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## **ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS**

# **GENDER AND ETHNIC IDENTITY IN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES BY CONTEMPORARY NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS**

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## ABSTRACT

Keywords: autobiography, Native American identity, gender roles, identity fragmentation, stereotypes, cultural heritage, ancestral land, reassertion, nature, economic development, women's status.

This doctoral thesis focuses on analyzing two main issues that Native American women writers are concerned with in their autobiographies. First, the current research discusses ethnic identity by identifying the major Native American identity components such as bloodlines, heritage, ancestral land and language, and second, it focuses on gender by highlighting women's status and roles within the society. By connecting traditional Native worldviews with Euro-American theoretical approaches such as feminism and ecofeminism I argue that Native American women writers explore current issues that afflict the Euro-American society and particularly their own Native communities, namely women's belittlement and environmental destruction. I also demonstrate that Native American women include their tribal knowledge into their autobiographical writings to emphasize the need for change in the community as a whole by showing that contemporary Native women live in a world where they have to face the Euro-American stereotypes projecting for them the role of either a "squaw" or "a noble princess", the erosion of their formerly powerful tribal position and the loss of Native men's respect as a consequence of colonization and adoption of Euro-American patriarchal society's ways and views.

Starting from Helen Cixous's affirmation that "women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 876), this current research also shows that Native women's autobiographies are examples of their vivid imagination and intelligence as they both describe their experiences, feelings and inner thoughts as well as their traumatic historical past and tribal traditions by employing various techniques and devices and combine them in an extraordinary and original way.

The corpus of the current analysis consists of four Native American women writers' autobiographies, namely: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* (1981), Louise Erdrich's *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birthyear* (1995), Linda Hogan's *The Woman Who Watches over the World* (2001), and Joy Harjo's *Crazy Brave: A Memoir* (2012). These four Native

American women writers are renowned for their powerful and insightful works, having been widely acknowledged as part of Native American literary canon.

The research relies on an ethno-critical approach and demonstrates that Native American tribal knowledge is not only included in Native works to ensure tribal survival, but it is also employed to function as a site of transformation. The feminist perspectives that are shown to be congruent with the Native American ones emphasize the current status of Native American women.

The thesis is structured into five chapters, each chapter focusing on different issues that Native American women writers included in their autobiographies, such as identity (re)formation, traditional tribal knowledge, gender roles and environmental preservation.

The first chapter entitled “Theoretical Framework: Feminism, Ecofeminism and Ethno-criticism” identifies the main theoretical perspectives that are applied to the analysis in the following chapters. In the introduction to theoretical chapter, concerns regarding the connection between feminism and Native American perspectives are addressed. While academics such as Devon Abbot Mihesuah (2003) claim that: “the introduction of the multifaceted lives and values of Natives into feminist discourse will necessarily and appropriately confuse the understanding of ‘women’s’ experiences” (5), other Native scholars, such as Paula Gunn Allen (1992) regard this intertwining as “essential” due to the predominance of “paternalistic, male-dominant modes of consciousness” (295) that characterize the Native American literary field. In spite of the concerns regarding the applicability of feminism to the Native American women’s current status, the fact that Native women are still facing discrimination from both the Euro-American society and the tribal one is undeniable and needs to be addressed. Also, based on Morwenna Griffiths’s interpretation of the “self-identity” term, it is demonstrated that inner feelings and emotions as well as cultural values participate in women’s struggle for the assertion of a self-identity that no longer abides patriarchal norms.

The first part of the chapter entitled “Feminism: Identity Formation through Writing” delineates the main feminist concepts that have applicability to Native American women’s fight against discrimination. Starting with Simone de Beauvoir’s definition of “woman” as “the Other” in her groundbreaking work *The Second Sex* (1956), other feminist interpretations of “woman” have been included to show that, while Euro-American women have deconstructed the image of “the Other”, Native American women are still facing this perception of being “the Other” from the mainstream society. The discussion also focuses on other important concepts, such as gender and gender roles

where the main differences in perspectives are highlighted. Native American women have never engaged in the analysis of “gender” from a psychological point of view. They rather interpret it from the traditional tribal point of view, according to which, men and women’s roles were clearly delineated and women have been respected for their abilities to sustain life. The subchapter also shows how stereotypes influence one’s identity formation process and emphasizes the main stereotypes related to both Euro-American and Native American women. The chapter’s first part ends with a parallel that is drawn between Gloria Anzaldúa’s “mestiza consciousness” concept and the Native American women’s power of creation that functions as a site of recovery of tradition and identity (re)construction.

The “Ecofeminism: Preserving Nature and Nurturing the Self” part of the first chapter delineates the major ecofeminist theories regarding environmental protection that are congruent with Native American traditional knowledge. In Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies’s *Ecofeminism* (2014) the ecofeminist claims that are discussed include: woman-nature connection, the industrial development and its negative impact on women and marginal communities as well as the connection between patriarchy and the capitalist society. Based on these three main points and other ecofeminist views discussed by Val Plumwood, Catriona Sandilands and other academics, it is shown that Native American traditional belief that a balanced relationship between humans and nature must be maintained is nowadays used in the environmental activists’ fight for nature’s preservation. Also, Shiva and Mies’s arguments regarding the industrial and technological development and its negative effects on marginal communities are used to describe the current state of Native American women and their tribal communities, namely the impoverishment of the Native communities by destroying their sustainable lifestyles due to expansion and increase in Native peoples’ health problems due to the Native reservations’ function as waste sites.

The “Ethno-criticism: Native American Decolonizing Voices” part of the chapter delineates major arguments of Native American scholars’ and authors’ activism. It is demonstrated that Native American authors use their traditional tribal knowledge in their works to deconstruct misconceptions regarding Native Americans as being either creatures of the earth or extinct in a romantically and tragic way. Also, using the arguments of Native American scholars, such as Winona LaDuke (Ojibwe), Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo), Devon Abbot Mihesuah (Choctaw) and Lee Maracle (Cree/Salish), according to which Native American women are currently facing gender related discrimination from both tribal and mainstream societies, the subchapter shows that nowadays there is a surge

in Native American women's identity construction based on the reassertion of their traditional tribal roles.

In the second chapter of the dissertation titled "'We Are Linked by Water and Fire'<sup>1</sup>: Native American Identity Formation in Leslie Marmon Silko's, Louise Erdrich's, Linda Hogan's and Joy Harjo's Memoirs" Native American identity formation elements are separately analyzed. Starting with Julia Watson's and Sidonie Smith, Linda Anderson's, Arnold Krupat's and Hertha Sweet Wong's arguments, the chapter begins with a discussion of the similarities and differences between Native American perspectives and the Western ones regarding concepts such as "identity" and "autobiography". It is pointed out that since the Native American and African American historical experiences left insurmountable trauma, they share common stages in the identity formation process. William Cross's model of identity reassertion applied to African Americans consists of the following stages: a) the pre-encounter, where people adapt mainstream society's norms disregarding their ethnic background, b) the encounter stage, when the personal traumatic experience leads to questioning the self, c) the immersion-emersion stage, when people develop an interest in their ethnic background, but still undergo insecurities, and d) the internalization stage, when people achieve a balanced sense of self. Although similar to the Native American process of identity construction, the chapter shows the differences between these two groups due to Native Americans' tribal heterogeneity, multiple mixed heritages, differences in bloodline, psychological influences and Native women's ancestral role models that constitute the basis of identity reassertion. Regarding the concept of "autobiography", besides discussing the similarities and differences between Western and Native American autobiographical narratives, the subchapter demonstrates that Native American women's autobiographies employ traditional tribal techniques such as storytelling, use of tribal myths and stories, historical references and identification with the tribal community to address the issue of identity fragmentation afflicting contemporary Native people.

The "Homelands" part focuses on the importance of land in the construction of Native American identity as portrayed in the four Native American women writers' autobiographies. Based on Linda Krumholz's arguments that Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* (1981) functions as a ritual of initiation for the non-Native reader and a site of

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<sup>1</sup> Joy Harjo, *Crazy Brave: A Memoir* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012) 30.

identity (re)construction for the Native American people, the analysis focuses on “Storyteller” and “A Geronimo Story” narratives to show the importance of land in the construction of Native people’s identity. In “Storyteller” a parallel between nature on the verge of doom and the characters of the story is drawn to show that extreme identities based on either total rejection of change or adoption of the new ways lead to fragmentation. Also, in “A Geronimo Story” land and nature are portrayed to offer guidance if valued and respected. Linda Hogan’s *The Woman Who Watches over the World* (2001) points out the land’s healing powers, as she creates an “I” that is deeply interconnected to the land and the natural environment, drawing her strength to go on. Also, Joy Harjo’s references at human interconnectedness with nature in her *Crazy Brave: A Memoir* (2012) and the memoir’s division into cardinal points reveal her reverence of the land and its vital importance in the Native American construction of identity.

The “Language and Storytelling” subchapter focuses on the vital role language plays in the construction of Native American identity. The subchapter demonstrates that although written in English, Native American women writers have preserved the traditional Native characteristics of tribal languages, such as the oral tradition of storytelling and metaphorical complexity. In *The Blue Jay’s Dance: A Birthyear*, Erdrich links her identity as a writer with ancestral language from which the creative force is driven. In Leslie Marmon Silko’s “A Geronimo Story” language and the oral tradition of storytelling are demonstrated to function as a vessel of tribal knowledge transmitted from one generation to another. Throughout Linda Hogan’s memoir it is seen that language and storytelling are tied to the creation of a self, where her traumatic childhood and lack of stories resulted in a broken sense of self.

The last part of the chapter, entitled “Bloodlines, Heritage, Reinvention” focus on the Native American women’s celebration of their Native ancestry. The subchapter demonstrates that cultural heritage and tradition are major components of Native American identity and that Native American women rely on their ancestors’ resilience to heal their broken selves. Regarding cultural heritage, Erdrich, Silko, Hogan and Harjo include numerous references to their tribal traditional values such as interconnectedness between people and their ancestors and nature, reverence for nature’s powers, identification with the tribal history and community, and ability to maintain tribal knowledge while adapting to new ways of life.



The third chapter of the current thesis entitled ““With These Stories We Will Survive<sup>2</sup>”: Recovering Tribal Cultures in Leslie Marmon Silko’s, Louise Erdrich’s, Linda Hogan’s and Joy Harjo’s Memoirs” shows that Native American women’s autobiographical narratives rely on traditional tribal views, Native identity formation components and include historical references to counteract the stereotypes related to Native American people, to provide healing to Native people and to reassert a vigorous identity. In the chapter introduction, Berinski and Mendelberg’s discussion of the term “stereotype” is used to show that the stereotypes created by the colonial literature related to Native Americans still persist in people’s minds.

In the subchapter entitled “Deconstructing Stereotypes” the analysis of Native American women writers’ memoirs demonstrates that Native women writers have included references to the Native American ways of life on reservations to deconstruct the Natives as earthbound creature stereotype. In Silko’s *Storyteller* the phrase “squaw man” is used to show the discrimination faced by non-Native men married to a Native woman. Although “squaw” is used to refer to Native women of low moral values, it is pointed out that the word actually means “woman” in Native languages. Erdrich’s parallels between Euro-American and Native American ways of life have pointed out the irony of Euro-American portraying Native people as primitive, due to their reverence of nature while believing in, and enacting, various superstitions. In Harjo’s *Crazy Brave: A Memoir* (2012) references to situations in which the author was placed at the beading table when in primary school or to depictions of Native male warriors in movies are included to show the Euro-American ignorance regarding Native nations and their tribal traditions.

In “Reinterpreting Myths” the analysis reveals that Erdrich’s reference to Manitous (Ojibwa spirit), Silko’s inclusion of female deities such as Grandmother Spider (the Laguna Pueblo creation myth) or Yellow Woman (Laguna’s powerful female figure) reinforce the roles myths play in the construction of Native American identity, such as offering guidance and knowledge of the surrounding world. Joy Harjo’s use of water and fire imagery also points out the narrator’s celebration of her Mvskoke lineage, her identification with Mvskoke creation stories and the enactment of the storyteller’s role in ensuring tribal survival.

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<sup>2</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, *Storyteller* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1981) 247.

The subchapter “Reconstructing Identity through Tribal Tradition” shows that Native American women writers are active participants in the maintenance of Native American tribal traditions and emphasizes their powerful role in the construction of a balanced sense of self. Erdrich’s choice to be assisted by a midwife, while pregnant, her memoir’s division into seasonal time periods and her references to the Christian doctrine as constrictive underline her internalization of Ojibwa traditional beliefs, through which she fights to maintain and ensure tribal survival. Hogan’s and Harjo’s ways of maintaining their traditional tribal beliefs to ensure tribal survival and their pointing out the tribal value of interconnectedness or of regarding time as a cycle are also highlighted.

Chapter four of the dissertation entitled ““Women are strong, strong, terribly strong<sup>3</sup>: The Reassertion of Native American Feminine Power in Silko’s, Erdrich’s, Hogan’s and Harjo’s Autobiographies” demonstrates that the autobiographies analyzed are sites of feminine reassertion of powerful identities, as each includes accounts of the mainstream society’s discrimination and the healing of trauma through tradition. Despite the existing difference in opinion regarding the applicability of feminism on Native American women’s struggle, the chapter points out that all Native American women’s works address Native women’s discrimination and loss of traditional tribal roles within the context of communal prosperity and tribal survival.

The “Women’s Roles within the Family and the Community” part of the chapter discusses the status of Native American women within both Euro-American and Native communities. Regarding the Euro-American society’s views concerning women, it is shown that Erdrich deconstructs Euro-American views on women as highly responsible for children’s rearing and on the birth-giving process as a horrendous experience, while pointing out the Native American celebration of life. The impact of Euro-American enforcement of patriarchy upon tribal nations and the traumatic experiences endured by Native American women, such as domestic violence, poverty, and forced sterilization are some of the accounts that are included in Harjo’s and Hogan’s memoirs to emphasize the contemporary status of Native women within the mainstream society. In terms of traditional Native American women’s roles and gender relationships, the analysis of Native women’s autobiographies reveal that traditional values such as providing care and nurturance of the weak (in “Lullaby”), celebration of women’s sexuality and fertility (in

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<sup>3</sup> Louise Erdrich, *The Blue Jay’s Dance: A Birthyear* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995) 12.

“Yellow Woman”) and gender cooperation (in Erdrich’s memoir) are presented as the core of traditional tribal knowledge. Also, the subchapter outlines the importance of each life cycle in Native American tradition as presented in Silko’s, Erdrich’s, Harjo’s and Hogan’s memoirs. The mother-daughter relationship in Native American cultures represents a learning stage of Native American values for young women. While Erdrich and Silko emphasize the valuable knowledge they received from their grandmothers, Harjo and Hogan present the disastrous effects such as alcohol abuse, abusive relationships and a shattered sense of self of not being initiated into tribal life by a guiding older female. The analysis shows that in Erdrich’s, Silko’s, Hogan’s and Harjo’s autobiographies the traditional grandmothers’ roles were taking care of the children, surrounding them with stories, thus functioning as keepers of tradition and vessels of tribal history, laying the foundation of a Native identity construction in the young generation.

In the “Women as Writers” subchapter, it is shown that Native American women writers choose autobiography as a self-expression form to better illustrate their current status of modern citizens with a traditional tribal view on life and to deconstruct their portrayal as victims. By drawing a parallel between de Beauvoir’s arguments regarding women as interested in creating rather than destroying and Erdrich’s *Blue Jay’s Dance: A Birthyear* (1995), the analysis points out that motherhood has not been a major theme in literature and that when women writers become mothers their newly formed self overtake their other self as writers, thus explaining the small number of literary works written by mothers. Starting with Cixous’s claim that writing is the keeper of a woman’s voice and identity, the analysis of Harjo’s and Hogan’s autobiographies points out that Native American women writers also regard writing as a form of healing the self.

The last chapter entitled “It’s Our Job to Love Each Other: Human, Animal, and Land<sup>4</sup>: Ecofeminist Perspective in Louise Erdrich’s, Linda Hogan’s and Joy Harjo’s Autobiographies” draws parallels between the Native American views and the ecofeminist arguments and emphasizes the Native American women writers’ maintenance of traditional tribal views regarding nature and their emphasis on these views as evidence of Native women’s powerful selves. Based on Karen Warren’s theory, the chapter introduction presents ecofeminism’s link between the environment and women as threefold: first, the environmental destruction is acutely felt by the marginal communities and out of those

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Hogan, *The Woman Who Watches over the World* (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001) 29.

communities women are the ones to suffer most; second, women's roles as household managers and care providers are linked to the environmental issues, and third, the current society still perpetuates male oriented norms and values.

The subchapter entitled "Violence and Economic Development" identifies the effects of economic development on the Native American people. Vandana Shiva's argument that economic development deepens the existing gap between the rich and the poor, destroying traditional sustainable lifestyles and impoverishing the already marginalized groups has proved to be a reality for the Native American people. The analysis of Linda Hogan's memoir shows the consequences of economic development where references to the construction of the Ardmore airport on Chickasaw land or of the hydroelectric plant on Cree and Inuit lands led to Native people's loss of homes, land, lifestyles, poverty and even suicide. The capitalist society views on marginalized communities as expendable are depicted by Erdrich in her ridiculing the people who owned a game park larger than a Native reservation.

In "Environmental Health and Powerful Selves", the analysis focuses on the woman-nature association from both the Euro-American and Native American points of view. According to Carolyn Merchant, women's association with nature pointing out either their wildness or their nurturing side is a mechanism of subjugation. The subchapter shows that the Native American tribal societies' reverence of women for their knowledge of ecosystems and their power of creation are reinforced throughout the Native American women writers' memoirs. Both Hogan's and Erdrich's references to nature's healing powers and its connection to one's sense of self emphasize the powerful basis of women's identity reassertion that Native American traditional values and beliefs may provide. Also, the animal-humans relationship is acknowledged in Erdrich's, Hogan's and Harjo's memoirs as being very strong. The Native American women writers draw parallels between animals and their tribal history, such as a duck's rape by ten mallards, a horse's loss of foal and its battering to show that the lessons which animals can teach humans include resilience and fierceness, necessary to any Native to recover from trauma.

The final chapter reveals that the Native American women's memoirs provide a realistic portrayal of Native women's lives as constantly facing marginalization from the mainstream society. However, they reject the role of victims and, by highlighting the profound connection between nature and women, the autobiographies of the Native American women writers under discussion in this dissertation show a powerful tradition-based sense of selves.

The thesis has demonstrated that Native American women writers' autobiographies function as means of empowerment for Native women to fight against Euro-American derogatory attitudes and against Native men's internalization of patriarchal model. The analysis of the selected autobiographies has also shown that these works emphasize the strength and ability of Native women to reassert tradition-based identities and to ensure traditional tribal cultural survival.

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