has unvoiced him” (TuSmith 115). Abel remains annihilate and it is not until Momaday makes him realize about the power of rituals and ceremonies that he is able to recover his voice and therefore, live. Momaday’s criticism against the vanity of white language also appears in relation to the sermons The Priest of the Sun tells.

In the white man's world, language, too -- and the way which the white man thinks of it--has undergone a process of change. The white man takes such things as words and literatures for granted, as indeed he must, for nothing in his world is so commonplace. On every side of him there are words by the millions, an unending succession of pamphlets and papers, letters and books, bills and bulletins, commentaries and conversations. He has diluted and multiplied the Word, and words have begun to close in on him. He is sated and insensitive; his regard for language -- for the Word itself -- as an instrument of creation has diminished nearly to the point of no return. It may be that he will perish by the Word. (*The House Made of Dawn* 53)

He considers that distorting language and losing the real value of words is something white people do quite often. He uses the priest to tell his own opinion about that and in one of the sermons Tosamah contrasts the use of Words by white and Native people. He also refers to his grandmother, a reputed storyteller who respects and takes delight in language. Momaday goes a bit further and in another chapter Ben, who is still trying to help his friend recover, observes that there are many differences between the English spoken by Indians and that used by white people. These differences would turn white people unable to understand Abel and his problems, because they speak differently, and although they can understand each other, their meanings are completely separate because they belong to different cultures, making communication impossible. This shows the inability of white people to understand Native Americans and the other way around.

Abel represents the first generation of characters in Native American Renaissance that Velie classifies as alienated. He is lost, poor and a heavy drinker, but he represents more than this too. With his creation Momaday is reversing the topics usually placed on Native Americans. He was destined to self destruction as it is expected from a veteran, a murderer, an unemployed and a Native American character. However he is able to overcome these stereotypes and find a viable alternative and he does it through storytelling, but also through his discovery of his connection to land and environment. The importance of the land and environment is evident everywhere in the novel as the novel explores the connection between man, nature and time. Men have to find a way to live in nature and Abel struggles to do it, like Thoreau in *Walden*. He fights to find a way to live in a human way among the forces of nature but also adapting to progress. He constantly feels he is out of place because cannot find his way in the city or the reservation. The Indian Relocation Program was intended to free Indians from

reservations but it did not work. Abel is an example of this. Native American people considered that it was just an attempt to make them abandon their land so that the natural resources on them could be developed by non Native American corporations. Politicians considered that reservations were impediments for economic development and Native Americans were encouraged to leave them with promises of jobs, training and homes, among other things. But the truth was quite different and they found isolation, discrimination and segregation. Abel exemplifies the effects of all this. Momaday denounces the effects of white invasion on native lives with this character, unable to live among anybody because he has lost a sense of a place. This proves that human existence is indivisible from the landscape and that the separation may cause spiritual illness and isolation. When this separation is imposed by programs like the Relocation Act, someone is to blame, as in Abel's case. Although in this case, his alienation can be also caused by his own inability to remain within the land. Indeed, his disconnection to nature and environment is more clearly exemplified when compared to his grandfather Francisco. He was a bear hunter and grew up when people were still stunned to the land and the farms, when stories were still important and there was a reciprocal relation between man and nature. Abel barely knows anything about that but when he discovers it, he is saved.

According to Lawrence Buel, Ursula K. Heise and Karen Thornber, Ecocritics have been attracted to indigenous place-based stories and myths for their own sake and for "the potential adaptability as models for contemporary artistic and life practices, e.g., for their insights into the challenges of sustaining or restoring ecocultural identity notwithstanding the traumas of cultural change, displacement, and discrimination" (429). Momaday's work is an example of this as the novel depicts Abel's real struggle to get in touch with nature again after feeling discriminated and displaced, either because of his own separation from the land or because of the influence that living among white people had on him.

Ecocriticism is also exemplified on the imagery and words Momaday uses throughout the novel. Indeed, as Buel, Heise and Thornber state, another major concern of Ecocritics pertains to "the nondualistic recognition within 'native' people's collective imagination of nonhuman entities as fellow beings, whether at a sensory or a spiritual level or both, and for their cultivation of sensory awareness as an indispensable part of

the human make up” (429). Here, the text begins and ends with references to nature “Dypalon. There was a house made of dawn. It was made of pollen, and of rain, and the land was very old and everlasting” and finishes similarly “Qtsedaba,” which signals men’s place within nature. The rain is indeed an important element within the novel. It is present in most dramatic events: the first time Abel and Angela make love, when Abel leaves Los Angeles to return to his home town, when Francisco dies, or when Abel murders the albino man. It is like an anticipatory element that lets readers know something relevant is happening or about to happen. Indeed, water imagery is important not only in Momaday’s work, but also in that of many other contemporary Native American writers because water is an essential element for the survival of tribes in reservations too.

Similarly, animals also play an important role within the story, above all the eagle and the bear, symbolizing Abel and Francisco respectively and also connect the novel to Ecocriticism.<sup>79</sup> Francisco was a bear hunter and behaved like that all his life. His bear hunt is represented as a proof of patience and skill and Francisco is able to pass it and return to the reservation as a hero and man. Abel, who belonged to The Eagle Watcher’s Society, is also able to capture an impressive female eagle but unlike his grandfather he is unable to feel proud of that capture and feels that like him, the eagle has been deprived of liberty. When he lets it go and as he sees it fly again, he longs for this freedom. The question is who deprived him of this freedom when he was physically free. Probably what Momaday intends to say is that white oppressor did it as well.

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79 Often intertwined with the discussion of place, animals have played an important role in Ecocritical thought too, because conservation efforts in Western societies have focused on the protection of habitats and animals as two elements related to the protection of nature in general. According to Buel, Heise and Thornber, Ecocriticism has found a rich territory for investigation on the literature on animals in both Western and non-Western traditions, “which often include an important environmental dimension when their principal focus lies elsewhere” (431). They provide as examples the narratives of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, Jack London, Rudyard Kipling, William Faulkner, Robinson Jeffers, Gary Snyder, Julia Leigh, Jian Rong and Guo Xuebo, among others, because these writers “grounded encounters with whales, wolves, and bears in particular as scenes where nature and culture came face to face and masculine as well as national identities are put to the test in search for some combination of human dominance over and coexistence with other species” (431).

Nature is also reflected through female characters. However, in this case, the novel is not related to Ecofeminism. Indeed, here we are presented how the lack of female references in the novel also emphasizes Abel's feeling of separation from his land and from nature. His mother died when he was only a boy and the only motherly Indian women in the novel are those who appear in the memories of the people who surround him, and the old women from their pasts. Those are the ones who have witnessed the great changes in their men and who appear strong and able to maintain their families without the presence of men.

They were at home in the kitchen and, they prepared meals that were banquets. They were frequent prayer meetings and great nocturnal fests. And afterwards, when the quiet returned, I lay down with my grandmother and I could hear the frogs away by the river and feel the motion of the air. (*The House Made of Dawn* 124)

It is through some rituals that he would feel able to come back home, not only physically, but also spiritually. Momaday places Abel's suffering in the context of a Walatowa and Navajo ritual. As Allen explains, "within this ritual framework, suffering is necessary and comprehensible in the life of the tribal hero." (87)

So in the novel, we learn about Native American women from the past, who were strong and could care of their families, although for some literary critics, Momaday's presentation of women was quite misogynous. Kathleen M Donovan considers, for instance that Momaday's novels present contemporary women as negative forces whose duplicitous language, sexuality, transgressiveness, and witchery actively subvert the male protagonists' healing. For her "Momaday himself subverts the tribal concept inherent in female fertility by using pregnancy and maternity to silence his disorderly female characters" (11). For this author, Momaday was a highly educated and well-read man who writes out of an Anglo as well as a Kiowa tradition. One example is the character Angela Grace St. John, the principal female character in *The House Made of Dawn*. She enters the narrative as the Angelus is ringing, in a scene juxtaposed with Abel's memories about the military tank bearing down upon him. She is seen as opposed to Abel's healing and this is exemplified by his perceptions of natural phenomena related to her. She is always associated to negative elements in the natural world. She "looks for some sign of disaster on the wind. Now and then she watched the

birds that hide and skittered in the sky, but the birds always went away, and then the sky was empty again and eternal beyond all hope” (*The House Made of Dawn* 34).

What is true is that women have a special role within the novel. They are as powerful as to change male characters’ lives and their relation to the earth and motherhood was such a special one that not having the presence of a mother may change the way you are considered by the community. Donovan may consider this misogyny but the truth is that by providing Angela with the ability to change natural forces and make them appear as disturbing, Momaday is also providing this female character with a force that no male characters seem to have in the novel.

A. Robert Lee defines the novel as a portrait of worlds in collision, Native and European American, Laguna New Mexico and modern California, with the II World War Pacific and Pueblo Indian country juxtaposed as two kinds of American war one. This may summarize the novel indeed, but it could be added that it is also an extraordinary example of the power of nature and women, the power of stories and the power of traditions to overcome this constant war.

Momaday’s last novels, as well as those of other Native American authors, have turned different in the last five years. Now protagonists are not socially isolated people but just the opposite. He represents Native American characters who are professionals and successful in different sectors within the white world: “It seems that Momaday...turned from depicting life in the tribal community to a matter that touches them more closely: the question of the cultural identity of an Indian who leaves the tribe to live among whites and becomes so successful he can’t go home again” (Larson 112).

This is the case of Set in *The Ancient Child*, who represents Momaday himself. He is a famous artist who succeeds in New York and Paris but who never lived in the reservation. He is alienated from his family and community because he had been adopted into a white family, so he grew up with only a vague sense of his identity as a Kiowa or as a Native American. He did not enjoy his life and always felt a terrible pain and the need of a change. When he returned to his reservation for this grandmother’s funeral, he met Gray, a young Native American woman, part Navajo part Kiowa, who had become a medicine woman after her great-grandmother’s death. She would help him find his way back to his origin and restore what he had lost after inviting him to

Oklahoma. There, she would give him a medicine bundle which contained several objects, among them a dried bear paw. Set would start to see his own connection to the animal and also immediately notice its power and his own transformation. Now he would leave civilization and scientific issues behind and would move towards the primitive and the mythological. The novel ends with a revelatory scene of transformation as Set has a vision in which he becomes a bear in the Kiowa creation story.

This novel is really important as long as it may reflect also the struggle contemporary Native America people have to deal with in their everyday lives. At first Native people were probably detached from white world, and obviously discriminated from social and cultural life in the United States. They were isolated and alienated, like Momaday's first characters like Abel, in *The House Made of Dawn*. However, little by little Native American people have incorporated into American and white culture and life. They are educated in white schools, and they work and marry or relate with white people. They are part of American life and this may cause them trouble. Despite discrimination is not so important nowadays, they still need to feel they belong to their tribe. Probably, they do not feel completely integrated within the white world, but at least they are not as isolated as they used to be. However, when they have to return to their original tribes, as Set, they do not feel happy either. They feel they have missed something important of their background and culture which is essential for their personal development. No matter how successful they are in the white world, this is not important within their own tribes if they do not recognize who they are and where they belong to or come from. This is probably the feeling that common Native people also have. However, they are not to feel sorry about because they are not victims. Just the opposite, they must be proud of being able to enjoy both cultures and be recognized as mediators between the two.

### 2.3.2 James Welch

James Welch was born in Browning, Montana in 1940, and attended schools on the Blackfeet reservation, as well as the University of Montana. He is considered one of the best Indian poets, as he wrote poetry following Native forms and telling about Indian subjects.

However, this was not easy as it seems, at least not at the beginning of his literary career. As he recognizes in an interview held with Owen Perkins, when he started writing poems he did not know what way to follow. It was after he attended a course that his teacher, Victor Hugo, told him to write about his ancestry, his people and his culture. He thought that nobody would be interested in reading about it, but he tried and was quite successful. Moreover, as Momaday, he managed the difficulties of dealing with Native American topics but using European forms: “James Welch ... was aware of the fictional devices of Euro-American poets and novelists. At the same time he embraced the traditional Blackfeet beliefs found in narratives derived from oral traditions” (Lupton 15).

Although Welch always showed his reluctance at being labeled, he has considered and defined himself as a storyteller and wanted, above all, to help people understand that being Native American was not easy, and that each individual tribe should always try to maintain their own characteristics, so they will not be stereotyped as a whole. He explains this in the following quotation:

I do not hope to point out... the differences in cultures, the clashes that can result from those differences a how a person or a group of tribal people have to struggle to maintain their individual and tribal identities in mainstream culture. Although I consider myself a storyteller first and foremost, I hope my books will help educate people who don't understand how and why Indian people feel lost in America. (qtd. in Selden 277)

As he says in this quotation, he felt proud of being a storyteller, as well as proud of being part of the Renaissance movement and of the things the writers belonging to this generation did with storytelling. For him, the best part of this movement is that the writers are quite good and that they are writing about subjects which are important for



them, doing it with energy and vitality but without ignoring a tradition of storytelling. They tell their own stories with poems, short stories, or novels. Indeed, he believed that although Indian writers come from different groups, generations, or places and that they want to be considered independent, they all have something in common: they are all storytellers that will be heard by future generations too.

As Momaday and other contemporary authors, Welch was able to adapt oral tradition to new times. He could control narrative methods with his “persuasive use of plot, character and structure; his photographer’s sense of setting; his opulence of imagery” (Lupton 15), although the deep influence that Blackfeet oral tradition and his ancestors left on him is also clear in his works with “repeated motifs to convey a relatedness within the Indian community” (Lupton 15). His use of time is also adapted to oral tradition, as there is little regard for chronology and most the time actions move in circle, and stories begin in the middle of the novel. His work *Winter in the Blood* is an example of this too.

The novel begins sometime in 1960s when a narrator (whose name is unknown) and who is thirty-two years old and belongs to the Blackfeet Indian tribe, returns home after been drinking in town and fighting with a man in a bar. When he gets home he knows that his girlfriend has left and taken some of his things, including a gun. The narrator decides to look for her. He would get into lots of trouble and ultimately meets Yellow Calf, and old blind man who would explain him some facts about his grandmother and who would ultimately be the narrator’s real grandfather. When his grandmother dies and the narrator discovers the truth, he starts thinking about his future and about the possibility of marrying his girlfriend.

Welch considers family and society as the supporting points for human beings to know who they are, and in this sense, family stories have much to say. Therefore, in the novel, considered somehow biographical, Welch describes a narrator who is trying to recover his relation with his family and his tribe in order to understand his own life. It is not until he encounters the old Indian Yellow Calf, and he starts to tell him about old tales related to his family, that he starts to integrate and learn about his people and history and even think of the possibility of enjoying a future.

The narrator is also the protagonist of the novel. Although his name is not told in the whole novel, we know that he is alienated (indeed the story is told in first person narrator, so that the reader understands his feelings better). He does not seem to have any interests in life and goes from bar to bar in the reservation, getting drunk and into fights. He is described as intelligent person but without a purpose in life and distant from anybody else in the novel. He does not show any type of feeling towards those who surround him and remains detached from emotions. He also feels distance from the land in which he lives. Like *The Invisible Man* in Ralph Ellison's novel, he remains nameless because he is invisible to the dominant culture, or because remaining without a name it could mean that the same that happens to him could happen to any other Native American person, because this dominant society does not take them into consideration and has destructed everything that was important for them. Similarly, the nameless narrator in *...And the Earth Did not Devour Him* remains nameless to emphasize the possibility of being anyone, as like Native Americans in Welch's novel, Afro-Americans in Ellison's novel or Chicano in Rivera's, they are all oppressed by white people and it is not important who is each because all of them are the same for the mainstream society. Indeed, Welch strongly criticizes white people, who brought alcoholism and disgrace, through this character. The distance and isolation the narrator shows for the land is also a result of the destruction white oppressors caused. When the factory was build, they contaminated the water in the river and now Native American people cannot even go fishing. The protagonist is deprived of an ancient activity that also characterizes Indians like him. In the novel he says:

The country had created a distance as deepen it was empty, and the people accepted and treated each other with distance. But the distance I felt came not from a country of people, it came from within me. It was as distant from myself as a hawk from the moon. And that was why I had no particular feeling toward my mother and grandmother. Or the girl who had come to live with me. (*Winter in the Blood 2*)

Throughout the novel, Welch presents a really pessimist ecological reading. From the very beginning the reader finds gravestones, burned weeds, an abandoned cabin, no fish in the river, an useless sugar been factory, contaminated environment, dirtiness and no balance among ecosystems because "the natural world is isolated" (Lupton 60), connecting the novel to Ecocriticism. Indeed, for Ecocritics, ecology, especially in Ecocriticism's first phase of development, was often understood "to provide an account

of the natural functioning of ecosystems as stable, harmonious, and homeostatic if not disrupted by humans. Societies that understand and adapt themselves to this state of nature, it was thought, are or become freer, fairer, and more sustainable” (Buell et al. 422). Some Native American works, such as Welch’s, were singled out for praise in that they present models of sustainable living.

Ecocritical perspective is also shown through imagery. Again water is an important element within Native American texts. The impossibility of fishing determines the existence of a tribe, and this is provoked by white people’s intervention in their lives. Once again, a contemporary Native American author criticizes this. Because of the depiction of this destruction from the very beginning and the style, the novel may be indeed compared to T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*. However, Welch also considers that this distance and isolation the narrator shows for the land in which he lives is not common, and it does not exist in other protagonists. Lame Bull, for instance, feels closely connected to the land and cares for it, he smells “the beautiful land that have been so good to him” (*Winter in the Blood* 11). This means that the disconnection to the land is not a general feeling but an individual one. The narrator’s isolation and disinterest is unique and probably attached to other factors, such as his own internal problems. His main quest is his search for his identity and roots, a theme present in even classical works such as *Oedipus*. He only seems to show a kind of feeling when he remembers his father and his brother Mose, who died in an accident when the narrator was fourteen years old. From that moment on, he does nothing special and remains invisible until Yellow Calf helps him and teaches him his real identity.

Welch also connects his narrator to animals, and this vein he is also connecting him to the trickster figure in Blackfeet mythology and with Ecocriticism.

The narrator’s relationship with the animal characters Bird and Amos, as well as his general antisocial behavior and his transformations from drunk to son to cow-saver suggest his trickster affiliation. The narrator’s attachment to his grandfather, “Old Man,” also connects him to No’pi, the Blackfeet trickster. (Lupton 40)

Lupton even considers that Welch’s consistent openness towards natural functions such as urination also helps connect characters within the context of the landscape. Urine connects the narrator to horses and other animals that do not need sanitation systems and sewers. Only human beings do need it. Through his vision quest he is

mutilated and looks for an older man who can guide him and encounters a series of strange beings that guide him, and above all he is connected to animal guides: a spinster cow, a horse named Bird, a duck (Amos) and the fish who appear and disappear. Ecocritical works usually depict animals which have the ability to speak or which behave as humans do.<sup>80</sup> This strong connection to nature is also exemplified through women, as the novel is also an example of the strength and importance of Native American women within the community. Sometimes female characters in Welch's novels are overshadowed by male ones. However, despite the titles of the novels may a proof of that, the truth is that women hold important places in the narrative and the community. Here, female characters are strongly related to animals and "in a more customary Oedipal way: through the stained relationships between fathers and sons, between mothers and sons, through memory, in dreams" (Lupton 49). In the novel, Teresa (the mother) is a respected woman who plays an important secondary role. Lupton compares her to a Gertrude to her son's troubled Hamlet (49). Indeed, unlike most Blackfeet women, she has a husband who depends on her. However, one of the most relevant characters in the development of the narrator's personality is his grandmother. Throughout her he learns Blackfeet oral traditions and his own family history.

This woman who was Teresa's mother told me many things, many stories from her early life. My brother, Mose, had been alive at the time when, one winter evening, as we sat at the foot of her rocket, this woman who was never known, this woman who was our own kin. She told us of her husband, Standing Bear, ... When the old lady had related the story, many years ago, her eyes were not flat and filmy; they were black like a spider's belly and the small black hands drew triumphant pictures in the air. (*Winter in the Blood* 36)

The strength of this woman is emphasized by the fact she could have been the Sun Dance woman. She apparently remained virgin as she never had a sexual encounter with Standing Bear. When she was twenty she became a widow and although she remarried a

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<sup>80</sup> Poetic and storytelling traditions have focused on animals' similarities to humans and have featured them with the gift of language. Trickster figures such as coyotes or rabbits are in the border between animals and humans. In Western tradition, "the figure of the speaking animal appears across a range of high literary genres from ancient myth to stories of metamorphosis and in animal fables from Aesop to Jean de la Fontaine" (Buell et al. 432).

man called Doagie and they were supposed to have had a daughter, Teresa, it was questioned whether him was the real father or not. As HollRaf states, “While the grandmother does not remain a virgin, she was never unfaithful to her husband while he was alive, does not disrespect his memory by remarrying, and never reveals the true father of her daughter, Teresa” (64). Her affair with Yellow Calf remains a secret and she was a virtuous woman considered for the Sun Dance woman. She can also take the role of warrior woman because she hates Agnes, the narrator’s girlfriend, for being a Cree, a traditional enemy of Blackfeet people. She really wanted to kill her and avenge her tribe and considered that she is sexually promiscuous. The truth is that when the unnamed narrator discovers the identity of his grandfather and the sad story of his grandmother, who almost starves to death during the winter famine, he goes back to his life and land. It is like an epiphany for him, a ritual that will finally put an end to his alienation. Sometimes it has been considered that women in the novel do not have a principal role on the journey the unnamed narrator takes in order to discover this identity and reach this epiphany, and that they were merely “backdrop against which the main character plays out his coming-of-age role, or perhaps coming-to-terms-with-his-past role would be a better descriptor” (HollRaf 60). However, although he was distant from the female members of his family, he would need to realize that he needed to complement with women, so that their roles are necessary for his health as individual and as a member of the tribe. As HollRaf states, “A tribal structure of gender complementarity explains, in part, how the Native women are able to hold some of the strong roles in the novel” (60). Once again, we see the importance Native American women have in their communities, and the relevance the oral stories they told had for the development of characters. These are just literary works, but the same happened in real life, and these authors wanted to exemplify it in their novels so that everybody could see it and value Native women as they did.

It could be said that although at the end of the novel the protagonist’s alienation remains unresolved, unlike in other novels, the novel’s main feature is that it contains a “gem or oral history” (Nabokov 39). The hero tells his grandmother’s story and this resurrects traditional Indianness in the book. So “the novel is held together by this one account of meaningful human connection conducted secretly beneath the white man’s eyes, and oral tradition told it to us” (Nabokov 39). The novel attracts native and non-

native readers because it tells about contemporary Native American people who struggle to survive but who are not stereotyped as those shown in Hollywood films.

As in Momaday's case, Welch also developed his characters from sufferers to successful men and women. In his novel *Indian Lawyer*, "Sylvester Yellow Calf develops from a shy, lonely child, abandoned by alcoholic parents, living in poverty on the Blackfeet reservation, into a highly successful lawyer with the most prestigious law firm in Montana" (Velie 267). However he feels so uneasy because of his success and the failure of the rest of members of his tribe, that he almost destroys his career.

Welch paints a far bleaker picture of Indian life than does Momaday. It is not that Sylvester Yellow Calf endangers his career, but that his success is so uncharacteristic of Blackfeet. Like Momaday, Welch portrays an Indian who succeeds in white America, as Momaday and Welch themselves have ... but he heavily emphasized the point that an Indian who succeeds in white America is an anomaly who is likely to feel as much concerns as satisfaction with that success. (Velie 267)

According to Renee Newman Knake in the novel the reader is exposed to "otherness and the feeling of being an outsider" (15). According to him, this exposure helps the majority become aware and understand the problems of the minority. It also helps the reader learn about "the consequences of self-deception, which are exposed on several levels in the novel" (15) and finally the "novel's conclusion teaches the reader about acceptance, providing an example of how the kinds of real-life dilemmas faced by the novel's protagonist may be resolved in the lives and work of attorneys" (15). For him, there are several moments in the novel when Yellow Calf struggles to resolve his identity as an American Indian, "his obligations to the law, and his individual morality" (18). These moments are divided into three main themes: "the experience of otherness, the consequences of self-deception, and the resolution of acceptance" (18).

Kathryn W. Shanley also studies this 'otherness' in Yellow Calf. She thinks this character has done well in terms of himself, as he has got an education and a comfortable life and everything he needs in life to be happy. However, he does not seem to guide himself, but he is pushed by others in the directions they believe to be important or appropriate for him, as when he runs for public office but "he has unfinished business with himself and is not sharp about the ruthlessness of politics" (Shanley 240) Shanley also explains Sylvester's family relationships. At first he does

not understand why his mother had left him and is guided by questions of “how to love and be loved, how to belong, even though he does not consciously shape those ideas as questions” (240). However, as he grows up and becomes a man, he learns how to accept himself, and decides to belong to the American Indian community and serve it by working to promote tribal sovereignty (240).

Momaday and Welch, like other authors who are not originally American, such as Amy Tan, have presented characters who had to endure the problems of not having a definite identity. They were not fully accepted as American or as Native or Asians (in Tan’s case), but who could eventually find this identity by fabricating their own ones. This is the most important part of their novels, as they could ultimately use their heritage and the oral transmissions of their ancestors to define themselves, despite the trouble they had to go through on the way. With their criticism against environmental and cultural invasion of white people, they also make readers aware of the problem and this may lead them act in consequence.

### **2.3.3. Simon Ortiz**

Simon Ortiz was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1941 and grew in the Acoma village of McCarty’s, where he learnt and spoke Keresan language. He is also one of the most acclaimed Native American writers, especially because of the relevance his poems and short stories have acquired in the last decades. He is considered a member of Native Renaissance group and his recognition goes beyond the Indian circles.

Ortiz’s studies somehow reflect the life of many Native American young children. He remembers starting the US government McCarty’s Day School with trepidation and excitement. Native American people had been faded with American schools since 1870s and Indigenous children were moved to boarding schools away from their tribes. He considers that they started a program of destruction and brain-washing with children, so that they would become Americanized. When he started this school he felt excited despite he did not speak English and was not allowed to speak the Acoma language that he had spoken since he was born. He remembers that although he was at school he was lucky to be close to his family and tribe, who kept teaching him, but who also

considered that in order to maintain their tribe, in order to help it, children like him had to study and learn (10). It was not until he left the tribe for a year and went to live with his family to Arizona, that he realized there was a world beyond his tribe and that this meant that they were a minority. At this school he discovered what colonialism meant and that people who had gone to places like California and Arizona returned different. He found out that he was member of a minority and that this was not a good feeling (13). Later, he was sent to study to a boarding school, St. Catherine in Santa Fe, where he was not allowed to speak his native language and where the education he received was based on English and Western dispositions. Ortiz began to feel, then, the need of writing in diaries all his feelings and also the need to read. He also missed his family and life in his tribe. After St. Catherine, he started to study in Albuquerque, where he was taught manual subjects and which would help him work in the uranium plant. Later on he would start to study at the University of New Mexico, where he would discover ethnic voices. His education reflects how education in the United States has always affected questions of Native American survival and identity. Ortiz's account of his life in boarding schools and the mission they seemed to have, exemplified why it is not strange that Native Americans nowadays regard non-Native educational systems with hostility and ambivalence. Most schools wanted to assimilate Native Americans but the cost was too high, as forgetting one's cultural heritage was a price too high to be paid. Now, authors like him advocate for schools and Native studies that promote nationalism and the maintenance of Native traditions and culture alive.

Ortiz has written recognized works such as *From Sand Creek: Rising in This Heart Which is our America*, *A Good Journey*, *Going for the Rain*, *Fight Back: For the Sake of People*, *For the Sake of Land*, or poems such as "The People Shall Continue," "My Father's Song" or "It was that Indian."<sup>81</sup> He would later collect all of them on the book *Woven Stones*.

*Woven Stone* shows the different stages the author goes through as he is trying to integrate his background knowledge to current American societies, and the difficulties he has to deal with in doing. Marc Rothenberg classifies them. For him, the first section can be divided into four parts: "The preparation", which reflects Ortiz's earliest

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<sup>81</sup> Bibliographical notes excerpted from *Woven Stones* by Simon Ortiz.



memories with his family and with his people; “Leaving,” when he leaves his community; “Returning,” which shows his confusion because he could not integrate his new experiences with his previous knowledge and beliefs, and “The Rain Falls,” which represents his understanding of the myths he had heard. The second section “A Good Journey,” represents his experiences in American society when he tries to find a direction to follow.

Simon Ortiz has always provided language a major importance. He starts his collection of poems *Woven Stone* referring to a meeting he had with a group of young students. He told them the name of his town in Acoma language but it was not until he told the English version of the name that the young students realized what he meant. This also helped him realize that what “I do as a writer, teacher, and storyteller is to demystify language...making language familiar and accessible to others, bringing it with their grasp and comprehension, is what a writer, teacher, and storyteller does or tries to do” (3-4). Ortiz, like many other writers in his generation, wonders about the problems that writing in English while being raised in another language has brought him, and the troubles that translation into English of Acoma thoughts caused him. He considers that he has always tried to make language comprehensible for others. He thinks that now he considers that he has made English accessible even for himself, while some time ago, this was not the case, because “we did speak, understand, perceive and feel in our native Acoma language, however and if there was anything that sustained me through my years of writing it is that fact, even though I do not speak the Acoma language as fluently and fully traditionally as others do” (4). He explains that he has heard Acoma language since he was born and learnt songs and chants in this language because his parents and people spoke it. The cultural integrity of the language was secure although it was constantly attacked by the US education system. So he knew that in order for the family and community to continue, Acoma language had to be preserved. However, when he learnt to speak and write English fluently, he started to objectify his own language in translation, and felt bad or like doing something wrong. Although he had insisted himself on the idea that we can translate Acoma language into another language, he lately realized that “human cultures are different from each other, and unique, and we have different and unique languages, it is not easy to translate from one language to another through we egoistically believe and *think* we can” (6).

Regarding the relation of language and oral tradition, Ortiz considers that although the oral tradition of Native American people is based on spoken language, it is more than simply that. For him “oral tradition is inclusive, it is the actions, behavior, relationships, practices throughout the whole social economic and spiritual life process of people. In this respect, the oral tradition is the consciousness of the people” (7). He believes that oral tradition has been defined in terms of verbal-vocal manifestations in stories, songs, meditations, ceremonies, rituals, philosophies and in general histories that go from generation to generation. However, he goes a bit farther and says that “When I think of the ‘ideal’ Acoma oral tradition, I think of the interaction of the grandfather with his grandson, as well as what he spoke and what the story verbalizes as it is told” (7). For him, oral tradition is used to evoke and express a belief system and thanks to it that belief is conveyed and confirmed (7). Besides, his connection to oral stories is quite strong and goes back to the time when his mother used to read them. He used to love reading and listening to all sorts of stories, and never had enough of them. These stories ranged from current gossips to stories about the Acoma community and people and even mythic people and events which turned heroic or magical. He understands that those stories made him feel close to the “communal body of my people and my heritage” (9). When he started to read and write in English, he did not forget them, but on the contrary “I believe I felt those stories continued somehow in the new language and use of the new language and they would never be lost, forgotten, and finally gone. They would always continue” (9). That is why he probably believes that it was not that bad to use English to convey and tell Acoma stories and write poems about his tribe and people using English or even including some Western forms. This would not mean that he had forgotten his real background. Indeed, Ortiz has also been quite aware of the importance of maintaining native languages although incorporating English forms too. He considers it essential to connect the heritage of Indian people to new and current problems Native people have and to new forms of present literature. For him, the importance of the form does not lie in the form itself but in the content. Because he is a poet, he does not find any contradictions in the use of Indian songs and written poetry at the same time. When he “articulates the creative process, he could be describing the traditional Indian visionary beseeching spirits for aid” (38). For Ortiz, the poet is complementary to the source that give him the energy, the content for what he

wants to say, so that the poem is complementary to what is outside and away from you (Nabokov 38).

After his grandfather's death, Ortiz realized he had a role to play. He had learnt all about his family and tribe history, about the railroad, Spanish and American colonization or about the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the struggles his people had to face to keep their lands and ways of living, but he also realized he was living in a time "and place that was the result of the change in which Native American people had a role and that we ahead a role now. Therefore it was important to remember the past so that I could learn from it what there was to do in the present" (17). Although he knew that Acoma was not the only tribe and that there were many others who spoke and even though differently, "a sense of heritage and identity was becoming apartment to me, and it was the beginning of a definite purpose in being Native American. ... I felt a pride on love for my race and culture" (17).

Ortiz was convinced of the importance storytelling has in the process of adaptation and understanding of your personal heritage. He demonstrates in his poems "how a deep sense of people, belonging and community can be communicated and realized (becoming real) across times, worlds and geographies through the power of conversive storytelling" (De Ramirez, "Writing" 168). For Ortiz, stories are a means of approaching distances, because as Susan Berry Brill De Ramirez states, Ortiz considers that geographical, race or language divisions are more traversable when poetry and stories invite the readers and listeners to share history and experience ("Writing" 168). According to her, Ortiz shows us that belonging and relationship can "extend beyond the geographical limits of ancestry and tribe and to embrace other places and persons" ("Writing" 169). For him, people do not need to return to their ancestral lands to feel renovated but this renewal can be achieved through "storied remembrances and participation" ("Writing" 169). That is, stories are a useful tool for people coming from different tribes to understand themselves and they are also a way for people to feel close to their ancestors and history, even when they are geographically distant from them, and this is that Ortiz tries to show in his poetry and short stories.

In order to achieve this proposal, language is a basic tool. De Ramirez calls it “subversive language” and thinks that Ortiz is a clear example of how a poet belonging to the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century can provide the “means for intercultural communication that can transcend both personal affiliations (tribally Indigenous or diversely diasporized) and the broader public geopolitics of place and nationhood without the erasure of either” (“Writing” 167) with the only help of his poems and words. With his poetry Ortiz can show people worlds that would be completely unaffiliated to them otherwise. With language, Ortiz, as many other Native American writers, has been able to connect distant times and places, as well as to maintain tribal heritage, despite the terrible consequences that colonization brought to native languages and the use of English as a vehicle of communication.

Language is also an important issue within the topic of alienation, and Ortiz felt it on his own. He knows well the personal alienation and dislocation that lies “in the world’s intestinal nowheres” (De Ramirez “Writing” 175) and thanks to a poetic journal he could overcome the solitude. He used stories of survival that helped him to continue connected to his real world and not feel isolated both in the western and the tribal worlds, belonging to no place. Like many others Native American writers, alienation is one of his main topics, although he will show it through his poems and not through the creation of protagonists like Momaday’s Abel, Welch’s Yellow Calf or Silko’s Tayo.

Therefore, Simon Ortiz tries to root his poems and short stories in the oral tradition of his Acoma pueblo. He uses these oral stories to avoid alienation and to connect to the tribe in which he was born, but also to show it to the rest of the world and link them, despite their ignorance about the topic or their distance in time and place. Because of that, his poems are quite narrative and he is completely proud of it, as this style reflects Indian oral stories and also show a real connection between the listener and the storyteller, another traditional feature of oral stories that he explains: As quoted in Owens, “And it has been thought the word of the songs, the prayers, the stories that the people have found a way to continue, for life to go on. It is the very experience of life that engenders life” (*Other* viii). According to Owens, for Ortiz storytelling was so important because by participating within the myths, they become closer to their ancestors and “they enter into a collective consciousness of the ages” (*Other* 13). This is achieved thanks to the interaction between storyteller and listener so that the listener

could be considered a contributor of the “wealth of intimate knowledge to the telling of any story” (*Other* 13).

Ortiz has published several collections of poems. One of the most well-known is *From Sand Creek*, in which he gives voice to the veterans of American army who are in hospital and tries to reflect the alienation and struggles to survive of Native Americans and non Native American people in the America of the twentieth century. He also refers to the terrible massacre of Sand Creek of Arapaho and Cheyenne people, about which he would be told by the veterans in the hospital.<sup>82</sup> He also visited the place where this event took place as “he was able to walk the lands of that place as he, himself, struggled with finding his own place in a country and world that continued to deny his presence and subjectivity as a contemporary American Indian” (De Ramirez, “Writing” 181). De Ramirez considers that once he put this event into a storied poetry, Ortiz makes the place, its history and Indigenous people accessible and meaningful for the readers who “engage the words and poems in the co-creative manner of conversive storytelling listeners” (“Writing” 181). In this collection of poems, Ortiz is able to represent many of the characteristics of oral storytelling that many other novelists like Momaday represent in their works too.

One of the most important features is the use of space on the page that opens the poems and histories to the readers. Besides, Ortiz also uses the oral techniques of emphasis and silence, which allow the readers and listeners to have more time to reflect on the story. According to De Ramirez, Ortiz also uses an episodic and associative organization, which also parallels “structural intricacies of oral storytelling, in which stories, vignettes, persons, times and worlds are interwoven in the process of a larger unfolding story” (“Writing” 182). He also uses other techniques such as repetitions, assonances, para-rhyme that help readers understand the history of the event and relate it to oral storytelling to (“Writing” 184).

With the poems about Sand Creek, Ortiz wants the listener/reader to know a little bit more about the history of Cheyenne and Arapaho people, even when these readers are not Native American. This understanding does not have to be the same as that of native

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<sup>82</sup> This is a historical event that took place 29<sup>th</sup> November 1864, when the troops under the command of John W. Chivington attacked six hundred Cheyenne and Arapaho people (mostly women, children and old people ) who were camped at Sand Creek and massacred them (De Ramirez, “Writing” 181).

people, who actually lived the situation or who consider this event as part of their “ancestral legacy” (De Ramirez, “Writing”184). In this way, the histories of people could be enriched by the versions and visions that others give about it. As de Ramirez says “In the telling of Sand Creek, Ortiz demonstrates the capacity of stories to be reworked and modeled to fit meaningfully within different languages and geographies as a means of making these stories accessible to virtually any reader” (“Writing” 184).

Ortiz’s collection of poems *Fight Back for the Sake of People for the Sake of the Land* wants to honor the struggles that his people and other tribes had to go through due to the colonization by Spanish and Mexican people. The collection is set in the context of uranium industry in the early 1960s, as Ortiz himself explains. Although the poems were published twenty years later and the mines were not as powerful but winding down, it was then when Ortiz had formed his political and social consciousness and when he was aware of being on his own. He became angry because of what Americans were doing with them and because in his opinion, they were not fighting back, or at least so he thought. He defines the collection as “ a literary work intended to be a political statement about what’s happening to our lands and lives in the Acoma-Grants-Laguna region where the uranium industry was most active” (30). In the introduction to *Woven Stones* in 1992, he refers to *Fight Back for the Sake of People, for the Sake of the Land* and stated: “The American political-economic system was mainly interested in the control and exploitation, and it didn’t matter how it was achieved, just like the Spanish crown had been ignorant of people’s concern and welfare (qtd. in Hamilton 243). That is, he made clear his interest in calling for revolt, like the one in 1680, so that the government and corporate forces responsible for the uranium mining that had destroyed and poisoned their lands took responsibility, as this also brought the destruction of their culture.

The collection includes different poems which became very relevant and well known. In “I Too Many Sacrifices” for instance, he brings together a series of poems that explore the development of uranium mines near Grants and Milan, in New Mexico. He criticizes the exploitation of the land and the people that the current government makes and mixes biographical and anecdotal material. He also intends to demonstrate the close relation existing between Native American people and the land, and makes a strong defense of environment and its care. In “Final Solution: Jobs Leaving” he is able

to put into words the horrible consequences toxic pollution and despoliation of the pueblo lands have for people there, who are unable to support themselves. The government promised jobs on the railroads but this also meant the “diaspora of fathers and families and destroys the extended family of tribal associations” (Hamilton 243) and the poem “Starting at the Bottom” deals with the falsehood concerning job opportunities and prosperity that white people promised to Native Americans. The poem “That’s the Place Indians Talk About,” reflects the importance of words and stories to help people be connected to their lands, even when they are physically distant from them. The poem is based on the story about Coso Hot Springs, a sacred place in the China Lake Naval station that seems to be also a healing place but which was closed by the government to the public. A man related the story to Ortiz who wrote it in a poem with this title. The poem also tells about the uranium boom and deals with the environmental racism and injustice that underlay this boom. In “It Was that Indian,” he also makes a critic against the desecration of the land due to the uranium exploitation and the consequences this had for the Indigenous population. The hypocrisy of white people regarding this issue is also criticized in this poem.

Martinez  
from over by Bluewater  
was the one who discovered uranium  
west of Grants.  
That's what they said.  
He brought that green stone  
into town one afternoon in 1953,  
said he found it by the railroad tracks  
over by Haystack Butte.  
Tourist magazines did a couple of spreads  
on him, photographed him in kodak color,  
and the Chamber of Commerce celebrated  
that Navajo man,  
forgot for the time being  
that the brothers  
from Aacqu east of Grants  
had killed that state patrolman,  
and never mind also  
that the city had a jail full of Indians.  
The city fathers named  
a city park after him  
and some even wanted to put up a statue  
of Martinez but others said  
that was going too far for just an Indian  
even if he was the one who started that area  
into a boom.  
Well, later on,  
when some folks began to complain  
about chemical poisons flowing into the streams

from the processing mills, carwrecks on highway 53,  
lack of housing in Grants,  
cave-ins in Section 33,  
non-union support,  
high cost of living,  
and uranium radiation causing cancer,  
they — the Chamber of Commerce — pointed out  
that it was Martinez  
that Navajo Indian from over by Bluewater  
who discovered uranium,  
it says so in this here brochure,  
he found that green stone over by Haystack  
out behind his hogan;  
it was that Indian who started that boom.<sup>83</sup>

In “Mama’s and Daddy’s Words” he uses his own tribal language. He tries to reflect his father’s words encouraging his children to learn all they can “about the rapidly changing world in which they find themselves, telling them ‘You young people/You have a chance’” (Adamson 60). In the poem Ortiz’s father explains him the difficult tasks he did in the fields, in the road and in the sawmill. However, he felt proud and good because he was learning about the world in the same way his ancestors did, through work. Besides, as Joni Adamson states, “his work took him out into the world of the ‘Mericano,’ or American, where he gained insight into a culture unlike his own, a culture that was going to be destroyed and over which Acoma people had no control” (60).

In the collection *A Good Journey*, he evocates the emotions he felt when he was a teenager. He says “The book is based upon the oral tradition, specifically the oral voice of stories, song, history and contemporary experience” (17). He considers that the poetry of this poem is styled as a storytelling narrative, “ranging from a contemporary rendering of older traditional stories to current experience: From Grandmother Spider to my children, from Coyote to being in the Veterans’ Hospital for alcoholism treatment” (18).

His poem “My father’s Song” reflects his interest in oral storytelling. It was first published in 1976 and tries to show the importance of the heritage his father gave him. He is telling a song, but not a common one, but a song of life. In the poem, Ortiz tries to represent the value that all living things have, something that most Native American

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<sup>83</sup> From *Woven Stone* by Simon Ortiz.



people also believed. He remembers his father and the lessons that he taught Ortiz orally, because orality was essential for them. He also remembers his Acoma heritage, and the close link these people had to their lands.

Wanting to say things,  
I miss my father tonight.  
His voice, the slight catch,  
the depth from his thin chest,  
the tremble of emotion  
in something he has just said  
to his son, his song:

We planted corn one spring at Acu-  
we planted several times  
but this one particular time  
I remember the soft damp sand  
in my hand.

My father had stopped at one point  
to show me an overturned furrow;  
the plowshare had unearthed  
the burrow nest of a mouse  
in the soft moist sand.

Very gently, he scooped tiny pink animals  
into the palm of his hand  
and told me to touch them.  
We took them to the edge  
of the field and put them in the shade  
of a sand moist clod.

I remember the very softness  
of cool and warm sand and tiny alive mice  
and my father saying things.<sup>84</sup>

Like most contemporary Indian novelists, Simon Ortiz also reflects the impotence of Native people today when they are searching for their origins and how this impotence disappears as long as they are able to relate themselves to their ancestors.

This process is similar to that of the characters in novels by Momaday, Welch, Silko or Erdrich. They all feel the need to put their knowledge in and out the reservation together, so they understand who they are and where they come from. This also means that Ortiz aims to present the trouble of contemporary Native American people in society today but also that Native Americans are just a part of the American society.

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<sup>84</sup> Poem: "My Father's Song," by Simon F. Ortiz from *A Good Journey* (University of Arizona Press)

Therefore, Simon Ortiz, like other contemporary Native American writers and like many other American writers from different origins, tries to reflect the importance of working with ancestral stories and tales that help them understand their origins and their culture, without forgetting where they are living now.

#### **2.3.4. Louise Erdrich**

Louise Erdrich is probably one of the best representatives of the importance storytelling has for contemporary Native American writers. She was born in 1954 in Little Falls, North Dakota and is an author of poetry, novels and children's books. Because of her origins and inheritance (her father is of German descent and her mother a Turtle Mountain Chippewa) she has always been proud and conscious of her role as mixed blood. Indeed, in her fiction she includes central characters that are both Native and non-Native Americans and tries to reflect the unresolved tensions of preserving a minority cultural heritage in the face of a dominant white culture, and while doing so, she is also able to denounce contemporary issues related to political, social, economic or environmental matters and reflect Native American oral tradition in her works.

Her career started with the publication of *Love Medicine* in 1984 and continued with the three novels *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988) and *The Bingo Palace*, which continue the stories begun in *Love Medicine* and narrate the life of three families in a fictional town created by the author in North Dakota. Together with her husband, she worked in novels such as *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (1987) and *The Broken Cord* (1989). After his suicide, she published other novels like *Grandmothers Pigeon* (1996), *Tales of Burning Love* (1996), *The Antelope Wife* (1998), *The Birchbark House* (1999), *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), *The Master Butchers Singing Club* (2002), *The Range Eternal* (2002), *Four Souls* (2004), *The Painted Drum* (2005), *A Plague of Doves* (2008) and *Shadow Tag* (2010). She has just received the Library of Congress prize 2015 for American fiction for her three-decade literary career.

One of Erdrich's most recognized novels is *Love Medicine*, which represents a story cycle and demonstrates the struggles of a group of Chippewa people to survive in the

modern world where white impositions become more and more important and strong. It draws upon Erdrich's Chippewa heritage and examines familial relationships among Native Americans and their conflicts with white communities. It consists of fourteen interconnected stories related by seven different members of the Kashpaw and Lamartine families in the Turtle Mountain reservation. The novel gives a non-chronological account of fifty years, between 1934 and 1984, beginning with June Kashpaw's death as she goes back home under snow and the family gathering after it. In the novel, there are multiple characters belonging to the two families, such as Lipsha or Lyman Lamartine, who narrate a few chapters in *Love Medicine* but who would become protagonists in *The Bingo Palace*. It also presents characters such as Nector Kashpaw, Gerry Nanapush, Lulu Nanapush, Mary Lazarre, Moses Pillager, Eli Kashpaw or Albertine Johnson, to name only a few. The love story between Nector and Mary will bring together many of the important images in the novel, including the notion of love medicine and will also connect some of the characters to the story.

*Tracks* was written after *Love Medicine*, but the events narrated occur before those in Erdrich's first work (between 1912-24). Here Erdrich presents the characters' struggles to hold on what remained of their lands and it focuses on the tangled family stories of several characters previously introduced in *Love Medicine*, including Marie Lazarre, Eli and Nector Kashpaw. The story is narrated in alternating voices, that of old Nanapush, the eldest tribal member who rescued Fleur, and the last Pillager member; and that of Pauline Puyat, Marie's crazy mother. This helps develop the tension between the Native Americans' ancient beliefs and the Christian notions of the Europeans. The two heroes of the novel, Nanapush and Fleur try to defend tribal ways against the effects of Dawes Act, which demands the land be individually owned and consequently the breakup of tribes.<sup>85</sup> Erdrich criticizes this at the beginning of the novel and through Nanapush' words the reader may guess that the starvation he is referring to had to do with white invasion of their lands and the Dawes Act that obliged them sell their lands and remain isolated from their tribes:

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<sup>85</sup>Dawes Act, named after its creator Senator Henry Laurens Dawes, was signed in February 1887 and allowed the division into allotment for individual Indians. If they accepted to remain separate from the tribe, they were guaranteed U.S. citizenship. It was intended to promote Native American assimilation into American society, but it also meant that lands could be sold and bought by other people too.

And we were. Starvation makes fools of anyone. In the past, some had sold their allotment land for one hundred poundweight of flour. Others, who were desperato to hold on, now urged that we get together and buy back our land, or at least pay a tax and refuse the lumbering money that would sweep the marks of our boundaries off the make like a pattern of straws. Many were determined not to allow the hired surveyors, or even our own people, to enter the deepest bush. (*Tracks* 8).

*The Beet Queen* is the only novel in the tetralogy that moves from the reservation and sets in Argus, the fictional town invented by Louise Erdrich. It deals with whites and half-breeds as well as with Native Americans, exploring the interactions between these worlds. The story begins as Karl and Mary Adare are abandoned by their mother together with their baby brother. Mary moves to Argus to live with her aunt while Karl goes to an orphanage. The novel centers in these characters' lives between 1932 and 1972 and their relationship with native people such as Celestine James, Russell Kashpaw, and white ones such as Sita Kotza or Wallace Pfef.

*The Bingo Palace* returns the readers to the North Dakota Indian reservation. Lipsha Morrisey, June's son, goes back to the reservation upon her grandmother's advice. In this novel Erdrich centers on the way new generations of Chippewa characters, such as Lyman or Lipsha, who must live with the continuous influence of white culture and the exigencies of their own Chippewa heritage. They both go on a vision quest and decide to build a casino on Fleur's land, but as a vision she sends them a skunk that continuously repeats "this ain't no real state" (200). For Fleur it is not a matter of who owns the land, because for her there is no private ownership but she just wants to differentiate traditional and real estate property. Lipsha considers there must be an intermediate point regarding land, "it's not completely one way or another, traditional against the bingo. You have to stay alive to keep your tradition alive and working" (*The Bingo Palace* 221). Lipsha waves between the luck and easy money of gambling and the fear that turning the land into casino property will rob his community of its heritage and sense of identity as the skunk had foretold. With the planning of the construction of the Bingo Palace, Erdrich also focuses on a very controversial topic at that time, gambling. She somehow tries to break with traditional stereotypes related to Native American people and this issue by creating a character who still wanders about the consequences this white intrusion can have for his native community. This is always under the love story performed by Lyman, Lipsha and Shawnee Ray. Erdrich provides

continuity to the series by having the novel primarily narrated by Lipsha Morrissey, the illegitimate son of June and Gerry who also appeared in *Love Medicine*.

In the four novels Erdrich presents a series of characters and almost everyone is related to everyone else. The same stories are told from different perspectives depending on the character who is narrating it, and she depicts varied groups of characters who live in this multicultural society, due to the increasing influence that white people had on the different reservations. She includes characters who are identified as Indians, worry about the preservation of their culture and lands and who speak Chippewa. They try to break traditional stereotypes related to Native Americans. They represent most of the features that characterize Chippewa traditions, beliefs and customs. A second group of characters would include those whose main aim is getting money and power. Although they are Native Americans they do not pay much attention to traditions and heritage. This reflects the influence that white people had over them and the consequences of terrible events such as the Vietnam War, in which many Indians were enrolled, or the importance attached to considering Indians as assimilated within white society and not as isolated individuals who just drink alcohol and wander in the streets. The adaptation to elements coming from white people may have both positive and negative consequences, and this would be reflected in their characterization. Erdrich's characters also include white people, those who influence Indian way of living and who are closely connected to Native Americans but who also are somehow influenced by them.

In a conversation held with Wang, Erdrich mentioned the importance family stories had in her life, as well as her husband Michael Dorris' life.

Sitting around listening to our family tell stories has been a more important influence on our work than literary influences in some ways. These you absorb as a child when your senses are the most open, when your mind is forming. That really happened, I know, in our family, and (to Michael) certainly with yours. In Michael's family not a thing happens but it is really a tale (qtd. in Chavkin, *Conversations* 38).

Like most Native American writers, Louise Erdrich also tries to include oral storytelling elements coming from her Chippewa heritage within her narratives and she does it including contents related to oral stories, employing language techniques and

protagonists and with a unique style mostly based on oral elements too. However, Catherine Rainwater also believes that Erdrich's narrative tactics in these novels are derived from Eurocentric as well as from tribal storytelling forms. For instance, she refers to the fact that some critics consider Faulkner deeply influenced the author, as he also created Yoknapatawpha County, where most of his protagonists live and where most of his stories are set. His characters narrate portions of Faulkner's southern epic from their point of view. In general, Rainwater believes that despite Faulkner's obvious influence, this "does not eclipse that of tribal raconteurs whose voices have shaped the traditional Ojibwa tales informing Erdrich's prose" (271).

Most of the characters in Louise Erdrich's novels perform the role of narrator and storytellers and many of them also use Chippewa language to communicate. However, she also intended to show the changes that the influence of white people had brought to the reservation and uses Michif that is, the Cree language of the Turtle Mountain reservation, which is a combination of Cree and French, as the language that the youngest characters in the four novels employ to communicate. Although Erdrich does not provide many details about the protagonists' ages, it seems clear that the relationship between ages and the linguistic pattern follow the concept that people who are over sixty-five years old speak Chippewa and learned it as a first language, while the youngest characters are likely to forget it and use English as their main vehicle of communication. This is true in the case of Albertine, Lipsha, King and Lyman, who are not in direct contact with it and are barely able to utter any words in Chippewa. Only those who have been in close contact with their ancestors, grandparents or old people would be able to use and understand it properly, as it is Eli's case. Erdrich blamed Indian institutions and white oppressions for the loss of this language and tried to include Chippewa in her works as a way of being close to her culture and ancestors.

In the three novels, the most representative character in relation to language is Old Nanapush, the only character belonging to the first generation that is able to speak the two languages. This is what differentiates him from the rest of men in the Chippewa tribe and turns him into an authority within the tribe. However, his relation to English is quite contradictory. On the one hand, he does not accept the fact that English could be used to count Indians and their lands. He could sign or speak perfect English but did not want his name to be in any type of register. On the other hand, his knowledge of English

and law facilitates his way to bring Lulu back to the reservation. However, when he needs to communicate with other members of the reservation he uses Ojibwa language. His use of English language is also a way to develop his role of mediator. He is between the Chippewa and the white world, and makes use of his ability to function as a mediator.

Eli is the last speaker of the traditional Chippewa language in the four novels. Through him, Erdrich reflects the influence that French had over Chippewa and how people in the reservation were not affected but developed the so called Michif language. Eli never went to school because his mother had avoided it, something she could not do with her other son, Nestor. They embodied the two versions of Native American people, those who were sent to boarding schools and forgot their languages and traditions, and those who remained within the tribe and learnt the old knowledge that fights modernity and white oppressions. Erdrich is quite clear in this way too. At the end of their lives, while Eli remains clear and sharp and is able to pass his knowledge to his people, Nestor, the one who had been educated and spoke only English, lost his memory and could not even recognize himself. Both belong to a second generation of characters, who were still supposed to understand and speak Chippewa language, but who also represent the effects that white colonization had over the different tribes. With this opposition between Eli and his brother Nestor, Erdrich is clearly denouncing the effects American education system had over Native American children, who are completely detached from their culture and love for land, and who forget what the best for their tribes is, as exemplified the differences among the two characters. Eli remains attached to the land and nature and Nestor does not care about it. Paradoxically, by making him lose his mind while Eli remains sharp and clever, she is ironically describing the ultimate effects of this educational system. Indeed, the members of the third generation of characters appearing in the tetralogy, such as Lipsha or Lyman, feel unable to utter a word in Chippewa, and they hardly understand it. It is impossible for them to communicate using the language of their ancestors, even when these ancestors do not seem to be so far in time from them and do not care about the land and the need of keeping it safe from white hands. That is, through the presentation of her characters in the four novels, Erdrich is criticizing the inclusion of English in the native education

system, while still revealing the importance it has if characters want to participate of white culture and survive in a world in which Western ideas seem to be over the rest.

Apart from using her characters as means of promoting her Chippewa language, Louise Erdrich goes a bit further. Her novels employ a conversation style, a dialectic relationship between the different characters, who usually address their listeners and readers, which reminds the reader of the oral formula employed by storytellers and creates an intimacy between the person who is talking and the listener which imitates that of face to face communication. As Silberman commented:

Her work ... seems at times to aspire to the status of 'pure storytelling.' This goal would make the text appear to be a transcription of a speaker talking in the first person present tense, addressing a clearly defined listener. Thus in several of her narratives the speaker addresses a 'You.' (146)

That is, Erdrich mixes first and third person narrations in some of her works and the narrator is not always a central or omniscient one, but the role moves freely from character to character and each of them is central to an element or a situation within the story and the novels in which they participate. The characters usually tell their own stories, spinning out a large web of relationships and providing the context in which they can be understood. This is clearly identifying of Native American literature, as Chippewa literature is defined as "the cycle of stories having to do with a central mythological figure, a culture hero. One tells a story about an incident that leads to another incident that leads to another incident in the life of this particular person" (Quennet 9). According to Rocio G. Davis, Louise Erdrich uses some connective devices and among them she employs patterned after spoken as well as written narrative voices "the characters tell and retell family and community stories from their particular point of view and their own unique idioms. One tells a story about an incident that leads to another incident that leads to another incident in the life of this particular person" (15-16). According to her, in this vein Erdrich blends stories from family and community and tells and retells them from different perspectives so "that the reader, offered several versions of the same events, is forced to integrate, interpret, and reinterpret the narratives" (16).

Besides, Erdrich counters the limitations of a first person narration, such as limited information or a narrow scope of knowledge using multiple narrators which offer



readers different reading experiences. Indeed, although most of these narrators use first person singular they also use interior monologue to tell their stories, and this is also typical of oral storytelling. In Michael Dorris' opinion, this was very important to understand the characters better. He suggested that the readers get to know them more deeply and mentions the fact that most of their characters are not educated (except for the fact that some of them attended white schools). With this literary device readers are able to learn about the characters' thoughts and emotions more intimately than with traditional forms of narration, they are more complex in the way they think and speak and we know what they have lived from their own point of view (Chavkin, *Conversations* 88). Jennifer Sergi thinks that Erdrich employs oral markers that capture the essence of Native American oral and mythic tradition and does it in three main ways that she summarizes as follow: "1) She captures the form and purpose of oral storytelling; 2) she includes the contents of Chippewa myth and legend; and 3) she preserves these cultural traditions in a voice that harks back to the old as it creates anew" (279). In general it could be said that Erdrich reproduces in her novels a really important side of her Chippewa heritage, traditional storytelling, and she does it in several ways: first of all, using multiple narrators; secondly, by employing characters who behave as narrators and who use first person. Finally, Erdrich tries to create an intimacy between the narrators and the readers and even within the characters themselves, by allowing the former to directly address the latter.

For Catherine Rainwater, Erdrich's cross-culturally innovative use of multiple narrators within single texts, her elaborate intertextual connections among her novels, demand attentive and participatory readers who really want to work hard and perceive subtle patterns "temporal sequences, kinship networks, serial repetitions of images, metaphors and symbols" (279). For her, the reader's task involves philosophical reflection upon Erdrich's representation of reality, as for Rainwater, for Erdrich and her characters, "human experience of the world is radically disjunctive" (279). As it was said at the beginning of this chapter, contemporary Native American authors want readers to participate of the stories in order to make them realize about the issues they are denouncing. By using this sort of techniques that demand their attention, Erdrich is also achieving this aim.

Louise Erdrich also puts into practice some stylish features coming from oral storytelling in the tetralogy. One of them is the use of a non-linear concept of time but a circular one. For instance, in *Love Medicine*, the first story is set in 1981, when June dies and then the story goes back to 1934. Later on, the stories are in chronological order and ends two years after Nector's death, so that the story is set in 1984 and returns to June, when Lipsha learns his mother is June and his father is Gerry. This meant Lipsha's reconciliation with his mother and with his past. June opens the novel and her son closes it. As Brown states, "In this manner the beginning suggests the end as the final story concludes with Lipsha, who like his mother before him, travels across the water to return home" (15). In this novel he also uses other connective devices on an intratextual level in the narration, "repeated symbols like the water (lakes and rivers associated with a series of oppositions: water can join or cleanse, or kill, save or erode) and images of edges and boundaries" (Brown 16).

Protagonists are also an important part of Louise Erdrich's novels. Traditionally Native American characters belonging to Native American Renaissance are marginalized, as those appearing in Momaday's, Silko's or Ortiz's works, and somehow, some of the protagonists of *Love Medicine*, *Tracks*, *The Bingo Palace* and *The Beet Queen* are not an exception. Characters are marginalized not only by society but also within the ethnic group or the family. The bonds that link family are not strong but tenuous and this is principally because they do not have security in their family group and because they are completely uncertain about their parents or origins. Indeed, Wong thinks that this is also shown in the structure of the novel "in the proliferation and juxtaposition of individual voices (voices not often speaking or listening to each other) positioned between the covers of the book" (Brown 17). One of the clearest examples is Lipsha in *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*. He behaves as a storyteller in the novel and provides different points of view about some events, but he is unable to tell his own story, about his childhood and past because he has been given so many versions about them that he feels unable to discern which one is the real one. This turns him into an uncertain narrator who is clear about others' lives but who feels insecure about himself. He feels lost and disoriented until he learns the truth, at the end of *The Bingo Palace*. This also connects him to other contemporary protagonists, who are in search of their own identity and need to find it in order to recover and get back to land.

Apart from emphasizing storytelling, healing and historical consciousness, she also emphasizes family, motherhood and environmental issues, and because of that her novels have often been connected to Ecofeminism. She connects her female characters to the environment and their sad endings remind readers of that of land because of white invasion, so the novels takes this way on an Ecofeminist persona. The two main female protagonists, Fleur and Pauline seem perfectly to reflect this, especially on *Tracks*. Fleur is depicted as embodying animal and natural features that identify her and her behavior.

Her cheeks were wide and flat, her hands large, chapped, muscular. Fleur's shoulders were broad and curved as a yoke, her hips fishlike, slippery, narrow. An old green dress clung to her waist, worn thin where she sat. Her glossy braids were like the tails of animals, and swung against her when she moved, deliberately, slowly in her work held in and half-tamed. But only half. ...They never looked into her sly brown eyes or noticed her teeth, strong and sharp and very white. Her legs were bare, and since she padded in beadworked moccasins they never saw that her fifth toes were missing. (*Tracks* 28)

She is connected to different animals through the novel and her link with other characters also makes them get connected to these animals. She is related to the bear, one of the most important animals within Chippewa mythology because it is able to transform sustain and regulate human existence, according to Chippewa people. For them it is a guide, a guardian of mortals and a barrier. Bears live within the borders of death and life because they spend half their lives hibernating and the other half living among other animals and humans. Fleur is connected to the bear and bearwalking and their shamanistic/healing powers, both because of her family connection and because of her own strength and powers: "Fleur is what the Anishiaabe call a bearwalker, one of the most feared types of shamans" (Vecsey 148). She is also connected to the wolf, because this is supposed to be the grandson or underworld brother of Nanabozho and she was adopted by Nanapush, who is considered a Trickster/healer like Nanabozho. When Nanapush describes the first time he saw Fleur, he claims "She was wild as a filthy wolf, a big bony girl whose sudden burst of strength and snarling cries terrified the listening Pukwan" (*Tracks* 3). Comparing her to this animal, she is described as an independent person who is able to look after herself and who has survived a disease that had killed all her family. Similarly, in other occasions Fleur is connected to the water monster Matchimanito, who is supposed to be the underworld protector of wolf and

who, according to Pauline, wanted Fleur for himself. Indeed, Nanapush said that it was Fleur's ancestors the ones who brought the monster to the lake and the ones able to keep him under control, as Fleur did too. This is also an important issue, as it connects Fleur to water too. Twice she was about to drown and a third time she tried to kill herself by getting into water. The three times she survived because she was supposed to be protected by the underwater manito, or so people said.

Her protection of the land, the trees and the earth that surrounds her and that are her ancestors' heritage also turn Fleur into a reflection of Ecofeminist view of women and their fight to defend the environment; and her rape and destruction of her land also symbolize the destruction caused by a patriarchal society that considers women and lands are subjects of their oppression and possession, as Ecofeminists claim. When Fleur is raped at the beginning of the novel her power and strength seem to fail. Similarly, when her land is invaded by white loggers at the end of the novel, she tries to commit suicide. However, both times she is able to get over the situation and destroy those who had destroyed her. After being raped a tornado seems to devastate the place and some days after that the men were found frozen. Likewise, while the white loggers were trying to cut Fleur's trees, she made them fall: "With one thunderstroke the trees surrounding Fleur's cabin cracked off and fell away from us in a circle, pinning beneath their branches the roaring men, the horses" (*Tracks* 223). The two times she left after the events, although the second one she never came back. She is powerful as nature is, and with her characterization, Erdrich is able to show that both women and nature are strong enough to protect themselves, but also that they are condemned to be oppressed by men. However, her intended suicide and the death of the men who raped her also show some kind of positivism, because she is able to decide upon her destiny, and this means that although they tried, men cannot control women, at least not spiritually. Like Ultima, in *Bless Me Ultima*, Fleur overcomes the impositions of patriarchal and white societies and lives as she wants to. Ultima is condemned by those who do not believe that a woman should hold such a huge power, which includes even the ability to heal and to foretell the future, and also by Christian church, as she embodies everything they fight against. However, like Fleur, she becomes powerful and teaches Antonio new things related to nature that will help him in his future. Fleur is also free and lives as she wants without following conventional traditions. Her relation with nature is like that of

Ultima, and both women at the end, although dead will become important for other characters' development, spiritually and psychologically.

Similarly Pauline also exemplifies the attempt to control women and nature by patriarchal societies. However, unlike in Fleur's case, Pauline seems to succumb to this oppression. At first we know that she is only valued by men because of her work but she remains invisible for white men and society the rest of the time. This poses her within a marginal side within white context. She is physically related to earth because of that, as she describes herself as blending "into the stained brown walls, a skinny big-nosed girl with staring eyes" (*Tracks* 15-6). Brown like earth, she is invisible for men as invisible and useless is the land for these people. Their disdain for Pauline equals their disdain for the land, which they only value for the economic benefit they can get of it. Unlike Fleur, Pauline ultimately falls into oppressor's hands and becomes an obsessed Catholic nun who subordinates her own beliefs and her own person to religion. This religion does not include women in godly creation but considers them inferior to men, tied to them, becoming a patriarchal creation. When Pauline subordinates her life to this religion she is being controlled by a male creation and this can be compared to the control human beings exercise over nature but unfortunately, she cannot overcome this control that finally destroys her.

Their relation to motherhood is also quite different. Fleur had two children, Lulu and a boy who died before being born. Pauline gave birth to Marie, but their attitudes towards their children are completely opposed. Fleur looks after them and feels completely lost when the baby dies. On the contrary, Pauline abandons her daughter and goes to live with nuns to become a crazy one. This reflects their relation to their native origins as well. Fleur is proud of being a Pillager and defends her land and traditions as she defends and protects her children. Pauline rejects being Native American as she rejects and disdains her daughter. Motherhood reflects in the novel the effect of patriarchal societies on both characters. In Afro-American literature, motherhood is also seen in terms of duality between the good and the bad mother and in Chicano culture, there are also examples of women who behave as terrible mothers, such as La Llorona and Melinches, as Pauline does.

In the four novels, women have a strong influence on men and seem to guide and be strong and unaffected by feelings or extraordinary events. Susan Pérez Castillo refers to the concepts of authority and power related to women. She mentions the fact that traditionally women had power, especially within the house, while men had the authority. Indeed, although within some Native American groups certain women had both power and authority, they were not so well considered among American people, who also discriminated Native women because of their race. This has changed recently, above all in Native American literature with “increasing numbers of female characters who exercise both power and authority” (14). Among them Pérez Castillo distinguishes Marie Lazarre and Zelda Kashpaw as clear examples because they held both power and authority. Marie is the illegitimate daughter of Pauline and inherits her mother’s power but becomes a free girl after being abandoned by her mother and marrying Nector Kashpaw. Indeed, according to Castillo, she uses her power to propel Nector into a position of authority, and he becomes the tribal chairman (16). She knows that her husband became so powerful because of her help and when Nector abandons her, she realizes that she does not need him to exercise her power: “But I was not going under, even if he left me. ... I’d still be Marie. Marie. Star of the Sea! I’d shine when they stripped of the wax” (*Love Medicine* 128). Zelda is Marie’s granddaughter. Unlike her mother, she becomes a career girl and exercises both power and authority in *The Bingo Palace*, where she reappears. That is, in general, Erdrich creates female characters who do not depend upon men to become powerful and authoritative and apart from being the base for the male protagonists’ healing processes, become also protagonist on their own, because of their actions and their own personalities. They also become the source of storytelling development because with their actions and their words, they promote cultural transmission and become role models for other generations of female characters.

Actually, all of Erdrich’s male characters seem to have something in common: they generally accept inevitable doom in their lives and feel like they cannot do anything to avoid their destinies. It is women who guide them in many situations and in some cases turn them into important figures within the reservation. This is Nector’s case. His brother Eli also seems to be tempted by women and he fears and desires Fleur for example, at the same time. Lyman and Lipsha behave as it is expected from them until

they fight for the same woman's love. Karl Adare, in *The Beet Queen*, also seemed to be lost until a woman, Celestine James, accepts him, and something similar occurs with Wallace Pfef. He is unable to accept his real sexual tendencies and lies pretending to have a dead girlfriend, who never really existed. Even Old Nanapush seems to be under Margaret's control at certain points in his life, as when he moves to live with her. Moreover, one of the strongest characters in Erdrich's novels, Gerry Nanapush, also seems to have doubts about his life whenever women are concerned especially his wife Dot or his ex-lover June Kashpaw.

So women and especially mothers bear an enormous responsibility that sustains community and individuals, "despite the existing conflicts between them. They are powerful women who counteract destruction. Although mothers provide the sense of continuity particularly to the children, these women are not idealized; they have their problems" (Tanrisol 72). They are the key element in the survival of the community and its people and take the tasks that men do not seem capable to do. Therefore, it could be stated that some of Erdrich's characters break traditional roles played by other members of their sex and connect to the so called "two spirit" figure or "berdaches" in Chippewa mythology.<sup>86</sup> The fact that women are stronger than men is the first example of these transgendered roles. However, many male characters, such as Nanapush or Eli, also behave as women at certain points in their lives, taking care of children and behaving as their mothers. Similarly, many women adopt male roles and even male physical appearance, such as Celestine and Mary Adare. The two girls become increasingly masculine in appearance and habits and do it because they are forced to become independent and self-sufficient. That is, Erdrich creates characters who defy gender definitions and does it "to expose the illusions of the naturalness of binary gender representations in order to reveal their andocentric constructions" (Dara 64).

Other characters are also connected to nature and land, although not as strongly as Pauline and Fleur. Moses Pillager seems to be the only character in the *Love Medicine* and *Tracks* that ignores white people and their customs and their influence on Native Americans. He lives in accordance to the land and old traditions and remains isolated and untouched by consumerism and white education. Even for Lulu, Fleur's daughter,

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<sup>86</sup> The word "berdache" refers to people who take the roles culturally defined for the opposite sex and who cannot be identified as either male or female but as a gender on their own.

who feels attracted for him and even has a relationship with Moses, he looks like a man who still lives in the past. The gap between the two generations and the fact they had lived in very different worlds is reflected when Lulu says “He still wore everything backwards-old dungarees, a shirt made from a blanket. Even his moccasins tied at the heels” (*Love Medicine* 78). Although these things seemed insignificant, they actually called Lulu’s attention, demonstrating the differences existing between a girl educated in white customs, who went to school, and a boy who rose up wild, living alone and in accordance with Chippewa spirits and beliefs. Moses belongs to Pillager family and is closely connected to animals and more specifically to bears and cats. Lulu says he lived in a cave, as bears do, with the only company of his cats: “he went into the cave that was his house” (*Love Medicine* 78) and sometimes his behavior was cat-like: he was quiet, observed people without talking and even moved silently like cats do (*Love Medicine* 77-8).

Nanapush is also defined by earth. He continually fights to protect his lands in this novel because according to him “land is the only thing that lasts life to life” (*Tracks* 33). During the story, he continually complains about the pressure that white government set on Native Americans to sell their lands, and how it took advantage of the Indian’s illiteracy to take them by force:

I had already given Father Damien testimony on this Anishinabe land, which was nibbled at the edges and surrounded by farmers waiting for it to go underneath the gavel of the auctioneer...There were so few of us who even understood the writing on the papers. Some signed their land away with thumbs and crosses. (*Tracks* 99)

As the novel goes on readers learn how this question separated members of the same reservation and divided families. Nanapush tells Eli, for instance, the story of the confrontation between the Morrisseys and Lazarres and themselves. The former supported the idea of cash settlements for land while the Pillagers and Kashpaws remained opposed to it. This led to the Morrisseys and Lazarres attack against Old Nanapush and Margaret and the following revenge on the latter’s part. Nearly at the end of the novel, when Nanapush narrates the terrible winter famine by which they all almost die, the old man also tells how his land, together with the Kashpaw’s and Pillager’s were the only ones which had not succumbed to white pressures and had not paid the allotments they were asking for:



We watched as Damien unfolded and smoothed the map upon the table...we examined the lines and circles of the homesteads paid up-Morrissey, Pukwan, Hat, Lazarres everywhere. They were colored green. The lands that were gone out of the tribe- to deaths with no heirs, to sales, to the lumber company- were painted a pale and rotten pink. Those in question, a sharper yellow. At the center of a bright square was Matchimanito, a small blue triangle I could cover with my hand. (*Tracks* 173)

However, in order not to lose their lands, they all had to raise money to pay and this finally divided them too. Once they had enough money, Old Nanapush and Fleur discovered they had lost their lands because Nector Kashpaw only paid for his. At the end of the novel Nanapush explains to Lulu that because Fleur had no land, she decided to send her away and let her have a better life than the one she could offer her. The loss of her lands turned Fleur into a wanderer who could not look after a girl. Land becomes therefore the top element in the novel, and it is Nanapush who is the one in charge of connecting it to the story development, so that both the readers and Lulu feel able to understand it. She will understand why her mother abandoned her and readers will understand how white policy destroyed the reservation and its culture

Not only characters, but the novels themselves seem to be linked to natural elements. *Love Medicine* centers on water, with continuous references to this element resonating in the different stories, becoming a predominant metaphor in this novel. Various characters figure themselves as being born near water or drowning, so that through the metaphor of water the characters emerge as linked. Indeed it could be said that Erdrich sees water as suggesting “transformation...and a sort of transcendence” (Chavkin, *Conversations* 44). The continuity of water relates to the continuity and repetition of some images and stories through the different narratives as well. The meaning of water is related to tears, alcohol and sorrow, you may either cross the water or drown, fail or success in finding your sense of belonging to a community: “Water not only stands for the transformation of individual identities but symbolizes connections as many rivulets spring and return to one source; individual lives are all connected in the larger scheme of the community (Rosenthal 113). Nanapush and Pauline refer to Fleur’s connection to the lake monster and how she nearly drowns three times, for instance. This event is not only told in this novel, but it passes from generation to generation and becomes an old event which turns into a legend, as Gross states,

... the source of Fleur's magic quickly becomes evident; it is the water monster, Michibizhii. It has incredible strength, but can be extremely dangerous...Her family has had a long relationship with the waterman. ...She thus seeks out Michibizhii as part of her family's heritage. (52)

Nector, as it will be seen later, is also connected to this element, as he considers his life as being like a river in which he follows according to water rhythm. Besides, he falls into alcoholism and this is metaphorically connected to water too.

In *Tracks* we find continuous references to land, as the author's main purpose is to show the incursion of white people into Native American's lives and the loss of their lands and consequently their traditions. Here the characters fight to protect their lands, especially the Pillagers and Kashpaws, as they witness how the rest of Natives sell them. Nanapush, Eli, and Nector, to name only the male characters, are directly involved in the conflict.

In *The Beet Queen* imagery is centered on air and the characters are strongly connected to it. Karl and Marie Adare see how their mother flies away leaving them alone at the beginning of the novel, and Dot nearly does the same at the end. Male characters like Karl will try literally and metaphorically to fly as well on different occasions, contrasting in this sense with female characters, who are usually down to earth.

Finally, the main imagery in *The Bingo Palace* is that of fire, exemplified in the different matches that Xavier lights to show his love for Zelda or the pipe that Lipsha and Lyman want. They quarrel to get it as it will provide them with a sense of who he is and what family he belongs to (in Lipsha's case) and a sense of prestige and relevance (in Lyman's case).

In an interview held in 1986 Erdrich identified the imagery she used in each of her four novels:

Wong: I have heard that the imagery of your quartet of novels- *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks*, and *American Horse* is patterned after the four elements. What is the grand plan of you quartet?

Erdrich: We really think of each book as being tied to one of the four elements There's a lot of other imagery as well.

Dorris: Oh, sure. It's not neat. But *Beet Queen*, as you will see, is clearly air.

Wong: What about *Tracks*?

Erdrich: That's earth. (qtd. in Chavkin, *Conversations* 45)

In general, Catherine Rainwater defines Erdrich's novels as "interconnected tales of unforgettable characters" (271). She considers that to read her novels is to play an active role as reader "within an elaborately structured, historically allusive universe that is rich in layered meaning" (271). For her, the author ties people, geographical locations, refers to the importance of community for people, to the complexities of individual and cultural identity and "the exigencies of marginalization, dispossession, and cultural survival" (271).

In a very recent interview in *El Pais*, Louise Erdrich recognizes once more the relevance her Ojibwa heritage in her writing and in her life. She is currently working in her new novels while at the same time she is trying to do something to recover Ojibwa language, which is about to disappear. Although she accepts that it is English the language she employs while she is writing, she believes that when a language is extinguished a part of history also disappears and compares this to the use humans do of natural resources, which also disappear due to our interest to obtain energy. She does not want this to happen with her native language as she does not want to forget the stories that she has been told as a child and that so important became for her and her people.

### **2.3.5. Gerald Vizenor**

Gerald Vizenor is a widely recognized writer, literary critic, ethnographer and professor. He was born in Minneapolis (Minnesota) in 1934. His father was Anishabe and his mother Swedish American. His father was murdered in a homicide so he was raised by his mother and his paternal grandmother on the White Earth Reservation, Chippewa tribe. He attended college on the GI Bill but after that he served in the armed forces in Japan for three years. After that he also studied in New York University and post graduated at Harvard University and University of Minnesota. Among his different jobs

he directed the American Indian Employment and Guidance Center in Minneapolis, worked as a reporter for the Minneapolis Tribune, taught full-time at Lake Forest College and ran the Native American Studies program at Bemidji State University. He also became a professor at the University of Minnesota and was a visiting professor at Tianjin University, China. Later on he would be appointed teacher at the University of California, Berkeley and at the University of New Mexico.

Vizenor has published multiple works which include poetry collections such as *The Old Park Sleeper* (1961), *Empty Swings* (1967), *Matsushima: Pine Islands Collected Haiku* (1984), *Summer in the Spring: Anishinaabe Lyrics Poems and Stories* (1993), *Raising the Moon Vines* (1999), *Cranes Arise* (1999), *Bear Island: The War at Sugar Point* (2006) and *Almost Ashore: Selected Poems* (2006). Some of his novels include the science fiction novel *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (1990), *Griever: An American Monkey King in China* (1990), *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991), and *Hiroshima Bugi* (2003). His nonfiction works have also received awards, such as *Interior Landscapes: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors* (1990).

Vizenor's relationship to oral stories and storytelling comes from his childhood, as he belongs to Anishinaabe tribe, storytelling people. As Kimberly Blaeser explains in *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition* (1996), "Stories form the foundation of his being, words the foundation of his career. In the worst moments of his life, he has survived by the power of these" (3). She continues saying that before he ever conceived of his own power to create, Vizenor had experienced the liberating power of oral culture and the wonderful imaginative freedom inspired by storytelling. Blaeser quotes Vizenor's words regarding this: "The thing I remember mostly about stories-whoever was telling them: my grandmother, my uncles, the kids, even my mother- the thing that I remember most vividly is the idea of being set free" (3). Indeed, it seems that he considers storytelling as an intrinsic element related to the community, or as Kathryn Hume explains "Storytelling is probably the chief community-building enterprise that Vizenor describes. He seems to value it for the heartening effect it can have and its ability to persuade people not to feel victimized" (135). It is for him an activity that brings people in contact with each other and builds sympathy-interaction (135). He confessed that his ability to tell stories early on was a practice familiar in his family and that he went along with it, but what he appreciated was the quality of stories. He loved

the visionary sense of presence where memory “is a kind of hologram that you call upon and tell the story in different ways” (Knittel 23). He says that he saw his family calling upon the stories in at different times, depending on the circumstances, above all his grandmother and his great-uncle. The stories were always different and they had different emphasis, connected to some event or question at the moment, so “they obviously had these stories in memory as a kind of visual back and could call upon it in different contexts each time, and look and draw on it from different perspectives. To me, that became later a source of imagistic poetry scenes” (Knittel 23).

As the rest of Native American writers Vizenor also found it difficult to translate oral tales into written form without losing their essence and provided high importance to language and words. He explains in *Native American Literature*:

Native survivance is heard in creation and trickster stories, dream songs visions, and other presentations in thousands of native oral languages in North, Central, and South America. Some of these diverse oral narratives have been translated and published in various forms for untold reasons, as social science evidence. The problem, of course, is that written translation, even when the languages are similar, is not a representation of oral performances, and even the best translations are scriptural reductions of the rich oral nuances. (42)

In the interview he held with Janna Knittel (2014), he referred to this. Vizenor stated that the most honorable way to read Native American literature is imagistically, to understand that traditions change and to appreciate how a Native writer is experimenting with language and trying to draw in modes, from Native story into written word. For him, however, this is a difficult task because “you are moving from a very dynamic oral appreciation of stories and relationships into a structured language, so you can see how Imagism works her” (36). He has attempted to incorporate events and elements of oral tradition into his written work and according to Blaeser, “his goal, ultimately, is to destroy the closure of his own texts by making them perform as ‘word cinemas,’ turning them into dialogue, releasing them into the place of imagination” (15). For her, although Vizenor accepted the fact that the oral can never be fully expressed in the written and that Native culture cannot be translated, he also believes in the importance of the attempt and in the possibilities for vivifying the text. He has reexpressed and reimagined traditional stories, songs, ceremonies, and has invested the written form and his creative works with the qualities and the power of the oral (16). In

order to achieve that he has used different techniques, such as incorporating songs, legends and tales in his writings, or non linguistic sounds such as vocables in songs, the sound of the drum, the rattle, the sounds made in the voice of other beings, the sounds of spirit voices and so on (Blaeser 22). Blaeser somehow analyzes the elements of orality present in Vizenor's works and summarizes them. She refers to fixed grammar of themes such as the invented Indian, the new urban reservation and trickster liberation; a spectrum stock of characters that range from evil gambler to tribal entrepreneur and Naabozho; dialectic discourse such as question-and-answer scenes between a Vizenor persona and a representative of the social sciences or between historical figures and contemporary tricksters; riddles in the form of neologisms or English words written backwards; special kind of formulaic diction, repetitive phrases, epithets and characters who appear in different novels (31-32). She also mentions the fact that Vizenor strengthens his link with the oral by subscribing to the storytelling techniques and intentions of tribal predecessors, including for example, the technique of minimalism. "In the writings of Vizenor, as in traditional oral tales, audience participation is elicited through the method of telling, specifically through implication, absence, contradiction, and ambiguity, and by making use of allegory, metaphor, satire, shock, and humor" (33). Apart from this, in order to offset the inevitable losses in the transition from oral to written, he uses some stylistic techniques such as abrupt transitions, unusual juxtapositions, pronoun shifts, repetitions, self-conscious or metaliterary devices, understatement and lack of closure, according to Blaeser (33).

Apart from the relevance he provided to words, Vizenor also considered that Native Americans would only survive if they kept their traditions and culture alive, and if they detached themselves from *Indiannes*. He considers that the destiny of American Indians rests in tribal oral tradition and that they will survive or vanish through the merits of language: "survive through oral tradition, or be made to vanish through popular scientific, literary, and political rhetoric" (Blaeser 39). According to Blaeser, Vizenor has gone so far as to suggest that if the sign "Indian" does survive, it will be at the expense of Native people themselves (39). For Vizenor, tribal stories reflect their beliefs and encourage cultural survival and as Elvira Pulitano quotes, he used to say that "My pen was raised to terminal creeds" (146). According to Pulitano, this line has often been used as a symbol of his revolutionary project: "deconstructing the most destructive

stereotypes of Native Americans created by the Euroamerican imagination, those ‘terminal beliefs’ that have prevented and still prevent Native Americans from imaging themselves as contemporary, living human beings (146). That is, for Vizenor, oral tradition and language will help Native American people survive and help their culture end with the continuous stereotypes placed on them by Euro American people.

His concept of survivance can be used to define what contemporary Native American writers are doing now. The invented narrative of victimry and tragedy because of the dominance of more powerful cultures is what mainstream societies want Native Americans to believe in. Bringing Native cultural inheritance into life again is what contemporary native writers are doing to avoid this idea of victimry and this becomes a key to survivance. Native American identity cannot be considered a reminiscence of the past but it must continue despite the influence external forces exercise over it, and this is what Vizenor tries to tell in his works. Native identity must sustain regardless European influences. “More than this, ...European discourses, in the presence of Native cultures, acquire Native elements that remain as remanences even after Native communities have been removed to the margins of the dominant society” (Rostkowski xv). Survivance implies different aspects, such as turning stereotypes, fighting to reclaim tribal lands, to revitalize languages, to defend historic treaties, to protect sacred places, to support tribal sovereignty, to improve education and health systems, among other issues. It also includes the idea of transmotion, “whether between Western and tribal understanding of the nature of time, or the interchangeable transformations of the human into animal and animal into human, or the transformation of the nature of place through Native geographical movement” (Rostkowski xv). In general, Vizenor considers that Native American people have to get rid of the idea being the victims of white oppressors and fight for what they consider theirs, including language, customs, traditions or stories, without forgetting the modern world in which we live at present. This is what survivance means and this is what he puts into written word in his works too.

He also wants to finish with what he considers the “invented Indian” and the effects this has on the lives of contemporary Native Americans. Mainstream societies depict Native Americans as static and he expects them to get rid of the words white people put on them and which make them dependant on their solutions, although for him, the only

solution is to unwind the tribe from the white word, because tribal identities have become entangled in stereotypes — expectations” (Blaeser 43). If Native Americans remain clinging to these assigned roles, White Americans safeguard their position of power, preserve their status quo. That is why he calls “terminal creeds” to those characterized by a closed and limited view, by static ideas and denounces “manifest manners,” above all those that abound in places such as universities, the government and popular media.<sup>87</sup>

In *The Heirs of Columbus*, Vizenor tries to do this. He inverts history and turns Columbus into a descendant of Mayan and Sephardic Jews who returns to America, his native home. With this Vizenor shows that the Mayans were the first civilization in the world and that they civilized Europe, so that Columbus was their descendant and wished to return to his ancestral home. When he first landed in the Americas he had a love affair with a Native American healer who got pregnant. Their heirs are present-day Columbus’ descendants and are trying to bring Columbus’ and Pocahontas’ remains back to their land.

It is important to notice the fact that in the novel Vizenor, unlike many other Native American writers, deals with the topics of science and technology and relates them directly to Native topics and customs. This connects his work to Ecocriticism too. Some Ecocritics see science and technology as causes of ecological crisis, because they reduce nature to objects studied and manipulated by a detached observer, and because they amplify people’s ability to inflict damage on nature. This would be Welch’s or Momaday’s case. On the contrary, other Ecocritics see the connection of their work to scientific research “as the distinctive mark of literature-environment studies compared with other types of humanistic inquiry” (Buell et al. 42), and Vizenor thinks that as well. Vizenor blends indigenous oral traditions and worldviews with contemporary

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<sup>87</sup> As examples of these “manifest manners” he refers to Richard Von Horn, who in 1990 encouraged students at the University of Oklahoma to say hello to minority students on campus, or the Boy Scouts of America, “the wild simulations of tribal misnomers used for football teams, automobiles and other products, Western movies, and the heroic adventures in novels by James Fennimore Cooper, Frederick Manfred, Karl May and others” (Blaeser 56). In the nineteenth century he complains about writers such as Tomas Jefferson, Francis Parkman and George Bancroft and more contemporary scholars such as Charles Larson, Andrew Wiget and Lynn Andrews for their manifested manners too.



science, including field theory, genetics and holographics in the novel.<sup>88</sup> This is something uncommon, as most critical studies of Native American literatures tend to be limited to the fields of Native American or ethnic studies, and most critics position Native Americans and their texts against science, “reading their work in dichotomous terms that oppose indigenous and epistemologies of interconnection and wholeness to a Western linear, dualistic, and reductionist episteme of destruction and domination” (Arnold 530). For Arnold, much of the fiction and poetry written by Native Americans has engaged in the “important work of exposing, critiquing, and subverting the dominant culture’s deployment of scientific and technological violence against Native Americans and the natural world” (530). However, Vizenor, as well as other writers such as Silko, Linda Hogan and Carter Revard, creates works which engage “complementaries between the worldviews of indigenous oral traditions and the vision of reality emerging from the postmodern sciences of relativity theory, quantum mechanics and particle physics to suggest new ways of knowing the world that are informed by both Native and Western perspectives” (Arnold 530). This is quite relevant if we bear in mind the importance contemporary Native American writers have provided and still provide to keeping traditions alive but always taking into consideration the context that surrounds them and the changes they have to make in order to adapt their works to current circumstances. Vizenor proves in this work that maintenance of native traditions is not incompatible with developments in white society and adaptation to new circumstances that surround not only native tribes, but the world in general. And this is also shown in the characterization of protagonists in these authors’ works. That is, in the novel Vizenor combines science and technology with traditions and culture, reminding readers and critics that despite the pride of feeling Native, times evolve as well as science and traditions and we all have to adapt to these changes in order to survive too. This does not mean, however, that he forgets the importance of environment for Native American people and of keeping earth safe.

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88 The dialogue between science and storytelling is obvious in the representation of issues such as chemical contamination and radioactive fallout, according to Buell, Heise and Thornber. They refer to scientists and science writers who have mobilized narrative as a way of making the impact of environment toxins intelligible and to writers and filmmakers such as Don DeLillo or Christa Wolf, who integrate scientific facts, figures and documents into their stories, plays and films about environmental contamination and its consequences for humans and the natural world (423).

Without forgetting his origins, it could be considered that *The Heirs of Columbus* is also a trickster novel. As Arnold states, the novel has been interpreted as a trickster reversal of the Columbiad, a kind of rediscovery and reclaiming of the Americas from the European invaders. It is a novel that recreates Columbus as “an obscure crossblood” with Mayan and Jewish blood and a “trickster healer in the stories told by his tribal heirs” (3). Most the characters in the novel can be considered trickster figures too. Stone Columbus, leader of the heirs, bears in his name the markers of his mixed genetic and cultural heritage. He takes his name from Naanabozho, the trickster creator who has a brother who is a stone. According to the myth, the stone tricks his brother trickster into shattering him into thousands of pieces, which scatter in the four directions to populate the earth (Arnold 5). In the novel, the heirs remember that Naanabozho had a brother who was a stone, a bear stone, a human stone, a shaman stone, and a stone. Besides, the stone will become an important symbol in the novel, as Arnold explains. Stone says in the novel “The stone is my totem, my stories are stones, there are tribal stones, and the brother of the first trickster who created was a stone, a stone, a stone” (*The Heirs of Columbus* 9). The original Columbus had lost some parts of his body on the voyage and was saved by a bear shaman who put him back together with heated stones. At the Stone Tavern stones “listen at the mount,” “heal and remember the blue radiance of creation and resurrections,” “hold the beat of water drums” and “warm the emery of the stories in the blood” (Arnold 537). Assinika also means stones and Columbus signature is the secret of the stone. There is an insistent repetition of the word ‘stone’ through the novel and according to Arnold “it performs a kind of textual hologram that manifests the interconnectedness of all life forms on earth and echoes the organizing image of the narrative” (537-8). Therefore, Stone seems to be an important character within the novel, and not only for his attitude or actions but also because of the relevance of his name. However, although he is the leader, Stone does not only do what it is expected from him. Instead of trying to perpetuate Columbus’ colonialist interests, he tries to recover the history of the heirs and to create a tribal healing society. Although his father, as well as Columbus’ father was a weaver, he is also doctorate in Consciousness Studies in the University of California. That is, as it was stated before, Vizenor creates characters who demonstrate that native traditions and evolution are not incompatible forces. The same happens with other characters such as Almost Browne. His name shows ambiguity and mixedblood. He makes the reservation and the new nation feel

amazed because of the laser shows and new technologies. Felipa is also an example, as apart from fighting to recover Columbus' remains, she works as a model and as a lawyer. So they all seem to have adapted to the society that surrounds them without ignoring their traditions, customs and beliefs. Besides, unlike other characters in other contemporary novels, they are successful. They are turning the traditional victim-like characterization in native works. In his conversation with Knittel, he claims:

Anything which does not change is terminal. And traditionalists, unfortunately, have misinterpreted traditions as changeless and they aren't; the experience of tradition is that's it's constantly changing, re-storying, retelling, otherwise it's finished. What we think of as traditional must be impermanent. It has to keep changing, just as the weather does, You can estimate parts of it. You can tease parts of it, but it won't even be the same every time. (33)

Apart from the presence of trickster characters, the novel has also been considered a trickster novel because of stylistic reasons. The work offers different genres, such as history, fiction and mass culture. It values humor, imagination and language play and it provides importance to ambiguity and parody, too essential features of trickster characters. The structure of the novel is also divided into episodes and there is a ludic style and comic voice narrated in third person. The characters are somehow archetypal and they are interrelated, as well as plots. There is a double discourse and the history of Columbus' trip and life is only important when it is mixed with Native history.

Vizenor's novel *Griever: An American Monkey King in China* also promotes some Native American traditions and myths. Here the author bases on his own experience as a professor in China. The main character, Griever deHocus, is a mixedblood and reservation trickster who starts teaching in Tianjin. There he studies the numerous connections between Native American history and the process of neocolonialism that is currently occurring in China. The country is turning towards Western capitalism and leaving communism behind. After multiple adventures, Griever has a love affair with a young woman who turns to be the daughter of a government official. When she gets pregnant and is murdered, Griever raises his voice and weapons against the Chinese Communist Party and the oppressive policies they carry.

In the novel Vizenor likens the Native American trickster and the traditional Chinese trickster. Indeed, some critics consider they are very similar in their approach. One of them is Mark Shackleton, who deals with the trickster figure in both Henry Louis Gates' and Vizenor's works. He states that Gates provides an exclusive textual approach to trickster figures in his well-known study *The Signifying Monkey*. According to him, Gates traces Esu-Elegbara from Nigeria to his New World figurations, the same way as Exú in Brazil, Echu-Elegua in Cuba, Papa Legba in the pantheon of gods known as *loa* in Haitian voodoo, and Papa La Bas in the *loa* of Hoodoo in the United States. One of the conclusions Gates reaches, according to him, is that the myths of Esu and the accompanying Monkey stories are "concerned with the indeterminacy of interpretation" (189). Thus, for Gates "a key text in African-American literature is Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* in which the spirit of Esu-Elegbara is manifested through the central speaking character of the African- American trickster figure, Pa Pa La Bas" (189). Shackleton goes a bit further and states that both Gate's notion of the Signifying Monkey and Vizenor's "trickster discourse" foreground the importance of language - and interestingly "in some Native American traditions, the trickster is in fact the originator of language" (189). The trickster exists in language, and "in this self-engendered world the trickster operates according to his (or her) own rules, which are made to be broken and this way keeping signification evolving is vital" (189). Shackleton considers that the connection between Gates and Vizenor through their shared postmodern perspective on traditional oral trickster tales signifies an important link between contemporary Native American and Afro-American literary writing (189).

Apart from his novels, Gerald Vizenor is also very well-known because of the different genres he has dealt with, including poetry and screenplay. He began writing haiku in the early 1950s while he was serving in the army in Japan and sometimes he has compared the haiku to Chippewa dream songs too. He could master the combination of his Native American background with the haiku form, reflecting the reality of tribal experience. Indeed, generally speaking, Vizenor's work is full of references to his Native American origin and he feels quite proud of that. He wants to show the importance of maintaining traditions alive and show them to people so that everybody knows about Native American culture and people.



## **CHAPTER THREE**

## LESLIE MARMON SILKO

Through the stories we hear who we are.

Silko — *Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirits*

### 3.1. BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: SILKO AS A STORYTELLER.

Leslie Marmon Silko is one of the most accomplished and best known Native American contemporary writers. She was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1948. She has mixed origins, because her family is a mixture of Laguna Pueblo, Mexican and white ancestry. This would help her write about Laguna People from very different perspectives, although she lived out of the reservation she participated in some of the most important rituals in the tribe. However, this would also cause her lots of trouble, as she never felt she had been fully accepted by either full blooded Native Americans or white people.<sup>89</sup> Despite this, she knew and learnt about traditional stories, because she was born into a family environment already rich with story. Her family was prominent in Laguna's history of contact with Euro-American social, political, economic and educational forces. In general, she grew up in a house full of books and stories: Laguna stories, Euro-American books, and Laguna stories about Euro-American contact. In general a legacy that has influenced her life and work.

Apart from the education she received at home and from the people that surrounded her, Silko also studied at a Catholic Church and then at the University of New Mexico, where she received honors and her BA in English. She then enrolled in the American law program, but abandoned it to start a creative writing program. She married Richard Chapman in 1965 and they had a son. They divorced four years later and she married John Silko, whom she also divorced a few years later.

Her literary career started with the publication of the short story "The Man to Send Rain Clouds," which was awarded with the National Endowment for the Humanities and which is considered one of the most important works in the American Indian

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<sup>89</sup> She wrote "at the core of my writing is the attempt to identify what is to be a half-breed or mixed-blood person, what is to grow neither white nor fully traditional Indian ...I am a human being, one Laguna woman" (qtd. in Nelson, "A Laguna" 22).

Literary Renaissance. The best known of the stories within this collection is “Yellow Woman.” Then she published a book of poetry entitled *Laguna Woman*, in which she draws upon her tribe. However, it was the publication of her first novel *Ceremony* in 1977 that provided her with international recognition and also with critical acclaim and controversy. Indeed, she did not publish any other novel until 1981, when she wrote *Storyteller*, a collection of poems and short stories which were interconnected.<sup>90</sup> It would take her other ten years to publish *Almanac of the Dead*, an extensive novel which covered different aspects of Native American folklore, history and tales and which is also considered one of her most overtly political works. She has also written *Gardens in the Dunes*, which refers basically to women’s history, gardening and the question of slavery.<sup>91</sup> Her last work *The Turquoise Ledge: A Memoir* (2010) is an autobiography in which Silko shows her close relation to the natural and spiritual worlds. She deals with her pets, her pictures and weather rather than with human relationships and strengthens the important link between native people and nature.

Silko has been equally praised and criticized by other contemporary Native American authors and European and American literary critics. For instance, as TuSmith reminds, although *Ceremony* was written by Silko in her own voice, biographers and critics still question its authenticity on grounds of ethnicity, as Silko is only a half-blood Indian and an academic to boot, and in relation to authorship, referring to the question whether a person who writes down tribal stories is a real author (119). Similarly, other authors have openly criticized Silko because of her use of clan stories in her novels, without asking for permission and violating the conventions of Native literature. Robert A. Lee, for example considers that Silko is too eco-activist in her writings, and “one who meets a further and different contrariety of voices, tribal political but far from narrow and rarely without its own laughter” (22). However, being too eco-activist does not seem to be something strange in a Native American writer and this is probably one

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<sup>90</sup> For Silko *Storyteller* was an attempt to record an oral tradition that was in fear of disappearing “an entire history/an entire vision of the world” depended “upon memory/any retelling by subsequent generations” (*Storyteller* 6).

<sup>91</sup> *Gardens in the Dunes* was published in 1995 and it deals with the story of a young girl, Lizard, who is ripped from her tribe by white soldiers. She is moved to a government school where she was taught white ways and is finally rescued by a kind couple who teaches her to be a lady. However, her Native spirit will remain intact and ultimately she will be able to break the bridge that separates both cultures and teach her adoptive parents about it.



of her best features, since she seems also connected to the Ecofeminist movement, as the analysis of her works shows. Moreover, other critics like Robert Franklin Gish considered her work extremely relevant for American literature and said:

Leslie Silko is a decidedly major author whose books have come to mean much to many readers, and especially critical readers, ... Certainly among contemporary authors Silko enjoys much esteem- whether labeled as an American author, and American Indian author, an American Indian woman author, or a regional author, Silko's place is secure in the "tradition" of modern American Indian literature. (vii-viii)

Gish also emphasized the influence Silko had over his own work when he explains that Silko's "mixed forms about her family helped me through the writing of a literary biography of novelist Harvey Fergusson" (ix). He said that thanks to her, he was able to understand the power of story and above all he could mystically return to New Mexico, where Silko had placed some of her most important characters such as Tayo or Ts'eh (x).

Regardless the critical voices, it is unquestionable that Silko has a close relation to the oral tradition, stories and culture in general of her native tribe. She has a strong bond to her Native American origins and populated her novels with references to these elements as well as to nature. As a child she became familiar with the culture and folklore of Laguna people and learnt about most of their myths and stories from her paternal great grandmother, Marie Anaya Marmon (to whom she refers as Grandma A'mooh) and her great-aunt Susan Reyes Marmon (Aunt Susie), who would become strongly relevant in her career and above all in her novels. They had a tremendous effect on her and Silko told about it a conversation held with Ellen Arnold:

My sense of that, the hearing and the giving, especially with *Almanac*, was that there was a real purpose for that. I had to take seriously what I was told. There was some kind of responsibility to make sure it wasn't just put away or put aside. It was supposed to be active in my life. (16)

The two women helped raise Silko and told her about Laguna history and culture so that she learnt what a storyteller was and what storytelling meant in their lives, proving this way the importance of Native American women in the transmission of oral culture to other generations. She described them in very kind ways in her essay "Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirits." Here she explains she called her Grandma "A'mooh" because this is the word she told Silko every time they met. She says her

Grandma was the person who told her about the old days, about family stories related to relatives who had been killed by Apache riders, and

Best of all they told me the hummah-hah stories, about an earlier time when animals and humans shared a common language. In the old days, the Pueblo people had educated their children in this manner; adults took time out to talk to and teach young people. Everyone was a teacher, and every activity had the potential to teach the child. (61-3)

She also mentioned the importance of storytelling in her life in a conversation with Laura Coltelli, where she says that storytelling was an amazing experience as she was a child. While she was listening to old people telling all those stories, she was transported in time, like the storytellers, and could watch and see them put themselves in the center of story itself (*Winged* 137). For Silko, the stories she heard as a child had an extreme relevance for her future and for the future of her reservation too. These stories are also useful if you want to explain not only past events, but also present and future ones. Indeed, Silko also stresses the importance that learning stories had for the reservation. She believed that everybody was expected to carefully listen to the stories and recall them afterwards. In this form “the remembering and retelling were a communal process. Even if a key figure, an elder who knew much more than others, were to die unexpectedly, the system would remain intact (*Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirits* 31).

She defined storytelling in a very clear way in her essay. She does not believe storytelling is just something that parents tell their children when they go to bed. Her understanding of storytelling is deeper than that and that she connects to experience and to the comprehension of the “original view of Creation-that we are all part of a whole.” (*Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirits* 50). She is categorically insistent, “Basically, the origin story constructs our identity-with this story, we know who we are” (*Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirits* 50). For Silko, storytelling is one of the most important parts of Native American mythology, basically because, as quoted above from “Yellow Woman,” it helps construct the identity of the tribe and consequently of the members of the tribe as well: “The stories are always bringing us together, keeping this whole together, keeping this family together, keeping this clan together” (*Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirits* 52).

This idea of communal identity and authorship is very important for all Native American authors and one of the main problems that they had to face while dealing with the exigencies imposed by white critics. The general attitude of Native American authors toward the concept of authorship is very different from that of European and American authors, and Silko is an example of these differences. As TuSmith explains the word author comes from the Latin *augere*, which means “to originate, create” and “to augment, increase” (120). She refers to Arnold Krupat who considers that while Native Americans have retained the idea of augmentation in their definition of authorship, “the rise of individualism in European American culture has caused this meaning to disappear from usage in white society” (120). This means, that whether the author is viewed as an originator or as an augments explains a lot about the culture’s value, and that while Eurocentric American society removes the author from their cultural background, Native American people view the individual as inseparable from the community and this is clearly exemplified when the audience listens to the story (120). Indeed, in Native American literary works, the topic of “coming home” is essential, and those characters who are not related to the community seem to be completely lost, as being close to the relatives and community represents success by the Indian standards. All this is reflected, according to TuSmith, in the attitude towards telling the story because “the sharing of stories is, above all, a communal act: among other things it helps to alleviate suffering by guarding against individual isolation” (121). Silko also believes that because, from the variety of Laguna People culture, she has learned to respect stories “as an integral and necessary part of life”, her faith in the power of stories, to heal and bind in a collective sense offers an alternative to Tocqueville’s judgment of Americans as isolated individuals” (TuSmith 121-22). She does not understand the concept of individual author who is completely unconnected to the community to whom he or she belongs. In general “sovereignty, community, and the vitality and power of a tradition that is constantly evolving are fundamental categories for the Laguna author” (Weaver 133). Besides, she sees her writing as an act of subversion and deals with topics such as “injustice, land expropriation, racism and discrimination in subtle and often humorous ways in order to gain a hearing among the dominant culture while still addressing a Native audience” (Weaver 133). However, this will be also contradicted in some of her works, such as “Yellow Woman,” in which the

main protagonist will look for this individualism that Native American people reject that much.

Although Silko places emphasis on the importance of keeping tradition and culture, she still understands that traditions are not static and that they change to adapt to the new times and époque. She believes that if a story has relevance for the people, they will remember it and will retell it, but “If it does not feed the People or ceases to have that relevance ... it will disappear or die” (Weaver 135). In *Storyteller*, for instance, the moments when her aunts told her stories but always with changes in details and descriptions because “such change was part of the story. In the process, new stories were created” (Weaver 135). She considers that the current lives of the people become part of the story and “though the past determines the present and though past wrongs must be redressed, one must not get stuck in it” (Weaver 136). Indeed, as it will be seen, Silko’s main purpose is that stories must be traditional but also innovative and adapt to a powerful function in today’s world. This is what she wants to achieve with her works.

It is also important to keep in mind that Silko’s stories extol female agency. She deals with female goddesses, considers Mother Earth as the protector and creator of human beings, and believes in the power of women to restore one’s identity and relation to one’s people. She also claims that economic, ecological and socio-economic disasters such as the Dust Bowl or the Great Depression were due to the western idea of progress. She values Pueblo lore as tutorials of “nature stewardship — guides to the well-being of individuals, communities and the earth” (Snodgrass 105).<sup>92</sup> The author mourns the destruction of nature due to the atomic blast in New Mexico’s disaster and considers that the sacrilege by white loggers, miners and physicists generated a growing identification in women’s writings with the earth itself, an increasingly intimate engagement with the natural world called “Ecofeminism” (qtd. in Snodgrass 105). Because of her leadership in an evolving field, Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic “salute

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<sup>92</sup> Dust Bowl was the name given to the Great Plains regions, which were devastated in the 1930s due to the drought period from 1934 to 1937. Then there was little rainfall, light soil and high winds, a combination that resulted destructive. It was possibly caused by the exploitation of the land by ranchers and farmers who moved deep-rooted grasses that kept the land wet even during drought periods, and also because of their willingness to use machinery that was not suitable for that land and which set up the region for ecological disaster.

Silko's canon as the vanguard of environmental thought" (qtd. in Snodgrass 105), and this is clearly presented in her novels.

Like for most contemporary Native American writers, the process of including traditional oral stories and culture within written works was not an easy task for Silko, and in order to understand how she achieved it, it is necessary to study some of her novels in depth. The following subheadings will focus on "Yellow Woman," *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead*, attending to storytelling from different points of view: the study of language, style, protagonists and that of the legends, oral stories and myths that are present in the three works, mainly focusing on politics and Ecofeminism and how the western patriarchal capitalist and colonialist society dehumanizes women, natives, animals and the environment, whilst also exploring the deep confrontation between the Anglo-Saxon and the Native American cultures and how it affects the search for the self and women's identity, politics and nature.

### 3.2. “YELLOW WOMAN” AND SELF-DISCOVERY.

Silko has often referred to mythological figures in her works, especially females, as a way to fill her novels with the cultural heritage she grew up with. She was raised in an egalitarian tribe that did not distinguish between male and female work but where the “most able person did the work” (*Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirits* 66). In this tribe they did not value women for their clothes or physical appearance, children belonged to the mother’s clan and women owned and bequeathed the house and farmland (*Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirits* 68). They also reinforced the idea of a female creative principle and filled religious and traditional tales with figures of female deities as Thought Woman, Spider Woman and Corn Mother, among others. However, it looks like the female figure of Kochininako (Yellow Woman) is her favorite, because she “is both heroic and sexual, that is, she protects the pueblos with her heroism and also with her uninhibited sexuality, which affirms the life force of nature” (Nelson, “A Laguna” 19).

In *Storyteller*, Silko includes seven Yellow Woman stories from different perspectives and styles, some more traditional than others, but they are all about the same sort of adventures: a young woman who behaves as a traditional housewife and mother wanders beyond the pueblo area and has a sexual encounter with a man, who seems to be a spirit-man or a ka’tsina from the mountains. Sometimes she is kidnapped, other times she returns to the tribal house, other times she is killed by the ka’tsina or by her husband; sometimes she brings back buffalo meat or provides the tribe with cultural and spiritual understanding and other times she has babies or just simply goes on with her life, and tells her story becoming part of storytelling tradition. That is, they are stories of meeting powerful spirits and getting power from them, abduction, births and of outrageous and incorrect behaviors that are accepted because they involve benefits for the tribe.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> The Kat’sina spirit is usually described in Pueblo stories as a beneficent spirit associated with water and rain and who abducts a woman, Yellow Woman, endowing her with special powers. The Kochinnenako or Yellow Woman receives this name from Keres tradition because Keres women usually paint their faces in yellow on ceremonies and also when they die, so that the spirit that waits for them at the entrance of the spirit world, Mother Corn Woman knows that she is a woman

In “Yellow Woman” Silko seems to link the limits between this myth and reality, modern and traditional cultures and stories and fantasies, dealing with some important topics such as storytelling, nature and sex.

### **3.2.1. “Yellow Woman” and storytelling.**

Melody Graulich stated that “Yellow Woman” is a Chinese box: story within story within story” (4). This is, indeed, one of the features that distinguish the story. In “Yellow Woman” Silko makes use of one of the best known Native American oral stories and adapts it to modern times by turning its characters into contemporary people who make traditional Kat’sina and Yellow woman mythological characters their own. In this vein, she is creating a story within a story, because there are two parallel ones, the real story of a woman, housewife and mother who meets a man by the river side and decides to run away with him after having a sexual affair with him, and the mythological story of Yellow Woman that Laguna people repeat over and over again. The problem arises when the identification of the two characters as the mythological ones is not as clear as it seems and the unnamed narrator cannot make clear what is real and what is not.

When she wakes up the first day and asks Silva his name, he calls her Yellow Woman for the first time. At this moment she starts to wonder whether this may be possible and her concept of reality starts to be linked with that of mythology. She has a complex understanding of Yellow Woman stories because she grew up listening to her grandpa telling them. Now she needs to determine if her own adventure could fit within these stories. At first she tells him: “But I only said you were him and that I was Yellow Woman — I’m not really her — I have my own name and I come from the other side of the mesa. Your name is Silva and you are a stranger I met by the river yesterday afternoon” (“Yellow Woman” 368), asserting their real identities. However, as narration moves and she insists that Yellow Woman story has no connection to the life she has in the twentieth century, she starts to doubt about the reality of her connection with the mythological woman. This happens as they move from the river bank towards his place and she gets away from the pueblo. She starts to think whether Yellow Woman had

another name that her husband and relatives knew and whether only the Ka'tsina and storytellers used to call her Yellow Woman, as Silva is doing now with her. She also starts to need the presence of another person to make sure that she is not indeed Yellow Woman and that "he is only a man — some man from nearby" ("Yellow Woman" 369), and finally she wonders whether everything is a trick invented by Silva in order to seduce women: "do you always use the same tricks? ... Which tricks? ... The story about being a ka'tsina from the mountains. I don't believe it. Those stories couldn't happen now" ("Yellow Woman" 369). As A. LaVonne Ruoff states "the farther away she goes from home and family, the more powerless she is to prove to herself that she is not Yellow Woman" (76). As the narration continues she makes sure that she has to tell her story and her narrative will become part of a larger one in the community. She is now part of the new and the old world and includes herself within the web of oral stories that storytellers frequently tell to their audience. She has heard many stories about Yellow Woman and now she is shaping them to make her own: "she becomes a storyteller, passing on the stories in her own voice. As the stories have shaped her, so will she shape them; they must evolve to respond to her particular experience and point of view" (Graulich 4). That is, Silko is adapting the old stories to the new times and explains them to justify the narrator's temporary escape from routine, something many other women may also do in their lives. Indeed, this has also been a recurrent topic in literature. From *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to *Madame Bovary*, many writers have focused on love affairs between married women and their lovers.<sup>94</sup> However, this dualism between reality and mythology, between old and a new world is not contradictory in pueblo oral tradition, as there are many cases of conflicting versions of stories that coexist harmoniously. Indeed this is one of the features that characterize Native American storytelling, as one story may be told by different people and in different manners and it still has the same value.

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<sup>94</sup> It could be said that there are many similarities between *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and Yellow Woman. In the novel by Lawrence, Connie Raid (Lady Chatterley) feels isolated and bored, confined in a house with a man who is in a wheelchair and cannot satisfy her desires. She longs for human contact and starts an adulterous relationship with the game keeper who works for her husband (Oliver Mellors). Like Yellow Woman, she encounters her lover by chance, this time not by the river, but in the forest and later in the woods, and they have sex, getting to orgasm together. Ultimately she gets pregnant, and as her husband and Mellor's wife refuse to give them divorce, they separate and live in different places. However, the novel, like Yellow Woman, finishes with hope, as both may get together one day again.



The unnamed narrator presents a complex respect for oral stories and although she wants to adapt her own story to the traditional ones, she also understands that she will become a storyteller once she goes back home and tells her family what happened. Her grandfather would have immediately recognized her story as that of the Yellow Woman: “But if old Grandpa weren’t dead he would tell me what happened — he would laugh and say ‘stolen by a ka’tsina, a mountain spirit. She’ll come back — they usually do” (371). However, he is dead and because her family is no longer connected to the past and to those oral stories, she does not know what to tell them and decides to turn her story into a more “common” one, that of being kidnapped by a Navajo. Thus Ruoff states,

The grandfather’s belief in the tales in which the lives of the Pueblos people live inextricably intertwined with their gods has been transmitted to his granddaughter, who utilizes them as an explanation for her temporary escape from routine. Her conviction that her own experiences will serve the pueblo as a new topic for storytelling, and that she herself will have to become a storyteller to explain away her absence indicates that the process will continue. (79)

Another version could also be given. She has an adventure but goes back home to a life which is comfortable but boring and that could get on without her. Instead of the Yellow Woman myth, she substitutes the story for that of the Navajo kidnapping, and this “false story deprives her of volition and transforms the experience of her time with Silva into an unlooked for ordeal” (Taylor 23). Maybe the story of Yellow Woman is just a way to provide her adventure with mythic character and this way give it a greater meaning, not only to the story, but also to her life. The two stories are too different, “while the story she tells the reader seems much ‘truer’ to her interior experience, the projected story may be what really happened, for the narrator has often wondered if Silva might be a Navajo” (Graulich 18). Because Silko leaves the story open, the reader may in fact wonder which story is the real one, or if any at all are real, and once again it suggests that different stories may have different interpretations.

It is important to notice here that when the narrator returns home, and as she expected, her relatives had continued their lives without altering their daily routines for her absence. This may also make the reader think the story she has told may be completely unreal, and open to other possibilities too. The fact that the narrator remains nameless, while the rest of male protagonists do have a name (Silva and Al) may

suggest that both men are the same person. Maybe they are a version of Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, although in this case, they could also be impersonated by the narrator too, as she may be the one who looks for comfort and stability provided by her husband, and adventure and mystery, provided by Silva. Similarly, her husband may be the one who has double identity, behaving as Dr. Jekyll when he is Al, or Mr. Hyde when he is Silva. However, the fact that she remains nameless could lead to other interpretations too. There are other examples of nameless narrators in other ethnic minority literatures. For instance, in ...*And the Earth Did not Devour Him* and *The Invisible Man* the narrators also lacks a name. In these cases, the authors wanted readers to understand that their protagonists could be anyone because all Chicano farmers or Afro-American slaves seem to be the same for mainstream society. In Silko's story, she tells her own story but never tells her name, while she does tell the name of male protagonists. The question is whether Silko wanted to show that she could be any woman too. If any Native American woman could reach the same feelings she did, because they all should be free to try and live the experience. So that the fact she comes back home and continues with her life does not alter who she is.

From a more technical point of view, Silko makes an extraordinary use of the first person narrator who becomes storyteller. Her style is clear, unsophisticated and straightforward, as that of oral storytellers. She shows sensitivity towards the natural elements that surround her and describes them in a simple manner, with a direct prose as when she describes birds — “The small brown water birds came to the river and hopped across the mud, leaving brown scratches in the alkali-white crust” (“Yellow Woman” 367) — or when she describes the elements surrounding her — “I was standing in the sky with nothing around me but the wind that came down from the blue mountain behind me” (“Yellow Woman” 370), — to give just a few examples. This is one of the qualities Isabel Allende appreciates on storytellers; they must make incredible things credible and make the listener feel they are living the same experiences that the protagonists of the stories live and this is easier with a simpler style.

Besides, Silko gets with one of the features of oral storytelling; the use of non-linear time sequence. The story begins in *media res*, not when the protagonists meet for the first time but after they had spent their first night together. She uses narrative past when describing her feelings and actions but also direct speech when reporting her

conversation with Silva, creating a feeling of nearness, as if the reader were the spectator of these conversations, that is, Silko recreates the same atmosphere created in a storytelling session, when the listener is hearing the storyteller's words about a past story but sitting in front of him or her and witnessing all his or her gestures. Nevertheless, the narrator seems to present a kind of confusion about time, and about her own situation within the story, making the reader wonder about the authenticity of her narration. "I tried to remember the night but all I could see was the moon in the water" ("Yellow Woman" 368) or "When I woke up in the morning he was gone. It gave me a strange feeling because for a long time I sat there on the blankets and looked around the little house for some objects of him — some proof that he had been there or maybe that he was coming back" ("Yellow Woman" 371), are some examples.

The narrator's description of space is also quite significant. She makes continuous references to directions to guide the reader through her journey too. "I was hungry and followed the river south in the way we had come the afternoon before" ("Yellow Woman" 367), "It was an easy ride north on horseback" ("Yellow Woman" 369), indicate that she is conscious of the place she was and the place they were going to. It also shows circularity as the journey goes from South to East, to North, to West and then to South again, probably showing that no matter how far she goes from home, she will return. Indeed, the idea of "coming home" is a much exploited one in Native literature and also by Silko, who will also use it in *Ceremony*. Besides, these continuous references to space are also linked to colors. In Pueblo culture, cardinal points are related to colors: yellow for the north, blue for the west, red for the south and white for the east, and black for zenith. For Pueblo people, the individual and their pueblo are at the center of the universe and orienting yourself to this direction is essential because it makes you get close to the sun and Silko uses colors to orientate the characters too. When the characters are still in the lowlands, there are references to white, brown and green. They sleep looking at the south because the colors are related to red and as they move farther from the pueblo, colors turn into blue, indicating they are moving to the west. When they move to the north, colors and flowers acquire yellow tones. But her journey is circular because she returns home, and circularity is also a feature that distinguishes Native American storytelling.

Therefore, because of the intimate relationship between the narrator and Yellow Woman story, because her fusion with the mythological character, because she turns into a storyteller of her own story and believes to be part of the traditional one, because of the use of the first person narrator and because the style Silko uses tries to adapt oral forms into written ones, because of all this, it can be stated that storytelling and “Yellow Woman” are intrinsically related.

### **3.2.2. “Yellow Woman” and Nature.**

Probably, one of the features that best distinguishes “Yellow Woman” story is the close connection Silko makes between the narrator and nature, and the Ecofeminist perspective that can be read from this.

In her story “Yellow Woman” is not a simple housewife who has an adventure with an unknown man. She can be defined as a woman who looks for oneness and this oneness is not only a personal one, she looks for the union of humans and nature. This connection to nature includes spirits, animals and land and this is clearly exemplified in the story through imagery and characterization. Ecofeminists consider that women and nature are closely related and that both are exploited by patriarchal societies. This is somehow reflected in this story too, as it will be seen afterwards.

According to Elizabeth Hoffman Nelson and Malcolm A. Nelson, the Yellow Woman is familiar with the traditional Yellow Woman stories and this familiarity adds to the confusion and ambiguity she feels when she realizes she is becoming part of these stories. She is searching for identity and sexual freedom and with that she comes to a growing awareness of the land around her, and her place in it, and a “further understanding of the importance of stories (124). The realization about the land they refer to is what links the protagonist with nature and stories too and connects the work to Ecofeminism.

Yellow Woman is usually associated with the image of a river that snakes its way along the southeastern corner of old Laguna (Nelson 248). In the story, there is a large use of imagery related to water. Yellow Woman meets Silva by the river and their first

sexual encounter also takes place by the river bank. Indeed, as Melody Graulich states in the introduction to *Yellow Woman*, water imagery is central to all of Silko's work and she portrays the river as a special place where anything could happen and where young people experiment with behavior on the fringes of acceptability (3). Water and rain are also connected and Silko prays lakes and rain because of her Grandmother A'mooh's membership in the water clan.

The narrator in the story uses naturalistic images to show her opening to herself. She comments on the moon reflected on the river, representing sexual desire, the images of flowers she refers to evoke the female body and when she first made love with Silva before dawn, she opened to a yellow light, a new awareness. In the cactus flowers she can see all the colors of human races "suggesting the universality of the Yellow Woman stories," (Graulich 15) and "by coming to understand and accept her desires through her connection to Yellow Woman, and acting upon them, the narrator becomes the yellow blossom, an image of awakening" (Graulich 15). Indeed, she narrates her actions and behavior as if they were inevitable, like the blossom of a flower, "I did not decide to go. I just went. Moonflowers blossom in the sand hills before dawn, just as I followed him" ("Yellow Woman" 371). It is important to notice here the continuous references she makes to flowers, as in Native American culture flowers are usually related to the sun and the sun is the creator of human beings together with Mother Earth. Besides, the cactus' flowers symbolize warmth, protection and endurance, the elements the unnamed narrator relates to Silva, but they are also a symbol of maternal love for Native American people, because of their medicinal properties. The narrator is looking for love, indicating with this similarity that maybe her real life lacks it, as she can see flowers alongside the trail she is following with Silva. She is also strongly related to color yellow, the moon in the water, the deep yellow petals, the yellow blossom of cactus flower, her own beauty connected to yellow, all show her close connection to the mythological character.

On the contrary, Silva is related to darkness, he rides a black horse, lives in the Blue Mountains and is connected to the Mountain Spirit. When they ascend to the mountains, they are surrounded by black color: "dark lava hills," the house made of "black lava rock and red mud," "black horse," "black rim rock," "black mountain dirt," "black ants." Indeed, he is a criminal, a cattle thief and possibly a murderer, and black color is

usually related to this sort of people. It could be then that the unnamed narrator does not return home because she wanted, but because she understood that he was not the right person to be with. He could even be compared to other mythological figures such as Hermes, also considered a trickster. Hermes presents trickster features because he is marginal, erotic, creative and related to thievery. Hermes steals the cattle from Apollo, as Silva steals Navajo cattle and also retrieves Demeter's daughter from the underworld so that mother and daughter could be together. He steals to heal and although Silva does not seem to have such noble purposes while stealing, ultimately his actions also heal, as the narrator decides to go back home and although maybe just for a while, we will never know, she felt like the powerful mythological woman that she has always admired.

Apart from plants, nature also includes animals and humans may be also connected to them in the story. Silva is a hunter, like Yellow Woman's companion, and the physical description the narrator makes of him sometimes associates him to the horse, buffalo and coyote. In some of the versions of Yellow Woman stories, the kidnapper may have been a buffalo or a wolf, and the woman's husband goes to look for her and kills the buffalo, explaining why Pueblo people hunt buffalos and eat their meat. For Native people the buffalo symbolizes the sacred, life, great strength and abundance. Here Silva may be connected to this animal as a ka'tsina he says to be.

In the story the narrator remembers stories about Yellow Woman and she mentions the figures of Coyote and Badger, to whom she relates Silva. Coyote wanted to sleep with the woman and sent Badger to look for something. In the passage, Silva also wants to sleep with her and immediately after that thought she wonders if Yellow Woman might have had another name, so she instinctively relates Coyote and Silva, Yellow Woman and to herself. Moreover, Coyote is the Trickster god in Native mythology, and when the narrator identifies Silva with Coyote, she is identifying him with the trickster too. Indeed, in the different versions of this character, Coyote may appear as a handsome man, whose qualities may be traveling, changing the ways of rivers or standing in mountains. All these seem to be characteristics easily applicable to Silva. What is more, the male coyote is sometimes considered the antithesis of the ideal Pueblo character and Silva does not seem to be accepted among them, maybe because he is a Navajo but also because of what he can represent as his animal counterpart. To the Pueblos, "Navajos embody aspects of the wilderness, freedom, the sense of

wandering and wilderness. ...Silva is the wilderness: beautiful, nonpredictable, the perfect metaphor of the spirit in the real world” (Dunn 199), probably what the narrator longs for.

Nature is also presented in the story as the opposite of the pueblo. For the narrator, the world of the pueblo where she lives with her family suggests a comfortable but limited world, where she has a good but boring life. The world of nature and mountains, like Silva, represents wilderness and freedom and also timelessness and mythic knowledge. This may exist also in other civilizations, and it sounds similar to Puritanism. For them, the forest and nature were the places where evil spirits lived and where immoral behavior could take place. The city meant the established norms, the acceptable behavior and it was the place where people lived under rigid moral values. In “Yellow Woman,” the unnamed narrator finds herself between two worlds: comfort and freedom. In one of the most important American novels, *The Scarlet Letter*, the protagonist Hester Prynne, may find herself in the same situation. Indeed, there are many similarities between them. It is in the forest/nature where Hester, like the narrator in “Yellow Woman,” feels free to meet her lover, where she does not seem to have the pressure of being under the stigma of adultery and where her daughter Pearl also feels free. The city embodies morality, Puritanism and control. For people in the town, the forest can turn people into evil and they are continuously looking for the “Black Man,” the personification of evil, as the Native Americans look for spirits. Moreover, in American literature, few characters seem to have found an awakening similar to that of Yellow Woman and Hester. Both characters ultimately discover their oneness through their communion with nature and feel free to decide what to do at the end of their stories: Hester decides to return to the city as a free woman, and the narrator decides to go back home and become a storyteller who forms part of traditional oral stories. Indeed, like a Yellow Woman, she may consider that she has no options but return because if she personalizes the mythic character, she may have become a gift for her tribe, as Yellow Woman was.

This also sounds familiar to Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston also creates a character who finds oneness and who decides to become natural and return to the city where she first discovered her independence, regardless the others’ opinions or commentaries. Similarly, Ultima helps Antonio to reach his spiritual awakening in *Bless*

*Me Ultima*. Without her help he would not have discovered oneness in the natural world and would have lived quite differently.

### **3.2.3. “Yellow Woman” and Sex.**

“Yellow Woman” and sexuality are intrinsically related. We may not forget that the story is that of an infidelity, a sexual awakening of a woman with someone who apparently not her husband. This would be the Western summary of the story. However, beyond this elemental appreciation, there is something more that is related to Native American culture in relation to sexuality and women. The Yellow Woman stories are used as a way to explain the reproductive forces Pueblo women and for them sexuality and storytelling are the basis of cultural continuance.

For Silko, sex is not always a marital act, but it may happen in different contexts, and she feels free to refer to this. For a long time, Navajo people went to Laguna Pueblo looking for food and animals and sometimes they captured women and sold them as slaves. This is why women were warned not to go alone beyond the limits of the reservation and this is probably one of the reasons why the narrator insists that Silva must be a Navajo. In their myths, they included the stories of Yellow Woman and how she was abducted by a ka'tsina spirit who took them as wives, but who also obliged them to take difficult tasks. They sometimes returned to town with children and this was accepted by the members of the tribe because it meant the continuation of their tribe. Besides, through the Yellow Woman stories, pueblo people learnt about female sexual activity and with this story, Silko is transmitting it to the readers too. When the narrator says that her grandfather would have immediately recognized her story as that of Yellow Woman and that he liked to tell about the Coyote and Badger story, Silko is acknowledging the importance of these stories as an explanation of sexuality too. Silko herself always fantasized about meeting a man by the river, as Yellow woman had and with this story, the narrator seems to be expressing her desire, an essential part of life. As Graulich explains,



From Yellow Woman the narrator receives encouragement to look more deeply into herself, to explore desires beyond the confines of Pueblo boundaries, and of everyday life. As the teller of "Yellow Woman," Silko receives courage to transgress propriety and write explicit sexual scenes." (19)

What is more, most of her positive women characters are versions of Yellow Woman, who is courageous in helping her people and achieves success through sexuality rather than destruction. She is able to protect her community as a man would do, and becomes a heroine, although instead of violence she may use her female nature. She does not stop being a woman and because of her sexuality she brings good to the tribe. This is a version that non Native American people do not seem to understand because it belongs to Native traditions and their view of nature, women and stories but other ethnic minorities do as shown in Kingstons' *Woman Warrior*. Although Fa Mu Lan takes the role of a male warrior, she is also a female avenger. She is still a woman who gives birth and who has not lost the ability to take life, something exclusive of women. She maintains her womanhood while at the same time she is the best warrior. She continues with her duties as a wife and mother but she also fights against enemies. When she is a warrior she ties her hair up and when she is a wife she lets it down. She keeps her baby under her armor while she fights and she still loves and kills simultaneously. Her sexuality and gender are not divorced from violence and bravery.

If there is a character who may be compared to Yellow Woman is probably Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. She is quite similar to the unnamed protagonist in Silko's story. In a North American society that was not ready for such a type of novel, Chopin dealt with the story of a woman who decides to leave her husband and children behind in order to find oneness and become free from the restrictions imposed by a conventional society which bores her. Her sexual and spiritual awakening is opposed to the traditional role played by Victorian women. She is aware of her prudish behavior and starts a process of self discovery that will be the main part of the plot. When she meets Robert Lebrun this process accelerates and she starts to become aware of her independence and sexuality and realizes that love can also be liberating. This is also related to her increasing interest in arts and her decreasing interest in her family and husband, learning that she can find her identity independent from them. She learns to swim and water starts to symbolize this freedom she longs for. This is similar to Silko's conception of water and river as the place where anything may happen and

anything is accepted. That is, at first Edna lived in a semi-conscious state, comfortable with her marriage and unaware of her feelings. As a child, however, she dreamed of marrying a cavalry officer and then she considers marriage as a social responsibility. As Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, her romantic view of marriage (related to the blossoming of a pear tree) is broken by reality, but they never stop dreaming of finding it. Edna finds this in Robert and Janie in Joe, although only initially, as she is silenced again until she meets Tea Cake. Silko's Yellow Woman has a romantic ideal of love too, as it must not be forgotten that she idealizes being a mythological woman who is abducted by a handsome man who turns her into his wife and lover, although she already has a husband that she seems to have forgotten. In *The Awakening*, as in "Yellow Woman" there are continuous references to sexuality, desire and physical urgency for sex for which North American society is not ready. For the nameless narrator in Silko's story, Silva represents wilderness and freedom. The same goes Robert and Alcée for Edna. She finds sexual independence with them and although Edna feels emotionally attached to Robert, she keeps control in her affair with Alcée, expressing her wish for independence and freedom that other Victorian women lack, something Chopin wants reader to understand.<sup>95</sup> Similarly, Hurston's Janie and Silko's narrator seem to represent the same. They all want to show women's need to be and feel free from their husbands and their monotonous lives and societies that only consider them wives and mothers. Besides, both Edna and Silko's Yellow Woman reject this by not thinking about their children and husbands, as none of them seem to be really worried about their lives without them. Although other female characters that do the same as Emma Bovary or Anna Karenina are ultimately punished by their authors, Chopin does not do it. At the end and just by thinking of her children and the fact that although she does not care about others' opinions, her children will be always suffering the consequences of her acts, Edna freely commits suicide. She freely decides what to do with her life, as Silko's protagonist decides to go back home or Janie decides to return to Eatonville.

Ecofeminists consider that both women and nature are exploited by patriarchal societies that mistreat them and that because of women's close connection to nature,

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95 Eulalia Piñero has recently translated the work into Spanish and emphasizes the attribution of sexual awareness and desire to non-white women in contrast to the lack of sexual desire presupposed in white middle class ladies.

they are the most suitable people to fight on nature's behalf. If the reader does not understand Native American culture, the narrator in the story could be indeed considered Silva's victim. There are some scenes in which the protagonist depicts Silva's strength and her fear of being hurt.

He pulled me around and pinned me around with his arms and chest. "You don't understand, do you, little Yellow Woman? You will do what I want."

And again he was all around me with his skin slippery against mine, and I was afraid because I understood that his strength could hurt me. I lay underneath him and I knew that he could destroy me. ("Yellow Woman" 370-1)

This passage, among others, has been considered in the limit between rape and seduction. She is afraid of Silva but also inevitably attracted to him. She is happy because unlike ka'tsina spirits, when they arrived at Silva's place, he did not make her do horrible tasks, but just fry some potatoes. Read from a Western or European point of view, it may sound terribly male-chauvinist but when taken into consideration of the Native cultural point of view, it seems absurd to think so. For Native American women, Silko's story is not that of a traditional captivity narrative, but the "sacred stories detailing the relation of the tribe to the lands and the sacred gifts of corn to the people — the Yellow Women or Irriaku" (Dunn 197). Carolyn Dunn considers that what may be seen as antifeminist in regard to the content of Silko's story by some in the white world is irrelevant to its tribally derived meaning. She thinks it is necessary to discuss a tribal story in the context of tribal aesthetics rather than the dominant worldview and aesthetics (197). American Indian people live in the context of the land and their literature must be understood in these terms: in relation to land and to the rituals through which they affirm their relationship to it. As Warren stated too, oppressions may be different for different societies, depending on the situation the victim is in and the social and cultural context that surrounds him or her.

Patricia Clark Smith and Paula Gunn Allen explain that nontribal people often perceive the land as an object to be controlled, reshaped, painted and feared. Tribal people consider it a mysterious place beyond human domination "as something to be spoken with rather than confronted" (176). For them the land embodies a multitude of entities that possess intelligence and personality and humans and land hold dialogues to

ensure balance and harmony. In literature, this dialogue is often presented in sexual terms.<sup>96</sup> For Clark and Allen, Native Americans do not consider that wilderness has to be raped or tamed, but “they do associate wilderness with sexuality” (178). In traditional or contemporary literature, wilderness appears not only as a landscape, but also as a being which may be male or female. A male may abduct the woman or a female who seduces a man, but never a “Zeus-style rape” (178). For them,

in the coming together-person, spirit and land engage in a dialogue... the ultimate purpose of such ritual abductions and seductions is to transfer knowledge from the spirit world to the human atmosphere and this transfer is not accomplished in an atmosphere of control or domination. (178)

Some other feminists speak about ‘rape-fantasy,’ in which the woman imagines a man with “sexual power to overcome her inhibitions” (Graulich 19). In more recent publications about this topic, some psychiatrists say that women seek to be protected and cared and a rape fantasy is not just a desire to be dominated but to be able to completely surrender. It seems it is not an uncommon topic among women, even among those who have been actually raped. In the “Yellow Woman” the unnamed narrator fears and desires Silva. She always makes references to feeling warmth in his arms although she is conscious that he can hurt her if he wanted because of his strength. It could be interpreted as a rape fantasy, but not a rape, because she knows when to stop and as “storyteller retains control over what happens. As Silko’s use of her first person narrator makes clear, the Yellow Woman stories offer women control over their sexual fantasies, ways to express unsanctioned desires” (Graulich 19). The story can be read more as an expression of desires than as an anti-feminist or rape story. Indeed, it could even be said that Yellow Woman embodies the features of a triumphant woman, an ideal mixture of female and male characteristics and the “perfect representation of feminism in Silko’s text, the union of personal independence, sexual freedom and heroic endeavor for the community at large” (Nelson, “A Laguna” 20). If the narrator of the story thinks she is Yellow Woman, she must also be the bearer of such features and therefore, an icon for feminists.

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<sup>96</sup> Clark and Allen explain that the sexual metaphor for expressing the relationship between the land and people is not unique in Native Americans. Scholars have remarked the inclination of early European male colonists to speak of American earth in terms of possessing a virgin land or being seduced by wilderness. This is not something acceptable for female colonists, who also dreamed of transforming the land but in terms of domestication (177).

In general it could be said that the narrator wants to construct her identity in two worlds. She is a mother and a wife who lives a traditional life, but she is also a woman with desires and with a strong connection to nature; she is a woman of the twentieth century who believes that old stories could not happen now, but at the same time she sees herself as a participant in one of these stories. She lives in the present but looks for the past and returns home but wishes to encounter her lover and freedom again.

### **3.3. CEREMONY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF TRADITION.**

Briefly speaking, *Ceremony* narrates the story of Tayo, a veteran from World War II who returns home to the Laguna Pueblo reservation. Suffering from mental problems, mainly caused by the trauma of losing some of his friends and his cousin in the war, he has to find a way to cure himself in order to reconnect both to the world in general, and to his people and culture in particular. In order to overcome the trauma, he starts a healing process, a ceremony held, firstly by Ku'oosh, and finally by Betonie, a Navajo shaman who ultimately helps him to recover. He starts a ceremony process that will include different steps but that will be completed with the help of a woman, Ts'eh, and that will finish when he realizes about the power of nature and stories and their connection to himself.

*Ceremony* has become one of the most required readings in university courses that include Women, American Indian, literary, religious and anthropologic studies. However, for Allan Chavkin and Nancy Feyl Chavkin, it is also one of the most complex Native American works. In their opinion, in order to understand the novel, it is also necessary to understand its origins, because even for the author it was too difficult novel for readers in 1977. For them, now, with the help of some manuscripts found that reveal the initial purposes of Silko's writing, readers are able to cope with "joking together of myth and gritty realism, its technique of narration that imitates a ceremony and its abrupt, disorienting shifts in time and place" ("The Origins" 23). She first wanted to tell a funny story about a veteran from war who was alcoholic and whose mother made terrible efforts to keep him sober. Then she realized that the community felt embarrassed because of the alcoholism and the story was not funny anymore. She noticed that some veterans were able to return home while others suffered war disease and could not. She remembered that after war soldiers were received with traditional ceremonies, purification rituals but they were not effective forces for some of them. Silko wondered if this failure was because of inadequacy of the community's traditional beliefs or because they were not designed with the twentieth-century warfare in mind. The pueblo and Navajo peoples performed these curing rituals in which mythical stories were told to affect cures and protect people and she came to the conclusion that they may indeed help them. But she also wrote the novel as a cure for herself, because

between 1973-4 she suffered from depression, headache and nausea, and initiated the book as a ceremony for herself. At first the protagonist was a woman, but because it was too autobiographical, she decided to change it into a man. The stories "Returning" and "Hero" that she had previously written were inserted within the new novel. The former dealt with a Native American prostitute who committed suicide, and that Silko included as Tayo's mother. The latter was about a hero called Loui who had thirty per cent disability and was paid only 40 dollars a month. Like Tayo, he suffered from fever, fatigue and tried to recover at the veteran's hospital. His disapproving mother would turn into Auntie in *Ceremony*, and the hero's name will be changed for that of Tayo.

At first sight, the similarities between this work with Momaday's and Welch's are obvious. The three novels present characters who are alienated, unemployed, poor, disturbed after war and without plans for the future. Besides, they all need to go through different processes to realize that they have to go back to the land in order to be healed, that they have to go back to nature, stories and traditions to find themselves and get along with their lives, and they all achieve it thanks to the help of different women. With their novels, the three authors empower Native American characters and readers and create alternative understanding of history, showing the hard effect that twentieth-century had over native people in general and men in particular. But apart from this, *Ceremony* had another purpose. The year the novel was published, Laguna people received the warning that Rio Paguete, which goes along the reservation, had been contaminated by radium-226. Later, it was known that the tribal council, the community center and the reservation road had been built with radioactive mining. The area was considered "National Sacrifice Area" and the landscape was destroyed. When Silko was a child, and as she reflects in her essay "Landscape, History and the Pueblo Imagination" (1986), she heard of old stories that warned against the apocalypses caused when Mother Nature was destroyed, and she lived to see it. The Laguna people response to the landscape devastation was to include it in their stories, so that it will never be forgotten, ensuring its memory. According to Karen Piper Silko's analysis of the mines provide the base for the reading of *Ceremony*, as the devastation of the land on one hand, and the continuation of stories, on the other (483-4). That is, apart from revealing the problems of Native American people in the twentieth-century, from the

analysis of the novel from a female perspective, and from showing an alternative perspective of history, *Ceremony* also deals with the land, stories and politics.

### 3.3.1. *Ceremony* and storytelling.

That *Ceremony* is intrinsically related to stories is clear from the very beginning.

Ceremony  
I will tell you something about stories,  
    [he said]  
They aren't just for 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 the stories.  
    Their evil is mighty  
but it can't stand up to our stories.  
    So they try to destroy the stories  
let the stories be confused or forgotten  
    They would like that  
    They would be happy  
Because we would be defenseless then. (1)

This passage, which opens the novel, emphasizes the important role that storytelling plays within the Pueblo culture and the relevance that it will have in the development of the plot. It also focuses on the efforts that white people make in order to destroy their ceremonies, because they know that for Native American people, stories are the base of their culture, traditions and the way they pass knowledge on. Without them, they are lost and defenseless. Leslie Marmon Silko defends the key theme of her novel as the power inherent in storytelling. For her, stories are important because they enable us to cope with grief and loss, and Silko reminds that Native American peoples have suffered enormous grief and loss with the arrival on American shores of Europeans; diseases for which they had no immunity and that made tribes disappear and the greatest of all, despair, which led to violence, suicide and alcoholism. With stories Native American people can overcome this grief and loss and this is one of the purposes of her novel. She states “This novel is essentially about the power inherent in the process of storytelling ... The chanting or telling of ancient stories to effect certain cures or protect from



illness and harm have always been part of the Pueblo's curing ceremonies" (qtd. in Kroeber 40).

She makes such a strong defense of stories that some authors have wondered about how the novel should be called,

*Ceremony* is a novel whose unsettling story has lost none of its force in the nearly three decades since it was published. It is a book so original and so richly textured that the novelist N. Scott Momaday has wondered whether it ought to be called a novel at all. Perhaps, he suggests, it should be called a "telling." (*Ceremony* xxii)

In a more general way, TuSmith refers to the concept of story in relation to Silko's work. She says that while any narrative can be considered a story, in Silko's case the term story reaches beyond the general usage and refers to an entire way of life. As TuSmith states, "Thus, as people's stories are regarded as rituals that help the individual maintain balanced relationships with the environment. As such, stories are sacred and must be tended with infinite care" (123). For TuSmith, Silko's *Ceremony* actually inserts the reader in the ceremonial process of storytelling (123).

For this, storytelling is presented in different forms in the novel, both inserted within the context of the story itself and in the form of poems which frame the narrative and which can be considered old Laguna stories that Laguna people have known and heard all along their lives but which can also be understood by people who do not belong to the tribe, like readers. All these stories will have as the ultimate purpose the healing of the protagonist, but they are also used as a criticism to certain aspects of contemporary society. The novel can indeed be considered as a mediated text because the protagonist, Tayo, will understand questions related to racism, education, nuclear power and/or politics, and he will do it through traditional oral stories. He will perceive the world in terms of the struggles on a medicine man's mythic story and the non Native American world will be exposed through the understanding of Laguna culture, which will be Tayo's final achievement.

It is important to start noticing that from the beginning of the novel, Silko detaches herself from the role of author and storyteller and provides this role to Thought Woman. In traditional Laguna creation stories, this female deity (Ts'its'tsi'nako) thought of her sisters and created them and together they created the world by thinking of all things. Silko attributes the novel to the thoughts of this mythic character:

Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought-Woman,  
is sitting in her room  
and whatever she thinks about  
appears.

She thought of her sisters,  
Nau'ts'ity'I and I'tets'ity'I,  
and together they created the Universe

This world  
and the four worlds below.  
Thought-Woman, the spider,

named things and  
as she named them  
They appeared.

She is sitting in her room  
thinking of a story now  
I'm telling you the story  
she is thinking.

However, although she is providing a female figure with one of the most important powers, that of creating, and although she tries to detach herself from such a role, the truth is that she appears in the story and becomes a storyteller, being an active participant of the story she tells for others to read. She is initially an outside observer who uses third person narration but she will place herself in the center of this myth, because she provides herself with the role of transcribing Thought Woman's thoughts, and so that the ancient storyteller is not only able to create a story with words but also to bring it into being only by thinking about it. Nevertheless, she does not choose this creation myth randomly. This myth is important in two forms, as it explains the Pueblo People's ideas about the universe. For them, it consists of the earth, which is basically our world, and the world of the spirits, where dead people go. Its second function is to emphasize the relevance that storytelling has for these people. It is more than passing stories from generation to generation in order to entertain or to let younger generations learn about history or religion. Storytelling is also a ceremony that links current people and gods. Moreover, people approach deities through myths like this one. Thought Woman does not only create the world as she is thinking but she also creates a story that someone (Silko) will listen to and tell others (readers), starting in this vein the storytelling process that will be so important in *Ceremony*.

The novel is also related to storytelling through the characters themselves. With *Ceremony*, Silko is somehow complaining about how white impositions may make Native American people disdain their own culture, and this is reflected in Tayo's attitude towards oral stories, very similar at first, to that of the unnamed narrator in "Yellow Woman." Both seem reluctant to believe in the power and veracity of these stories. They grew up in the twentieth-century world, were educated in white models, and were told that stories were not real. The protagonist of Yellow Woman believed old stories could not happen then, because the Yellow Woman of these tales did not know all the contemporary elements she knew, such as trains or roads. She could not be that Yellow Woman, because in this sense, they had nothing to do. However, she never stopped thinking about them and about her grandfather, who used to love them. Tayo also used to believe all these stories that he had heard in his childhood and that formed part of his life. For Tayo, the stories represent the way Indians understand the world, but this initial feeling was completely deleted from his mind when "teachers at Indian school taught him not to believe in that kind of 'nosense'" (*Ceremony* 17-18). It is not until he is able to understand that they, and not he, were wrong that he could reconnect with his people and finish the healing process. Similarly, it is when the unnamed narrator accepts that she is part of the story, that her awakening is complete. Both achieve wholeness when they accept the importance of storytelling. Likewise, it is in this moment when they also become storytellers. This process is very similar to the one followed by other minority characters. In Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, daughters feel unable to understand their mothers' traditional oral stories because they have been educated in a society that has nothing to do with these old stories and that remote country where they were usually told. When they learn the meaning of these traditional tales and why their mothers told them, they are able to reconcile with their original communities and above all with their mothers.

At the end of "Yellow Woman" and *Ceremony*, the two protagonists will become part of the storytelling process turning into storytellers of their own stories. Yellow Woman decides to change her Yellow Woman story into that of the Navajo kidnapping because she knows that her family, who is not connected to old traditions any more, would not understand it. For Tayo, telling about his encounter with Ts'eh, and all the events took a long time, but "It was while he was sitting there, facing southeast, that he

noticed how the four windows along the south wall of the kiva had a particular relationship to this late autumn position of the sun” (*Ceremony* 238). Paradoxically, it is the protagonists’ grandparents the ones who had no doubt about the veracity of the stories Tayo and the unnamed Yellow Woman were telling. At the end of “Yellow Woman” the narrator says “I was sorry that Grandpa wasn’t alive to hear my story because it was Yellow Woman stories he liked to tell best” (“Yellow Woman” 374). At the end of *Ceremony*, Old Grandma said: “It seems to like I already heard these stories before ...only thing is, the names sound different” (*Ceremony* 242). That is, both accept the truth of oral stories. Maybe this also shows the separation of the new generations from oral stories.

When the protagonists accept their role as storytellers, Silko is ensuring that the process will continue, that storytelling will not finish and that stories will go on for others to listen to them. This sounds familiar to Ishmael in *Moby Dick*. Melville’s purpose when creating him was to ensure that the story will be known, to make sure that it will not be forgotten, and turns him into a storyteller. He discovers this when he is surrounded only by the sea and its immensity. At that moment Ishmael finds out what his role is in the story and why he survived the shipwreck while the rest died. Yellow Woman and Tayo also have this kind of allegory in the story, and in this moment, they find the real meaning of their lives too, as Ishmael did. Indeed Tayo can be considered a trickster figure within the novel. Like tricksters, and like Ishmael, he is on a quest that he has to complete in order to find his salvation and end up with the problems that oppress his tribe too.<sup>97</sup> He is “the trickster hero of Laguna myth who defeats the Evil Gambler who had caused a drought by imprisoning the rain cloud” (Velie 265). He survives the evil as Ishmael survives the whale.

Other characters in the novel are also related to storytelling, but in different forms. Betonie is one of them. His connection to stories is similar to Tayo’s but from a different perspective. Unlike Tayo, he never doubted the power of stories. It is Old Betonie who finds an answer to Tayo’s problems and sets him on the quest for his healing. As a medicine man he is in constant contact with the mythological world of

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<sup>97</sup> Ishmael’s quest in *Moby Dick* is apparently related to becoming a sailor. Unlike other characters as Captain Ahab, whose quest is to defeat the whale and what this embodies (as in the novel the whale represents the universe and nature), he does not pretend to fight against the universe, and this is what saves him.

spirits and knows stories that common people have never heard before. He plays the role of Tayo's teacher and healer and guides him with the tools he needs to complete the ceremony and therefore, his reconnection to the world to which he belongs. Even Betonie's own birth is surrounded by the mystery of oral stories, as he tells that he is descended from a woman who appeared in a tree and that his grandfather decided to keep her as his wife because everybody else had rejected her. He also tells stories to help Tayo understand the steps he has to follow in order to complete the ceremony process. He tells him that he had visions of stars, cattle, mountains and a woman and Tayo has to find them and finish his healing. However, what differentiates him from traditional storytellers is that he also uses new techniques and this is what makes him different from other medicine men, he includes elements from the white world (telephone books, coke bottles or almanacs) and demonstrates that ceremonies, like all other traditional things, must change and evolve in order to adapt to new times and necessities. This is one of Silko's goals with the novel too.

Betonie first impressed Tayo because of his appearance and the objects he owned at home:

Tayo turned around then to figure out what it was. He looked at his clothes: the old moccasins with splayed-out elkhide soles, the leather stained dark with mud and grease; ... He looked at his face. The cheekbones were like the wings of a hawk soaring away from his broad nose; he wore a drooping thick mustache; the hairs were steel gray. Then Tayo looked at his eyes. They were hazel like his own. The medicine man nodded. "My grandmother was a remarkable Mexican with green eyes," he said. (*Ceremony* 109)

This first description reminds readers of Nanapush's description in Erdrich's novel. Indeed, he is very similar to this character. Betonie is an old shaman, a medicine man who uses ceremonies to cure people around him and help them reconnect to their lost culture. He is a healer, as tricksters and Nanapush are. He also embodies the Trickster characteristics because he establishes the precedents for the spiritual quest that Tayo will go through and which will determine his salvation. He is also similar to Ultima in Anaya's *Bless Me Ultima*. They all three behave as spiritual guides for characters who need them to find their identities but who also understand that traditions evolve and need to be adapted to current times.

Because of his mixed ancestry he is on the border of different cultures, the Mexican, the Native American and the white ones. This is also a trickster feature. His physical appearance reminds us of the old Native Americans who still wore their tepees, although he includes many current objects and ideas into his lifestyle and even into his ceremonies. For him, change and evolution were essential to improve and develop as persons and tribes. Indeed, it could be stated that Tayo and Betonie represent this evolution and this change for the Native Americans due to their mixed heritage. In Betonie's case, this is even stronger if we pay attention to the fact that he blends old and new medicine. He stated:

At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong.

She taught me this above all else: things which don't shift and grow are dead things. They are things the witchery people want (*Ceremony* 116).

David Rice referred considered that one of the most relevant aspects of Betonie's personality is his desire for transformation. This meant that for him, in order to survive, Indians had to transform their ceremonies and adapt them to new requirements. This "challenges Euroamerican stereotypes of Native American rituals as codified and stagnant and thus unable to survive the change of Euroamerican encroachment and expansion" (127). At the beginning of this section, when dealing with the origins of *Ceremony*, it was stated that Silko believed that maybe the ceremonies designed for the soldiers did not work because they did not pay attention to the contemporary warfare. This is maybe the reason why she decided to create a character who believed that stories and ceremonies had to evolve, to show that they can adapt to current circumstances without ignoring cultural heritage and this is why Betonie's ceremony works while others did not. Betonie, Tayo and the narrator in "Yellow Woman" are twentieth-century characters who can use white elements but who still believe in the power of stories and traditions.

In "Yellow Woman," the narrator somehow relates Coyote and Silva. In *Ceremony*, Betonie tells Tayo a story about Coyote, who stole a son-in-law from his family, transforming himself into him and turning the young man into Coyote. When the family

is finally able to find him, they must ask for the four old bears to bring the boy back to his normal state. The ceremony these bear people follow to restore the boy back into his normal life is similar to the one Betonie uses with Tayo:

He sat in the center of the white corn sand painting. The rainbows crosses were in the painting behind him. Betonie's helper scraped the sand away and buried the bottoms of the hoops in little trenches so that they were standing up and spaced apart, with the hard oak closest to him and the wild rose hoop in front of the door. The old man painted a dark mountain range beside the farthest hoop, the next, closer, he painted blue, and moving toward him, he knelt and made the yellow mountains; and in front of him, Betonie painted the white mountain range. (*Ceremony* 131)

Therefore, it is through this ceremony that Tayo turns into a Coyote, which looks for the identity and is able to find it, becoming a powerful figure that can help and harm his people. He turns into a leader who helps his people. With that Silko is also making a strong claim: Tayo/Coyote survived white oppression and won those who wanted to destroy native nature and culture, white people who wanted to impose their rules ignoring Native American traditions. No matter how hard the oppression is, Native American people like Tayo will overcome it following their heritage. So, using Coyote's simile, Silko is strongly criticizing this oppression and telling oppressor they are stronger than the evil (white society) as Ishmael is stronger than his own destiny too.

Other twentieth-century characters in the novel, however, do not think the same. When Tayo encounters his friends after his return to the reservation, he finds a group of men that had nothing to do with those he had left. They are also veterans and victims of the influence of white culture and people. They have been so much exposed to them that they have established barriers that prevent them from becoming part of their people and reservation again. They externalize this frustration and alienation by drinking in bars and telling aloud stories about their actions during the battles, or inventing stories about the way they were treated by white people during that time. But none of these stories would help them recover because they had nothing to do with their culture, and this is why in the end they are not successful.

From a more technical point of view, Silko's mastery of oral traditions is presented in several forms. For Silko, as for the rest of contemporary Native American authors and Native American people in the past and present, language was a basic tool in life. Her statement: "All existence is meaningless," is actually full of meaning; that is the irony

of language” (qtd. in Weaver 3). For Weaver, language forces meaning into existence and all barriers yield to language, such as those of distance, oceans, darkness, time or death. For her, when we hear a story about beloved ancestors from hundreds of years ago, we begin to feel the intimacy and immediacy of that long ago moment and our ancestors are very much present during the process of storytelling. For her, Silko also believes that language can be used to “transcend humanly insurmountable barriers, we call that transcend art, to the extent that it deals with transcendence, it also involves religion” (3-4). *Ceremony* is an example of these ideas, of how language is considered an important element not only for the transmission of culture, but also for the development of the individual and the community.

Language is an essential part in the process of storytelling and *Ceremony* reflects it. For David A. Rice, Silko uses storytelling to create a political context and uses *Ceremony* to insist “that language is integral to the very survival and reemergence of Indigenous peoples in response to Euroamerican colonialism (117). According to Rice, Silko uses Tayo’s experience and narrative to mediate between the Indian and American worlds and does it with the juxtaposition of American and Native storytelling ways. However, the importance Silko provides to language and words goes beyond this. In a society where the records of history and culture are only recorded in oral stories, the words used in narration are very important.

Apart from this, Native American people consider that language is essential in the healing process of an individual and a clear indication of the pain he or she may be suffering. *Ceremony* also exemplifies it through Tayo. At first, when he is in hospital he is unable to utter a word. His insomnia comes with “humid dreams of black night and loud voices rolling him over and over again like debris caught in flood” (*Ceremony* 5). He refers to himself in the third person and pretends to the doctors that he “can’t talk to you. He is invisible. His words are formed with an invisible tongue, they have no sound” (*Ceremony* 15). His inability to speak isolates him and it is not until he recovers it that he will connect to life and his people again.<sup>98</sup> However, for Silko, as for the rest

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<sup>98</sup> Other characters in literature have also been presented as suffering communication problems, such as Faulkner’s. He usually presents characters alienated and unable to communicate with words after living the experience of World War I, or simply because they cannot do it, as in *As I Lay Dying*, in which the members of the family are unable to communicate with each other, despite their interior monologues reveal they have a great inner life that they feel unable to share with the rest of the family members, causing their isolation.



of contemporary Native American authors, transmitting oral ideas into written words was not an easy task and she had to make use of different techniques related to language and style.

One of the clearest techniques related to language is that of double-voicing. This refers to the use of two types of registers, one which is lyrical and another one which is colloquial. The lyrical voice is used in formal situations such as ceremonies and invocations and the colloquial voice is used in less formal situations, especially when storytellers are telling stories or teaching. In *Ceremony*, Silko also uses two types of registers: the lyrical and the prose or narrative ones, and this is very similar to what Dubois explained, as the narrative parts of the novel frequently refer to Tayo's own life, and the events that surround his present life, while the lyrical sections usually include myths or legends and the traditional oral story of Hummingbird and Fly, as well as the ceremonies. The passages of Hummingbird and Fly are representative of both the colloquial and lyrical voice registers, as the content of the stories help the reader think of the lyrical voice, while the didactic or teaching purposes of the stories as well as the narrative and colloquial style in which they are written relate them to the colloquial one. In the case of ceremonies, however, as the context itself is more formal, the register is also more formal and lyrical. This is also the way she has to reconcile the Western literary forms and the oral tradition as with the use of oral rhetoric elements she extends storytelling to present day literature and contexts. The recurrent poem about Pacayanyi is an example of this connection, as it explains a really important myth for Laguna people but at the same time Silko matches it to some passages of Tayo's life, making it more contemporaneous and providing it with a meaning that non-Native readers can also understand. It explains the importance that a crop has for the Pueblo people to survive, and their strong and close relation to Corn Mother or Corn Woman.

One time  
Old Woman K'yo's  
Son came in  
From Reedleaf town  
Up north.  
His name was Pacaya'nyi  
And he didn't know who his father was. (*Ceremony* 43)

Silko continues the poem all along the novel and explains that Pa'caya'nyi asked people if they wanted to learn some magic. He brought the mountain lion and made him lie in altars; he also made water pour out of a wall, as well as a bear. Everybody believed in his magic and forgot about praying their mother corn altar ("they neglected the mother corn altar" (*Ceremony* 44)). However, his magic was just a trick and Mother Corn became very angry because of the ignorance of people and because she had been rejected, so she left them and took the plants, the grass and the rain clouds with her.

"I've had enough of that  
she said,  
"If they like that magic so much,"  
let them live off it."

So she took  
the plants and grass from them.  
No baby animals were born  
she took the  
rainclouds with her. (*Ceremony* 44-5)

Humans started to starve and crops did not grow, so they decided to send someone to ask for their forgiveness. They saw that hummingbird was well fed and asked him why he was looking so good. He said that "three worlds below this one/everything is /green/all the plants are growing/ the flowers are blooming./I go down there/ and eat." (*Ceremony* 50). Hummingbird explained to humans the ritual they had to follow to create a messenger that would intercede between them and Corn Mother: they would have to bring a pottery jar, mix mountain dirt, sweet corn flour and water. After covering it with buckskin and singing aloud "after four days /you will be alive" (*Ceremony* 66) a big green fly "with yellow feelers on his head" (*Ceremony* 76) would appear. He would go with Hummingbird to see Corn Mother. When they approached her, Corn Mother told them that old Buzzard "had to purify the town" (*Ceremony* 97). When they found Buzzard he asked them to bring him tobacco (*Ceremony* 105). Fly and Hummingbird went back to Corn Mother and she told them that they had to ask the caterpillar if they wanted tobacco (*Ceremony* 140), what they finally did (*Ceremony* 167). They brought tobacco to old Buzzard, who purified the town:

And he did-  
first to the east  
then to the south  
then to the west  
and finally to the north.

Everything was set straight again  
after all that ck'o'yo' magic.  
The storm clouds returned  
the grass and plants started growing again.

There was food  
and the people were happy again.  
So she told them  
“Stay out of trouble from now on.  
It isn't easy to fix up things again.  
Remember that  
next time  
some ck'o'yo magician  
comes to town” (*Ceremony* 237)

Silko also connects this old tale to some passages of Tayo's story. For instance, the first part of the poem appears when Josiah and Tayo are waiting for water barrels to fill. Josiah explained Tayo:

These dry years you hear some people complaining, you know, about the dust and the wind, and how dry it is. But the wind and the dust, they are part of life too, like the sun and the sky. You don't swear at them. It's people, see. They're the ones. The old people used to say that droughts happen when people forget, when people misbehave. (*Ceremony* 42)

Besides, this moment in the poem also coincides with a moment in Tayo's life when he is also emotionally and physically dry.

Josiah explained him a part of the poem, the moment in which greenbottle fly appears, and the relevance the flies have for their people, when he saw that Tayo was killing some in the kitchen:

Well, I didn't go to school much, so I don't know about that but you see, long time ago, way back in the immemorial, the mother of the people got angry at them for the way they were behaving. For all she cared, they could go to hell- starve to death. The animals disappeared, the plants disappeared, and no rain came for a long time. It was the greenbottle fly who went to her, asking forgiveness for the people. Since that time the people have been grateful for what the fly did for us. (*Ceremony* 93)

Tayo felt sorry for what he had done and Josiah only told him: “Next time, just remember the story” (*Ceremony* 94). However Tayo could not endure “the flies that had crawled over Rocky; they had enraged him. He had cursed their sticky feet and wet

mouths, and when he could reach them he had smashed them between his hands” (*Ceremony* 94).

The end of the poem also coincides somehow, with the end of Tayo’s healing ceremony. For instance, the moment the carterpillar gave Fly and Hummingbird the tobacco that would mean the purification of the town, and therefore their salvation, is written down right after Tayo finds the stars that Betonie had talked him about. Both seem to be positive moments (*Ceremony* 167). Ultimately, the end of the poem also coincides with the completion of Tayo’s process and he and his people are saved. Corn Mother gives them the rain and the possibility of survival back just at the same time Tayo returns to the reservation and tells old people there the story. They are blessed again by “A’moo’ooh” as people in the poem are blessed again by Corn Mother (*Ceremony* 237).

Tayo is considered, therefore, a modern day messenger and his story represents the running story line of Fly and Hummingbird. When Tayo becomes this messenger in Laguna stories, Silko is representing cultural knowledge too, because the messengers are very prominent within Native American tradition, and here Tayo also plays this role, he is the intermediary. He has to face a spiritual and personal journey to counterbalance the damage he was supposed to have caused to his people when he prayed for the rain to stop, and this coincides with the role Fly and Hummingbird play in the traditional myth. Besides, Silko creates a modern situation that is similar to her native heritage — the traditional deities and events can be applied to the modern day events that Tayo lives. In this case the story of Corn Woman parallels those of Tayo, so Silko is adapting the old story to a new situation, which is also the function of storytellers, as they are to transmit cultural knowledge in oral tradition and apply them to new situations. Somehow, with this myth that goes throughout the whole novel, Silko is presenting readers a story about a duty too. The myth reminds us that “life is based on mutual respect and communal responsibility. By subscribing to false magic and neglecting their duties, the people ultimately hurt themselves” (TuSmith 126). For TuSmith, this parallels the story in *Ceremony*. For her, traditional wisdom is used to enlighten the present in a continuously vital relationship and because humans are abusing their privileges in the natural order of things, a curing ceremony is necessary to purge these abuses and make the world whole again.

For Robert A. Lee, when Silko situates Tayo's story within each legend of Corn and Red Woman, Ck'o'yo and the tricksters, Hummingbird, Pollen Boy, and their spirit company "Silko unravels a story both actual and ethnomythic." Her protagonists may be at home, abroad, in war-zones or represented through figures such as Emo, but she is telling a story which is wholly specific in time and place. "Yet it is a place synchronous with, and to be understood through, a tribal vision of the world" (108). For Lee, she places two different sides and illness and cure, whether of Tayo or of postwar Laguna itself, is told throughout *Ceremony* as literal. In the one term are those of "Philippines, killing, post-traumatic disorder-with would-be 'white' hospital treatment, bars, the barbed wire fencing of their land...the drought, ultimately the bomb." In the other side, they are those of Pacaya'nys's bad magic or the mythical witch gathering; and against all of them, according to him, "the deities of sun, cloud, corn and water provide good stories and tribal ceremonies of health" (108).

Silko uses some of the most typical characteristics of oral stories in her novels, such as repetitions. This also brings her narrative closer to Indian ways and separates it from the Euroamerican styles that Rice mentions above and which are so destructive for Native literature. Repetition is indeed an internal quality of ceremonies, as there are always repeated words, songs, prayers, and phrases that intensify the power of the ceremony and its healing purpose. Here, repetitions show Tayo's mental problems and his following healing process. Silko repeats continuous examples of the confusion the protagonist experiments with, as he does not distinguish reality and present in order to show that this is also necessary for his salvation. Besides, this process will be accelerated through the repetition of stories (that Ku'oosh, Betonie or Grandma tell Tayo). There are other types of repetitions too, such as the idea of continuously traveling to dangerous or dark places, or that of paying homage to those elements that come from earth, such as the rocks, wind, clouds or water, or the four cardinal points. These are recurrent elements within the novel inherited from Native American tradition.

In relation to style, one of the first characteristics that call the reader's attention is the non-linear narrative structure since the novel does not follow a chronological order, as most contemporary Native American novels. At the beginning of the novel, Tayo is presented as an undefined person and the narrative moves forth and back in time and

setting, reflecting Tayo's confusion. There are fragmented images of people and the situations that surround him, the Philippine jungle, his uncle and cousin, the hospital. In the second part, however, when Tayo starts his process of recovery and Betonie performs his ceremonies, Tayo's images are more coherent and recurrent; they are no longer disconnected or disjointed from the rest of the events that are happening around him. "Silko structures the novel according to how mind works through memory and associative chains" (TuSmith, 124) and the narrative structure that she uses "almost imperceptibly moves the reader from an individual to a communal frame of mind" (TuSmith124). Through the stories, Silko also expresses the tribal traditions of time and space, since Tayo remembers the past days as back, so that Silko addresses both past and present at the same time, like many other contemporary Native American works based on stories. Not centering the story in time and space, the reader is forced to view reality through the perceptions of the native Others. Silko provides two parallel storylines that merge at the end of the novel, as in "Yellow Woman," and Tayo's story, like that of the unnamed narrator in *Yellow Woman*, which is set against a "mythic mirror that provides the connection between the worlds that are ongoingly constructed in the novel as well as providing for the construction of the novel itself" (Dunn 97). So when Tayo looked around him he saw a world of stories that were always changing and moving.

Another important stylistic characteristic is the connection established between the listener and the reader that Native American authors include in their novels. Silko is aware of the importance of including the reader and the audience within the context of the story and about the participatory role that the listener and reader have, so that the story is believed to be inside the listener and the storyteller's role is to draw the story out of the listener. This is also closely related to the interconnectedness between different worlds in Native American literature in general and in *Ceremony* in particular. Here the physical and spiritual worlds also seem to be linked and Silko is able to use different techniques that place us in other realities. In *Ceremony* myths are presented in the form of poems and they are scattered throughout the text. The stories from Pueblo culture are used as contextual backdrop for the contemporary prose narrative and this splicing technique simulates the atmosphere of storytelling, as if the reader were actually listening to and watching an oral performance. As TuSmith points out, "It effectively disabuses us of arbitrary separations such as past versus present, dream

versus reality, and the animate versus the inanimate” (122). This vein the author is able to place the reader in a different reality, like the narrator in “Yellow Woman” did when using past and present tense simultaneously. Indeed, many Native American traditions believe that there are different layers of reality that are all interconnected, for instance the spiritual and the physical worlds, so much that they cannot exist without the other. Other scholars consider that the novels should be studied on many levels. In *Ceremony*, the spiritual and physical worlds are linked and many times Tayo as to figure out the world where he is. These realities are expressed through the various stories that are presented in the novel, such as those of creation, of healing, of power and which are all connected to create the plot of the novel. For instance, the novel starts with the creation story of Thought Woman, who is sitting in her room, thinking of a story which includes events that happen in the novel, this is the physical world. Besides, Tayo continues referring to stories and remembers them, so that he finds himself in different realities and invents the stories to support them.

Storytelling is present throughout the entire novel in different forms and the attitude that the characters have towards it, especially Tayo and Betonie, make it clear that stories are more than a reality Native American life. Stories are useful in current times because they are used to exemplify issues such as the relevance of maintaining traditions despite the oppression of white education on Native Americans, because with them you are able to find wholeness.

### 3.3.2. *Ceremony*, Nature and Women.

Like “Yellow Woman,” Silko makes a strong connection between *Ceremony* and nature, from different points of view and with them, the author has a look into Ecofeminism too. The treatment characters make of nature and women and the fact that the most important female protagonists in the story embody natural features prove it.

Tayo is a damaged veteran from World War II and seeks a therapy that helps him recover from his trauma. This therapy will turn into an eco-therapy guided by Betonie and by two women who embody features of nature. Betonie and his powerful identification with nature and his belief in the power it has to know oneself will play an important role too. Tayo ultimately recovers when he accepts that he has a reciprocal relationship with nature, that he and his community need the land and that his disorder has not only been caused by the effects of war, but also because he lost touch with earth and with his community. His deep respect for the natural world, for women and for ceremonies will make this reconnection an easy one.

One of the main criticism Silko carries in the novel is the fact that white society tries to silence nature and objectify it. As Ecofeminists think, white people exploit natural resources because they consider that they inferior to them because unlike Native American people, they do not believe that each natural element has an importance on its own, that they are useful for different reasons. In *Ceremony*, Silko humanizes nature through Tayo and turns it into a presence in the novel. Tayo must look for signs of love in the environment and will realize that we are dependent on nature and that we should never confront it, as Allen and Clark stated. In an interview held with Laura Coltelli in 2010, ten years after the publication of *Almanac of the Dead*, she states:

You can't separate indigenous people from their land, their animals, and their water without oppressing and destroying them, and yet this is what colonialism brings forth. They took people too for the slave trade. A lot of the oppression of people grew out of what was done to the land because all the invaders ripped open the earth and took whatever they wanted. ... You can't talk separately of the welfare of people and the welfare of the land because the two are closely interlocked. To take resources from the land means taking resources from the people. (*Almanac Reading* 203)



Tayo will have to discover this and he will get it through the ceremony that Betonie prepares for him and thanks Night Swan and Ts'eh for their help. Indeed, Tayo hates the so called 'Destroyers,' for what they did to the land, as he considers that the exploitation of uranium mines and the prolonged drought have damaged the earth, but Betonie tells him that he has to get rid of this hate because his recovery depends on this. Witchery is part of this hate, according to Betonie. Tayo's separation from his people helped witchery get into his life and in the community, and one of witchery's main aims is to hurt people destroying the natural world and robbing the earth of its force. This is illustrated by white people and some Native American characters such as Emo, Harley or Tayo's other friends in the novel. When at the end of the novel Tayo decides not to kill Emo, he becomes aware that he is also resisting witchery and this means the end of his ceremony. "The witchery had almost ended the story according to its plan; Tayo had almost jammed the screwdriver into Emo's skull the way witchery had wanted" (*Ceremony* 235). Tayo will not be another drunken Indian who suffers from war disease and kills another Indian, as was expected from him, and this saves him.

In this process, Ts'eh and Night Swan play a crucial role. Both embody the features of Yellow Woman, and therefore, are strongly related to the earth. Like nature, they are rational and cannot be objectified by patriarchal society. They are powerful people who become strong presences in the novel.

Night Swan is a mysterious and powerful woman. She appears when we know that Josiah had fallen in love with a Mexican woman as he saw her dancing in Lalo's bar. They become lovers, despite Auntie's rejection because of all the gossiping the affair caused in the reservation. Meanwhile, Tayo decides to invent his own prayers and ceremonies to bring water back to the reservation. As he finished his prayers and climbed down the mountains, he saw a hummingbird and two days later, it started to rain. Because of the rain, Josiah tells Tayo to bring a note to Night Swan, as he would be unable to meet her that night. When Tayo gets to the bedroom, he is seduced by the Woman and they make love.

Night Swan's relevance in Tayo's life is reflected in the colors surrounding her and her connection to other important female characters in the novel, Ts'eh and also Betonie's grandmother. Night Swan is surrounded by the color blue: she is wearing a

blue kimono, has her room full of blue flowers and blue armchairs. Blue symbolizes power among men and as “the case of men, blue clothing along with other items carrying this valence of the west signify women with a state of power. In addition, *these women have a strong base in cardinal south* evident in a variety of shared Mexican features” (Swan 8).

At the end of their encounter, Night Swam tells him that she had been observing his eyes, which Tayo describes as Mexican eyes that he would like not to have. Then, Night Swan tells him:

They are afraid, Tayo. They feel something happening, they can see something happening around them, it scares them. Indians or Mexicans or whites-most people are afraid of change. They think that if their children have the same color of skin, the same color of eyes, that nothing is changing.” She laughed softly. “They are fools. They blame us, the ones who look different. That way they don’t have to think about what has happened inside themselves. (*Ceremony* 92)

These words sound similar to those Betonie would tell him just a few days later, when he referred to the importance of changing and the fact that they symbolized these changes because of their mixed ancestry. Night Swam is indeed of mixed ancestry, like them and this is what people around them are afraid of. Her eyes and his eyes also connect them to Betonie’s grandmother, another special character in the novel. As Edith Swan states: “Each of these three characters has hazel-green eyes, a tell-tale mark setting them apart from the others, and creating a bond between them because mixed ancestry makes itself known in the color of their eyes” (8).

She would finally tell him: “You don’t have to understand what is happening. But remember this day. You will recognize it later. You are part of it now” (*Ceremony* 92). It seems that she is placing him in the first steps of his ceremony process, which would lead him into Betonie’s and Ts’eh’s hands. After Tayo finishes these first steps in the ceremony he is ready to continue enter the cosmic ceremony that Betonie has prepared for him. It will be this cosmic ceremony that will ultimately heal him, his tribe and even the Earth Mother or Corn Mother. As Edith Swan says, it seems that Night Swan behaves as the mature version of Betonie’s grandmother and as the preparatory version for the love that Ts’eh and Tayo would have later in the novel. She is considered Ts’eh’s winter version, as in the Yellow Woman’s tale (12).

Ts'eh also embodies many of the features that characterize Yellow Woman. She corralled Tayo's cattle and takes good care of them while he goes to get a truck to transport them. When Tayo returns, she is gone but they will meet again in the summer. Then she tells him her name and claims that she has siblings in the area, although he does not know them. They spend the summer together and after getting into her world, surrounded by plants and nature, Tayo realizes that she was Yellow Woman, "He could feel where she had come from and he understood where she would always go" (*Ceremony* 230). She shows him a world of butterflies, wild flowers and rainbows that remind Tayo of the earth's fertility. Physically, Ts'eh also embodies all the features that characterize Yellow Woman, like the unnamed narrator in "Yellow Woman," "the color yellow surrounds her; she is linked with the rain; she has the Hunter as her companion part of the year" (Nelson 127). When Tayo leaves his aunt's house at the end of May, and meets Ts'eh again, he encounters a "yellow spotted snake" (*Ceremony* 205), which is one of the god's messengers and finds Ts'eh walking through yellow sunflowers and carrying her carved willow staff. However, Silko also describes her as a more modern character, "with all the confusion and bewilderment a contemporary person would feel if thrust into the middle of an ancient story" (Nelson 121), similar to the narrator of Silko's story too.

As a Yellow Woman, Ts'eh helps Tayo to finish his ceremony, but Silko seems to go beyond and provides her with even more power than the medicine man Betonie, because she will be able to heal Tayo, something Betonie could not achieve completely. Besides, although Ts'eh lives with Hunter, which reminds us of the traditional Yellow Woman tale, she does not seem to be captured by the man. What's more, unlike the traditional myth which tells how Winter and Summer fight for the right to marry Yellow Woman and finally decide to share her half the year each, Tayo and the Hunter do not fight for the woman's affection. The main parallel or similarity between Ts'eh and other Yellow Women is perhaps the relevance they provide to stories. At the end of their meeting, Ts'eh advises Tayo about the importance of finishing the story and trying to avoid the negative influence of witchery:

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 dead alone in these hills. (*Ceremony* 215)

Ts'eh tells Tayo that he must remember stories in order to survive. Betonie also wants Tayo to remember, because this seems the way for his healing and for the survival of their customs and history. However, he uses stories to heal him, while she wants Tayo to remember also to transmit them to other generations. According to Barnett, The Yellow Woman in Silko's novel is the most complex figure of the complete myth as she combines sexual freedom with heroic action:

... Where the protagonist of the story "Yellow Woman" is a passive adjunct to Silva's action, Ts'eh, *Ceremony's* Yellow Woman, plays an active role. ... Ts'eh is in fact not only Yellow Woman but also the author stepping into the narrative and revealing the general shape of the novel's conclusion. (24-5)

Ts'eh alerts Tayo to the competing forces that are attempting to control the story and prepares him for the final confrontation with evil and which will help him to write a new ending for the story, one of survival rather than death. Thanks to Ts'eh's advice, Tayo is able to understand the need to learn about his people in order to be healed and above all, in order for his people to survive too.

However, it is also important to notice here that Tayo, despite being a man, also embodies many of the characteristics, actions and feelings of the contemporary Yellow Woman. In fact, Elizabeth Hoffman Nelson and Malcolm A. Nelson go a little bit further and mention the possibility of comparing Tayo to a Yellow Woman as well. They quote Mary Chapman's essay "The Belly of this Story. Storytelling and Symbolic Birth in Native American Fiction," where she states that Silko considers that language can create a life, because stories bear culture as mothers bear children. As men can use language, they can also create and "Tayo, through language, through storytelling, creates life — a new life for himself. We believe that Tayo is a Yellow Woman" (122). At the end of the novel Tayo becomes the storyteller who goes back to the reservation to tell the story to the people there. This benefits the community, as he helps them end the drought that had been destroying their fields and people. Because of this very last act, he can indeed be compared to Yellow Women. What is more, Nelson even states

that the end of the novel is a reflection of all this, as *Ceremony* ends with Old Grandma remarking that “It seems like I already heard these stories before... only thing is, the names sound different” (*Ceremony* 260). Indeed names have changed, as well as the genders, because the one who returns to the community bringing health and fruitfulness is no longer a woman, but Tayo, the one who cursed the rain and brought the drought and is related to water is not Ts’eh as in “Yellow Woman” and as Nelson states:

The one who takes us out of ourselves to find new fruitfulness and new selves is no longer Silva or the evil Ka’tsina or even Betonie- it is Ts’eh. And the one who tells us about how to heal ourselves is no longer old Grandpa- it is Leslie M. Silko.” (131)

This is even more clearly seen if we compare Tayo’s treatment of nature and women with that of his friends. Unlike many other male characters in the novel, he does not want to destroy the earth, or women, if the parallelism is established. He needs to return to them in order to recover his identity. He loves both land and women and wishes to live in harmony with nature. In the novel, white society wants to end up with the voice of nature as miners who take uranium from the earth to make atomic bombs and the soldiers seeing Native women only as prostitutes and servants, a very Ecofeminist view. However Tayo rejects all this. Unlike Emo, Harley, Pinkie and Leroy, he believes in the importance of both women and nature to survive. The other characters have deepened their hate for both and show it in the novel. Harley abandons his family cattle to go from bar to bar, Pinkie sells his sheep to buy a new harmonica and other useless things, Emo believes that white women are just a body and all of them laugh when he says “they took our land, they took everything! So let’s get our hands on white women” (*Ceremony* 55). For him, these women have no face and even Mother Earth is empty. Because they have no land now, they can mistreat women. But Tayo does not want to agree with him. He does not want to believe that women are just reproductive beings. On the contrary, for him making love is sacred and Silko compares it to getting into a river. Silko describes his relation with Ts’eh in the following terms: “he eased himself deeper within her and felt the warmth close around him like river sand, softly giving way under foot, then closing firmly around the ankle in cloudy warm water” (*Ceremony* 168). This sounds similar to the description of Yellow Woman’s relation with Silva. Indeed, the two times he has sex in the novel are with Ts’eh and Night Swam, both considered Yellow Women, who, as said above, are represented by a river. The

difference between them is that this time, it is Tayo who feels warmth in Ts'eh and Night Swam's hands, that is, the two women warm Tayo, and not the other way around. Genders are inverted here too. This Ecofeminist view of nature and women is part of his ultimate happiness. At the end of the novel Tayo is successful, while the rest are not. This may show that nature and women have to survive to help others survive too.

The importance of nature and of women is also reflected in the imagery that Silko uses in the novel, above all related to animals. Like in "Yellow Woman," Silko relates the protagonist to some animals and his recovery process includes them, especially the bear, the mountain lion and the deer. The bear is strongly connected to Betonie for different reasons. He is a healer and the bear and the mountain lion are spiritual guides, as Betonie is. At first Tayo is unable to see it because his education in a boarding school deprived him of this belief. Betonie's assistant, Shush is also closely related to bears. Betonie tells Tayo Shush's story: as when he was a little boy, he got lost and his relatives found him with bears, acquiring features and attitudes typical of these animals. The medicine man could not get him back all at once but little by little, but "he wasn't quite the same/ after that/ not like the other children" (*Ceremony* 120). With this story, Silko is presenting a character that is not completely within any of the worlds: he does not belong to natural world, but he does not belong to the tribe either, his transformation is incomplete, like Tayo at that point of the ceremony. Tayo is captive in two worlds: the modern and the tribal one, but unlike the boy, he will complete his transformation and will be saved, integrating into the tribal world he had missed in order to return to earth. With this Silko makes clear that there are a lot of people who get lost because they are within two worlds and that the inaction of some of them because they are too influenced by the white world and the education they received makes them finally give up and their end is never a happy one. This was not Tayo's case but it was that of others such as Tayo's mother, his cousin Rocky and his friends. They are all lost because of their relation to white culture and the impossibility for them to reintegrate into the Laguna one. They do not have spiritual faith but prefer materialism and this is why they fail in their recovery and their ends are so sad. Bears are relevant in nearly all Native American works, and are related to characters like Francisco in Momaday's *The House made of Dawn* and Fleur in Erdrich's *Tracks*. For the former, bear hunting was related

to patience and ability, something his grandson lacked but that for him became synonymous for success. After killing the first one, he turned into a man for his reservation. For Fleur, the bear represents her healing power and strength. The three are successful thanks to this animal.

With the bear as supporter, Tayo completes the first stage of his ceremony and decides to look for the cattle. In his way, he will find the mountain lion, the second animal figure that will help him. According to Laguna stories, mountain lions transform from human into animal and are related to human hunters. When Tayo encounters him he had already started to lose faith to find the cattle and started to believe Betonie's words were useless. The mountain lion's appearance provided him hope and he decided to continue. Indeed, a bit later, the mountain lion would save him again, as he was about to be captured by two cowboys who ultimately decided to follow the mountain lion instead. What is more, when he was getting frozen a man wearing a mountain lion fur skin coat appears and brings him home. Mountain lion has taken the Hunter's form and helps him once again.

The third animal that will help him, the deer, is introduced by Ts'eh and it is related to the Mexican cattle because it is as strong as the deer. When Tayo looks for the cattle he is following a process similar to deer hunting. Tayo must return the cattle to his people and then reinitiate a cycle of life, bringing rain and fertility back. This is similar to what deer hunters did in the past when they brought the deer to the tribe and renewed the cycle of life. Tayo has to behave as the Mexican cattle, which resist no matter what occurs around them. He has to be strong to in order to help his tribe and himself.

The three animals also guide Tayo on his journey back home in relation to the cardinal points too, as in "Yellow Woman." Like the unnamed narrator of the story, who follows a circular journey, Tayo follows the animals to the West (symbolized by the bear), the North (symbolized by the mountain lion) and back to the West again (symbolized by the deer). This journey represents the "home coming" topic, so characteristic of Native American texts. Here Tayo "envisioned himself as a boy returning home, like heroes in Grail narratives, he elevates himself from fighting and torture to a higher plane of oneness with stars, a dependable celestial pattern that unites him to his ancestors" (Snodgrass 106).

In general it could be said that Tayo goes through a therapy that requires the help of females and mentors to get in touch with earth again. The female characters are the natural forces that provide with him love and strength, and Betonie, as his tribal mentor, reconnects him to nature through stories and his wisdom. Tayo recovers when he is able to understand the power of nature and its imagery, and of women.

### **3.3.3. *Ceremony* and politics.**

*Ceremony* is not only a novel about the importance of storytelling and nature. It is also a useful tool for Silko to criticize certain aspects related to Euro-American attitude towards Native American people and their customs. The impact of the white world within native life can be studied from different perspectives: the impact of war on Native American people, the impact of white elements and consumerism, and the impact on the land.

The effect that the contact between Native American people and white society had on the former is clearly depicted in this novel. According to Alan Velie, the first generation of writers belonging to Native American Renaissance described Indian characters who were suffering terribly for different reasons. Although they employed humor and topics were usually compassionate, most of the protagonists were heavy drinkers or poor, tormented people who did not know who or what they belonged to, or because they had participated in terrible events like World War II (264). This is probably the case with Tayo and other male characters in *Ceremony*.

From the very beginning of the novel, the reader knows that Tayo is suffering from terrible pain, and also by the feeling of not belonging to anywhere, as even when he returns to the reservation he does not feel it is home. World War II interrupts his life, as that of most people of his generation, and causes him a terrible disorder. The response to the threat of capture, and torture and to the dismemberment of bodies because of bombs and other weapons becomes a routine in the life of American soldiers. Tayo is aware of all this, and for him it is difficult to kill other people in the battlefield because



he understands that they are young men who only want to go back home like him. The loss of his cousin and his inability to save him torture his mind. At first, “fellow infantrymen dismiss Tayo’s hallucination as a normal part of combat fatigue for front-line GIs who fear what the ancient Norse called ‘the sleep of the sword’ (Snodgrass 95).<sup>99</sup> In 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, some psychiatrists adopted the term “post Vietnam syndrome” or “post-traumatic disorder” (PTSD). The victims, like Tayo, suffer from flashbacks, dreams and fever and becomes irritable, hypervigilant and vomits. The consequences are even more terrible: a psychotic state, tension, delusions, anger, chronic digestive illness, night sweats, alcoholism, drug addiction, accidents, bullying, spousal and child abuse, criminal assault and suicide. For Tayo the symptoms “take the form of fog and smoke and an incorporeal state that denies him substance and color” (Snodgrass 95). He feels invisible and unable to speak because of his trauma, and he cannot be relieved by doctors at the Veteran’s Hospital, because they are only able to control the body, but not the mind of the patient. Like him, the majority of Native American men who return from World War II require alcohol to drown their trauma. The difference is that Tayo is not simply angry, he is also sad because of all the things he has lived through, to which he has to add the tremendous confusion he suffers because of Euro-American influence, the city and the education he received. He will need a ceremony process to recover from all this. Unlike the rest of his friends, he is not interested in glorifying his time in the army and is completely aware of the ways in which Native Americans were mistreated by the whites. He states:

One time there were these Indians, see. They put on uniforms, cut their hair. They went off to a big war. They had a real good time too. Bars served them booze, old white ladies on the street smiled at them. At Indians, remember that, because that’s all they were. Indians.”  
(*Ceremony* 38)

When the war finished and they did not wear the uniform any more, they were ignored and mistreated again. This is something Tayo accepts but his friends do not, they prefer to drink alcohol and tell stories about good times “in Oakland and San Diego; they repeated them like long medicine chants, the beer bottles pounding on the counter tops like drums” (*Ceremony* 39). Even though they know what Tayo is

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<sup>99</sup>The term dates from American Civil War when Jacob Mendes da Costa called the syndrome “effort syndrome,” “nostalgia,” “irritable heart,” or “soldier’s heart.” It was renamed “shell shock,” “war neurosis” or “battle fatigue” during World War I by psychiatrist Charles Samuel Myers (Snodgrass 95).

suffering they show it differently because they deny their experience, and use alcohol, misogyny and drugs. However, their stories “have moments of insights into the difficulties faced by Indians encountering Euro-American, urban culture for the first time” (Rice 122).

Emo’s, Harley’s, Leroy’s and Pinkie’s experience at war and with the white world has displaced their ethical and historical feelings towards Native American traditions and this makes them become lost. They embrace materialism and violence and blame white people for their suffering and for that of all Native American people. Fortunately, Tayo initiates a process of recovery that will help him. Betonie explains to him that not all is that simple. It is not enough to blame white people for what they did: “Nothing is that simple,” he said, “you don’t write off all the white people, just like you don’t trust all the Indians” (*Ceremony* 118). With this Silko seems to suggest that those like Emo, Harley, Leroy or Pinkie deny their heritage because they embrace the materialistic and individualistic cultures of Euroamerican culture and this can hinder their cultural survival in the same way that white people have done with them.

In the novel, Silko opposes the reservation and the city and the latter represents an element of Euro-American destructiveness. However, she also insists that in order to progress, Indians must evolve in their worldviews and adapt to the new challenges represented by “urban growth in order to encompass the contemporary experiences of Indians like Tayo” (Rice 115). Although Tayo decides to change the city for a more traditional life in the reservation, he realizes that the knowledge he has acquired there is essential to understand the forces at work in the world and as he is able to adapt this understanding into a traditional and adaptable framework. Therefore, he survives, unlike the rest of characters. He is able to combat witchery represented by white people and their temptations and comprehend that destroyers are the ones who lack things, because they are thieves:

He wanted to kick the soft white bodies into the Atlantic Ocean; he wanted to scream to all of them that they were trespassers and thieves. He wanted to follow them as they hunted the mountain lion, to shoot them and their howling dogs with their own guns. The destroyers had sent them to ruin this world, and day by day they were doing it. He wanted to scream at Indians like Harley and Helen Jean and Emo that the white things they admired and desired so much ... all these things had been stolen, torn out of Indian land: raw living materials for their ck’o’yo

manipulation. The people had been taught to despise themselves because they were left with barren land and dry rivers. But they were wrong. It was the white people who had nothing; it was the white people who were suffering as thieves do ... The destroyers had tricked the white people as completely as they had fooled the Indians, and now only a few people understood how the filthy deception worked; only a few people knew that the lie was destroying the white people faster that it was destroying Indian people. (*Ceremony* 189-90)

Betonie tells Tayo that witches created white people while competing and showing off their diabolical powers. This story does not have a counterpart in Laguna mythology but it is set in the pre-contact era and it depicts the coming of the whites to the Americas the devastating consequences this had for them: capacity to kill with weapons, senseless death of animals like buffalo, starvation, terrible diseases, rape of the land by mining, and destruction via nuclear weapons among other things. With *Ceremony*, Silko seems to create an apocalyptic vision of the Jackpile mine and its incorporation into the myth. The novel describes the effect white people had over the land and the destruction they caused. Indeed, the concept of territory is very different for Native American and white people. Traditional Native stories describe places and functioned as maps to determine the territory, so when listeners heard the stories they became incorporated not only into a story but also into a place or material world. In contrast, “white cultures appropriate territory with the language of the witchery” (Piper 486). For Laguna people the landscape is a being and a member of the story and to eliminate the land is to eliminate the story itself. This is what white people in the novel did with the mine in Cebolleta land and the barbed-wire fences around it and with the atomic bomb at White Sands. When Tayo understood all this, he also knew that all the stories he had been told fitted together and that he was not crazy at all, so his ceremony had been completed and he and his community had been saved. He beat witchery and survived.

*Ceremony* represents the importance of storytelling and land to the survival of Native American people, but also the relevance of believing in oneself in order to achieve wholeness. Tayo will find his salvation with the understanding of what witchery means, with his understanding of the need of evolving to adapt to new situations and with his understanding of stories and their relation to Mother Earth.

### **3.4. ALMANAC OF THE DEAD AND VISIONARY STORYTELLING**

*Almanac of the Dead* is a compilation of multiple stories and characters, related by different events and explained in a nonlinear way. The book is divided into six main parts and each of these parts is divided into different books. The four main parts correspond to different places; Part One to The United States of America; Part Two to Mexico; Part Three to Africa; Part Four to the Americas; Part Five to The Fifth World, and Part Six refers to one world and many tribes. The novel combines multiple places, characters and events that make it difficult for the reader to follow but that lead to an ultimate end in which everything is assembled together.

The novel has been equally praised and criticized. For Robert A. Lee, Silko overreaches, her novel is too crowded or hectoring, or damagingly under-edited. He continues saying that some admirers “speak of rare brilliance, The New World, as indeed a very old world, replete in its own wisdom of populations and languages” (24). For him, the novel fills out its tapestry of fissure and self-loss, its show of multiple sexual desire or damage bears the promise of a redemptive better world of the Americas than that “preyed on by the modern raptors of both capitalism and capitalism” (24). According to Lee within the novel the almanac “supplies the banner of resistance, complex prophecy, a codex” (24).

For Meredith Tax, the novel can be compared to a mural by Diego Rivera, with the characters of the novel as pictures typical of this type of mural: on one side the Mexican bourgeois represented by Illiana and Alegria; on the other side Lecha and Zeta; in the center Angelita la Escapia and all the revolutionaries, including El Feo and Tacho; and at the bottom David’s and Seese’s baby. She deals in depth with the novel and says that for the first hundred pages, “my heart was in my mouth, I felt the kind of suspense I remember from first time reading *One Hundred Year of Solitude* or *The Brothers Karamazov*” (17). She felt suspense not created by the plot but by her worry about the audacity of the work and the fear the author would not be able to pull it off. However, she soon got involved in the reading and stopped worrying because “despite its elaborate structure and tonal complexity, the book is truly engrossing” (17). Tax praises its “luminous faith in its own and the importance of preserving the story for those who

come after” (17) and its combination of modernist techniques and left-wing politics which is not common in the literature of the United States. And above all, she states:

When I was a girl, writers-mainly Norman Mailer- used to talk about the “Great American novel,” and wonder which of them would master her. ...I always figured there could be one great American novel, so it didn’t have to be such a hot competition. What a joke on all those big-mouthed New York guys. This one was written by a woman and a Native American at that. (18)

No matter the criticism, it seems that the novel compiles a huge number of characters, stories and events that deal with varied and important topics, such as the importance of stories and its opposition to written words, a criticism against the corruption of Anglo-European culture, money, power, exploitative sexuality, corrupt individualism and male disdain for women. She criticizes not only European values but concepts of land ownership, modern democracy, capitalism, and the Western idea of freedom and human rights. It can even be considered a kind of visionary novel that predicted many events that are quite current at present, as it can be seen below.

#### **3.4.1. *Almanac of the Dead* and storytelling.**

Storytelling is one of the most relevant elements within the plot development and it takes a special meaning when it is opposed to the written words in the novel too, represented in the form of the almanac that old Yoeme gave to her granddaughters Lecha and Zeta.

Stories acquire great importance in the course of the novel and Silko parallels them to the changes that the different characters foretell that will occur in a short time, the revolution that most characters talk about. This is what Adam Sol refers to in his essay “The Story as it is Told.” He considers that the Native American practice central to *Almanac*, and the power that is responsible for the strength of the revolutionary movement is that of oral storytelling and “In *Almanac of the Dead* this aspect of storytelling takes on special meaning with the radical changes about to occur” (30-1).

Some characters reveal the great importance that stories have for Native American people. For example, Angelita La Escapia’s opinion considers that storytelling is

completely necessary in order to connect people with their past, understand it and ultimately, preserve it. In the novel, La Escapía goes on to say, “the stories of the people or their ‘history’ had always been sacred, the source of their entire existence. If the people had not retold the stories, or if the stories had somehow been lost, then the people were lost; the ancestors’ spirits were summoned by the stories” (*Almanac of the Dead* 315-16). Some characters have much to say in this vein. Old Yoeme, Sterling, Clinton or Calabazas play the role of storytellers, using both written and oral forms and becoming relevant in the novel.

Old Yoeme is the Yaqui woman who relates old and new ways and lives. She is able to transmit to her granddaughters the knowledge they need, and which the tribe also needs to learn in order to survive. She possesses the old almanac that explains their past and which Lecha and Zeta have to keep as an invaluable possession. She is a great storyteller. According to Annette Van Dyke, storytelling is central to the novel-story in the form of the almanac and in the form of prophecy, but also in the form of each character’s personal story. In this vein, Yoeme, “the ancient Yaqui woman whose story links the days of the Spanish conquerors with the days of her granddaughters, Zeta and Lecha” (“From Big” 36), is a good example. She believed that the almanac had living power within it, a power that would help all tribal people come together and fight for the same purpose, that of retaking the land.

Van Dyke defines Yoeme as a storyteller, as a “representative of the people who emerges at a time when the bloodlines are being mixed and the people are losing their traditional culture” (“From Big” 41). She only reappears in the story when she considers that her granddaughters are old enough to understand the meaning of the stories she has to tell them, ensuring that they will preserve them. Indeed, by telling her granddaughters about the existence of the almanac and the need of keeping it, Yoeme establishes a grandmother-granddaughter relationship which is very typical of the Pueblo culture and basic for Native American storytelling techniques. For the past twelve thousand years, most cultures have practiced the tradition of passing on the explanation of “being” and “becoming” to their offspring. “While this function is not gender specific, the recipient of this information must have full faith and confidence in the one who is teaching. In many cultures, women carry the ontologies to their offspring” (Evans 172). Once again, it seems that women have the responsibility of

transmitting oral legacies to their children, and this proves their importance within the Native American community.

In Laguna Pueblo, which is principally based on a matriarchal society where women develop a really important role, grandmothers and mothers also transmitted their stories to their children, as Charlene Taylor Evans refers: “the role of the grandmother is to ‘tell’ and ‘re-tell’, and the mother-daughter pair serves as a custodian of culture” (173). When Yoeme gives Zeta the almanac, she is making sure that it will survive. She warns her to keep it intact, because when something is written down, it is also subject of interpretations and embellishments that can even destroy its essence. So, although they trust the written form to trespass their knowledge, Yoeme is also aware of its possible negative sides. Evans considers that because of the assault on the American Indian culture, “the need for secrecy is clearly transmitted from mother to daughter” (181). For her, there is again the implication of the inaccuracy and distrust of the written word, because there is always the opportunity to distort and embellish the text. As she points out, “Consequently, to assure that they are guarding and transmitting the truth, Yoeme and Zeta must be in direct communication with ancestral spirits and the dead” (181).

However, moving on in the novel we learn another side of Yoeme and she is sometimes paralleled to Betonie. She does not worry about changes and she is irreverent; her attitude towards white people and even to her own husband or other members of her family is that of complete ignorance. She wants to link the twins to their heritage with stories and challenge their understanding of the world, totally Americanized. She knows that sometimes it is necessary to look forward and she even includes some parts of her story in the almanac; “because Yoeme believes that power resides within certain stories, the power ensures the retelling of the story, and with each retelling a slight but permanent shift [takes] place” (*Almanac of the Dead* 181). This is somehow what the stories in the almanac reflect. Silko believes that traditions must evolve in order to maintain their importance and she demonstrates it through Betonie in *Ceremony* and through Yoeme in *Almanac of the Dead* as well as through the unnamed narrator in “Yellow Woman.” The three characters remind readers that Native American traditions and ceremonies are not out of date and that they are not so far from American lifestyle. This is also Ultima’s role in *Bless Me Ultima*. She understands that the traditional view of life is the best one for Antonio’s development and self-

understanding, but she also considers that this does not mean ignoring the contemporary society we live in and the circumstances of being in America. This is why Ultima, Betonie and Yoeme are so similar.

Indeed, the notebooks are reinterpreted by Lecha and Zeta, as well as Seese and even Yoeme. Lecha even writes a section in English and although she thought Yoeme would be angry with her for doing that, the woman responds in just the opposite way. She is happy because this is what the keepers of the almanac had been waiting for. It meant that old and new ways were mixed, that past and present were fused and that changes will be produced, as Yoeme and Betonie wanted. This even connects the written and oral storytelling: As Sol states, “The idea of change and the continued evolution of a tribe relates the almanac back to the oral literature on which they are based. So while the written world is of the utmost importance it is still informed by ideas more common to oral literature” (35).

Yoeme is therefore, a good storyteller who tries to see the positive aspects of including written forms into their culture in order to ensure the transmission of their customs to following generations. It is important to notice, however, that despite the fact that Old Yoeme consider Zeta and Lecha strong enough to deal with the responsibility of transmitting such an important message to the next generations, they are probably not ready for such a mission, at least at first sight. They are weapon dealers and suffer from profound disorders, a lack of love in their hearts which is not very typical. Like Tayo in *Ceremony*, the twins grew up without a mother figure, as she died when they were children. Like him, they also lack a connection to earth and feel lost. When Old Yoeme reappears to make them legitimate bearers of the tribal secret, they do not feel the need of having to do it. It is not until they discover what she means that they will ultimately appreciate its value and will go back to earth and to their lives. They go through a similar process to Tayo's. When the giant stone snake appeared in New Mexico, nobody except them understood its meaning. They then reached the point of returning to their heritage.



According to the gardener, religious people from many places had brought offerings to the giant snake, but none had understood the meaning of the snake's appearance; no one had got the message. But when Lecha had told Zeta, they had both got tears in their eyes because Old Yoeme had warned them about the cruel years that were to come once the great serpent had returned. Zeta was grateful for the years she had had to prepare a little. Now she had to begin the important work." (*Almanac of the Dead* 702-3)

A different interpretation could also be made, however. It could also be that through Zeta and Lecha, Silko exemplifies that the transgression of law is also considered a resistance strategy to break the established social order. For instance, Geronimo, a cultural hero in Native American mythology, is a drug dealer, as are Zeta and Calabazas. This could be equally condemned by readers, but theirs is not considered a Destroyer's act by Silko, but an overturning of conventional moral categories, a transgression of white law that implies resistance against colonization.

Another important storyteller in *Almanac of the Dead* is Sterling. He is somehow related to Tayo in *Ceremony* and to the narrator in "Yellow Woman." Sterling gets to Zeta's ranch after being expelled from his reservation. There he could not control a group of American people coming from Hollywood who wanted to get as close as possible to the stone snake, a symbol in the area. As he had spent most of his life in boarding schools and was educated according to white teachings, he never feels completely integrated within the tribe and it is not until he lives in the ranch and then comes back, understanding most of the stories, that he is able to reconnect and comprehend the relevance of the tribe's folklore. Besides, he will need to tell his story to others, becoming in this way a storyteller, in order to feel better about his past and understand his future and present. Like Tayo and the narrator of "Yellow Woman," he was reluctant to believe in traditional stories, because he had been taught about their lack of veracity, but when they understand the power of stories, they feel complete and related to the land again.

It is Sterling who the first to introduce some myths related to Native American folklore and he also expresses his opinions about stole idols, museums, or Hollywood people, that is, about white people, aloud and quite clearly. For him, ancient people were too exaggerated about the importance they gave to old stone symbols. However, after his experience in Tucson, he could understand the true meaning of the snake and the importance it had for old people. It was not until he looked at it from a distance that

he understood and accepted old prophecies and the meaning of the symbols, although this was not an immediate healing vision, he finally achieved it.

When he leaves Zeta and Lecha, he remembers all the old stories that he had been told and realizes that after this experience, he would be unable to live as he had lived until then, ignoring old stories and paying more attention to the world of white people than to his own tribe. Paradoxically, these stories had been told to him by the female members of his family.

He knew he could never again live as he had before. Aunt Marie and other old folks used to scold Sterling when he came home from Indian boarding school to visit because he wasn't interested in what they had to say and wasn't interested in what went on in the kivas ... Sterling had never been disrespectful of the old folks' beliefs, he just had not cared either way about religion. This indifference had been used against Sterling during the banishment proceedings of the Tribal Council.... But now, after Tucson, Sterling felt as if he knew too much, and he would never be able to enjoy his life again. (*Almanac of the Dead* 754)

After this revelation, Sterling knows that he is back to tell the story. He is now able to tell people the meaning of the return of the snake because he had learnt it from the almanac and his experiences in Tucson as well. He knew that the snake meant the end of the white exploitation, because it was looking at the South, the way the twin brothers were coming. He was there to explain this positive message to his people, as Tayo did at the end of *Ceremony* too. They had to convey this and in this way they become storytellers. For Lee, Sterling represents the conciliator and returnee in the novel because on Silko's part "this is the novel as hemispheric vision, mythic while would-be actual, ecological while sedimented in the humanity of its indigenous peoples, and the Americas in their entity as first and last landscapes" (24).

Robert Nelson compares Sterling and Tayo in *The Cambridge Companion to North American Literature*. He considers that Sterling's personal history is a story of contact with attractive but dangerous non-Laguna forces, departure from Laguna, and eventual return to it with the acquired knowledge that teaches him how to live with those forces. For him "both men's histories recapitulate the "Yellow Woman" motif that Silko so strongly associates with the image of the river that snakes its way along the southeastern corner of Old Laguna" (246). While Tayo completes his personal return by crossing the river from the southeast at sunrise, in *Almanac of the Dead*, the water-spirit of Kawaika takes the shape of the giant spirit snake Maahastryu, "who formerly inhabited the lake

after which the Laguna people were originally named” (246). Maahstryu reappears in the open pit of the uranium mine, looking south, and fulfilling the prophecy of which the Laguna story is just a small part (247). Sterling is a witness of all this, and an active participant too.

The third important storyteller in the novel is Clinton. He appears in the middle of the novel and although at first it could be considered a secondary character, he became relevant once he decided to start to look for volunteers to create a new army. This had as its main objective dividing wealth among people, especially the homeless.

He wanted people to know and learn about African history. Indeed, he was in charge of explaining to all the members of his group about it, becoming a storyteller. He is able to remember old stories told in ancient times.

Clinton remembered the old grannies arguing among themselves to pass time. The older they got, the more they had talked about the past; and they had sung songs in languages Clinton didn't recognize, and when he had asked the grannies, they said they didn't understand the language either, because it was spirits' language that only the dead or servants of the spirits could understand. (*Almanac of the Dead* 420)

Through Clinton, Silko presents the African origins of Native people, as well as the capacity that African slaves had to maintain their bonds with their culture and land despite being far from their native lands. Miriam Schacht refers to the importance slaves had while maintaining their roots and folklore and transmitting it to their sons, at the same time they respected and established a bond with American culture. For her, “Clinton, a homeless African American Vietnam veteran whose first appearance comes in a chapter titled “First Black Indian”, is the novel's prime example of African-American Syncretism (58).”

The chapter “Creole Wild West Indians” represents this bond, as it shows some of the songs African Americans sang and danced and which Clinton had also reflected in his notes, like those sang during the Mardi Gras parade.

Clinton was not a fool. He could remember how his old aunties and grannies had loved to sit smoking their pipes, teasing about one another's lineage. Indians were Indians, even if they looked black. The black Indians didn't get invited to any parade, certainly not to the Negro Mardi Gras parade. Because the black Indians were troublemakers, and trouble had been the last thing the Negro middle class of New Orleans needed. (*Almanac of the Dead* 423)

It could be, however, that Clinton's main objective goes beyond this. Silko uses him with a different aim. He is African American and a Vietnam vet. His strong sense of history of American people makes him move out because he really wants to fulfill a complete version of Native and African history. But before doing it, Clinton looks back at his past and his people's history, and this helps Silko explain the relationship between African and Native peoples. This also helps her put their myths together as well. He becomes the link between the two cultures because the reader learns that African and Native American spirits worked together in the past. That is why he becomes a storyteller: "That would be his main work, to explain to the people that many of the African spirits also inhabit the Americas too" (*Almanac of the Dead* 747). Besides, the Hopi gives Clinton a book of stories about Indians who failed to be remembered by people. The Hopi had travelled around the world and written notes about African and American tribes, creating a document which can be paralleled in importance to the ancient almanac. So, in the same way Yoeme gives Lecha the almanac, Clinton also inherits a quite relevant document.

Ignorance of the people's history had been the white man's best weapon. Clinton had continued to fill his notebook with fragments of the history the people had been deprived of for so long. The Hopi had given Clinton a book that the Hopi said might shine some more light on black Indians. Clinton had written in bold letters at the top of the notebook page *Thank you, Herbert Aptheker!* (*Almanac of the Dead* 742)

His promise to the Hopi was clear in this sense as well: "... he would spread the word among the brothers and sisters in the cities. He would tell them to prepare; a day was coming when each human being, man, woman, and child, could do something, and each contribution no matter how small would generate great momentum because they would be acting together" (*Almanac of the Dead* 747).

Calabazas can also be considered a storyteller within *Almanac of the Dead*. We first learn about him when we know that Lecha and Zeta had business with him. He used to tell stories to Root and Mosca, and had a strong relationship with the first one. He used to tell him stories about old ghosts or beliefs (*Almanac of the Dead* 190-1), and, like most of the storytellers in this novel, Calabazas also remembers old people telling stories to their children and descendants. He is a storyteller now because he was also a listener in the past. For instance, he had heard multiple stories about Geronimo, one of

the most popular cultural heroes for native people. Afterwards, he would be able to tell the same stories to Mosca or Root. Indeed, each story seems to be part of other stories that reflect others and the atmosphere and landscape that surround them. This is what Calabazas reflects in the *Almanac of the Dead*. That is, he remembers people telling different versions of the same story, and each version provided something new, enriching it. This helps maintain the oral stories alive.

Despite the importance Calabazas provides to oral stories, he also represents the duality the novel tries to show between oral and written literature. He is quite sure of the relevance of putting things into written form when the topic has to do with business. He says “I don’t know. We live in a different world now. Liars and feeble-minded are everywhere, getting elected to public office or appointed federal judge. Spoken words can no longer be trusted. Put everything in writing” (*Almanac of the Dead* 217). He is quite pragmatic in this sense and recognizes the vulnerability of the spoken word. He knows that the only guarantee of keeping contracts and lands is writing everything down.

All these characters play the role of storyteller and become relevant not only because of their own behavior within the novel development but also because of the importance their words acquire for the rest of the reservation, and even for the readers. Without them, the reader would probably be unable to understand many stories, and even less the duality of written and oral literature that Silko tries to exemplify in the novel. As Clinton says, if people knew about their history, they would rise up. The stories of tortures, slavery, stolen land, unequal distribution of resources, among others, are those stories white people try to hide but that characters in the novel want to show the rest, so that they know the truth and act against it. This is what Silko wants to do in the novel, let readers know about the Native American situation and cause actions that help them solve their problems. With stories, Silko opens up a futuristic vision of the destiny of white civilization. With the almanac Silko enunciates the power of revolutionary forces and these revolutionary spirits are exemplified by Angelita la Escapia and Old Yoeme, among other characters.

From a more technical point of view, Silko also tries to include some techniques that present oral storytelling into written words. One of the features of oral tradition that she includes, like in “Yellow Woman” and *Ceremony*, is the nonlinear structure of the

stories told and of the novel itself. For example, when Sterling tells Seese about his life he starts from the point in which he becomes the gardener of the house where they both worked, he starts in media res, like “Yellow Woman.” In this vein, Silko connects the novel to ancient storytelling. Sol refers to this: “Silko frequently uses the image of a web to describe her storytelling (and essay-writing) techniques (31). Silko’s concept of time in the novel is also exemplified through Calabazas’ words:

We don't believe in boundaries. Borders. Nothing like that. We are here thousands of years before the first whites. We are here before maps or quit claims. We know where we belong on this earth. We have always moved freely. North-south. East-west. We pay no attention to what isn't real. Imaginary lines. Imaginary minutes and hours. Written law. We recognize none of that. (*Almanac of the Dead* 216)

In this statement, Calabazas uses the present tense, as if he were one of the ancient storytellers. This idea of time contrasts with the linear description of time divided into present, past and future, typical of Euro-American culture. For Native American people, everything was always present because the land was always present too. Indeed, as Calabazas states here, land and time are always connected. The borders he refers to create distinctions between present and past, north and south, east and west and there are always privileges for ones and not for the others. Native American people do not believe in that, and Silko shows it in the novel. There are multiple and varied characters who at first sight do not have anything to do with each other, however, they are connected because of their dreams, or because they have heard the same prophecies or because they can see the future. So they do not need time to be together, but their spiritual lives link them despite being far away from each other. These people are not connected through their national affiliation or location on either side of the borders but, as Romero states,

through their relationships to the land and the spirits of the land. To reinforce this idea the text is built around a spiritual structure that connects past, present, and future peoples through shared powers and channels of communication that have been discredited by the dominant American culture. (628)

Calabazas’ words are similar to Faulkner’s concept of land as expressed by one of his Native American characters in “A Courtship,” as it was seen before. Moreover, instead of this present, past, future time line, Silko establishes here, like in the rest of her novels, a cyclical concept of time. Each story seems to return to an origin, space or

event that happened earlier. Lecha reveals this in one of the fragments of the ancient almanac: “An experience termed past may actually return if the influences have the same balances or proportions as before. Details may vary, but the essence does not change. The day would have the same feeling, the same character, as that day has been describes as having had before” (*Almanac of the Dead* 574). And the stories told by Mahawala to Calabazas also exemplify this circular conception of time. “Old Mahawala started out, and then the others, one by one had contributed some detail or opinion of alternative version. The story they told did not run in a line for the horizon but circled and spiraled instead like the red-tailed hawk” (*Almanac of the Dead* 224).

Another important technique included in the novel is that of “tangents,” used for different purposes. It basically consists on moving the attention of the main elements and focusing on secondary ones. For instance, some protagonists are left aside for many pages while secondary stories and characters acquire great relevance and are deeply explained. Sometimes the reader does not even learn what happened to these protagonists. Sol says that this is a traditional feature of Pueblo storytelling and Silko herself referred to this too in her novel *Yellow Woman*,

The impulse was to leave nothing out. ... Accounts of the appearance of the first Europeans (Spanish) in Pueblo country or the tragic encounters between Pueblo people and Apache raiders were no more or no less important than stories about the biggest mule deer ever taken or adultery couples surprised in cornfields and chicken crops. Whatever happened, the ancient people instinctively sorted events and details into a loose narrative. Everything became a story. (31)

Tangents also had a practical side, they teach readers about different aspects of current life which do not usually appear in books. He provides the example of Alegría and the moment she got lost in the desert, which can be read as “a lesson in desert survival” (Sol 32). According to this author, tangents are also used “to contextualize the stories in which they occur and to introduce unfamiliar readers to the perspective of central characters, most of whom belong to ethnic groups whose histories have been suppressed or coopted by the dominant forces of power” (Sol 32). This means that some parts of the novel have also a political side that Silko uses to explain the readers certain aspects of their history that she knows the readers are not familiar with. For Sol, the aggregate effect of the orally based narrative structure used in the novel is the constant reminder to the reader that the novel is not only a novel but also an attempt to bring

Native American traditions to life. “This links back to the novel’s ambition to participate in return to native ways of seeing and undermining of European practices (Sol 33).

However, although *Almanac of the Dead* shows many of the characteristics of oral storytelling, it is basically a written novel and the written word acquires a really important role, represented by the ancient almanac. Indeed, it could be said that the almanac is the opposite of the storyteller, because it explained who they were but not through oral transmissions. Old people were sure they would not survive so they decided to transmit their origins in a different way. Silko reflected it in the novel:

They argued whether they should send the strongest to make a run for it, or whether they should give up and all simply die together. Because they were the very last of their tribe, strong cases were made for their dying together and allowing the almanac to die with them. After all, the almanac was what told them who they were and where they had come from in the stories. Since their kind would no longer be, they argued the manuscript should rightly die with them. Finally, the stubborn voices prevailed; and three young girls and a small boy were chosen to carry the almanac North. ... The people know if even part of their almanac survived, they as people would return someday. (*Almanac of the Dead* 246)

For them, the almanac meant survival, because even if they did not survive, if someday someone finds the almanac and is able to transmit and understand it, they would return. This means they rely on the written word more than on the spoken one and that it could even replace their traditional storytelling.



### 3.4.2. *Almanac of the Dead and Nature.*

Ecofeminists were concerned with the figure of the Other and their exploitation by the patriarchal societies. Charlene Spretnak states that many of the men and women in charge continually “remind everyone that the proper orientation of civilization is to advance itself in *opposition* to nature” because “we are entangled in the hubris of the patriarchal goal of dominating nature and female” (9). Silko connects domination of nature and women in her works but she also focuses on the oppression of the poor and Native Americans, which is consistent with the Ecofeminists’ concern for “the liberation of all subordinated Others” (Gaard 5). *Almanac of the Dead* is probably the best example of this concern. In the novel, Silko deals with the aim to liberate subordinated Others in an attempt to establish a reciprocal community. In the group of these Others, Silko includes women, Native American and disabled people, but also the earth, as this is humanized here as in the rest of Silko’s works.

The treatment of women by some male characters in the novel is clearly connected to what Ecofeminists consider disdain and mistreatment because men think they are superior beings that can control them. In *Ceremony*, Silko presents male-chauvinist characters such as Emo who consider women are just bodies they can benefit from because for him they have no feelings or mind. He follows the oppressive conceptual framework of women as Down, because they represent nature and body in opposition to rationale and culture represented by men. Silko also presents a series of native women who prostitute to get alcohol or drugs. However, *Almanac* presents an even stronger version of misogyny that trespasses the limits of acceptability, and which contrasts with the opinion other male characters, and female ones too, have of women.

With their clear hate towards women, Serlo and Beaufrey, overtly homosexual and proud of belonging to the European lineage, want to remove them from the procreation line, and create a superior bloodline that does not include women. For Serlo, a child can be destroyed by its mother’s defects: “even the most perfect genetic specimen could be ruined, absolutely destroyed by the defects of the child’s mother. Serlo believed the problems that Freud had identified need not occur if a child’s “parents were both male” (*Almanac of the Dead* 542). He even considered the possibility of creating an alternative Earth, self sufficient as long as energy is generated. “Once sealed, the

Alternative Earth unit contained the plants, animals, and water necessary to continue independently as long as electricity was generated by the new “peanut-size” atomic reactors” (*Almanac of the Dead* 542). His disdain for women and Earth was immense. Indeed, he remains celibate because of his grandfather’s idea that penetration is useless and that it is better to freeze his semen for future generations to use. Taking advantage of technology and biotechnological development he belongs to a secret multinational organization with a secret agenda which develops the HIV designed virus to destroy those unwanted group of people that for him form part of a filthy world. This means he is somehow a kind of terrorist that resembles the Nazis and aims to destroy those considered inferior because they are not the superior race he belongs to. Similarly, Beaufrey manipulates everyone for his own purpose and his jealousy for his lover’s son ultimately leads him to his kidnapping and probably to killing him too. His dangerous behavior includes the production of films that deal with abortions, murders, fetal dissections, ritual circumcision, sex change operations, snuff films, and sodomy. Even an event as important as an abortion is treated cruelly by male characters, it “recurs as an adjunct to other gory motifs that virilify cruel males rather than reluctant mothers-to-be” (Snodgrass 42). With them Silko creates characters who are opposed to what she struggles for, the veneration of women and Earth as elements intrinsically linked to humanity and progress. Their actions seem to be directed by “malicious narcissism” (Jarman 155). Michelle Jarman states that sexual perversion is not unique to homosexual or disabled characters in the novel, “Debased sexual fetishes are constitutive elements of ‘Destroyer’ culture. However, Serlo and Beaufrey’s willingness to efface or rescript the historical relationship between eugenics and homosexuality underscores Silko's larger argument: that the Euro-American drive to domination depends upon an active cannibalisation of its own past” (Jarman 155). As aristocrats they believe that society has been vulgarized because lower classes have been able to amass fortunes or have political power. Included in these lower classes we find women. However, they are not so far from other authors’ characters anyway. Faulkner’s Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* also excludes his son because of his back blood and is determined to create a dynasty free from this race, a project based on the containment of race crossing and the creation of a kind of paradise in which some are not accepted because they do not have certain characteristics. Similarly, Hurston’s Joe Starks, despite

being Negro, wants to distinguish himself from the rest of his town fellows in order to feel superior too. Both consider or at least treat women as inferior beings too.

It is not only them who disdain women and anything related to them. Other male characters in the novel do it too. Menardo, for instance, rejects his native origins and does not worry about his wife's multiple abortions, or even her death, which only worried him because the chief was asking uncomfortable questions; General J. is also a scholar of castration and sterilization (*Almanac of the Dead* 495). They all represent the patriarchal society Ecofeminists disagree with. They believe in the supremacy of male over female and this is what Silko is strongly criticizing in the novel. Indeed, in contrast to all these opinions, she creates powerful female characters that have much to say. Angelita La Escapia is probably the strongest one, very much alike Silko's favorite Native American goddess, Yellow Woman. Unlike the unnamed protagonist of "Yellow Woman" and like Ts'eh in *Ceremony*, she is triumphant. She is sexually free, graduated, overtly political and establishes a relationship with El Feo and with other men based on her own power that they understand and accept. She is also identified with the earth and sex with her relates her lover with natural forces. Silko describes it in these terms,

He imagined the warmth of the darkest, deepest forest in an early-summer rain; he imagined he was burying himself deeper and deeper into the core of the earth until he lost himself in eternity where wide rivers ran to a gentle ocean that included all beings, even Engels and Marx. (*Almanac of the Dead* 522)

This depiction reminds us of that of Tayo's sexual relationship with Ts'eh and the unnamed narrator's one with Silva. Once again a woman is related to the river, implying Angelita's connection to the mythological Yellow Woman. Her main aim was recovering the land their ancestors had stolen and she transmitted this desire to those who surrounded her. "A great 'change' is approaching; soon the signs of the change will appear on the horizon." Angelita's words filled El Feo with rapture. The earth, the earth, together they would save Earth and her sister spirits" (*Almanac of the Dead* 468). For her, like for most native people, the earth is so important that it deserves violence. She cannot accept it is destroyed by white people. Her connection with earth comes, then, in a different manner from that of other female protagonists in Silko's novels, but it is not less important. Protecting the land with fighting or with stories seems to have the same ultimate objective. Indeed, "Angelita's combination of Yellow Woman qualities —

untrammelled sexuality, earth-centeredness, and heroic action — provides an antitype to the white women in *Almanac*, all mired in an artificial, sterile and narcissist culture, corrupted and corrupting” (Barnett 27).

Her connection to Marxism is also worthy of being dealt with. She follows Marx because “he understood what tribal people had always known” (*Almanac of the Dead* 520). For him the stories of the people or their history had been sacred and include powerful spirits. If the stories can be healing they can also inspire political metamorphoses and revolution: “stories of depravity and cruelty were the driving force of the revolution, not the other way around” (*Almanac of the Dead* 316). Silko compares him to a shaman or storyteller whose words are powerful and moving. However, she is also aware of the limitations of these words when they are put in a Native American context, because they do not deal with animals, or land, or elements which are useful for Native people, and for the characters in the novel only those who fight for the land can also fight for liberation.

This treatment towards women is similar to that provided to other Others, including disabled, poor or homeless people, treated as inferior beings. Paraplegic Trigg is one of those characters who show this attitude towards them. His only aim is to walk again with the help of “electronic-impulse hookups to his legs and skulls. He wanted to help research teams obtain the fresh biomaterials they needed” (*Almanac of the Dead* 389). As a businessman, he also creates a bank of plasma donors with homeless people but “Avoid the ones with scabby arms and legs from needles, and don’t bother with the ones with runny noses or runny eyes” (*Almanac of the Dead* 394). He pays them for their plasma but ultimately kills them. However, he does not consider this a murder but euthanasia to carry out his “personal eugenic project” (Jarman 152) Trigg blames his victims for being easy preys and reinforces his idea that they are human rubbish, because of “their economic failure within what he sees as the limitless profit-making possibilities of capitalism” (Jarman 152). Therefore, he actually believes that he is transforming human debris into useful biomaterial he can sell. His disdain for these people seems endless and fits with what Ecofeminists complain about, the mistreatment of Others made by male white characters.

Root also exemplifies the treatment to disabled people in the novel. After a bike accident he turned from being a common man into a disabled one “with slurred speech, a leg that dragged” (*Almanac of the Dead* 170). His relationship with his family and those who surrounded him changed completely after that and he could then realize his own situation from an outsider’s perspective. When Calabazas explains to him that in order to survive one must be different from others but also be able to appreciate these differences (*Almanac of the Dead* 201), Roots learns about his own changes, and his family’s attitude towards his anomalies, which they consider incomprehensible and repellent. “Through Root, Silko suggests that disability might allow one to cross into another form of consciousness, even an alternative cultural identity” (Jarman 162). After the accident he starts to reject his Caucasian identity and resents the way white people treated him for not being perfect. In contrast, he could feel better with Calabazas or Mosca, who did not seem to worry about his imperfections. When Tayo was in hospital, he also felt white doctors were unable to identify his problem and were unable to empathize with him because they could not understand what he felt was not only the consequences of war, but his disorder was inner and had to do with his disconnection to land. Roots also feels the white side of his family is also unable to understand him and appreciate the value he had for surviving an accident, no matter the consequences this had for his physical appearance or his abilities. He prefers then to exile from them and get into contact with Native people, who do not seem to have such high expectations on him. Similarly Tayo will only recover when he realizes white doctors cannot cure him and centers on native ceremonies and people. Root finally understands what being different means and states: "Because if you weren't born white, you were forced to see differences; or if you weren't born what they called normal, or if you got injured, then you were left to explore the world of the different" (*Almanac of the Dead* 202-203). It seems then that “*Almanac* suggests that shifting identities are an elemental product of an impermanent world. Within this context, only a commitment to difference, an imperative to adaptation, and a revolutionary demand for diversity — in other words, only an anti-eugenic framework — will allow a productive form of evolutionary agency” (Jarman 163 ). If one links this to Ecofeminist’s thinking, it could be implied that only when differences among people are appreciated, it will be possible to establish a coherent society that evolves in equality.

Silko is also dealing with the concept of exceptionalism and criticizing its injustice through Mosca. This idea is based on Puritan belief that America is a nation chosen by God to be superior to the rest of the world and therefore it should exclude “those individuals that mainstream conceptions of nationhood consider inferior and nonexceptional — namely, the poor, disenfranchised, nonwhite, and non-Christian” (Romero 632). He considers that oppressed people will die in the hands of white people because “They were the puritans who believed they were the chosen, the saved” (*Almanac of the Dead* 212). The novel describes that any attempts to destroy this concept of nation have been met with violent resistance, such as the poor’s protests in 1960s. According to Calabazas, they were sent to the Vietnam War so that those who survived and returned were ill enough as not to protest anymore. According to Romero, *Almanac* tries to present an alternative concept of nation by Native American people that would not exclude anyone, because they put the emphasis back on people and their relationship to the land rather than “emphasizing a superior and exceptional form of government. ‘Nation’ is used in American Indian contexts to describe a people tied to a specific geographic area, as opposed to the political entity of a centralized authoritative government found in the concept of to ‘nation-state’ (Romero 632). That is, Silko matches land and people so that both are respected as equal, as Ecofeminists state.

However, this emphasis on the care of land does not seem to apply to white characters in the novel, considered ‘Destroyers.’ Indeed, they are depicted less sympathetically because of their lack of esteem for the land. Silko considers that social, political and economic injustices stem from Christian and Euro-American disconnection from the land, because they are removed from the earth and do not understand its meaning and the importance it has for people’s survival. Like *Ceremony*, *Almanac* presents a series of white characters who show a complete ignorance of the power of earth and do not care about its destruction and the consequences this may have not only for animals and plants, but also for themselves. Moreover, the mistreatment they provide to women is also the same they provide to the earth, because as Ecofeminists state, the earth is referred to as Mother by Native characters. “Throughout the novel the word ‘rape’ is applied uniformly to land and women and to the land as woman” (Clair 150). Leah Blue, for instance, wants to create immense waterfalls in the middle of the desert and Trigg destroys the land polluting it to later create orbiting space colonies

where only selected people would live. Against them, eco-warriors decided to fight to save the earth. At the International Holistic Healers Convention their appearance seems even ridiculous, announcing that six of them had died to free the mighty Colorado and that the war had started because their leader had been killed. For them, the enemies were space station and biosphere tycoons who were rapidly “depleting rare species of plants, birds, and animals so the richest people on earth could bail out of the pollution and revolutions and retreat to orbiting paradise islands of glass and steel” (*Almanac of the Dead* 728), as Trigg was indeed planning. They are sure that wealthy people will abandon the earth to live in these biospheres where rare species of animals and plants will create a paradise and “the last of the clean water and the uncontaminated soil, the last healthy animals and plants, would be removed from earth to the orbiting biospheres to ‘protect’ them from the pollution on earth” (*Almanac of the Dead* 728). In order to avoid this, they are planning to switch the United States off, to destroy all interstate high-voltage transmission lines, power generation plants, and hydroelectric dams simultaneously, and they will get Awa Gee’s help to do it, although they do not know it yet. Calling themselves “Earth Avenger” or “Eco-Coyote,” eco-warriors are maneuvered from gay right activists and patients with terminal AIDS disease to sabotage governmental infrastructure, starting with the Glen Canyon Dam. So they do not only fight for the protection of the environment but also for the discriminatory policy of political institutions. Silko then creates a series of characters who decide to fight to save the earth who look like an extreme version of our ecologists, and who fight against a project that although is a bit unreal for contemporary readers, could be probable in a near future, creating biospheres only for rich people to survive outside the contaminated and destroyed earth. However, she also includes a sociopolitical context because the novel does not only concentrate on the description of a liberation movement but also on the suffering and mistreatment of minorities and gays and lesbians are part of these minorities. Moreover, it is interesting to see the technology ‘Destroyers’ used. This technology ultimately destroys them, and this is quite paradoxical. Illiana dies on the staircase she desired. Menardo dies with his bulletproof vest, to show some examples. That is, modern technology that goes against nature is what causes their deaths and it becomes the witchery that destroys ‘Destroyers.’

Their violence contrasts, however, with El Feo and Tacho's idea of looking after the earth or Wilson Weasel Tail's and The Barefoot Hopi's optimism regarding a peaceful revolution. They want to finish with the white influence over Native people in order to save the land, but they want to do it without violence. Tacho (Wacah) and his brother and all the people with them "believed the spirit voices; if the people kept walking, if the people carried no weapons, then the prophecies would come to pass, and all the dispossessed and the homeless would have land; the tribes of the Americas would retake the continents from pole to pole" (*Almanac of the Dead* 711). Wilson Weasel Tail refers to Ghost Dance, a movement that tried to predict the end of white culture in favor of the Indian one. This old Native man blamed Indians for the influence that white people had over them: "You cry the white man has stolen everything, killed all your animals and food. But where were you when the people first discussed the Europeans? Tell the truth. You forgot everything you were ever told. You forgot the stories with warnings" (*Almanac of the Dead* 721). However, as he continues, he seems to provide some positive perspectives too. He seems to conclude and tries to convince the audience that in order to finish white oppression they must educate themselves and their followers about their culture and traditions, so they can spread the knowledge and keep it alive. The Ghost Dance movement seemed to have this aim. "Moody and the other hand never understood the Ghost Dance was to reunite living people with the spirits of beloved ancestors lost in the five-hundred-year war" (*Almanac of the Dead* 722). That is, he states that returning to their position before the coming of white men was possible. All they had to do was to pay attention to people of the past and the stories they told to learn about their traditions. This will help them find a way to recover their lands and all they had lost after the invasion. Similarly, The Barefoot Hopi strongly defends the twin brother's behavior and criticizes the United States government for accusing them of terrorism. He connects the twin brothers to the giant snake and to efforts they had made to recover their lands in peace: "Millions will move instinctively; unarmed and unguarded, they begin walking steadily north, following the twin brothers" (*Almanac of the Dead* 735). The Barefoot Hopi bets for a peaceful revolution without weapons or death. He is optimistic and talks about gradual changes, invoking patience and love for spirits and sees the march of the twin brothers to the North with real optimism. He invites people from different races to join them and strongly believes everything can be done without violence: "The Hopi and the twin brothers might sincerely believe in their



recovery of the Americas could take place without bloodshed” (*Almanac of the Dead* 739).

Once more, Silko presents the idea of chosen people who are superior to the Others, the need to get rid of European-American things to concentrate on the recovery of the land and characters ready to fight against this, similar to Ecofeminism. However, she also depicts Native American characters who do not need to go to such extremes and who actually understand the need of protecting the land. They have always been taught the need to care for the land and interact with it in order to survive. This provides them spiritual sustenance to the characters as the earth and its animals are depicted throughout the text as intermediaries and messengers between the Indigenous peoples and their powerful ancestor spirits. For instance, Calabazas tell his nephews that it is important to pay attention to the land because it can provide with you critical information about traces of water or grass. That is, Silko presents three types of characters: white people who seem to be blind to nature and its importance and do not mind destroying it, extreme warriors that want to protect the land, no matter the violence they have to employ or the “unclear methods” they use, and Native American people, whose concept of land as an animate being that everybody needs to pay attention to in order to survive. Seen from this perspective, it seems the most coherent one is that of Native American people, so maybe she wants us to think about that. Tax states:

Silko’s treatment of the Holistic Healers Convention is like a brief digest of her method for the whole book. In alternating currents of irony and crackpot occultism, pity and disgust, common sense and messianic vision, she shows that her intention is the Brechtian one of alienation, she sucks the readers in not only to tip them off balance, the purpose being not to make them identify but to make them think. (18)

Finally, in the novel Silko proposes the idea of saving the land through a series of tribal coalitions. She thinks in order to create a new concept of nation that is based on land, it is necessary to go beyond cultures and make cross-cultural and cross-national alliances so that injustices of Euro-American concept of nationhood will be avoided. She describes completely different groups of people who fight for the safety of Mother Earth and who finally have a “Meeting in Room 1212.” The healers and leaders from various tribes, Native American gunrunners, The Barefoot Hopi, Awa Gee (computer hacker), Clinton and many other religious leaders plan this revolution. Silko seems to

want to create a revolution supported by peoples from multiple places and origins. However, the novel finishes before the revolution starts so readers do not actually know if it works or not or if this is the best way to recover the land and fight injustice. It should not be forgotten, anyway, that Silko's main aim with this type of nation is not only to recover the land from white people, but also to create a new kind of nationhood that will be opposite to that of Euro-American people in which people will be connected to the land and will understand the importance of saving it, because those who are related to the earth, like Native American people, also understand that we are all equal and that it is not fair to distinguish or discriminate people because of their race or culture. Indeed, Silko has often been considered an anti-Euro-American writer because the novel seems to do the same with Euro-American people, that is, blame them for all the trouble Native American people have suffered, but the truth is that she does not exclude Euro-American people from this new concept of nation, because as El Feo stated:

All were welcome. It was only necessary to walk with the people and let go of all the greed and the selfishness in one's heart. One must be able to let go of a great many comforts and all things European; but the reward would be peace and harmony with all living things. All they had to do was return to Mother Earth. No more blasting, digging, or burning.  
(*Almanac of the Dead* 710)

This sentence could summarize the whole novel's intention. It is also important to remember that for Silko, after five hundred years of conquest, the land will protect itself from abuse. Earth is not dependant on us, but we depend on it. In the conversation she held with Laura Coltelli in 2010, when asked if she still thought that cruelty, brutality, corruption and exploitation of the land came from a single event or group of people and that all this continued to pervade our times, she answered that "cruelty, brutality, corruption, exploitation of the land do not come from a single event or a single group of people, it is more wide ranging I would say if you pay attention to literatures whether from China, India, Russia, Europe, the Americas, literatures of the people" ("*Almanac Reading*" 195). She adds that if there is a careful consideration and study of literatures, dramas, the folklore of people all over the world, then we will realize that cruelty, brutality and corruption go on and "there exist in the world over time and across any kind of arbitrary orders, and there is something about us human beings that seems to

invite these negative deadly energies that extend over people, over human beings” (*Almanac Reading* 195).

Silko’s relation to Ecofeminism is clear from this perspective. The novel defends the figure of Others against patriarchal and Euro-American versions and oppression. Women, disabled and land acquire an important role in the novel, opposing patriarchal and Euro-American conceptions.

### **3.4.3. *Almanac of the Dead* as a visionary novel.**

One of the most important myths in Native American literature reflected the preoccupation of Native people for the invasion of their lands by European people. This is shown in the novel, becoming the one of the most relevant and recurrent topics in the novel, as well as in Indian folklore. In the nineteenth century, most Native Americans were worried about the coming of Europeans and created myths referring to this. Many prophecies “spoke of the arrival of light-skinned people in their midst, the earliest appearance of Europeans was surely a shock for the Native populations in North America” (Leeming and Page 25). A Sioux tale explains that the arrival of the whites was announced by the spider trickster who floated through the air, alerting the Arapaho, the Shoshone and the Crow. Ultimately the spider explained Sioux men that these men were coming by boat. In the novel, the readers are explained that the arrival of Europeans had already been predicted in the ancient almanac, as well as the terrible consequences the coming of this new civilization would have for them, not only regarding culture and traditions, but also in relation to the lands and the crimes they would come against it. Silko quotes some fragments of the ancient almanac which state that white men will bring diseases and terrible natural disasters like earthquakes that will finally destroy their fields.

In the sixty-seventh year after the alien invasion, on January 3, 1590, the epidemic began: cough, chills, and fever from which people died. In the sixty eight year after the alien invasion, the face of the moon was covered with darkness soon after the sunset. It was really a great darkness and the moon could not be seen. The surface of the earth could not be seen at all. (*Almanac of the Dead* 577)

Indeed, Silko refers to the five hundred years that the white men lived in Native lands as the “Reign of Death-Eye Dog” and to white people as the “Destroyers.” These years were characterized by terrible events like famine or cruelty and Destroyers were considered as obsessed for having military power and political relevance. They are violent and do not care about humanity and earth. However, this era is about to end and there are many references to great changes about to occur.

Europeans called it coincidence, but the almanacs had prophesied the appearance of Cortes to the day. All Native American tribes had similar prophecies about the appearance, conflict with and eventual disappearance of things European. The almanacs had warned the people of hundreds of years before the Europeans arrived. The people living in large towns were told to scatter, to disperse to make the murderous work of the invaders more difficult. Without the almanacs, the people would not be able to recognize the days and months yet to come, days and months that would see the people retake the land. (*Almanac of the Dead* 570)

The novel deals with this prophecy and how the giant snake appears again to start the revolution that Tayo and El Feo leader. However, apart from this prophecy which becomes the main part of the novel’s plot, it seems that the novel itself became prophetic in many other fields. Although it may seem that *Almanac of the Dead* presents a series of fantastic ideas that may never become true, reality seems to be different and many of the aspects developed in the novel have acquired a great relevance nowadays. Zapatistas, terrorism, Mexican violence, Jihad, Al-Queda, global economy, human organs, Marxism, union of continents, illegal immigration, they all seem very current topics but also quite related to the novel and somehow present on it.

The same month that the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit was meeting, the novel appeared on bookstore shelves, so it seems the novel was anticipating an event which would get international importance and which also dealt with the relevance of creating an international environmental justice movement. More than three hundred Latino, Native, Asian and African American people from fifty different states met in late October to deal with serious environmental issues. They were joined by Delegates from various countries and wanted, above all, to speak for themselves in such serious matters, as for them it was important to reaffirm their connection to and respect for the natural world. Like for Silko in *Almanac of the Dead*,

for people of color in this summit, the environment is woven into “an overall framework and understanding of social, racial and economic justice” and the definitions that emerge from this group “are deeply rooted in culture and spirituality, and encompass all aspects of daily life-where we live, work and play” (Alston 14). They complained that communities of color are systematically targeted for the disposal of toxic waters and the placement of the country’s most hazardous industries, a practice known as “environmental racism” (Alston 14). They provided as example the fact that three out of five black and Hispanic Americans live in communities with uncontrolled toxic water sites and about half of all Asian/Pacific Islanders and Native Americans live in those areas. Dana Alston claims that for people of color, environmental issues are not just a matter of preserving ancient forests or defending whales, although the importance of saving these species is recognized, “it is also clear that adults and children living in communities of color are endangered species too. Environmental issues are immediate survival issues” (17). They did not only discuss but proposed solutions and processes for developing solutions that could help future organizing, such as the formulation of the Principles of Environmental Justice.<sup>100</sup> In *Almanac of the Dead*, the reader is not sure whether the Holistic Healer Convention and the meeting in room 1212 was successful or not but the truth is that the similarities cannot be denied. The leaders of disparate people met to deal with land issues and did it peacefully, as these people did too and want to start a revolution that will help recover the land and therefore, justice. This is what participants in this summit wanted to get too, a fair system that helps them protect Mother Earth and be free from ecological destruction. For Silko the limitations of the lack of a leader because of the multiple and different people attending to the convention are overcome by the fact they are all connected and dream of the same thing because “If individuals are connected to each other by their dreams, the earth they walk on, and the water they drink, this movement has some kind of spiritual structure, even if its members are fighting for wildly different causes” (Romero 637).

Moreover, the novel deals with an army formed by people that gathered in the Mexican state of Chiapas and which wanted to end with human rights abuses and the unfair expropriation of indigenous lands. Three years after the publication of the novel,

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<sup>100</sup> See appendix.

these people seemed to jump from fiction and materialize in the real world when rebels of Mayan descent, calling themselves Zapatistas, “burst out of the rainforest on the Mexico-Guatemala border and took over several towns in Chiapas...they were fighting for the right to plan their own political, economic and environmental futures” (Adamson xvi). They used a combination of grassroots and protests and used media to get international alliances and force the Mexican government to enter into negotiations with them, resulting in cease-fire. *Almanac of the Dead* presents many resemblances with this. In the novel Silko describes the way the peaceful march of the twins was followed not only by hundreds of people, but also by international media because German and Dutch tourists had witnessed Wacah’s sessions with the people and German and Dutch television recorded them. They received “a large amount of cash from a Swiss collector of pre-Columbian pottery in Basel” (*Almanac of the Dead* 709-10). Similarly, like Angelita la Escapia resembles Ana Maria, a Mayan woman who led the occupation of San Cristobal. Many critics have argued that the novel was the catalyst for the revolution because most of the revolutionaries had read the novel before the revolt but for Romero “it seems more likely that the historical significance of this region to ancient Mayan culture and its current devastating poverty made it a primary staging ground for both fictitious and material revolutions” (Romero 637). Anyway, it seems that Silko was in favor of the revolution, as she wrote an article expressing her support which is not surprising because Zapatistas aimed to reclaim Indigenous land, which is what Silko expresses in the novel too.

Zapatistas rebellion is not the only event the novel seems to predict. There are many other current topics included in the novel too. *Almanac of the Dead* presents a series of characters that are ready to fight to recover the land that Destroyers have stolen. Clinton and Roy are two of them. They look for volunteers to create a new army among Veterans from Vietnam War. “The Day will come when I’ll need volunteers to head units,” Rambo had said carefully (*Almanac of the Dead* 396). Their initial objective seems to be dividing richness among people, especially homeless and poor but their ultimate aim was not only that, at least not Clinton’s one. He emphasizes the similarities between African and Native American people and wants to create a coalition among them in order to fight for a common goal, destroying white invaders who have stolen their land. He speaks with the spirits of his ancestors and keeps a notebook that contains

historical and spiritual messages similar to Yoeme's. Roy and Clinton initially plan to lead their army to occupy winter homes of the rich, re-appropriating the possessions of middle class people and establishing a new code of social and spatial organization. Their army is ready to react when the army of the Mexican brothers reaches Tucson. However, they also want to control airwaves and broadcast a call on the radio to go to war. They want to use the media to get their purpose and seize radio stations to promote their ideas, because he wants to remind African Americans that "the spirits of their ancestors were still with them right there in the United States" (*Almanac of the Dead* 418). Although far from extremes, this resembles other types of propaganda made by more recent terrorists groups, such as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Very recently, this group is also trying to recruit soldiers to fight for their cause. Many men and women all over the world abandon their lives to participate in the Jihad and fight for it. The difference with Clinton's soldiers is that those were hopeless people and nowadays, they seem to be young women and men who become radicalized and who are attracted by propaganda made by media and advertisements that promise them to find a better world and fight for the holy land. Like Clinton and Roy in the novel, they also use the media to attract audiences, although their methods are more sophisticated at present because of technological developments. But they also fight to conquer the land that in their opinions belongs to the Muslim and create an Islamic State. Their treatment of women seems quite similar, anyway. In the novel Clinton's attitude towards women was much alike that of contemporary ISIS members. "Clinton thought women were correct about being enslaved by men; otherwise, Clinton had no use for bitches because what at one time had been so good in them had been ruined by their enslavement" (*Almanac of the Dead* 405). In a very recent *New York Times* article entitled "ISIS Enshrines Theology of Rape," Rukmini Callimachi describes the rape of a twelve years old girl by a military belonging to ISIS who claimed that it was not only his right to rape her but that he was also supported by Corán to do it. Callimachi adds "The systematic rape of women and girls from the Yazidi religious minority has become deeply enmeshed in the organization and the radical theology of the Islamic State in the year since the group announced it was reviving slavery as an institution" (n.p.). One only has to have a look at the news or read the newspaper or internet to know the way they treat women and their truly belief that they can be sexual slaves of soldiers, as Clinton states in the novel. So although it cannot be stated that Clinton resembles ISIS

terrorists or that these can be based on him, the truth is that Silko created a character that unfortunately has much in common with terrorists that cause so much pain in the world and that with this misogynous character she is also claiming why Ecofeminists fight against people like him.

Other similarities have also been established between the novel and Al-Qaeda and ISIS as well.<sup>101</sup> After the 11<sup>th</sup> September terrorist attacks in New York, much has been studied and analyzed about Al-Qaeda terrorists and their organization methods. In the novel, there are different sets of characters but none of them is a central protagonist. Silko also depicts a series of subplots that develop through the novel but which do not seem to be connected to the rest of plots, although there is always an emphasis on the fact that the poor and dispossessed people will rise up in a revolution. At the end of the novel, these disconnected characters meet at the Holistic convention and there they plan this revolution. In the terrorists' attacks, the nineteen hijackers did not know each other; they were only acquainted with a few of them. Even the leader, Mohamed Atta, only had direct contact with three other hijackers. Shane Graham analyzes this according to a theory by Krebs called "Social Network Analysis," and claims that resistance groups and criminal syndicates have used "leaderless cell" structures since World War II. But "Kreb's analysis becomes more complex when it includes not just the hijackers themselves, but also those believed to have provided training and/or financial and logistical assistance" (78). This shows an intricate web of connections and Atta seems to be at the center of the plot, although there are still unanswered questions such as what their relation to multinational oil companies, or to the Saudi family was. For Graham, "what makes al-Qaeda so insidiously effective, and what makes Silko's vision of a pan-tribal uprising so provocative, is that both borrow selective aspects from the decentred but inter-networked structures and flows of capital" (79). The novel suggests that tribal resistance needs to resemble these strategies of decentralization that characterize capitalism and al-Qaeda, "In other words, the novel urges the poor and dispossessed,

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<sup>101</sup> Al-Qaeda was led by Bin Laden until his death and although at first ISIS and Al-Qaeda could seem to have the same ultimate goal, the truth is that despite both show a strong ideological opposition to the West, they also present important differences. Al-Qaeda was never concerned with the immediate formation of an Islamic state but considered their attacks on America and the U.S. will provide them enough followers as to form a global movement of Muslim and stop the advance of the West. They mainly fought against Europe and America while ISIS centers attacks on the Middle East and beyond, especially Syria or Iraq, which according to them, prevent the creation of a pure Islamite state.



who are ordinarily spatially confined to ghettos, reservations, or refugee camps, to mimic the border-crossing hyper-mobility of capital and power” (Graham 79). Characters such as Angelita la Escapia and Clinton call for a coalitional politics that forge alliances between Native Americans, Mexican immigrants, African Americans, homeless people and other tribes. The novel seems therefore to be more relevant now than when it was written, above all because of the topics it deals with. Probably, these characters would not mind to be called terrorists and maybe if the fictional events narrated in the text happened in real life, it would be treated as a terrorist attack, as authorities in the book do, despite for the protagonists of the revolution, it was just a way to recover what they have been stolen.

Apart from the possible similarities with the Zapatista and Jihad movement, the novel discusses a series of topics which are on the spotlight at present in our society. The novel depicts a series of characters whose principal feature is the use of violence, above all those related to the Mexican side. Max and Leah Blue are real-estate developers who try to usurp the land and water of Native American people in order to build golf courses in the middle of the desert. But, apart from this, Max Blue assassinates for money. He was the only survivor of a plane crash and a shooting. He was sent to El Paso Veterans Hospital and we are told that he used to be a sicario who prepared and hired men to become assassins. Silko wrote,

Max believed killing a man was doing him a favor; life insurance policies were good once the widow and family were cleared by police and private investigations. ... Max never lifted a finger, of if he did, he was hundreds, even thousands, of miles away lifting only a telephone receiving. (*Almanac of the Dead* 354)

When he was shot and Uncle Mike died, he wanted to explain his wife that they were scheduled for death because they had a regular route and daily routine. Leah’s family is also related to crime and she uses sex and money to become rich. Violence in Mexico is not an unknown topic for contemporary people. The country experiences high levels of violence because of illicit drug trafficking organizations and efforts to counter them. There is continuous news about people assassinated in Mexico, of sicarios who kill for money and of businessmen, lawyers, journalists, or threatened people who have to continuously change their daily routines in order to avoid their own murder or kidnapping. Criminal cartels have killed about sixty thousand Mexican soldiers,

politicians, police and civilians since 2006. More recently President Enrique Peña Nieto has promised to fight against the cartels by improving law enforcement and public safety, an arduous work attending to the fact that most criminal institutions are deeply corrupt, as *Almanac of the Dead* also shows. So it seems the novel deals with a very current topic, more current than when it was written. Silko herself refers to this in the interview with Laura Coltelli in 2010. She explains that the situation in Mexico is terrible and that she received an email from a friend in Chihuahua that said that *Almanac of the Dead* was coming true in Mexico and she adds “I only hope that it works out like it does in *Almanac* and that it turns out right in the end” (“*Almanac Reading*” 208). She also mentioned the weapons they were using and the fact that people treated this as a battle between drug lords but in her opinion it was more than that: “it’s the beginning of a civil war, because each of the drug-smuggling cartels aligns with politicians and leaders in those Mexican states. So people are going to come pouring over our border, and it’s only going to escalate, so what I wrote is true” (“*Almanac Reading*” 208). It seems that she was right again, because illegal immigration is a real problem not only in the United States but also all across Europe. This has even recently increased due to the fluent of immigrants coming from Syria and who run away from war. We only have to look at the news to see the waves of immigrants trying to reach Europe to escape from the horrors of ISIS destruction. A reflection related to everything told about second generation of immigrants to the United States, slaves or Native Americans can be also done in reference to them. Syrian people exiled in European countries, including Spain, will keep their traditions, language and stories alive, although surely they will also try to adapt to new circumstances and the mainstream society in which they are sheltered. A problem may appear, however, when their children grow and are educated in a different system that has nothing to do with their culture and language, while at home, they will retain them. It may happen then the same it happened with the second generation of Chinese-American, Chicano, Afro-American or Native-American people educated in boarding schools and in an Anglo-Saxon educational system that had nothing to do with what their parents told them at home. One may wonder then, if they will also lose their traditions or on the contrary, and hopefully, they will keep and fight for them, in order not to be lost, as many of the characters depicted in the novels studied in this doctoral dissertation.

Similarly, readers are told about illegal traffic of human organs. Trigg planned to turn Tucson into an international center for human-organ transplant surgery and research, building a hospital for billionaires who needed organ transplants and other delicate operations (*Almanac of the Dead* 663). How the reader already knows that he had already been killing homeless people to transplant their organs illegally. Indeed, he had everything in mind: “Since the international market for organ transplants might at first be unpredictable, Trigg had been careful not to scrap his faithful standbys, the plasma donor centers, or his private hospitals for substance abusers and disturbed children and teens” (*Almanac of the Dead* 663). He does not even mind if there is a war in Mexico, as this will mean that his hospitals will be filled with wounded soldiers, and “the secret was how to obtain the enormous supply of biomaterials and organs which was necessary, and the civil war in Mexico was already solving that” (*Almanac of the Dead* 663). Even Leah Blue states “except for fat farms and tennis resorts, Tucson’s only booming business these days was human organ transplants” (*Almanac of the Dead* 751). That is, Silko is presenting a very serious matter that is quite relevant nowadays too. Indeed, in the conversation she held with Laura Coltelli in 2010, ten years after the publication of the novel, Coltelli asks her about that. Coltelli tells her that in *Almanac*, the black market of body parts seemed to be horrifying, frightening and somehow incredible, gratuitous violence. She refers to its symbolic meaning “since workers in the global economy are being robbed of their body parts” (“*Almanac Reading*”197). However, she also states that they know this traffic is real so she tells Silko “your evil characters had and still have astonishing counterparts in real worlds, although even now, some readers are uncomfortable with all this” (“*Almanac Reading*” 197). Silko’s answer to this is quite clear:

I was a little ahead of the time; nowadays it’s very well-known that in some countries like India, people will sell a kidney, and foreigners fly from Europe or the U.S. to get kidneys from there or from other places. This kind of traffic, which I sort of imagined and made up, was already going on while I was writing *Almanac*.” (“*Almanac Reading*” 198)

She states that by then, however, the media had not started to pay attention to it and that the reactions that her novel arose were hypocritical as she was describing something that was going on. She also considers nowadays it is not something new and that that there are still controversies and arguments over whether organ donors or

families of organ donors should be able to get paid money for it in this country, which is also hypocritical in her opinion, because “the truth is just as I said in him- there’s always somebody who can get everything. Everything has been commoditized in this global capitalist system, so people might want to turn away and pretend this doesn’t exist” (“*Almanac Reading*” 198). It seems that Silko, as she states, was a bit ahead of time but the truth is that most of the topics dealt in the novel are quite relevant nowadays.

Leslie Marmon Silko is, therefore, an excellent example of how contemporary Native American people have adapted to the new circumstances in which they live without losing touch with their ancestors’ culture and traditions. In her novels and short stories she has been able to include traditional Native American stories and provide them with a new meaning that helps her criticize those Euro-American aspects she does not agree with, but which also puts the characters in the dilemma of deciding which world is the best for them. Characters in “Yellow Woman,” *Ceremony*, and *Almanac of the Dead* need to learn who are responsible for the new world order they live in and also have to decide what is the best way for them to deal with the contradictions that appear from ideological differences with their native culture. Those who can do it are victorious while those who are unable to do it experience a negative ending. Silko is skillful in dealing with current topic and including them in a Native perspective too, as the works analyzed here exemplify.



## CONCLUSIONS

Stories and storytellers are fundamental in the development of the culture of most ethnic minorities that populate the United States. This has enriched American culture to unthinkable limits. Apart from its traditional forms, storytelling has extended itself to representing history, personal narrative and criticism, political commentary, cultural norms and education. Ethnic identities are not shadows of something from the past now, and they have remained despite the influence of external forces. They are not dependant on American culture or European influence, but on the contrary, European and American discourses have more worth thanks to them, even after being removed to the margins by the mainstream society. Their rich oral traditions make them valuable and necessary in an American culture that has historically lacked them.

Rejected until the Civil Rights Movement, Asian-American, Chicano, African-American and Native American minorities have proved to be essential in the development of American culture and they have also proved not to be so different in relation to the treatment of oral traditions, stories and storytellers. They all have terms to refer to them and have similar myths, tales and mythological characters that receive different names but that seem to play similar roles in their oral culture. No matter if stories are called *danstan*, *marchen* or *sagen*, or if storytellers are *seanachie*, *ozan*, or *griots*, the truth is that they had an important mission in a time when culture could not be written down and when the only way to transmit knowledge was through them. No matter if tricksters were called Signifying Monkey, the Rabbit, Anansi the Spider, Hermes or Monkey King, or if cultural heroes were twins, John Henry, or if Goddesses were Fates, Graces, Yellow Woman, Thought Woman, La Llorona or if monsters received the names of Cyclops, Titans, elves, dwarfs, giants or manitos, to name just a few examples of each. The truth is that they all have continued in time and been recovered in contemporary literature to the point of being the basis of many authors at present. This does not mean, however, that they have not evolved either. Contemporary ethnic authors have used and adapted them to refer to contemporary issues that help mainstream American society learn about ethnic minorities, their history, struggles and current circumstances.

The study of ethnic minorities in the United States and their relation to storytelling serve to see the similarities between them and also between contemporary ethnic authors. Tan, Kingston, Anaya, Rivera, Cisneros and Hurston all emphasize and denounce the same issues in their works, and they do it through stories. Racism, the negative influence of white society on their minorities, stereotypes, the oppression of the Others (namely women, nature and minorities), deculturation, and immigration seem to be common topics among them, but above all their relationship with Ecofeminism is a basic issue in their works.

Asian American writers focus on the relationship between men and women in a society that silences women because of the Confucian concept of marriage and the male chauvinist society that considers it is better to raise geese than women because they will belong to another family once they are married, as any with other object that can be passed from one person to another. They focus on mother-daughter relationships and the inability of second generation immigrants to understand their parents and a culture that is distant from their American understanding of things, but which their parents, and above all mothers, want them to learn and follow. The lack of visibility, racism, the effects of consumerism and Americanization are frequent topics in their literature which have been fully developed in the works of Tan, Kingston and Chin. Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, and Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* present women as oppressed beings subjugated to a patriarchal culture that disdains them. However, they also present strong women able to overcome and break with the silence imposed on them through the use of stories and storytellers. This shows that they are strong enough and ready to fight against male impositions. Asian American writers focus on the figure of the Other related to Chinese immigrants when dealing with topics such as Kingston's 'paper sons,' or when presenting the figure of Chinaman, an intent to break with the stereotypes placed on Chinese Americans, such as Chin in *The Year of the Dragon*. The three authors portray the gap between generations of Chinese immigrants as a consequence of the American educational system that prevents children from believing in their ancestors' culture. Tan, Kingston and Chin are also connected to Ecofeminism, as Ecofeminists defend the liberation of all subordinated Others and consider the dominance of males over females as the key to comprehending present patriarchal cultures and systems. Tan and Kingston defend the importance of breaking with old

beliefs and patriarchal conventions taking into account Ecofeminist principles — human beings are latecomers to the planet and therefore have no right to rule others.

Similarly, contemporary Chicano writers denounce deculturation and the oppression of farmers and women within their own communities through stories based on oral folklore. Nameless characters appear in Tomás Rivera's works as examples of the negative influence of the American education system which has alienated Native American children as well as made them feel as outsiders in both cultures. With strong independent Ultima, Rudolfo Anaya offers an Ecofeminist perspective, as this female character, connected to land and nature, proves how customs evolve and the Native American culture need to be adapted to present times.

As for Asian and Chicano, the use of storytelling is the perfect tool for those contemporary Afro-American writers who want to denounce political injustice and female sexual exploitation since they arrived in America. The Harlem Renaissance means, no doubt, the recovery and celebration of their ancient oral heritage. Employing that technique, Zora Neale Hurston portrays an ethnic independent woman who uses the power of the natural environment to set herself free from male oppression.

There are a lot of connections between Asians, Chicano and Frican minorities and Native American communities and the way they use storytelling in order to show the value of the culture of their ancestors. Momaday, Welch, Ortiz, Erdrich, Vizenor and Silko have promoted the Native American oral tradition to the academic arena as a practical way to transmit knowledge both to ethnic minorities and other cultures. It is obvious there is still a hard task to be done, the influence of the American television and cinema made visible the figure of the Indians, most times showing stereotypes but also the outstanding role of Native American women. Abused both by their own tribes and the European colonizers, they have emerged as powerful agents who preserve tradition. The mixture between human beings and natural imagery contributes to help those females who claim for their rights not only as fictional characters but in real life. We cannot deny the significance of the Native American Renaissance and its contributions to highlight storytelling and Indian writing, but before British and American authors such as James Fennimore Cooper, Washington Irving, Henry Thoreau, William



Faulkner or Jane Austen had filled their works with storytelling remaking the relevance of past traditions which open doors to new ways of life.

The excuse that Native American culture and traditions are static and do not evolve is no longer right now that it has been proved that contemporary Native American authors have been able to adapt storytelling to new times while keeping its essence. They use English as the vehicle to transmit oral stories as the real way to prove that they are aware of the times they live in. They have dealt with the problems of transforming the oral into the written by adapting them to new generations of all kinds of readers who need to understand not only old issues but also new ones such as environmental damage or racism. They use techniques such as double-voicing or silence, trying to imitate the suspense created by oral storytellers. They also employ mythic language that resembles the terms used in oral myths, establish a dialogic relationship between reader-writer which is similar to that of speaker-listener, and create a non-linear sequence of time in their novels which demonstrates that time for Native Americans is a quite different concept to that of Euro-American writers. This is what these writers were taught while they were listening to oral stories and this is also what they want to show in their works. The protagonists of their stories represent this entire struggle and the consequences that being in touch with white society had for their Native people. Besides, storytelling itself has gone through a series of births and rebirths that also demonstrate that Native American traditions are not fixed. Nowadays, storytelling is still present in Native American communities and used for numerous purposes. Ancestral methods and stories are being used to deal with current affairs such as violence among Native American people, violence against women and health, among others. Traditional oral stories have become an important tool because they present characters with whom Native people identify and who become role models to follow. Indeed, storytelling has been adapted to today's world thanks to the use of digital storytelling and comics or graphic novels that make stories more real and closer to new and younger generations of readers. Indeed, storytelling must change and adapt to new times because the tempo vital is now changed too.

The works of contemporary Native American authors as Momaday, Welch, Ortiz, Erdrich and Vizenor, exemplify that. They demonstrate that contemporary Native literature is closely connected to oral tradition and that they feel proud of the heritage

received from their ancestors. They show it with pride in their works teaching others their value and relevance. Moreover, they are not so different from other ethnic writers or even among themselves. With his masterpiece *House Made of Dawn* Momaday opened the door for other Native American writers to be accepted, studied and praised but above all he proved that it is possible to preserve oral culture by retelling oral stories if we adapt them to contemporary issues. Like Welch, Erdrich and Vizenor, Momaday used new and old techniques, mythical words, repeated imagery, and circularity in time, multiple storytellers and interpretations of stories, dialectic discourse, traditional oral tales and double-voicing in order to put into written words all the features that characterize oral storytelling. However, his traumatized and alienated characters need these stories to create a mystical bond of relationship with the land they had been deprived from as a consequence of the Relocation Program and school education. The powerful imagery in both his novels and James Welch's connect their works with Eco-criticism and depict women as strong females who do not depend on men. They use the effects of war on Native Americans, the invasion and destruction of their lands or "environmental racism" to obliterate strong independent females. On the contrary, Erdrich's female characters are closer to an Ecofeminist perspective with her emphasis on motherhood and her positive view of environmental issues. Erdrich's Fleur is probably the best example of Ecofeminism, as she is intrinsically related to earth, not only physically but also with her strong defense of the land that she inherited from her ancestors. She overcomes male oppression, even after being raped and represents a strong woman who fights to be independent and free from societal constraints like Ultima, the Woman Warrior, Janie or many other female ethnic characters.

Vizenor, Ortiz, and Silko demonstrate how traditions evolve as well as the importance of present day concerns to attract new audiences. By using their works as political and social tools, they denounce the treatment mainstream society makes of the land and the prosperity for Native Americans that the government promised through years of political and social struggle. These authors fight against the idea of the "invented Indians" and encourage Native Americans to overcome stereotypes, revitalize their native tongues, and above all, avoid victimization in order to survive with dignity. For them, oral tradition has a pedagogical purpose which keeps their nations alive.

All these contemporary authors defend oral tradition as part of Native American culture because losing it implies losing their essence as a nation. It is easier to fight against the enemy when this is divided and that is why it is so important for them to keep traditions alive. With stories Native American people learn who they are and where they come from. Losing those stories means losing their origins and becoming something they are not, because they do not want to be simple Americans or adopted into a society that does not fully understand them. They want to be Native Americans living in a nation that knows who they are and appreciates their value. In order to do so, they must teach people about this and this is what they intend to do through their novels. What is more, these authors want their people to understand that if their welfare depends on unreachable supernatural beings as those shown in traditional stories, they are vulnerable to external influences. When these authors connect these oral tales to real events, to contemporary issues, they make their people aware that they must take action in today's world. In her definition of Ecofeminism, Spretnak refers to an awakening to nature that will make all of us aware of the need of taking action. Maybe this is what all these contemporary Native American authors want their readers to do: to understand that it is necessary to evolve and move in order to survive and maintain traditions, culture and communities. Native Americans cannot simply blame mainstream white society for their problems but must act and fight for what is theirs. They cannot cling to the past but look at the present and the future.

Silko's Ecofeminist perspective is perceived in her defense of women, the land and oppressed minorities. She is an unconventional visionary writer whose concerns are more approximate to current affairs than any other authors and who encourages her readers to act. Ecofeminists studied the values associated to the image of nature and women and the implications this had for our lives today. Silko does the same and connects it to storytelling too. Infidelity, armed conflicts, post war experiences, organ traffic, terrorism, drugs, immigration and the negative effects of capitalism on Indian peoples transform the main characters of her novels into modern storytellers. They represent the influence of the American educational system on young Native Americans but also the importance they provide to listening to their ancestors and the positive consequences this has for them as individuals and for their communities. Cyclical structures and double voicing mix readers and writer the same way oral tradition does

with storytellers and their audience, ignoring traditional distinctions of past, present and future because this is the way oral storytellers did it. In a capitalist wild world Silko's works humanize land and women. Nameless, objectified and obliterated, her manipulative female characters help heal the wounds and update the miraculous mythological goddesses that protected their communities in ancient oral stories. Yellow Woman, Night Swam and Ts'eh make audiences remember the past and create life from water and earth while the destructive powers of the white civilization do not survive.

Ethnic minorities still have many important issues to deal with as we live in a changing world. No doubt, their ways of living have evolved like people and times. The transition of storytelling from ancient times to today's world has demonstrated the effectiveness of tradition and the significance of the preservation of culture for the American nation and for the rest of the world. Nature tests human beings and both Ecofeminism and Ecocriticism are the perfect tools to reinforce the links between men, women, land and culture by suggesting solutions to save people and the land from moral destruction. Silko, her fellow writers, their advocates and those authors before them have a long way to calm the anger of the earth and celebrate life



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# **APPENDIX**



## PRINCIPLES OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

**WE, THE PEOPLE OF COLOR**, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to ensure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples, do affirm and adopt these Principles of Environmental Justice:

### The Principles of Environmental Justice (EJ)

- 1) **Environmental Justice** affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction.
  - 2) **Environmental Justice** demands that public policy be based on mutual respect and justice for all peoples, free from any form of discrimination or bias.
  - 3) **Environmental Justice** mandates the right to ethical, balanced and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interest of a sustainable planet for humans and other living things.
  - 4) **Environmental Justice** calls for universal protection from nuclear testing, extraction, production and disposal of toxic/hazardous wastes and poisons and nuclear testing that threaten the fundamental right to clean air, land, water, and food.
  - 5) **Environmental Justice** affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples.
  - 6) **Environmental Justice** demands the cessation of the production of all toxins, hazardous wastes, and radioactive materials, and that all past and current producers be held strictly accountable to the people for detoxification and the containment at the point of production.
  - 7) **Environmental Justice** demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making, including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation.
  - 8) **Environmental Justice** affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment. It also affirms the right of those who work at home to be free from environmental hazards.
  - 9) **Environmental Justice** protects the right of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages as well as quality health care.
  - 10) **Environmental Justice** considers governmental acts of environmental injustice a violation of international law, the Universal Declaration On Human Rights, and the United Nations Convention on Genocide.
  - 11) **Environmental Justice** must recognize a special legal and natural relationship of Native Peoples to the U.S. government through treaties, agreements, compacts, and covenants affirming sovereignty and self-determination.
  - 12) **Environmental Justice** affirms the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature, honoring the cultural integrity of all our communities, and provided fair access for all to the full range of resources.
  - 13) **Environmental Justice** calls for the strict enforcement of principles of informed consent, and a halt to the testing of experimental reproductive and medical procedures and vaccinations on people of color.
  - 14) **Environmental Justice** opposes the destructive operations of multi-national corporations.
  - 15) **Environmental Justice** opposes military occupation, repression and exploitation of lands, peoples and cultures, and other life forms.
  - 16) **Environmental Justice** calls for the education of present and future generations which emphasizes social and environmental issues, based on our experience and an appreciation of our diverse cultural perspectives.
  - 17) **Environmental Justice** requires that we, as individuals, make personal and consumer choices to consume as little of Mother Earth's resources and to produce as little waste as possible; and make the conscious decision to challenge and reprioritize our lifestyles to ensure the health of the natural world for present and future generations.
- More info on environmental justice and environmental racism can be found online at [www.ejnet.org/ej](http://www.ejnet.org/ej)**

*Delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held on October 24-27, 1991, in Washington DC, drafted and adopted these 17 principles of Environmental Justice. Since then, the Principles have served as a defining document for the growing grassroots movement for environmental justice.*

LESLIE MARMON SILKO







NATIVE AMERICAN LIFE AND STORYTELLING









NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN



# INDEX

## “

“Yellow Woman”, 5, 22, 288, 291, 292, 293, 294,  
297, 299, 300, 302, 309, 312, 321, 326, 327, 341,  
344, 350, 376

## A

*Almanac of the Dead*, 5, 6, 12, 17, 22, 185, 281, 286,  
323, 334, 336, 338, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343, 344,  
345, 346, 347, 348, 350, 351, 352, 353, 354, 355,  
357, 358, 359, 360, 361, 364, 366, 367, 375, 377,  
381, 391, 392, 393, 394

Anaya, 11, 21, 57, 60, 61, 62, 148, 283, 311, 369,  
370, 379

*And the Earth Did not Devour Him*, 124, 236, 291

Arnold, 13, 17, 27, 105, 215, 223, 276, 277, 283, 284,  
379, 386

Austen, 5, 182, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 372,  
384, 386, 395

## C

*Ceremony*, 5, 12, 17, 22, 166, 281, 282, 286, 292,  
303, 304, 305, 306, 307, 308, 309, 311, 312, 313,  
314, 315, 316, 317, 318, 319, 320, 322, 323, 324,  
325, 326, 327, 328, 330, 331, 332, 333, 334, 338,  
339, 340, 341, 344, 348, 350, 353, 367, 375, 376,  
380, 389, 390, 392, 393

## Ch

Chavkin, 256, 259, 268, 269, 304, 380

Chi., 11

Chopin, 299

## C

Cisneros, 64, 369, 381

Coltelli, 12, 18, 109, 283, 323, 357, 365, 366, 381

Cooper, 5, 182, 183, 184, 185, 188, 193, 275, 371,  
381, 392

## D

Dorris, 7, 100, 101, 104, 106, 112, 115, 256, 259,  
269, 380, 382

## E

Ecofeminism, 4, 11, 12, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 47,  
48, 63, 87, 128, 140, 142, 146, 147, 148, 149, 206,  
218, 230, 261, 286, 294, 322, 356, 358, 369, 371,  
372, 374, 375, 376, 383, 391, 393, 395

Erdrich, 5, 10, 14, 16, 22, 36, 103, 104, 106, 113, 120,  
126, 144, 147, 156, 161, 186, 207, 251, 252, 253,  
254, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261, 263, 265,  
266, 268, 269, 270, 311, 371, 373, 375, 380, 381,  
383, 390, 391, 392, 393

## F

Faulkner, 5, 52, 84, 87, 182, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200,  
201, 202, 224, 256, 314, 345, 349, 372, 382, 383,  
394

## G

Graulich, 288, 289, 290, 294, 298, 302, 384, 391

## H

Hurston, 11, 21, 68, 71, 81, 84, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91,  
92, 93, 200, 201, 207, 297, 300, 349, 369, 371,  
382, 385

## I

Irving, 5, 182, 189, 191, 192, 193, 372, 385

## J

*Joy Luck Club*, 34, 309, 369, 381, 393

## K

Kingston, 11, 21, 32, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 148,  
207, 369, 382, 386, 387

Krupat, 13, 17, 27, 98, 105, 107, 115, 124, 223, 284,  
386

## L

Lee, 14, 31, 33, 147, 232, 282, 319, 335, 341, 385,  
386, 387

Leeming and Page, 80, 81, 83, 84, 85, 130, 132, 133,  
134, 135, 136, 137, 358

*Love Medicine*, 253, 255, 260, 261, 265, 266, 268,  
269, 381, 383, 392



**M**

Momaday, 5, 10, 12, 14, 16, 22, 96, 98, 100, 103,  
106, 107, 113, 120, 121, 126, 127, 161, 180, 186,  
219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 227, 228, 229,  
230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 239, 240, 246, 247,  
251, 261, 305, 307, 329, 371, 373, 375, 388, 391

**N**

Nelson, 18, 80, 97, 99, 110, 153, 280, 287, 294, 302,  
325, 327, 341, 388

**O**

Ortiz, 5, 10, 12, 16, 22, 101, 103, 104, 129, 241, 242,  
243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 248, 249, 250, 251, 252,  
261, 371, 373, 374, 382, 389

**P**

Piñero, 33, 39, 41, 300, 389  
Pulitano, 147, 274, 389

**R**

Ramirez, 18, 115, 123, 129, 245, 246, 247, 381  
Rivera, 11, 21, 58, 60, 61, 236, 335, 369, 370, 390,  
391  
Roemer, 18, 97, 99, 105, 108, 109, 119, 388, 389,  
390, 394, 395, 396

**S**

Sayre, 131, 193, 194, 228, 391  
Scheub, 11, 134, 391  
Silko, 2, 10, 11, 15, 17, 18, 22, 36, 46, 98, 101, 103,  
104, 106, 109, 113, 120, 124, 126, 144, 145, 147,  
161, 185, 186, 207, 246, 251, 261, 276, 280, 281,  
282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 287, 288, 289, 290, 291,  
292, 293, 294, 298, 299, 301, 302, 304, 305, 306,  
307, 308, 310, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317,  
318, 319, 320, 322, 325, 326, 327, 328, 330, 332,  
333, 335, 336, 338, 339, 341, 342, 344, 345, 346,  
347, 348, 349, 350, 351, 352, 353, 356, 357, 358,  
359, 360, 361, 363, 365, 366, 367, 371, 374, 375,  
376, 378, 379, 381, 385, 390, 391, 392, 393, 394  
Spretnak, 18, 19, 348, 393

**T**

Tan, 11, 21, 32, 33, 34, 38, 240, 309, 369, 381, 393  
Tchin, 3, 175, 393  
*The Ancient Child*, 220, 232, 388  
*The Beet Queen*, 253, 254, 261, 265, 269, 383  
*The Bingo Palace*, 253, 255, 261, 265, 269, 383  
*The Heirs of Columbus*, 271, 276, 277, 395  
*The House made of Dawn*, 329  
*The Way to Rainy Mountain*, 220, 221, 223, 224  
*The Woman Warrior*, 35, 36, 39, 41, 64, 370, 382,  
386  
*The Year of the Dragon*, 42, 370, 380  
*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90,  
91, 92, 93, 148, 200, 201, 206, 297, 299, 371, 385  
Thomas King, 15, 103  
Thoreau, 5, 18, 182, 193, 194, 195, 196, 202, 228,  
229, 372, 383, 391  
*Tracks*, 253, 254, 261, 262, 263, 264, 266, 267, 269,  
329, 383, 391  
TuSmith, 17, 26, 30, 38, 42, 43, 55, 70, 114, 119,  
127, 225, 228, 282, 284, 307, 318, 320, 321, 394

**U**

Ultima, 60, 62, 63, 109, 127, 148, 263, 297, 311, 338,  
370, 371, 374, 379

**V**

Van Dyke, 147, 337, 394  
Vizenor, 5, 10, 12, 16, 22, 25, 30, 98, 99, 103, 109,  
117, 161, 180, 188, 200, 218, 219, 271, 272, 273,  
274, 276, 278, 279, 371, 373, 374, 379, 385, 386,  
387, 394

**W**

Warren, 20, 21, 144, 395  
Weaver, 18, 95, 101, 107, 130, 285, 314, 395  
Welch., 10, 16, 22, 98, 103, 106, 109, 240, 251, 371,  
373, 375, 395  
Wiget, 154, 161, 164, 167, 275, 396  
*Winter in the Blood*, 98, 235, 237, 238, 373, 386, 394,  
395  
*Woven Stones*, 242, 248, 389