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RACE, GENDER AND CULTURE: RECONSTRUCTIONS OF 'AMERICA' BY NATIVE WOMEN WRITERS

por

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DEDICATION

For Lauro, in name of his enormous generosity and patience;

and for the memory of my grandmother Irmgard, a great storyteller.

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ABSTRACT

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Like other feminist and postcolonial criticism developed in recent years, the present study looks at the fictional work of minority women authors who have been excluded from the North American mainstream, perceiving such texts as literary and cultural representations that resist homogenizing and universalizing attempts. Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich and Susan Power are the authors of the three novels analyzed, respectively, Ceremony (1977), Tracks (1988), and The Grass Dancer (1994), presenting alternative perceptions of gender, ethnicity, knowledge and tradition as constructed from the viewpoint of native women, here broadly defined as hybrid female subjects of American society or minority women writers. Their very hibridity is highlighted so as to demonstrate that any belief in purity in relation to race, ethnicity or culture is an illusion. In my reading of these women's texts, I try to de-exoticize their fictional production, focusing on their differences not as cultural, romanticized artifacts but as alternative interpretations and solutions of and for contemporary societies. Throughout my work I defend that the representations produced by such writers should be considered in any attempts at defining a US national or cultural identity. Thus

feminist and postcolonial (including native) theories provide a theoretical framework for the comparative analysis here developed.

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RESUMO

Como vários estudos críticos e literários desenvolvidos nos últimos anos, o presente trabalho focaliza a ficção de escritoras de grupos minoritários, que foram excluídas dos cânones estadunidenses ao longo da história daquele país. Tais textos são aqui percebidos como representações literárias e culturais que resistem a qualquer tentativa de homogeneização ou universalização. Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich e Susan Power são as autoras dos romances analisados, respectivamente Ceremony (1977), Tracks (1988) e The Grass Dancer (1994); todas elas apresentam percepções alternativas de gênero, etnia, crenças e tradições culturais, construídas a partir do ponto de vista de mulheres de origem indígena, aqui genericamente definidas como sujeitos femininos híbridos ou simplesmente como "mulheres de cor" (conforme Anzaldúa). A hibridez das mesmas é salientada a fim de demonstrar que qualquer expectativa de pureza com relação à raça, etnia ou cultura é uma ilusão. Na minha leitura dos textos dessas mulheres, tento deslocar a produção ficcional das mesmas para fora do terreno do exótico, enfocando suas diferenças não como artefatos culturais romantizados, mas como interpretações alternativas que carregam possíveis soluções para problemas contemporâneos. Ao longo do meu trabalho defendo que representações produzidas por tais escritoras precisam ser consideradas em qualquer tentativa de definir uma identidade nacional e cultural americana. Dessa forma, teorias feministas e pós-coloniais assumem papel fundamental na estruturação da análise comparativa aqui desenvolvida.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Considering the large number of recent publications on and by sexual, social, ethnic minorities[1] in the North American contemporary book market, it is possible to observe that the relations of power working inside the cultural arena have begun to change. Especially in the nineties, several anthologies by Chicana, Latina, Asian American, African American, lesbian and gay writers among others entered the editorial market not only as minor contributions but as proof that there were alternative topics and views that needed attention and recognition. In addition, it became obvious that there was a large group of people interested in such out-of-pattern perspectives and reconstructions of history, that is, there was an audience and new markets anxious for discussions on issues which, in the recent past, were not considered as deserving to be included in cultural or academic debates, probably because they put "humanistic" (often masculinist and elitist) presuppositions into question.

The writers chosen for the present analysis mark their presence in the cultural 'beyond', among those who have until very recently been edited out of official American[2] cultural history. One of Leslie Marmon Silko's , Louise Erdrich's and Susan

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[1] Ann Phoenix, an English-speaking Caribbean psychologist, in her opening lecture at the Humanities University in Utrecht makes some interesting observations on 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic group'. She claims most people acknowledge that everyone is inscribed by ethnicity (which includes religion, language and territorial belonging) but people tend to understand 'ethnic group' as if related exclusively to people who are in less powerful positions within society, often subjected to racism. In fact, if 'ethnicity' refers to everybody, the same happens with 'ethnic groups', although some of them are defined as 'majority' or, 'minority ethnic groups' as a result of unequal relations of power (10). Throughout this study, 'minority' is used not only in respect to ethnicity but also gender, and such a perception is not based on numerical proportions but, rather, on power relations.

[2] On the title of the present study I mark the word 'America' to call attention to the frequent appropriation of that word (a broad definition, coined for all Americas) by one of its countries, that is, the US. I mark such a common but incorrect usage at least on its first appearance, that is, on the title of my text.

Power's commonalties is their origin: they are all women of native[3] descent and thus, despite their unquestionable right to be defined as American women writers, they also intend to construct and present their different viewpoints as culturally hybrid members of American society.

A non-mainstream corpus presupposes and even requires an innovative, untraditional use of critical tools. In this sense, feminist and postcolonial[4] criticism function here as co-stimulators of an impulse to look for alternative stories of representation that have been historically disregarded or erased. Through the analysis of such weavings of exclusion, of visible or hidden versions and interpretations of "reality", I intend to highlight the richness of contemporary literary production by minority women writers in the US and their right to be acknowledged in serious research and anthologies on American literature.

As is well-known, feminism has been discussing the inequality of power distribution among female and male members of society and the consequent discrimination women have been forced to face. Bringing women and their texts to the public sphere and including them in the literary and cultural traditions was one of the first aims of feminism. In this way, it has problematized several "humanist" definitions and their implied binarisms, concepts which used to be taken for granted. More recently, feminism has been involved in the de-essentializing of identities, recognizing that people who apparently fit within the same categories are often differentiated. So the category 'woman' or even 'women' is no longer determined by an essence or essentialist belief but is, instead, influenced by ethnicity, sexuality, social class, age, etc.

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[3] I use 'native' throughout my text with small letters and I capitalize 'Native American,' following the form used for other ethnic groups such as African American, Asian American, etc.

Postcolonial theory has developed as a counterdiscourse to official imperialistic history. It has called the attention to other, divergent points-of-view coexisting with mainstream interpretations of colonization. While feminism has historically been interested in giving voice to women in order to see how they deconstruct and reconstruct their visions of the world and of themselves from various possible perspectives, postcolonialism listens to "invaded", colonized subjects of the so-called "new world" in order to challenge the normally taken for granted picture of Western civilization and history.

The present analysis makes use of these two theoretical discourses concomitantly as a way of deconstructing the fixed meanings usually attached to the signifiers, 'women' and 'native.' Throughout my study, identities are conceptualized as "always in the process of being formed, rather than achieved and fixed" (Phoenix 10). The three writers selected for analysis are marked by at least two referents, namely, gender and ethnicity, and so their literary representations can be better criticized if we take such elements into question in our readings of their work.

In this manner, among the fragmented, fractured, overlapping unities of culture of postmodernity, this work focuses on a "specific" minority, that is, in the theoretical and fictional production of American women writers of native descent. The 'post' of this work, thus, is the 'post' surviving in the American Diaspora–women's voices that might change considerably the usual definitions applied to American (female) subjects, collaborating in the project of destabilizing monolithic and exclusionary social and cultural definitions. If, at first sight, my main interest seems "essentialist" or partial, since it concentrates on the fictional production of native women writers, which might

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[4] I use 'postcolonial' in my text, only adopting 'post-colonial' with an hyphen in some quotations of

sound as a homogeneous perception of such a 'group' or 'minority', throughout the study, as the reader comes into contact with several different literary strategies used by such authors and different critical approaches to their work, s/he will become aware that no universalizing explanation is being defended or constructed. On the contrary, while analyzing the three novels of my corpus, I look not only for similarities but also for differences–differences inside, within the Native American cultural group as a whole, and (native) women in particular. By bringing to light the diversity existing among native women, within the category which inscribes them, I plan to point to the diversity of positionalities and experiences of women at large, a fact that dismantles hegemonic or universalizing definitions of femininity and ethnicity so common in Western culture.

In this way, my study undertakes a comparative analysis of three native novels: Ceremony, by Leslie Marmon Silko (1977), Tracks, by Louise Erdrich (1988) and The Grass Dancer, by Susan Power (1994), authors who became renowned in the US during the 70s, 80s and 90s respectively. Through the comparative reading of these texts, my intention is to collaborate with literary, feminist and native studies in identifying different possibilities of cultural agency by minority women writers as members of postcolonial societies. The basic elements analyzed in my work are the processes of ethnic and cultural identity formation and identification, gender organization and its relation to power.

My text is organized in two parts. The first consists of a theoretical review–mainly of feminist and postcolonial thought, as discourses inscribed in postmodernity–and a review of native criticism. This is intended to introduce the specific categories employed, contextualizing the selected novels and the analyses as

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(mostly British) authors who prefer that spelling.

well. The second part, subdivided in three chapters, is where the literary aspects of the novels are examined under the light of the theories discussed in the first part. My first chapter in this second part focuses on the representation of ethnicity (hybridity) in the literature by contemporary native women writers, discussing notions of race, ethnic categorization and the inevitable links such topics establish with gender issues. Here I point out some weaknesses of essential definitions of 'American Womanhood' by highlighting the existence of subjects who cannot be easily included in the usually limited perspectives of 'gender' and 'ethnicity' from the point of view of mainstream culture. The second chapter discusses the relations established between knowledge, colonization and domination, a relation also perceived as marked by discursive constructions of gender, philosophy and religion. The third and last chapter emphasizes the representations of femininity in the three novels, defending that different, more powerful and open constructions of women are developed by these writers, as a result of their reference to an alternative cultural genealogy and mythology, according to which female subjects are allowed to establish a closer (and different) relation to power as compared to other subjects inscribed by Western models.

Assuming that revolutionary theories function as ways of putting "fossilized" (institutionalized) knowledge into question (Minh-ha), the use of feminist and postcolonial theory in this work is planned to liberate new readings of the analyzed novels which enable the recognition of innovative literary strategies used by each of these writers as ways of marking difference. As Trinh T. Minh-ha states in Woman, Native, Other:

> Theory is no longer theoretical when it loses sight of its own conditional nature, takes no risk in speculation, and circulates as a form of administrative inquisition. Theory oppresses, when it wills or perpetuates existing power relations, when it presents itself as a means to exert authority–the Voice of Knowledge. (Minh-ha 42)

Thus it might be important to stress that the present reading of these novels is not a neutral exercise of theoretical applicability. Literature and reading activities are here perceived as intermingled with social arrangements which influence not only the lives of women, colonized peoples, minority groups but, in different degrees, all members of contemporary societies. Feminist and postcolonial theory, both discourses that have developed as modes of resistance to hegemonic culture, are expected to collaborate in the decolonizing process of our reading of these novels as well as in the decolonization of culture at large.

PART I

1.1 - FEMINISM, POSTMODERNISM AND POSTCOLONIALISM

> *Feminist perspectives are of increasing importance in post-colonial criticism and indeed the strategies of recent feminist and recent post-colonial theory overlap and inform each other.* (Arschcroft)[1]
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> *Postcolonial feminisms are those feminisms that take the experience of Western colonialism and its contemporary effects as a high priority in the process of setting up a speaking position from which to articulate a standpoint of cultural, national, regional, or social identity.* (Schutte)[2]

During the nineties, as several publications in women's studies all over the world confirm, feminist theory underwent important and undeniable changes. New issues started taking part in the feminist debate and the intrinsic plurality of contemporary feminism, that is, the plurality involving and affecting its subjects, became obvious. Subjectivity, identity, agency, all these previously safe and stable concepts that have historically helped define and unite the subjects of feminism were, if not put into question, at least analyzed as possibly reductive constructions of feminist discourse.

After studies developed by feminists during the present century on the categories of 'woman', 'women', and, later on, 'gender', as well as on the ways such concepts have affected women's lives, determining their inscription in society, feminist theorists have realized that there are relevant topics which have been left out of these discussions. In spite of being aware of the political importance of the representation of women as a category, approaches or points of view coming from the "borders of feminism" started claiming the difference existing *inside* or *within* such categorizations. Judith Butler, in

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[1] Passage taken from the book The Empire Writes Back, 32.
[2] Taken from Ofelia Schutte's article, cited in the bibliography.

Gender Trouble, affirms, for example, that "there is a great deal of material that not only questions the viability of the 'subject' as the ultimate candidate for representation or, indeed, liberation, but there is little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes, or ought to constitute, the category of women" (1). Thus, some historical foundations of feminist thought began to be put into question or, at least, analyzed from completely new perspectives.

The growing importance of such topics coming from 'marginalized feminisms' that have not, until recently, been part of mainstream feminist agenda, as well as the recognition of the theoretical and literary work produced by African American, lesbian, Chicana, Asian American, Latina, Native American[3] women, was fundamental for acknowledging the impossibility and absurdity of defending and believing in a totalizing and universalizing feminist discourse. In fact, women belonging to minority[4] groups (mainly lesbians and women of color) started questioning the universalizing positions taken by white, straight, middle class feminists during the previous decades.

Feminist theory, like other discourses of postmodernism, brought revolutionary perspectives to the academic and political fields related to "equality" (in difference) between men and women, women's rights, gender construction and deconstruction. In this sense, it has problematized several "humanist" definitions previously taken for granted. While in the 1960s and 1970s, the feminist polemic was centered around the words 'difference' and 'equality', in the 1980s the main focus became the differences

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[3] Many Americans of native descent prefer to use the term Indian or Indian American when referring to their people or heritage, in spite of the much more common usage of 'Native American' in recent publications, which is the most frequently adopted in this work.

[4] Some minority groups are against this definition, believing that the word 'minority' reproduces prejudice and keeps domination intact. The use of the term in this text, however, as was mentioned in the introduction, stresses and questions social relations and the reduced access to power some groups have been forced to face. In the US, minority women have often defined themselves as "women of color," to stress their radical difference from white, heterosexual or "First World" womanhood.

existing among women. As a matter of fact, in the last decades, minority groups have problematized the very notion of female subjectivity, questioning differences in terms of gender, race, class and sexual orientation, affirming that it is impossible to use one "name" for all women. The experience of minority women is not at all the same as that of white, heterosexual, "First World" women and, thus, they cannot believe that their identities or political goals could be exactly the same. For some minority women, it has become much more important to fight racial, cultural or economic exploitation than sexual discrimination. Such new viewpoints were able to problematize feminist 'identity politics', shaking or at least opening up some of its foundations to change. The first of such questionings came from black feminists, who felt excluded from white middle class American feminism.

Hazel Carby, a black feminist theorist, has stated that, as a result of slavery and the consequent racism in the New World, more specifically in the United States, black women were not constituted as "woman" in the same way white women were. Instead, they were constituted racially and sexually–as a marked female (animal, sexualized, and without rights) but not as a 'woman' (human, a potential wife, a "free" individual). Native American, Asian American, Latina women–all experience different kinds of oppression or discrimination inside American society according to the stereotypes that have been imposed on them through history. Donna Haraway stresses this by affirming that "each condition of oppression requires specific analysis that both refuses the separations and insists on the nonidentities of race, sex, sexuality, and class" (1992: 95). Minority women or women of color became aware that their "specific" problems were not always on the agenda of (white) Anglo mainstream feminism. These historical differences indicate why feminist theory produced by women of color has developed

differently, disrupting discourses of womanhood, if compared to the humanism of many Western discursive traditions (Haraway 1992: 95). In this sense, women of color can really be taken as the most radical, innovating voices of contemporary feminist discourse since they were responsible for bringing to light concrete differences among female subjects.

Since the seventies but especially during the nineties, it is possible to affirm that a blooming of publications on such "alternative," revolutionary topics came into the feminist editorial market. Several new anthologies[5] on and by minority women writers and theorists became popular and were responsible for the material representation of the atomization of feminism. If at the beginning of contemporary feminism it was possible to think of 'woman' as 'the Other' inside a patriarchal gender system, at the moment we can only speak of several, displaced, ever-changing subjects of feminism(s). In fact, the acknowledgment of the 'Other Woman' (nonwhite, lesbian, "Third World", colonized) by mainstream feminism has not only shaken some of its standpoints but problematized the whole notion of (female) subjectivity.

However, contemporary feminists have no reason to be afraid of the consequences of having deconstructed the stable "subject" of their field of studies. On the contrary, they are aware that emergent, differentiating, unstable subjectivities must be part of the further development of feminist theory and practice. According to Haraway, this involves "the commitment to transformative social change, the moment of hope embedded in feminist theories of gender and other emergent discourses about the breakup of masterful subjectivity and the emergence of inappropriate/d others" (1992:

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[5] Examples are This Bridge Called My Back, Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras, The Sacred Hoop, Reinventing the Enemy's Language, listed in the bibliography.

96). That is, the subject of feminism has survived in postmodern times although it has become less identified with the "center", with "appropriated" Western paradigms.

To illustrate this change, Donna Haraway brings up the "inappropriate/d" figure of Sojourner Truth as a resisting example for contemporary subjects of feminism. Sojourner Truth has been reconstructed since the last century in several feminist texts as a symbol of the woman who survives on the borders, who is simultaneously included and excluded from the feminist stage. She was black, a former slave who became a preacher of God and a representative of a community of women. Haraway considers her as a trickster figure of American history. Sojourner Truth does not settle down nor assumes any definitive category; on the contrary, she is always changing positions and meanings and, consequently, the way people perceive her. Maybe this is the reason why even nowadays, 150 years after that memorable speech given by Truth in 1851 at a women's convention in Ohio, her question remains valid–"And Ain't I a woman?" Sojourner asked a fundamental question that is still relevant for contemporary feminists; that is, what defines the subject of feminism? Where are the borders of the group formed by those allowed to speak "in the name of" or "as" women? What we find out at the present stage of feminist discussions is that women are always displaced as members of a society in which fixed, stable identities are out of the question. In this sense, it is possible to agree with Haraway when she sustains that "any finally coherent subject is a fantasy" (1992: 98). Feminism, as well as other theories interested in subjectivity, has to deal with these ever-changing identities without expecting any fixed essence and, at the same time, believing in the "fantasy" or "utopia" of more emancipated and fair social possibilities for all individuals, especially women.

Nevertheless, while several non-feminist contemporary theories see this questioning of identity and subjectivity as an aftermath of the crisis of narratives typical of postmodernity, identifying it with the "death of the subject," many feminists do not accept such formulations, questioning its emergence at just the moment when so many previously silenced subjects begin to claim authority to represent themselves and history according to their own perceptions.

Contemporary feminists are not exclusively interested in identifying internal differences and even contradictions inside feminist discourse, but rather they still feel the need to question male supremacy or hegemony in most social institutions. In this sense, concepts such as identity, subjectivity and subversion continue to be of interest for the subjects of feminism, even if they are aware of the constant necessity of disrupting such definitions, showing the erasures and absences they have implicated over the years.

One of the results of these new approaches to the feminist debate is the broadening of its topics, of its field of knowledge. As a consequence, interdisciplinary feminist studies have come closer to the area of cultural studies, gender being inscribed as one more element of the debate, but not the only one of interest to women; variables of race, class, sexuality are taken into consideration in any serious cultural debate by and on women nowadays. Considering that feminist theory has developed as a mode of resistance to hegemonic (patriarchal) culture,[6] it seems obvious that it should not take one of its issues, that is, gender as the unique, central one for all women's

[6] The reference to an existing hegemonic patriarchal culture does not imply that patriarchy is the same (and equally powerful) everywhere. There are differences inside patriarchy, which affect individuals in different ways. However, the purpose of the present study is not to concentrate on hegemonic groups and their ways of organizing power but on questioning them **because** of the irregular access to power they have imposed on women and other minorities.

agenda[7]. A negotiation between different feminisms and other contemporary theories, especially the discourses of postmodernism and postcolonialism can be taken as a requirement for the improvement of the feminist debate, since in order to survive in the 'beyond,' here indicated by the 'post', we have to enter into dialogue with other contemporary plural, unfixed entities.

1.1.1 - Feminism and Postmodernism

In spite of some epistemological divergencies between these two contemporary cultural theories, both have appeared together as possible allies in several publications from different academic areas. First of all, both are interdisciplinary approaches to reading contemporary culture. Postmodernism as well as feminism have been influenced by poststructuralist thought and deconstructive approaches. As is well-known, feminism deconstructed the gender system of patriarchal society, questioning the artificial construction of "woman" as a "subject" (or object) of subordination. Later on, further theoretical deconstructions as well as new topics developed by minority women provoked the questioning of the very foundations of feminist discourse, that is, the previous belief in a possible category of "women" and their collective difference in relation to "men." Thus, some feminists from different areas of knowledge, such as Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, and Chantal Mouffe, among others, have criticized the belief in the fixed foundations of feminist thought and have constructed antiessentialist viewpoints. They have stressed the inevitable and continuous fragmentation of the

[7] Several minority feminist critics affirm that gender has been taken as the main axis of feminist discussions along several decades because such analyses reflected the privileged position those mainstream feminists occupied in society; being white, middle-class, heterosexual and allowed to speak, the problems such feminists faced as social members were related to gender issues only.

subject, showing that any artificial or excluding notion of unity is useless for feminist political improvement. Others, in spite of being aware of the limitations of some essentialist feminist foundations, have been more interested in seeing immediate and practical changes in women's lives, being in favor of keeping a female "essence" so as to guarantee agency[8] (while antiessentialists do not see this stance as the only and fundamental way of guaranteeing it).

There are several publications by feminist theorists along the last decades which well-represent the discussions on essentialism from women's perspective. According to Diana Fuss, in her introduction to Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference, "essentialism is most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity" (xi). Such essentialist notions, she asserts, have been highly criticized by feminist theories interested in resisting any attempts to naturalize human nature. Fuss defends that either feminist theorists are totally against essentialism and question the transhistorical essence of a possible homogeneous categorization of women, or they believe they can make use of it provided that they are aware of the dangers involved. She affirms, however, that in any anti-essentialist construction, there is always some kind of essentialism as part of its formulations. Her own position is that of an "anti-essentialist who wants to preserve . . . the category of essence" (xiv).

At a certain point of the discussion on the fragility of any definition of the subject(s) of feminism(s), several theorists started defending that, if some unity was to be kept in order not to dismantle the feminist project as a whole, a few essentialist notions were inevitably going to be necessary. One theorist who defended the use of

[8] 'Agency' here indicates an impulse towards "transformation, resistance, and radical democratization" (Butler 92 , 13). It cannot be taken for granted, as an a priori guarantee, since the political possibilities of

essentialist concepts for political interest is Gayatri Spivak. In her book of interviews The Post-Colonial Critic, Spivak affirms that she really "thinks it's absolutely on target to take a stand against the discourses of essentialism, universalism . . . but strategically we cannot" (11). She argues that we are committed to these concepts, whether we acknowledge this commitment or not. Thus, we should become vigilant about our own practice and not repudiate essentialism at once. She asserts that even when a critic is using deconstruction as a theorizing tool, s/he must be aware that essentializations will be necessary at some moment. "So then strategically you can look at essentialisms, not as descriptions of the way things are, but as something that one must adopt to produce a critique of anything" (1990: 51). If to produce a critique one has to essentialize, in order to keep this critical thought valid it is necessary to put it constantly into question, opening it up to inevitable internal and external contradictions.

In The Spivak Reader we see that, while defending the position that deconstruction teaches one to question all transcendental idealisms (including the notion of an essential 'woman'), Spivak establishes connections between deconstruction and feminism, affirming that the common cause between both theories is an "espousal of, and an attention to, marginality–a suspicion that what is at the center often hides a repression" (1996: 31). From such a perspective, feminism and deconstruction are interested not in replacing the center, in a reversal of positions, but in observing how positions and privileges are constructed. As Spivak puts it, "it is also the deconstructive view that keeps me resisting an essentialist freezing of the concepts of gender, race and class. . . .This aspect of deconstruction will not allow the establishment of a hegemonic 'global theory' of feminism" (1996: 60). Here she stresses the necessary incompleteness

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agency are diverse and always involved in the constitution of the subject.

or unfinished state of any single contemporary theory by highlighting the flexible interrelation existing among all involved categories.

Judith Butler, in her article "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism," defends that to consider the construction of the subject as a political matter is totally different from doing away with the subject; to deconstruct the subject is not to negate its existence. As a matter of fact, to deconstruct is "to open up a term, like the subject, to a reusage or redeployment that previously has not been authorized" (1992: 14-15). According to this, the deconstruction of subjectivity is a political attitude and not an abandonment of agency, as several essentialist feminists have defined it.

Spivak, in spite of defending strategic essentialism as a feminist theoretical tool, in The Spivak Reader positions herself in relation to the encounter between deconstruction and feminism similarly to Butler, stating that "deconstruction . . . simply questions the privileging of identity so that someone is believed to have the truth . . . .It is constantly and persistently looking at how truths are produced" (1996: 27-28). Thus, through a deconstructive analysis of identity, Spivak similarly to Butler calls attention to the processes by which any political position is established. In fact, she is much more interested in discussing "space" than "identity" or "voice," two very limiting and more individualistic concepts, in her view. She believes the two latter concepts are also part of that which "one cannot not want" and, therefore, have to be permanently criticized (1996: 28). Identity has become, indeed, a quite problematic topic, especially when related to 'gender' as inscribed in the field of essentialist and antiessentialist debates.

Butler is one of the contemporary theorists who have forged a fundamentally new concept for feminist debates on essentialism and identity. Departing from the "safety" of

feminist gender concepts, which defined gender as a cultural interpretation opposed to naturalized sex, she politicizes the discussion, claiming that nowadays sex is as problematized as gender: "Gender is not to culture as sex is to nature. Gender is also the discursive cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'natural sex' is produced and established as prediscursive, prior to culture" (Butler 1990: 2). That means that sex may be as culturally constructed as gender, since sex does not "exist" before being discursively constructed. Thus a man can construct himself differently and, in this way, "become a woman" and a woman can "become a man". In the same way, gays or lesbians might not be interested in defending the rights of those defined as 'men' or 'women.' Physically, of course, unless they are hermaphrodites, they belong to one of these categories but their discursive construction, what can be referred to as "gender", "sex" or "sexual identity," might not be related to any of these binary categories. This concept problematizes even further any attempt to rely on fixed identities or established essences. According to Butler, "man and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one" (1990: 6). Taking this idea into account, Butler defends that the feminist notions of gender and identity should be much more open and unlimited.

At the same time, Butler claims that gender does not come "before" race or class. She believes that "the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'women' are constructed" (1990: 14). So she defends the coalition of differently positioned subjects as a way of keeping agency as a possibility, with the acknowledgment of its internal and inevitable contradictions. One should not believe in an essentialist category of 'women' that simply needs to be filled in with

components of race, class, age, ethnicity, and sexuality in order to become complete. "The assumption of its essential incompleteness permits that category to serve as a permanently available site of contested meanings" (Butler 1990: 15). This is the reason why at the very beginning of Gender Trouble, Butler states that she does not believe in any "strategic" use of 'women', 'identity' or any such totalizing and essentialist notions, affirming that strategies always have meanings that exceed the purposes for which they are intended. According to her, if we strategically take white female subjects or any other "specific" group of women as "the" subjects of our studies, this "strategic" choice will affect very negatively those "inappropriate/d" others of feminism who were left out of such a selection. Spivak, on the contrary, considers temporary, strategic choices as inevitable in order not to be silenced forever.

Postmodernism, similarly to feminism, has been theoretically constructed under poststructuralist influences, where the deconstruction of some Cartesian given concepts such as 'reality,' 'history,' 'truth,' 'reason' represented the very impulse for the possibility of a different perception of the world. Madan Sarup, in his book Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World, lists some key features often associated with postmodernism: "there is an acceptance of ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity. . . .There is an intense distrust of all global or 'totalizing' discourses, a rejection of metanarratives, of large-scale theoretical interpretations, of universal application" (95). Jane Flax, in her article "The End of Innocence," also affirms that the modern Western sense of self-certainty has been undermined by political and intellectual events, stating that postmodernism questions the belief in any form of "innocent knowledge" (447). According to Linda Singer, feminism and postmodernism are the offspring of the kind of critical cultural practices that commanded social visibility during the late 1960s, and

both were involved in challenging the terms, conventions, and symbols of hegemonic authority (469). She continues affirming that part of the tradition of critical writing that postmodernism and feminism inherit, although in differentiated ways, is a tradition of writing as a form of resistance–a writing that works to disrupt, destabilize, denaturalize (469). Since fragmentation and discontinuity are taken as elements of postmodernism which have definitely marked contemporary theories and practice, uncertainties in terms of definitions and understanding have affected all areas of knowledge.

In fact, if one cannot have a single definition of 'subjectivity,' 'identity,' 'history,' 'discourse,' and even of 'feminism,' being most terms often used in the plural as a way of calling attention to internal contradictions and fragmentation, one should not expect to find a single and coherent theoretical approach to postmodernism either. According to some critics, including Chantal Mouffe, "it is with regard to the critique of essentialism that a convergence can be established among different currents of thought and similarities found in the work of authors as different as Derrida, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Dewey, Gadamer, Lacan, Foucault, Freud, and others" (370). Of course, not all such theorists have used the same "language" for naming what they have analyzed in society, culture, or the human mind. There are different readings and appropriations of such ideas and, again according to Mouffe, the critique of essentialism takes so many different forms that if we want to analyze its importance for feminist politics we must engage with all its models and implications, not dismissing it on the basis of some of its versions (370). Mouffe believes that the construction of an antiessentialist approach can bring crucial insights to the elaboration of a feminist politics which is also informed by a radical democratic project (370). Thus, politically it is important for feminism to keep a dialogue with other areas, other fields of knowledge so as to avoid oversimplified

solutions for problems which have been affecting women's life in several places and times. As Nancy Fraser mentions in her article on feminism and radical democracy, it is fundamental to consider different differences by interrogating their relation to inequality, which brings back to the feminist stage the topic of social equality and power redistribution, concrete liberating needs for oppressed and discriminated subjects of postmodernity (187). That is, if some subjects are exhausted of too much power, there are still many others claiming for basic empowerment.

The topic of "mutual interested political usage" between postmodernism and feminism is brought to light by Sara Ahmed in Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism. Although she acknowledges the fact that postmodernism has been instrumental in "authorizing" feminism to be seen as a 'theory' by more conservative institutions, as a result of some historical misunderstanding of feminism as "weak" in theoretical terms, Ahmed does not see feminist theory as subjected to postmodernism. For her, when feminism is taken as part of postmodern discourse, it is authorized but not listened to in its particularities. She therefore favors an approach linking these two theories but stressing their differences. Ahmed marks each term separately, that is, 'feminist theory' and 'postmodernism,' the way they appear in the subtitle of her book. She is more interested in stressing the **and** of this subtitle, which shows that we are obviously dealing with two different entities that are being juxtaposed as a way of staging this discussion in new ways. She affirms that the **and** forces the two terms apart, as it brings them together (2). Besides, not only should the relation between these two terms be reexamined but the terms themselves should not be taken for granted, as if they were not questionable. Ahmed believes that if feminism is apparently authorized by postmodern theory, the importance of feminists entering the debate may be "precisely in

order to undo such gestures of authorisation whereby postmodernism comes to define the terms of feminism's existence" (4). In other words, this points to feminist questionings of fixed (and often distorted) relations of hierarchy and authority in the theoretical arena.

In this sense, Ahmed defends the idea of speaking back to postmodernism, of questioning its theoretical position of reference and authorization. In fact, she argues "against reading postmodernism as a generalisable and inclusive condition, demonstrating the violence against other which is at stake in such a reading" (12-13). In relation to the crisis of identity verifiable in feminism, it is important to mention that it has been a conflict within feminism, not only a result of its coming closer to postmodernism. Such crises have appeared inside feminist theory as a consequence of its awareness of internal difference, the difference within the very category "women," what might have affected or appeared concomitantly with the construction of postmodern theory. Thus, one should take the issue of the postmodern "authorization" of feminism as our impetus: "How can we read postmodernism differently as feminists and for feminism?" (Ahmed 2). Feminists can dialogue with postmodernism but stressing that it is one reference point among others. Believing that feminism can enrich postmodern discussion by including explicit topics of gender, Ahmed stresses that she does **not** see postmodernism as ungendered, but believes that the focus on gender brought by feminism can be very transformative for the whole debate.

Linda Singer, in a similar way, calls the attention to the **and** existing between the two fragments of the title of her article "Postmodernism **and** Feminism." According to Singer, both discourses present similar ways of resisting and calling into question established forms of power by undermining the mechanisms through which that power is

assured. The **and** "keeps open a site for strategic engagement and preserves difference" (475). Postmodernism, in its differences from feminism, can be applied concomitantly with feminist discourse so as to enrich it and, at the same time, be enriched by it.

In terms of the relation between feminism and postmodernism, then, we observe a tendency not to believe any longer in the possibility or viability of a "symbol" or "token subject" of feminism; on the contrary, an amplification of our perceptions of what is usually defined as "women," "the subject of feminism," has been highly defended.

Women from minority groups can collaborate with several different constructions of gender that may concretely affect the whole picture of the gender system questioned by feminist theory. More specifically, among Native-Americans one can notice such a different perception and construction of female subjects. Joy Harjo, a Native American critic and writer, in her anthology Reinventing the Enemy's Language, co-edited with Gloria Bird in 1997, affirms:

> Where white women struggle to assert their voice in a patriarchal, hierarchical system and have had to pit themselves against men, Indian women were heard, relied upon, and in some cases, have controlled the politics of a tribal group. Contact denied the voice of women. (30)

In fact, Harjo is stating that colonization and the implicit cultural domination of white colonizers have been much more damaging for native women than a male supremacy inside the tribes, which has never been "universal" anyway. The gender organization of most native groups before contact was very different from that of Western models. Thus, native feminist theorists very often develop their ideas from a postcolonial perspective, questioning the presence and interference of white colonizers much more than patriarchy

itself. Besides, they are much more used to dealing with cultural difference than whites would suppose, as a consequence of the interrelation of tribes, which they never considered a disadvantage. "We, too, appreciated the differences between us, and recognized that though the differences may sometimes be difficult (which can include old tribal enmities and divergent customs) these were to be appreciated, for our differences add dimension to any knowledge" (Harjo 23).

Several theorists of contemporary feminism believe that the characteristic discomfort with respect to positions and priorities that "haunts" contemporary feminist theory might be very enriching in the long run. According to Donna Haraway, for example, "humanity" is still a concept we must deal with but feminist humanity must have another shape, other gestures, a different face (1992: 86). Haraway believes in the importance of having feminist representations of humanity, which do away with gender polarities, with concepts of what it means to be 'man' or 'woman' as historical narrative has been constructing them; such figures have to resist literal figuration and representation and "erupt in powerful new tropes, new figures of speech, new turns of historical possibilities" (1992: 96). In fact, what is being discussed here is the use of deconstruction for feminist purposes. One has to deconstruct "the humanist subject" not in order to become inhuman, but to

> take affirmative and critical account of emergent, differentiating, self-representing, contradictory social subjectivities, with their claims on action, knowledge, and belief. The point involves the commitment to transformative change, the moment of hope embedded in feminist theories of gender and other emergent discourses about the breakup of

> masterful subjectivity and the emergence of inappropriate/d others.
>
> (Haraway 1992: 96)

Most of such "emergent discourses" have appeared with the sign of the 'post.' Like postmodernism, postcolonial theory is considered in the present study as an enriching partner for feminist theory, either by opening new fields of discussion or by bringing previously "unseen" subjects to the debate.

1.1.2 Feminism and Postcolonial Theory

For the authors of The Empire Writes Back, most critics, when referring to the postcolonial condition, inscribe this term to cover all cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day (2). This means that experiences during and after the period of European colonization, and its effects on contemporary postcolonial cultures, are of interest because they are able to bring a "new" picture of history to light, a history that constantly questions the veracity of facts that have been accepted as "final interpretations" or "official reports" of cultural history. It is possible to affirm that the most important feature of such postcolonial cultural or literary manifestation is its hybrid condition, its syncretic resolution of an unavoidable crisis in terms of myths, history, and values brought about by the colonial advent. After intensive interactions between differently positioned cultures (the colonizer and the colonized), it is impossible and useless to look for a 'pure,' 'original' pre-colonized culture or literature. By accepting this, one demystifies the idea of a solid, central, universal European cultural model as well. Both cultures have been intensely in contact and, thus, have been mutually influenced, even if the colonized culture has often

appeared as "marginal" or "subordinated." Such marginality has been, in fact, created through colonial institutions interested in assuming and guaranteeing their "central role" in the Americas.

According to Diana Brydon, postcolonial literatures form a field where meaning is produced through history and language, and in exchanges between social and literary texts (32). However, the reading process is also responsible for such production of meaning, "through the critic's openness to otherness, her attention to contradiction and differences and the questions she chooses to ask" (32). Thus not only does postcolonial fiction bring new versions of stories (or history) to public view but also postcolonial theory helps unveiling alternative meanings of them.

Feminism and postcolonial discourse face very similar situations–both are either not seen or marginalized by the patriarchal and/or the colonial order. From this viewpoint it is clear that

> women . . . share with colonized races and peoples an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression, and like them they have been forced to articulate their experiences in the language of their oppressors. Women, like post-colonial peoples, have had to construct a language of their own when their only available 'tools' are those of the 'colonizer.' (Aschcroft 175)

Furthermore, postcolonial culture even in its own terms has never been homogeneous either. The postcolonial experience and discourse in India, for example, is considerably different from the ones developed in Canada, Latin America, Africa or Australia. Even the experience of different native tribes in America has not been exactly the same in the whole continent or in distinct historical moments. While 'women' have had to

acknowledge the differences existing 'inside' the gender category they belong to, postcolonial groups have also learned they cannot find a single voice to reconstruct experiences of colonialism. As a matter of fact, they are highly interested in deconstructing any notions of 'fixed otherness' often attached to them. However, women and postcolonial groups can, and generally do, circumstantially refer to specificities in order to be able to act as political agents.

Knowing quite well the experience of oppression and discrimination, and having political reasons for defending different possibilities of social, literary, and cultural participation than those in tune with the universal masculine paradigm, feminists can ally with postcolonial critics and writers (women and men) in order to enable the proliferation of new social possibilities. Early feminism as well as early nationalist postcolonial criticism sought to invert the structures of domination, putting, for instance, a female tradition or traditions in place of a male-dominated canon (Aschcroft 175). However, feminism and postcolonial theory no longer defend a reversal of positions. As has been previously discussed in this chapter, the questioning of essentialism has undermined such limited and, at the same time, authoritarian (although at that time necessary) beliefs. Feminist and postcolonial critics are interested in studying, for instance, canon formation not to replace it by another equally limiting canon, but in order to analyze how it is produced by "the intersection of a number of readings and reading assumptions legitimized in the privileging hierarchy of a 'patriarchal' or 'metropolitan' concept of literature" (Aschcroft 176). Here again what is being proposed is the deconstruction of such a canon in order to enable its reconstruction and/or redefinition in less constraining terms.

The process of a literary decolonization implies that European codes and values have to be questioned and, sometimes, subverted. In respect to the United States, it is important to mention that, even if after its independence and especially during the present century, when it became an imperial power on its own, and, thus, would not fit well into the categories of those countries responsible for decolonizing the imperial mind by cultural production, there are several instances of postcolonial thought blooming in very creative ways. Many contemporary critics such as Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Gloria Anzaldúa, Trinh Minh-ha, usually defined as postcolonial theorists, are interested in such innovative perspectives.

Gayatri Spivak's inspections of the double colonization experienced by women as members of colonized patriarchies points to the figure of the 'subaltern woman,' who is silenced because there is no place from which she can speak. By implication, the silencing of the subaltern woman extends to the whole of the colonial world, and to the silencing and muting of all natives, male and female alike (Aschcroft 177-78). Spivak is very much worried about the role intellectuals play in reinforcing or dismantling discriminatory attitudes in relation to colonized or postcolonized cultures. She makes a correlation between indigenous or colonized nations, and women. How can the intellectual woman, the theorist, the academic speak in the name of "other"/ "subaltern" woman? The woman who writes, who is able to problematize the question of female specificity, in fact, represents other women, speaking in their names. She is, from some perspective, privileged, but this fact should not silence her. Even assuming that this is a somewhat essentialist position, Spivak defines it as a fundamental field of agency for the benefit of all women. Here again she defends the strategic use of essentialism instead of universal discourse, even stressing that it is impossible **not** to be an essentialist from

time to time. In relation to feminism, as we have seen, she claims for the assumption of temporary essentialist positions in order to confront sexist discourse and attitudes, pointing out that theoretical purity is impossible anyway and would not take women anywhere (she sees purity for purity's sake as useless).

Homi Bhabha, contrary to Spivak's position, believes the 'subaltern,' the marginalized, the colonized can speak and that a native voice can always be heard, even if it is through mimicry or parody. By undoing such "imitations" through symptomatic readings of the colonialist text, he asserts, one can recover a native voice (Aschcroft 178). In The Location of Culture, Bhabha is mainly interested in analyzing the borderlines of the 'present,' always connected to the prefix 'post': 'postmodernism,' 'postcolonialism,' 'postfeminism.' At the same time, Bhabha sees the frequent usage of the prefix 'post' as an insistent gesture to the 'beyond.' One cannot see the present simply as an instance separating the 'past' from the 'future.' When it begins to be understood as the 'post' of some experience that preceded it, the present can transform our contemporary moment into an "expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment" (4). The importance of postcoloniality, in his opinion, is that such a perspective enables the authentication of histories of exploitation and the evolution of strategies of resistance (6). One becomes able to identify the artificial creation of a normativity that excludes what is 'other' or located outside its definitions.

In this sense, the stepping into the 'beyond' of the postcolonial, willingly or not, allows us to take a revising look at the world in order to redescribe history from alternative viewpoints. Feminism has already been involved in displacing (female) subjects from traditional positions in society as well as in revisioning its structuring, and postcolonialism, while focusing on the voices of migrants, colonized people, refugees,

also calls the attention to such locations of "cultural displacement." However, postcolonial discourse starts from the acknowledgment of historical and cultural hybridity, differently from feminist discourse, which has been forced from 'inside' to become aware of the 'difference within' through its problematizing of the very notion of identity.

Bhabha sees postcolonial perspectives as emerging from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of 'minorities.' Such perspectives "intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic 'normality' to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples" (171). Thus, his statement that postcolonial theory can help enrich our understanding of the world and the existing social relations is clarified. In fact, it is from those who have experienced subjugation, oppression, domination that privileged people may learn their most enduring lessons in terms of life and thoughts.

The aesthetic produced outside hegemonic culture, coming from its "margins,"[9] is necessarily different in terms of canon formation as well as in its theoretical strategies. Like several postcolonial theorists, Bhabha does not believe in holistic explanations of contemporary cultural communities. Not concentrating in national aspects of the postcolonial, but trying to approach cultural history from transnational and translational points of view, Bhabha departs from "the subaltern margins of modernity. . . to revise the known, to rename the postmodern from the position of the postcolonial" (175). However, he does not put any positive or negative value in connection to subalternity.

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[9] Although considering that the decentering of identities has affected many binary notions, even those existing between 'center' and 'margin', which might indicate that we are all marginal now (a provocation presented by Ann Phoenix), I take for granted that gender, ethnicity and 'race' continue to be inflected by

Bhabha wants to see subaltern agency emerge as relocation and reinscription. This interference of the subaltern voice interrupts the Western discourses of modernity by displacing narratives and theories.

Thus, Bhabha takes theory as a field of tension between different positionalities that should constantly be negotiated. Our political referents and priorities–be they the people, the community, class struggle, anti-racism, gender difference, the assertion of an anti-imperialist, black or third world perspective–do not exist in a naturalistic sense. They make sense as they come to be constructed in the discourses of feminism, Marxism, postcolonialism and others (26). Focusing on the power of rearticulating or translating elements that are neither the One nor the Other but something else which challenges the terms and territories of both, Bhabha believes that class and gender, for instance, can be approximated in displaced and differentiated boundaries (28).

Gloria Anzaldúa, in books and anthologies she edited or coedited, such as This Bridge Called my Back and Making Soul, Making Face: Haciendo Caras, but particularly in Borderlands - La Frontera, has been interested in examining the encounter of different cultures, the "zones of borderlands." According to her preface to the latter book, "the borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy." This is one reason why she deliberately writes in English and "Spanish dialects"(with Indian, Mexican influence) concomitantly as a way of defamiliarizing what at first sight seems natural, that is, the use of English. If it is natural to expect a book printed in the United States to be totally in English, she makes the reader

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unequal power relations and so not all "marginalities" are the same and neither do they have the same

remember the fact that what is presently Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and California was, until 1846, part of Mexico. Thus, most of the population now living in such (border) areas uses very naturally both languages. So, she writes a book that makes the first-language English speaker aware of the existence of other possibilities besides the white, Anglo-Saxon culture inside the American territory. If this reader does not understand what is written in Spanish, s/he is the one who is missing something, who is, in a way, handicapped in terms of cultural environment. Why should Native Americans or Latin Americans always erase their specificity in the name of American cultural 'purity' or 'whiteness'? Anzaldúa tells a history of America that has been edited out, bringing to light historical events and myths which have not been told or written as part of the picture of the colonial enterprise in the US. Like Spivak, she is interested in deconstructing stories to see how they could be (re)told differently.

Besides switching between Spanish and English (dialects) when she writes or speaks, Anzaldúa, like several other women of color, puts genre boundaries into question. When she is writing theory, she is concomitantly writing poetry and testimony, expressing her feelings and thoughts about her very theorizing enterprise.

Being interested in recovering some representational space for postcolonized cultures, Anzaldúa discusses gender aspects which tend to oppress women cross-culturally. She concludes that the Spanish as well as the Anglo-Saxon cultural influence in America have been responsible for new strict patterns of behavior, which are responsible for attaching new (and weaker) meanings to women's lives,

> Matrilineal descent characterized the Toltecs and perhaps early Aztec society. Women possessed property, and were curers as well as

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effect on people's lives.

> priestesses. According to the codices, women in former times had the supreme power in Tula, and in the beginning of the Aztec dynasty, the royal blood ran through the female line. (1987: 33)

All this changed after indigenous peoples came into contact with powerful European patriarchal structures of organization. After that, women started being protected by men, they could not simply "wander" around any longer. Not only women but a whole nation had to change. That is why Anzaldúa gives vent to her feelings–"as a person, I, as a people, we, Chicanos, blame ourselves, hate ourselves, terrorize ourselves. Most of this goes on unconsciously; we only know that we are hurting, we suspect that there is something 'wrong' with us, something fundamentally 'wrong' (1987: 45). Anzaldúa is politically interested in reaffirming native myths and traditions, especially those able to bring power back to native people, mainly to women. In fact, she advocates that the previous colonizers or Europeans have to learn several lessons from "people of color."

> Let's all stop importing Greek myths and the Western Cartesian point of view and root ourselves in the mythological soil and soul of this continent. White America has only attended to the body of the earth in order to exploit it, never to succor it or to be nurtured in it. Instead of surreptitiously ripping off the vital energy of people of color and putting it to commercial use, whites could allow themselves to share and exchange and learn from us in a respectful way. (1987: 68)

Besides the possibility of 'teaching' whites some different ways of approaching life and nature, natives might as well reinforce almost imperceptible bridges existing between different cultures in all Americas, by reminding these peoples that their cultural roots

and historical experiences are much more similar than any common European colonial influence they probably had to cope with during the last centuries.

Trinh T. Minh-ha, an Asian American postcolonial theorist, worries about the stereotypes imposed on colonized people, especially on women who happen to write. In Woman, Native, Other, she reasons that "if it is difficult for any woman to find acceptance for her writing, it is all the more so for those who do not match the stereotype of the 'real woman'–the colored, the minority, the physically or mentally handicapped" (9). Minh-ha affirms that very often such literary production is cheapened and discredited as being just a manifestation of a racial or sexual minority. If such a writer happens to come from a (non-white) Third World community, her work tends to be exposed to forms of criticism that "either ignore, dispense with, or overemphasize her racial and sexual attributes" (6). Such a woman, sooner or later, is forced to chose among three conflicting identities–"Writer of color? Woman writer? Or woman of color? Which comes first? Where does she place her loyalties?" (6). In fact, her loyalties will necessarily be connected to sex, ethnicity and class.

Trinh T. Minh-ha, like Spivak, is very skeptical about the way Western intellectuals want to teach (post)colonized people how to reevaluate their past, their traditions, their historical "mistakes." She states that "*they* decide who is racism-free or anti-colonial and they seriously think they can go on formulating criteria for us, telling us where and how to detect what they seem to know better than us: racism and colonialism" (59).

Admitting that there is always going to be some ambivalence between old imperialist cultures and (post)colonized ones, we have to accept the unavoidable hybridized nature of the contemporary cultural moment as a fact. There is a kind of

interdependence between these different "worlds." Some authors, such as Bhabha and Anzaldúa among others, claim that postcolonial fiction, by telling a different history, is able to displace the "center," giving vent to culturally hybrid new possibilities. In this respect, if difference separates and differentiates individuals, groups, nationalities, and women into minimal fractions, fragments of (provisional) identities, these "particles" of subjectivity may ally for some specific political reasons. Several contemporary theorists discuss the idea of a coalition for some collective benefit. Diana Brydon even states in Decolonising Fictions that "identity politics, while sometimes strategically useful, can at other times be more valuably replaced by coalition politics" (17). Such theorists defend that it is not only necessary to look inside, to unfold the "I"; on the contrary, they claim the importance of considering the presence of other subjects and intereacting with them.

Donna Haraway, in her revolutionary article "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," while discussing the fragmented or fractured nature of our contemporary concepts, stresses that there has been a growing recognition of coalition - through affinity, not identity (180). This same article has played an important role by changing the perspectives and approaches to identity politics. Several other authors interested in analyzing postmodernity or postcoloniality deal with similar perspectives, even if they stress other elements such as 'borderlands' (Anzaldúa) or 'location' (Bhabha). They are also interested in these in-between places, relations and "realities". In such a world, no one should be afraid of "partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (Haraway 1989: 178). In an interview with Kum-Kum Bhavnani, Haraway defines standpoint as "crafted out of struggle, out of engagement, and then [it] becomes a powerful possibility for fueling a different kind of knowledge in the world" (Bhavnani 37). It is clear that she

does not consider standpoint as an individual taking of position but as a political compromising with a collectivity.

Regarding such different categories or collectivities, Haraway mentions "women of color" as a good example of subjects with no essential criterion of identification. According to her, this is a fully political category–"this identity marks out a self-consciously constructed space that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identifications, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship" (1989: 180). In this way, it allows the building of a unity that does not replicate the imperializing, totalizing subjects of previous Marxisms and feminisms. Such formulations as those developed by 'women of color' are perceived by Haraway as potent for feminists interested in questioning any forms of colonialist or imperialist discourses (180).

The idea of a coalition between differently positioned entities is also brought up by Edward Said in Culture and Imperialism, where he argues for a contrapuntal analysis of history that sees Western and non-Western experiences as belonging together, connected by imperialism. He advocates the reading of texts of the metropolitan center and the peripheries contrapuntally. Madan Sarup, while developing some of Said's concepts on the experiences of domination and the dominated, affirms that "the contrapuntal method goes beyond the reified polarities of East versus West. To read not univocally but contrapuntally is to have a simultaneous awareness of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which the dominant discourse acts" (158). So Sarup stresses the interdependence existing between colonized/colonizer, East/West, South/North.

In respect to identity politics, Sarup states that "the main objective facing the cultural intellectual is not to accept the politics of identity as given, but to show how all representations are constructed, for what purpose, by whom, and with what components" (160). Even using a different vocabulary, Spivak is also interested in verifying not what a woman **is** but which women are represented, which are not and the reason for such exclusions and inclusions.

In the mid-90s, a leftist group of Italian feminists also became interested in dealing with these new provisional understandings of feminism and the involved possibilities of agency. They organized meetings between differently positioned women in political neutral territories (Italy). The bringing together of Palestinian and Israeli women in Italian cities, with their discussions mediated by a 'neutral listener,' was an attempt to materialize such new politics, which they called 'transversal politics'. Transversal politics is another form of naming what Butler and Haraway denominated 'coalition politics'. According to Nira Yuval-Davis, transversal politics "aims at providing answers to the crucial theoretical/political questions of how and with whom we should work if/when we accept that we are all different as deconstructionist theories argue" (125). Yuval-Davis clearly states that all feminist (and other forms of democratic) politics should be viewed as a form of coalition politics, where differences among women should be recognized and given a voice, and the boundaries of this coalition should be set not in terms of **who** we are but in terms of what we want to achieve (126). In this sense, she stresses the idea of 'dialogue' instead of any fixity of location as a way of assuring political action for contemporary feminists. Each woman (or group of differently positioned women) brings her rooting in her membership and identity to the dialogue, trying, at the same time, to shift so as to put herself in a situation

of exchange with women who have different memberships and identities (130). The process of shifting should not homogenize the 'other,' however. The "transversal" coming together "should be not with the members of the other group *en bloc*, but with those who, in their rooting, share values and goals compatible with one's own"(130). This would be a coalition among people who share aims and purposes, despite their differences and, thus, are able to organize agendas and actions collectively.

As is possible to notice, theorists from different parts of the world have been developing ideas and proposals for the feminist agenda. Among different critics who have been describing the arrangements and rearrangements of contemporary society, one might agree with Haraway when she affirms that "if we learn these webs of power and social life, we might learn new couplings, new coalitions. . . .The task is to survive in the Diaspora" (1989: 194). Thus, contemporary feminist discourses that do not look for a singular form but feel comfortable with the 'plural,' and postcolonial discourses that still believe in the existing of stories that have not been told, that were 'edited out', are perceived as important tools for this critical work. The point of view recovered in this study is based on perspectives and representations of literature, criticism and culture deriving from contemporary native culture. In this sense I hope that my different 'rooting' as a white, Brazilian woman might prove, through my 'shifting' (so as to create a situation of exchange), that a dialogue can always be established and the different voices respected when one is interested not in universalizing but in 'transversalizing' experience.

1.2 - NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CRITICISM

> *Since the coming of the Anglo-Europeans beginning in the fifteenth century, the fragile web of identity that long held tribal people secure has gradually been weakened and torn. But the oral tradition has prevented the complete destruction of the web, the ultimate disruption of tribal ways. The oral tradition is vital; it heals itself and the tribal web by adapting to the flow of the present while never relinquishing its connection to the past.* (Paula Gunn Allen)[1]

1.2.1- A Critical Review of the Field

According to The Empire Writes Back, "more than three-quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism" (1). One can, therefore, consider that literary works which rewrite 'history' and 'representation' from a postcolonial perspective are necessarily of interest to a large group of people around the world. In America, native people form one of the groups interested in (re)constructing a different history than that which has been presented as "the" official one.

Jace Weaver, in his book That the People Might Live, discusses native tradition, religion and literature from such a perspective, that is, seeing contemporary native cultural production as having resulted from the experience of colonization and the inevitable tension derived from the contact between native and European cultures. However, he stresses that "Native Americans are **not** postcolonial peoples. Instead, today they remain colonized, suffering from internal colonialism" (10). Weaver takes native literary production as the "resistance literature" of a minority group but not as

postcolonial. In fact, it seems that there is a problem of definition involved in his affirmation. What Weaver sees as delimiting postcoloniality, excluding natives from its terrain, is not exactly what other postcolonial critics have in mind when defining their field of studies. Several publications on the theme, in spite of acknowledging the powerful position the United States has assumed in political and economic fields along the last decades, see its cultural history as belonging to the postcolonial scene, since the experience of colonization has marked, in different ways, all groups living in America. The authors of The Empire Writes Back give a brief and clear definition of what they think of when referring to postcolonial literature:

> We use the term 'post-colonial'. . . to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. . . .We also suggest that it is most appropriate as the term for the new cross-cultural criticism which has emerged in recent years and for the discourse through which this is constituted. (2)

These authors give to the 'post' of postcolonialism the meaning of 'beyond' or 'after,' postcolonial literature being the one produced in the colonies **after** the advent of colonialism, that is, after contact with Western culture. In another passage, the same authors clearly state that the literature of the US should also be placed in this [postcolonial] category (2). It is undeniable that, in different degrees, most previously colonized cultures are still affected by imperial power, suffering some kind of "internal colonialism". Such experiences of profound interference in colonial social life can never be totally erased, not even after decades or centuries of political independence.

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[1] Taken from The Sacred Hoop, 45.

However, when discussing American literature, it is important to distinguish the hegemonic, early canonized authors from other writers belonging to minority groups which have only very recently been published on a larger scale. For early Anglo-Saxon Americans (or Euro-Americans, as some native critics name them) the most important aspect of literature was the assertion of a national culture, independent, or at least to some extent different, from the British cultural production and free from its institutions, which tried to control the publishing process and, in this way, define the American canon. If one thinks of James F. Cooper, Washington Irving and so many early writers in America, it is clear that they were much more attached to England in terms of cultural formation than to a new environment always defined as "wild" and "dangerous." Even by reading Henry James' much later literary production it is possible to notice that, while he was interested in identifying differences between Europe and America, he was still very much "European" in terms of education and experience, having spent much of his life in England, finally becoming a British citizen. While not British by birth, Henry James and, consequently, his literary work, as that of many other canonized American writers, were undeniably affected by the experience of colonialism. Thus, agreeing with the statement in The Empire Writes Back, American literature at large can be defined as postcolonial.

In respect to native experience, however, the effects of encountering a white, European imperial force are far more drastic and disturbing than such a differentiating phase was for the first generations of colonial settlers. As is well-known, indigenous people of the Americas formed oral communities. Natives relied on memory, their stories and myths being told over and over again, first because they were seen as creative and formative, but also in order not to be forgotten. Telling stories was as important as

listening to them, storytelling being a collective activity, a communal experience. Thus, contact with Europeans meant not only meeting for the first time people who were totally different in terms of outlook and culture, who were devoted to a different (and single) God, and who spoke a different, "strange" language, but also facing a culture based on the acknowledgment of the written word. It might well have been that, without the direct interference of the Church and countless missionaries, many natives who learned how to write and read would have only done so much later (if ever). Nevertheless, for natives, the written word has not always been taken as a positive, new cultural element brought by "civilized" and "Christianized" Europeans. The written use of English is also connected to some sad facts of indigenous history, such as treaties through which tribal land was taken by whites as well as the spiritual and cultural taking away of children to boarding schools.

Thus, when considering the beginnings of American literature, it is fundamental to keep in mind that native literature, an old tradition which pre-existed the coming of Europeans to this continent, was oral, and native written texts appeared only after the first Native-Americans became literate. However, most of the anthologies and studies[2] that have traditionally been used in literature courses at American schools and abroad take the first settlers' writings, their guides, diaries, reports or sermons as the first literary works in the Americas. However, nowadays it is possible to see that any serious literary and historical account of cultural life in the States takes indigenous cultural experience as one important element in the composition of a national culture. No sane

[2] Here I refer to literary guides such as Marcus Cunliffe's The Literature of the United States, and Robert Spiller's The Cycle of American Literature among others, first published in the 1950s, which neglected the literary existence of natives before the coming of Europeans to America. In such books, natives appear as uncivilized, barbaric groups which were positively "acculturated" by Europeans. Even much later, in Peter High's An Outline of American Culture (1986), there is no recognition of native literary culture

academic of our times would neglect the existence of indigenous culture and literature before the arrival of Western civilization in America[3].

As a matter of fact, it is important to discuss who is presently considered 'Native American' or 'Indian'. First of all, it is relevant that most native people have always "identified themselves primarily as members of a particular tribe" (Velie 3). Even nowadays, most natives feel they belong first to their tribal groups than to the large Native American or Indian community. Velie draws a parallel to the way Europeans refer first to their national groups–German, Dutch, etc.–rather than to a general 'European' category. It is important to keep in mind that this delimitation by tribe is reasonable, since tribes differ a lot in terms of language, habits, myths, stories, experiences and social organization. Besides differences in terms of experience among tribes, contemporary native people live in very different conditions–in reservations, in cities, among whites or in ghettos. Even reservations vary considerably, some being rich, productive and well-organized, while others are barren deserts. Thus, any attempt to perceive native life and culture in a singular way is problematic. It would repeat a historical tendency showed by imperialist power to define its 'Other' as one entity, easily identifiable and delimited. A serious study of native literature cannot suppress its intrinsic heterogeneity and hybridity.

Yet, if the definition of 'Native American' is so open and vast, how can we know if someone, some text, some artistic work is really representative of or belongs to native culture? Who is 'native' after all? Several authors, such as Alan Velie, Frederick

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before the coming of the English to this continent. I quote, "The story of American literature begins in the early 1600s, long before there were any 'Americans' "(5).

[3] Here it is important to mention that The Columbia Literary History of the United States, edited by Emory Elliott in 1988, contains a first section entitled "A Key into the Languages of America", opening with the essay "The Native Voice," signed by Momaday.

Turner, and more recently Gerald Vizenor, Louis Owens, Paula Gunn Allen and Jace Weaver, have been discussing such ideas on native identity. Most of them agree that a native **is** or **becomes** "native" by the recognition of the tribe, which should consider him/her as belonging culturally and racially to the group in order to validate such relationship. However, the way tribes define this belonging varies considerably. For most tribes specific blood quantum is not taken as a determinant any longer. That is, race alone is not sufficient. The cultural and social formation based on traditional stories and communal experience must be constitutive of any native individual. As Weaver clearly states, "to most Native Americans today, it is not merely enough that a person have a justifiable claim to Indian blood, but he or she must also be at least somewhat socially and culturally definable as a Native American" (6). The idealized, pure, wild Indian is, in fact, a romanticized, stereotypical construction produced by European minds. According to Turner, the recent boom in native cultural production (novels, films, etc.) has played an important role in "altering the older stereotype of the red man [sic] as a stone-faced, monosyllabic horseman of the Plains" (7). While discussing contemporary native identity, Weaver states that, "Native Americans move beyond 'ethnostalgia'–towards an affirmation of a syncretic, dynamic, adaptive identity in contemporary America" (8). In fact, native people do not accept being repeatedly studied in the past tense as if their lives were of interest in museums only. American indigenous people are alive and very productive at the beginning of this new century.

Native literature has been divided by contemporary native critics in two general types–traditional and mainstream. Traditional literature, according to Alan Velie's anthology, "includes tales, songs and oratory (traditional genres), having been composed on this continent for thousands of years" (3). In the past, such "texts" were told in tribal

language but nowadays they circulate and, to some extent, are perpetuated in English. Still according to Velie[4], "mainstream literature refers to works by Indians written in English in one of the standard American genres–fiction, poetry, biography, history" (3). Paula Gunn Allen, in The Sacred Hoop, makes a similar organization of native literature, dividing it into 'traditional' and 'genre' literature. For her, 'genre literature' is the same as what Velie defines as mainstream literature, that is, contemporary works in the classic Western categories (5) . Nowadays, most Native American writers are mixed-bloods, that is, they have been exposed to more than a single, "pure" native culture, and most write in English.

Too many non-Native academics or critics are still mainly interested in traditional native literature. This fact indicates that, until recently, non-natives have been mostly interested in the "folklore" frequently related to native life–the dances, songs, cures–an interest that tends to freeze native creativity in a place lost in the past, as if such culture had not been affected by centuries of colonization. According to Weaver,

> limiting consideration or admission to the canon to orature is a way of continuing colonialism. It once again keeps American Indians from entering the 20th century and denies to Native literary artists who choose other media any legitimate or "authentic" Native identity. (23)

Attempts to overdefine and control native cultural production by attaching it necessarily to a sacred world in the past are, thus, another form of prejudice against this minority that, in fact, obviously belongs to the American present.

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[4] It might be important to stress here that although contemporary meanings attached to 'traditional' and 'mainstream literature' tend to colide, since I'm revising native criticism, I am faithful to terms used by the metioned authros. In fact 'native'and 'mainstream' literature could be suggested so to clarify their intrinsic difference.

Rodney Simard, in his article "American Indian Literatures, Authenticity, and the Canon," states that native writers are very often expected to perform the role of the 'real Indian,' according to white people's perception of them, in order to be accepted as "authentic" representatives of Native American culture. Still, according to him, many critics of Native American literature, in a similar way, expect native writers to restrict their writing to traditional genres in order to preserve 'authenticity.' "Poetically implicit is the charge that the novel form is European, non Indian, and to write one is somehow to betray tradition and thus 'authentic' Indianness" (245), a charge taken as "nonsense" by the author of the article. As a matter of fact, several native authors, when abandoning traditional genres, do not abandon native culture. Most of the time they are simply experimenting with it, using such "new" forms for reconstructing their myths, while rewriting and re-presenting some characteristics of native culture at large–"circularity, polyvocalism, ambiguity, an ecosystemic view, tribalism, inherent mysticism and spirituality, strong place identification, and the like" (Simard 245), elements which start playing a different role in mainstream native literature. If such authors, in spite of their higher or lower Indian blood quantum, really have experienced tribal life and native culture, such elements will probably appear to some degree in their texts. Simard, clarifying that his theoretical tools are Marxism and feminism, is highly interested in questioning American canon formation–"what is 'great' or 'good' or 'true' to a group of white male academics frequently is not so to another group differently composed, and greatness, goodness and verity are not absolute qualities; yet the American literary canon is founded on just this assumption" (243). Following a theoretical path very much used by other feminists, Simard states that theory, criticism and, consequently, canon formation, are social and thus political activities, always indicating political choices and

positions. In this sense, he proposes that American national literature, as a single entity, "must be viewed as the text of the country in its multifaceted, multicultural, multiethnic, multiexperiential reality" (244).

Contemporary native cultural production is hybrid, mixes experiences, languages and actions. Jace Weaver is a defender of a necessary "communitism" in native cultural life. He defines 'communitism' as a position between community and activism. "Literature is communitist to the extent that it has a proactive commitment to Native community . . . and 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" (xiii). Thus the role performed by contemporary native writers is a relevant one for the whole community. Besides questioning fixed, stereotypical definitions of native identity, the texts produced by them also help native readers think of themselves as Indian from the inside rather than as defined by the outside, dominant society (Weaver 5).

Despite the considerable pressure hegemonic groups have historically played in order to control native culture, keeping it colonized and marginalized, the very existence and even blooming of native artistic production in the last decades in America reinforces a postcolonial belief in the possibilities of resistance, of working through the gaps of any oppressive system, creating unexpected alternatives.

With respect to language, it is important to stress that some critics also question the use of English in contemporary native literary work. The relation to language in most postcolonial societies has been quite ambivalent, since imperial power has marked such societies linguistically. One has to keep in mind, however, that publishing opportunities in native languages are practically non-existent. The use of the "colonizer's language"

should not be taken as a flaw on the part of native people. On the contrary, indigenous people have always been very talented in learning languages, being responsible for the early communication with whites. Currently there is no sense in not using English in Native American literature, since most people of native descent, after so many years of white interference in the continent, cannot speak their original languages any longer. Thus, through the use of English, they are able to reconstruct plural and syncretic worldviews, or more than that, to describe their adaptation to life between two worlds, reconfirming their fragmented identities. In fact, Native Americans, as well as many other colonized groups, appropriate[5] the language of the colonizer in order to subvert its system or, at least, to recreate native perceptions through it. Like the feminist questioning of the masculinist use of language and the chauvinism involved in written and oral expression in the last decades, native people, by 'appropriating' English, have questioned standard American literature.[6]

Non-native readers frequently face difficulties in following native literature and its codes, its particular references, constructions and deconstructions. According to Louis Owens, "the very hybridity of the work is subversive. The Indian reader becomes the insider, privileged and empowered" (14-15). This shows the intrinsic *difference* of native literature, if compared to more European-influenced literary work; it does not have to be constructed in traditional genres in order to differ from hegemonic, "Westernized" texts. It is also considerably different in its contemporary syncretic

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[5] The Empire Writes Back discusses the relation of the colonies to the colonizer's language. According to the authors, 'appropriation' means that the language has been taken to bear the burden of a different cultural experience (38).

[6] It is interesting to notice that Native American women writers are "appropriating" English on two levels–as women and as previously colonized people. A good example of such an enterprise can be seen in the anthology Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writings of North America, edited by Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird.

constructions. In this way, not only should the descent of their authors be taken into consideration, but the different worldviews they present in terms of gender, sexual orientation, religious perceptions and social organization.

Natives' perception of space also affects their approach to literature. Jace Weaver reminds us that North American natives did not respect nation-state boundaries, having a different perception of borders, one which did not rely on maps or official demarcations. As with their geographical and relational perception of space and mobility, native writers have for decades played with the rules of Western literary genres, using their creativity to go beyond oral tradition.

> Like the archetypal figure, the trickster, native writers easily adopt a multiplicity of styles and forms to suit their purposes, and in so doing they are giving birth to a new literature. They easily adopt and adapt the alien forms, and that new literature is still Indian without the essentialized need for "beads and feathers." (Weaver 26)

It is important to point out that most contemporary native writers do not restrict their writings to one genre only. On the contrary, they experiment with most genres, writing 'across' them. Authors such as Paula Gunn Allen, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, N. Scott Momaday, Susan Power and Linda Hogan have all written poetry as well as short stories and novels. William S. Penn, Gerald Vizenor, Louis Owens and Paula Gunn Allen, among others, write fiction as well as criticism. It seems that native authors can "move smoothly" among several styles, genres and discourses. In fact, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, "it is not always possible to separate theory and practice in post-colonial literature," since creative writers have often offered the most perceptive accounts of the postcolonial condition. Thus, symptomatic readings of postcolonial

literature can give us a good account of significant theoretical shifts in the development of postcolonial writing (83). That is, the mutual feeding of theory and literature in native writing is very intense and by concentrating on one of these fields one is necessarily attached to and affected by the other.

William S. Penn, a Native American creative writer and critic, in his anthology As We are Now: Mixblood Essays on Race and Identity, states that contemporary "narrative essays," following a form created by natives of giving meaning to events according to their importance, is where scholarly or academic writing is heading to "if it wants to revive its relation to an audience greater than seven" (5). According to the author, it may seem "loose, nonlinear, fractured or digressive" but in fact this kind of essay is well-structured, oral and conversational. In his anthology, Penn puts together very different native voices, most of them representing people living in cities, away from reservations and tribal councils. One can read, for instance, an autobiographical essay by a native homosexual man, a sexual identity not very often taken into consideration by most Americans when dealing with native culture. One might observe as well that native ethnicity is not very often considered in gay or lesbian studies or Readers either. Penn defends that Native American writers, ignoring some Western demarcations, mix genres and modes as well as chronology and tense, "to better bridge the gap between themselves and the dominant culture around them, as well as the gap within themselves" (3). He believes that such a literature has an important role in renewing what is understood by "American literature." In his view, such "mixblood" writers, whatever their backgrounds or disciplines, can offer postmodern America and Western culture a renewed diversity of imagination and thinking (3).

In fact, the acknowledging of other possibilities besides the already-structured American literary canon has been discussed by many minority groups–women, Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, among others. As Kathleen Donovan states in her book Feminist Readings of Native American Literature, "perhaps the most fundamental issue raised by both Native American literature, particularly that by women, and feminist theories is the issue of voice: Who can speak? and how? and under what circumstances? What can be said?... And what action can be taken?" (7-8). Most minority groups have been interested in articulation, voicing, and action. In fact, women of color have been organizing their agendas on these terms since, according to bell hooks, "for women within oppressed groups. . . coming to voice is an act of resistance" (12). By speaking or telling stories that give meaning to experience, women help transform female objects into subjects.

Contemporary Native women writers, aware of the double oppression experienced by most as women and as members of cultural and racial minority groups, have been highly interested in negotiating identity as well as in questioning the misogyny of a "Native American canon," and so many other aspects involved in their process of coming to voice. Besides, they reinforce that women of color in general and Native women, specifically, are not a monolithic 'Other.' Points of view differ so much among Native women that some define themselves as feminists while others do not even see a reason for the creation of such a concept. This confirms Edward Said's claims that hybridity of identity and culture, shaped by language, is characteristic of postcolonial societies (1993: xxv). Kathleen Donovan, agreeing with Said, affirms that the work of Native women writers demonstrates that storytelling, whether oral or written, is establishing new alignments across gendered and national borders and can be interpreted

as a source of resistance and continuance (14). Still according to Donovan, there are several parallels between Native American literature and feminist literary and cultural theories. Native American literature illumines feminisms, and feminisms help us understand many of the issues developed by Native writers, especially Native women writers (7). The dialogue between both discourses is thus seen as very productive.

According to several contemporary Native American critics, such as Allen and Vizenor, what differentiates native literature from other Western productions is that it is constantly being fed by oral tradition. In this sense, native literature also assumes an important role in constructing a more positive image of native people than the one usually presented in movies, poems and novels by whites or even by some alienated Indians. "Indian control of the image-making and information-disseminating process is crucial and the contemporary prose and poetry of American Indian writers, particularly of woman-centered writers, is a major part of Indian resistance to cultural and spiritual genocide" (Allen 42). In order not to be "swallowed" up by conventionally masculinist and individualistic American mainstream models of social life, women, and especially native ones, have to interfere in the construction of more positive public identities for female subjects.

Writers from American minorities are appropriating and adapting for their particular purposes not only the language of the dominant group but also mainstream literary genres and the concept of authorship. The writer really assumes a position similar to that of a storyteller, a common figure in any oral culture. However, native storytellers are never perceived as definitive and exclusive creators nor do the stories they tell ever have a final form. "Within oral tradition, literature is authorless" (Owens 10). The birth of the novel, on the contrary, is very much related to the emphasis placed

on the individual in Western societies. Since the rise of the novel, writers have focused mainly on private, individual issues, and they have been taken as the creators of original plots. In this sense, while Native American poets, for example, still have the reference of an ancient (anonymous) oral tradition, Native American novelists use a genre totally foreign to their culture, where the author's signature is a fundamental mark, sometimes even determining the editorial success and prestige of a specific fictional work. In this light, native novelists can be defined as 'acculturated'–in that they write in a Western genre–and at the same time, as 'appropriators'–in that they make use of such a "foreign" cultural model for their own (postcolonial) purposes. Interested in such superposed positionalities, Diana Brydon, in the introduction to Decolonizing Fictions, points out that, from a postcolonial perspective, the encounter of colonial and imperialist cultures can never be interpreted as a one-way street. Cultural productions in the colonies could never be defined as simple margins of the imperial center. The transmission of culture has always been a "two-way traffic characterised by the failure of the imperial power to acknowledge colonial and postcolonial cultural contributions and their differences" (15). Native novelists, used to bicultural environment, are well-equipped for appropriating Western artistic frames for their construction of innovative perceptions of past, present and future events in the postcolonial society to which they belong.

In the same way feminists, decades ago, came to find out that traditional or limited representations of female subjects in books, movies, pictures, etc. have negatively affected women's practical lives, native people have also perceived that historical mainstream negative or distorted pictures of tribal life have destroyed several individual lives as well as menaced native cultural survival. Being able to read novels, poems and essays, to watch movies and to take courses that show a different picture of

colonization and its effects in the Americas is fundamental in at least two ways–first, it reinforces the idea that native people are not vanishing at all. On the contrary, they are brilliantly resisting cultural threats, thanks to an inexorable oral tradition which keeps feeding their lives. Second, it is a remarkable proof that Western literature and culture has been merely one influence among many in the creation of what we might call "The American Cultural Canon." If local, indigenous voices were less heard, it was not because such cultural production did not exist but rather because of economic and political interests on the part of the imperialist colonizers, who justified interventions in native life as a divine mission. The blooming of a resisting native literature is thus an important feature for the unveiling of American culture at large. Images and stereotypes of what 'life' or 'culture' is in America have to be reviewed, keeping in mind all those other minority voices–Native, black, homosexual, Chicano, etc. Thus cultural and literary production by Native American writers, especially native women, is not going to influence only native people but the cultural identity of American people as a whole.

Of course, there are several differences between Western and native literatures. First of all, while Westerners tend to put much more value on individual talent and creativity, with self-expression probably the main impulse for producing texts or art objects, native people are more interested in sharing stories, visions, knowledge. Anglo-Europeans tend to be more analytical, organizing events and facts in hierarchical and dualistic terms.

> People reared in traditional American Indian societies. . .do not organize perceptions or external events in terms of dualities or priorities. This egalitarianism is reflected in the structure of American Indian literature, which does not rely on conflict, crisis, and resolution for organization. . .

> .Rather, its significance is determined by its relation to creative empowerment, its reflection of tribal understandings and its relation to the unitary nature of reality. (Allen 59)

What also marks native difference in terms of the perception of reality is its very specific comprehension of time and space. Most native tribes take time as cyclical and space as spherical. Thus, for Indians the whole depends and relates to all parts, being all "points" of the "sphere" equally significant. This concept logically affects the literature, especially novels, produced by native people. Generally there are no exclusive protagonists and time is not chronologically organized. In fact, the organization of texts relies much more on the importance of events and their interrelationship than on a prior sequential order. In short, such novels tend not to be tied to any particular time line, main character, or event. They tend "to be tied to a tribe's tradition and tribal ritual" (Allen 79).

It is also important to mention that native writers' doing away with chronological time is not a political postmodern attempt at questioning Western organization of thought. They are simply reconstructing their perception of a world that existed even before signs of modernity such as the clock or the imposition of a fixed schedule became part of daily life. Such achronological, apparently disorganized constructions of reality are more interested in rites and ceremonial and seasonable time. Besides, people are not more important than things, animals or objects. In ceremonial terms, meaning can move from one body to another without losing or changing value. Thus, power can circulate much more freely in a less centralized way.

Native people's concept of power is related to their understanding of the relationships that occur between the human and non-human worlds, a linkage that is not

material but spiritual. Its essence is the power that enables magical things to happen, such as the transformation of objects from one form to another, the movement of objects from one place to another by teleportation, the curing of the sick, communication with plants and animals (Allen 22-23). This explains why some objects, animals, or substance, common under Western eyes, are sacred for native people. Many times such sacredness has been misinterpreted by colonizers. For instance, menstrual or postpartum blood is taken as sacred by most tribes. Since what is empowered is not to be touched, and, thus, kept in isolation, many anthropologists have simply affirmed that native people show prejudice in respect to women, especially menstruating women. In fact, Allen states that especially before contact with white people, "the blood of a woman was in and of itself infused with the power of Supreme Mind, and so women were held in awe and respect" (28). Contrary to Anglo-European perceptions, menstruating women were considered as so powerful that it would be dangerous for a medicine person or a warrior to approach them during their period. It seems fundamental to reread native cultural production from its particular perspectives, which might result in totally different (and more faithful) perceptions on the part of non-native audiences.

In most contemporary native American novels, cultural conflict appears as a major theme. Very often some of the characters are 'mixed-blood' or 'breeds,' which brings the topic of cultural contact and colonialism into discussion. Most characters portrayed are bicultural and have to deal with the effects of colonization as well as with problems of identity. Allen states that "more and more, American Indian novels by Native American writers are concerned with tribal and urban life. . . .Most of these contemporary novels are ritualistic in approach, structure, theme, symbol, and significance, even though they use the overlay of Western narrative plotting" (Allen 79).

Such characteristics of native fiction point to the inevitably hybrid environment to which such writers have been exposed through centuries of cultural interference after the colonial advent.

All three selected writers for the present study are surely marked by their communal experience as tribal members and have been very creative in finding ways for making their fictional work, as far as possible, a collective experience. Silko, for instance, presents in Ceremony the figure of Thought Woman. According to Pueblo Culture, Thought Woman[7], also called Old Spider Woman or Serpent Woman, is taken as the Creator of Life, and in Silko's novel, she is creating the very story that is being told (written): "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."[8] In this way, Silko is sharing the position of storyteller or "author" with another entity, reminding the reader that the stories do not belong to anyone in particular; but to a cultural community. In this sense, the very genre used by native novelists already brings them into a terrain that can not be totally traditional, where they have to adapt and assimilate ways of expression from the other, outside, mainstream culture–here this 'Other' refers to Western culture, as a consequence of a displacement of positions. Louis Owens correctly states that the very form of the novel may represent "a necessary 'desacralization' of traditional materials," a transformation that brings sacred issues–from ritual and myth–into the secular world of "decontextualized 'art'" (11). In fact, not only genres are being displaced, but also themes and positions, and one of the results of such new arrangements is that the native reader assumes a privileged

[7] A quite detailed exploration of this figure is presented in The Sacred Hoop, by Paula Gunn Allen.

place in telling and giving meaning to such stories. Non-native readers, educated according to Western, Eurocentric points of view, used to some input from Greek and Roman mythology in order to approach classic or already canonized literary texts, generally resist the idea of the "usefulness" of some knowledge on Native American mythology when approaching native stories. One has just to consider that no common contemporary reader of English will be able to read (and understand) Beowulf without some introduction to the culture, history and language of that period (Owens 29). In a similar way, in order to read literature produced from a native perspective, the Non-native reader usually feels the need of some preparation for that experience. Native literature has never been "naïve," childish or plain, as Western people tended to define it according to their frequently limited readings of it. On the contrary, such literature is quite often very complex and its authors have recently begun to be praised for their talent and creativity by renowned critics and editors. In this respect, postcolonial theories, according to the The Empire Writes Back, have "revealed with univocal clarity that value, like meaning, is not an intrinsic quality but a relation between the object and certain criteria brought to bear upon it" (188). Any canon is a construction, not at all based on essences or unquestionable values and, thus, such constructions always carry political interest. In this sense, reading and teaching native literature, and especially one produced by women, is necessarily a political stand in and of itself: in the very act of discussing alternative texts which have been historically marginalized, one realizes opportunities for deconstructing the mainstream canon. One has to keep in mind, however, that the postcolonial (native) subject is as fragmented as contemporary feminist and postmodern subjects. Thus, such subjects will have to tolerate the polyvocal

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[8] Leslie Marmon Silko, Ceremony. New York: Penguin Books, 1986, p. 1. All further references to the book are taken from the same edition and will appear as C, followed by page number.

characteristic of their discourses as well as the impossibility of finding a single, united voice in their constructions of the experience of colonialism.

1.2.2 - Silko, Erdrich and Power: Introduction to Native American Women Writers

After the success of N. Scott Momaday and his Pulitzer Prize winning novel House Made of Dawn, 1968, which has been considered a precursor of the boom in native literature that came about in the following decade, several other native writers who had been mostly read by their own people became better known by the larger American and international public. N. Scott Momaday has become a kind of "spiritual father" for Native American writers; he was the first of a new generation of writers to deal with Indian identity, presenting it as a kind of "vision quest," bringing not only characters but writers as well back to their cultural roots. Besides, if one takes into consideration that, before Momaday's above-mentioned novel, there were only nine novels written and published by native authors, with only one of them written by a woman (Mourning Dove's Cogewea, 1927), the boom of native literature in the last decades can be taken as an amazing shift in American culture. Dee Brown's bestseller book Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee can be taken as a first step of a literary opening which happened after the enormous success of Momaday's novel. The three women authors here analyzed are part of this new generation of native writers, all interested in representing characters that question old, stereotypical and limiting definitions of Indians, especially of native women. In this way, they depart from the typically negative images of natives or at least from the grotesque stereotypes attached to them in earlier fiction by Indian and non-Indian writers. The following brief overview of their lives and

works intends to locate them as well as their fictional work inside the American literary field.

Leslie M. Silko, according to a book of articles and interviews edited by Helen Jaskoski, can be considered as a good representative of the mixed-blood Indian. Born in 1948, in Albuquerque, she had the opportunity to be together with the elders of her family and tribe. She received her BA (with honors) from the University of New Mexico in 1969. In Jaskoski's book, Silko affirms that, despite some inevitable crisis of identity as a bicultural person, her cultural formation rests on Laguna Pueblo oral tradition (91). When asked about the reasons for developing more intense male characters than female ones, she states,

> I guess it goes back to the fact that when I was growing up I never thought of myself as having any sort of gender one way or the other. . . .I never made the connection that because of one's sex one would be limited to certain kinds of experiences. (Jaskoski 106)

Since Silko perceives that no opportunities or experiences were prohibited to her as a result of gender determinations, she believes that either a female or a male character can be representative of native values and provoke a renewed approach to traditional native culture. According to Kathleen Donovan, however, Silko has somewhere else pointed out that, despite her coming to feminism differently because of her identity as a Laguna woman, she is, indeed, a feminist (7).

Silko, who praises oral tradition as spiritual food and storytelling as a healing communal activity, has nevertheless very strict positions in respect to the invisibility native Americans have been forced to assume in the mainstream history of the United Sates. She criticizes colonialism and all involved in the consequent interventions in

native life. Pointing out that Indian land has been stolen by whites, she asserts that Anglo-Saxons, while celebrating prosperity in the New Land, should always remember that this became possible on native land, on stolen land (Jaskoski 111).

Leslie Marmon Silko wrote several short stories, essays, poems, but recognition came with the publication of Ceremony, in 1977. In Ceremony, Tayo, a mixed-blood Laguna who returned from combat, struggles to regain his health and mental balance. Suffering from what his physicians term "battle fatigue," Tayo had become dysfunctional when he was ordered to shoot Japanese enemies, which he could not to do because he saw his own ancestors among those Asian faces. In the hospital, doctors advise him to avoid native medicine and to stay away from his people. After he leaves the hospital and returns to his tribe, Tayo's illness worsens. Finally his grandmother calls in a traditional healer who starts Tayo on a journey of inner healing (through the help of several Native American healers) and recomposition of a painful but rich native past.

Silko has also written another very ambitious novel on native culture, with some 70 characters and events spanning 500 years. The Almanac of the Dead (1991) is probably one of the most serious literary enterprises undertaken by a native writer to recover native culture in all the Americas. Probably because of its length, however, it has never been as popular as Ceremony. Her most recent novel, Gardens in the Dunes, published in 1999, shows once again that Silko remains interested in reviewing history and recovering oral tradition in order to reconstruct and represent Native American identity from more appropriate perspectives than those constructed by Anglo-Saxon eyes.

Harold Bloom, in a surprising[9] collection on native women writers, while reaffirming that he sees no reason for taking gender into literary and aesthetic discussion, recognizes Silko together with Erdrich and Mourning Dove as "the most widely read Native American women writers." In the introduction to his book of extracts on native women authors, he exposes that his main interest is not in Silko's novels or short stories, as he considers them excessively political. He stresses that her correspondence with James Wright, "a major American poet", is much more refreshing, freeing Silko from "the politics of protest" of her other fictional work. Admitting that James Wright has stated that Ceremony is "one of the four or five best books he has ever read about America," Bloom adds that, "though that was overpraise, Ceremony will continue to sustain many rereadings" (xv).

Louise Erdrich was born in Little Falls, Minnesota, in 1954 and grew up in North Dakota, where her parents worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, her mother being Chippewa and her father, German-American. Erdrich spent some time with relatives in the reservation but, unlike Silko, did not grow up as a regular tribal member. She received an MA degree from The Johns Hopkins University in 1979. Erdrich is a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, also called Ojibwa or, as the Chippewa usually refer to themselves, Anishinabe, meaning 'Original People.' She wrote several short stories and poems but recognition came when her novel Love Medicine received the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1984 for the Best Work of Fiction. Since then she has been praised by many writers and critics. Philip Roth has

[9] It seems surprising that a critic who has a clear position against taking gender as an element in literary discussion edits a book on native women writers. In his introduction to the book he even states that "the consequences of making gender a criterion for aesthetic choice must finally destroy all serious study of imaginative literature as such"(xii). The remaining question never answered by him is–if he really believes one should never take gender as a category of analysis, what are his reasons for editing a book exclusively on (native) women writers?

declared her "greatly gifted" and found in her work "originality, authority, tenderness, and a pitiless and wild wit," and Toni Morrison has written that "the beauty of Love Medicine saves us from being devastated by its power" (Chavkin 1994: 14).

Erdrich was married to Michael Dorris, a Native American anthropologist and writer, who had a Modoc father. This reference is important since most of her books are dedicated to him, her way of acknowledging the collaborative nature of their literary production. She always stated that he was such a faithful collaborator and critic of her work that she might not have written them 'that way' without him. They wrote one book together, The Crown of Columbus, which was not well-received by critics. Erdrich and Dorris' marriage fell apart in the mid-1990s and, during the divorce proceedings, he committed suicide in 1997. Her latest novel, The Antelope Wife (1998), is probably her first novel written without Dorris' collaboration, but when he was still alive.

Tracks was published in 1988 and refers to earlier events of native history than those presented in Love Medicine (1984). In fact, for "chronological minds" it is much easier to follow both novels if one reads Tracks first, and then Love Medicine. Neither novel is historical, but they bring to light political topics which highly affected native tribal life, such as the treaties with the American government and the creation of reservations. Tracks is set in the 1920's and is the chronicle of the Anishinabe (Chippewa) community in North Dakota struggling to keep their land and to continue with their traditions and beliefs. Presenting the counterpointing voices of Nanapush, a traditional tribal elder, and Pauline Puyat, a mixed-blood Christianized Indian, the novel describes the intertwining lives of Fleur Pillager, Nanapush and Pauline and their interaction with other tribal members. Pauline, internalizing Western standards, negates

her identity and ends up in a Catholic convent. Nanapush and Fleur resist acculturation and claim their identities in amazing ways.

In fact, Love Medicine and Tracks are interconnected in terms of characters, families and communities to Erdrich's three other novels–The Beet Queen (1986), The Bingo Palace (1994) and Tales of Burning Love (1996). However, as stated earlier, Erdrich's books have not been published nor written in a chronological order. These five books can be taken as a large epic of Native American culture, although the The Beet Queen concentrates much more on white Anglo-Saxon culture. The decision to concentrate on Tracks in this study rests on the more overtly political nature of this book, which can be better compared, in terms of representation and reconstruction of native values, to the two other novels here analyzed.

It is also important to mention that Love Medicine (1984), despite its great success among native and non-native readers and critics, was republished in 1993. Erdrich calls the new version of the book Love Medicine: New and Expanded Version. According to an article by Chavkin on the two versions of the book, it seems that Erdrich decided to clarify some topics in the second version in order to make clear her political points. Erdrich has simply claimed that, after the original publication of Love Medicine, she discovered more stories that had to be added to it (Chavkin 1999: 90). Thus she added four more chapters in the second version, in which some characters are developed in more detail and some topics differently or more profoundly depicted. Again, according to Chavkin, it might well have been that Erdrich wanted to answer the many critiques she received, especially from native communities, for presenting negative stereotypes of indigenous people in the first version, such as the drunken, rapist or lost male Indian, the promiscuous female Indian and so on. At any rate, in accordance with

Erdrich's comment that "people should be politically committed in their personal life but not in their art, for to do so makes the art polemic and boring," the new version is not openly political; "it avoids didacticism and expresses its politics subtly" (Chavkin 1999: 93).

Susan Power, born in 1962, is the youngest and most recent success among the three authors. She won the PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Fiction in 1995. Power is a member of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, belonging to the Sioux or Dakota native group. She received degrees from Harvard/Radcliffe and Harvard Law School, having received her M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers Workshop. At the moment her first novel was published she was a Bunting Institute Fellow in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She has written a new novel, which has not come out yet.

These three women writers, despite having some similar roots in respect to racial and cultural backgrounds, have developed quite different, sometimes conflicting perspectives on Native life in both fictional and academic work. Silko has often criticized Erdrich for her "acquiescence to postmodern influences, specifically, to self-referential writing." In Silko's opinion, Erdrich has forgotten about the land. Her characters "are disconnected from the land on which they walk and from which they emerge" (Salyer 132). Erdrich has conversely been praised by some critics (Brogan and Louis Owens, among others) exactly for being able to recreate a story about (and on) the native land, while (re)presenting contemporary native identity. As a matter of fact, as the acculturation processes have been different from tribe to tribe, the degree of alienation, as reflected in such fiction has also been different (Allen 145).

Despite such conflicting opinions, reading the work produced by these authors as well as that produced by several other writers of native descent such as Momaday,

Welch, Allen and Vizenor, among others, gives insight into contemporary native perspectives of America and, in a larger sense, of the world, which may enrich our understanding of colonialism, reminding us once again that the famous theory of "The Vanishing American"[10] has simply been another attempt to sell out a colonizer's wish–the wish to homogenize and "lighten" the color of the country, hoping for the silencing or elimination of its original populations.

As noted, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich and Susan Power belong to the Laguna Pueblo, Chippewa and Standing Rock Sioux tribes respectively, with quite different myths, stories and traditions. Since literature by native writers is generally fed by oral tradition, it is important to take into account some aspects of these three tribes' stories and myths.

Laguna is one of the Pueblo Tribes of the Southwest. According to Bertha P. Dutton in her book American Indians of the Southwest, the language used by Laguna people determines their belonging to the larger Western Keresan group. "Laguna followed a matrilineal-matrilocal pattern of organization" (30). They have historically developed a sedentary life style, in settlements called *pueblos,* located in the state of New Mexico, near Albuquerque. Like most native tribes, Laguna Indians follow a communal pattern. Society is concerned with the group as a whole and not with individual success. Observing rules is important not as a result of Christian influence, but because Lagunas believe that if one does wrong, illness may befall one's village or

[10] This notion is well-developed in Brian Dippie's book The Vanishing American, where he analyzes American changing attitudes and policies in respect to native populations along the centuries. At a certain point, it became convenient to defend that Indians were weak in physical and intellectual terms and, thus, doomed to disappear in order to allow the continuance of a "stronger," "better-equipped" ethnic group, the Euro-American. Later on, since natives were really not vanishing and the lands they were living on became valuable because of the discovery of gold and oil, the US Congress created the policies of Allotment and Removal. In this way, the non-vanishing original American could be further dislocated to some undesirable territories of the American West, far from their sacred lands.

family group, a disastrous flood may destroy property and crops, or severe drought may endanger tribal survival (Dutton 14). Most Pueblo Indians accept death as the ending of material life and the continuation of spiritual life. Pueblo children are very much involved with their tribes' social organization. Since early childhood they take part in most activities. Pueblo Indians practice monogamy but extramarital sexual relations are not uncommon. Religion transcends and permeates all other aspects of tribal life. Sacred rites and ceremonies are performed before hunting, planting, and many other activities. Traditional religion is seen as a way of giving meaning to existence.[11]

The Chippewa or Ojibwa were a powerful tribe that dominated a large area around the Great Lakes. Now they are concentrated in North Dakota, where the Turtle Mountain Reservation was established around 1882.[12] They came into closer contact with Christianity in the last decades of the 19th century, but the tribe has been syncretic, that is, the Chippewa were able to keep traditional ceremonies when in their environment and attend Christian ones when in town. According to Chippewa tradition, each individual has two souls, the ego-soul and the free-soul. Both souls can travel at specific times–during dreams, feverish states, etc. The ego-soul, however, is supposed to travel to the afterworld immediately after death while the free-soul becomes a ghost, joining the other only four days later. This helps explain Chippewa's belief in metamorphosis. While the souls are traveling, during dream time or after death, the individual is likely to have the power to take other appearances, other forms and states. Death is generally well-accepted by Chippewa since they do not believe in afterlife

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[11] Some other aspects of Pueblo Culture, specially those related to the Keresan tradition, will be discussed later on in this study when referring to Allen's defense of gynocracy, in the last chapter.

[12] This general summary on the Chippewa culture is based on "A Primer on Ojibwa History and Culture", an unpublished manuscript by Dr. G. Thomas Couser. His main source is Christopher Vecsey's Traditional Ojibwa Religion and Its Historical Changes, 1983.

punishment for misbehavior on earth. The only kind of death Chippewas are really afraid of is drowning, because the one who dies in water will become a ghost, wandering forever between worlds. Important in their system of beliefs are the manitos. Manitos are non-human beings who influence the tribe's survival and balance. There are several manitos such as the Four Winds, the Underwater Manito, and Nanabozho, a kind of culture-hero and trickster. Nanabozho, according to Chippewa Creation Myth, is believed to be responsible for the creation of the present world after a flood. However, there is no consensus about Nanabozho, since the variance of opinions on him is enormous: he is taken as human, a manito, a wolf, a demigod, a trickster. In short, he is a composite, synthetic figure with contradictory and complex characteristic. On the one hand, as a Culture-Hero, Nanabozho created the world and organized it. He gave identity to people and helped them in their needs, giving them medicine knowledge, ceremonies etc. On the other hand, as a trickster, he is a manipulator of others, an example of bad behavior. Nanabozho is believed to have the ability to appear in several different forms, an example of metamorphosis. For Chippewas, another important manito is the Underwater Manito, that is, Misshepeshu. Besides its power over fishing, this manito is also important because of Chippewa fear of drowning. Such feared manitos were frequently connected to Matchimanito, that is, the "evil spirit." However, when Nanabozho created the world, according to the myth, he also created manitos able to counteract Matchimanito. The most important reason for the existence of such different manitos is to keep balance. The Ojibwas divide their corpus of approximately two hundred narratives into two basic categories: stories mostly related to living human beings and myths about the manitos and deceased humans. Most of their stories are supposed to be told only during winter, since at that season the underwater manitos are

believed to hibernate, and thus are unable to hear. Telling such stories in summer could bring punishment for the whole tribe.

Finally, the Sioux or Dakota Indians dwell north of the Arkansas River on the right bank of the Mississippi, stretching over to Lake Michigan and up the valley of the Missouri, according to the book The Myths of the North American Indians by Lewis Spencer. The people of the Sioux Nation refer to themselves as Lakota/ Dakota/Nakota, which means 'friend' or 'ally'. The United States government took the word Sioux from *Nadowesioux,* which comes from a Chippewa (Ojibway) word which means 'little snake' or 'enemy'. The word was shortened by the French to 'Sioux'. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, to which Susan Power belongs, is one of the Great Sioux Nation tribes. Turner states that perhaps no other native group has so symbolized the American Indian as have the Sioux - "the faces of Red Cloud, Sitting Bull, Gall, and other great leaders. . . all have combined to engrave them on the national memory" (125).

The Sioux resisted white advances in Indian land as long as possible. The battles between the Sioux and the American 7th Cavalry are a sad and bloody part of the history of North America. Basically, the problem started after the 7th Cavalry found gold in The Black Hills, a sacred place for those natives. The Gold Rush started the conflict between the United States and Great Sioux Nation. Since the US search for gold in violation of the Treaty previously signed with General Custer, the Sioux resisted, not accepting proposals of the American government to buy or rent the hills. Sitting Bull, one of the Sioux leaders, firmly wanted to preserve their way of life and did not agree to leave the place and go to reservation land. In 1876, there was a big battle between the 7th Cavalry and the Sioux and some other Sioux allies. The Battle of Little Big Horn marked the Sioux victory. In 1889, a governmental Act divided the Sioux into smaller groups and

determined their settlement in smaller reservations. Sitting Bull resisted such a division and reduction of native land. In addition, the Sioux were participating in the Ghost Dance Movement. Because of his resistance in accepting the governmental decision and his participation in the Ghost Dance, (probably a more plausible excuse for revenge from a Christian perspective) Sitting Bull was shot by Indian Police in 1890. His band fled to the Pine Ridge reservation to meet Chief Red Cloud and get reorganized. The 7th Cavalry caught them, together with several other Ghost Dancers at a place called Wounded Knee in December, 1890. They massacred 300 hundred natives, half of them children and women, and left the bodies to freeze in the snow. The descendants of the Sioux tribes are still living in their homeland, respecting their traditions and reconstructing them in their artistic production.[13]

Despite representing Indians from a tribal, "communitist" (Weaver's concept) perspective, most contemporary native writers do not worry about defining or delimiting too much the realm of their potential action nor do they wish to be artificially restricted by origin. According to some extracts by Leslie M. Silko in Gregory Salyer's book, Native American writers are surely aware that such writing belongs to a tradition not exclusively defined by race:

> You might be able to say that all writing from those considered Other by the powers of life and death has some similarities. But that includes gay people, immigrants, people who have maybe been insane. . . .But to say, 'This is how Native American writing is different from African American,' I don't think so. . . . I think that what writers, storytellers, and

[13] Most of such information was taken from the site on the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, available on The Internet Public Library.

> poets have to say necessarily goes beyond such trivial boundaries as origin. (Salyer 131)

As Salyer states in the same book, "boundaries are real, as real as the relation that is created by crossing them and as real as the danger involved in the transgression" (131). However, it seems that the three selected authors are more interested in transgressing previously defined limits than in creating new boundaries or safe territories for themselves. Erdrich, in an interview with Hertha Wong in the book Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris, when asked if she considers herself a Native American writer, answers:

> I think of any label as being both true and a product of a kind of chauvinistic society because obviously white male writers are not labeled "white male writers." However, I suppose they're useful in some ways. While it is certainly true that a good part of my background, and Michael's background, and a lot of themes are Native American, I prefer to simply be a writer. (31)

Susan Power, in an interview to the Internet Public Library online resources, clarifies that her concerns target Native Americans although she also considers global issues, breaking away from overt activism. Very much aware of contemporary reality in the hybrid country she lives in, Power claims: "We're living in a larger world, not just an Indian world." She clearly defines the double experience she had during her life as an advantage: "it was important for me to move back and forth between the two worlds that also exist within me, to nurture both spirits."

Keeping in mind the existing differences among native people, native women and women at large, one of the main purposes of this study is to highlight

difference–different possibilities of giving meaning to life, to individuals and to experience. By bringing native culture and criticism to the analysis of native texts, one of my intentions is to show that Western models and thoughts are not and have never been universal. At the same time, my composite, interdisciplinary approach to native fiction has no intention of repeating older universalisms. Thus, throughout this text one sees the weaving of at least two critical discourses, that is, feminism and postcolonialism, involved in guaranteeing new reading possibilities for literature and for world history. These two discourses are expected to exert power on the process of deciphering images, myths and stories so to avoid any hegemonic interpretations of the world, of human life and culture, which shows a clear compromise with postmodern critiques of any forms of master narratives. The second part of this dissertation presents a comparative analysis of the three novels selected, in terms of their representations of ethnicity, religious beliefs and gender.

PART II

2.1 - REPRESENTING THE MIXED BLOOD: RACIAL AND CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS

> *'En unas pocas centurias', the future will belong to the 'mestiza'. Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos–that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves and the way we behave–la mestiza creates a new consciousness.* (Anzaldúa)[1]

Most contemporary Native American novelists have shown increasing interest in representing mixed blood characters in their fiction. Since colonization is a fact which can be criticized but not denied, (postcolonial) writers of native descent have realized that those people who have been most affected by so many historical and cultural intercrossings–who have had to learn how to survive in the in-between, circulating through or mediating very different cultures–might well become the key to a better understanding of life in America(s). The mixed blood, representative of (or affected by) not one but at least two intersecting cultures–colonizer and colonized–is a reality which brings racial categories into question. According to Paula Gunn Allen, "the breed (whether by parentage or acculturation to non-Indian society) is an Indian who is not an Indian. That is, breeds are a bit of both worlds, and the consciousness of this makes them seem alien to traditional Indians while making them feel alien among whites" (129). When considering breeds, or mixed bloods, one immediately thinks of

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[1] Taken from Borderlands: La Frontera, 379.

boundaries, limits, terrains. In fact, mixed bloods threaten the meaning attached to all these words–they cannot be safely defined as belonging 'here' or 'there', being equipped to circulate on both sides of the 'border,' able to assume the position of the 'One' and of the 'Other,'[2] even if often reminded that they belong out 'there'. Such flexibility of positionalities questions the very notion of (racial or ethnic) borders, especially if we take into account Gloria Anzaldúa's definition in Borderlands: "Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them" (1987: 3). In this sense, it becomes more complex to define who is 'us' and who is 'them' when dealing with individuals who, at least in terms of genealogy, belong to both sides of the border. Anzaldúa mentions some of those who usually inhabit (or are forced to inhabit) the 'borders': "the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'" (1987: 3). Thus it is not surprising that, after a first period of reconstruction of history from a "pure" native or Indian perspective, many native authors have become interested in representing "reality" from more hybridized or composite viewpoints as a way of recovering some sense of community identity in contemporary societies. Most of these authors are, in fact, concrete examples of mixed blood existence, being of more than one culture, with a generally closer attachment to their inherited tribal culture, which, through orature, informs their literary production. Paula Gunn Allen affirms that, as a consequence of their experiences as "breeds," contemporary Indian writers have shown a "preoccupation with alienation in classic

[2] One may consider Gayatri Spivak's affirmation that when the Western intellectual starts to pay attention to the East, most of times s/he is not interested in observing how this different "universe" works, in its specificities, but in creating the image of the 'pure Other', the true 'Indian' (The Post-Colonial Reader, 4). Edward Said expresses similar ideas in Orientalism , stressing that the West constructed the "Orient" to be appropriated by Western culture under the excuse of having civilized "barbaric people". A very similar position can be identified in the US in relation to natives.

dimensions of isolation, powerlessness and meaninglessness" (129). As a matter of fact, in the case of Silko, Erdrich and Power, their fictional work and their interviews indicate a common interest in the mixed blood category as a possibility of cultural resistance for contemporary native people.

Leslie Marmon Silko, in spite of having received the sort of conventional education that anyone schooled in the US shares, is deeply affected by the fact of being defined as marginal in two cultures–"mixed-blood within Pueblo society and 'Indian' in the Anglo or 'American' world" (Jaskoski 91). In several interviews Silko stresses that she was not the first in her community to face such a double cultural experience. She expresses her gratitude to the elders, especially elder Laguna women, who, despite their exposure to a dual tradition, have been able to keep oral tradition alive along with their literate and scholarly formation (Jaskoski 91). In her writing, Silko tries to recover the dynamics of the oral tradition in order to enable the (re)construction of a sense of community among contemporary native people.

Louise Erdrich, part German American and part Chippewa, has since childhood been able to circulate in two cultures. She grew up off-reservation but often visited family members on the Turtle Mountain Reservation, where her grandfather was a tribal leader. According to Kathleen Brogan, Erdrich "has described the mixed blood's quest as a search for parentage, an attempt to understand self by interrogating genealogy" (169). The Chippewa were one of the first tribes to establish contact with whites and, thus, incorporated white elements into native culture earlier than most North American tribes. In this sense, to reconstruct a story or a "version" of an "original tradition" which does not deny the existence of incorporated elements is one of Erdrich's main objectives in her fictional writing.

Susan Power has also circulated in two worlds, being a member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and a native Chicagoan. She affirms she always knew she was different but never thought of it as something negative. On the contrary, in her self-introduction to the anthology Reinventing the Enemy's Language, she states: "I felt I had a secret, another world I could retreat to when the dominant culture, for all its material success and political power, felt empty and meaningless. In the Indian world there were living stories: ghosts, mischievous spirits, bad medicine and good medicine, people with real problems, problems of survival" (375).

Having experienced the conflicts of being half-breeds and, at the same time, members of a dominant culture that values whiteness and "purity" of origin, these authors consciously or unconsciously construct alternative perspectives on life in America after the advent of colonialism. As Allen puts it,

> There are ways to write about colonization, the disasters and the misery and disorganization that have flowed in its wake, that do justice to the enormity of the tragedy while maintaining a sense of humanity of those involved. That means treating the subject of colonization and of alienation with respect for the complexity of it. And there are plenty of poets and writers who do so with great competence, in some cases with brilliance. (132-133)

Native Americans have been largely used as inspiration sources for Euro-American artistic work. In the 19th century, there were several stories on natives (among them Cooper's The Last of the Mohicans), most of them constructed from a totally external, fatalist and non-native viewpoint. Even nowadays one can easily find texts or films on Indians, produced from non-native perspectives, in which one often faces the

stereotypical "stoic, humorless, pancake-flat Indian" (Owens 29). Even those texts produced by early native authors, such as John Rollin Ridge's Joaquin Murieta, the first novel published by a (mixed blood) Indian in 1854, was still very much connected to white, European culture. In those days, literary works which openly expressed native points of view would very probably have been rejected by most printing houses.

Native fiction can be taken as a counterdiscourse to the previous "vanishing theories" on native doom, since they tend to express diverse points of view, but especially those of hybrid subjects, as mixed bloods represent the majority of the Indian population in America. Not only has their blood been 'mixed', but also their patterns of life, stories, cultures. The figure of the (native) mixed-blood reminds the dominant culture (the "full bloods" of any kind) that no "purity" in racial, cultural or experiential way is possible after so many years of contact. Racial purity is a myth that can be questioned or deconstructed through the very recognition of the mixed blood condition and its symbolic construction.

As has already been discussed in the present study, even acknowledging that the belief in any essential notion of gender or ethnic identity can only be temporarily useful, some Native Americans as well as groups of women still defend the importance of engaging in the construction of fragile, ever-changing specific minority identities as a way of counterposing a dominant identity construction imposed in (post)colonized countries. Thus, despite "belonging" to or circulating in a more Westernized culture, such mixed blood novelists are interested in representing their personal perception of native cultural history.

The mixed blood character has been an important presence in the three novels to be analyzed, perhaps indicating how far miscegenation has affected American self-

perception. American Indian novels can easily be read as novels of protest. Such readings are heavily influenced by "social attitudes" developed by colonized people such as Chicano, African and Native Americans in the contemporary United States (Allen 127). Louis Owens, while concentrating on native literature, points out that "the consciousness shared in all of these [mixed blood authors'] works is that of the individual attempting to reimagine an identity, to articulate a self within a Native American context" (22).

In Ceremony, Silko constructs Tayo, a mixed blood Laguna young man as the character who, in search for personal identity, is highly and positively influenced by the process of storytelling. His momentary "sickness," that is, his post-war depression and exhaustion, requires a healing process, not only for his personal survival but also for the benefit of the whole tribe. Such an illness, which could not be healed during his internment in the Veterans' Hospital, where Tayo simply refused to talk, believing he was invisible, can not be eliminated through traditional native ceremonies either. Tayo can only recover through the story which is being constructed for him, as if to bridge his two different cultural and racial heritage. Native oral tradition applied to the new times is the basis of such a bridge which will allow him to move again, taking him out of his paralysis. In this way, the first lines of the book in verse form already indicate a pattern that will develop along the whole novel. Such verses, apparently parallel but in fact intertwined with Tayo's story, mostly told in prose, reconstruct oral tradition and, thereby, native memory and tribal identity. As a matter of fact, prose and poetry here intermingle to weave the web responsible for holding Tayo in his search for sanity, identity and sense of belonging. Since belonging is a basic assumption for traditional Indians and estrangement is considered as abnormal from native perspectives, it is not at

all surprising that "narratives and rituals that restore the estranged to his or her place within the cultural matrix abound" (Allen 127). In this way, Ceremony from its very beginning, in the name of Thought Woman, unfolds its stories in a sacred atmosphere, in such a way that Tayo's story is not a simple, imagined one, but an outcome of some mysterious processes connected to that Superior Spirit. It seems that Thought Woman is blessing his search for identity, for his story is part of a larger, ancient and cosmic plot. The storyteller, or better, the writer stands for the means by which such a remembering and repossessing process can be fulfilled. According to G. Thomas Couser's article in the book Memory and Cultural Politics, such "return-to-roots" narratives are very important for minorities such as Native Americans or African Americans: "For groups whose traditional culture is primarily oral, the only history is memory; . . . to repress memory is to reenact and perpetuate oppression" (107). One might infer that Thought Woman is, through Silko, giving life and identity back to Tayo and to his tribe through the process of recovering collective memory. And in Ceremony identity is necessarily connected to stories, as a voice, probably that of Thought Woman, (re)tells us,

> I will tell you something about stories,
>
> [he said]
>
> They aren't just entertainment,
>
> Don't be fooled.
>
> they are all we have, you see,
>
> all we have to fight off
>
> illness and death.(2)

People are the stories they have; there is no belief in transcendental essences, in intrinsic identities. Besides, throughout Silko's novel, Tayo's mixed blood condition, despite the

discrimination imposed on him, is not an exception. As an aftermath of droughts, famine, poverty, loss of identity and perspectives, several native young women became attached to white men–highway workers, bosses in towns or cities where they went looking for a job, people who could give them some pleasure, illusion or at least some coins. In this sense, the state of being a mixed blood child of an Indian mother with some white stranger is presented in Ceremony as somehow attached to shame–as if these women had sold out their pride, their roots. According to Pueblo culture, the mother is the one responsible for the child's link to the tribe.[3] Thus, Tayo's perception of his condition and position inside the tribe is a very problematic one–he obviously belongs there, since his mother was a Laguna, but he had been abandoned by her. His story can be read as a complicated case of 'original rejection.' Besides, Auntie is constantly reminding him that he has no right to be there. She fears tribal gossip and has some sense of guilt because of her sister's "sin." Auntie, Tayo's mother's older sister, has already been converted and is highly influenced by Christianity and its system of values. Thus, her sense of shame in respect to Tayo is connected to his condition as a child born out of wedlock, the offspring of a white man, who ended up at his grandmother's house when he was four. Tayo's cousin, Rocky, who is Auntie's full blood son, is always perceived by her as the one who is well-placed, a blessed child resulting from a blessed marriage, the one who will succeed. One notices, however, that Tayo is much more attached to traditional values than his cousin. Rocky, on the contrary, is anxiously awaiting the moment to leave the reservation and go to town for good, leaving his original cultural heritage behind. At the moment when both of them go for a hunt and

[3] See Paula Gunn Allen in The Sacred Hoop (9-43), where she explains and defends the matrilineal organization of Pueblo groups.

catch a deer, a sacred animal for those natives, Tayo realizes once again that Rocky does not respect Indian norms. Thus, he takes off his jacket and covers the deer's head.

> Why did you do that? asked Rocky. . . .Tayo didn't say anything, because they both knew why. The people said you should do that before you gutted the deer. Out of respect. But Rocky was funny about those things. He was an A-student and all-state in football and track. He had to win; he said he was always going to win. So he listened to his teachers, and he listened to the coach. They were proud of him. They told him, 'Nothing can stop you now except one thing: don't let the people at home hold you back.' Rocky understood what he had to do to win in the white outside world. (C 51)

The representations of Tayo and Rocky in Ceremony reflect Silko's view that living a life in tune with native traditions does not have so much to do with 'blood,' but with attitude, that is, culture. In this sense, a mixed blood can be more "Indian" than a full blood. What comes to light is that 'culture' is more of a determinant than 'race' in the formation of individual or group consciousness. Despite this fact, in Ceremony Tayo is the one who suffers prejudice, who is discriminated against, even though he is conscious about his difference and wants to belong in the native world anyway. In one of his meetings with some native war veterans in a bar, where most of them are just hanging around to have fun and get drunk, Tayo does not hesitate to question their belief that now all of them would be equal to white Americans, since they had fought for the country. Tayo, being very perceptive, precisely states:

> I'm half-breed. I'll be the first to say it. I'll speak for both sides. First time you walked down the street in Gallup or Albuquerque, you knew.

> Don't lie. You knew right away. The war was over, the uniform was gone. All of a sudden that man at the store waits on you last, makes you wait until all the white people bought what they wanted. And the white lady at the bus depot, she's real careful now not to touch your hand when she counts out your change. You watch it slide across the counter at you, and you know. Goddamn it! You stupid sonofabitches! You know! (C 42)

Because he has been constantly discriminated against as a consequence of his mixed-blood nature, he is much more able to identify other levels of prejudice and discrimination, as for example, the one existing in white America against its "red brothers." Probably because of Tayo's sensitivity and ability to see things from different viewpoints, his experience of living 'in between,' he is the one who suffers most with the war experience. He has not internalized notions of borders, of property or enmity yet. In this sense, Tayo's sudden sickness is the consequence of a spiritual emptiness, an identity crisis caused by a sense of displacement. He feels guilty for all the wrongs at home after his return from the war.

His first sense of guilt is in respect to Rocky's death. Since he had promised Auntie he would bring her son safely home from the war, he believes he is to be blame for Rocky's death, even though it was Rocky's idea to sign up for the army. Besides, he imagines he is responsible for Josiah's (his uncle's) death, which happened at home while he was taking part in the war. While he saw the Japanese being shot, he saw Josiah among them and thus believes the army he was taking part in killed his uncle. The loss of Josiah's cattle after his death and during Tayo's absence is also perceived by Tayo as a personal failure. He feels responsible for the drought at home. During the war

he had damned the rain which made it difficult to walk through those forests while carrying Rocky's corpse. The result of his guilt and feeling of impotence is his emotional state, defined as his "fatigue"–he cannot sleep, cannot eat, feels constantly like vomiting, even when his stomach is empty. At the beginning of the novel, he sees a mixture of different times and realities: American, Spanish, Laguna and Japanese faces and voices are mixed up in his head. In fact, Silko is quite skilled at making the reader enter into Tayo's mental confusion in the chaotic, polyvocal way the story is told at that point, moving back and forth in terms of time. Even in such a state of confusion, Tayo perceives that the Veterans' Hospital cannot help him. He feels invisible, empty and displaced there. So he goes home, but does not get better.

> He lay there with the feeling that there was no place left for him; he would find no peace in that house where the silence and the emptiness echoed the loss. He wanted to go back to the hospital. Right away. He had to get back where he could merge with the walls and the ceiling, shimmering white, remote from everything. (C 33)

In one of those nights when he could not sleep but only cry, Grandma sat by him on his bed, holding his hand, crying with him. Finally she stated, "Those white doctors haven't helped you at all. Maybe we had better send for someone else" (C 33). Grandma is aware Tayo won't be able to survive the way he is and, as a consequence, the drought will not be over. According to native tradition, Tayo's personal crisis affects the whole tribe, since no events affecting living beings or nature are independent but are all interconnected. However, at the moment Grandma tells Auntie that she wants to call for a medicine man, Auntie frowns:

> I don't know, Mama. You know how they are. You know what people will say if we ask for a medicine man to help him. Someone will say it's not right. They'll say, 'Don't do it. He's not full blood anyway'. (C 33)

Grandma does not care about gossip, feeling that Tayo really belongs in the tribe. As a more traditional member of the group, not yet deeply influenced by Christian beliefs, she respects the clan rules, according to which the child of a native woman belongs to the mother's tribe. Thus, she affirms, "He's my grandson. If I send for old Ku'oosh, he'll come. Let them talk if they want to. Why do you care what they say?" (C 33). Ku'oosh comes and while he cannot cure Tayo, he is able to make him stop vomiting. The healing ceremony, however, will have to involve more people in order to be completed.

Emo is a native veteran who loves telling lies about the war and bragging about his success with white women. Such reservation veterans usually meet on the day they get their army checks. On one of these days, Tayo sees Emo sitting at a table, telling stories and playing with some teeth he had taken out of a Japanese man's mouth during the war. When Tayo, already sick and dizzy, cannot stand the scene any longer and screams that Emo is a killer, once again he is reminded of his status:

> You drink like an Indian, and you're crazy like one too–but you aren't shit, white trash. You love Japs the way your mother loved to screw white men. (C 63)

At that instant, Tayo becomes aware of the hatred he keeps inside, behind his indifference, his fear of invisibility, his new habit of drinking. He identifies Emo as the enemy, even if he cannot tell which battle he is involved in. He starts seeing Emo and some other acculturated Indians as sold out and part of a "witchery" which has been installed in the country. He attacks Emo with a broken bottle.

> He should have hated Emo; he should have hated the Jap soldiers who killed Rocky. The space to carry hate was located deep inside, below his lungs and behind his belly; but it was empty. He watched while they knelt over Emo and then loaded him into the ambulance. . . .He didn't feel anything. (C 63)

Emo is a full blood Indian who does not respect native values towards tribal life and community. He hates all mixed bloods for reminding him of his difference from white people. Tayo, as a mixed blood, questions Emo's native identity, since he is more "Indian" than many full bloods, including Emo. Tayo does not kill Emo, but their different positions have become obvious.

On the other hand, when Tayo thinks of Josiah, he always remembers him as someone who could be or relate to both sides, able to see positive things in both white and Indian culture. Significantly, Josiah is the one who decides that, instead of growing Hereford cattle, a pure breed, it would be better to buy a new Mexican breed, believing it will adapt better to hardship. In a similar way to Indians, this cattle has "little regard for fences" and because of their sense of freedom are difficult to control. Here the mixed blood (cattle) shows strength and survival strategies better than the pure, full blood one, an interpretation of adaptation which can be very well applied, in a symbolic way, to mixed blood people in general.

Tayo is being forced to face his condition as a hybrid member of his Laguna tribe, assuming the position of the new, different element, the one which has not always been there. Native life has been changing after so many decades of contact. Night Swan, an older and more experienced mixed blood woman, gives him an accurate explanation for his feeling of rejection:

> They are afraid, Tayo. They feel something happening, they can see something happening around them, and 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. . . .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. (C 100)

Night Swan sees Tayo's feeling of displacement at this early moment, even before he goes to war. He already felt he was not welcome by everyone at the tribe. In fact, Night Swan reminds Tayo that it is much easier to see (and reject) the change in appearance, on mixed blood faces than seriously consider the internal changes that have been happening in tribal life through the centuries after colonization.

Central to Ceremony is the author's attempt to highlight some internal strength within what has often been represented as "the 'tragic' fact of mixedblood existence" (Owens 167). If Tayo is totally lost in terms of references and identity at the beginning of the novel, throughout the story one learns that he is the one who is more adaptive and syncretic, and who thus ensures the tribe's survival. "Through the dynamism, adaptability, and syncretism inherent in native American cultures, both individuals and the cultures within which individuals find significance and identity are able to survive, grow, and evade the deadly traps of stasis and sterility" (Owens 167). If at its beginning the novel seems to construct the story of an individual in search of personal identity, at the end the reader notices that Tayo is really recovering a communal identity, and that affects not only his life but the whole tribe's well being. At the end, Tayo is invited inside the *kiva,* where he assumes a central position while telling and thus

(re)constructing his experiences for the elders of the tribe. Through Tayo's ceremony, which does not happen only in his encounterings with Ku'oosh and Betonie but in all events that involve and affect his process of coming home, "Silko makes it clear for the first time in American Indian literature that the mixedblood is a rich source of power and something to be celebrated rather than mourned" (Owens 26). In this way, the tragic aspect of the traditional mixed blood character is renewed, pointing to very positive new ways of looking at the world, maybe very helpful to Western culture - it is a "holistic, ecological perspective," where the totality of existence is validated and human beings assume the "responsibility for the care of the world they inhabit" (Owens 29). Silko, by representing Tayo's healing through his reattachment to his native group, in a way confirms Allen's statement that Native Americans see the roots of oppression as immediately connected to loss of tradition and memory because this also determines a loss of a positive sense of self. "In short, Indians think it is important to remember, while Americans believe it is important to forget" (Allen 210). From an Euro-American perspective, it seems to be important to forget the savage, violent, unethical behavior towards native peoples at the colonization period in order to feel safe and comfortable in contemporary privileged social positions.

In Louise Erdrich's Tracks, Pauline Puyat, a mixed blood woman, shares the narration of the novel with Nanapush, a full blood, traditional Chippewa. While Nanapush, as a narrator, addresses Lulu, his adopted granddaughter, for whom he is recovering Chippewa culture and history, Pauline never mentions why or to whom she is telling her story. Several critics[4] agree that Pauline comes across as a very unreliable

[4] Among them Daniel Cornell in "Woman Looking: Revis(ion)ing Pauline's Subject Position in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*" and Gloria Bird in "Searching for Evidence of Colonialism at Work: A Reading of Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*".

narrator–one never knows for sure when she is making up events or just being too enthusiastic about them. It is easy to identify the story she constructs against Fleur.

Fleur and her cousin Moses are the last surviving Indians from the Pillager clan, a very traditional and respected group of Chippewa, highly considered for their supernatural power and medicine knowledge. Pauline, an ambitious and jealous woman more interested in personal power than in her tribe's cultural survival, sees in Fleur the possibility of "othering" traditional native figures in order to question a knowledge to which she, as a mixed-blood, has little access. While Nanapush's words construct Fleur as a human being, a woman who enjoys life, nature, sex, her children and the power resulting from her interaction with all these aspects of life, Pauline, in the chapter she narrates, keeps deconstructing Nanapush's story, portraying Fleur as a terrible, horrifying and insane Pillager woman.

Pauline's negative representations of Fleur result partly from jealousy. The best way for Pauline to forget that she herself is not a full blood Indian (nor a white person) and does not possess as much power as Fleur is by ridiculing tradition and presenting Fleur as a frightening creature. Pauline knows she cannot compete with Fleur in a native context, since she does not have traditional cultural roots–or if she has had them, they were lost for ever, as she herself defines her family: " . . . except for me, the Puyats were known as a quiet family with little to say. We were mixed-bloods, skinners in the clan for which the name was lost."[5] Thus, Pauline describes Fleur as a kind of witch, her knowledge outdated and her presence totally unnecessary for the tribe's survival. She decontextualizes Fleur in order to portray her as negatively and mysteriously as possible:

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[5] Louise Erdrich, Tracks, 14. All further references to this book appear as T followed by page number and are taken from this same edition.

> Alone out there, she went haywire, out of control. She messed with evil, laughed at the old women's advice and dressed like a man. She got herself into some half–forgotten medicine, studied ways she shouldn't talk about. Some say she kept a powder of unborn rabbits in a leather thong around her neck. She laid the heart of an owl on her tongue so she could see at night, and went out, hunting, not even in her own body. (T 12)

Both women met for the first time in Argus, where Pauline went to in order to start a different (acculturated) kind of life, working at her uncle's butcher shop, despite her father's advice that she would "fade out" in the white town and not be an Indian any longer. At that moment, however, Pauline already knew she wanted to "cross the cultural border," to become as white as possible:

> I wanted to be like my mother, who showed her half-white. I wanted to be like my grandfather, pure Canadian. That was because even as a child I saw that to hang back was to perish. I saw through the eyes of the world outside of us. I would not speak our language. (T 14)

As a matter of fact, in Tracks, all mixed blood characters are presented as sold out to white culture. The Lazarres and Morriseys, also mixed blood, acculturated Indians, despite being disregarded by Nanapush and Fleur, are seen by Pauline as smart users of the new policies applied to Indians, such as the allotment policy: "[T]hey were well-off people, mixed-bloods who profited from acquiring allotments that many old Chippewa did not know how to keep" (T 63). Pauline does not (or does not want to) identify with traditional native people, who, unprepared for the new ways of keeping their land–that is, unable to afford to pay taxes and fees–begin to lose their possessions. She decides to

stay on the side of the Lazarres and Morrisseys, those who profit from despair of "blanket Indians."[6]

After having a child as a single woman and having given it to Bernadette immediately after delivery, Pauline goes to the convent in search of purification. There she becomes further detached from her native descent. While describing her dreams, delusions or what she calls "revelations," she affirms God had come to her to explain her origin:

> He said that I was not whom I had supposed. I was an orphan and my parents had died in grace, and also, despite my deceptive features, I was not one speck of Indian but wholly white . . . .He pressed the tears away and told me I was chosen to serve . . . .Other things. I was forgiven for my daughter. I should forget her. He had an important plan for me.
>
> (T 137)

If here she says God is responsible for her denial of her 'Indianness,' in a following "revelation," God tells her "not to turn [her] back on Indians." She should "go out among them, be still and listen" (T 137). In fact, what becomes clear is that Pauline is using Catholicism as a way out of her problems with racial and cultural identity, and, eventually, she becomes a traitor of Indian culture. It is not 'God' who wants her to observe and maybe disturb native life. She herself creates her tools, that is, her interpretation of Christianity, as a way of fighting the memories of her mixed blood nature, her undesirable Indian descent, planning to use that heritage for her survival in a changing world. She surely is not one of those Indians who will "hang back." Allen makes an interesting comment on such (sold out) Indians, which she calls the 'apples':

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[6] This expression is a pejorative term used by "modern Indians" or whites when referring to traditional natives who keep the old ways of living.

> The 'apples', who categorically reject the Indian culture they were born to, choose one side, the white. The personal war waged by those who choose to perceive themselves as thoroughly Westernized is often worked out in bouts of suicidal depression, alcoholism, abandonment of Indian way, 'disappearance' into urban complexes, and verbalized distrust of and contempt for longhairs. (134-35)

In Pauline's case, after assuming she is receiving divine messages, she starts waiting for some more transcendental information on what she should do in respect to Fleur. Fleur is perceived by her as one of the pillars of native culture and, thus, by destroying Fleur's power, Pauline believes she is able to shake the basis of the whole Chippewa culture. In addition, with the dismantling of native culture, Pauline would not be a half-breed any longer. Since she has clearly taken the other side, as she affirms, "'the Indians', I said now 'them'. Never *neenawind* or us" (T 138). If there are no Indians to remind her of her origin, she can peacefully pass as white.

Nanapush, when describing Pauline, also stresses her different, estranged position among Indians. Her displacement is obvious:

> She was different from the Puyats I remembered, who were always an uncertain people, shy, never leaders in our dances and cures. She was, to my mind, an unknown mixture of ingredients, like pale bannock that sagged or hardened. We never knew what to call her, or where she fit or how to think when she was around. So we tried to ignore her, and that worked as long as she was quiet. (T 39)

Pauline does not fit among Indians–not because she is a mixed blood, but because she lies and negates her (partial) Indianness. Besides, she understands Indian suffering in the

"new, civilized world" as the result of a divine wish. She believes God had planned to keep only white people alive and that is the reason why they are succeeding in Indian land:

> [Our Lord]. . .had obviously made the whites more shrewd, as they grew in number, all around, some even owning automobiles, while the Indians receded and coughed to death and drank. (T 139)

Again, Pauline is justifying the whites' way of colonizing, of devastating native culture based on their apparent economic success–a position very much in tune with the idea of The Vanishing American. She, as a mixed blood Indian, has been so deeply brain-washed by white, Western, Christian culture that she is unable to see that Indians' "weakness" only appeared after their contact with whites. That is to say, Indians did not change immediately and drastically; what did change were their living conditions, a consequence of a predatory colonization which did not respect previous history, peoples or their traditions.

Pauline faces a crisis of identity that gets worse and worse because she denies it. By lying to herself about her origin and her connection to Indians, she feels displaced everywhere and gets detached from everybody. When she comes back from Matchmanito, believing she has helped God by killing the demon but having, in fact, killed Napoleon Morrissey, her previous lover, nothing of the old Pauline is left. To hide her nakedness, she rolls in ditches, leaves and mud:

> . . . I was a poor and noble creature now, dressed in earth like Christ, in furs like Moses Pillager . . . so that by the time I came to the convent, by the time I crawled and stumbled past the early risers, I was nothing

> human, nothing victorious, nothing like myself. I was no more than a piece of woods. (T 204)

Since she is no longer the person she used to be, Pauline feels fulfilled when she perceives more and more advances on the side she has taken as her own, the whites' one. Her voice is the loudest in forecasting Western success:

> The land will be sold and divided. Fleur's cabin will tumble into the ground and be covered by leaves. The place will be haunted I suppose, but no one will have ears sharp enough to hear the Pillagers' low voices, or the vision clear to see their still shadows. The trembling old fools with their conjuring tricks will die off and the young, like Lulu and Nector, return from the government schools blinded and deafened. (T 205)

After this "prophecy," Pauline has nothing else to do in the native world. She leaves her past behind, her mixedblood, hybrid heritage, taking the other side. She goes to Argus as a teacher sent by the convent. The convent Superior even tells her that vocations such as hers are rare and, thus, she should set an example for other girls from that region.

> I asked for the grace to accept, to leave Pauline behind, to remember that my name, any name, was no more than a crumbling skin. . . .Leopolda. I tried out the unfamiliar syllables. They fit. They cracked in my ears like a fist through ice. (T 205)

Pauline, or better, Sister Leopolda is rewarded for having sold out her soul, her emotional connections to her original culture, although the image of the name change is passed through a quite painful metaphor. While Fleur, at first, leaves her cabin with no direction to take, and Lulu, against her wish, ends up in a government school for Indians, having to wait for a long time until Nanapush is able to bring her back home,

Pauline/Leopolda is finally totally accepted in a white institution, in a white world. Here the mixed blood is a traitor of the community, one who survives and moves higher in the social ladder according to Western individualism.

Erdrich is very able, however, to make the reader aware of Pauline's delirious mental state. Even if she is finally accepted by the convent, the price she has to pay for such acceptance in that world is the erasure of memory and isolation. Her original name had to be forgotten and replaced by a meaningless one, suggested by her Superior. In Erdrich's Love Medicine (1985), which chronologically follows Tracks (1988), Sister Leopolda is presented as a crazy old nun, psychologically worse than ever. Thus, in Tracks, adaptability and spiritual "whitening" are not presented as ways of improvement for native people. Such postcolonial representations of mainstream history try to reverse our opinion on that history, enlarging our perspective and understanding of what really happened [according to other (alternative, decentralized) peoples' point of view] on this continent after the arrival of Europeans.

In The Grass Dancer, Susan Power does not portray one mixed-blood protagonist but rather the mixed-blood condition of a whole native group. In that Sioux community, the continual intercourse with the white society shows the uselessness of looking for racial definition; blood, origin and cultural purity are all presented as fantasies. It might well be that Power's work (1994), if compared to the other two novels here analyzed (1977 and 1988), is already able to present a better acceptance and recognition of the mixed-blood category, a phenomenon presently observed in American culture at large.

Power's novel and her representation of fragmented, displaced identities is very much in tune with the theoretical work on identity of some feminists of the 90s. For example, Donna Haraway, in her "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," also discusses the

difficulty implicit in attempts to trace the origin and the constitution of any contemporary subject. She refers very creatively to the figure of the cyborg as a metaphor of the new subject of feminism or of feminist revolutionary writing (1989: 174). The cyborg, not resulting from natural reproduction, does not have an origin, a history, a place to which it necessarily belongs. It lives in the confusion of boundaries and, according to Haraway, this is exactly the case of the contemporary subject of feminism, or, one may go even further, of any minority subject.

What Haraway is really looking for is a discussion of identity with no certainty of what is cultural and what is natural. She states that "the certainty of what counts as nature–a source of insight and a promise of innocence–is undermined, probably fatally" (1989: 177). When referring to the writing produced by women of color in the US, she refers to it as 'cyborg writing,' since it is "about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (1989: 198). The tools here mentioned are often stories, retold stories, versions that "reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities" (Haraway 1989: 198). Native Americans are highly interested in questioning normative positionalities often taken for granted inside mainstream American culture:

> The crucial factor in the alienation so often treated in American Indian writing is the unconscious assumption that Indians must ally with one particular segment of their experience and not with another. The world is seen in terms of antagonistic principles: good is set against bad, Indian against white, and tradition against cultural borrowing: personal significance becomes lost in a confusion of dualities. For many, this process has meant rejection of Indianness. (Allen 134)

Thus, the writing of women of color, and in this case, the fiction produced by our three native women writers, is a struggle for power, for a different signification.

In The Grass Dancer, among several mixed blood characters, Power presents Pumpkin, an Indian-Irish young girl; Crystal and Charlene, mother and daughter respectively, who grew up as full bloods but who are, in fact, mixed bloods; and Lydia, who never finds out that her real father was a Japanese doctor her mother worked with during the war. In Power's novel, hybridity is already a concrete "reality"; the condition of the full blood is constantly being questioned. What makes a difference, at this point, is not 'race' but traditional culture and knowledge, and how people fight to keep both alive in creative and revolutionary ways.

On the other hand, there are some "traditional" native characters in Susan Power's book, such as Herod Small War, Anna (Mercury) Thunder and Margaret Many Wounds. Herod Small War is the famous *Yuwipi* (shamanic) man; in his own words, "the one who finds things: misplaced objects, missing persons, the answers to questions" (GD 74)[7]. Margaret Many Wounds is a full blood who circulates in white culture, especially through Catholicism, but returns to her native religion and practices before her death, when she rejects the presence of a priest at her dying bed. Anna (Mercury) Thunder is a powerful woman, defined as a kind of witch, using native knowledge in powerful but polemic ways:

> Had she practiced good medicine, people would have called her a Dakota medicine woman and rubbed themselves against her at every opportunity. But Mercury practiced selfish magic, lived her own doctrine of Manifest Destiny, until her power extended across the Dakotas. (GD 21)

[7] Susan Power. The Grass Dancer. All further references are taken from this same edition and will appear as GD followed by page number.

Traditional natives and mixed bloods either share or alternate "central" positions in The Grass Dancer. It seems impossible to perceive the (native) world in dual, Manichean terms any longer. Thus, the problematic of the mixed blood circulates among those characters, and appears most often connected to Pumpkin, who is aware of the fact that she belongs to two different worlds: she is afraid of losing her internal balance as a consequence of her constant necessity of adaptation. The title of Pumpkin's graduate speech as a valedictorian already indicated her awareness of the implications of being defined as mixed blood or as a migrant Indian–"Exclusion: The Plight of the Urban Indian." Pumpkin was going to university, entering another world and this is described as somehow disturbing: "[Her] world was constantly expanding until she could no longer fit herself into the culture that was most important to her" (GD 23). The closer she comes to Western cultural institutions, The more she becomes disconnected from her origins. When she thinks about native culture at the moment she is traveling to the powwow, she says to herself, "I stand outside of it" (GD 24). Here this mixed blood character is not happily wishing to step to the other side, as Pauline in Tracks, nor is she suffering a total displacement and disability as Tayo in Ceremony. Pumpkin is aware of the changes, of the possibilities and inevitable adaptations she will have to face. In short, she knows the high cultural price she will have to pay for her success in the white world:

> 'At least I'll get in a few powwows before I take off', Pumpkin thought. Just the idea of college made her nervous in a way that was both good and bad. She would leave for Stanford in the fall, able finally to indulge her academic side but fearful of moving from one culture to another. (GD 24)

In the essay she had sent as part of the application to college, she puts it clearly:

> This goes beyond leaving home and my parents. . . .I know I am committed to a college education because I am willing to go to great lengths to earn one. I will have to put aside one worldview–perhaps only temporarily–to take up another. From what I have learned so far, I know the two are not complementary but rather incompatible, and melodramatic as it may sound, I sometimes feel I am risking my soul by leaving the Indian community. (GD 24)

As a matter of fact, Pumpkin arrives at the powwow as a visitor, a stranger who impresses everybody, especially Harley, becomes the champion of the Grass Dancers' Contest, and dies in a car accident when she leaves the town. Her death, as several other events of the novel, is involved in a magic atmosphere since her body seems to remain for ever in the sky: "The car finally landed on its nose, collapsing like an accordion. But Pumpkin was still flying, shedding fears and insecurities like old skins, until she was distilled to a cool, creamy vapor. Pumpkin melted into the sky, and so she never came down" (GD 51). Before that, she falls in love with Harley at the powwow. Their love affair (the first for both) is very short, since she dies after spending one night with him, but her effect on his future remain. Despite his saying that he was "empty again" after he got the news of her death, in fact, Harley has changed for ever. Although Harley does not know it, he is no full blood either, as he is Lydia's son, and thus the grandson of a Japanese doctor. Harley has felt empty all his life, affected by his mother's self-imposed silence. When Lydia was pregnant with Harley, she sent her husband to take a ride with his oldest son and both died in a car accident. Lydia believes it was her harsh voice in telling them to leave that led to their death. So, she keeps silent and Harley grows up without stories. He feels his dead brother had taken everything from him, even his

mother's voice. He feels emptiness everywhere, a hole inside which only Pumpkin was able to fill for a short time. He misses roots, stories of belonging; if in "blood" terms he is more Indian than white, in cultural terms he feels lost. In fact, in Power's book we, as readers, have the information about most characters' origins, but the version we read is just another story, in the same way they have a story of their lives. Thus, Power aptly shows us that origin, racial definition and a sense of belonging depend a lot on stories and fantasy, and, in this way, can be changed, redefined, re-presented.

It is because Pumpkin knows she has an Irish father that she identifies with the mixed blood legend. In fact, she is not so different in all respects from many of the other Indians portrayed in the novel, except that they do not know of their hybrid origins. In this sense, one may infer that what creates the mixed blood is an awareness of 'deviant' origins, a conscious crossing of borders. But if we, as readers, know that not all "full bloods" in the novel are really full bloods, it is possible to put this whole perspective into question. Is it important to know about blood quantum, parents' origin and the like? Isn't Pumpkin a better dancer than most full bloods? In the same way, isn't Tayo "more Indian" than Rocky in Ceremony? If knowledge and respect for traditions do not "make an Indian," why should race alone be responsible for this definition? Thus, Herod's comments to Jeannette, a white researcher who lives with the Sioux, after the birth of her mixed blood baby who looked very Indian, seem quite perceptive:

> 'You must have sat there with a spoon and skimmed off the white cream. This baby is pure Dakota. . . .But Jeannette, she needs to know both sides. Otherwise she'll stand off-balance and walk funny and talk out of one side of her mouth. Tell her two stories.' (GD 284)

Herod admits the child as "pure Dakota," even if he knows it is not totally 'true.' Racial or ethnic definition depends on identification, on choices and stories, and surely there are several layers of identity in a community that has, for centuries, been exposed to more than one ethnic background. Such a group has experienced the oppression of a foreign culture that came to erase traditional custom and ancient systems of belief. In this sense, in Herod's opinion, Jeannette's baby has the right to know about her hybrid, mixed blood condition in order to be able to make better choices in cultural terms. It is not possible to represent artificial wholeness when there is fragmentation inside.

Again, the main question resulting from all discussions on the mixed blood condition might be–what is an Indian? If the borders around the mixed blood are said not to be well-defined, are they so in respect to Indians, meaning full bloods? What comes first? Blood quantum? Cultural heritage? One might come to conclude that the mixed blood is a problem only in so far as it questions white and full blood categories as well. Identity discussions resulting from the taking into account of a single racial axis reminds us of the historical myth involving the perception of Indians from a white, "civilized" perspective. If Indians were considered to be "real" savages, those different uncivilized beings living in American woods or fields, "Indian" or "native" is nothing else than an idea which is opposed to civilization, whiteness, sameness. According to this rationale not only do "Indians" as such not exist, but neither do "whites" or Anglo-Americans. In this sense, it might well be that the most important collaboration Native American novelists have brought to the contemporary literary field is the discussion of (native) identity in these terms–there are no concrete referentials for mixed bloods as represented in their novels, just as there have never been any for all canonized characters and stories of Western culture. Such native authors are, in this way, and according to

Louis Owens' comments, taking their creative impulse from the disjuncture of myth and reality, working in the interstices of categories in order to confront and, if possible, resolve such questions of identity:

> For American Indians, the problem of identity comprehends centuries of colonial and postcolonial displacement, often brutally enforced peripherality, cultural denigration–including especially a harsh privileging of English over tribal languages–and systematic oppression by the monocentric "westering" impulse in America. . . .The recovering or rearticulation of an identity, a process dependent upon a rediscovered sense of place as well as community, becomes in the face of such obstacles a truly enormous undertaking. This attempt is at the center of American Indian fiction. (Owens 4-5)

As a matter of fact, US minority groups such as Hispanic, Asian, African, Native Americans, are taking the voice of postcoloniality to construct different possibilities of identity. They put into question any defense of hegemonic or universal features connected to American people, their values, their "nature." However, despite acknowledging the necessity of deconstructing elements of identity such as the belief in the "real" mixed or full blood condition, Native American novelists in general do not assume a position totally in tune with postmodern impulses. Even discussing the problematic of fragmentation and displacement in their novels, most native novelists tend to look for and represent in their fiction the "possibility of recovering a centered sense of personal identity and significance" (Owens 19). It is relevant that this is also the political and literary position assumed by several feminists: without denying the essentialism involved in identity discussions, most contemporary feminists still defend

the conquering of positions and spaces on the part of women as concrete members of unequal social groups. As Gloria Anzaldúa states in Borderlands,

> The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war. (80)

It is for this strategic purpose that Anzaldúa defends the 'mestiza' culture as better adapted for contemporary times. Such a hybrid, composite cultural syncretism can play a strategic role for the survival of people not usually defined as 'pure' or 'white.' Besides, it brings to light facts, voices and events that were not given proper importance throughout history. Gayatri C. Spivak is another critic who is highly interested in new elements entering cultural debates, in what has been 'left out,' that information which was edited out from the "final, mainstream version" of history and which exceeds it. Spivak considers postcolonial readings of fictional stories, history and the world as helpful in order to take literature out of that "enchanted place within intellectual cultural history it has occupied at least since the end of the eighteenth-century in Europe" (1990: 73). Here, the important role of dealing with historical events from postcolonial perspectives becomes clear–to help in the deconstruction of master texts and to explore "differences and similarities between texts coming from the two sides which are engaged with the same problem at the same time" (Spivak 1990: 73).

Contemporary criticism should reflect an awareness of the impossibility of easy or simplistic definitions of native texts and authors, which not always happens. Gloria

Bird, for example, in "Searching for Evidence of Colonialism at Work: A Reading of Louise Erdrich's Tracks," argues that Erdrich is reproducing and reinforcing old stereotypes of the Indian as the 'Other' who is vanishing, read by the author as evidences of colonialism at work in the novel. Bird even affirms that Nanapush's descriptions of Fleur marginalize her as the "ignoble savage". Quite the contrary, I see Fleur represented as a traditional native woman, closely attached to her tribe's culture, constructed by a mixed blood author and, thus, only perceived as savage by a Westernized perspective which idealizes the native as 'Other'. What might be vanishing in contemporary native literature is the idea and importance of full Indianness, what our three analyzed novels clearly indicate.

Since 'race' (in the meaning of blood quantum) has been put into question as a determining element in the inclusion of individuals as members of a specific group, other aspects of belonging, such as knowledge in terms of traditions and history, have to be more seriously taken. As a matter of fact, by avoiding biologic explanations of origin, one might perceive several other levels of belonging that are imperceptible if we keep looking for specific divergent features. This is exactly what I try to examine in the next chapter, that is, how knowledge, religion, philosophy and literature interrelate and interact in the three novels.

2.2- KNOWLEDGE AND RELIGION: NATIVE PERSPECTIVES IN A CHANGING WORLD

> *Knowing is not so much about the assemblage of existing knowledge as it is about recognizing our constitution as 'ourselves' within the fragments that we process as knowledge.* (Avtar Brah)[1]

Native cultures all over America have developed very particular explanations of human existence and life as compared to European mainstream viewpoints. The encounter with Western paradigms after the advent of colonialism has deeply affected the practical life of American indigenous peoples. Jace Weaver, a Native American scholar, in the introduction to his book That the People Might Live, argues that natives have always been very skeptical about theology because, contrary to Judeo-Christian traditions, theirs are not primarily religions of theology but of "ritual observance" (viii). Unlike Western societies, where religion became, to some extent, isolated in a sacred sphere, native traditional religions are totally integrated into daily life. It is interesting to point out that the Cherokees, for instance, have one single word for 'religion', 'culture', 'land', 'history' and 'law', which indicates how interwoven such aspects of social life are in their tribal community (Weaver viii).

Considering that native religions[2] are communal, rarely used for personal purposes or self-empowerment, one can imagine how impressed most tribes were by the

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[1]Taken from "The Scent of Memory: Strangers, Our Own, and Others", cited in the bibliography.

[2]Here I use "religions" in the plural as a way of stressing the non-universalizing tendency of tribal organization of beliefs and practices. Besides, such religions do not follow 'one' book nor a unique Spiritual Guide; on the contrary, such elements vary significantly from region to region, often being determined by natural and geographical particularities.

status delegated to European priests and other religious people who arrived in the 'New Land,' with highly (imperialistic) political and religious aims. After the encounter with colonizers and some consequent changes in indigenous life style, several natives started feeling some weakness in their own religious traditions when trying to solve those problems brought to this continent by white colonizers, problems such as new diseases, famine, and the like. Some tribes at first accepted the new priests, considering that they might in effect be better prepared and more powerful since they knew how to deal with those problems. Others believed that native spirits had abandoned their land after white invasion. Of course, later on most natives became aware that white colonizers (including priests) were the ones who brought such crises to America, which might explain why they could better relate to the implied difficulties of the new times.

As Brian W. Dippie states, "the European image of the Indian oscillated between the noble savage and the bloodthirsty devil" (6). Of course, such changeable opinions depended a lot on the policies of the moment. When New England settlers were looking for a national origin to differentiate them from the English, they defined natives as "brothers" or "fathers" of the New American civilization. When they noticed that natives were not so glad to "exchange land for civilization," colonizers proclaimed the necessity of saving those lost souls; thus, religion started playing a fundamental role in excusing all massacres that happened in the 'new, virginal land' (Dippie 7).

Christianity and all attempts at converting "the savages"[3] have marked native culture in several manners: young children were taken to missionary schools in order to become "civilized" or "Christianized." Once there, most of them were forbidden to speak their original languages, causing an inevitable rupture with their cultures at home.

[3] I am using the word most commonly applied when referring to natives at the beginning of colonial time, obviously derived from a Christian, "civilized" perception of the "New World".

New words and notions were introduced to native vocabulary such as 'sin', 'salvation', 'punishment' and 'confession' and, at the same time, native worship started being defined as a sacrilege by the priests. Thus, the specific terrain for native production (and revalidation) of ancient knowledge, that is, traditional ceremonies and language, became conflicting sites for those interested in resisting cultural extermination. Schools and imported religious institutions brought books, literacy, churches, priests to this continent but they worked as 'cultural erasers;' from such "innovative" perspectives, native memory and traditions did not count at all, and were even expected to disappear. Western religions and European knowledge became, in fact, integrated agents for the "civilizing" and acculturation of those "lost souls." In addition, Christianity has always been involved in land conflicts. At the very beginning of colonial (un)structuring, priests were mainly interested in guaranteeing new pieces of land for the concrete establishment of their religious buildings, schools and churches. Thus, American territory was understood to be an empty space for God's work, which could only be completed through the interference of Western religious people. As Vine Deloria, Jr. states, Christianity "endorsed and advocated the rape of the North American continent, and her representatives have done their utmost to contribute to this process ever since (1988: 30). Thus it is not surprising that most postcolonial native writers are extremely interested not only in analyzing how native land was taken but which forces have played an important role in the dismantling of native territory. In a clearly postcolonial questioning of American government international attitudes at the present moment, Vine Deloria, Jr. claims:

> Until America begins to build a moral record in her dealings with the Indian people she should not try to fool the rest of the world about her

> intentions on other continents. America has always been a militantly imperialistic world power eagerly grasping for economic control over weaker nations. (1988: 51)

Similarly to Deloria, many other contemporary native writers call attention to the fact that American government should respect cultural difference inside the country instead of advocating international human rights, mainly in relation to foreign policies.

Irene Vernon in her article "The Claiming of Christ: Native American Postcolonial Discourses," points out that, only in 1987, the Church Council of Greater Seattle eventually declared a formal "Bishops' Apology" to natives living in the US. That document "apologized to Indian people for the signatory churches' long standing participation in the destruction of traditional Indian ceremonies" as well as for not having defended them from federal injustice (75). Intrigued with such sudden (and delayed) excuses on the part of an institution that has largely been involved in the devastation of traditional native culture, Vernon reviews the life and narratives produced by some Indians who are known as representatives (and survivors) of Christian institutions such as William Apess (b.1798), Rev. Peter Jones (b.1802), Edward Goodbird (b.1869), Thomas Alford (b.1860) and Charles Eastman (b.1858).

These five early native (male) voices give hints as to how intensely the introduction of Christianity has affected life in America. All these men, with the exception of Rev. Jones, a Chippewa who totally rejected native ways and even his Indianness, were interested in keeping traditional native views together with new Christian perspectives. In fact, they (as well as other natives) had experienced the prohibition of their original tribe's worship, the attacks on their languages and worldviews, and were expected to buy the idea that conversion and religious

domestication were preconditions for entering American society as citizens. In addition, entering the Church represented a way of bettering their social conditions; by becoming Christians, Indians could not only get better formal education but were also allowed legal ownership of land (Vernon 81). According to colonial mainstream understandings, only Christian Americans where considered citizens, having the right to own property. In the same article, Vernon stresses that postcolonial native narratives of the twentieth century produced by New Christians expressed a growing discomfort with the notion that negation of 'original' culture was a requirement of conversion, which exposed the existing tension between Christianity and native culture (81). She also claims that, in the discourses produced by native Christians interested in analyzing the world through the lenses of postcoloniality, Christianity is presented as "a means of survival and as a vehicle of adaptation, reflecting considered choices which do not necessarily imply rejection of Native spirituality or 'Indianness'" (Vernon 76). In fact, Christianity represented a means for native survival in a mixed world where white supremacy had been established through force.

At least since Momaday's House Made of Dawn, 1968, native poets, fiction writers and theorists have been interested in representing or studying the dilemma that so many Native Americans have faced since colonization: "how does one remain whole while accepting the supernatural and ritual practices of the tribe and simultaneously assimilating white Christian attitudes required by white presence and white colonization?" (Allen 96). According to several authors, proximity to the 'civilizing' attempts of white Christians has not improved the already existing system of values in native country. This is another reason why native writers concentrate their efforts in marking their own territory "contrapuntally to those non-Native voices" that have been

almost exclusively heard throughout American history (Weaver xii). In this context, syncretism is not only inevitable but a "peculiar strength" for fighting "internalized oppression" (Weaver xii) as well as for reconstructing memory and history in more liberating ways. Towards the end of the twentieth century, since colonization processes have not ended and natives still refuse total assimilation into the dominant society, Christianity is still an important theme for those interested in keeping hybrid and alternative interpretations of the world constructed from the viewpoint of a minority group. What has been defended since the 1960's (mainly by Vine Deloria, Jr.) is an inclusive Christianity, in which native people may incorporate their values, creating their own versions of contemporary (native) religion.

Countless native authors, when trying to characterize their literature, refer to the alternative worldviews of texts by Indians–more focused on space than on time, presenting time as cyclical instead of linear, reality as non-anthropocentric and ecologically-oriented. Weaver stresses that, as a result of a difficulty on the part of native cultures to admit any split between sacred and secular spheres, native worldview remains essentially religious, involving the native's deepest sense of self and embracing tribal life, existence, and identity (28). Observing that the literature produced by natives tends to express a preoccupation with the imposition of foreign, Westernized worldviews, this chapter analyzes representations of religious and philosophical issues, arguing that such knowledge can be taken as an integral elements of literary discourse.

Even after five hundred years of insistent attempts to destabilize the traditional religious systems of indigenous tribes, Christianity has been unsuccessful due to the "intimate connection between Native religion and Native culture and community"

(Weaver viii). As only 10 to 25%[4] of contemporary Native Americans are Christians, one can conclude that imported Western cultural and religious philosophical patterns have not always succeeded in the battle of paradigms which has taken place in America during the last centuries. Many Christianized natives adopt syncretic practices: they go to church but keep following traditional ways and ceremonies. In Silko's novel, Tayo observes that "all the people, even the Catholics who went to mass every Sunday, followed the ritual of the deer" (C 52). Going to church on Sundays is obviously one of the requirements for being defined as a "Good Christian"; at the same time, however, the ritual of the deer is one of the most important rites from a native point of view. So native "new Christians" had to find a middle-way, an obviously syncretic solution for the impasse of religious and cultural paradigms.

Conflicting elements of American postcolonial world are largely represented in the literature produced by contemporary native writers. As mentioned, native women writers are especially interested in analyzing the differences existing between their "original" cultures and that colonial, imported one to which they have been exposed, one that has been responsible for several changes in native gender system, affecting women's private and public lives in quite negative ways. Such literature became not only a tool for elaborating their conflicts but also a strategy for the maintenance of traditional stories, beliefs and values apart from those imposed by a dominant, colonizer's culture which has historically privileged male-centered worldviews. Such women writers want to discuss topics which have been treated by male native (Christianized or not) intellectuals since the beginnings of colonization and Christianization, issues women have very rarely had the opportunity to discuss.

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[4] These statistics are presented by Jace Weaver in his introduction to That the People Might Live.

The representation of such cultural encounters and the implied syncretic arrangements in the fiction produced by native writers may exemplify what Homi Bhabha refers to as the existence of "in-between spaces" where strategies of singular and communal selfhood can be organized in the articulation of cultural differences (1-2). In fact, such "in-between places" have to be constantly recreated as inexorable sites of conflict, of coalition, of interchange. Besides, taking such coexisting realities into consideration reminds us of the fact that our times are times of "contamination," where most cultures have already been positively or negatively affected by others, and where "purity" is a fantasy (parodying Haraway's statement that "origin is a fantasy").

Weaver, quoting Guerrero, brings up a fundamental aspect to the discussion: unfortunately, the illusion of white superiority has very often been accepted as an "unquestionable factual reality" by native people. Leslie Marmon Silko discusses such an inferiority complex in Ceremony as a sign of self-imposed oppression on the part of the colonized. Tayo, when wondering about who could have taken Josiah's Mexican cattle, never considers a white thief:

> . . . Why did I hesitate to accuse a white man of stealing but not a Mexican or an Indian? . . .He knew then he had learned the lie by heart–the lie which they wanted him to learn: only brown-skinned people were thieves: white people didn't steal, because they always had the money to buy whatever they wanted. (C 191)

If colonial knowledge and the imported educational institutions implied an inevitable internalized oppression on the part of native people, it is exactly through revolutionary practices, by moving back to their traditions and rereading them in creative ways, that natives can (re)emancipate themselves and, at the same time, build a more democratic

and inclusive American society. Literature can thus stand for the site where a more positive construction of native identity, in its constant struggle against colonialism, might be elaborated. Nancy Peterson, in her article "History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich's Tracks," affirms that native writers like Erdrich have to face some difficult issues: "unrepresented or misrepresented in traditional historical narratives, they write their own stories of the past only to discover that they must find a new way of making history" (984). Even acknowledging that the history told by such "new subjects" who have survived in the margins can never be 'the' final version of any history or story, this study considers listening to those voices "contrapuntally" (Weaver xii) to be of fundamental importance.

In Ceremony, Leslie Marmon Silko constructs a story that concentrates on the effects of cultural changes brought by European knowledge to Indian reality. Tayo laments the fact that America was not left in peace by imperial colonial forces: ". . . So he cried at how the world had become undone, how thousands of miles, high ocean waves and green jungles could not hold people in their place" (C 18). If one considers Weaver's defense that native identity derives from a "geomythology," meaning that it is constructed in bioregional terms, varying with the natural environment in which their worldviews evolve (28), Tayo's concerns are understandable. From a native perspective, it is unacceptable that another people, from a different environment, would cross (natural) frontiers in order to change or challenge the life concepts of people who have been living on their own, in their land, for a long time. Even more absurd, some of these indigenous peoples were "pushed" to remote, Western territories, forced to leave behind all their sacred places around which much of their system of beliefs and mythology was based.

From the reading of Silko's novel one learns that native power in healing, curing and solving problems diminished considerably after the advent of colonialism as a consequence of changes in real, practical life. For instance, after Tayo and the other veterans came back from the war, no traditional native ceremony could save them because the Scalp Ceremony could only be successfully performed when the soldier knew for sure he had killed someone in a battle. In modern war, however, soldiers cannot tell if they killed some enemy with their own guns or if the enemy was exterminated by bombs, grenades or other soldier's bullets. As Ku'oosh, a traditional medicine man, tries to explain to Tayo: "'There are some things we can't cure like we used to', he said, 'not since white people came. . . '"(C 38).

Since European and native cultures have coexisted for a long time, indigenous people have had to learn how not to get lost inside a foreign but dominating discourse. Throughout the history of colonization, Native Americans had to learn how to appropriate such mainstream knowledge on their own terms. Silko is interested in representing such questionings and appropriations in her fiction. Josiah, Tayo's uncle, when trying to learn about cattle raising in Western books, is very skeptical about the information since it seems not to fit into their reality. After studying and discussing such material on cattle with his nephews, Josiah states: "'I guess we will have to get along without these books'. . . 'We'll have to do things our own way. Maybe we'll even write our own book, *Cattle Raising on Indian Land*, or how to raise cattle that don't eat grass or drink water'" (C 75). Josiah has learned how to read and write and, thus, feels able to criticize, from a native perspective, the material published by white experts, material which is often totally useless for Indian reality. Rocky, who denies his Indianness and identifies with mainstream American models, immediately takes the other side: "'Those

books are written by scientists. They know every thing there is to know about beef cattle. That's the trouble with the way people around here have always done things–they never knew what they were doing'" (C 76). Rocky is blinded in his defense of white man's perspective because he has accepted the white man's definition of indigenous ignorance as a way of stepping into Western culture. According to his mother's perception, Rocky could "not only make sense of the outside world but became part of it" (C 76), an attitude applauded by her.

In Ceremony, Silko concentrates much more on the changes happening inside native culture and on aspects of the consequent (strategic) syncretism than on 'Christianization' or 'acculturation' *per se*. Auntie is the only character closely connected to the Catholic Church, but the effects of such connection are presented as not very empowering. She gets more insecure in relation to people's gossiping about her family, what makes her unable to forget (or forgive) Tayo's "illegitimate" status.

In terms of beliefs and ceremonies, Tayo's cure, for example, is possible only because he accepts being exposed to different treatments, alternative ceremonies in his search for healing, identity and memory. When Ku'oosh is not able to complete Tayo's healing process, he sends him to Betonie, a very untraditional medicine man: "This Betonie didn't talk the way Tayo expected a medicine man to talk. He didn't act like a medicine man at all" (C 118). Tayo's perception of Betonie's difference rests on the latter's use of perfect English and his very untraditional ceremony. Betonie, as most Indian medicine men, uses the circular form as a pattern for his ceremonial room; however, he displays very uncommon objects in it such as coke bottles, calendars, newspapers, telephone books, everything piled up and following the cyclic pattern. When perceiving Tayo's surprise in respect to such uncommon ceremonial material,

Betonie states that "all these things have stories alive in them" and the telephone books serve for "keeping track of things" (C 121). Further explaining his unconventional methods, Betonie states:

> 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 . . . things which don't shift and grow are dead things. . . . Otherwise we won't make it. We won't survive. (C 126)

Here it becomes obvious that Silko is trying to discuss and collaborate with native survival. If changes in traditions are required so that the "people might live" (borrowing Weaver's expression), Silko is interested in supporting them in her literature. Thus, in Ceremony not only Betonie but also Ts'eh, Tayo's female spiritual helper, reaffirm the necessity of using "both sides," of being syncretic as a way of survival, "'This is the only way'. . . 'It cannot be done alone. We must have power from everywhere. Even the power we can get from the whites'" (C 150). Ts'eh is looking for strategies which might allow more people to be included in the weaving of new solutions for problems and future possibilities. It is interesting to see that Silko, aware of the determinant role of native culture in her representations, avoids any Manichean taking of positions: if 'witchery' and 'evil' exist, it is not only white people's fault. In fact, in Ceremony whites and Indians can be taken as victims of some worldly evil that existed before (or independently of) the whites, even though she stresses that whites were the first creation of 'witchery,' which gave continuity to all other wrongs. When the healing ceremony

announced by Betonie starts working, Tayo, cutting a fence in his search for the lost cattle, has an insight:

> The lie. He cut the wire as if cutting away at the lie inside himself. The liars had fooled everyone, white people and Indians alike; as long as people believed the lies, they would never be able to see what had been done to them or what they were doing to each other. . . .If the white people never looked beyond the lie, to see that theirs was a nation built on stolen land, then they would never be able to understand how they had been used by witchery; they would never know that they were still being manipulated by those who knew how to stir the ingredients together: white thievery and injustice boiling up the anger and hatred that would finally destroy the world: the starving against the fat, the colored against the white. (C 191)

Through his insights and at the exact moment he approaches the mine of Los Alamos, where the US government had developed the first nuclear bomb experiences 'against' Indian will but 'in' Indian land, Tayo is able to identify a pattern. Here 'salvation' happens in native ways, through a recovering of memory, an understanding of history, a decolonizing of worldviews. Christianity is not even mentioned as a possible helper for Tayo's social reintegration:

> He cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together–the old stories, the war stories, their stories–to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy. He had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time" (C 246)

By constructing such an insight on the part of her protagonist towards the end of the novel, Silko reinforces the interdependence and responsibility of all living beings for the continuity of life, a perspective very much in tune with tribal philosophy. Silko seems to suggest that, although most people in the world (natives included), are not presently living in tribes or reservations, some cultural traits brought by those who had experienced or still experience life in societies which respect nature and meaningful traditions can become a strategy of survival in an otherwise "civilized" but, concomitantly, "wild" and "barbaric" world. At the same time, not only because her views are in accordance with native perspectives but also because her own viewpoint is marked by gender, that is, is constructed as a "woman's" gaze at postcolonial times, her collaboration to the refreshing of literary studies should be (and has been) seriously taken into consideration by academic and non-academic readers alike.

In Louise Erdrich's Tracks, traditional knowledge is often presented as a 'salvation tool,' while Westernized knowledge and Christianity, unless adapted to indigenous reality, are portrayed as useless for the survival of native culture and its people. In the article "Catholic Nuns and Ojibwa Shamans: Pauline and Fleur in Louise Erdrich Tracks," Michelle Hessler states that in that novel one can read "the most violent clash between the two religions" [catholic and native] and the very negative effects of forced assimilation and religious conversion (40). As a matter of fact, a bridge has to be build so to save priorities of both sides. The necessity of translations between native and more Westernized points of view appears in the beginning of Erdrich's novel, at the moment Fleur and Nanapush are almost dying of consumption, hunger and inaction, lying speechless in bed, day after day. By using the word 'consumption', instead of tuberculosis, Erdrich brings up a very common term among Chippewas in the

19th century; the very word in its root indicates the historical process of devastation which has been affecting that tribe since the 17th century. Not only the sick ones have been "consumed" but all members of that Chippewa group have, to some extent, experienced cultural consumption (Brogan 179). If we consider this issue from a broader perspective, one might even point out that native traditions, habits and cultures from pre-colonial periods have been 'consumed' by the European invaders to such an extent that the survival of natives in postcolonial times depended considerably on the remaining crumbs of their civilization, not yet 'consumed' by colonizers.

Thus when the priest, Father Damien, steps into Nanapush's cabin, he "saves" him and Fleur in unconventional ways, at least from Christian perspectives. In fact, it was not the priest's speech or the religious power delegated to him which saves them both but the fact that Chippewas are always used to welcoming a visitor, as Nanapush explains: "We could hardly utter a greeting, but we were saved by one thought: a guest must eat" (T 7). So Nanapush, a name somehow related to Nanabozho, a Chippewa mythical trickster figure, not only raises from bed to prepare tea and food for the priest but also starts a pauseless speech, which is also responsible for his (and Fleur's) coming back to life: "Father Damien looked astonished, and then wary, as I began to creak and roll. I gathered speed. I talked both languages in streams that ran alongside each other, over every rock, around every obstacle. The sound of my own voice convinced me I was alive" (T 7). Thus, in this specific situation, salvation comes through two elements of Chippewa culture–the welcoming of visitors and trickster talk. Nanapush's speaking in both languages signals the importance of dealing with both cultures as a survival strategy. According to Kathleen Brogan, bilingualism "establishes translations of the past in terms of the present, of one culture in terms of another–as a life sustaining act

that transforms without eradicating the past" (180). In Tracks, Nanapush is presented as the character who identifies translation as essential to cultural survival, showing one of the strengths of Indian culture, that is, its capacity of including or 'incorporating' new elements into its traditional framework. In fact, Pauline's interpretation of Christianity is also a translation, though a quite distorted one, since she "invents her own version [of Catholicism] under which she assumes the role of 'the crow of the reservation'" (Hessler 41). In this way, considering both Nanapush's and Pauline's cultural mediations, one perceives the importance as well as the potential danger of the act of translating culture (Brogan); it might positively influence both cultures involved, but it can also distort the "new" and "old" likewise, causing a general loss of roots and references.

If Father Damien could not do much to help those natives dying of consumption and other diseases, Pauline Puyat, despite the fact of being accepted[5] inside Christian institutions towards the end of the novel, does not work as a savior in Tracks either. On the contrary, Pauline can be defined as a traitor of her original people, of herself and especially of Fleur. Her approach to Fleur reminds one of the role Judas has played in Christian biblical stories, especially because there were three episodes of treason. Pauline could have saved Fleur three times but did not. Fleur was only able to survive as a result of personal power or some supernatural help coming from the native world.

Pauline's first treason or betrayal takes place in Argus, where she was working and where Fleur went to in order to make some money to pay for her allotment fees. After winning a high stake poker game over her coworkers, Fleur is raped by them, silently observed by Pauline, who, later on, cannot explain her own inaction:

[5] Several native critics stress that Pauline is mainly accepted by those nuns because she reminds them of Saint Thérese of Lisieux, a converted native woman who created her "little way" of (humble) life. This might explain Pauline's masochism as a way of reinforcing such comparisons.

> That is when I should have gone to Fleur, saved her . . . .I closed my eyes and put my hand on my ears, so there is nothing more to describe but what I couldn't block out: those yells from Russell, Fleur's hoarse breath, so loud it filled me, her cry in the old language and our names repeated over and over among the words. (T 26)

The young Russell, who is Pauline's nephew and who really likes Fleur, wanted to interfere, but Pauline didn't allow him to do so, holding him tight. Later on, Pauline plays some role in Fleur's revenge of those men, that is, by apparently being responsible for locking the rapists inside the freezing meat lockers where they were trying to protect themselves from a sudden tornado (supposedly conjured by Fleur's rage). However, Pauline was unable to act at the moment of the rape, when she could have stopped the first violence so as to make the second one, the death of the three men, unnecessary. Some critics affirm that Pauline's later neurotic unfolding is connected to her guilt in respect to the three deaths she has caused.

The second time Pauline fails to help Fleur happens at the moment the latter is giving birth to Lulu, her first child. As Nanapush tells it: "Eli had brought Pauline to help, but she was useless–good at easing souls into death but bad at breathing them to life, in fact, afraid of birth, and afraid of Fleur Pillager" (T 57). She could not help Fleur in that difficult delivery in any way and what saves Fleur and Lulu from death is the approaching of a bear, which tried to enter the house: " . . . when Fleur saw the bear in the house she was filled with such a fear and power that she raised herself on the mound of blankets and gave birth" (T 60). Pauline first believes she herself has, then, killed the bear with one shot but later she notices "it left no trail either, so it could have been a spirit bear" (T 60). Margaret, Eli's mother, arrives immediately after and she is the one

who takes care of Fleur and the newly born. Here one can read the bear's appearance as a supernatural element in the novel because the Pillager clan has always been protected by certain animals, among them the bear, who could appear in very difficult situations. At this opportunity, what saves Fleur are the magical elements of her Chippewa culture and not the future nun and her prayers. As a matter of fact, Fleur, through her shamanic power, is much more able to help and save people's lives than Pauline, who has learned from Bernadette how to care for the dying but who, in fact, has never been very interested in other people's salvation.

The third time Pauline could have saved the again pregnant Fleur but did not happens exactly when the latter, noticing Pauline's bad smell resulting from her lack of bathing, a restriction self-imposed as a religious penance, decides to wash her properly. Pauline tries to avoid any pleasurable feelings during those minutes in the tub while Fleur and Lulu wash and scrub her skin and hair. At the end, however, Pauline admits it was "so terrible, so pleasant, that [she] abandoned [her] Lord and all his rules and special requirements" (T 154). At the moment Fleur finishes that hard work, she notices thick blood running down her legs, indicating a possible involuntary abortion. Lying on the bed, she asks Pauline to look among her medicinal plants for some alder in order to stop the bleeding. Pauline, too far acculturated, or not wishing to help, cannot remember what the plant looks like. In spite of Fleur's very precise description of alder, she simply cannot find it. Pauline, clumsily searching for the plant, cannot avoid thinking of the house she used to live in with Bernadette, where "remedies were all in bottles, labeled, mainly bought from the store" (T 156). Bernadette was another mixed-blood Catholic and, thus, could not teach Pauline about the use of traditional herb. It is also important to mention that, by eradicating traditional customs, the Catholic Church has further

complicated the survival of native communities, since Indians could no longer use the medicines that surrounded them in large amounts (Hessler 42). Fleur, Nanapush and very few others are exceptions as members of a society that was rapidly being acculturated.

Lack of knowledge on native plants may well be a cause for Pauline's incapacity to help Fleur, but it can also be that the forbidden pleasure she had felt during the bath moments before the abortion was transformed into hate or rejection projected onto the pregnant woman, someone perceived by Pauline as a source of sensuality and power. While observing Fleur's surprising whiteness, her deadly look during the abortion, Pauline simply could not move: "I do not know why the Lord overtook my limbs and made them clumsy, but it must have been His terrible will. I never was like this during sickness before, not since Bernadette taught me. But I could not work my arms, my hands properly, my fingers" (T 157). Thus she watches motionless the baby sliding from Fleur's body; then Fleur cutting the cord and breathing into her child's mouth in an attempt to save it. Afterwards, Fleur's soul starts traveling, preparing for death. The baby's soul goes with her; Pauline's, too. After some card game played in the other world, where Fleur has to negotiate for her life and the life of her daughter Lulu, also in danger outside the house, the two women come back to their bodies. What finally saves them is, again, Margaret's arrival, but the baby is already dead. When Pauline wants to baptize the dead child, the only way of "salvation" she can offer, Fleur tries to attack her and Margaret simply spits on her. After this third treason, Pauline is definitely perceived as a traitor or an enemy by that small group of traditional Indians. Her new knowledge and beliefs are useless and do not make sense from the viewpoint of those natives.

Pauline, however, as a godly soldier in a crusade, tries once again to bring the words of the Lord to the natives. When Nanapush, together with Moses, prepares a ceremony for Fleur in order to get her out of her strange state of indifference after the death of the baby, an undesirable visitor appears. According to Nanapush's words " . . . then who should enter, walking tentative and slow, but the nun who could sniff out pagans because they once had been her relatives" (T 189). Pauline immediately states why she came: "I'm sent to prove Christ's ways" (T 190). Part of the ceremony was putting their hands, previously prepared with roots and plants so not to get burned, into a pot with hot water. Pauline, trying to show that her God was stronger than native medicine and that traditional knowledge had become useless, puts her own hands, without any previous preparation, inside the boiling water. Back in the convent, humiliated and in a delirious and feverish state, she concludes God has abandoned her because of her insignificance. She decides, then, to go for a last time to Matchimanito, near Fleur's cabin, to unmask the devil she believes, in a very (delirious) syncretic interpretation, is Misshepeshu, the Chippewa water manito, who she believes is in love with Fleur. As mentioned earlier in this study, with her rosary, she strangles her previous lover instead. Pauline as a character seems to indicate that loss of cultural roots and a too rapid acceptance of foreign models cannot improve native living conditions; on the contrary, such artificial acculturation processes do determine the erasure of memories, of traditions and, thus, are no solution for people who have been trying to learn how to survive in a bicultural (postcolonial) country.

Erdrich stresses in Tracks that, although some acculturation is inevitable after years of contact, natives should not throw away their whole history and tradition. Pauline is the one who really gets lost as a result of ambitious attempts to enter the white world

at any price. Fleur keeps traditional ways throughout the novel. Nanapush is probably the most syncretic character–very knowledgeable in traditional Chippewa terms but also able to interact and affect the new society which was being formed in Indian land as a consequence of colonization. He is able to write and read in English, despite his conviction that his name, Nanapush, "is a name that loses power every time it is written and stored in a government file" (T 32). At the end Nanapush is the one able to negotiate with colonial institutions in order to be allowed to bring Lulu back home, a power he can only guarantee because of his adaptability.

Susan Power, in The Grass Dancer, presents "the new times" and the implicit adaptations in native life style as inevitable, though not always desirable. Thus, Pumpkin, a young woman of Irish and Indian descent, is glad and excited to go to college at Stanford, even though she fears that while adapting to the new environment, she might get emotionally lost. In a similarly adaptive way, Anna (Mercury) Thunder, a medicine woman from that Dakota group, when seeing a periodic table for the first time and hearing from her granddaughter Charlene that "an element is a substance that can't be split into simpler substances", firmly states: "That's my story . . . I'm all of a piece" (GD 21). She thus assumes the name Mercury, Mercury Thunder. Mercury (or Anna), however, is not so open to other new elements when changes affect her religious concepts. At the moment her granddaughter gets interested in God, the Bible and Christian matters, she firmly states:

> 'You get back with your Jesus . . . You take him right back where you found him, and don't bring him to me. That one has too many faces. You don't know where you stand with him. Give me honest Jack anytime,

> because I know he wants to do me in, but I can see him coming a mile away'. (GD 47)

Mercury affirms she can better deal with what she knows well enough, in this case, evil as perceived by her powerful Indian eyes and not a foreign, blond, blue-eyed imported messiah.

Mercury's thirst for recognition and status might explain her acceptance of Jeannette, a white anthropologist interested in her life story. According to her, Jeannette appealed to her vanity: ". . . and who wouldn't enjoy being admired, quoted, chronicled?" (152). Here it is also possible to notice that Jeannette is portrayed by Power as a stereotypical (thus, excessive) model of the white researcher, who wants to be more Indian than the Indians.[6] In class, she asks her Indian students to sit in circle, telling them that, in this way, she is bringing them back to the old ways, when time and organization were cyclic. She forces the students to share traditional stories of their families with the classmates, expecting them to tell something original and sacred in front of the class. She never notices that all students make up silly stories, since it would be absurd from their viewpoint to tell such secrets in public, especially to a stranger. After studying Cooper and some other early American white writers who have developed native topics in their fiction, she hears from one of her students: "We were wondering. Instead of this stuff, could you read some of that Vine Deloria?"(GD 58). When she asks who he is, they answer: "He's our cousin" (GD 59). This dialogue represents well the gap existing between Jeannette, the white scientist and teacher, who represents the dominant, Westernized culture, and the people she thinks she is bringing

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[6] Power constructs an inversion of positionalities in terms of stereotypes as commonly portrayed in mainstream American literature; that is, the colonized or dominated are describing their view of the colonizer, the white researcher, as a caricature, here represented by Jeannette.

into cultural awareness. Her proposals are not what they need and her objects of study, on the other hand, are her fantasy, her idealized creation.

Susan Power represents the points of clash still existing between white and Indian culture even after so many years or centuries of contact. In some aspects, it seems that both cultures have coexisted as oil and water, never able to mix equally and properly. According to Neil Wright's article "Visitors from the Spirit Path: Tribal Magic in Susan Power's The Grass Dancer," the subtext of this novel is the incompatibility between "the vital core of tribal Indian life and the essence of Indian identity, and the rational, technological and spiritual groundwork of the West" (39). In terms of European religious approach, for example, one reads in Power's novel that early Christian missionaries have tried to enchant and impress Indians through images and music. Herod, a *yuwipi* (medicine man), explains this to his grandson Frank and Frank's friend, Harley, while taking them to the river and pointing downstream:

> 'That's where Christianity came from. . . A steamboat finally made it up the Missouri, using stilts to get over the sandbars. It brought the first piano to this area, the first one our people ever heard. They took to that music, I think, because it's dramatic, and you know how we are, always ready for a big show. That sound made them believe about heaven better than any priest's words. They could hear it, couldn't they? After the piano and all the church music hit this tribe, there were a lot of converts' (GD 59-60).

While showing the young boys where the piano (and Christianity) first appeared, he does not forget to reaffirm his traditional resisting beliefs, by throwing some tobacco into the water and saying: "I'm just saying to *Wakan Tanka* that I haven't forgotten Him. I didn't

go the way of the steamer and the great piano. I listen for his voice and the music he makes in the water and through the wind" (GD 60). Through Herod, Susan Power is constructing a postcolonial narrative of religion: explaining the changes after contact and, concomitantly, reinforcing native historical versions as well as oral tradition.

Several characters are skeptical in relation to Christianity and white culture in The Grass Dancer, but Herod is the one who expresses his viewpoint more clearly. He does not trust the Christian God. Through a simple story, he shares his perspective: "[T]he Christian God has a big lantern with the kerosene turned way up, and the people pray to Him for help, for guidance, and he lights the way. Now *Wakan Tanka*, when you cry to Him for help says, 'Okay, here's how you start a fire!' And then you have to make your own torch" (GD 285). What Herod really appreciates in *Wakan Tanka* is that he does not require people's total adoration and submission to his divinity. On the contrary, he wants people to be independent and, at the same time, responsible for their actions, ideas that really give support to tribal communal organization, where all individuals are expected to be able to survive on their own but be interested in the benefit of the whole community.

Another traditional character in The Grass Dancer who develops interesting opinions on Christianity, new and old knowledge is Margaret Many Wounds. Stating that she had entered the Church because of her guilt in relation to having twin daughters with a Japanese man and of having lied her whole life about it, she assumes a rebel position in her last days alive. With her twin daughters Lydia and Evelyn, and Lydia's son, Harley, near her, she openly repents her Christian conversion. At this seminal moment, she does not want to confess nor see the priest: "And don't you let that Father Zimmer near me! All he wants to do is have the last word over my body and go fishing

for my soul"(GD 96). Margaret tries to go back to the old times, rejecting all cultural imports she has accepted before: "I'm not a sheep . . . There is still time to go back" (GD 96). Being closely connected to her grandson Harley, a very young boy at that time, she asks him to go to the yard and bury her cedar rosary, thinking aloud: "Maybe something useful will grow" (GD 97). In further conversations with Harley she tells him that she was again praying to *Wakan Tanka*, the great Spirit from her childhood, who was not a jealous God, "but waited patiently for her to honor Him again" (GD 97).

It is interesting to point out that Margaret dies on the exact day the American astronauts are arriving on the moon. Two processes–one natural and the other artificial, scientific–are completing their cycles: Margaret's life is ending and men are getting to that distant, previously unreachable moon. While she lays on bed, everybody is watching television to see what the moon looks like. Evelyn, proud and amazed by the opportunity of watching the scene, thinks aloud: "it will be history", while her mother, quite indifferent to what is being shown completes: "it is all history" (GD 108).

Harley, the one in the house best equipped to circulate in modern and ancient worlds because of his high sensitivity, notices that there are two moons, in fact–one on the screen and another one in the sky. His grandmother perceptively feels this is the last moment to teach him something; she states that there are many, many more moons than that, "for every person who can see it, there's another one"(GD 109). Margaret helps him experience some transcendental moment by making him pretend the moon is inside him. Harley, closing his eyes, is able to see the moon inside him, inside his skull and when he finally, a little afraid, opens his eyes, Margaret is saying: "That's the moon. That is the way into the moon." When the child gets a little confused, pointing to the television once again, the grandmother clarifies: "They can only walk on the surface"

(GD 110), and continues, ". . . remember that feeling. Remember what it's like to be the moon, and you, and the darkness and the light." After that definition of 'completeness', Margaret dies. Harley, feeling her departure, keeps looking at the men on the moon, while her grandmother's body starts to be washed by her two daughters. Margaret, however, with her traveling soul, appears to Harley once again. He sees her on the television screen, beside (and through) Armstrong; she is there, dancing for Harley and telling him to look at her, "Look at the magic. There is still magic in the world" (GD 114).

In this passage of Power's novel the supernatural plays an important role, introducing Harley to magical events. In several tribes, spirits of the recent dead are believed to appear after death. The strange element here is the television, that is, technology being used in favor of magic, showing the very syncretic nature of native survival strategies. This is exactly what Margaret is trying to show her grandson–that things are changing a lot but there is still place for magic in people's lives. This event prepares Harley for his future visions and spiritual quest, at the end of which he meets Red Dress on the verge of the living world. Such natural and supernatural learning processes passed on from one generation to the next are very typical of oral societies, where the continuance of power and knowledge depends a lot on telling and listening, that is, on reconstructions and revisions of collective memories.

In the quite kaleidoscopic plot developed by Power, one presence is constant–as a legend for other characters or as a character from the past–Red Dress, the archetypal female figure for these Dakotas. Her story takes place in 1864 and begins when an insistent Jesuit approaches that Dakota group looking for converts. Red Dress, as an important young figure in her tribe, was co-opted by the priest, learned English and

eventually became a translator of the religious services. She wonders why the priest has chosen her: "Perhaps I should have told the Jesuit directly: 'I will never be the convert you desire. I am Red Dress, beloved of snakes'. I know he would have found that statement foolish. He had no patience for spirits, dreams, or animal totems, despite his self-proclaimed ability to transform wine into living flesh" (GD 220). From that Dakota woman's perspective, Christian ceremonies are also taken as empowering performances. However, she is afraid she can't explain to the Jesuit, Father Flambois, that she is believed to be so powerful because, as a baby, she was "embraced" by two snakes, which never bit her. This story became one of the most important elements of such a legendary figure from her tribe's viewpoint. It is interesting to notice that Red Dress is aware that myth or magic is only respected by white society when it can be controlled through descriptions in a book, such as the Bible. In this sense, oral, unlimited, unexpected magic situations such as the ones that often happen in connection to Red Dress are taken as primitive, illusory or fake by Westernized or Christianized eyes. Her silence in respect to her unconventional power emphasizes her high sensitivity, since she seems to know she could not trust those people, and her wish to better observe and evaluate the new Christian ways.

Roland Walter, in his article "Pan-American Borderland (Re)visions," stresses that the magical realism attached to Red Dress is one of the strengths of the narrative in terms of postcolonial purposes. Red Dress is accepted as a spirit who is allowed to circulate among the living, responsible for their continuous impulse to keep fighting cultural extermination or suppression. Walter affirms that, magical realism, placed inside the neo(colonial) contemporary times, has always been a concept of "cultural differentiation in the New World." (66) According to him, the specific transgressive

ability of magical realism in crossing the boundaries which usually separate truth from imagination, the natural from the supernatural, "undermine dominant Western discourses and rational paradigms" (66). In the case of Red Dress and her role in Susan Power's novel, Walter stresses that her magic element "signifies the dynamic harmonious relationship between (wo)man and nature, different times and spaces, a cyclical perception of reality" (67). In short, she is the source of a power which circulates, adapts itself and imposes the possibilities for native survival.

Father Flambois, the Jesuit working with that Dakota group, believing he can count on Red Dress as a helper, decides to hold a big mass, an enormous religious event. Red Dress works as a translator. However, she changes most of the content of the priest's speech, believing she is helping him: "Mind you, when I translated inaccurately it was not out of carelessness or spite. Father was tactless, but he had been a friend to me. It was loyalty that led me to overlook his indelicate remarks and speak in a voice of my own"(GD 222). Red Dress is aware of something the priest is not able to see: his stories did not make sense to those Indians and that was the reason why he could not secure a single convert. Because of her understanding of the problem and, at the same time, her real friendship to the priest, Red Dress keeps her thoughts to herself: "My father had seen other bands trade with white people, succumb to diseases, and grow dependent upon their superior goods. . . . We rejected mirrors, flour, coffee . . . I felt it would be rude to tell the priest his teachings were just another import for us to resist (GD 225). As a matter of fact, after some years of contact with white people, natives were able to see how badly their cultures had been affected by Christianity and by colonial culture at large. Power brings to light some postcolonial ideas through Red Dress' later words as a way of questioning the history of white domination in America:

> For years I had thought I was shielding Father La Frambois from information I felt he would never understand, would in fact find disturbing. I had been protecting myself, refusing to speak aloud the legends and ideas I thought would sound absurd in bare English. I nurtured secrecy to avoid derision. Perhaps this is why the dream came to me. A rare opportunity for redemption. (GD 226)

Following the pattern of a powerful dream, Red Dress and her brother go to Fort Laramie, "the key military outpost in the campaign to subjugate the Sioux nation" (Wright 41). It is there, through her deep process of coming to consciousness, that she understand how strange her relation to colonial knowledge and English is:

> Look at this sullen brown grass, dispirited because winter is coming to punish it. This, to me, is English. It is little pebbles on my tongue, gravel, the kind of thing you chew but cannot swallow. Dakota is lush spring grass that moves like water and tastes sweet. (GD 237).

In fact, in Power's novel one notices that Red Dress, by developing a postcolonial understanding of her tribe's problems, becomes a warrior in the battle for a different social and cultural model than the white, dominant one. Working as a secretary to Pyke, the army chaplain, she participates in the organization of a representation of *Macbeth* in Fort Laramie. Afterwards, her magical power begins to take effect and her rebel nature becomes more obvious. Three of the actors in *Macbeth*, in fact, soldiers of the white army, come to her room and commit suicide immediately after their performance, as if conducted by the two twin stones she had brought with her from home. She feels those magic stones are moving to her, since she is now definitely at war (GD 244). According to Wright's article on the novel, "the execution of these legendary white 'chiefs'

constitutes a symbolic victory of tribal magic over white prowess and immortalizes Red Dress as a historic medicine woman" (42). Pyke, who has always been skeptical about Red Dress because of her close connection to snakes, taken as a "Satanic sign" by him, eliminates her a little before committing suicide himself. He could not properly fight her and avoid her power; so he kills her as a way of stopping her strategies, even if he cannot win the war against her without losing his life.

In The Grass Dancer, Red Dress is clearly involved in a fight against an imposed and imported culture which cannot peacefully coexist with native life. Pyke, for instance, sees nature as wild and dangerous and takes his own voice as a godly projection of divine power. Such centralizing, artificial explanations of life are unacceptable from a native perspective. In this sense, Red Dress keeps reappearing as a spirit or ghost in order to help those Dakota people in their rediscoveries of identity and voice through magical elements based on traditional Indian history. When she appears to Harley at the very end of the novel, at the moment he is having his first vision, she explains how she perceives his role as the best grass dancer of the group–she tells him he is "dancing a rebellion" (GD 299). From a native perspective, it seems that Power's point here is not only to make people trust again their memories, their identities in the present but also remind them that there were other fighters in the past, such as the Ghost Dancers, who may well be still helping and pointing directions to living natives. The Ghost Dance Movement developed towards the end of the 19th century as a religious manifestation among several tribes. The dancers believed they could bring the old times back by dancing and praying to their ancestors, by receiving the visions they experienced in such meetings. White Americans, especially those in the army, getting afraid of the magical tone of such meetings and their power in congregating large groups of natives

all over the country, tragically interrupted one such religious dance meetings at Wounded Knee in 1890. Wounded Knee can be considered as the last explicit war event among Indians and whites. It was a real massacre, in which natives were killed while dancing for freedom and expectations of a better life. Susan Power's novel can be read (or listened to) as an echoing voice of that movement, a voice that can still inspire contemporary natives to dance a rebellion with her.

In the three novels analyzed in my study, one can easily perceive supernatural, magic elements as parts of their narrative. Many critics agree that magical realism has mainly appeared in the Americas in connection to "indigenous and black *weltanschauungen*" (Walter 64). In fact, the very ritual basis of native worldviews favored the development of such stories on myths and legends. Most of the characters related to the magical events in such novels are those who show a collective rather than an individual identity and who participate in human, natural and cosmic realms of their group's life. The novels by Silko, Erdrich and Power share such characteristics. Tayo, Fleur and Red Dress assume very important roles for the survival of at least some original native traits in their cultures. All of them are more intensely interested in collective memory, in listening to the voices of the past as ways of recovering power, agency and resistance. The lives of all these characters are determined by magical events, unexplainable or unacceptable from a rational, objective, Western interpretation of reality. These characters' healing, cure or survival possibilities are determined by the help they can get from their ancestors, from totem-like figures, from animals, from spirits and ghosts. Since natives perceive 'reality' as very close to 'imagination,' there is no tension between what can be seen or imagined and, thus, the past can be taken as a vital part of the present. The marvelous, the supernatural must be supported by faith, a

collective belief in its power; for "myths and legends as lived/living (hi)stories, as value-laden images that endow the facts of ordinary life with philosophical meaning, constitute the very ground for belief in Indian and black cosmologies"(Walter 65).

This characteristic of presenting natural and supernatural elements in close interconnection can be observed in the three novels. Tayo is more then once saved by natural elements or animals. One example is when he is running after the lost cattle and, inside someone else's field, is saved by the appearance of a mountain lion, since the guards run after the animal and forget about him. Fleur, in Tracks, is saved by the appearance of a bear during a very difficult delivery. She is also protected by Misshepeshu, the Water-Manito, who took other people's life in her place every time she almost drowned. Red Dress, in The Grass Dancer, is defined since childhood as a friend of snakes, who respect and give power to her. Other characters of these novels can also be said to be attached to animals, to natural and supernatural events, but it seems that Tayo, Fleur and Red Dress are the ones best equipped to use imagination and unlimited reality to fight fragmentation and discontinuity. In fact, the supernatural is here used as a literary strategy which recreates suppressed historical elements and voices in its decolonizing cultural processes. It is clearly a way of resisting: resisting imposed Christianity, imposed cultural models, imposed rationality. In this sense, the supernatural is a way of undermining mainstream, dominant Western paradigms and, at the same time, a possibility for liberation of meanings, visions and legends from the past in creative new articulations. These authors are interested in recreating memory and history but according to their own perceptions, generally supported by native worldviews.

Kathleen Brogan develops a good viewpoint on the alternative, imaginative characteristics of native texts: "[in] the case of cultures subject to near annihilation by more powerful groups, the invocation of the supernatural can be seen as a survival strategy, through which loss or absence becomes, by awful necessity, generative" (170). Since Tayo, Fleur and Red Dress confirm their continuing presence at the end of each of these novels, one might conclude that there is a very positive reading emanating from such texts; that is, native power is not only still necessary for the survival of its people but effective for the bettering of life conditions in general.

2.3- 'FEMININITY' IN POSTCOLONIAL WRITING BY WOMEN: DIFFERENCES THAT MATTER

> *Strange things begin to happen when the focus in American Indian literary studies is shifted from a male to a female axis. One of the major results of the shift is that the materials become centered on continuance rather than on extinction.* (Paula Gunn Allen)[1]

The previous chapters of this study have focused on Silko's, Erdrich's and Power's representation of culture, ethnicity and on the ways such representations differ from those of other American authors. As Susan Castillo (1996) pointed out, most female protagonist in American novels, "particularly those who challenge prevailing social and cultural norms," have had quite a sad fate, "all too prone to every sort of disaster"– and she mentions Sister Carrie, Hester Prynne, Daisy Miller and Edna Pontellier as some examples (13). Castillo makes this point in order to call attention to the fact that, differently, in fiction by so-called "ethnic" or minority women writers, female protagonists very often not only survive but prosper. My intention in this chapter is, therefore, to analyze how Silko, Erdrich and Power, contemporary members of ethnic and sexual minority groups in the US, construct 'femininity'[2] and how such constructions relate to power.

Susan Castillo brings interesting issues to the discussion and analysis of fiction by women. Based on anthropological viewpoints, mainly those developed by Michelle

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[1] Taken from The Sacred Hoop, 265.

[2] I mark the word to emphasize it as a construct, not at all a natural characteristic of women, sometimes presented as "**the** historical or essential femininity".

Zimbalist Rosaldo,[3] she points out the differences existing between concepts of power and authority in most contemporary societies. According to her, power has been understood as "the ability to act on persons or things to make or secure favorable decisions which are not of right allocated in the individuals or their roles" (14); that is, it involves the ability to do or act. Authority, on the other hand, is "socially validated and implies a hierarchical chain of command and control" (14). It indicates that somebody has the right to give orders or make others obey. Thus 'power' seems to rely on independence and strength, while 'authority' relies much more on hierarchy and command. In addition Castillo argues that women have frequently exercised considerable power throughout history while men have retained authority (14). Native women tend to experience power as well as authority in the groups they belong to, at least much more often than women belonging to other ethnic groups. However, as Castillo precisely observes:

> . . . in contemporary America, when Native American women are marginalized by traditional patriarchal structures not only because they are women but also because they are Native American, it is often the case that the texts they produce will portray women of power, though not necessarily of authority. . . . (14)

What comes out is that, as soon as native women come into contact with Western social groups, their authority stops being recognized by different hierarchical institutions but their power keeps being effective. This can explain one of the objectives of minority women writers–to establish a chain of texts and discourses that recognize and validate alternative gender approaches through empowering representations of women, authorizing their voices to be heard and their power to be acknowledged and respected.

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[3] Rosaldo, Michele Z. and Louise Lamphere, eds. Woman, Culture and Society. Stanford: Stanford UP,

It is thus interesting to keep in mind Castillo's statement that "power, after all, lies within us, while authority is conferred by others" (17). In this way, a literature that represents power attached to female characters is much more able to blur the usual gender stereotypes and to create a new space where the arrangements of power and authority can be differently exercised by men and women alike (Castillo 20). This is actually a literary reconstruction of the way gender relations used to work (and in some cases, still work) in many native societies before the imposition of a patriarchal European culture.

In The Sacred Hoop, which attempts to bring native female power to light, as the subtitle suggests–"Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions," Paula Gunn Allen provides a reading of tribal culture, arguing that gynocracy[4] has been a well-advanced social system among most tribes, and affirming that even at the present moment such a system "takes on new life, appearing in new guise and revealing its uncommon tenacity" (xiii). As a Laguna Pueblo woman, Allen is aware of the plurality and variety of myths and stories among different tribes. By analyzing Keres, Lakota, Hopi and other Pueblo tribes' creation stories, she concludes that, for native people, the "uses of the feminine testify that primary power–the power to make and to relate–belongs to the preponderantly feminine powers of the universe" (17). She recovers and analyzes stories about several feminine entities such as Thought Woman, Old Spider Woman, Serpent Woman, Yellow Woman, figures taken as quintessential spirits by Pueblo people.

1974.

[4] According to Paula G. Allen, "in a system where all persons in power are called Mother Chief and where the supreme deity is female, and social organization is matrilocal, matrifocal, and matrilineal, gynarchy is happening" (Allen 223).

In addition, she establishes some parallels between native creation stories and Western biblical ones. Allen states that, like most Pueblo tribes, the Keres, for instance, understand God as a Woman and (re)present 'her' two helpers in creating the world as women, too. According to Allen, this belief might explain the quite different positions women have historically assumed inside Pueblo tribes, being highly respected and frequently attached to power–the power to give life, cure, envision and influence the future.

> . . . In the beginning Tse che nako, Thought Woman finished everything , thoughts, and the names of all things. She finished also all the languages. And then our mothers, Uretsete and Naotsete said they would make names and they would make thoughts. Thus they said. Thus they did.[5]

A fundamental difference between native and Christian creation stories, besides the fact that God is female in most native ones, with power closely attached to female figures, is that creation is not an individual act. For the Keres, for instance, the Supreme Spirit does not do everything on her own. She obviously has some (female) helpers, here Uretsete and Naotsete, who are also responsible for bringing life into existence. Power is not concentrated in one (masculine) figure's hands. In addition, the way such female figures exert their power is also very different. According to the Keres, Thought Woman and her helpers 'sang' beings and the world into existence. Similarly, the Lakota White Buffalo Woman brought life and power to the tribal ceremonies and rituals through her pipe, that is, by 'smoking'. Thus, life is created through sounds and smoke, as if, in the process, it passes from mouth to mouth, from hand to hand. This might indicate that the understanding of such creation processes according to such ancient tribal literature is

smooth and collective; no violent acts, prohibitions or sins take part in it, quite differently from the Biblical stories.

According to Allen, therefore, to assign to such powerful female beings the position of 'fertility goddess' only is too demeaning: it trivializes the tribes and the power of 'woman' as well (14). In fact, what these creation stories refer to is not simply women's capacity of giving birth, as many anthropologists have stated, but their power to create life in sacred terms, by thinking life and bringing it into reality.

> Thought Woman is not limited to a female role in the total theology of the Keres people. Since she is the supreme Spirit, she is both Mother and Father to all people and to all creatures. She is the only creator of thought, and thought precedes creation. (Allen 15)

Allen has been criticized by some contemporary critics for her defense of tribal gynocracy as if this would be an essentialist move. She, however, insists on her attempt to reconstruct the picture of pre-contact native life, where native women had a much higher status and more powerful positions than American women in general ever did. In addition, the female forces she refers to are located in the mythological sphere and, in this way, influence a perception of women as strong individuals, well-equipped for surviving under or for changing the so-called 'established order.' One might infer that Allen is using mythology to show native difference in terms of gender perceptions as compared to Western definitions, which might practically and positively affect women's lives at large.

Nevertheless, Allen is certainly aware of contemporary debates on the plurality of feminism, as her native voice is one often heard to express lesbian projects and

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[5] The passage cited is Anthony Purley's literal translation from the Keres Indian language of a portion of The Thought Woman story. It is taken from Allen's The Sacred Hoop , p.13.

actions, which coexist with some very different native heterosexual or "white-feminist" projects. She is aware of the 'difference inside,' that is, the difference among tribes, among native women, among women in general. She is also aware that gynocracy has never been an absolute rule but a tendency among native tribes as can be seen in her statement: "male dominance may have characterized a number of tribes, but it was by no means as universal (or even as preponderant) as colonialist propaganda has led us to believe" (32). Allen considers the recovering of these old myths related to women as fundamental, since, in her view, Anglo-European cultural attacks on native institutions "rested on the overthrow or subversion of the gynocratic nature of the tribal system" (32). She firmly defends that the different native perception of women, which involved higher social status and respect for their knowledge, was one of the pillars of native structure that Anglo-Europeans took as very dangerous for their expansionist patriarchal projects. Citing several colonial anthropologists, priests and other authorities, Allen makes clear that Western men could not devastate the tribal system unless they were not able to shake native women's power. She even suspects that many records of women's powerful roles inside tribes have been omitted, falsified or distorted by Anglo-European historical records.

In order to effect tribal social transformation from egalitarian and gynocentric systems to hierarchical and patriarchal ones, four basic changes were needed: the primacy of the female as creator had to be replaced by male creators, tribal governing institutions had to be destroyed, tribal land had to be taken from native people, and the clan structure had to be replaced by the nuclear family (Allen 42). Christianization and politics have played important roles in fulfilling such requirements. Colonial Church

representatives defended that "a woman's proper place was under the authority of her husband and that a man's proper place was under the authority of the priests" (Allen 38). Native children suffered with the terrorization of priests, who were responsible for introducing them to notions of sin, guilt and punishment. In this way, clan consciousness began to be replaced by a more individualistic, artificial familial consciousness, which could be more easily controlled by the colonizers. The life of most native American people has been affected by such imposed changes. "Women (including lesbians) and gay men–along with traditional medicine people, holy people, shamans, and ritual leaders–have suffered severe loss of status, power and leadership" (Allen 195). In short, all that was seen as 'deviant' by the colonizers had to be destroyed or at least weakened, forgetting that these habits or people were 'deviant' only from the point of view of a culture that considered, and to some extent still considers, itself as "the" universal representative of The Good and The Right.

Besides Allen, there are several critics and writers interested in reconstructing the foundations of native tradition as a way of questioning imposed gender and ethnic mainstream definitions. Susan Castillo, for example, is interested in discussing not only power and authority and its relation to women, as we have seen, but the very construction and relation between gender and ethnicity. She questions any fixed definitions of ethnicity, considering it as a historical process (1994: 229). Castillo calls attention to the fact that gender as well as ethnicity are constructed, not having "real", "exact" referents.[6] Her (poststructuralist) observations are in tune with Haraway's statement in her interview with Bhavnani:

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[6] Similar discussions related to the impossibility of fixing 'ethnicity' have been developed in the first chapter of the second section of this study.

> There are no pre-constituted entities . . . .It is in relational encounters that worlds emerge . . . so there is no pre-discursive identity for anyone, including machines, including the non-human. Our boundaries form in encounter, in relation, in discourse. (32)

In fact, by analyzing texts produced by women who do not belong to mainstream American social groups, often defined as "ethnic" minority groups (a quite open definition), it is easier to find out different constructions of femininity and new understandings and possibilities for the whole gender system. Since such identities are 'relational', they obviously change if the subjects involved or the power forces change. Still according to Castillo, the study of literature by minority writers opens up new possibilities for feminism as a whole:

> In texts by Native American women . . we soon become aware that femininity is constructed in a radically different way. On reading these texts, it soon becomes apparent that what has traditionally been perceived as ahistorical essential Femininity within our own culture is an eminently historical construct, and as such is open to change. (1994: 230)

Reading texts by minority women writers in such a way highlights their innovative potential. These writers not only fight for a different representational space for their fictional discourse but, through such discursive constructions, they challenge some solidified perceptions of gender which have been responsible for fixing historical relations of oppression and discrimination in several societies. Besides, if most social groups are really experiencing a globalized moment, as believed, one has to make sure that minority groups will also participate in defining what is being (or should be) globalized. Similarly to what women have done since the first steps of feminism,

subjects from minority groups want to assure their rights to be equal in terms of possibilities of self-fulfillment and to keep difference in cultural topics they define as fundamental. This is exactly the proper moment of bringing 'deviant' experience to global discussion, so that what has been taken as a 'convention' or 'common sense' by mainstream social institutions might also be opened up to change. Novels by women from minority groups, subjects who are used to circulating through different cultures, with composite cultural backgrounds, might thus influence and, at the same time, put into question several concepts taken for granted even by feminism such as 'women', 'femininity', 'gender system', 'equal power distribution', etc.

One of such novels is Ceremony. Introduced by Thought Woman (Ts'its'tsi'nako), the poem she voices starts shaping or weaving the tissue of the story. Despite having a male protagonist, Silko's novel is permeated by women's presence as if a web of female voices is carrying and conducting the protagonist in his search for health. As a matter of fact, Tayo can only get out of his state of crisis and paralysis because of the help he gets from women, some of them attached to mythological figures of Laguna culture.

Grandma and Auntie are two fundamental and contrasting female characters in Ceremony. While Grandma always stands by Tayo, Auntie is constantly questioning his right to be among them. When Tayo becomes worse and worse after his war experience, their attitudes differ considerably as a consequence of their system of beliefs and approach to life. Grandma plays an important role in Tayo's recovery, being the one who decides he should be seen by Ku'oosh and later on, by Betonie. Auntie wants to be a good Christian and thus insists in treating Tayo, at least publicly, even better then her own son: "those who measured life by counting the crosses would not count her

sacrifices for Rocky the way they counted her sacrifices for her dead sister's half-breed child" (C 30). It is clear that Grandma likes and protects Tayo because she sees him as a relative and that Auntie tolerates him because it would be a sin not to do so. Both Grandma and Auntie assume powerful positions in the family, being the owners of the house and the cattle. The only male figure involved in Rocky's and Tayo's education is Josiah; he is Grandma's son and thus belongs to her clan. Such arrangements are in tune with Paula Gunn Allen's comments on Laguna Pueblo tribal system: in this novel, the organization of that reservation clearly shows a matriarchal and matrilocal structure. Here the clan is organized around the figure of the grandmother and it proves to be strong and effective in the solution of problems.

Besides Grandma and Auntie, there are also other women who assume fundamental and powerful roles in this novel. One of them is Night Swan, a mixed blood dancer. Probably much older than Tayo, even if he states he cannot think of age when looking at her (C 98), she introduces him to sexual life and tells him her personal experiences as a mixed blood. Night Swan, now a mature woman, knows that the power she felt the time she first fell in love "had always been inside her, growing, pushing to the surface, only its season coinciding with her new lover" (C 84). She is represented not only as a charming dancer (probably a prostitute) but as a very perceptive woman, able to predict some important events in Tayo's life. After having sex with Tayo as he brings her a note written by his uncle Josiah, she advises him to remember that day because he would recognize it later (C 100). This was, in fact, the first episode of a new pattern that starts determining Tayo's life and his trajectory as a mixed blood Indian.

Several critics defend that Night Swan is the first of a series of female figures in Ceremony connected to the image of Yellow Woman. Yellow Woman, also called Corn

Woman, is a female entity connected to the earth and to life according to Laguna Pueblo mythology. Many female characters in this novel show traits of Yellow Woman–Tayo's mother, Helen Jean, Night Swan and Ts'eh. Silko is able to play with their roles as myths as well as with their physical existence. They are all real creatures, their bodies occupy a space and interact with other people, but their presence transcends concrete boundaries. According to Gregory Salyer,

> Yellow Woman is not a victim, although she can suffer and even be killed. She exemplifies the dangers and rewards of exploring relationships, of tying the world together rather than splitting it apart. She represents what Tayo is after, namely, a coherent vision of the world that does not categorize. . . . (45)

Tayo's mother as well as Helen Jean are not simply presented as victims, 'lost women' sold out to white men, but they are trying to make sense of the new times, they are at least looking for new ways of relating to what is different. Neither is rewarded in their attempts, however. On the contrary, Tayo's mother ends up dying quite young, while Helen Jean, instead of becoming a secretary as she planned when she left the reservation, has to survive as a prostitute in Gallup. Night Swan and Ts'eh, on the other hand, stand for mythical female forces and they cannot be contained in their relation with the changing society as far as Tayo's mother and Helen Jean. They stand for sources of power and creativity fundamental for the solution of problems the group is forced to face after coming into contact with white civilization and Christianity. Since both never came into close contact with Anglo civilization, one might suspect that the power and authority they still exert were sustained by their traditional native roots. Tayo's mother

and Helen Jean, on the contrary, despite having tried to relate to the new ways, end up by losing power and status under the eyes of their original groups.

If we consider that it had been Night Swan who made Josiah buy the Mexican cattle instead of the Hereford, one identifies her as constant presence in the novel. In fact, it is because this cattle really behave in different ways, that is, they run further and further away, that Tayo feels responsible for bringing them back. Looking for the lost cattle becomes a kind of personal quest for Tayo and one of the main elements that influences his healing process, making him feel useful. In his search, he is helped by T'seh, who shows him the way to the lost cattle and, later on, prevents them from running away once again. T'seh also makes love to Tayo, in a very similar way to his sexual meeting with Night Swan. In fact, T'seh is represented as very closely attached to the figure of Night Swan. It might well be that T'seh is another version of Night Swan (or of Yellow Woman). Both women, described in connection with Mount Taylor, a sacred place for Laguna people, appear as sources of stories which help in Tayo's healing and in the reinstallation of some order that makes sense for that group. As Silko states in her book Yelllow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit, "in each story, the beauty that Yellow Woman possesses is the beauty of her passion, her daring, and her sheer strength to act when catastrophe is imminent" (70). Besides, Tayo's sexual relations with Night Swan and T'seh, women closely connected to rain and to life itself, are ways for him to look for balance as well as to formulate new, less binary perspectives on post-contact life for the whole tribe. While Emo and other acculturated natives keep trying to seduce white women in a self-affirmative way, Tayo approaches traditional native women (or spirits) who embody the possibility of recovery–his own as well as that of native tradition. The presence of these two women, together with Grandma's

fundamental influence, helps Tayo's return to wholeness. As Castillo states when discussing Ceremony,

> The women in the novel own land and work magic, and it is they who are largely responsible for the cure of Tayo, the male protagonist. In novels by other Native American women writers, we can encounter similar portrayals of Indian women as figures of strength and power. (96: 3)

Erdrich's Tracks is also one of such novels where native women are portrayed as strong characters, determining the guidelines of the story. As mentioned earlier, in Tracks, there are two narrators, one male, Nanapush, and one female, Pauline. Nanapush is very closely attached to Fleur, the Pillager woman he has chosen to be his daughter after saving her of consumption. The story he narrates is addressed to Lulu, Fleur's daughter. In this way, Nanapush, practically Lulu's grandfather, is guaranteeing the connection between mother and daughter and between past and present events in the tribe's oral tradition. Nanapush is often represented as connected to the figure of a trickster: he speaks a lot, likes making and talking about sex. One can observe that, despite being the male narrator of Tracks, Nanapush never assumes a typically masculine position, at least according to Western patterns. He is a changing character, bonding much more often with women than with men, always interested in Fleur and her clan and showing respect for her medicine power. In fact, Fleur is the powerful woman who acts and makes decision in relation to important events involving her clan while Nanapush is the one who speaks about her, who tries to make her unforgettable for the other characters (mainly Lulu), as well as for readers and listeners.

From a more Westernized perspective of the relation established between the three main characters in Tracks, that is, Nanapush, Fleur and Pauline, it is probably

visible that, despite Fleur's personal status, she is not the one who has logocentric power, since she is not allowed to use her own voice. Nanapush serves, however, as the mouthpiece through which her story is narrated, legitimizing her position of leadership as well as strengthening her connection to her daughter.

Fleur's portrayals throughout the novel show her as a potent, lively woman. Pauline's description of Fleur as she arrives to work at the butcher shop in Argus confirms this: "her cheeks were wide and flat, her hands large, chapped, muscular. Fleur's shoulders were broad and curved as a yoke, her hips fishlike, sliperry, narrow" (C 18). In addition, Fleur was "hired for her strength. She could lift a haunch or carry a pole of sausages without stumbling" (C 16). Not only is Fleur's appearance and physical force impressive, but she is unconventional in her ways–as a young single woman, she one night decides to sit together with the male workers and play cards: "women didn't usually play with men, so the evening that Fleur drew a chair to the men's table there was a shock of surprise" (C 18). By playing cards with men Fleur has not only broken a gender norm of that small town, but establishes a different pattern to gambling: to win only one dollar every night. Her talent with cards disturbed those men–they doubted such a consistent luck. One night, however, after a month and thirty dollars won by her, Fleur decides to surprise them and wins much more than one dollar. After some hours playing, Fleur has won a large amount, almost all the money the men had with them. When they want to continue, she tells them she has given up, too tired to go on playing. As a matter of fact, she has already got the money she needed for the land fees and nobody is able to force her to go on playing once she decided to stop. By doing this Fleur has, however, gone too far in terms of trespassing the gender barriers in the opinion of her three opponents: not only has she beaten them in the game but made them

feel foolish and under her control. In addition, the butcher, Pete, was not there that night, having left Argus because of the intolerable heat, making the workers feel even more "at home". So as soon as Fleur left the room to sleep, the men "drank, steeped in the whiskey's fire, and planned with their eyes things they couldn't say aloud" (T 24). As a punishment, they decide to put her in her proper place by raping her. It is interesting to consider that Pauline's silence during the rape, not moving a finger to help Fleur, might stand for her secret wish to see the other woman punished for being strong, attractive, independent and mysteriously wise.

It is also important to take into consideration that the three rapists were white workers: Lily Veddar, who was called 'Lily' because of his light skin, Tor Grunewald and Dutch James, clearly marked as Americans with a European ancestry. Thus Fleur's victory in the game and her control of the whole situation did not only affect these men because of her sex but also because she is a non-white woman. During the whole month they played cards with her, they never believed she could be as good as she in fact was in the game. While she was winning only a small amount, Tor affirmed: "Well, we know one thing. . . the squaw can't bluff". As is well-known, 'squaw' is a word for Indian women who lived with white men, defined by whites as prostitutes, and as 'sold out' by natives. By naming Fleur this way, Tor is clearly trying to diminish her status as woman and as someone markedly "non-white", who could be used by white men. The racial issue intermingled with Fleur's out of pattern 'femininity' determines the rape event she experiences. It might well be that the three workers would not dare raping a white co-worker, but that they did not hesitate to undertake this act to a native woman, even one as strong as Fleur.

According to critic Joni Adamson Clarke, Fleur is the character that allows Louise Erdrich to play with traditional narratives, transforming them so that they make sense as part of a contemporary novel (34). She is an ambiguous character (at least from Western perspectives), attached to the past, connected to people and animals, sometimes referred to as related to the figure of the mythical Wolf, sometimes to Misshepeshu, the Water-Monster or simply to bears, the animal protecting her Pillager clan. As a result of the multiplicity of roles she is able to assume, Fleur can be perceived as a woman who subverts gendered identity, being continually displaced and showing a fluidity of identities, "an openness to resignification and recontextualization" (Clarke 34). In short, Fleur cannot be limited by any fixed definitions of 'woman', 'mother', 'native' or 'human,' since she is able to move from one role to the other, being sometimes taken as a strong human being, as an animal or as a kind of spiritual entity. Her changeability of positions relies not only in her ability to assume different roles but on her attachment to traditional culture, where shamans and medicine people were respected. Pauline, as a Chippewa is better equipped than the other butcher's workers to recognize Fleur's power and magic:

> They never looked into her sly 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. They never knew she'd drowned. They were blinded, they were stupid, they only saw her in the flesh. (T 18)

Here, Fleur's perculiar and respected position from a Chippewa perspective becomes clear. Pauline is aware that Fleur's power is being undervalued by those white workers. As a young woman able to "fade into a corner or squezze beneath a shelf", Pauline

knows everything that happens. She even states she "was invisible for most customers and to the men in the shop. . . a skinny big-nosed girl with stearing eyes" (T 16).

When Fleur goes back to Matchimanito (after the rape episode), Pauline returns, too. As a matter of fact, she is sent away because of her constant nightmares with dead people. Back at home, Fleur becomes Eli's love object. He goes to Nanapush looking for some advice on how to get her love but Nanapush tells him: "Forget that thing so heavy in your pocket. . . or put it somewhere else. Go town way and find yourself a tamed woman" (C 45). Nanapush's words stress that Fleur is not a woman a man can simply decide to live with, be taken as a wife with no further worries. She has never been controlled (or tamed) by any rules; her behavior is first of all free, out of contention, incomprehensible to many natives and non-natives alike. Eli, however, does not give up the idea of having her. Finally she accepts him and, probably as a result of some love medicine and Nanapush's advice as well, they are described as having a very sensuous relationship, according to Margaret, Eli's mother's words, "who learned my Eli to make love standing up! Who learned him to have a woman against a tree in clear daylight?. . . They are like animals in their season! No sense of shame. . ." (C 48). Margaret is not only surprised by her son's behavior but also by the woman he has chosen as a wife. According to Nanapush, Margaret wanted a "simpleminded daughter-in-law she could boss, a girl who would take advice and not bar her from the house. Everyone knew Fleur Pillager wasn't like that, did not need a second mother" (C 57). Fleur is not the ideal wife or woman according to the opinion of most people from that tribe, especially those like Margaret, who, despite having traditional power, have accepted the norms of Catholicism and its ethical discourses. Fleur's femaleness is too out of pattern, too uncontrollable to be taken in its positive ways by acculturated Indians trying to fit the

new religious and gender stereotypes. She is a woman who is able to survive on her own forces, to fight for her land, to exert her power as a medicine woman as well as live quite comfortably outside the patterns of the nuclear family.

However, it is important to observe that, although the representation of Fleur gives her mobility, stressing her changing roles and thus her unlimited possibilities inside her social group, she really cannot escape the experience of physical violence, that is, the performed rape. In fact, she changes after that and when she first speaks to Nanapush after her return and he asks if she is in any trouble, she states: "I shouldn't have left this place" (T 38). By leaving her place and going to town she was able to save the land, to get the money for the allotments. Her body, however, was temporarily taken over, was invaded by the town workers, the very first time she had to submit to other people's wishes. It might be that Fleur's rape appears in Tracks as a foreshadowing of the loss of land, of independence and respect to traditional power, a loss imposed on natives by postcolonial relations. Even if Fleur is able to begin a new relationship with Eli after the rape, and to continue exerting her power and authority among members of the tribe, her physical body was not totally hers any longer.

As a matter of fact, when contemporary discourses discuss the fragmentation of the body, of the subject, and in the feminist case, of female identity as a freeing move away from the binary, limited definitions usually attached to it, it is fundamental to keep in mind that there is still a 'concrete' body who suffers the experiences of oppression and discrimination. This, in fact, justifies the constant need of political taking of positions and the maintenance of progressive agendas for minority subjects. In Tracks, Fleur stands for the strong, out of pattern female subject who, despite being outside established gender limitations, experiences invasion, disrespect and violence on her

body. It is important to keep in mind that the unavoidable fragmentation or "de-essentializing" of identities such as 'woman' and 'native', despite positively breaking with some old stereotypes, is not sufficient to guarantee the bodily integrity of individuals not protected by institutionalized power. In this sense, Fleur exceeds the common definitions of womanhood but (or as a result of that) her body still suffers the constraints of patriarchal power.

Quite differently from Fleur, Pauline is a woman whose existence is mostly noticed through words, through storytelling. She is aware of her poor looks: "God had overlooked me in the making, given no marks of His favors. I was angles and sharp edges, a girl of bent tin" (C 71). Nobody notices her physically, she is taken as invisible until she starts telling her stories or her interpretation of stories. Very often Pauline states something only to throw it into doubt soon after, what makes the reader quite skeptical about her position as a narrator. Making up stories or versions of stories is a way of having some power, of making people believe she is the well-informed one, who can tell truth from lie, who manipulates information and gives form to discourse. Even if later the reader tends to perceive Pauline as a "liar", the changing stories and positions she presents play an important part in reminding the reader that any truth is a constructed version of a story, that truth itself does not exist as such, a quite postmodern strategy used by Erdrich in order to deconstruct metanarratives, even her own.

Having always been defined by her poor looks, Pauline is interested in sex, especially in observing other people's sexual relations. She enjoyed watching Fleur and Eli in their adventures:

> . . . they smelled like animals, wild and heady, and sometimes in the dusk their fingers left tracks like snails, glistening and wet. They made my

> head hurt. A heaviness spread between my legs and ached. The tips of my breasts chafed and wore themselves to points and a yawning eagerness gripped me. (C 72)

Because of the arousal such voyeurism provokes on her, she thinks she must get married. The only possibility was Napoleon Morrisey, another mixed blood Indian. She imagines the relation will be kind of similar to the one she watched between Fleur and Eli. However, at the moment Napoleon finally approaches her and sees her undressed for the first time, he states: "You're thin as a crane!" (C 73). It was a cold, meaningless encounter which makes her more bitter than never: ". . . we pressed together with our eyes open, staring like adversaries, but we did not go through it after all. He stopped for some reason, nothing we said or did, but like a dog sensing the presence of a tasteless poison in its food" (C 73). After that, Pauline is not interested in getting married nor in having sexual encounters any longer. She keeps infrequent meetings with Napoleon, but that first attempt has killed her sexual expectations: "now I knew that men and women ground their bodies together, sweat and cried out, wept, shoved their hips in motion and fell quiet " (C 74). What becomes clear is that Pauline has given up her 'femininity', her own sexuality, experiencing some pleasure through other people. Nevertheless, she cannot avoid feeling jealous of the sensuality she perceives between Fleur and Eli, predicting she will never experience those feelings herself. When Fleur becomes too caring with her child Lulu, Pauline feels even more jealous and plans to use the child's presence to separate the couple, approaching Eli in provocative ways. Nevertheless, her approaches are rejected. Thus she uses Sophie, Napoleon's young relative, as a "tool" to complicate Fleur's and Eli's relationship. Using some strong love medicine (prepared by Fleur's cousin), she makes Eli desire the young Sophie so much that they end up having

sex in the lake. Here Pauline feels she is controlling their pleasure, making them do what she wants to see. "They went on and on. They were not allowed to stop. . . .They were mechanical things, toys, dolls wound past their limits" (C 84). Besides enjoying looking at them, Pauline feels she is winning a battle against Fleur by controlling Eli's desire.

Fleur, after expelling Eli from the house because of his affair with Sophie, ends up by accepting him back. Meanwhile, Pauline decides to enter the convent, a safe place to escape marriage as well as to forget about her daughter, which, as we have seen, she left behind with Bernadette, Napoleon's sister, after deciding to take a religious life. Inside a religious institution, Pauline finds a way of being respected, assuming a differentiated position–that of a novice, a future nun. Since she sees 'femininity' as taking power away from her because she cannot compete with women like Fleur in terms of sensuality or traditional power, she assumes a position inside a system where she should not have a body or at least forget about its needs and desires. In fact, one might infer that, since Pauline cannot compete with Fleur in terms of power and authority, she decides to fight for Christian institutional authority, a position "conferred by others,"[7] where Fleur's traditional knowledge and attractiveness play no role at all. It is already indicated that she was not interested in becoming a "plain" mother, a common woman without projection, as it can be seen in her first perceptions of her pregnancy:

> I had starved for so long that I had no way of knowing, when I first felt the movement, how far back to count. So I did not know when I would bear it. And since I had already betrothed myself to God, I tried to force it out of me, to punish, to drive it from my womb. . . .But though I fell

[7] This citation appears on page 142 of this text in a quotation of Susan Castillo.

> upon the wooden pole again and again, till I was bruised, Napoleon's seed had strong a hold. (T 131)

Pauline is totally detached from her own body, only getting to notice she is pregnant when the baby begins to move too much. Her "blindness" here can be seen as a negation of her female body, her femaleness as well as of her Indianness, since most native women know quite well how to deal with such 'natural phenomena.' Although she was having sexual relations with a man, she never considered she might bear a child. During the whole pregnancy, a state she is able to hide from others, she keeps helping Bernadette in the easing of people's death, her profession at that moment, which contrasts quite a lot with her state of pregnancy, a bearer of life. During all those months she thought of "cinching [her] stomach with tight ropes, or jumping off the roof" but Bernadette's constant looks made her accept to have the child, promising to give her away to her (T 132). Pauline never feels any love for the baby in her belly.

> And as it grew, or she grew, she punched with her powerful head and rolled and twisted like an otter. When she did this, the fits of hate took me so hard that I wept, dug my sharp fingernails into the wood of the table. (T 133)

When Pauline assumes she is pregnant of a girl, Bernadette decides to call the baby 'Marie', named for the Virgin; but Pauline perceives it differently: "Satan was the one who had pinned me with his horns" (T133). The whole pregnancy is perceived by Pauline as a torture, and she experiences the moment of childbirth as if she was "slapped by a great beast, thrown over its shoulder, shaken like a child in the grip of its mother" (T 134). Here one might infer that, for Pauline, the acknowledgment of the fact of being pregnant and delivering a child is perceived as an act of disempowerment–she would

loose not only the right to become a novice, a door for her religious career, but also her authority in that institution would be forever questioned if this fact came out. Thus, at the very moment Bernadette is telling her to breathe deep and push, Pauline has an insight: "If I gave birth, I would be lonelier" (T 135). She fears that the delivery and the baby will determine her total isolation and loneliness:

> I would be an outcast, a thing set aside for God's use, a human who could be touched by no other human. Marie! I shook with the effort, held back . . . clenched around my child so that she could not escape. (T 135)

Pauline tells the scared Bernadette that she "has decided to die, and let the child too, no taint of original sin on her unless she breathed air" (T 135). Bernadette, however, does not allow this to happen. With two black iron cooking spoons wired together at the handles, and by tying Pauline to bed, she manages to put the spoons to the child's head and take her out. Even when the baby cries, in need of Pauline's breast, she feels nothing and, as soon as she can walk, leaves the house and the baby behind without looking back. The hate Pauline will develop towards Marie, which can be identified only in Love Medicine, is based on her perception of the child as an evil of the (native) world.

While Pauline rejects pregnancy and her child, Fleur fights for the life of both of her children as far as she can. As mentioned in the previous chapter, her second baby dies because Pauline is not able to (or does not want to) help Fleur, what might also be understood as a way of imposing suffering and feelings of loss on Fleur. Fleur is perceived by Pauline as a "hinge" that can "close the door or swing it open" (T 139). That is, Fleur has power and authority to give definition to situations and obviously she influences people's mind. Because Fleur has so much power, assuming a leading position, Pauline cannot accept that she does not recognize or validate her own new

identity as a religious woman, her only position of authority. When Pauline first comes back from the convent dressed as a novice, Fleur, who suspects the "nun" has given away her newly-born daughter before deciding to take God's words, brings up the topic: "I was just remembering your new little cousin. . . the one Bernadette took home. . . but it doesn't look like a Christian. . . . She has a Puyat mouth, turned down at the corners. Except hers hasn't told any lies" (C 143). Through this comment, Fleur unmasks Pauline's position as a member of the Church, putting her authority into question and showing that her attitudes and discourse are not coherent. It might well be that Pauline's paralysis during Fleur's second delivery is a response to such ridiculing as well as a way to punish Fleur's warm, affectionate nature, mainly towards her own child.

Some critics have pointed out that Pauline should not be taken simply as an empty signifier since this would be an oversimplification of her character. According to Castillo, "Pauline's mysticism may represent a tactic for escaping invisibility in a system which places her beyond representation" (1994: 236). Not being a beautiful or attractive woman, that is, not fitting into mainstream patterns of female beauty and attractiveness, Pauline was trying to find a position from where she would be heard and seen. Daniel Cornell brings up a similar point in his article on Tracks. He defends that under the power relations presented in the book, Pauline is able to assume a quite powerful position as a woman who demands a "constituting gaze, the privilege of being a constitutive subject" (52). According to Cornell, Pauline constructs her right to look and expose her opinion, against Nanapush's competing narration, through which he wants to have the last words. The interesting point of this argument is that it acknowledges both sides or the view of both narrators as valid and complementary. As Cornell states: "the ambiguity created in the gap between the narratives offered by Pauline and by Nanapush

reminds the reader that there is no one point of view from which the representation of events can be mastered" (53). By citing Craig Owens, Cornell reminds us that the "inability to master events from a single point of view" is often taken as "the basis of postmodernism" (53), the cause of a crisis in narrative. From such a perspective, Pauline's "lies" are part of the construction of a discourse on the part of the author which tries to be better aware of its inevitable lacks and gaps. Thus, hers are not less true than Nanapush's perspectives. Both construct different and interacting viewpoints. Pauline's place as narrator can be understood as a protest against the imposed invisibility she has to face in a world where women have to be, first of all, attractive according to imposed patterns created from a male perspective. This might explain why sometimes Pauline seems to explode female models, surpassing their limitations and frontiers, although differently from Fleur's ways. Even if Erdrich portrays Pauline in often disgusting, negative ways, she gives her voice and attitude to protest against a too limited and fixed construction of male authority and desire. Nevertheless one has to admit that Pauline, despite having a voice and being apparently free from imposed female stereotypes, clearly assumes a discursive construction very much in tune with white, male patterns. She manipulates information and some traditional knowledge in order to be accepted by the Church as someone who has the right to be there. She exercises power through her voice, but from the point of view of native people this power is misused.

Towards the end of the novel, when the new ways of civilization seem to be unavoidable and figures of traditional power such as Fleur start feeling unable to protect the tribe from all bad influences of the new times, Nanapush is the one who first notices Fleur's weakening:

> She had failed too many times, both to rescue us and save her youngest child. . . . Her dreams lied, her vision was obscured, her helper slept deep in the lake, all her Argus money was long spent. . . . Fleur was a different person than the young woman I had known. She was hesitant in speaking, false in gestures, anxious to cover the fear. (C 177)

Fleur's power has been constructed through practice, by exerting her abilities and applying her knowledge in hers and the tribe's daily problems. The moment she feels her practical power is diminishing, she simply starts giving up. She cannot compete with the authority legitimated by official, governmental institutions authority. She gives up the last battle against the imposed new models after she finds out that even Margaret and Nector, Eli's brother, had lied about the payment of the land fees. Matchimanito, the tribe's sacred place, is then taken by a lumber company. The traditional and respected Pillager's land going into white hands is a big loss for the whole tribe, a symbolic take over of the tribe's spiritual strength. Being forced to abandon the place, weakened by a new reality in which her power is not effective, Fleur finds an impressive way of leaving Matchimanito. When the company workers come to her land to cut the rest of the trees, she has a surprise for them. The wind suddenly starts changing and some trees crash on the floor. The workers, biting their lips, "glanced over their shoulders at Fleur, who bared her teeth in a wide smile that frightened even those who did not understand the smiles of Pillagers" (C 223). It is then that Nanapush understands what Fleur has done: "Around me, a forest was suspended, lightly held. The fingered lobes of leaves floated on nothing. The powerful throats, the columns of trunks and splayed twigs, all substance was illusion. Nothing was solid. . . .Each tree was sawed through at the base" (C 223). If Fleur is not able to stop the lumber company advances nor the destruction of the

tribe's traditional lifestyle, she can at least use her wits and power to scare some of the new comers by showing them that things are not only things, land is not simply land in native culture. According to a more traditional viewpoint, that company is advancing into a sacred territory and, there, nothing will be objective, solid or obvious. Neither power nor authority is being conferred to the invaders by that Chippewa woman. That was her last message, probably not understood by the ignorant workers of that company, ignorant at least in terms of native mythology.

Fleur does not lose her power, but it is not effective in the new reality brought to native land. Pauline's authority is saved by the fortified institution she entered in, although she has been constructed in Erdrich's other novel Love Medicine as Sister Leopolda, a perverse religious person who uses the church for taking revenge on her past. As a matter of fact, traditional female (creative) power is alive and continues through the story being told, while "artificial", imported authority, that one conferred by others is put into question or attached to madness. In subsequent novels by Erdrich (Love Medicine, The Beet Queen, The Bingo Palace), one identifies the power passing through the bloodlines of characters; this confirms that the Pillager power has not died out; only its practical use and applicability are questioned in a postcolonial reality. The land has been invaded, conquered by the white invaders in the same way that Fleur's body has been raped. But although "concrete terrains" are taken or invaded, an invisible, spiritual strength is kept alive through tradition and ritual. According to Erdrich's portrayals, women in particular and native people in general are intimately implicated in such a survival. It is possible to conclude that, although authority has changed, becoming more and more Westernized in its ways, native ways of exercising power are still effective, at least in spiritual terms. Institutions that authorized native power might have

been destroyed through acculturation and subjugation but have not eliminated traditional mythology and philosophy.

The three protagonists in Tracks cannot be easily placed in terms of gender if we approach them in binary terms. Fleur's strong 'femininity', despite being perceived as attractive and desirable, is not the pattern of 'womanhood', exceeding the limits of what is generally meant by that. Likewise Nanapush does not stand for the patterns of 'maleness' advertised by mainstream culture. Much closer to a joker, he is not interested in using his "logos", his organized thoughts or his speech to control others. Nanapush wants to keep moving, having fun and, at the same time, guaranteeing Lulu's future. Pauline is even more distanced from any notion of 'womanhood', negating her female body and adopting masculine, imported discourse to fulfill her feelings of emptiness resulting from the loss of family, tradition, roots (and the love of Fleur?). As a matter of fact, all three characters are constituted by mixed traits in terms of gender. Masculinity and femininity are thus put into question in Erdrich's novel, at least in conventional Western understandings of them. In this new undefined context with a mixing of cultures, features and stories any individual might be strong and make her/his own choices independently of (or despite) interpretations of both sex and gender. Julie Barak in an article on Erdrich's novels states that there are several "gender-mixed" characters in her fiction. She claims that such a fluidity of gender identities is represented by recreating a gender role common in many native groups–the berdache. The berdache is not well defined as male or female; often he/she likes cross-dressing. According to natives a male berdache is a womanly-hearted man and a female berdache, a manly-hearted one. As a matter of fact, in Tracks, as it has already been mentioned, all three central characters could belong to such a category or at least they show some traits of it.

In The Grass Dancer there is also a strong female presence, the spirit of Red Dress, which functions as a tribe guide since her death in 1864. Red Dress has protected her people throughout history, as she states towards the end of the novel:

> My spirit never abandons the Dakota people, though sometimes all it can do is watch. I was there when the army confiscated our horses to cut off our legs. I stood behind the Ghost Dancers, and when they fainted in desperate, useless ecstasy, I blew a refreshing wind into their faces. (GD 255)

Being portrayed as a character of the past intimately involved in the tribe's survival, Red Dress keeps serving the group as a source of power. Her death was the death of a warrior, fighting for the continuity of native lifestyle. Susan Power, in an interview on her writing for the Princeton Weekly Bulletin, affirms that her characters sometimes take her to places she does not want to go: "Red Dress, for instance, was supposed to be evil, but as I wrote in her voice, I realized she had reasons for what she did. She became a heroine, the heart and soul of the book, even though she killed some people who did not deserve to die". Actually, the ninth chapter of the novel is the only one in which Red Dress' voice is directly heard. Neil H. Wright however mentions, "none of the characters or situations of the novel can be understood without reference to Red Dress . . ." (39). He compares Red Dress to Addie in As I Lay Dying, by William Faulkner, since both of them are revelatory spirits speaking from the edge of the world and influencing that reality in which their living relatives are inserted (39). Red Dress is able to move through the years and the narrative, as a physical presence of last century and as a legend in several stories of the present.

Although there are no well-defined protagonists in The Grass Dancer, it is possible to agree that (Anna) Mercury Thunder is the strongest female figure in the present time of the novel, showing a close and, at the same time, ambiguous connection to the mythical figure of Red Dress, who appears in her dreams: "I had heard her insistent voice, crackling with energy, murmuring promises of a power passed on through the bloodlines from one woman to the next . . . " (GD 204). Mercury was chosen to inherit her grandmother's sister's medicine power and her life turns out to be an exercise of her will and strength.

Powerful witch of that Dakota group, Mercury is asked by her granddaughter why she cannot fix her own knees and raise from her wheelchair. She simply affirms: "'It doesn't work like that. I'm not a healer'"(GD 47). Mercury is constructed as a woman who has the power to twist events and people's destinies, which she really appreciates doing, but is not capable of curing, healing or saving lives. She can have the love of all men she wants, bewitching them so that they cannot leave her according to their own will. She is suspected to have caused Harley's father's and brother's deaths as well as Pumpkin's accident and consequent death. As a matter of fact, Mercury really wants to exert power, at any cost. If there is a villain in this novel, it would be Mercury (or Anna), although she is a quite charismatic one.

Mercury's daughter, Crystal Thunder, was supposed to become more familiar with traditional medicine knowledge in order to become the future witch of that tribe, according to her mother's will. Crystal, however, falls in love with a Swede and as she gets pregnant decides to run away with him. Mercury reacts strongly: "You haven't come into power, girl, you don't know what you're capable of. . . . I have so much to teach you, ancient ways passed down from the dead to the living" (GD 126). Finally,

Mercury gives in, letting Crystal go away with the Swede but the price she will have to pay is high: "'You do whatever you like. Run off with that lame Swede and bear him a dozen peg-leg brats with even less sense than you have. Waste yourself, go ahead. But don't you waste that child'. She poked [Crystal] in the navel. 'A soul for a soul'" (GD 126). Crystal finally decides to leave anyway, going to Chicago with the Swede. She feels free for the first time since she "grew in the bowl of [her] mother's womb," but the price she had to pay for her freedom was her daughter's soul (GD 142).

Mercury uses her power to gain revenge, to threaten people, to scare her enemies. She insisted in using power negatively, to control, manipulate and impose her own wish on others. Struggling to survive as a strong figure by exercising her worse aspects and potentials, she is aware that her power was not a choice, a talent she had asked for:

> Medicine puked within me, shot through my veins, and I don't mean the kind a doctor pumps into the body. I didn't practice good medicine or bad medicine, or a weak magic summoned by poems. I simply had potent blood inherited from my grandmother's sister, Red Dress. And there were times when it pained me like a fire, or froze me like a rock, and any weaker person would have crawled toward death. (GD 152)

Having medicine power here is not necessarily presented as a blessing but, in Mercury's case, as an inevitable talent to live with. Her bitterness probably results from the death of her first baby and it determines the questionable use she makes of her abilities. Even her daughter Crystal notices that some of Mercury's uncommon behavior is just a hint of her sense of nervousness and loss: "I understand now that my mother's lovemaking was despair, but when I was little I thought it was her great adventure" (GD 143). Crystal believes Mercury uses lovemaking as a language, a desperate attempt to communicate

something the daughter cannot grasp. Crystal decides it is a Morse Code and thus, after studying it at the library, she presses her ear against the wall to make out the meaning of that communication. She gets the word "grass" from the sounds the shaking bed makes against the wall and states: "mama is the grass" (GD 144). Grass is presented throughout the novel as one of the most traditional elements of that Dakota tribe. The Grass Dancers are glorified in all contests as natives who keep tradition alive by being able to imitate or 'be' the grass, and, in this sense, being related to the word 'grass' gives Mercury even more power as a traditional woman, at least under the eyes of her young daughter.

When Mercury decides to have an affair with Calvin Wind Soldier, descendent of Ghost Horse, who had been in love with Red Dress in the past, he is able to resist her approaches. It is interesting to notice that, although Red Dress is the one who had passed her power to Mercury, it is this same spirit that helps Calvin avoid her. One might infer that Red Dress is trying to keep balance between good and evil forces in the tribe. Mercury got her power but, if she is not able to deal properly with it, others have to be invested with a counteractive power so as to avoid tragedy or misuse of given talents. Red Dress appears to Lydia, Calvin's wife, advising her about Mercury's intentions of seduction. Calvin can consequently protect himself against Mercury's enchantment. Not able to have Calvin for herself, Mercury bewitches him into an affair with Evelyn, his sister-in-law. When Evelyn appears pregnant, she affirms: "That child is my creature". In this affirmation, it is clear that Mercury perceives herself as a kind of Goddess, a creator able to manipulate even life and death. Later on, when telling this story to Jeannette, the white anthropologist, Mercury states clearly: "the only thing I knew for sure was that I had filled these young people with hurtful desire, changed the course of

their destinies, because, after all, I could do it" (GD 167). It seems that because she felt defeated in respect to Calvin, not able to have him, and betrayed by Red Dress, she decides to prove the dimension of her power in a different way. She wants to be respected, as she tells Jeannette, the white anthropologist: "I'm not a bedtime story. I am not a dream" (GD 169).

When Mercury's granddaughter Charlene tries to follow her grandmother's magical ways by seducing some of her male classmates in order to get Valentine's Day presents but ends up by being gang raped, she is advised by Red Dress:

> You misused the medicine because you have a bad example. If you are selfish with it, someday it will be selfish with you. We do not own the power, we aren't supposed to direct it ourselves. Give it up if you don't understand my meaning. (GD 271)

Charlene does give up and leaves for the city, where she will meet her mother Crystal, mother and daughter mainly interested in living a calm life far from Mercury's influences. Both Crystal and Charlene, natural inheritors of Mercury's power, decide not to serve as her instruments. Understanding that power is not like a property you can buy or gain forever, and having experienced from close how dangerous its misuse can be, both women decide to forget about their origin and relation to Mercury.

It becomes obvious in The Grass Dancer that Susan Power does not intend to represent Mercury as totally "good" or "bad", being such binary notions of value quite uncommon in native culture; Mercury stands for a source of knowledge and strength which can be quite powerful, and used for the success or the defeat of the whole tribe. The main point is not power itself but the use one makes of it, that is, if its use benefits the fulfillment of personal or collective purposes. Probably as a consequence of a long

exposition to Christianity and Western systems of values, contemporary native culture also incorporated some notions of 'good' and 'evil', although they are not perceived in absolute terms. Thus, although Mercury is not constructed as a completely "bad" woman, being her positive characteristics and actions from the past also referred to, she appears in the present as a selfish old lady, whom most people fear, which matches well her surname–Thunder.

Red Dress, quite differently from Mercury, is not selfish, and when she killed those soldiers of the American army in Fort Laramie, an act easily defined as a crime according to Western ethics, she was in a battle for the survival of her people who were facing cruel extermination in a savage war. After her "crime", Red Dress' death does not erase her presence. On the contrary, she remains in between, at the edge of the world, trying to help and guide her people.

Similarly to Fleur's loss of traditional power at the end of Tracks as a consequence of concrete changes in the living conditions of the Chippewa, Red Dress in The Grass Dancer also has to change her tactics, not able to protect the Dakota from violence and absurdity. She is still present as a helper, a guide, but her scope of action is much more limited. She appears to Harley in the vision pit at the end of the novel, working as a supporter in his spiritual quest. She tells him he is "dancing a rebellion" (GD 299), and makes him feel how important his experiences are for the survival of the whole group and its traditions. His rebellion might well be a new Ghost Dance, a new beginning for native culture, pointing to new ways of dealing with traditional knowledge and power in contemporary times. In The Grass Dancer power will not necessarily be passed on through the bloodline of women only. Gender stereotypes have already been

shaken and, thus, Red Dress might be more interested in assuring Harley's access to power.

Alternative constructions of gender, especially of femininity, are presented throughout the novel, in connection to several characters. Earlier in the novel, when Pumpkin took part in the dance contest as a grass dancer, a traditionally male competition, it is already suggested that gender roles are not that fixed or stable any longer: "It's a challenge. I tried women's traditional and women's fancy shawl, but I was always myself out there. As a grass dancer, I'm trying to become something else. I step outside of myself. Do you know what I mean?" (GD 39). Pumpkin is interested in exercising different roles, in crossing frontiers and in representing herself in alternative ways. She wants to dislocate identities, especially gender identity so that she may enlarge her own possibilities. Even Herod, a traditional medicine man of that group, presents a quite open opinion about her unconventional style of dancing: "I guess a woman should be able to choose her own style" (GD 30).

Herod, who defends Pumpkin's right to dance in a male contest, does not however accept some changes in respect to his wife Alberta's behavior. It is suggested that Alberta's friend, Josephine, after becoming a widow, becomes a feminist and tries to influence other women from that group: "she organized women's meetings and lobbied for a bookmobile to be sent onto the reservation. Then she made her friends read" (GD 78). The literature Josephine suggested was composed by books such as The Joy of Sex and Our Bodies, Ourselves. According to Herod, together with the books a new vocabulary entered their house, words such as 'climax' became normal for his wife. He got really scared when Alberta told him, pointing to the books: "New ways, Herod. I am learning the new ways and have new expectations" (GD 79). The result was that he

moved outside the house, to a cabin, avoiding those "new ways" he could not understand or simply feared. Herod's wife is in effect trying to change, but from the literature she is reading and the ways she starts dressing and speaking, one might suspect that she is following an imposed Western model for "women's liberation". In fact, such an imposed form of feminism can be as oppressive as any other theory or philosophy that tries to contain, guide or control individuals in hierarchical and universal ways. According to what was presented on the first theoretical section of this study, we cannot expect to have one 'feminism' for all 'women' in contemporary times. People, and especially women, have to be able to express 'difference', to make different uses of liberating or revolutionary discourses according to their own cultural backgrounds. Anything different from that is going to be oppressive. Susan Power is able to construct such a mixture of positions and different levels of overlaid oppressive forces in her novel. A mobility of positionalities on the part of subjects, being on the side of innovation at one moment, and on the tradition at the next, is typical in societies of transitions: social groups that, after being exposed to different cultural influences, try to find their own ways, their composite survival strategies. Sometimes trusting the old ways, sometimes using modernity, negotiating in a terrain where difference is the rule, adaptability and adaptive memory are fundamental elements of success. In The Grass Dancer it is possible to identify the representation of this inevitable clash between new and old times, Western and native ways, and also some changes taking place inside these different models as a consequence of cultural exchanges.

Susan Power presents Herod and Alberta's marital conflicts to show how far cultural changes in native life can affect personal relations. Thus she brings up a scene which can be understood as a metaphor for what is happening between husband (Herod)

and wife (Alberta), between the new and the old. Archie, Herod's friend, comes to their house to show off a motorcycle he got in a bingo, a Harley Davidson. He races up and down the dirt road until he falls off the machine. Exactly then a bull runs towards the machine, smashing it to pieces. As one of the observers screams, "he's going to kill it!", one might suspect that they perceived the accident as a fight between two living beings or two ways of living. After some time, Herod tells the bull: "you won", which might metaphorically suggest that traditional, more natural native ways are expected to succeed, independently of the modernity and illusions of imported novelties[8].

Not only Mercury but Margaret, Pumpkin, Clara Miller, Lydia, all female characters belonging to different periods of time of the novel are constructed as figures of power, magic and decision. Mercury puts it clearly: "I don't mess myself with women, because you can't be sure about them. Sometimes there's a lot of power there, and you have to be careful. But most men I know I go down like that" (GD 41). In fact, Harley, the man chosen for becoming the new spiritual warrior of the tribe, can be taken as such only after he gets the soul of a woman, Pumpkin. Harley was earlier presented as a man without a soul, until he meets Pumpkin, who is able to make him feel alive, forgetting the emptiness in his chest attached to his father's and brother's death. In their first and only night together she affirms: "I have plenty of soul to spare. I'm rubbing it into you right now" (GD 45). She dies the next morning, but it is suggested that Pumpkin becomes a kind of spirit, observing native people from another world, a world in between.

The three novels analyzed present constructions of society that prove to be quite different in terms of gender organization than those representations common in

[8] One can infer that, by naming the main male character Harley, Susan Power is pointing to his ability to survive and determine native survival as well.

mainstream American novels. They not only recognize that women have power but they also present them as related and supported by female spiritual forces that legitimate their role as leaders. In this way, one might state that there is an acknowledging of a genealogy of women in these native women's texts. In addition, power is not ideally perceived as private property but is supposed to circulate and be used for the good of the whole group. Obviously there are some people (and women) with power who are not going to make a good use of it.

The fiction constructed by Silko, Erdrich and Power indicates that native writing is able to portray women in much more positive and liberating ways than those representations of them in tune with mainstream American culture. Based on their traditions, which often take the creator spirit as female, that see native land as sacred and keeps considering the clan system as fundamental for the survival of their societies, such a literature produced by native women can assume a liberating role not only for the ethnic group directly involved in its construction but for a rereading of the American cultural canon, especially the feminist canon. As Castillo observes while analyzing novels by Native American writers, such texts portray gender and ethnicity not as "airtight compartments or reified concepts" but as unstable, vital, mutable historical discursive constructs, which offer interesting alternatives to the old binary divisions of "Aristotelian patriarchal discourse, of power/powerlessness, self/other and masculine/feminine" (1994: 236).

Contemporary prose and poetry by Native American writers, especially by women writers, is nowadays a major part of Indian resistance to cultural and spiritual genocide (Allen 43). In such a literature, it is possible to observe a decentralized organization of power, based on political and religious ways which do not have a "pivot

God" allowed to command in hierarchical ways, as the Judeo-Christian tradition does. Native world is understood as deriving from collective creation, and power has historically circulated among men and women, depending on the rituals and activities of each specific moment. This is sufficient to explain the importance of recovering stories from native perspectives, texts which deconstruct not only the discourse of colonization but also the discourse of sexism and oppression. Through such processes one becomes aware that feminism has much to learn from women who, although victimized or ridiculed by mainstream culture throughout decades or centuries, have a great contribution to offer in terms of more equal experiences as regards of gender and power distribution.

CONCLUSION

The major premise for this investigation of literature by Native American women was the awareness of heterogeneity, especially in terms of gender and ethnicity. We have seen that the category 'women', as defended throughout my text, has already been largely deconstructed along the last decades, mainly by feminists, a deconstructive practice which does not seek to erase gender but to open up its definition and limits. That is, if 'women' as a referent has no safe, stable meaning, this does not imply that one should give up using such a category. On the contrary, one should use it keeping awareness of those subjects who are edited out, excluded from our necessarily partial, non-hegemonic interpretations of the world. That means that the approach I construct throughout my text in respect to women's subjectivity is thought to relate and interact with other possible interpretations and discussions produced by differentiated feminist voices of postmodernity as compared to my "Third World" (or "Southern", as the world has recently been thought of in terms of unequal hemispheres) Brazilian perspectives.

In addition to gender heterogeneity, the very plurality intrinsic to the term 'ethnicity' is here perceived as fundamental. The native writers discussed in my analysis are not to be understood as representative of some notion of a homogeneous native culture. Quite the contrary, Silko, Erdrich and Power present relatively differentiated relations to traditional native knowledge in terms of their practice, experience and positioning. They do not necessarily share a version of some ancient, pre-colonial culture but present specific tribal traditions, diverse cultural traits and, consequently, they have established differentiated cultural exchanges with mainstream American

culture. By bringing to light such differences inside the category 'native', my intention is to avoid any romanticized construction of Native Americans as the 'Other', a package ready to serve as a counterexample of mainstream Western models. As Ofelia Schutte correctly remarks, "if feminism is defined too narrowly, it will make an 'other' of women whose path to emancipation it may fail to understand or recognize."(65). That is, native women might not fit into too limited Western feminist categorizations.

To deconstruct any belief in a stable "sameness" in respect to indigenous women is fundamental since homogeneity has been imposed on Native Americans as a stereotype responsible for consolidating colonial interests. Although I refer throughout my text to 'natives,' 'native traditions,' 'native culture,' it is obvious that I use such terms as temporary and strategic ways of dealing with alternative constructions of 'women', 'gender', 'ethnicity' since, from such a perspective, it becomes easier to question the universalizing tendencies of most Western ways of thought as well as to read native literature from its own point of view.

These women writers' texts relate to Laguna Pueblo, Chippewa and Sioux cultures respectively, differing from many mainstream literary constructions, but in different terms. For instance, Laguna Pueblo tribal organization tends to be much more matrilineal than Chippewa and Sioux, which is highlighted in Ceremony. However, all three authors analyzed construct very powerful female characters in their fiction, women who are much more empowered than most female characters of mainstream American literary tradition. As a matter of fact, by using Western forms of expression such as the novel in their own terms, native writers can question the past and, at the same time, participate in the construction of new, imaginative ways for contemporary society, alternative and flexible patterns which might determine a better future for all of us.

Native women writers can bring some new perspectives to the field, because after colonialism, their voices, following the model of sexual discrimination common in the dominant, imported culture, became doubly silenced: they concomitantly experienced ethnic and sexual oppression. Burdened by a problematic sense of self, they might well be the ones who invest in going back to a past rooted in traditional culture in order to find solutions for very contemporary and apparently "insoluble" problems.

Christianity seems to have profoundly affected all these tribes, being one shared experience imposed on natives after the colonial advent. Thus, the representation of religion and life after contact are of interest to the authors as constituting elements of native contemporary life. The three novels point to the necessity of taking into account aspects of traditional native system of beliefs as a way for contemporary natives to find out creative, syncretic explanations or reasonings that differ from the ones offered by the almost exhausted philosophical model of the west, a model that has been increasingly questioned by both feminist and postcolonial theories.

In terms of the theory used for the readings here developed, it seems important to observe that, since feminism has historically questioned Western masculinist thought, a bridge linking feminism(s) and native studies proves to be fruitful. Feminism and postcolonialism are political sites where questions that could not be asked elsewhere can be posed. Thus, a dialogue is fruitfully developed between these two discourses, since 'women' and 'native people' have been forced to face problems of identity resulting from totalizing and discriminatory definitions of selfhood that compose mainstream culture (Donovan 7). Paula Gunn Allen claims that a feminist approach to the study and teaching of American Indian life and thought is essential because "the area has been dominated by paternalistic, male-dominant modes of consciousness since the first

writings about American Indians in the fifteenth century" (222). In fact, Allen is practically using the concept of "woman" and giving it a particular identity, that is "native selfhood." In this way, a totalizing concept of 'woman' is deconstructed while difference comes to be part of discussions on women.

> A feminist approach reveals not only the exploitation and oppression of the tribes by whites and white government but also areas of oppression within the tribes and the sources and nature of that oppression. To a large extent, such an analysis can provide strategies for ameliorating the effects of patriarchal colonialism, enabling many of the tribes to reclaim their ancient gynarchical, egalitarian and sacred traditions. (Allen 223)

Bringing up cultural interventions produced from the viewpoint of female subjects who have had access to a tradition of women leaders and figures of power as their ancestors, being influenced by a different genealogy, is one among other liberating traits of literature by native women. One has just to take into account the fact that, for a long time and until quite recently, Western women were defined as male property and, as a result, were not allowed to own property themselves. Conversely, in the case of most native tribes, especially Pueblo groups, women were the ones responsible for the clan, owning the house, animals, land or any other goods. This indicates a totally different organization of power relations among men and women. By bringing to light such alternative, independent female voices through a literary reconstruction of history, many feminist interests can be further improved. First, conventional notions of power distribution can be deconstructed, especially the relation between power and women which, despite having been discussed by feminists along the last decades, differs from society to society, from culture to culture, since they are symbolic constructs, and, in this

respect, 'white' women might have a lot to learn from women of color. In addition, not only Western power definitions are questioned but also gendered ones. It is possible to imagine any of the female protagonists[1] of the three studied novels repeating Sojouner Truth's precise question: "And Ain't I a woman?" By presenting such unconventional patterns of 'femininity' and insisting on their inclusion among other women allowed to speak, native women writers help de-essentialize feminist standpoints. As Gayatri Spivak stated in her open lecture "Women and History" at the IFU University in Hannover, 2000, cultural minorities are counterexamples of the 'One' and by working with such counterexamples we are able to deconstruct what was previously defined as the norm, the pattern of "universal" culture.

In this way, the three texts of the present corpus can be defined as counterexamples of singular, universalizing notions of 'womanhood', 'native' and 'American literature'. It is fundamental to acknowledge, for instance, the fact that Fleur and Mercury, among other female characters of the selected novels, belong to the category 'women', despite (or because of) their strength, magical power and independence. In short, they are portrayed neither as victims nor as white, but they obviously 'are' (or represent) 'American women'. What this inclusion asks for is the acknowledgment of the plural: the plurality of definitions of 'femininity', 'womanhood', 'gender', 'feminism', 'ethnicity', recognizing that these are all culturally legitimated phenomena.

Agreeing with Haraway's statement mentioned in the first section of this study, where she defends the need for new representations of humanity that escape the polarity existing between 'man' and 'woman', which can explode in new forms of discourse, one

[1] Although it was mentioned earlier in this study that native novels are unfrequently organized around a main protagonist, in our three texts chosen for the corpus one might point out a group of main characters

can affirm that native literature by women is seriously involved in such a political enterprise. By presenting the construction of social subjectivities that claim different knowledge, tradition and belief, such texts not only question the universalizing of gender concepts but also of ethnic and cultural definition and discrimination. These writers represent the historical 'Other', that is the woman who is not white, in a totally new position, a place from where she can speak and be heard. So if there is an 'Other' here it is not the native, not even the native reader, but anyone who has to struggle to make sense of an alternative culture which is perceived by him or her as "foreign". Agreeing with Ann Phoenix's statement that innovative ways of imagining 'race', ethnicity, gender and their intersecting identity positions are crucial for producing social change (29), this study concentrates on alternative figurations produced by women writers and theorists from minority groups.

Since America was founded on native territory after a violent invasion, colonial writing in the "new land" became a form of consolidation for Europeans interested in marking the place as definitely theirs. In this way, the Declaration of Independence can be understood as the (documental) establishment of a new "signature", an attempt at authenticating and validating the permanence of colonial invaders and their cultural interferences (Spivak 1993: 262). In most previous colonies, considering the political dimension of literature, the literary canon can be defined as a political matter since it is planned to secure the authority of the invader (Spivak IFU 2000). The act of deciding to analyze and discuss literary texts that question such historical authority is also a political act. The working with women's texts from minority groups is thought to improve the recognition of different Americas, diverse worlds which were often covered by a general

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and, among them, some are central for the specific aspects here analyzed.

picture of the US: generally white, middle class, heterosexual, English-speaking. Silko's, Erdrich's and Power's novels can be well-placed among postcolonial texts interested in the authentication of narratives of exploitation (and its effects) so as to recover those pieces of history which were cut out because their acknowledgment would dismantle the sovereignty of some central categories of thought, such as 'Western culture', 'white subjecthood', etc.

As mentioned, one among other positive and liberating tendencies of texts by contemporary feminist theorists has been the presentation of new 'figurations'[2] for the deconstruction and reconstruction of worldviews. Figurations such as the cyborg figure (Haraway), the nomadic subject (Braidotti), the subaltern (Spivak) allow new ways of imagining which can be relevant in the production of "complex ways of simultaneously keeping in view the contingent, relational nature of identities and political strategies for change" (Phoenix 30). Ann Phoenix also defends that figurations such as the cyborg are visionary ways of "theorizing blurred boundaries between male/female and nature/culture. Its very hibridity allows the deconstruction of the essentialist category 'woman', while maintaining relationality and relativism" (29) In addition, feminist discourses developed by women of color or minority women intend to provide positions from which to defend a comparative, feminist praxis that is "transnational in its response to and engagement with global processes of colonization" (Alexander xx). Thus, building not only postcolonial but also anti(neo)colonialist relationships among women which can bridge our different political and cultural positionings is crucial for the viability of any feminist project of democracy. In this sense, women from Latin America, India or any other (post)colonized country interested in resisting reductive

[2] Figuration is defined by Rosi Braidotti as "a style of thought that evokes or expresses ways out of the phallocentric vision of the subject" (4) in Nomadic Subject.

classification imposed on them by hegemonic cultures have much to gain in terms of empowerment from such feminist transnational (or transversal) interchanges. As a matter of fact, cultural exchanges between differently positioned female subjects has always been part of the feminist project. Feminist and postcolonial voices of diverse theorists and writers are taken in this study as enriching elements in the development of my analyses. Agreeing with Rosi Braidotti, "letting the voices of others echo through my text is a way of actualizing the noncentrality of the 'I' to the project of thinking, while attaching it/her to a collective project" (37-38).

Finally, if at the first encounters between Europeans and natives the invaders found out the importance of shaking the basis of female power in the tribes so as to be able to change native life style (Allen), it is also possible to infer that the opposite also works in innovative ways, that is, by highlighting female power through the reconstruction of representations of 'women' that differ from those imposed by Western patterns, one might liberate new possibilities of social organization as part of a feminist model which does not favor any hegemonic interpretations of its subjects. The building of cultural bridges among women (and other minority subjects), one of the main political objectives of the present literary research, may be the key for the success of a struggle towards a less sexist, less racist and more democratic society.

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