

REINVENTING THE SELF: NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN'S  
AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

by

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ABSTRACT

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Native American women's autobiographies are complex writings that stretch the very genre itself. As the genre of autobiography is reinvented by both early and contemporary texts, the nature of self expression through that genre is also reinvented. With Leslie Marmon Silko's inventive 1981 autobiography *Storyteller* as the guide post for what an autobiography can be, I examine other autobiographies by Native American women that come before and after this work, naming some works autobiographies for the first time. Naming a work an autobiography gives credence to the autobiographer's chosen means of writing her life. Native American women reveal who they are in their writing by revealing who their community is. Their choice to focus on their community

by mixing genres and voices in their narratives reveals their belief that self cannot be expressed in isolation.

This dissertation covers both early autobiographies – Sarah Winnemucca’s trail-blazing 1883 autobiography *Life Among the Piutes* and Zitkala-Ša’s fascinating 1920 autobiography *American Indian Stories* – and contemporary works -- Silko’s influential 1981 *Storyteller*, Anna Lee Walters’ 1992 *Talking Indian*, which includes many short stories, and Luci Tapahonso’s 1993 *Sáanii Dahataal/The Women Are Singing*, which favors the poetic style. Lastly, this dissertation will examine the 1997 compilation *Reinventing the Enemy’s Language*, edited by Gloria Bird and Joy Harjo. Together under the umbrella of autobiography these works suggest that Native women writers have reinvented not only the genre but the very idea of the self.

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# CHAPTER 1

## AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF ADAPTABILITY

### 1.1 Writing the Self

According to Eric Havelock in his *The Muse Learns to Write*, “The concept of selfhood and soul...arose at a historical point in time and was inspired by a technological change, as the inscribed language and thought and the person who spoke it became separated from each other, leading to a new focus on the personality of the speaker” (120). As Euro-American culture became more and more adept at writing, we also became prolific at reflecting on the self as something outside the person. According to Arnold Krupat, Southey is “credited with coining the word [autobiography] in English in 1809” (*For Those* 29). It is, then, through the genre of autobiography that writing about the self has become most prominent and has succeeded with readers accepting it on a scale from fiction to the embodiment of the writer’s identity.

Writing about the self, according to David Murray, “has long had a special importance for underprivileged and under heard groups in America” (66). Autobiography, in particular, is the most direct way for minorities to “act out and confirm the development of an identity,” which most likely is undervalued and misunderstood by the rest of society (Murray 66). This sentiment is echoed by Linda



Tuhiwai Smith in her *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People*; she believes indigenous people, in particular, have a “very powerful need to give testimony to and restore a spirit, to bring back into existence a world fragmented and dying” (28). It is the testimonies of the minority, underprivileged, indigenous people of North America that is the focus of this study, specifically autobiographies by Native American women.

Defining the parameters of Native American sometimes turns to blood quantum, sometimes to community opinion/tribal affiliation, and even to “an idea which a given man has of himself” (Momaday 49). All the Native American works of this study are written by individuals who have Native American blood, but identity is an extremely complex issue for Native Americans and had the parameters of this study called for it, I would have included any works written by an individual who calls him or herself a Native American.

When critical ventures turn to Native American autobiographies, there is usually a mention of how unnatural this genre is for a people who do not think of the individual in terms of autonomy. Kenneth M. Roemer in his introduction “Native American Writers of the United States” from the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, points out the “irony” of Native American writers “drawing authorship and authenticity from [oral/communal] traditions to which individualized notions of authorship are foreign” (xiii). One contributor to Arnold Krupat and Brian Swann’s autobiographical compilation, *I Tell You Now*, included a letter with her submission, pointing out that it is

“bad form for Indians” to write about themselves ( xii). Another chose not to contribute. David Brumble, however, makes an important point that “when the anthropologists, poets, and amateur historians began collecting autobiographies from the Indians, they were not asking the Indians to participate in an endeavor that was entirely foreign to them” (46). Brumble writes in his *American Indian Autobiography* about “preliterate traditions of American Indian autobiography,” such as coup tales that recounted an individual’s special deeds, and Hertha Dawn Wong, in her *Sending My Heart Back Across the Years*, devotes time to “pre-contact oral and pictographic autobiographical narratives.” Pre-contact, self was not a completely foreign concept to Native Americans, but that self was always relational, connected to others in the tribe or to the tribe as a whole. It is the idea of the individual self completely separated from the self and all other selves and expressed through the tool of writing that was foreign to Native Americans.

According to the Tohono O’odham point of view, “Literacy is...evidence that Europeans are lost, ignorant and detached from a knowledge of themselves” (Wilson xxiii). This belief stems from the idea that oral language is alive and written language is dead. According to Walter Ong in his *Orality and Literacy*, for primary oral cultures, words are “occurrences, events” that have “magical potency” (31, 33). To speak about oneself orally, then, is a “mode of action” that adds to that self (32). The written self, therefore, because it attempts to capture one idea of that self, could never be for primary oral cultures a true self, only a dead version of it. As writer Leslie Marmon Silko puts

it, for Native Americans, “The life of a story is not something that any individual person can save” (Barnes 51). Capturing something alive and locking it in a permanent state “dooms” the oral because it “fixes the spiritual ideas,” and spiritual ideas aren’t meant to be fixed, studied or collected (Ruoff, *American* 14 and Lincoln 45). The Colonizer’s culture, however, did believe that some form of the self could be written, and this is the culture through which Native Americans were introduced to writing and the West’s particular ideas of the self.

Early Native Americans, as they began to write, joined the autobiographical tradition, but early autobiographies were by no means seamlessly part of the Euro-American tradition of autobiography. According to Nina Baym, a rigid system of “periodization and thematization” excluded pre-twentieth century women from joining established literary traditions, and according to Krupat, worked to exclude Native literary expression as part of American literature. Native Americans were not part of the mainstream culture and it showed in their works. Not only did they belong to an oral culture that did not believe that self could be represented in writing, they often eluded individual authorship by including tribal history and infusing oral elements, like speeches and songs, in their texts. In addition, they often rejected the Euro-American tradition of linear and cumulative autobiographies, opting instead for something Karen L. Kilcup calls “organizational disruptions” (4). Early autobiographies by women also mixed genres, infusing oratory, myth, songs, and even sentimental fiction as in the case of Sarah Winnemucca’s *Life Among the Piutes*.. Early Native autobiographers had to

work with a medium, the written language, for which they had no cultural tradition. When they did learn to write, there were still the looming constraints of the Euro-American autobiographical genre. Well-meaning non-Native editors often interfered with the process and final product to make early autobiographies more mainstream, but even from the beginning Native American autobiographies were different. Some early writers, such as Narcissa Owen (*A Cherokee Woman's America*) believed in assimilation, but most early writers are advocates of Native American cultures, making early works extremely political in nature and prominently concerned with survival. The themes of early works also include religion, women's and children's roles, alcohol abuse and temperance, and the retention of land (Kilcup 7-10). Furthermore, like most writers, early Natives had aesthetic ambitions as well, making early autobiographies a complex mix of voices.

Contemporary Native American women autobiographers are concerned with many of the same themes, and their works possess many of the same qualities of early autobiographers. On the other hand, contemporary Native American autobiographers, to use the phrase Ong uses for early Greeks, have "interiorized writing" (24). Writing is now part of evolving Native American traditions, traditions that include an expanding understanding of the self. Contemporary autobiographies range from texts that follow the tradition of traditional Euro-American autobiographies to texts that bear very little resemblance to that tradition. The expectations of the autobiography are now ones that do not necessarily loom over Native American writers, but are ones that can offer

writers a model. This model, however, can just as easily be ignored, as Native Americans now write as part of their own culture. This is not to say that literacy has somehow become more important than orality; orality is still very much a part of Native American cultures. Writing is now not just a political tool to give Natives a voice, but also a means by which they can explore their identity.

In his essay “Kafka and his Precursors,” Jorge Luis Borges argues that writers create their own predecessors through the choices they make—what they take up and don’t. Specifically, Borges believes that Kafka’s work “modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future” (615). I argue that Leslie Marmon Silko’s 1981 autobiography *Storyteller*, influenced by N. Scott Momaday’s works, does the same. *Storyteller* allowed me to conceptualize early and contemporary Native American women’s autobiographies differently. This fresh conceptualization led to a realization that through their written autobiographies, Native American women are reinventing the idea of self into one that is primarily communal in nature. When the community is involved in one’s understanding of the self, then the genre of autobiography necessarily changes. An individual women autobiographer may use others’ voices and other genres like poetry and fiction to tell her story. The voices in Native American women’s autobiographies, then, may be literally the words of another Native American or the Native American women choosing to speak in second or third person. When taken to its natural conclusion, works that literally contain communities’ voices become autobiographies, such as the 1997 compilation *Reinventing the Enemy’s Language*.

Native American women's autobiographies complicate the question of what is and isn't an autobiography. This complication is reinventing the genre and the understanding of the self that is held by the academic and non-academic alike.

Derrida says the goal of the Other should be to speak the Colonizer's language without renouncing his/her own. Despite the influence of boarding schools on early writers and the legacy of those schools on contemporary writers, Native American women authors have shown "spirited and generative narrative creativity" (Katanski 8). Indian cultures were not eradicated and early Native American writers like Zitkala-Ša were able to "wrest control of both the content and the form of their self-representations...out of the hands of the schools in acts of rhetorical sovereignty" (Katanski 12). Contemporary writers, like Silko, who use the English language and writing without sacrificing their Indian culture are further proof that the Carlisle Indian School's goal of assimilation was unsuccessful.

Currently, there is a broad movement for Native Americans to preserve, study and write in Native languages because as Dexter Fisher points out in her introduction to her anthology *Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States* says, "Language is the means by which one 'knows' the universe and shares that knowledge with the community" (5). Native Americans want and need their original languages in order to make their oral and literary traditions ones that more closely express a Native understanding of the world. In 2006, *American Indian Quarterly* devoted two issues to this topic with special guest editor David Treuer. In one of the articles, written

primarily in Ojibwe, Anton Truer quotes the Sweetgrass First Nations Language Council's "Declaration on Aboriginal Languages":

Our Native language embodies a value system about how we ought to live and relate to each other... It gives a name to relations among kin, to roles and responsibilities among family members, ties with the broader clan group... Now if you destroy our language, you not only break down these relationships, but you also destroy other aspects of our Indian way of life and culture, especially those that describe man's connection with nature, the great spirit, and the order of other things. Without our language, we will cease to exist as a separate people. (87)

Other articles discuss the challenges of reclaiming and/or maintaining indigenous languages. Still others suggest models for a broad reclaiming project. Of the 500 or so Native languages flourishing at the time of contact, only 34 languages are being naturally acquired by children (Watahomigie 28). The urgency and importance of this issue is clear, and I in no way suggest that the English language can serve as a substitute. It is, however, being embraced in certain ways by Native peoples. As history tells, English was aggressively forced onto Native Americans. Certainly, many Native American English speakers despised the very language they spoke and felt self-hatred especially when it was their one and only language, as was often the case. Starting about the time of the Native American Renaissance, Native English speakers began to work within the system. That is they found a way for English to work for them even in

what Mary Louise Pratt calls a contact zone, a “social place where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (33). Specifically, contemporary Native American autobiographers have been able to “reinvent” the system and make it work for them by writing autobiographies, or what Pratt would call autoethnographies, texts “in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” (35). Pratt would say that Native American women’s autobiographers are speaking to Euro-Americans in a continuous dialogue that attempts to “intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding” (35). These autoethnographies serve as a “point of entry into the dominant circuits of print culture” (35). With entry, Native American autobiographers “speak” with Euro-Americans through the ways they use the English language, their own languages, writing, oral traditions, the genre of autobiography, and the cultural understanding they bring about the concept of community.

It is important to further conceptualize the tradition of autobiography that came to Native Americans through colonization and the reasons that pairing minority writers with autobiography is important, but has been problematic. The Euro-American idea of autobiography had its first substantial discussion as a genre with George Gusford in “Conditions et limites de l’autobiographie” in 1956. Gusford’s model is based on a self that he identifies as endemically Western and individualistic. Gusford says that autobiography is the direct consequence of the rise of individualism, arguing that autobiography does not exist endemically in cultures where “the individual does not



oppose himself to all others; [in cultures where] he does not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others” (29-30). Native Americans did not see themselves individualistically, and they did not have a tradition of autobiography that parallels the West’s. The Copernican Revolution belongs to the West not Native Americans, and it is this revolution that took away the concentration on the “great cosmic cycles,” replacing it with individuals on autonomous adventures (Gusford 31).

Many Native American critics, however, are quick to disagree with Gusfordian definitions of autobiography (Krupat, Brumble, Friedman, Wong, Bataille and Sands, Johnson). They find them limiting and oppressive because they disqualify Native Americans from even writing autobiographies and they disallow the possibility of an autobiography that does not focus primarily upon the individual. Gusford’s understanding of self is not the same as the understanding of most Native Americans who often create “unusual autobiographical” writings in which the self is of equal or lesser importance to the focus upon the community. Kendall Johnson in “Imagining Self and Community in American Indian Autobiography” even suggests that Native autobiographies “potentially rework generic expectations” about the genre (393).

The latter half of the twentieth century has made room, in theory, for non-traditional autobiographies. In 1992, Kathleen Sands wrote that Native American autobiographies “are hard to find, often obscured by misclassification in libraries (anything Indian must be anthropology) or not kept in print by publishers or marketed widely” (“Indian” 270). Luckily, there are enough recent Native American

autobiographies, for example through the University of Nebraska Press' Native American autobiography series, and anthologies of Native American autobiography, like Arlene Hirschfelder's *Native Heritage*, to make this statement outdated. Critics go back and forth as to whether we want to stretch the West's definition of autobiography or find a new name for such works "unusual" autobiographies, such as "auto-gynographies" for women's autobiographies or for Native American autobiographies, "bicultural composite composition" (Stanton, Krupat). Those who want non-traditional autobiographies to be labeled as autobiographies know that another term will not carry the weight of "autobiography." Bataille and Sands argue, "Creative imagination, invention in adaptation, and flexibility in form have been accepted as essential characteristics of poetry and fiction, but the respectability and existence of these qualities are controversial in autobiography. They lead to descriptions like 'personal memoir,' 'reminiscence,' or 'social narrative'" (15). In other words, they lead to labels that are viewed by many to be more glib and simplistic than the genre of autobiography. The genre of autobiography, as Todorov states about all genres, exists as an institution in that it functions as a "'horizon of expectation' for readers and as a 'model of writing' for authors" (18). If recent Native American autobiographies were not labeled, shelved or reviewed as such, then they would not be seen as autobiographies; readers would not learn what self means to a Native writer and non-Native autobiographers would not learn new ways to conceptualize and write the self.

The genre of autobiography, despite its limitations, was crucially important to early Native American autobiographers because it enabled them to shape their messages into a discourse comprehensible to an audience from a different speech community, and it gave them a model that they desperately needed to make that first step into the writing community. Contemporary Native American autobiographers, when they are given the credit for writing an autobiography, are now able to make the genre of autobiography their own, by molding it into one that allows them to write about their selves in ways that express their understanding of those selves, and in doing so they often broaden the definition of autobiography and the horizons of many readers' expectations.

Even before Gusford put the genre of autobiography into the critical arena, autobiographies did have rules, at least for Native Americans. James Olney in his "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment," suggests that historically "there are no rules or formal requirements binding the prospective autobiographer—no restraints, no necessary models, no obligatory observances" (3). He suggests that the genre is slippery even to the point of slipping into a place of dominance—all writing is autobiography. And it is true that starting with Augustine's *Confessions*, the genre of autobiography did reside loosely next to other genres, in this case philosophy and theology, among others. Autobiographies were, however, expected to hold to what Olney characterizes as the "naïve threefold assumptions about the writing of autobiography": "first that the bios of autobiography could only signify 'the course of a lifetime'...second, that the autobiographer could narrate his life in a manner at least

approaching an objective historical account...and third, that there was nothing problematic about the *autos*, no agonizing questions of identity, self-definition, self-existence, or self-deception” (20). Gusford and other critics changed this when they argued that the *autos* of autobiographies “has its reasons and its truth (which in terms of historical fact may well be false) that neither reason nor a simple historical view of *bios* can ever know” (Olney 21). Clearly, Gusford made important contributions to the study of autobiography, first by rooting out its motivation in the individualistic sort of culture, and then by pointing out that a person’s written account of self is not simply the “recollected life as transmitted through the unclouded, neutral glass of the *autos*” (Olney 21). The first, as mentioned earlier, is now seen as limiting; the second makes all of us unreliable sources of ourselves, a situation that earlier was limited only to those out of the mainstream.

A spotlight was shined on the naïve assumptions that Olney points out when Native Americans began to write autobiographies. Early Native autobiographers often did not signify just one lifetime; they went back and forth in time and dealt heavily with other people’s or groups’ lives. Secondly, Native American autobiographies were not as concerned with facts; early Native autobiographers, however, felt pressured to give as many details (dates, names, places) as possible, but the oral tradition from which they came was not one that focused heavily upon such details. Lastly, like all minorities, Native autobiographers faced many agonizing questions of identity because not only were they caught between two or more cultures, but like all autobiographers, they were

struggling with expressing their identities through writing. Furthermore, they were the outsider which meant that the rules of a genre were enforced more strenuously upon them than on an insider. Society would not allow, in the sense of accept in the publishing arena, early Native American writers to write too far out of the general understanding of autobiography. Most early Native American autobiographies were different, but they were not so different that they lost the label of autobiography. Contemporary Native autobiographers still struggle under the naïve assumptions because they are still the Other, and their autobiographical writings often slip outside the margins instead of stretching those margins from within. Their autobiographical writings are getting noticed, but many times they are not seen as autobiographies.

In *American Indian Autobiography*, David Brumble defines autobiography as “first-person narrative that seriously purports to describe the narrator’s life or episodes in that life” (17). This definition is too narrow for this study, and even for Brumble’s own study as he includes works that do not seem to fit his definition, such as N. Scott Momaday’s *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller*. These works and other works that I include do not always use consistent first person, or even just one narrator, and some of them do not “seriously” attempt to describe the writer’s life, that is they do not make an effort to list all the major events of a life and comment on that life by explaining its meaning. More specifically, for the purpose of this study, I am only going to focus on Native American women and examine only autobiographical books, in particular mixed-genre/media autobiographies in which the *I* of the subject

does not dominate, single and mixed-genre/media autobiographies in which the *I* does dominate, and compilations of self-written autobiographical texts. I am leaving out the long and thriving tradition of as-told-to autobiographies because the writer is not the Native woman. For that same reason, I am leaving out pre-literate autobiographies and pictographs (see Brumble or Wong), and compilations of interviews such as Laura Coltelli's *Winged Words*, 1990. Those writings that are not in a full length book form, such as short self-written memoirs that were published in ethnographic studies or magazines, like Lilah Denton Lindsey's "Memories of the Indian Territory Mission Field" from *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 1958; or in a book, but only as a part of a bigger subject, such as "Yoimut's Story, the Last Chunut" in *The Handbook of the Yokut Indians* are also not included. To narrow my study further, books about childhoods only, such as Jane Willis's *Genieish: An Indian Girlhood*, 1973 will not be included. All of the types that I am leaving out are a part of the American and Native American autobiographical tradition, but space restrictions and a focus upon the Native as writer of her own book limit this study. Furthermore, the works I have chosen to focus upon in detail are those written works that are the most unique, in that they shake the foundation of Euro-American autobiography or the most informative in terms of understanding the direction of the genre for Native American women. Lastly, the choice to only include Native American women writers is a deliberate one because this study is about how Native women create autobiographies as writers, collaborators, and cultural-bearers. According to Bataille and Sands:

The process and the forms of both male and female narratives are the same, but the focus and the kind of symbolic representation that determine the aesthetic quality of women's narratives are quite separate from their male counterparts...The autobiographies of American Indian women are generally concerned with the more private and intimate aspects of their lives and culture and with the partnership women share in the structuring and preserving of traditions within their societies. The dynamics of autobiography are similar [to autobiographies by Native men], but the qualities of Indian womanhood lead to a separate literary tradition, molded from the uniqueness of insight and the pervasive character of womanhood. (9)

In this dissertation, I will examine the qualities of early Native American women's autobiographies, starting from Sarah Winnemucca's 1883 text, *Life Among the Piutes*, and ending with Luci Tapahonso's 1993 *Sáanii Dahataal/The Women are Singing* with particular emphases on the intersection of orality and literacy and the differences between pre and post 1960 works and how they compare with Euro-American autobiographies, using primarily Postcolonial critiques and New Literacy Studies, "which are based on the view that reading and writing only make sense when studied in the context of social and cultural (and we can add historical, political and economic) practices for which they are but a part" (Gee 180). For early autobiographies in particular chapter 1, I will examine Native women's motivations for writing their life

stories, the reception of their works both then and now, and the challenges and results of writing when the autobiographer is steeped in her oral tradition. Specifically, chapter 1 will include the autobiographies *Life Among the Piutes*, 1883 and *American Indian Stories*, 1920. These Early Native American women's autobiographies are two of the mere handful of book length early works of autobiography written solely by the Native women that have been studied or discovered, and they set the stage for the comparison with post-1960 works. Both *Life Among the Piutes* and *American Indian Stories* anticipate the autobiographies discussed in later chapters.

This study skips next to post 1960 works in chapter 2 because after Zitkala-Ša's *American Indian Stories*, 1920, there was a lull in literature written and published by Native Americans because of social and political reasons. This lull began to take seed in the early 1920s when Zitkala-Ša's pieces were published individually; then in 1920, when *American Indian Stories* was compiled, a promising movement took shape. In 1923 John Collier, the future commissioner of Indian Affairs 1933-1945, established the American Indian Defense Association, which set out to preserve Native American cultures and beliefs. Unfortunately, the Secretary of the Interior by the 1930's, Ray Lyman Wilbur, had a view that contradicted Collier's. Wilbur believed that Native Americans must join the melting pot and stop trying to maintain separate cultures. Wilbur's view coupled with World War I and the Depression made Collier's work difficult. Although during World War I, according to Thomas A. Britten in *American Indians in World War I*, "tribal dances, giveaways and feasts became prevalent again



among some Indian peoples as a way of recognizing their veterans' accomplishments," health and education services declined significantly. Epidemics also ravaged Native American communities. Britten suggests that World War I was the "initial and perhaps most important catalyst for Indian citizenship in 1924," but health and education problems continued during the Depression.

Collier and his American Indian Defense Association continued to fight and developed the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 under Franklin D. Roosevelt's term. This act was designed to halt and reverse the destruction of Native American communities. Life improved for Native Americans, but they were resentful that they lost most of their sovereignty, and without an adequate education in reading and writing, most were not equipped to write their own story in English. According to Britten, most Native Americans only received "the rudiments of the English language"; instead the emphasis was on vocational skills (156).

World War II and the Termination period in the years after Collier saw conditions both improve and deteriorate for Native Americans. World War II took some 25,000 Native American men overseas and led to 40,000 Native Americans entering the workforce; both which decreased Natives' dependency on the Bureau of Indian Affairs and "inspired a new political awareness directed toward self-determination" (Bernstein 171). Healthcare, however, was still sub par, and education still stressed vocational work, which fit with the majority of the jobs available to Native Americans at the time. During WW II, the whole country, however, was in survival

mode, leaving little time for the championing of literature written by Native Americans. As for Native Americans, they, for the most part, were not given access to the kind of education that would lead them to writing an autobiography. Instead, as discussed in chapter 2, the as-told-to genre dominated. Following WW II in the years 1945-1961, the Termination Period loomed. Fourteen tribes were terminated in order to free the federal government of budgetary responsibilities and push assimilation. During these years, a new generation of Indian rights advocates were emerging because Native Americans, according to Alison Bernstein, “sudden and unprecedented exposure to the white world contributed to a new consciousness and what it meant to be an American Indian, and a sharpened awareness of the gap between the standard of living on most reservations and in the rest of American society” (171). Self-determination during these years, “became an Indian-endorsed concept” (171). Such a concept would eventually lead Native Americans back to writing.

In short, the period of 1900 to 1960 did not see a significant amount of Native American literature. Conditions were not ripe for writing or publishing. Works of note written by Native Americans include Mourning Dove’s 1927 novel *Cogewea* and Darcy McNickle’s 1936 novel *The Surrounded* and his 1954 *Runner in the Sun*. Autobiographies during this period were primarily as-told-to narratives, such as John Neihardt’s 1931 *Black Elk Speaks* and Ruth Underhill’s 1936 *Papago Woman*. Oral literatures still dominated Native American tribes, and most Native Americans were not interested in writing them down because, to put it simply, their oral traditions worked.

In other words, why change a vital tradition. As Larry Evers points out in his “Cycles of Appreciation,” it was non-Natives, collectors and editors, who were attempting to write down what they saw as a disappearing art; Evers argues that they were confusing “loss with change” (29).

There are no doubt undiscovered written works of this period, but likely they are not the innovative works of the post-sixties. As David Murray argues in his *Forked Tongues: Speech, Writing and Representation in North American Indian Texts*, Native American writings before the Native American Renaissance were “likely to reflect the tastes of a white audience....Indian writers are mainly going to materialize...only when what they say meets a white need” (57 ). Some focus, however, must be placed on pre-1960 works in order to better explain the progression of Native American women’s autobiographies. Therefore, chapter 1 will be an examination of pre-1960 works -- two early Native American women’s autobiographies. Subsequent chapters will all focus on post-1960 works of these same kinds, but subsequent chapters also introduce the trend to combine multiple Native American women’s autobiographies into compilations. Each of these chapters includes multiple autobiographies for an overview of the type, but I also examine particular texts in detail. For contemporary works the focus will be on the nearness or distance of the text from Euro-American autobiographies, and for very distanced texts, the implications for defining a Native American women’s literature and a Native literary criticism. Specifically, chapter 2 examines multigenre/media autobiographies in which the *I* of the subject does not dominate,

particularly Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*. These works are the pinnacle of an autobiographical form started by the early autobiographer Zitkala-Ša.

In chapter 3, I will examine, more recent multi-genre autobiographies that continue to complicate the genre and expand the concepts of author, text, reader, and even the concept of self as expressed through singular and plural first person pronouns. Works of focus include Anna Lee Walters' 1992 *Talking Indian* and Luci Tapahonso's 1993 *Sáanii Dahataal/The Women Are Singing*. Lastly, the focus of chapter 4 will be compilations of self-written autobiographical texts. There is no early precursor to this form, but such works reveal that despite differences, Native Americans have common worldviews that tie them together in opposition to the non-Native. The compilers here are predominantly non-Natives except for the 1997 work *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*, edited by Gloria Bird and Joy Harjo. Therefore, this work will be the main focus of chapter 4.

### 1.2 Gender Background, Misconceptions and Challenges

Brumble argues that the study of autobiography is the study of the "ways in which human beings have told about their lives" (13). The sex of Native women authors has an impact on the particulars of how they tell their lives and readers' reception and critical assessment of those lives, justifying a study that focuses solely upon women and requiring in this section a broader exploration of Native women's gender roles. Native women are, as Sands argues, "perversely distorted" in the minds of non-Natives ("Indian" 269). In reality, the Native American women are the lifeline

of their people, and all autobiographical texts by Native American women help to undo misconceptions and stereotypes and to give Native women substance in the minds of non-Natives, who often see them as ghost figures from the past or so radically different as to not have certain basic human feelings and needs. These works also undo the misconception that if you read one Native women's autobiography, you have read them all and reveal the differences between tribes and between Native women of different time periods.

Pre-contact Native Americans, for the most part, accepted their gender roles. They did not find them confining or degrading. On the contrary, they were proud of them. Although this is a broad generalization considering the diversity among tribes, studies suggest that Native women and men, overall, were happy with their roles. This idea is difficult to grasp because of the label "beast of burden" assigned by Colonizers to Native women, due to their horticultural activities. Additionally, this point is not mainstream because most continue to think of Natives through Eurocentric and ethnocentric perspectives; equality between the sexes is viewed as a modern idea, thus an impossibility in a "savage" culture. Research and criticism about pre-contact gender relations of Native Americans suggest that not only did Colonizers misinterpret Native women's roles, but that those roles were ones that were more equitable and in most cases more powerful than the roles of the women of Colonizers' time and even today. Overall, Native women were seen as crucial contributors to community survival, worthy

of political power, and even possessing special powers to harm or heal due to menstruation and/or pregnancy.

Historians and anthropologist examine this subject at the tribal level in works such as *Women and Power in Native North America* and *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspective of Native American Women*. Nancy Shoemaker in *Negotiators of Change* points out: “All [pre-contact] Indian societies had a gendered division of labor and authority” and “gender differences were crucially important in Indian cultures for organizing behavior and activities” (5). Gender was a crucial factor in how Native men and women lived their lives, yet contact led to Euro-Americans transferring their “savage” ideas about gender on to Native Americans, which were detrimental to Native women. Shoemaker says that pre-contact, “gender was flexible and variable” (5). Daniel Maltz and JoAllyn Archambault argue in *Women and Power in Native North America* that for pre-contact Native North America ‘domination’ and ‘inequality’ are not the most useful concepts for examining the nature of gender or the relationship between gender and power, that ‘autonomy,’ ‘complimentary,’ and even ‘egalitarian’ are more useful” (245). As Native American women, like Wilma Mankiller, assume more visibly powerful roles, the mainstream population will continue to believe this is result of Euro-American feminism. However, most Native women come from tribal traditions in which powerful roles were common to women. Not all tribes were women-centered, but even those Native women who were not in leadership roles, felt worth in the roles they did have.

It was not liberation that Native American women received from colonization; it was a decline in their status and power. Rayna Green gives details in her *Women in American Indian Society* that in order to civilize Native Americans, they had to make farmers out of the men. Green explains:

In order to accomplish this goal, the government had to obstruct the established system of production and distribution of resources. Thus, many women not only lost their right to participate in the tribe's government, but they were also deprived of their specialized role as agriculturist. (47)

Recent scholarship, however, suggests that Native women post-contact actively, creatively, and often successfully resisted marginality. This is manifested in different ways throughout colonization. During the mid-eighteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, Shoemaker argues that Native women “adapted traditional roles to participate in market-oriented economic activity” (14). Lucy Edersveld Murphy, in her article “Autonomy and the Economic Roles of Indian Women of the Fox-Wisconsin Riverway Region, 1763-1832,” explains that Sauk, Mesquaquei, and Winnebago women mined lead for trade with Euro-Americans. Murphy suggests that this was natural for these women because it was “a kind of labor which could be considered women's work since it was a form of gathering and could be integrated into the seasonal round of maple sugaring and corn planting” (Murphy 15). During the mid-nineteenth century white men took over the mining, depriving Native women and men of their very land.

From the nineteenth century until about present, Native women have participated actively in the emerging farming and ranching industries. Later, Native women turned to tourism, especially sewing, weaving and crafts, as well as agricultural wage work. Native women did not accept their demotion in society blindly; they adapted, finding economic roles that let them survive. They never gave up feeding and taking care of their families. They lost power in society, but they gained it tenfold in their homes. Today, Native American women are as diverse as non-Native women in their careers and ambitions, but they continue to fight poverty all the while dealing with alcoholism and domestic abuse. Conditions are grim for many Native American women, but supporting themselves and/or their families, as well as attempting to resist marginality, in successfully creative ways continues to be priority for them.

In addition to historical and cultural studies, Native women's autobiographies, as Sands suggests, are one of the few ways that non-Natives can "learn the realities of life in tribal cultures [past and present]" ("Indian" 288). The stereotypes that plague Native women, the beast of burden (the squaw), the overly sexual being, and the princess have decreased but are still with us. Native American women's autobiographies undermine these stereotypes. Unfortunately, stereotypes are not usually broken the first time they are questioned, and Native women's autobiographies do not have a huge readership and cannot be expected to change completely non-Natives' views of Native women. Reader by reader, however, Native American women's autobiographies do make individual Native woman real to the non-Native



reader, that is readers experience her in all of her complexities. And if readers are what Kathryn Shanley calls a “committed audience,” that is to “offer to be an audience and then to amplify those voices barely heard or not heard at all,” these autobiographies can be extremely influential (27).

### 1.3 Disparate Worldviews: Colonizer and Colonized.

The roots of the word *autobiography*, “auto” “bio” “graphie” immediately reveal that the genre of autobiography was an awkward fit for Native Americans, as pointed out earlier. In addition to gender issues, this point needs further exploration and emphasis as it reveals the fundamental point that Native Americans did not have the same understanding of the self and life as Euro-Americans, and they did not have a system of writing. Euro-American autobiography “is marked by egocentric individualism, historicism, and writing. These are all present in European and Euro-American culture after the revolutionary last quarter of the eighteenth century. But none has ever characterized the native cultures of the present-day United States” (Krupat *Native* 29). Roy Pascal argues that the genre of autobiography “imposes a pattern on a life, constructs out of it a coherent story.” However, what makes a pattern of life and a coherent story is not the same for every cultural group. Pre-contact Native Americans, as stated early, had a tradition of autobiography, but it was a tradition based not on individualism, historicism and writing, but one based up community, cyclical time, and orality.

The German philosopher Hegel is usually given credit for much of the West's understanding of history, including the ideas that history is chronological and universal. One of the underlying principals from which Euro-Americans make sense of reality, supporting not only the Enlightenment idea of progress and the theory of Evolution but also our very notion of history itself, is the concept of linear time. According to Alan Watts, "If time is cyclical, Jesus Christ would have to be crucified again and again. There would not be, therefore, that one perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. Time had to be a straight line from the creation to the consummation to the last judgment" (qtd. in Wilson 5-6). The idea of linear time, then, was one that was important to Christianity and, therefore, sacred. For traditional Native Americans, time is cyclical; pre-contact oral autobiographical forms consisted of "a series of anecdotal moments rather than a unified, chronological life story" (Wong 12). When Native Americans began to write some parlayed their traditional ideas of time into a non-linear writing style; others used the linear structure that dominates the genre. It was only the linear works that were seen as civilized, synonymous with Christian.

Pre-contact indigenous autobiographical forms also emphasize a communal rather than an individual self; Krupat argues, "Traditional Native American self-conceptions...are defined by community and landscape. In many cases, this identity is also dynamic; that is, it is in process, not fixed. Native Americans autobiographical expressions tend to tell a portion of a person's life—a dramatic or a transitional

experience” (*Native* 15). They were, in other words, event-oriented. Events are important for the Euro-American’s understanding of autobiography, but those events had to be connected explicitly for the reader because the point of the genre was to reveal the self. An non-connected event-oriented autobiography left room for interpretation, a very scary concept for traditional Euro-American writers who wrote their lives to answer all questions and clear up all misconceptions.

Traditional, Native Americans believe that all were created to be a part of a particular landscape. According to Wilson, “This approach has always jarred with the Euro-American, Judaea-Christian tradition. Exiles from Eden are not part of a particular place, with a unique connection to particular rocks and mountains, rives and trees: they are separate from the inanimate ‘natural’ world to which they have been banished and can manipulate and exploit it at will” (Wilson 9). Too much discussion of a connection to land in an autobiographical work would, then, make the separation of Natives from their land unjustifiable and thus very inconvenient for Colonizers.

The ideas of the American Indian poet can be applied to the Native American writer, revealing a further gap between the worldviews of the Colonizer and the Colonized. According to John Bierhorst, “The Indian poet does not consider himself the originator of his material but merely the conveyor. Either he has heard it from an elder or he has received it from a supernatural power...Indian poetry, then, is usually attributed not to an individual but to his culture” (*In the Trail of the Wind* 4-5). Krupat builds on this idea, applying the ideas of Dennis Tedlock who said when talking about

the Zuni that the “conveyer” is always the “interpreter” as well (Krupat *Native* 12). Krupat explains that Native American oral performance “is the originality of augmentation, not of pure origination....Something always already exists” (*Native* 12). Euro-Americans thrived on the idea that they were the original creators of their autobiographies; this raised their status in their own and others’ eyes. Furthermore, according to Kenneth Lincoln, for Native American storytellers, the audience is a mandatory part of the process. The audience is an “historical witness to human events” (Lincoln 223). The Pueblo writer, Leslie Marmon Silko puts it: “a great deal of the story is believed to be inside of the listener” (“Language” 50). Therefore, the idea that the reader had no say in developing the life story of the writer does not fit with the way stories were developed pre-contact.

Lastly, when the Native American participated in oral autobiography it was not for the same reasons as Euro-Americans wrote autobiographies. Krupat argues, “Euro-Americans write autobiographies to set themselves apart from (better than, different from, richer than, more successful than) other member of his or her society, where as pre-contact a Native American speaks a personal narrative to become more fully accepted into (a fuller participant in) his or her community” (Krupat, *Native* 16).

When the two disparate worldviews came together, it was Native Americans who were expected to change. They were expected to put their archaic and inconvenient pre-contact ideas aside and to live and write their lives like the Colonizers did. Colonizers justified their treatment in different ways. According to Wilson, when

James Mooney estimated incorrectly, by six million, the population of Native Americans at the size of contact to be 1.148 million, that figure attained the status of fact. A culture of less than two million was apparently not worth serious consideration. The land bridge theory also puts the legitimacy of Native cultures into question. According to Wilson, “If, as archeology suggests, Native Americans arrived in America at a specific date and then moved around more or less incessantly, nudging and modifying and displacing each other as they went, then their claim to an absolute relationship with a particular landscape is undermined” (13). Colonizers also condemned Native Americans for their oral culture. Hegel, echoing Hume and Kant, suggests that a culture that doesn’t write has no history. A culture with no history is one that need not be acknowledged or preserved.

Most prevalent was the idea that Native Americans were just not civilized. According to Edward Tyler, the founder of modern anthropology, “The savage state in some measure represents an early condition of mankind, out of which the higher culture has gradually been developed or evolved” (qtd. in Wilson 14). Euro-Americans tried to help the “savage” Natives evolve by making them more like their “civilized” Euro-Americans selves. After religion, Colonizers believed the most important way to evolve Native Americans was to educate them, particularly to teach them to write.

#### 1.4 Orality to Literacy

There was not one simple reaction to the system of writing by Native Americans. Some were suspicious since this was the avenue by which they lost so

much of their land. On the other hand, according to Wilson, “Native American societies were open, vital and dynamic, pragmatically accepting new cultural practices from each other” (28). Thus, accepting new cultural practices from Europeans was not necessarily shocking or disruptive. Writing, for early Native Americans was, however, the only option by which to be seen as civilized. India, China and Japan were literate cultures prior to contact with the West, but they were still seen as uncivilized for other reasons. Literacy then is not always the key to “legitimate” knowledge, to being a “civilized” society. It is, however, a mandatory element from the West’s point of view (Havelock). What Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes about slaves is also true for Native Americans: “Writing, for these slaves, was not an activity of mind; rather, it was a commodity which they were forced to trade for their humanity” (9). Humanity was synonymous with writing. Even today, according to Ong, the “social condition of illiteracy is confused with the condition of primary orality, which by analogy is also a ‘put down’ in estimation” (119). Ong suggests thinking along the lines of “managed acoustically but successfully” (119). Native Americans did succeed acoustically, and even though most now recognize that, it still would not have halted the reality that writing was and is necessary in order to function successfully with Colonizers. Literacy is still seen as a higher skill. Ong makes three relevant points which emphasize this: “Written text...freed the mind for more original, more abstract thought” (Ong 24). “More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness” (Ong 75). “Writing...is a conscious-raising activity” (Ong 147). Even

some Native Americans view themselves as less civilized than Europeans upon contact. A Creek, Pleasant Porter says, “Who can say but that we would finally have reached a stage of civilization toward which we were progressing slowly” (qtd. in Wilson 322). He goes on to say that the “civilization” Natives reached would be more suited to them than the one violently thrust upon them. Writing may or may not have been in such a civilization, but we’ll never know. What we do know is that writing certainly did change the way of life for Native Americans.

In an oral culture, knowledge, once acquired, had to be constantly repeated or it would be lost. Tradition, then, was taught by action, not by ideas. Writing changed all of this. The surviving orality of primary oral cultures “ceases to be functional, that is, to carry the responsibilities of a memorized code of behavior...The language used is no longer a governing language” (Ong 45). Despite the move to literacy, as Ong suggests, “oral formulaic thought and expression ride deep in consciousness and the unconscious, and they do not vanish as soon as one used to them takes pen in hand” (26). Characteristics of orality are still prominent in writings by Native Americans, including repetition, formulaic elements, episodic narratives, and the belief in the power of the spoken word over the written word. These qualities are different when they are executed by a Native American steeped in an oral history and culture. According to Haveloc:

Deplotted stories of the electronic age are not episodic narratives. They are impressionistic and imagistic variations on the plotted stories that

preceded them. Narrative plot now permanently bears the mark of writing and typography. When it structures itself in memories and echoes, suggestive of early primary oral narrative [such as Joyce's *Ulysses*] with its heavy reliance on the unconscious, it does so inevitably in a self-conscious, characteristically literate way. (148)

Ong, however, may be wrong in this thinking that orality is no longer a governing language for Native Americans. Ong says orality “can, however, with the help of literacy, be modeled into forms that are attractive and interesting and have an appeal both aesthetic and romantic” (45). True the written language dominates most of the governmental documents of tribes and it can be appealing, but the beliefs of many Native Americans are still governed by the tenants of orality and many traditions are still passed down orally. The oral word is still the powerful one. Furthermore, Ong speaks of a gradual development from writing formulaically until the time when “writing [becomes] composition in writing, a kind of discourse—poetic or otherwise—that is put together without feeling that the one writing is actually speaking aloud” (45). This may also not be the case for many Native American writers who now write as part of their evolving cultures, but write from the traditions of their oral cultures. They may or may not be specifically speaking aloud when they write, but many Native American writers are writing in ways that resemble their oral traditions and the worldviews that attend them.



### 1.5 Criticism of Native American Women's Autobiographies

It is valuable to examine the criticism of women's autobiography and Native American women's autobiographies from which this work finds its base and jumping off point. Bataille and Sands are prominent critics of Native American women's autobiography and argue notably that Native American women's autobiographies can "best be addressed and analyzed in terms of the process of its creation rather than an established genre" (*Native* 3). They also say, "Each personal narrative by an American Indian woman is unique—in content, mode of expression, and intention. Each demands to be judged on its own terms; yet collectively these autobiographies give structure to the fragmented nature of human lives in a way that is both recognizable as both specifically female and specifically Indian" (*Native* 130). Although I agree that each work should be analyzed on its own terms, I do believe that a tradition is coming together. As Kilcup suggests we should think of this genre in terms of a tradition in which the works "share concerns and perspectives and that react to a common pattern of historical, political and cultural moments" (7). As for calling Native American autobiographies an established genre, this would only set up expectations. The autobiographies of Native women are broad in structure and scope, and they are still changing and developing.

Autobiographical theory associated with women's and other minorities' is helpful starting point in understanding Native American autobiographies. Sheila Rowbotham in her *Woman's Consciousness* argues that a woman cannot experience

herself as an entirely unique entity because she cannot escape the idea that she is being defined by the dominant male culture. Margo Culley in her *American Women's Autobiography: Fea(s)ts of Memory* explains this as a woman seeing herself not in the privacy of her own bathroom mirror, but “catching a glimpse of herself in a mirror in public, a store window or mirror placed strategically in a department store” (9). W. E. B. Dubois says something similar in his *The Soul of Black Folks*: “The Negro... is gifted with second-sight...It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others...One ever feels his twoness” (30). This sense of alienation felt by women and African-Americans is also relevant to Native Americans. Native Americans, however, are different in the respect that they were not a group, like women or Blacks, who did not have, as Rowbotham says, “names, who [did] not know themselves, who [had] no culture” (27). The problem was that their fully developed cultures were severely impacted by colonialization, which in turn impacted their understanding of the concept of self.

Nancy J. Chodorow in her *Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* suggests that isolated selfhood is unsuitable to women. She suggests that “the basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate” (169). Chodorow claims the individual [woman] does not oppose herself to all others, nor does she feel herself to exist outside others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence. The same can be said for Native Americans. Former President of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, Johnson Holy Rock, said to Wilson: “We are a

small, collective society, where people aren't encouraged to push themselves forward. And we are surrounded by the most aggressively individualistic society in the world'" (qtd. in Wilson 416). Autobiography, as it is traditionally conceived by Euro-Americans, is an aggressive genre, as it thrusts the self into focus. An autobiography that does not have such a focus, one that is "communitist," focused upon the community as many Native American women's autobiographies are, is, therefore, not up to Euro-American standards (Kilcup11).

Minority women autobiographers often want to escape their ethnic identity: Jew, Black. Native American women autobiographers, although their identities are just as problematic, do not. In Isabella Leitner's *Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz*, the loss of individuality to the category of Jew is the horror that she faces. Furthermore, in Paule Marshall's autobiographical *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, she fights for individuality from her gender and the racial category of Caribbean-American. Native American women autobiographers rarely express the desire to free themselves from the category of Native American. They like other minority women are pigeonholed into their racial category, but the drive in Native women is not to be seen as something other than their racial group; it is the drive to be understood and accepted as Native Americans. In other words, many Black autobiographers look forward, writing about their attempt so enter "the promised land," a land in which their race will not longer suppress them (165). Indian autobiographers "want to return"; thus, they

“look black to Eden” to a time when they could live fully in their own cultures (Brumble 165).

Group identity based on oppressive gender roles is also common in women’s autobiographies. One autobiographical work of horror is Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The female of this work is driven mad by late-nineteenth century upper-middle class society that entraps her in the role of wife and mother. She rips off the wallpaper in an attempt to free herself from such confining roles, but this victory is also her defeat as she ascends into madness. Native American women, however, only have trouble at the crossroads of gender and ethnic identity because white culture suppressed the often woman-centered cultures of Native Americans. They are trapped by the Colonizer’s gender roles, which is all the more maddening when their own gender roles are enriching

What other women’s and minority works do have in common with Native American women’s autobiographies is the salvation of a group consciousness. For Isabella of *Fragments of Isabella*, it is her identification with other women, her three sisters, that gives her the strength to survive concentration camp life. For the mad women in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Friedman suggests the wallpaper is a metaphor for her shared identity with other women, who she frees along with herself as she rips it down (47). For Native Americans, other Native Americans are almost always the key to harmony.

Some critics of autobiography, such as Willis Buck, Gerald Kennedy, and George Ulmer, use Lacanian and structuralists approaches. Such critics argue that the self is a fictive entity constituted in words that cannot refer back to the “real” self because all signs are inherently nonreferential. These critics talk of this false self as distinct and separate from all other images. This is not an adequate avenue to Native American autobiography because the self in Native women’s autobiography is not separate from the other selves of the community.

#### 1.6 Understanding the Impact of Contact

While the above critics help guide the specific direction of my examination of Native American women’s autobiographies, a historical look at the events leading up to the first Native American women’s autobiography and the important events surrounding subsequent autobiographies help to frame the lives of the women and their autobiographies.

About a decade before the first Native American women’s autobiography, 1883, the United States government in 1871 had suspended all treaty-making, no longer even pretending to recognize tribal governments (Wilson 292). Native Americans were reduced to the status of children. Two incidents in particular marked the beginnings of a national movement to campaign for Native American rights and citizenship, a campaign which ultimately led the way for Native American women autobiographers. In 1877, the Poncas of Nebraska, under the leadership of Standing Bear were targeted for removal to Indian territory. Many died on the journey, including three of Standing

Bear's children and least of 158 of his people. When he refused to bury his son on alien soil and set off for home, he was arrested. After a newspaper article detailed the atrocities, money was raised for Standing Bear's defense, and his eloquent speech moved the whole court to tears. Standing Bear was eventually released on a writ of habeas corpus even though the court had previously claimed he was not eligible for the writ because "he was not a person within the meaning of the Constitution" (Wilson 294). This was a landmark case which the *Ala California* described as the "'only case now recollected where a court of this country has rendered justice to the Indian as if he were a human being'" (qtd. in Wilson 295). The Ute War also sparked a movement to gain the Indians' legal rights. During this conflict, "an insensitive federal agent sparked an outbreak of violence among the Utes of Colorado" (Wilson 295).

Following these disasters many philanthropic organizations were born and their leaders met annually at Lake Mohonk in New York State to forge a common strategy, including The Women's National Women's Association, which by 1882 had presented its third petition of 100,000 signatures to Congress, urging for Native American rights and the honoring of treaties. During this time, the Nation was beginning to recognize that other cultures were rapidly changing the landscape. Irish and southern and eastern Europeans immigrants, Chinese laborers, and the recently emancipated African-Americans all had cultures like Native Americans, and Whites graciously offered to share their tenants of civilization, "Protestant individualism, a belief in hard work, private property, and the law," with these groups (Wilson 296). Furthermore, in general

Americans were becoming more sympathetic to Native Americans in particular. Books like Helen Hunt Jackson's *A Century of Dishonor* in 1881 disquieted the Nation as it detailed atrocities done to Native Americans. And earlier in 1877, Lewis Henry Morgan in his *Ancient Society, or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery Through Barbarism to Civilization* argued that *all* humans are together on *one* evolutionary ladder.

Sarah Winnemucca published her *Life Among the Piutes*, 1883 to protest the removal of her own tribe, discussed in chapter 1, but the national movements for Native American rights gave her an avenue to make political speeches about the unfair removal of Piutes from their land, which eventually led to the writing of her successful autobiography. In 1900 when Zitkala-Ša's autobiographical essays appeared in *Atlantic Monthly*, the Native population was at its lowest point. By 1920 when Zitkala-Ša had published these essays in her *American Indian Stories*, her position in society was still not much more stable than Winnemucca's forty years earlier. Despite an overhaul of the Indian Service in 1905, the failure of assimilation and the failure of the 1887 General Allotment Act brought about many different conclusions, including a renewal of the idea that Native Americans were lesser human beings because of their "inability" to be capitalists. The movement for Indian rights, however, was still underway, and in 1924, citizenship was granted to all Native Americans, an occurrence that was greeted with mixed feelings by Native Americans. Early Native American women autobiographers wrote as participants in specific political movements of their time;

Winnemucca ends her autobiography with a petition to restore her people to the Malheur reservation, and Zitkala-Ša ends hers with an essay titled “America’s Indian Problem,” which asks readers to question their Bureau of Indian Affairs and includes parts of the scathing report of the Bureau of Municipal Research. These writers were not even thinking primarily of cultural survival; they were still dealing with human survival.

In the late twentieth century, Native Americans did look to preserving and renewing their cultures, and writing was one avenue. What Kenneth Lincoln calls a “Native American Renaissance” occurred, “a written renewal of oral traditions translated into Western literary forms” (8). As Krupat puts it: “the formerly conquered write” (4). This movement set the perfect stage for Native American writers to own their writings, starting with N. Scott Momaday’s novel *House Made of Dawn*, 1968 and eventually leading to the 1981 autobiography, *Storyteller* by Leslie Marmon Silko, which changed the landscape of Native American women’s autobiographies. Native Americans at the time of *House Made of Dawn* no longer fully associated writing with the West. They began to write even more like the storytellers of their oral cultures. Arnold Krupat includes this kind of writing in a category he calls “cosmopolitan literature,” a literature that uses “local, internal, or Indian modes of literary expression within texts that externally fit the Western typology of ‘novels,’ ‘poems,’ and ‘short stories’” (*Voice* 214). To use the terms and theory of anthropologist Stephen Tyler’s postmodern anthropology, many Native Americans abandoned the task of



“representing” Native American culture, trying to teach it, explain it, justify it; and instead began to “evoke” Native American culture, creating works that were the culture instead of about the culture. Western concepts associated with writing were being replaced with Native American ones. Western genres, including autobiography, merged and expanded, authors turned into storytellers, texts turned into stories, and readers turned into participants

There are many historical and political factors that contributed to the Renaissance of Native American writings. In 1944 around forty tribes came together to create a new lobbying organization, the National Congress of American Indians. In 1961, some seventy tribes came together in Chicago for the “American Indian Conference,” and they issued a “Declaration of Indian Purpose.” It began with “We... [have] a right to choose our own way of life. Since our Indian culture is slowly being absorbed by the American society, we believe we have the responsibility of preserving our precious heritage....” (qtd. in Wilson 378).

In 1960 with statistics concerning poverty and death still appalling in Native American societies, Johnson made Native Americans “eligible for assistance under the new Economic Opportunity Act” (Wilson 381). For the first time they could “take initiatives that reflected their own vision of their needs and priorities” (Wilson 381). On the heels of the Civil Rights Movement, the Red Power movement of the sixties ushered in an explosion of pride among Natives who participated in protests, fish-ins,

the Alcatraz incident, the Trail of Broken Treaties, and The Siege of Wounded Knee headed by the American Indian Movement.

Although Krupat suggests that the *renaissance* in the so-called Native American Renaissance is a somewhat misleading, the term does work to call attention to a change in the landscape of Native American literature. N. Scott Momaday's 1968 *House Made of Dawn* and Vine Deloria's 1969 *Custer Died For Your Sins* are the two texts most recognized at the beginning of the Renaissance. Momaday's work is most relevant for this study because he is a widely recognized Native American, and he deals with both traditional and contemporary issues. When Momaday won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for this work in 1969, there were questions about what Momaday had accomplished, a victory for Native Americans or Westerners. Dee Horne points out, using the words of Louis Owens, in her work *Contemporary American Indian Writing: Unsettling Literature*, a comment by a Pulitzer juror that suggests that Momaday won because he could write like a Euro-American; he could "'imitate the discourse of the cultural center—Euramerica—'" (Owens 90). The Juror said: "'an award to its author might be considered recognition of the arrival on the American literary scene of a matured, sophisticated literary artist from the original Americas'" (Horne 1). In other words, Horne and Owens believe this comment implies that Momaday was the first Native American writer to get it right, in terms of writing like a Westerner. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in their *The Empire Writes Back* discuss the double bind that colonized writers face: if they write like the Colonizer, they are either dismissed as "colonial

mimics” or they are hailed for mastering “the dominant culture’s discourse” (Horne 2). If they write outside Western literary traditions, their work is sidelined and labeled marginal (Horne 2). Horne’s assertion is that when writers like Momaday “write within the colonial rules of recognition while simultaneously contesting these rules, they often find that their subversive strategies are either unnoticed or overlooked” (Horne 2). Horne’s book gives example after example of Native Americans using “subversive mimicry,” a strategy that “mirrors/represents aspects of colonizers and their discourse and also refracts these images” (22). Horne’s theory of subversive mimicry is an important step, on the heels of other important steps, for Native Americans and writing. Despite the fact that Native American resistance in writing inscribes the resisted into the texture of the resisting, Native American write well enough to manipulate Western literary traditions; writing then is not just a borrowed tradition of the West anymore. It is the beginning of their own tradition; therefore, the Renaissance is both about non-Natives recognition of Native American writings and Native Americans recognition of writing as part of their evolving Native traditions.

Leading up to Silko’s 1981 *Storyteller*, the seventies brought the Indian Education Act and the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act. This is also the time when American Indians were beginning to be called Native American. As Wilson describes it, this is “an attempt to magic away centuries of misunderstandings, tragedy and suffering by a simple sleight of tongue” (411). The change is too little too late, but native people were viewed by this time with greater

respect. The population had grown from 52,400 in 1960 to 1.36 million by 1980 (Roemer 33 “Timeline”).

Subsequent to Silko, Native American women autobiographers wrote and are writing in a time when other positive developments continue together with depressing statistics. The Native American Right Fund and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 occur alongside continued cultural and economic dissolution. Communicable diseases, infant mortality and poor sanitation are being replaced with more spiritual and psychological crises and soaring rates of drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, homicide, family violence and ‘accidental’ death (Wilson 422). Census data in 1990 revealed that 76.2 percent of Native Americans spoke only English, but that number seems to be holding steady because many “organizations have been founded to document and teach Indigenous languages, a number of tribes have crafted ambitious language policies, and Congress approved the Native American Languages Act in 1990” (Wetzel 61). In 1986, the Onondaga traditional chief, Oren Lyons told a conference: “We will determine what our culture is.... (Wilson 427). His words already gain heft because of Silko’s *Storyteller* and continue to ring true in later autobiographies by Native women who tell their stories in creative and meaningful ways.

### 1.7 Overall Perspective

Before heading into the detailed examinations of particular Native American women’s autobiographies, this recap will assist in emphasizing the claims of this study.

Specifically, early Native American autobiographers saw their cultures were being systematically taken from them by loss of land and life, and later by the education forced upon them. Contemporary Native American autobiographers are the children of parents and grandparents whose cultures were legally denied them. Contemporary autobiographers, trying to salvage and reinvent their cultures, must tackle continuing stereotypes and deal with a legacy of attempted genocide. According to Susan Stanford Friedman, writing allowed/s women to create “an alternate self in the autobiographical act... ” (40-41). Early Natives were silenced because they came from oral cultures, so all the stereotypes and misunderstandings had power. Writing allowed them to defend and explain themselves. Contemporary autobiographers are still explaining themselves, but they also write autobiographies that reveal themselves, that is they are writing works that are their cultures not just about their cultures. They are heeding the words of Fanon who calls for the indigenous artist and intellectual to create a new literature.

Native American writers today are born into both the oral and scribal traditions. In fact, many urban Natives are exposed to the written tradition more than they are exposed to their oral tradition. Native Americans write from the beginning of their lives, just as Westerners do. Whether they participate in the oral tradition is not even assured. On the most basic level, writing preserves and perpetuates the cultures. However, as Jan Sequoya argues, “Literary forms of ‘cultural revitalization’ are paradoxical forms in that they are necessarily not constituted in the cultural terms of the traditions which they would vitalize” (460). For contemporary Native American

women writers, writing is now a part of their cultures, a part that they are vitalizing. The essays, interviews, fiction and autobiographies of contemporary Native American women writers reveal this. Native American women writers often think differently about writing than Westerners and early Native American writers, and writing is becoming less and less a “translation” from the oral tradition and more a Native tradition of its own based heavily on the oral tradition. In addition, writing is allowing Native American women writers to effectively interact with the dominant society and other cultures with which they have no choice but to coexist. Krupat is right when he argues that because of the “cultural and technical differences of Native American literatures from the literatures of the West” there should be a “reevaluation of what ‘American literature’ means” (*Voice* 98). I will participate in this reevaluation as I study the autobiographies of Native American women.

## CHAPTER 2

### ENTER THE WRITTEN WORD

#### 2.1 Literacy and Early Autobiographers

Greg Sarris observes that the “notion of autobiography as fiction, or interpretation, is nothing new. The autobiography, whether narrated or written, is not the life but an account, a story, of the life” (423). The stories of the lives of early Native American women can be found in the genre called autobiography. That this term is problematic is also not new. Kathleen Sands in her essay “Cooperation and Resistance,” argues that the as-told-to narratives especially suffer under this term. She suggests these works be discussed in terms of “a process, rather than a genre,” a suggestion that can also apply to texts written by Native American women (147). The thinking and writing process of the autobiography is a crucial part of early Native women’s stories, including the process of moving from an oral way of communicating to a written way; the motivations of and expectations on the writer; the reception of the text then and now; the issues of power, authorship, and voice of the writer; and the circumstances of the text’s production, including the publisher/editor’s role in compiling the text and the role of ‘framing’ through prefaces, forewords and appendices. All of these issues reveal the lives of early Native American women, as much as a strictly New Critical approach of the main portion of the text would. Hertha

Dawn Wong argues that “we can think of late-nineteenth and early twentieth century Native American autobiography as a type of literary ‘boundary culture’[Robert F. Murphy’s term] where two cultures influence each other simultaneously” (89). A focus on this boundary, some critics suggest, never allows the Native American women to “win,” because the focus is less about the specific content of Native American cultures. These early texts, despite their complex productions, do win. American Indian women’s voices do persevere; readers hear them, but they hear them more clearly if they understand how and why the text was written.

More than anything, these early autobiographies by Native women are public narratives. As Bataille and Sands argue, “Their [early Native American women’s] narratives were only secondarily personal life stories” (13). David Brumble in speaking about early men’s and women’s autobiographies says, “[S]ome worked for prestige. Some worked...to set the record straight. Others worked to preserve their knowledge of the old ways for future generations. Some worked quite simply for the money” (72). Early Native women’s autobiographies were all written by women in order to help improve the conditions of Native Americans in general and/or their particular tribes. Early Native American women did feel proud to use their stories to help their people, and in fact, the majority of these early writers are accused of self-aggrandizement, but personal pride and money seem to be a bi-product of grander motivations. As part of a culture that was seen as savage and animalistic, and not even on the level of a “domesticated animal” that African-Americans were assigned, Native American women



had to show their and their culture's best side, while reminding and/or telling of the reprehensible treatment they had and were still receiving. Their autobiographies had to reveal that they could feel as strongly, think as highly and act as civilly as any non-Native could. Because of the dire situations facing Native Americans, these autobiographies also had to be protest documents that would make non-Natives take steps to change specific actions and/or laws concerning Natives. The results were autobiographies that work for Native Americans, by being written for white audiences.

In speaking of early Native women's autobiographies, Sands calls them "acts of narrative resistance" ("Cooperation" 136). They are texts of resistance in the "areas of native linguistics and cultural aesthetics" (Sands, "Cooperation" 137). These early works did political work, but as early Native women wrote about themselves and their people, their native linguistic and cultural aesthetics were also at work. Even though Native American women wrote their stories, a Euro-American act in itself, they were resisting Euro-American cultures because by telling Native American stories, songs, rituals, and beliefs they were participating in the spirit of their oral traditions. Today, readers, both Native and non-Native, of these early autobiographies can learn about Native American cultures and see the beginnings of a Native written tradition.

The late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Native American women autobiographers, Sarah Winnemucca and Zitkala-Ša, did not write for the mystical, muse-inspired reasons many Euro-Americans did. They wrote to assist their tribe and all Native Americans. Therefore, their audience is not primarily other tribal

members. However, their works are not fully what Louis Owens calls, “literary tourism,” “accessible to the aesthetic and political tastes of metropolitan center and, perhaps more significantly,...carefully managed exoticism that is both entertaining but not discomfiting to the non-Native readers” (22). These works are accessible. Jarold Ramsey in his “Telling Stories for Readers” compliments the Native narrator, Clara Pearson for her “‘reader-solicitous’ practices” in her 1990 stories collected in *Nehalem Tillamook Tales* (129). Early autobiographies are also very reader-solicitous; they take white readers into account, explaining much for their benefit. However, they are also meant to discomfit just enough to get white readers to take political action, usually in form of signing a petition.

Early works are also not trying to accomplish in writing what their oral literatures accomplished. That is their writings did not primarily do what their traditional stories do—teach their members “about the world and their place in it, how to behave, and how to live harmoniously with nature” (Ruoff 40). They also did not primarily do what their ritual drama and songs do— “order the spiritual and physical world through the power of the word, whether chanted, spoken, or sung” (Ruoff 19). The writer had her culture reinforced as she told/wrote her story and some had hopes for teaching future generations of Natives, but early Native American women were compelled to write out of one of the most basic drives, defense. Their “strategic location,” Edward Said’s term for the “author’s position in a text with regard to the... material he writes about,” was that of a defender writing a defense to right past

oppression and stop future oppression (*Orientalism* 20). They had much to teach and correct about themselves as women and as Native Americans; they also had much to defend, their very lives in fact. As a whole, their works say, “Look at me a Native-American woman; I exist. I’m powerful in my culture, and I am just as moral, clean, feeling, and interesting as any non-Native woman. Look at what has been done to me and my people.” All early works do not go about this message in the same way, but the theme exists nonetheless. Spivak, drawing upon Nietzsche’s “will to power,” says the drive to explain is the drive to control. There was very little in their interactions with Euro-Americans that Native American women could control, so they were driven to explain in writing in hopes of gaining some control.

A challenge for early Native women autobiographers was the publishing system, especially editors. Most writings, Native American or not, have been edited, and the editorial influence is in most cases a positive one. White editors of early Native American women’s writings often did bridge the linguistic and grammatical divide, which early Native American women writers were trying to cross, from a Native language to English. Right or wrong, these early editors made many Native American works clearer to the English reader. Early editors did not stop there, however. Their influence often extended into the organization and content. Still, this kind of influence is not limited to works by Native Americans. Editors work for publishers, and their goal is to make the work marketable. Early Native American women’s writings were for non-Native English readers. Thus, for those works to be marketable, they needed to

be written in standard written English and in a familiar form. Editors as well as Native American women writers knew this and accepted this. According to Kilcup, early Native women autobiographers would often “ventriloquize a white editor, either consciously or unconsciously, for the purpose of creating a narrative bridge between themselves and their white audience—in effect a kind of translation” (20). James Ruppert would call this *mediation*; his *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*, although focusing on contemporary fiction, can be applied to early Native American women’s autobiographies. These writers “draw on different spheres of discourse [Native and Western] to create a new context for meaning and identity” (33). These early writers are struggling and juggling two spheres of discourse more than contemporary writers, writing works that subtly or not so subtly explained, expressed and defended their Native culture while trying to produce “good,” Euro-American writing. They are moving away from the victim role into “participants [of] two rich cultural traditions” (3).

Early Native autobiographies struggled to add literacy, the English language, and in this case the autobiographical genre to their other modes of expression. Their Euro-American educational levels varied, but all Native American women autobiographers were joining a tradition that did not mesh with their belief systems. Not surprisingly, early works of Native American women, including the autobiographies, *Life Among the Piutes* and *American Indian Stories* do incorporate many elements of the authors’ oral storytelling traditions. Thus, their autobiographies

were seen and are still often seen as poorly written, disjointed, unorganized, unfocused, and/or un-autobiographical. Those who remember that English is the second language for early Native American women and have knowledge of the workings and beliefs of their oral traditions know how unsound these labels are. Narcissa Owen's 1907 *A Cherokee Woman's America: Memoirs of Narcissa Owen* is another early un-autobiographical autobiography that foreshadows the genre hybridity that Native women seem to embrace. This work, according to Bataille and Sands is "a written, nonsequential narrative [which] includes a brief history of her tribe, family genealogy, descriptions of curing practices, vignettes of friends, family members, and important Cherokee leaders, as well her experiences living in the South during the Civil War and later as a teacher at the Cherokee Female Seminary" (*American* 166). This autobiography even with its "inaccuracies and re-visionings" deserves and gets well needed study in the 2005 Karen L. Kilcup edition (xv). This chapter, however, will focus specifically upon *Life Among the Piutes* and *American Indian Stories* because they serve as the clearest precursors for Native American women's autobiographies to come. Specifically, *Life Among the Piutes*, a linear work in which Winnemucca uses "I" to tell her specific story foreshadows many of the more European style Native American women's autobiographies that will be discussed in chapter 3. However, the works discussed in chapter 3 also reveal that a dominating "I" in no way guarantees an autobiography that is European in style in any other way. *American Indian Stories* hints at the works to be discussed in chapter 2. The use of "I" in these works does not

dominate because other voices and genres are mixed in the work to tell the woman's story.

The unusual qualities of early Native American women's autobiographies are not exclusive to women. Native males, such as the Ojibwe writer George Copway's 1847 *The Life, Histories and Travels of Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh* also wrote a mixed form autobiography of oral tradition, history and personal experience. Copway adds speeches and published letters to two subsequent editions. According to Ruoff:

Copway's blending of myth, history, and recent events, and his combining of tribal ethnohistory and personal experience create a structure of personal narrative that later American Indian autobiographers followed. This mixed form, which differs from the more linear, personal confession or life history found in non-Indian autobiographies, was congenial to Indian narrators accustomed to viewing their lives within the history of their tribe or band, clan and family. (257)

Others might slot early Native American women's autobiographies as part of the tradition of American women's writing, which "shared an interest in genre experimentation, an experimentation that forecasted modernism" (Kilcup 34). Sarah Orne Jewett, Pauline Hopkins, Maria Cristina Mena, Mary Austin, and Mary Hallock Foote all experimented with genre hybridity. Native women, as suggested earlier, had greater concerns than literary experimentation; they were concerned with cultural

survival and the conservation of Native traditions (Kilcup 34). Native American women's genre hybridity, non-linear structure, and "communitist" slant (Kilcup's term for a focus on community) should not be attributed to Modernism or an insufficient knowledge of the autobiographical tradition, although this was often the case, but to their oral traditions and worldviews which they translated into written forms.

Because writing was not part of Native American cultures, early works by Native American women expose cultures, but are not like many post-Native American Renaissance works that are the heartbeats of those cultures. Still, early authors laid the groundwork for contemporary authors to accept writing as part of their cultures and write in a culturally-driven way. *Life Among the Piutes* and *American Indian Stories*, as well as biographical information about their authors provide a spectrum of the struggles Native American women faced to tell their stories and a thorough spectrum of why early works were written the way they were.

### 2.2 *Life Among the Piutes*: A Trailblazing Autobiography

Sarah Winnemucca was born Thocmentony (translated Shell Flower) in 1844, the granddaughter of Truckee who was the leader of the Numa and "a guide to early emigrants crossing the Great Basin" (Canfield 4). Her *Life Among the Piutes*, 1883 is the first work published in English by a Native American woman. It is "a combination of tribal history, personal narrative, and political tract. The overtly political book was designed to make white readers support the cause of the Indians; it even contained a petition that readers could send to Congress" (Bloom 108). More specifically, it

combines elements of as-told-to, tribal history, oral history, oral story, and testimony. Winnemucca wrote her autobiography during a national movement by white women for Native American rights; she wrote it because of the forced removal of her tribe, the Piutes, to the Yakima Reservation, following an 1878 war between the Bannock tribe of Idaho and the white army. A limited number of Piutes did join with the Bannock in the war, but in the end all Bannock and Piutes were forcibly removed. Fluent in English and Spanish as well as her Native language, Winnemucca gave numerous speeches throughout the United States “on behalf of the Indians and protesting the wrongs of the federal Indian policies” (Bloom 107). From these speeches came this autobiographical work. Winnemucca hoped this book and the petition it contained would add momentum to her speeches and spur listeners to action on behalf of her people. Readers are never silent recipients of a text’s messages; they interpret a message and that interpretation becomes another message, but Winnemucca was attempting to control that interpreted message by including a petition in her own words that she wanted readers to sign and send to Congress. Society was not deaf to Winnemucca’s message, and critics such as Brumble, Ruoff, Fowler and Georgi-Findlay believe that the speeches, book and petitions “lent support to the passage of the General Allotment Act, also known as the Dawes Act in 1887” (Georgi-Findlay 225). This Act was something altogether different in its conception than it was in its reality. In its conception, it was supposed to do what the reservation system could not, insure individual Indian land holdings. Members were told to select individual allotments- 160 acres per nuclear family (Wilson 304). The rest



of a tribe's land was sold to whites. After the first thirteen years, 28,500,000 acres of "surplus" land was up for sale (Wilson 308). This "extra" land was usually the best land. Furthermore, after a few generations, there were so many heirs to a particular allotment that it could not be divided up and was often leased to non-Indians (Wilson 348). The legislation was ultimately tragic as Natives lost 60% of their lands. Winnemucca could not foresee such a miscarriage and to connect her name with the Dawes Act today is not accurate.

*Life Among the Piutes* is full of cultural information about the Piutes and defense of this very information; Winnemucca is attempting to counteract and correct Euro-American falsehoods and misconceptions about Native Americans. Bataille and Sands argue, and many readers of today concur, that Winnemucca's autobiography is the way it is because of her "heavily biased acculturated and Christianized viewpoints" (Bataille 21). I would argue that she is deliberately focusing upon the "acculturated" and Christianized aspects of her life in order to help her people and to make the text accessible to white readers. That is not to say that she is not acculturated or Christianized, but her agenda for this text is predominantly the future welfare and happiness of the Piutes. She is not letting go of her Native culture; she readily puts it forth to show its similarities with Christianity, but she just as readily questions the value of Christianity in the way it is practiced by invading whites and points out the ways the Piute way of life is superior to the Euro-American way. Mary Pratt in her *Imperial Eyes* says, that "subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials

transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture. While subjugated peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for” (6). To meet her goal, Winnemucca’s autoethnography uses writing, English, many Euro-American conventions of autobiography, the melodramatic writing style of her time, the stereotypes of the savage and Indian Princess, as well as Christianity and her first-hand knowledge and experience with Euro-American culture. According to Brumble, male autobiographers like Eastman and Griffis “yearned with a part of their being for the old life” (71). Winnemucca, while using all the tools she could from Euro-American cultures to make her autobiography one that could help her people, always “retained an essentially tribal sense of self” (71).

According to LaVonne Ruoff, “A major form of oratory after the coming of whites—and the type most frequently anthologized—consisted of the speeches made at meetings of Indians and settlers” (51). Oratory was, according to Ruoff, “a highly regarded skill in many Indian tribes” (48). One of those tribes was the Piutes, where “women contributed significantly to the tribal council” (Ruoff 48). Winnemucca writes in *Life*, “Women know as much as the men do, and their advice is often asked” (53). Not only was speech making part of the Piutes culture, Winnemucca had honed her particular topic in front of white audiences, who made up nearly all the buyers of her autobiography and who knew of her people’s condition and that the proceeds from the work supported Winnemucca and her cause to help her people, specifically her desire to

found a school for Piute children. According to Walter Ong, writing establishes “autonomous discourse,” “discourse which cannot be directly questioned or contested as oral speech can be” (77). However, Brumble argues that by the time Winnemucca came to write her narrative down, she would have already adapted the speech to the reactions of the white audience, a characteristic of adaptation that Winnemucca knew well from her own culture’s oral tradition. Brigitte Georgi-Findlay concurs with Brumble and suggests that “Winnemucca’s identity as a woman and the way her womanhood is, so to speak, ‘incorporated’ into her text, form an important part of Winnemucca’s dialogue with her public that should not be underestimated” (227). Thus, while speech-making, she not only honed how and what to say, but came to realize how crucial her gender was to the success of her autobiography. Furthermore, Winnemucca was acutely aware of all the negative perceptions and stereotypes that needed to be undone and the ones she could use to help her cause. Thus, when Winnemucca piles detail upon detail about her culture and explains her virtuousness or illustrates her bravery one too many times, it is because she had an agenda, but it is not the self-aggrandizement that has been suggested. And if her autobiography seems deliberate and contrived, that is because Winnemucca had to be all things to all people. She was never writing for art’s sake or to share; she had land to recover, families to reunite and lives to save. As Brumble suggests, Winnemucca may “have been exaggerating her altruism a bit,” and possibly her overall importance (64). This was a smart move on her part because as the first Native American women’s autobiographer,

her importance, her virtuousness, her bravery, her kindness, her openness would be read as speaking for all Native Americans, especially women. She was the spokeswoman for her tribe, so her personal qualities and actions were important. There was no room in this work for her flaws, weaknesses or mistakes; that would have set her people back. She didn't just have to seem similar to a white woman; she had to seem better.

A literary work, an author's voice, is shaped by the beliefs of its readers in a particular historical period. As a Native American women writer, Winnemucca was dealing with men and women accustomed to a woman's Victorian virtue, but who questioned that same virtue in Native women; therefore, she had to defend herself and all Native American women by showing herself and them under the light of Victorian womanhood (Georgi-Findlay 228). Her first education was in a "shame culture" (Brumble 66). She is concerned with "self-vindication" (Brumble 66). She must be worthy of respect in her autobiography, and who better to deserve respect than the image of the Indian princess. Georgi-Findlay suggests that Winnemucca used this stereotype to her advantage (228). Winnemucca could not show up for a lecture or on the pages of her story with anything less than the respectability of royalty. As a "princess" her virtue is implied and the sexual harassment and violence she and other Native women were subject to is made all the more shocking. Winnemucca's words make whom she is defending herself from clear: "My people have been so unhappy.... The mothers are afraid to have more children, for fear they shall have daughters, who are not safe even in their mother's presence" (234). That Native women's virtue was

not physically safe after contact with whites is putting it mildly. Her physical safety was not the only part of the equation. The stereotype of the Native American woman as an overly sexual object also forced Winnemucca to defend herself. There were specific attacks on her, and there were attacks on the morality of Native American women in general that Winnemucca wanted to undercut in her story. For Winnemucca these were one in the same because her credibility as a spokeswoman was criticized in the form of attacks on her virtuousness as a woman. According to Gae Witney Canfield's biography of Winnemucca, the personal attacks were in the form of letters written about Winnemucca and sent to Washington. She is described as prostitute, loose woman, and a camp groupie.

Winnemucca never comes across as simply a victim. She explains her culture and defends her virtue and the virtue of all Native women, but her deeds show her to be an exceptional woman among her tribe. Her exceptionalness was important because it showed readers that Native Americans were not just similar people, but could be exceptional people as well. Once when her sister and she were forced by circumstances to share a room with eight cowboys, Winnemucca threatens one of the cowboys who touched her during the night: "Go away, or I will cut you to pieces, you mean man!" (231). The offender immediately fled. As Ruoff says, "Winnemucca is not a victim, but rather an independent woman determined to fight off her attackers. Her strength of character, as well as her fast horse and sharp knife, enable her to achieve victories" (264). Her bravery and intellect are shown time and time again in the text.

Her main way of defending her culture is not by naming and then specifically arguing against the numerous stereotypes and falsities; it is by explaining and thus educating readers in the ways of her tribe. According to Catherine S. Fowler, Winnemucca imparts “data on Northern Paiute subsistence patterns, trade, shamanism, puberty observances, courting and marriage customs, death and burial practices, and more” (39). Common phrases include “it was a law among us” “it is a rule among our people” “for this is the way we.” While educating, she does, however, constantly anticipate any negative impressions her traditions might imply and corrects those impressions immediately. For example, after explaining that six horses were killed in honor of the dead chief, she writes, “Now my good readers, I do not want you to think we do this thing because we think the dead use what we put in” (39). Overall, according to Brumble, Winnemucca doesn’t perceive essential differences in social mores among the Piutes and the whites. Her explanations imply to her readers that Native Americans are fundamentally the same as white readers. In her chapter “Domestic and Social Moralities” she explains that Native Americans are “taught to love everybody,” and that their women are not allowed to marry “into our relations” (45). “They never scalped a human being” (54). The children “show natural good taste” (57).

Furthermore, Winnemucca’s autobiography is similar to the Euro-American literary tradition of autobiography; internal sections are coherent, specifically chronological, such as her story of two Native girls being abducted and raped by white

men. She takes great pains to give exact dates and locations. As a Native and woman autobiographer, Winnemucca was more vulnerable to doubts than other autobiographers. During the late nineteenth century, a Native American writer was not the norm; a Native American woman writer was downright unusual. Winnemucca had to be careful; she was speaking for her tribe and all Native Americans. In her autobiography she uses what Ruth Rosenberg describes as a “hesitant, nonconfrontational tone” (319). Winnemucca deploys this technique when she begins her autobiography with the line: “I was born” (5). The familiarity ends there because she adds: “somewhere near 1844, but am not sure of the precise time” (5). This admission lends an essential credibility to her text because she is immediately admitting that which she does not know to be fact, a fact that white readers take for granted about themselves. In chapter 3, she uses the same tone to introduce “wars and their causes”: “This was in the year 1858, I think: I am not sure” (58). Later she says, “As I do not remember all of the particulars, I will not attempt to relate it” (99). All of these examples show the cautiousness of a person who had no rights of citizenship and who was still stereotyped as a savage. However, like Frederick Douglass is separated from his white audience in the beginning of his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* when he begins “I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough.... I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it” (833), Winnemucca is also separated her from her white audience because most readers of her time if not all would know the exact time of their

birth and other important dates of their lives. As Kilcup suggests, such admissions are critiques of “authoritative white selfhood” (22). In Douglass’ case slaves were denied this basic knowledge, in Winnemucca’s case this knowledge was not important. Furthermore, Winnemucca’s admission bespeaks the immediacy of a spoken text that would invite readers to ask questions. Much of the work, therefore, also reveals the enormous divide between Natives and Euro-Americans, specifically when Winnemucca uses a wide variety of genres, manifesting generic variations within as well as across chapters (Kilcup 29).

The multi-genre quality of this autobiography stems from the writer’s oral tradition. For example, Brumble suggests that Winnemucca tells coup tales throughout her text (66). When she recalls leading a detail of soldiers to rescue her father and other Paiutes from the Bannocks, she writes, “I, only an Indian woman, went and saved my father and his people” (164). The coup tale continues when Winnemucca recalls her father’s praise: “Now hereafter we will look on her as chieftan, for none of us are worthy of being chief but her” (193). Another example is the history of her tribe that she includes in the work. Brumble categorizes her as falling into the “preliterate tradition” of American Indian autobiography (48). He groups her with two other early figures, White Bull and Two Leggings, mainly because their narratives resist the Western tendency to construct the self in a metonymic (part to part) manner. As Brumble puts it, “Many of the as-told-to Indian autobiographies include tribal history; indeed, that early Indians should tell about their own lives only after telling the history



of their people has suggested to several scholars something essential about Indian habits of mind. It seems to confirm that these early Indians conceived of themselves as tribal beings, that it was unconventional for them to think about themselves apart from their people" (54).

The word "savage" comes up time and time again in the text in reference to Indians; Whites are named as "civilized." The text eventually undercuts both words, and at times, they take on each other's meaning. When Winnemucca uses savage in relation to Native Americans, savage often ends up meaning civilized. When she uses civilized in relation to Whites, it often wends up meaning savage. In other words, Winnemucca implies that Native Americans are as civilized as Euro-Americans, and in some cases they are more civilized. She achieves this by explaining the ways that Native Americans are similarly civilized and by recounting numerous instances of White savagery. She compares the governments of the Piutes and whites and finds them remarkably similar. She says, "We have a republic as well as you. The council-tent is our Congress, and anybody can speak who has anything to say, women and all" (53). She knew that in white culture, women were rarely involved in government. Winnemucca implies that Piute civilization is ahead of Whites in equal rights for women, rights the Piute did not even have to fight for. Another time Winnemucca uses the word "civilized" to describe white courtship rituals; however, the rituals she describes are remarkable similar to white courtship rituals: "Oh, with what eagerness

we girls used to watch every spring for the time when we could meet with our hearts' delight, the young men, whom in civilized life you call beaux" (46).

Furthermore, a statement, such as "There is nothing cruel about our people" has an extra punch when one reads all the cruelties performed by Whites (46). As a child she heard about white cannibalism: "There was a fearful story they told us children. Our mothers told us that the whites were killing everybody and eating them" (11). Her parents temporarily buried her to protect her from such a fate. Whites, then, from the beginning of the autobiography are the savages in this text. Winnemucca also recounts an event in which two Native girls were kidnapped and badly abused. Winnemucca's brother and some other Native men killed the white kidnappers. In this incident sparked the Pyramid Lake War. Winnemucca does not use her own words to describe the reaction to the Indians' retaliation; she uses a white newspaper, which calls her brother and the other men "bloodthirsty savages" (71). This description falls on deaf ears after Winnemucca's explanation of the savagery done to the young girls. The only savages in this situation were the white kidnappers.

It is not surprising that *Life Among the Piutes* was written in the melodramatic mode of the time, a mode that shows her skill and reinforces her femininity. The word "Oh" begins many of her sentences, and she often starts them with "My dear reader" as well. She even shows her modesty as a writer when talking about her struggles with English: "I assure you my dear readers, I am not much better now" (82). This mode fits with Winnemucca's agenda because it is meant to stir the emotions, but it is also

generally very careful. She says, “Oh it is a fearful thing to tell, but it must be told” (80). Winnemucca is delicate with her bad news, sandwiching it between interesting cultural information. As she is describing the Festival of Flower and has readers imagining the beauty of the young girls and the festivities of the day, she slips in a small paragraph about how her “people have been so unhappy for a long time that they wish to *disincrease*, instead of multiply” because their daughters are not safe (48). The readers’ image of the festival is temporarily rocked by the image of young girls being abused. In this same chapter as she is describing how Piute boys are introduced to manhood, she explains that “if there is a war he can go to it” (51). She then segues into this comment: “I never saw a wardance. It is always the whites that begin the wars, for their own selfish purposes” (51). She cannot afford to be too accusatory, which might alienate readers from her book and thus her cause, but she does not completely hide her anger.

Others’ voices are also a large part of Winnemucca’s autobiography. They occur in the Preface and footnotes because of the editorial influence and in the appendix because of Winnemucca’s race and gender. In the Preface Mary Mann explains:

In fighting with her literary deficiencies she loses some of the fervid eloquence which her extraordinary colloquial command of the English language enables her to utter, but I am confident that no one would desire that her original words be altered...My editing has consisted in

copying the original manuscript in correct orthography and punctuation, with occasional emendations by the author. (1)

However, in a letter to a friend Mann admits that “I don’t think the English language ever got such a treatment before. I have to recur to her sometimes to know what a word is, as spelling is an unknown quantity to her” (Canfield 203). We will never know the extent to which Mann changed Winnemucca’s text, but by phrasing her editing task the way she does in the Preface, and not the way she puts it to her friend, it is clear that she is trying to play down her role. Furthermore, she seems to be genuinely moved by Winnemucca story, just the way Winnemucca wanted it. In the Preface, Mann calls the work a “heroic act on the part of the writer.” And again in her letter to her friend, she reveals that she has “a wholly new conception of them [Native Americans] now, and we civilized people may well stand abashed before their purity of life & their truthfulness” (qtd. in Canfield 201).

In the chapter, “Domestic and Social Moralities” the editor, Mary Mann, is also there; this time to back up Winnemucca. Mann says in one footnote, “Indian children really get education in heart and mind” (52). Winnemucca had just said this—“Our children are very carefully taught to be good.” “We are taught to love everybody,” but Mann must have felt her affirmation and explanation, as a white, would help to make Winnemucca’s words believable. Mann is a nineteenth-century woman though, and she also uses the voices of men to back her up. In the same footnote, she uses three men to attest to the fact that Native Americans can be “civilized” (52). For example, Mann

paraphrases the text of H.H. to explain how this stereotype of savageness began: “From the beginning the Christian bigots who peopled America looked upon the Indians as heathen” (52). The implication is that the stereotype of savagery has more to do with Christianity than with behavior by the Natives.

Winnemucca needed others to help defend her against the many personal accusations thrown at her because she called out certain men as thieves and liars. Again, Winnemucca as a woman needed more than Mary Mann to make her autobiography trustworthy and respectable. Mann does not include or quote from the specific accusations, but she says that the accusations stem from the “agents [Winnemucca] criticize[d]” (248). Winnemucca says in the appendix, “Every one knows what a woman must suffer who undertakes to act against bad men. My reputation has been assailed, and it is done so cunningly that I cannot prove it to be unjust” (258). It is particularly her gender that is attacked. She is not called a savage; she is called a “whore.” What Winnemucca does include in her appendix is a rebuttal to those accusations in the form of letters from men who attest to her character. Slave narratives and early African-American writings had to be authenticated by white voices as well. The letters in the appendix of *Life Among the Piutes* were requested personally by Winnemucca from certain men. The letters say such things as: “Her conduct was always good” (249). “She is intelligent” (250). “She is entirely trustworthy and reliable” (260). The letters attest to her conduct as a woman and her reliability as a writer in terms of the facts in the autobiography.

Sarah Winnemucca the writer never writes completely from the assimilation point of view or the tribal opposition one; she writes in what Mary Pratt calls the “contact zone.” She was the consummate negotiator. She continues a tradition started by her father. She watched her father’s willingness to adapt and compromise with whites, and she inherited this way of thinking. She wanted her tribe to survive, so she got along with whites. Her “white brothers” and “white sisters” are described as killing, raping, lying and cheating, but she never stops negotiating or compromising. This makes her narrative all the more influential in showing her Christian attitude. She stretches out the olive branch time and time again, even when she knows she could lose her hand. As a Pauite and a woman, she also resides in this zone. She shows not only how Native women are similar to white women, but how they have a superior role in their own community. If as many critics suggest, she preferred life among whites, who could blame her for wanting to avoid starvation and violence. She never, however, turned her back on her tribe. Her life’s work involved helping her tribe survive in the face of relentless colonization.

### 2.3 *American Indian Stories: Fiction Joins Autobiography*

Gertrude Simmons, who later renamed herself Zitkala-Ša (red bird), was born in 1876 a Sioux of the Yankton Band on her mother’s side, and a white on her father’s side. Her father left the family before she was born, and she lived with her Mother and an older brother on the Yankton reservation. Once she went away to White’s Manual Institute in Wabash, Indiana, at the age of eight, “under the seductive pressure of the

missionaries,” she could never again fully return to the ways of the Sioux (Fisher x). She took to her white education, particularly oratory and writing, so fast and so successfully that she became an object of suspicion in her Sioux tribe’s eyes. At the age of eleven, she returned to the reservation, but convinced her mother to let her return to school and finish her education. She later spent two years at Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana. Her Sioux family and tribe viewed her choice of an education in the white man’s world as tantamount to betrayal. The more she studied about the world outside of the reservation, the more she wrote herself out of her tribe’s good graces, especially her immediate family’s. Zitkala-Ša, however, was very successful at Earlham. According to Dexter Fisher, she “distinguishes herself as an orator and poet, publishing essays and highly formal poems in the school’s newspapers and winning several debating honors” (xi). Her first eight years were spent on the reservation; the rest of childhood was primarily spent in white schools, but the majority of her adulthood was spent working for Native Americans using the education she gained off the reservation. For the first half of her adult life speech-making and literary writing were her focus. Political writings and activism were her focus for the second half. Throughout her adult life no matter what she was writing, writing in English was the way she bridged the two sides of herself. As Fisher puts it: “She uses the language of one to translate the needs of another” (xiii). She translates those needs into poetry, drama, essays, fiction, and political writings, and autobiography, but personally,

Zitkala-Ša used writing to search for a way to be a white Sioux, that is to find a place between acculturation and tradition.

The autobiography *American Indian Stories* by Zitkala-Ša was published by Hayworth Publishing House of Washington D.C. in 1921. Much of this work was published separately by Zitkala-Ša, mostly for *Atlantic Monthly* and *Haper's Magazine* in first years of the twentieth century. Two new pieces, "A Dream of Her Grandfather" and "The Widespread Enigma Concerning Blue-Star Woman" were added, along with the political essay, "America's Indian Problem," parts of which were taken from an article she wrote for *Edict Magazine*, with her own added commentary. An examination of the text can be done on two levels: the individual pieces that Zitkala-Ša published in magazines, and those individual pieces compiled by the author in 1920 with other writings. Through the second option, readers can see the non-traditional autobiography of Native women as she moves from child to teacher to activist, and as Cathy N. Davidson and Ada Norris describe it, as a literary manifesto.

Because the work is primarily a mix of autobiographical essays and fictional stories, defined from Euro-American traditions, upon publication, the stories trumped the autobiographical essays because of the Euro-American understanding of the word "story." The work was put under the umbrella of fiction in 1921. The stories, if you will, infected the autobiographical essays, making all the chapters fictional, except the political essay at the end. Some readers had no prior knowledge of Zitkala-Ša; others knew her through her magazine publications or her previously published *Old Indian*



*Legends*, 1901. All readers, however, encountered *American Indian Stories* through the cover and the title page, which contained her picture and the following: “Lecturer; Author of ‘Old Indian Legends,’ ‘Americanize The First American,’ and other stories; Member of the Woman’s National Foundation, League of American Pen-Women, and the Washington Salon.” There was no preface or introduction to clue readers into what they were about to read, only the categorization “stories.” It cannot be known for sure whether Zitkala-Ša chose the title, but if she did, her understanding of story was very different from that of her white readers. Although she was educated in Euro-American traditions, her oral culture was one that did not make such clear-cut distinctions between story and autobiography, between fiction and truth. Because the work is called stories, not autobiography, many readers may not have distinguished between the autobiographical essays and the autobiographical fiction. Although the first three chapters are autobiographical essays and read in many ways like autobiography, they read just as easily as fiction. Furthermore, the first person pronoun that Zitkala-Ša uses in these chapters carries over to her first work of autobiographical fiction in which the main character is a boy. Readers of Zitkala-Ša’s day may or may not have known and/or read the first three chapter as autobiographical, but no readers of Zitkala-Ša’s time likely read the entire work as autobiography.

In 1985, the work was republished with a foreword by Dexter Fisher. In Fisher’s foreword, originally an article for a 1979 edition of *American Indian Quarterly*, she writes of Zitkala-Ša: “*American Indian Stories* is an important collection

because it represents one of the first attempts by a Native American woman to write her own story without the aid of an editor, an interpreter, or an ethnographer” (vi). Although Fisher in her 1979 classification of the work as “autobiographical,” is just referring to the first three “autobiographical sketches,” she does acknowledge the autobiographical nature of the stories that follow, and her above quote is used frequently, and on its own appears to refer to the whole work (vi). Furthermore, this edition was published around the time of N. Scott Momaday’s 1976 *The Names* and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller*, 1981. These works do not call themselves autobiographies. *Names* is subtitled “A Memoir,” and *Storyteller* on its back cover tells readers that the work includes “stories of her own family.” However, critics called *The Names*, and often *Storyteller*, autobiography, even though it does not adhere to the strictly Euro-Western ideas of autobiography. Under this movement, *American Indian Stories* as a whole could be classified easily as autobiography. Such a classification made sense with critics’ growing understanding of Native Americans’ cultures, oral traditions, and “communitist” views of themselves (Kilcup’s term).

Critics all agree that the first three essays are autobiographical in nature, but disagree as to whether the work as a whole should be classified as autobiography. In 1983, Paula Gunn Allen calls the work an autobiography: “Among the very few autobiographies of Indian women during this period is that by Zitkala-Ša [Gertrude Bonnin], *American Indian Stories*. In essays originally published 1900-02, Zitkala-Ša recounts her girlhood and school experiences and retells traditional

stories” (*Studies* 302). Allen implies that the traditional stories are part of the autobiographical whole. On the other hand, in 1984, Bataille and Sands in their *American Indian Women Telling Their Lives* do not speak of the whole work as autobiography; they speak of Zitkala-Ša’s “youthful recollections in a series for *Atlantic Monthly*” (12). In their bibliography of “American Indian Women’s Autobiographies,” they only include the autobiographical essays of *American Indian Stories*. They put the work as a whole in the “Contemporary Literature and Criticism” bibliography, and they describe it as “ten stories of Indian life,” leaving out all mention of autobiography or even autobiographical essays. Also in 1984, Harold Bloom concurs calling the work “autobiographical writings...collected along with other stories and essays” (118). In 1988, David Brumble includes Zitkala-Ša’s work in his list of autobiographies, but doesn’t speak in detail of her work beyond one brief mention. Then, in Arnold Krupat’s 1989 *The Voice in the Margin*, he does not mention *American Indian Stories* specifically, but he does call Silko’s *Storyteller* an autobiography, arguing that “Silko’s relation to every kind of story becomes the story of her life” (164). This same argument can be made for the “stories” in *American Indian Stories*.

Recent critics tend to split up the work and call the pieces of *American Indian Stories* by the Euro-American names: autobiographical essays and fictional stories. Cathy Davidson and Ada Norris in the introduction to the Penguin 2003 edition of *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings* explain, “Zitkala-Ša’s *American Indian Stories* takes some basic autobiographical material, melds it with stories of other

Native Americans who have been sent away to boarding school, then shapes it into a narrative” (xxix). The editors of this latest edition do not call the work as a whole autobiography, but narrative. This narrative, however, does begin and end with Zitkala-Ša’s autobiographical voice in the traditional Euro-American sense, and it is hard for this not to spill over in the middle of the narrative. The editors, in fact, call the “stories” of the text “autobiographical fiction or the fictions of her storied life” (xxxv). Krupat, in his *The Turn to the Native*, comments that “all anthologies are inevitably acts of criticism” (1). For example, a recent anthology by Karen Kilcup includes parts of *American Indian Stories*, but the introduction to the section of Zitkala-Ša’s writings makes a distinction between the autobiographical works and the stories. Another recent critic, P. Jane Hafen in 2001 calls the work an “anthology” and a “compilation,” suggesting that it is not a unified whole (ix).

It is impossible to know Zitkala-Ša’s exact intentions for the work. Native Americans do distinguish between stories that they understand to be true and those they know to be false. According to Krupat, “The Plains peoples’ customary practice that coup tales be told in the presence of people able to confirm or deny the veracity of the deeds being claimed is only one of several testimonies to their distinction between true and false” (*Return* 72). Furthermore, Zitkala-Ša was educated in the Euro-American tradition which saw and in many ways still sees an unquestionable distinction between truth, i.e. autobiography, and fiction. Krupat, however, also quotes one Native American who says: ““To my knowledge [early] tribal societies do not have fictions in

the modern sense of stories that people make up with no pretense or faith that the characters in the stories really lived or that the characters' actions really occurred” (qtd. 72). Zitkala-Ša collected the material for her work from her tribal members. The fictional parts, then, can still be called fictional or more accurately autobiographical fiction because these stories that she collected from her tribal members and then wrote down are about her because they are about her tribe. It is natural that she would be drawn to particular ones to include in her work that more closely reflect her own particular life experiences. As Patricia Okker explains, they have a “personal perspective” (95). The autobiographical essays and the autobiographical fiction, then borrow from each other's style. The fiction has the personal perspective and in the autobiographical essays, as Okker points out, Zitkala-Ša “uses dialogue and dramatizes specific scenes.... Also noteworthy is her avoidance of authorial interpretation” (95). It is not far-fetched, then, to believe that Zitkala-Ša likely believed that the autobiographical fiction of this work reveals her life as well as or even better than the “truthful” parts.

When Zitkala-Ša put this work together, it accidentally or purposefully becomes an autobiography, foreshadowing a trend in post-renaissance Native American autobiographies which become even more communal in nature. In fact, Zitkala-Ša's work can easily be classified with the contemporary communobiographies of Native American writers which, as J. Browdy Hernandez explains in “Writing for Survival: Continuity in Four Contemporary Native American Women's Autobiographies,” is

“like sitting with a group of storytellers, each whom pick up the thread of a different story and bind it into a whole” (44). Readers learn about Zitkala-Ša “obliquely, through the narratives of others who ‘compose’ her” (44). *American Indian Stories*, then, mixes genres, is episodic with no overt transitions between parts. The three beginning sections are placed in a linear sequence and work as a whole, but they do not cover even most of her life or reveal what parts are true or fiction. Readers, however, can come to know Zitkala-Ša through an autobiography that has more in common with the oral tradition and the worldviews of Native Americans than any other early Native American women’s autobiography.

As a writer, Zitkala-Ša had to be simultaneously an outsider and an insider, an ethnographer and her subject, a written storyteller and an oral one. She could never be completely one or the other, but her writing process forced her to try. As a writer, she was automatically on the outside of her tribe. Thus, she could take on the role of ethnographer, yet as an ethnographer writing about one’s own culture, she was in a strange position, like an artist painting a scene that he or she inhabits. In letters to one of the first Native Americans (Yavapai) to become a doctor, Carlos Montezuma, to whom she was briefly engaged, her ethnographic role takes precedence. She writes about spending time on her own reservation, the Yankton reservation, but never uses phrases like “my home” or “my culture.” She writes: “While the old people last I want to get from them *their* treasured ideas of life. This I can do by living among *them*. Thus I mean to divide my time between teaching and getting story *material*” (emphasis

added) (vi). In another letter she writes to Montezuma while staying on the Yankton reservation: “This place is full of *material* for stories...” (emphasis added) (vi). Her phrasing reveals the distance she felt with Yankton place and culture, and the whole tone reveals just how alienated she was from her tribal members. Ironically, had she spent more time on the reservation, she would have gotten all the material she needed through the oral tradition, yet then she wouldn’t have been able to speak and write English as well as she did. Writing alienated her, but allowed her a way back in as well.

Zitkala-Ša also had to work under the pressure of her white audience. According to Fisher, she was “the darling of a small literary coterie in Boston whose members were enthusiastic” about her writing (vii). In a 1900 issue of *Harper’s Bazaar*, she was described as displaying “a rare command of English and much artistic feeling” (330). Such a description, in some sense, made Zitkala-Ša a writer, more than her physical act of writing did. As a writer, she had to produce and produce well. For her specifically, being a writer meant being acculturated, but having access to the material she was expected to write meant the opposite. Achieving “artistic feeling” was also a different aim, although not necessarily exclusive, from having a socio-political aim. As a writer, she wanted to write well, but as a Native American she wanted to influence her white readers to think differently about Natives, regret the past, and make immediate changes.

The three autobiographical essays that begin *American Indian Stories* are placed in chronological order from her life as a child, to her life in school, to finally her life as

a teacher. These essays, which are episodic in form and cover the first 100 pages, have very little positive to say about Whites. According to Davidson and Norris: “With an anthropologist’s acuity in dissecting a foreign culture, Zitkala-Ša documents the aberrations of white culture, putting readers into the position of having to judge harshly the very culture of which the reader is a part” (xxx). There is nothing positive in her early life at school or in her essay on her life as a teacher, but in her college days, she writes that some of her white classmates were “courteous to [her] at a safe distance” (76). When she wins the oratorical contest, she was rushed by “happy students” wanting to congratulate her (78). These are the most positive items about whites. On the other hand, the three essays are filled with negative items. Zitkala-Ša’s mother especially attacks whites, and Zitkala-Ša as a child naturally agrees with her mother. The implication is, however, that her Mother was right. Her mother in chapter 1, “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” says the very water they drink will likely be stolen by the “paleface” and that “he is a sham,---a sickly sham!” (9). Zitkala-Ša immediately agrees with her mother called whites “bad palefaces,” saying she “hate[s] the paleface” (9). Her mother names Whites as “heartless palefaces,” and they don’t disappoint: “They came, they saw, and they conquered!” (41). Zitkala-Ša is lured away to school where readers learn in chapter 2 that she receives her most brutal treatment but also rebels against and accepts white ways.

Readers learn in chapter 2, “The School Days of an Indian Girl,” that Zitkala-Ša and the other Native children are basically abused at school for three years. She was



tied down and her hair was cut off, and she was forced to work even when she was sick. However, after her first year “a mischievous spirit of revenge” takes hold of her; this spirit coincides with her ability to communicate in “broken English” (59). She “whooped in [her] heart” after she mashes turnips so fiercely that she breaks the jar and crushed glass mixes with the turnips, making them unable to be served at dinner (61). Later she scratches out “the wicked eyes” of the devil in a illustration in the Bible (64). English becomes her tool of revenge against Whites during her school days and in her writings, but it also changed her in such a way that she felt compelled to attend college. These years create a divide in her that makes her reject the “Great Spirit” of her people, chapter 3, “An Indian Teacher Among Indians” (92). Her rejection comes not from her acculturation, but from the injustice she felt in the mistreatment of Natives she saw and experienced all around her. She turns from the Great Spirit because she feels he has turned from her. In the section titled “Retrospection,” at the end of chapter 3, Zitkala-Ša regains her faith in the Great Spirit; she blames the “white man’s papers” for her earlier doubt. She questions why she gave up her family and friends for “a race of people I loathed” (97).

The readers’ “retrospection,” however, comes long before this essay. Readers understand by the first autobiographical essay that Zitkala-Ša is changing, losing much of Sioux identity. Before she even leaves, readers believe Zitkala-Ša’s mother when she says that “I know my daughter must suffer keenly in this experiment” (44). The experiment is one that Zitkala-Ša had to undergo to be the activist she was in the future,

but the experiment is not without side effects. One of which is for the young Zitkala-Ša to think her own mother cannot comfort her because she “had never gone inside of a schoolhouse, and so she was not capable of comforting a daughter who could read and write” (69). Davidson and Norris say that this line is proof to the reader of Zitkala-Ša’s miseducation, “to the pernicious principle that book learning counts more than the deepest emotional bond between mother and daughter” (xxxiii).

As these three autobiographical essays reveal white atrocities, non-Native readers can’t help but doubt the very culture they belong to. As Davidson and Norris put it: “the initiation this Indian child undergoes is more violent than the initiation rituals of the Sun Dance that white Americans reacted so strongly against” (xxxii). Early Europeans and Euro-Americans were appalled by the Sun Dance religious ritual, in which most Plains tribes participated. The ritual includes going without food or water, and dancing under the “relentless heat of the sun. In some tribes, the ‘pledgers’ attached themselves to the central ‘sacred tree’ by long strips of leather skewered through deep slits in their chests: they then pulled away until the flesh ripped and the thongs broke free” (Wilson 259). The brutality of the Sun Dance was greatly exaggerated, unlike the physical and psychological brutalities that many Native American children experienced in the white school system. According to James Wilson in his *The Earth Shall Weep: A History of Native America*, “The deepest ruptures were caused by the school systems which carried the war not only into tribal communities but into families and individuals” (310). Wilson also argues:

It does not take a great psychological insight to realize that, for all but an exceptional few, this drastic experiment in social engineering must have been crippling. Its subjects were systematically taught to despise everything they loved...Many of them ended up hating both the ‘savage’ and the ‘civilized’—and hating, above all, themselves, the battlefield where the two sides struggled endlessly for supremacy...Thousands of them sank into apathy, alcoholism and despair, helping to create the cycle of abuse, dependency and self-destructive behavior that still haunts Native American communities today. (321)

These three powerful essays work to disquiet readers; they are activist, protesting the past and present treatment of Native Americans. However, Davidson and Norris suggest that the *Atlantic Monthly* editors saw the autobiographical essays not as activism but as exotic tales because Zitkala-Ša’s work was published in the same 1900 volume as Mary Johnston’s historical novel *To Have and to Hold*, which “indulges in all the possible stereotypes of evil and devilish ‘savages’” (xxxiv). Okker argues that the combination is “jarring” (89). However, Barbara Chiarello in her article “Deflective Missives: Zitkala-Ša’s Resistance and its (Un)Containment,” argues that despite all the elements working against Zitkala-Ša’s her autobiographical essays in *Atlantic Monthly*, they are resistance literature, and “the very act of mounting a defense has the desired effect of altering mainstream institutions” (23).

Readers of the 1921 *American Indian Stories* only had Zitkala-Ša's voice to contend with, and her motives were clearly both political and personal. She wanted her work to spur change, but her writings helped her to deal with her past and set a direction for her future, as an activist and an individual who embraces her culture. Chapter 4's personal essay, "The Great Spirit" and chapter 10's political essay "America's Indian Problem," as well as her autobiographical stories, chapters 5-9 crystallize Zitkala-Ša's intentions, and with her traditionally autobiographical essays, as a unified whole, reveal her life story.

Zitkala-Ša's presentation of herself extends to the cover image of her work, a work she called the "blanket book" because the cover image upon publication was that of a Navajo blanket. According to Davidson and Norris "back to the blanket" was a colloquial saying for "students who rejected their boarding school education and returned to their reservation" (xxvii). Zitkala-Ša was not Navajo, but she picked and chose among tribal representations. In a published photograph, Zitkala-Ša does not wear Sioux dress and is criticized for her choice. In addition, she chose freely among religions. As pointed out earlier, "The Great Spirit," chapter 4, was originally titled "Why I am a Pagan." Within months of the original *Atlantic Monthly* 1902 publication, Zitkala-Ša and her husband Raymond Bonnin became Catholics (Hafen 131). Later she practiced Mormonism. Hafen explains:

Native religions were not generally exclusive. Indeed, they welcomed additional sources of spiritual power. Instead of standing in opposition

to her “paganism,” Christian doctrines simply became additional layers of beliefs that her Sioux worldview enabled her to mediate...; her spiritual world had room for all. She exhibited this inclusiveness when she retitled “Why I am a Pagan,” [to “The Great Spirit”] mitigating the diametrical opposition of ‘paganism’ and Christianity implicit in the original title. (132)

Zitkala-Ša knew that “Why I am a Pagan” would cause a stir. She says in a letter to Montezuma: “I imagine Carlisle will rear up on its haunches at sight of this little sky rocket! ha ha!” *The Red Man and Helper*, a Carlisle Indian School publication, described the work as “trash” and its author as “worse than pagan.”

As a writer, Zitkala-Ša is both criticized and applauded. She was able to do what Winnemucca could not, openly criticize, but those whites who praised her and cheered her on must have put themselves above the whites in her writings. On the other hand, those whites who attacked her had close ties to the Carlisle school and could not distance themselves from the whites in her work. Zitkala-Ša still chose to include “The Great Spirit” in her autobiography because in it she once and for all rejects organized religion; “I prefer to their dogma my excursions into the natural gardens where the voice of the Great Spirit is heard in the twittering of the birds, the rippling of mighty waters, and the sweet breathing of flowers” (107). Gone in “The Great Spirit” is the intense hostility of the previous three chapters; readers encounter a grown woman who has created a semblance of peace with herself and the world around her.

Chapter 10 brings us to Zitkala-Ša's 1<sup>st</sup> person plural voice. She does not use the "I" of chapters 1-4, she uses "we." This "we" is not Native Americans but women activists:

Now the time is at hand when the American Indian shall have his day in court through the help of the women of America...In this undertaking there must be cooperation of head, heart and hand. We serve both our own government and a voiceless people within our midst. (186)

Zitkala-Ša has separated herself from her people in order to speak for her people. This essay is the pinnacle of the activist writing of her life, and that it ends the autobiography is appropriate, as the rest of her life is spent in activist roles. "America's Indian Problem" includes selections from a report from the Bureau of Municipal Research, which Zitkala-Ša lets speak for itself. She introduces the report using first-person pronouns, "Let us be informed by facts, then we may formulate our opinions" (187). She has aligned herself with her readers. As she puts forth this document as fact, it is not her opinion versus her readers' opinions; it is "our opinions." She knows to her readers that facts are basically indisputable, so when she offers them facts, she expects only one conclusion--that citizenship is the cure for most problems outlined in the report. Among other things, the report claims that the Bureau of Indian Affairs offers only "sham protection" of Native Americans, that the government owes Natives "many millions of dollars," and "that Indians who have acted in self-protection have either been killed or placed in confinement" (192, 193 and 195). Zitkala-Ša is very generous

in her quest for equal rights; she claims they will remove “the stain upon America’s fair name” (186). She also naively believes that citizenship will stop Indians “suffering from malnutrition” (186). Citizenship was given because thousands had volunteered to fight in World War I. This is unfortunate in some respects because citizenship did not come because the general population believed Native Americans were equal. Citizenship was not the cure all activists had hoped for, and some Natives even thought of it as poisoned chalice. Zitkala-Ša’s autobiography is even more important then because it reveals the real reason Native Americans deserved citizenship, their humanity.

Chapters 5-9 are fictional. Autobiographical elements have always been seen in fictional works by writers from all cultures, but it is primarily in discussions of non-whites that critics say that fiction can be part of an autobiography, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* and Sandra Cisneros’ *House on Mango Street* for example. Storytelling is part of many immigrant cultures in ways that it is not in Euro-American culture, or hasn’t been in a long time. Antje Lindenmeyer, in her “The rewriting of home: Autobiographies by daughters of immigrants,” argues that immigrant women’s autobiographies are a distinct genre. Native American women are not immigrants, but many were displaced from their tribal lands, and what Roemer calls the “homing motif” is strong in their works even when their sense of place may not be. Lindenmeyer’s explanation of the way immigrant women use fiction in autobiographies can be applied to Native American women: “On the one hand, the autobiographers use myths and

stories from the place of origin as a way to tell the story of their own origins and growth. On the other hand, autobiography is in itself a kind of myth of origin, a recreation of the forces that shaped the narrator” (423). Carole Boyce Davies calls this “the rewriting of home” (113 ). When creating their place of origin through their autobiographies, Native American women autobiographers do not just create a geographical picture of home, but a version of home, based on their community’s myths and stories.

If the three autobiographical essays show Zitkala-Ša moving from a child to a student to a teacher, and the two essays show her as a grown woman comfortable in her spirituality and self-assured in her beliefs, the autobiographical fiction of the work reveals the importance of the community to Zitkala-Ša, the depth of the influence of the oral tradition on her, and her own personal beliefs and dilemmas in a different light. These works are not original; Zitkala-Ša heard them growing up through the oral tradition or later when she returned home to gather material for her writing. From Zitkala-Ša’s Native American perspective, if one were to ask her to tell something about her life, she would just as likely tell one of these fictional stories; they would in her mind fulfill the request. In the as-told-to autobiography, *Life Lived Like a Story*, when the writer, Julie Cruikshank, asked Angela Sidney what children can learn from the traditional stories, she replies concisely by repeating the same story. The stories speak for themselves in many ways; they are self-explanatory, and by telling her life through telling stories from her tribe, she enunciates the overall influence of the oral tradition on



her. She also reveals that the issues of those stories are not unique to her alone; her tribal members face them as well, and her use of these stories proves her commitment to her heritage. Her story then is her people's story, just as theirs is hers.

From a stylistic perspective, the use of fiction to tell one's own story is effective because one has all the tools of that genre. Even though autobiographers of any culture can slip into storytelling mode, using dialogue that takes readers back to the moment being emphasized, the effect is often artificial. Readers can't forget that their narrator is not in that moment. A work like *American Indian Stories* that moves into storytelling with no introduction is more effective because readers aren't asked to suspend their belief that the narrator has gone back in time; they are only asked to leave with the feeling of the work. They can then connect the story with the autobiographer in a more abstract and subsequently more effective way. In addition, the stories gain credibility because they have the objectiveness of not being about the autobiographer directly. As the woman autobiographer speaks about others, we often trust her more than we do when she speaks about herself. In Zitkala-Ša's case, the parallels in the fiction to her real life are obvious. The reach then from applying them to her specific life is short.

Specifically, when read after the autobiographical essays, the autobiographical fictions enunciate the injustices Zitkala-Ša suffered, clarify the emotional turmoil of her life, and reveal her beliefs about certain issues. "Soft-Hearted Sioux," chapter 5, is a depressing first person tale of a white-educated Sioux boy who returns to his tribe as a man, but is not able to be a Sioux man, specifically to feed his family by hunting. His

off-reservation education makes him woefully unprepared to resume his life on the reservation, disputing the whole idea of off-reservation education. The soft-hearted Sioux's father dies from starvation because he is not able to bring him food in time. In his attempt to hunt, Sioux accidentally kills a white man; he is then hanged, and before his death, he is left disheartened about his fate in the hereafter. After reading the first three autobiographical essays, few would fail to make the connection with Zitkala-Ša's own life. The connection is not in the details, but in the theme and the emotions that the story evokes. There is no happy ending to this story; it overwhelms the reader with feelings of injustice and unfairness. If readers did not doubt the system of taking Native children off to white schools after reading Zitkala-Ša's autobiographical essay, "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," they certainly doubt it after reading "The Soft-Hearted Sioux." The title itself takes on layered meanings. The Sioux of the story was softened; the "savageness" was taken out of him. Those "savage" qualities, such as hunting, are the cornerstone of Native Americans survival. Soft-hearted, then, means white, but white is more closely linked with savageness in this text with all the examples of cruelty to Native American children in "Impressions of an Indian Childhood" and the corruption and thievery of whites in "The Widespread Enigma Concerning Blue-Star Woman."

If, as suggested earlier, some readers did not know the first three chapters were autobiographical essays, they would still realize that the author was passionate about how white education can be a corrupting force and take action to support the citizenship

movement. Some readers, in fact, did not even give Zitkala-Ša the respect of a writer who can create a narrator with opinions and feelings separate from her own. That is, this story was surprising to some when it was first published because as a teacher at the Carlisle School for a year, it was assumed that Zitkala-Ša understood the benefits of education, having supposedly benefited from them herself. A review of the story in the April 12, 1901, issue of *The Red Man and Helper*, Carlisle's newspaper, accuses Zitkala-Ša of ungratefulness and hypocrisy: "All that Zitkala-Ša has in the way of literary ability and culture she owes to the good people [white educators]....Yet not a word of gratitude or allusion to such kindness on the part of her friends has ever escaped her in any line of anything she has written for the public" (qtd in Fisher viii. Foreword). This implication is that Zitkala-Ša's education was charity, and that the culture she received in school was the supreme culture. In her autobiographical essay "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," chapter 1, Zitkala-Ša speaks of her white education as "tardy justice" from "the palefaces, who owe us a large debt for stolen lands" (44). Zitkala-Ša clearly felt compelled to write what she felt and what she perceived as the truth, and this was not lost on readers who do not grant her the cover of the narrative perspective. From her correspondence, it does not appear that Zitkala-Ša wanted this cover, but not giving it to her proves that every word she wrote was taken as autobiographical. For Zitkala-Ša, writing like a white didn't mean fully thinking like one. Her letters suggest an ethnographer's objectivity, but her actual writings reveal that Zitkala-Ša was not just writing about Native Americans as the Other; she was writing

about herself as a Native American whether she wrote what Euro-Americans understand as autobiography or fiction.

Zitkala-Ša's personal correspondence further crystallizes her political views of white education. Ruth Spack uses Laura Wexler's term "unintended reader" to describe Zitkala-Ša because she is someone who has "read material not intended for [her] eyes" and who is "affected by the print culture in ways that could not be anticipated" (161). Zitkala-Ša rejects the notion of the day that Native Americans were savages before contact because they had no written language; in rejecting this idea, she rejects the notion that learning to write would magically make Natives "better" people. She writes mockingly of this idea in a letter to Montezuma: "If [Carlisle] declares the Indian a superstitious savage she must allow him centuries—as the other savages [the slaves of the Romans, the Anglo-Saxons] have required to mature to the prevailing customs" (qtd. in Spacks 195). Again: "If the Indian race adapts itself to the commodity of the times...it won[']t be because [of] Carlisle! but because the Indian was not a degenerate in the first place!" I will never speak of the whites as elevating the Indian" (qtd. in Spacks 195). And again: "Education has developed the possibilities in me. Were they not there...no school could put them in!" (qtd. in Spacks 196).

The first-person narrator of chapter 5 leaves no escape for readers who experience with him and Zitkala-Ša the pain and consequences of having much of one's culture erased by another culture. Chapters 6-9 use third-person to contribute differently to Zitkala-Ša's story. They still reveal Zitkala-Ša's life and beliefs, but they

also put her in the role of listener. The Euro-American idea of the self is one that speaks, and Zitkala-Ša does speak, but as a Native American, to know her is to know that she listens as well. Throughout chapters 6-9, readers feel that Zitkala-Ša is listening along with them. She becomes the audience of other storytellers whose stories are most often told to teach or warn. Zitkala-Ša, however, never stops being the subject of the stories as well. She is embedded in these stories, not just popping up occasionally within or between them. In Silko's "Yellow Woman," Silko seems to enter into the story as a character because it is a modern day Native American woman who hears traditional stories but also lives a Euro-American life who walks into the yellow woman myth. Zitkala-Ša walks into her fictional stories as well; sometimes in her own form and sometimes in other forms, like a Sioux man in chapter 5.

"The Trial Path," chapter 6, focuses on the act of storytelling in which there is a storyteller, the grandmother, and a listener, the granddaughter. The grandmother tells her granddaughter a legend about how the "large bright stars are wise old warriors, and the small dim ones are handsome young braves" (127). The telling transports and transforms the storyteller; the grandmother exclaims: "Listen! I am young again. It is the day of your grandfather's death" (128). As she tells the story of her husband, she also passes on other traditions; at one point, she "ventured an explanation of the burial ceremony" (184). Zitkala-Ša does not, however, reveal this ceremony to her white readers. It was too sacred to tell, or she did not know the details of the ritual; the second option is reinforced at the end of the story when the granddaughter has fallen

asleep during the story. The grandmother is upset, saying “I did wish the girl would plant in her this sacred tale” (135). Zitkala-Ša was a Native American who spent so much time away from her tribe that she likely did not know many of the specifics of Sioux rituals and traditions; therefore, she is like the granddaughter. As listeners of this tale, readers and Zitkala-Ša are warned about the impending loss of knowledge as the younger generation falls asleep on the job. On the other hand, the power of storytelling is not lost to Zitkala-Ša who relates her belief in it as the grandmother is transported back in time to tell her story. She is the grandmother in this case because readers know that Zitkala-Ša believes that the sacred tales should be heard because she is a storyteller herself.

The next story allows Zitkala-Ša to enunciate the important and powerful role of women in her tribe. In “A Warrior’s Daughter,” chapter 7, the heroine uses her beauty and then the disguise of an old woman to save her love from an enemy camp. She carries the weakened man “upon her broad shoulders” to safety (153). We assume that Zitkala-Ša’s mother would not have neglected to tell her tales of powerful women and of Native women’s power and importance in their tribe. “A Warrior’s Daughter” reveals that Zitkala-Ša is proud to be part of a culture that acknowledges women’s power, and its very presence in her work is a critique that such power is not accepted in Euro-American culture. As a listener, it is important for Zitkala-Ša to be reminded of Native women’s power; she becomes one of many young Native girls listening and feeling like they are the warrior’s daughter. For Euro-American “listeners” it is

important to know what Native women lost and what they can contribute if given the opportunity.

Chapter 8, “A Dream of her Grandfather” finds Zitkala-Ša back in her own form as a grown woman activist. This story concerns a granddaughter who grows up to “follow in the footsteps of her grandfather to the very seat of government to carry on his humanitarian work” (141). Like the granddaughter, Zitkala-Ša “learned the white man’s tongue” and spent the latter part of her life doing work for her people” (155). “A Dream of her Grandfather” further reveals Zitkala-Ša in the details of its telling. As an individual who spent a large amount of time away from her culture, she could not help but examine some of the components of that culture in Euro-American way. In this story, the granddaughter has a vision of a circular Indian camp approaching utopia. This vision, suspended in a cedar chest, happens only when the granddaughter falls asleep and dreams. Perhaps, Zitkala-Ša was making the story more digestible for her white readers, or perhaps for her cross-cultural self. These fictional stories, then, can reveal Zitkala-Ša in ways that she is not even aware of herself.

One last fictional story, “The Widespread Enigma Concerning Blue-Star Woman,” chapter 9, reads “as a cautionary warning against the strategies of land grafters and a utopian vision of feminist solidarity” (Davidson 67). Certainly, this story has a political agenda, but Zitkala-Ša walks the path of Blue-Star woman, and much of whom she merges into this story. When Blue-Star woman asks, “Who am I?” readers hear Zitkala-Ša as well. This question is the “obsessing riddle” of both their

lives (159). Zitkala-Ša had a Native mother and a white father; she had a Native upbringing and a Euro-American education. Zitkala-Ša never seems completely at ease being both Native and Euro-American, and she never stops struggling to balance them. In the “Great Spirit,” Zitkala-Ša turns away from white organized religion and toward Native spirituality, but this is just one piece of a complex life. As Zitkala-Ša blasts white education, in this instance in form of two young white-educated Native men who swindle the Blue-Star Woman out of her land, she writes with the skill of that education, and it is with this skill that the best activist work for her people can be done. The complex relationship of the Native American to writing is recognized by Zitkala-Ša herself, for what she states in an essay about language can also apply to writing: “Language is only a convenience, just like a coat is a convenience, and it is not so important as your mind and your heart” (1919,154). Because of their white education, the young Native swindlers are described as “deceiving others and themselves most of all” (165). At one point in her life, Zitkala-Ša suffered under this same deception. Furthermore, Blue-Star Woman’s musings about her name also correspond to Zitkala-Ša’s life. Blue-Star Woman realizes that her “individual name seems to mean nothing” (163). Zitkala-Ša had a similar experience; her family, angry at her decision to seek an education, accuses her of desertion and suggests she give up the family name. She christens herself “Zitkala-Ša.” She makes her name mean something when Blue-Star woman cannot. She writes to her friend Montezuma, “I have made *Zitkala-Ša* known—for even Italy writes it in her language” (Fisher x).



The ending of the story “The Blue-Star Woman” bespeaks hope and despair, the inevitable pairing of which seems to describe the lives of past, present and future Native Americans. The Chieftain of the story whose land is given to Blue-Star woman has a vision of a “great galaxy of American women” who together with the Statue of Liberty’s “light of liberty penetrated Indian reservations” (180). This hopeful vision is immediately followed with the reality of the Chieftain’s land being swindled from him with the naïve help of his own son. The Chieftain can only sigh at this turn of events. He knows that “words were vain” (182). This mixed ending is the reality of Zitkala-Ša’s life and her future. The citizenship that she works so hard to achieve changes some things for the better, and some for the worse. That despair doesn’t infect all hope speaks to the amazing drive of Native Americans like Zitkala-Ša to endure.

For this sake of this study, I have been using the term *chapter* to help make my point. This term, however, is not the term used in *American Indian Stories*. The “Contents” page in the original and subsequent editions is not organized by assigning a chapter number to every essay/story. Only a blank page between entries tells readers they are moving to something different. Numbering entries suggests a linearity, which suggests that entries need to be read in a particular order. Indeed, these entries are put in a linear order of sorts. The first four chapters build from Zitkala-Ša’s childhood to her mature view of spirituality. Chapters 6-10 start the process over again, building from her childhood to her political essay at the end which presents her adult calling into activism.

One can see the organization as genre based as well. Traditional autobiographical essays are grouped together and traditional fictional stories are grouped together. The lack of chapter numbering leaves room for speculation; readers have more freedom to experience Zitkala-Ša's entries in any order they choose. As a knowledgeable reader of American Indian autobiographies, I suggest that had Zitkala-Ša written her autobiography after the Native American Renaissance, her work would be arranged differently. The autobiographical and fictional works would have been all mixed together as they are in works that I will examine in chapter 2, such as *Storyteller*. For example, "The Soft-Hearted Sioux" might have been placed next to or even in within her autobiographical work "The School Days of an Indian Girl." In this essay, Zitkala-Ša's mother wakens her with a "loud cry piercing the night," she feels the pain of her daughter's confusion and loneliness at coming home from school yet not feeling at home (74). This might be the time that a modern day Native American autobiography might move into the parallel story of the Soft-Hearted Sioux.

Fisher says of Zitkala-Ša, "The wonder is that she wrote at all" (xviii). She did write, and *American Indian Stories*, the political autobiography of a woman in and between two cultures is itself written in and between two cultures. Readers of today can see a Native American writer of the past and one with the creativity and sophistication to write in a way that contributes to the beginning of a Native written tradition.

## 2.4 Conclusion

The autobiographies of Winnemucca and Zitkala-Ša began to push the boundaries of what an autobiography could be and should be as the writers mixed genres. This characteristic is not unique to Native women, but does suggest distinguishable and compelling modifications of typical concepts of author, text and reader. When genres are mixed, the usually clear-cut concept of what an author and text are doing and what readers are supposed to be doing become dislodged. By the time Native Americans began to write, an author was conceived of as the originator of his or her work; no more was he augmenting past traditions as the etymology of “author” suggests (Krupat 10). This concept of author took hold of Native American authors in only a cursory way. They wrote their works, but did not conceive of themselves in isolation. That is they weren’t just writing with the wisdom they had learned from their people; they believed they were writing with their people, past and present, and for their people, past and present. Theirs was the name on the book cover, but the community was included in their concept of self. This communal self is often accomplished with the oral tradition. According to Jace Weaver, “To be a writer is to enter a kind of privileged class, educated, separated somehow from the community. Louis Owens contends that Native writers recover authenticity by incorporation and invocation of the oral tradition in their texts” (42). A communal concept of self explains why Winnemucca includes not just her life story, but history and protest essay; and why Zitkala-Ša does not struggle with the notion of including other genres in with

her linear “I” autobiographical essays. According to Weaver, “A feature that cuts across various Native worldviews is the importance of community” (37). As D’arcy McNickle puts it his work *Wind from an Enemy Sky*: “A man by himself was nothing but a shout in the wind. But men together, each acting for each other and as one – even a strong wind from an enemy sky had to respect their power” (197). These women do self-reflect and self-focus, but they don’t do just that because they view their lives inseparable from the past and present of their tribe or band, clan and family. Winnemucca and Zitkala-Ša contribute to the change in the solidarity of the concept of author. They conceive of their texts differently and thus write those texts differently. Readers, then, can’t help but have their notions of text, in this case autobiography, altered. As this chapter reveals, a conventional first-person chronological, confessional work is part of how these texts can be described, but it is the other parts that revamp readers’ pre-conceived notions of the autobiographical text. Simultaneously, readers’ part in the reading process changes. First, they must begin to accept the author and the text as something more than they anticipated. Their job then is to open their intellects to the idea of the communal self and how this is realized in a mixed-genre work, where the non-linear, third-person sections reveal just as much of the writer and her people as the linear first-person sections. Readers must also decide if and how to respond to the autobiographies. These are not works in which readers can sigh contentedly as they close the back cover; these texts ask readers to take action – to sign a petition, to change one’s thinking and/or treatment of Natives, and sometimes hardest of all—to allow that

wrongs have been done and that one's own people or one's self are to blame. As Barbara Chiarello argues, "Hearing Zitkala-Ša would require a new way of listening that included a willingness to question popular assumptions" (10).

Early Native American women autobiographies are critiques of mainstream culture when it is hypocritical and destructive, but these autobiographers and Native women in general believed their Native cultures and identities should not disintegrate with integration; "they figure Native culture as dynamic, adaptive, and central to the dominant society" (Baker 201 and Herzberg 26-27). Carolyn Heilbrun in *Writing a Woman's Life* claims, "Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter" (18). Political discourse is the most direct link to action; this was not lost on Native American women who infused their autobiographies with political essays and even documents. The choice of using autobiography to cushion those documents was inspired. Without the life stories, i.e. the emotional pull of the women's lives, the political documents would have likely had no context and no audience. Also, autobiography gives Native American women authenticity, an important quality in the eyes of all readers. Reading these works today is a recovery of the intelligence of early Native American women who made amazing and valiant attempts to "have [their] part matter."

## CHAPTER 3

### *STORYTELLER'S INFLUENCE*

#### 3.1 Writing Their Way

Leslie Marmon Silko's 1981 *Storyteller* is an autobiography that shakes the foundations of Euro-American critics' and readers' ideas about autobiography. Silko more than any other Native American women autobiographer has written a work that allows a non-Native to understand and participate in her culture. A discussion of only what *Storyteller* does for non-Natives, however, continues the Eurocentricism that the work does so well to combat. *Storyteller* lets Pueblo readers participate in their culture and all Native and non-Native readers participate in the storytelling process, becoming listeners/readers of the written word. For Silko, the storyteller, writing the work afforded her an opportunity to be what she is—a storyteller—and “create,” with the help of her reader/listeners, her storytelling self on the pages of her autobiography. Additionally, *Storyteller* is exceptional for its emotional and literary qualities—a future classic.

As seen in chapter 1, early Native American autobiographers infused some of their Native traditions into writings that largely followed Euro-American literary conventions. Native Americans were frequent essay writers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Will Rogers and Alexander Posey, and these texts began to reveal qualities that allowed

Native writers to express their cultures through the written word. According to Kenneth M. Roemer in his Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, although these essay writers “often do not explicitly draw upon communal oral traditions, [these] writers mimicked Native speech patterns” (15). In the area of autobiography, it was John Joseph Matthews’ 1945 autobiography *Talking to the Moon* which may be classified as the first Native American autobiography to be more “literary and experimental” (Roemer 15). A quarter Osage himself, Matthews returned to Osage country after a university education and his service as a pilot in World War I, to live for ten years on a ridge in a sandstone house he built on his ranch. The real subject, then, becomes “the non-human life which ebbed and flowed around the ridge with ‘The Little Flower Killer Moon of first summer [May] or the Baby Bear Moon of deep winter [December]’” (Underhill 212). This poetic autobiography is organized around the seasons and the Osage’s cycle of the moon, and Matthews thinks and compares nature’s activities and wherein man should try to fit, but usually doesn’t. Matthews, then, does not privilege his own story, but readers get to know him as he communes with nature and other people.

Still, Native writers were not widely recognized until the 1960s, largely because of the impact N. Scott Momaday. Since the 1960s, Native American writers are more widely recognized for writing more obviously against the current of Euro-American literary conventions. Their writings may reformulate non-Native writers’ ideas about writing. Literacy is no longer a tool or a skill to be conquered by Native Americans; it

is a part of Native Americans' evolving cultures, cultures that affect non-Natives. Hertha Dawn Wong explains that contemporary Native American autobiographers "often consciously combine their Native American traditions with their Euro-American educations" (10). Native Americans' Euro-American educations, including Euro-American literary traditions, will always play a role in Native American writings, but Native Americans can celebrate these Euro-American traditions now that they do not insist on total domination. The heritages of Native Americans now join in to allow Native American writers to create distinctive Native literary creations.

Specifically, by the 1970s, there was a sharply focused vision of Native American literature as based on a different tradition. Since then, the pairing of writing and Native Americans has become less and less of an oxymoron. Poetry, novels, and autobiographies by Native Americans have all evolved into more culturally-driven works. This has only been made possible because Native Americans have more fully embraced writing. This is not to say that some 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Native writers did not embrace writing, but they were not widely recognized (with the exception of Will Rogers), and they had not begun, on a large scale, to "experiment" with ways to make their writing represent their cultures. One can especially see the change in autobiographies because Native American authors often write specifically about the role of writing in their lives. In addition, it is not Euro-American, but Native American traditions that mold contemporary texts, including the denial of the self as the primary focus and, therefore, the lack of a dominant first person mode, as well as the



absence of a linear pattern and connections/answers for the reader in and between parts. None of the early Native autobiographers had complete control either because of an editor or because they felt pressured or compelled to editorialize themselves. In general, contemporary autobiographers control their narratives and can tell their story without interference or fear of repercussions.

This process did not happen overnight. Early Native Americans, says David Brumble only had a “single lifetime” to move from orality to literacy (6). Chapter 1 showed that Native Americans sped along the process because they were motivated to write in order to defend themselves and their people. They wrote for whites, and much of the form and content geared itself toward this audience. In the years following Zitkala-Ša’s *American Indian Stories* in 1920, there was a trend of non-Natives examining private Native Americans as the Other from a social sciences’ perspective. As pointed out in the introduction, the move from orality to literacy in some ways came to a stop during this period. As Brumble suggests, “During the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s they [anthropologists and ethnographers] published narratives [orally] collected from Apaches, Navajos, Sioux, Kwakiutls, Hopis, Papagos, and Kiowas among others” (98). During the Depression, World War II, and the Termination period, Natives were in less of a position to write and non-Natives were not in the position to “hear” from Native Americans without the filtering of a non-Native. The as-told-to form, therefore, dominated. Prominent examples include 1932’s *Black Elk Speaks* and *Red Mother*, better known as *Pretty Shield*, *Medicine Woman of the Crows* and 1940’s *Yellow Wolf*:

*His Own Story*. Thankfully, these as-told-to autobiographies were mostly written to affect positive changes for Native Americans. Again, during these decades, some Natives wrote their own stories, but there was no substantial audience for these works. As Brumble put it: “This was not a time in which the social order encouraged a cultural opening to Native American [literary] influences” (118).

Gradually, in addition to the political movements detailed in the introduction, certain pivotal texts, especially anthologies, turned the focus toward Native Americans. Larry Evers pinpoints three cycles in the publication of Native American oral literature. The first includes George Cronyn’s *The Path on the Rainbow*. The second cycle includes Margot Astrov’s 1946 anthology of Native prose and poetry, *The Winged Serpent*, to Grove Day’s 1951 anthology *The Sky Clears*. The third cycle, based in the late sixties and seventies, includes many anthologies, best represented by William Brandon’s 1970 *The Magic World* and Jerome Rothenberg’s 1972 *Shaking the Pumpkin* (Evers 23). Arnold Krupat in his 1989 *The Voice in the Margin* traces a similar path, also including Jerome Rothenberg’s 1968 *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, and Oceania* as a pivotal text. Kenneth M. Roemer concurs with Evers and Krupat, continuing to trace a path to the anthology that launched Silko’s career and beyond. In his introduction to the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Roemer explains that “Silko’s dominance of Kenneth Rosen’s short-story collection *The Man to Send Rain Clouds* (1974) helped to launch her career” (xix).

Non-Native writers of the 1960's and 1970's turned to Native poetic models for inspiration. Native literature gained widespread attention in 1969 when N. Scott Momaday won the Pulitzer prize for his novel *House Made of Dawn*. In the 1970s, many more Native American anthologies were published. With varying degrees, however, Native writers of the 1960s and 1970s relied upon the European literary traditions. Therefore, Krupat makes the point that the very existence of literature by Native Americans does not automatically equal the beginnings of a unique Native literary tradition. Much about Native literature was familiar. However, as non-Native writers turned to Native literature, especially poetry, for inspiration, critics did begin to recognize and examine the unique literary qualities that were present in Native literature. Krupat also cautions against subscribing to the idea of what Walter Sanders and Thomas Peek call “remembered Indianness” or the “inherited and unconsciously sublimated urge to employ the polysynthetic structure of Native American languages” and culture to one’s writing just because one is a Native (*The Voice* 126). In his *Turn to the Native*, Krupat makes this point again, warning against “essentialization,” “the tendency to specify race and culture...as fixed or given and largely determining discursive practices” (3). As Robert Dale Parker argues in his *The Invention of Native American Literature*, “Any form that we might connect to Indian writing (or to the writing of any given Indian people) might also appear in other people’s writing” (9). These warnings are important to remember; Native Americans do not somehow automatically write a certain way because of their racial category. However, I still

argue that there is a Native literary tradition. The tradition is not completely unique in the sense that all the qualities of it are distinct from European literature and other non-European literature. The tradition is unique in the sense that Native Americans have unique heritages, and when those heritages get translated into the written word, readers have a different kind of experience with literature. As Parker argues it is an “invention,” “an ongoing process and construction, as opposed to a natural, inevitable effusion of Indian identity” (5).

In his 1978 article “On Stereotypes,” Duane Niatum argues that there is not a Native American aesthetic that we can recognize as having separate principles from the standards of artists from Western European and American cultures” (554). However, he does concede that when Native writers are “well versed in the traditions of his or her ancestors and [care] about the values enough to integrate them into his or her art” that, as Parker puts it, “tendencies and topics” emerge (Niatum 557 and Parker 12). Native writers do not have to follow prescribed forms to have their own literary tradition, but their tendencies and topics do bind them into a tradition. As Jace Weaver proposes, one topic or worldview that binds Native American writers is the “importance of community” (37). This is a Native American tradition/aesthetic that began with the first Native American writers and strongly began to cohere with Momaday, but again it is not the result of genetics, but of the “multiplicity of cultural codes that are learned and go toward shaping one’s identity” (Weaver 7).

The Native American literary tradition dazzles with the emergence of N. Scott Momaday in the late sixties. He is an example of a Native writer who is just two generations removed from nonliterate storytellers, and yet in this short amount of time Momaday was able to conceive of a way to make his writing resemble oral Indian storytellers because he grew up with the oral and literate traditions (Brumble 6). Momaday stands, then, at the beginning of what many call the Native American Renaissance. Brumble says, “No Indian autobiography before Momaday....tried to imagine the literate equivalent of preliterate autobiography” (178). Brumble is referring to Momaday’s *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, 1969 and *The Names*, 1976. Momaday is not the first Native autobiographer to infuse his work with qualities of Native oral traditions and worldviews, but his works come as close to the ways of oral storytellers as had ever been seen, and his works were seen by the mainstream. Furthermore, Momaday won legitimacy when he won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *House Made of Dawn* in 1969. Momaday’s writings, then, are a logical place to designate as the beginning of the Native American Renaissance, and his autobiographies in particular reveal a change in the way a Native American can tell his or her story.

Krupat uses the terms “anti-imperial translation” and “cultural translation” in his *The Turn to the Native* to refer to texts written in English by Natives. Krupat is referring to texts that incorporate “alternate strategies, indigenous perspectives, or language usages that, literally or figuratively, make its ‘English’ on the page a translation in which traces of the ‘foreign tongue,’ the ‘Indian,’ can be discerned” (38).

From the beginning, Native autobiographies have had qualities that make them cultural translations, but with Momaday these cultural translations excel. He makes readers hear his writings and experience his culture. Briefly, Momaday's autobiographies are not chronological narratives. In a 1985 interview, Momaday said *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is a "staccato-like narrative," consisting of one entry after another, including illustrations. *The Names* also has a structure that is not continuous; he writes short entries, but doesn't write a connection between these entries. Clearly, these characteristics are similar to those of modernist literature, and Momaday was influenced by Modernism. The problem with calling all Native American works strictly modernist is that behind many of the characteristics of Native American texts is the oral tradition. According to Brumble, Momaday's "autobiographical narratives are meant to recall the kinds of stories he himself heard as a child" (167). Two other qualities that make these works similar to oral storytellers are the purposeful lack of literary allusions and the infusion of myth and tribal history into personal narrative (Brumble 168-170). Furthermore, the impact of *The Way to Rainy Mountain* takes many forms. It is more distinctly different than many modernist texts written by non-Native Americans. According to Kenneth M. Roemer, in *Approaches to Teaching Momaday's The Way to Rainy Mountain*, "Momaday successfully implies networks of representative Native American values and aesthetics that non-Indians should consider as valuable alternative perspectives to dominant Western attitudes and a provocative opportunity for the

expansion of literary canons” (Preface). In general, Momaday’s works are masterpieces of the Native American autobiographical tradition.

Five years later, Silko’s 1981 *Storyteller* was published and bore many similarities to Momaday’s *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and *The Names*, according to Brumble in 1988. She often writes in verse, suggesting oral performance in written form. The diction is intimate, suggestive of informal, oral storytelling. The multi-genre work is discontinuous and divided into many sections. It contains graphic images, and Silko expects readers to know her through stories not explanations (Brumble 178-179). Like Momaday’s autobiographies, *Storyteller* is an example of an autobiography by a Native American woman who has taken the colonizer’s tool—writing—and made it her own by combining it with her culture’s foremost tradition—the oral tradition. *Storyteller* continues the tradition Momaday made famous and suggests a particular shift in Native American women’s autobiography, which in turn suggests a shift in their attitude about writing and their ideas of self. Furthermore, the varied ways critics have discussed such a work since its publication reveal at times stereotyping and eurocentricism, and at other times a long overdue understanding of Native cultures and a willingness to let the Other affect the center.

### 3.2 Getting to *Storyteller*

Before I turn to a detailed look at *Storyteller*, it is useful to put the work in context with other Native American women’s autobiographies. The two qualities that *Storyteller* possesses that will be the guiding characteristics of this chapter and the next

are: genre hybridity and a non-exclusive first person voice. Works prior and subsequent to *Storyteller* possess these qualities, and of course, there are also many Native American women's autobiographies that use the model set by Euro-Americans, a point that will be discussed in chapter 3. In other words, the works examined in this chapter and chapter 3 mix genres, utilize other voices besides first person, and contain traditional Native American understandings of history; the difference is in the degree to which they enact these understandings through writing. This chapter will focus especially upon *Storyteller* because it is the most polyphonic-- a work that reveals as much about Native American culture in the way it is written as in what is written. In addition, for the sake of my mostly Euro-American, linear thinking audience, it will also focus upon those polyphonic works that predate *Storyteller*, not that there is any specific cause/effect relationship. Chapter 3 will focus on those polyphonic Native American women's autobiographies that were published post *Storyteller*.

An analysis of the bibliography of the 1984 work by Gretchen Bataille and Kathleen Mullen Sands titled *American Indian Women: Telling Their Lives* and Kendall Johnson's bibliography from his article "Imagining Self and Community in American Indian Autobiography" from 2006 reveals that there are book-length texts written by Native women post 1960 and before *Storyteller* which, at least by these two critics, are called autobiographies even though they mix genres and have a non-dominating first person voice. The Sands/Bataille bibliography is a valuable resource for the mere fact that it is the only such list I have found that focuses solely on Native women, and many



of the works are obscure and would have been difficult to find because they are out-of-print or classified by libraries and bookstores in so many different ways. However, not surprisingly Bataille and Sands's list seems uneven to me with my retrospective glance; it does not include *Storyteller*, which they list under "Contemporary Literature and Criticism," but specifically it includes three book-length works written, without the known significant influence of an editor, by Native women that possess the two qualities under discussion. Granted, today, Bataille and Sands do allow the classification of autobiography to *Storyteller*, but examining Silko's *Storyteller* and the "untraditional" autobiographies, untraditional in the European autobiographical tradition, that they did consider autobiographies in their 1984 bibliography, reveals the complicated road to defining a Native women's literary tradition.

The earliest Native American women's autobiography in which the *I* does not dominate is Pablita Velarde's 1960 work *Old Father Storyteller*. According to Bataille and Sands, Velarde, best known as a painter, weaves stories and legends from her family into her family and personal story (169). Velarde's work reveals very little family and personal story from the first person, which comes only in a foreword that is less than one page long. Apparently, because the rest of the work contains the legends that Velarde personally heard while growing up in the Santa Clara Pueblo, Bataille and Sands call this work autobiography. Most today consider it a children's book because it has the shape, brief length, and voice of one. Apparently, the crucial idea for Bataille and Sands is that the legends it contains are autobiographical material to Velarde

because she heard and was influenced by them as a child, the same idea that I argued for *American Indian Stories* in chapter 1. In *Old Father Storyteller* Velarde's first-person voice of the Foreword reveals:

I was one of the fortunate children of my generation who were probably the last to hear stories firsthand from Great-grandfather or Grandfather. I treasure that memory, and I have tried to preserve it in this book so that my children as well as other people may have a glimpse of what used to be. (17)

After the foreword, she sets the stage for each legend by explaining Old Father's reasons for telling it and the children's enthusiasm for hearing it. In these short sections Velarde does not include herself among the children. She uses third person: "The children settled around the fire as Old Father..." (25). She has become the storyteller here. This strategy distances Velarde, and makes the label of autobiography ground-breaking. However, Velarde's intentions for the work are relevant; her use of the word "memory" in her foreword suggests autobiography. First-person, then, is not always an essential criterion for Native American women's autobiography, but in 1984 for Bataille and Sands, what was essential was that all the non-first person sections be specifically connected to the life of the autobiographer. Despite the fact that there is more first person in *Storyteller* than in *Old Father Storyteller*, when the "I" disappears in *Storyteller*, Silko does not, like Velarde, always connect the writings specifically to herself.

Emily Ivanoff Brown's 1974 *The Roots of Ticasuk: An Eskimo Woman's Family Story* is another atypical autobiography in Bataille and Sands bibliography of "American Indian Women's Autobiographies" (156). Brown (Ticasuk) subtitles this work as a "family story"; she shows up at the end of chapter 4: This is the legend of Alluyagnak I and Alluyagnak II, my distant ancestors...What follows are of a more recent time and are the recollections of people who told these things to me" (19). Then she does not show up until the last paragraph of the book: "I am Ticasuk, their daughter, the last child of Stephen and Malquay of the lineage of Alluyagnak of Unalkakleet. I have three children..." (101). Brown's ellipses indicate that her story goes on with her children. Because this is Ticasuk's family story, it is not an autobiography in the traditional understanding of Euro-American autobiography. Bataille and Sands in their *American Indian Women Telling Their Lives*, however, label this work as an autobiography and describe it as a "dramatized genealogy, primarily anecdotal and episodic, including character vignettes, some ethnographic material, but little actual autobiographical information" (169). Again, that there is little first person autobiographical information does not seem to detour Bataille and Sands from calling it an autobiography because Ticasuk makes it clear that all the stories that she tells are connected specifically to her through her family. Thus, in Native women's autobiographies, biography of a family or tribal member is part of a Native woman's autobiography.

In short, *Old Father Storyteller* is a compilation of legends from Velarde's tribe that without the first person pronoun in the primary text still connects to the writer in the foreword and thus for Bataille and Sands still falls under the category of autobiography; in *The Roots of Ticasuk* the *I* also does not dominate, but because the chronological narratives are connected specifically by the writer to her tribal/family/personal history, it also falls under this category. In other words, even though they do not contain the typical Euro-American monologic first person voice, both works are easier to classify as autobiographies than *Storyteller* because the Native women writers make clear that the legends, tribal and/or family stories are all connected to them personally. Zitkala-Ša and Silko do not make the connection explicit. This is the reason, as revealed in chapter 1, that Bataille and Sands do not call the entire work of *American Indian Stories* an autobiography, and as I mentioned earlier, that they do not call *Storyteller* an autobiography either. *American Indian Stories* and *Storyteller* are, however, autobiographies because the autobiographers define themselves in relation to the stories they write whatever form they use and whether they make that specific or not. Bataille and Sands would agree that ancestors are both biological and communal, and they would agree with Momaday whose sense of himself is not solely determined by his remembrances, but also all what his tribe remembers in its myths and its history (Brumble 175). However, for them, in addition to the lack of direct personal connection between the author and some of her writings, many of the stories in *American Indian Stories* and *Storyteller* are more easily viewed as fiction or poetry,

excluding the works from the autobiographical classification. Specifically, some of the works in both texts were published separately under the classification of fiction in publications, such as, in Silko's case, *Fiction's Journey: 50 Stories*, *The Best American Short Stories 1975*, *200 Years of Great American Short Stories*. In Zitkala-Ša's case, the story of the "Warrior's Daughter" in *Everybody's Magazine* in April 1902 is categorized as "a story," and "The Soft-Hearted Sioux" and "The Trial Path" in *Harper's Magazine* in March and October 1901 are included in a section with other short stories. It is not that the stories are wrongly classified as such; it is just that they can also be autobiographical in nature when the author presents them as part of her and her people's story.

It is not surprising that Native American written works often were and are slotted in a genre strictly based upon the concepts of the dominant Euro-American culture; Native American cultures do not even have a history of distinguishing different kinds of writing. Native American cultures did classify their oral narrative, songs and ceremonies. Some were used to entertain. Some were used to teach; still others were sacred and used in ceremonies. However, as discussed in chapter 1, many Native Americans tribes did not put such importance on separating fiction from truth in their oral arts, whereas this distinction is the dominant factor for classifying Euro-American writings; all works are primarily fiction or non-fiction. Even in those works that mix the two, such as historical fiction, one can still separate fact from fiction if called upon despite the fact that most believe there are many truths to the past. Thus, accepting a

story as autobiographical is foreign to most Euro-Americans because stories are understood as untrue because they are primarily connected to short stories, to fiction. When stories find their way into Native American autobiographies, for many Euro-Americans those autobiographies lose their sense of truth; this is what happened with *Storyteller* and *American Indian Stories*.

This is not to say that many tribes, like the Zuni Indians, did not separate their narratives into fiction and truth. For the Zuni, fictional tales are called *telapnaawe* or “tales,” and those regarded as historical truth are called *chimiky’ana’kowa* or “The Beginning” (Tedlock xvi). It is the opinion of the two that differs in Euro-American culture. For Native Americans a fictional tale can be used to express the “truth” about a person. For Euro-Americans, a person’s story can only be truly expressed, or truly accepted, through historical facts.

Another polyphonic autobiography written solely by a Native woman that predates *Storyteller* is Beverly Hungry Wolf’s 1980 *The Ways of My Grandmothers*; Hungry Wolf mixes Blackfoot history, legend, myth, gossip, and other wisdom, such as recipes. She is the writer of this work, but her voice is not the only one readers encounter; the voices of her Grandmothers are also present. Despite the prominence of other voices and the “unusual” information included, Hungry Wolf specifically connects the others and the information to herself. Therefore, this too is in Bataille and Sands’ opinion and mine an autobiography.

In *The Ways of My Grandmothers*, readers experience a polyphonic style to a greater extent than the two earlier autobiographies. Hungry Wolf reveals herself not only through her first person autobiographical voice but through a multi-generational one in which all her female relatives, older and younger, and all the older women of her tribe are included as her grandmothers; Hungry Wolf explains that the title of the book “actually refers to the ways of the women of [her] tribe” (20). The first person, then, in this autobiography may be Hungry Wolf or one of her “grandmothers.” However, even when it is Hungry Wolf, the first person means more than just Hungry Wolf because she doesn’t conceive of her history as being separate from that of her people. When she serves as an as-told-to narrator, she is also not speaking alone because she is a granddaughter; her role is not the same as a narrator with no personal ties to the teller. When she tells their stories, legends, recipes in the first person, she is really telling her own stories, legends and recipes. For the sake of the written word the first person is used, but that first person contains more than just the writer and the teller; it contains all the female voices of her tribe, past and present.

Thus, for Native American women’s autobiographers, the “I” is complicated. According to Barbara Mann in her *Native American Speakers of the Eastern Woodlands*, Native Americans use a singular collective pronoun, speaking the ‘I’, but meaning the ‘One’ of his or her community (49). Stephanie Ann Sellers concurs in her 2005 dissertation *Redefining Native American Autobiography: The Case of Tekonwatont* concurs:

An individual from a communal people thinks of herself always in terms of the community, not of the 'I' in relation to one's group, and indeed, not as an 'I' at all but as a 'We'....The important point for this discussion is that the statement of 'I' to a European is a specific reference to the self or the individual. For the Native American, the 'I' or self has no intrinsic meaning separate from the community nation, so that at this foundational point, the literary genres [autobiography] vary dramatically and distinctly from each other. (21)

Although I agree that community always plays a part in a Native American's self understanding, to say it has "no intrinsic meaning separate from the community nation" may be taking it too far. Many Native American autobiographers today do use the "I" similar to the way Euro-Americans use it because Native Americans have been exposed to the Euro-American concept of the self as the center more than they have been exposed to their own Native cultures. On the other hand, many Native American autobiographers that use first person, like the ones discussed in this dissertation, do seem to use it as a way to represent community not individual self, redefining the very concept of first person.

The concept of first person expands as readers understand the cultures of the Native women. According to J. Browdy de Hernandez in her "Writing (for) Survival," when reading *The Ways of My Grandmothers*:



[It] becomes hard to remember who is speaking, as the different voices wind their stories in and around Hungry Wolf's voice. By inscribing the series of first-person narrators, Hungry Wolf attempts to circumvent the limiting linearity of written narrative, bending it into something that more closely resembles the multivocal oral tradition from which her texts draw. (44)

For example, in the section, "My Grandmother's Camp," the subtitle is "by Ruth Little Bear," and Little Bear explains in a first-person voice the way her grandmother camped and cooked. Readers know from the "Acknowledgements" that Little Bear is Hungry Wolf's mother. This section, however, is sandwiched between two sections with similar topics in which readers hear Hungry Wolf's first person voice; "Learning From My Grandmothers" and "Learning to Camp Like My Grandmothers." The first person voices, then, all start to run together becoming less specific and more the voice of a general Blackfoot woman. The first person voices are multivocal, but the second and third person voices are as well. These voices also become the voices of all Blackfoot women, telling legends, explaining customs, and/or detailing a recipe. As de Hernandez argues, the work can be described as a "communobiography" (44).

Even as the voices in the text merge, they also emphasize the listener/audience, an important role in all tribal cultures. Hungry Wolf is the writer, but readers know that she has listened to her grandmothers throughout her life in order to write their legends and wisdoms. The "Myths and Legends of My Grandmothers" section begins: "One of

my favorite childhood memories is sitting by my grandmothers and hearing them tell us kids the many different myths and legends that have been handed down from my ancestors” (136). As each grandmother tells her myth or legend, Hungry Wolf and all Blackfoot become listeners once more.

All the voices and the multi-genre content of *The Ways of My Grandmothers* contribute to the revelation of Hungry Wolf’s life, while knocking down stereotypes and contributing to the survival of the writer’s culture in a way one voice or one genre could not. Paula Gunn Allen in her *Sacred Hoop* sheds light on this tendency of Hungry Wolf’s to “distribute value evenly among various elements,” to give equal time to other subjects and stories (241). Allen explains that in traditional tribal narratives, “no single element is foregrounded, leaving the others to supply the ‘background’” (241). She goes on to say that the result is a lack of heroes, villains, or minor characters; “the foreground slips along from one focal point to another until all the pertinent elements in the ritual conversation have had their say” (241). Thus, the content of *The Ways of My Grandmothers* and the way it is presented demonstrate the oral Blackfoot storytelling culture, but the multiple voices of the autobiography also allow many Blackfoot women to speak, filling in historical gaps, preserving valuable cultural information, and refuting negative stereotypes about Native American women.

The three autobiographies found in Bataille and Sands bibliography that predate *Storyteller* definitely do not fit the Euro-American ideas that most have about what an autobiography should be. One last autobiography relevant to this discussion is

Elizabeth Cook Lynn's 1977 *Then Badger Said This*, a small volume of poems, stories and songs. This work appears on no bibliography of Native American women's autobiographies, but scholar Kenneth M. Roemer calls it one of "several intricate Native American autobiographies written since *Rainy Mountain* appeared" in his article "The Heuristic Power of Indian Literatures: What Native Authorship Does to Mainstream Texts" (14). Most critics classify this work as stories and poems, including Bataille and Sands, Wiget, and Gunn-Allen. Cook-Lynn would agree in part; in her dedication she explains, "These stories and songs and poems are fictional, but they are born of a very real and usable past which remains unforgettable." Fiction is often born from real-life events that a writer experienced; this is not unusual. Cook-Lynn, however, explains further in her dedication:

...If you do  
not believe that memory and imagina-  
tion are components of history, do  
not read this little volume, for its  
contents will mean nothing. If you  
wish to believe, do so with the  
knowledge that nothing is absolutely  
true nor is it untrue until someone  
has made it so.

Cook-Lynn has now complicated the contents of her volume. She believes that the “fictional” entries of *Then Badger Said This* are part of history and that their truthfulness lies in her making it so. Can one work be fiction, history and autobiography? It would be easy to say yes, but how Native American writers, like Cook-Lynn, are complicating

Euro-American understandings of ideas like history and fiction is more complex than that. It is the very complications that are so valuable and interesting. Non-Natives should not be expected to substitute Native American ideas with their own, as Native Americans were expected to do with Euro-American ideas. They should, however, validate them, and I suggest, benefit from them. Although *Then Badger Said This* is far removed from the Euro-American model of autobiography/history/truth, it is representative of Native Americans’ understanding of these concepts. By acknowledging this, readers can understand and enjoy works like this in a whole new way, and that enjoyment and understanding can spill over into other texts and even into readers’ very lives.

Silko’s *Storyteller* is similar to Cook-Lynn’s autobiography in that it looks and reads in part like the Euro-American idea of fiction. As argued in the introduction, critics’ classification of these texts as autobiographies is important so that readers can learn what self means to a Native writer and non-Native autobiographers will learn new ways to conceptualize and write the self. It may also mean more financial gain for the Native writers. If the mainstream denies Native women’s writings as expressions of

self, then they are denying the Native women's culture. Native women, then, are excluded and disrespected. Genre classifications may or may not ever become immaterial; they are becoming less rigid, but while they determine placement in libraries, bookstores, anthologies, while they are the means to determine awards, school courses and publishing possibilities, while they are the way the mainstream feels comfortable entering a text, they are important to Native American writers. Once the mainstream lets more and more non-Euro-American texts into the autobiographical genre, in this case, they can enjoy the aesthetic quality of these works, become less racist as they open their minds to other cultures, learn new ways to understand their own lives and how to put all of that down on paper.

### 3.3 Experiencing *Storyteller*

In 1981, Silko offers a text that has much to offer Natives and non-Natives. More than any other Native women's autobiography has offered, I contend. She takes the autobiography as close to the oral tradition as has been written by a Native American woman furthering the reformulation of the concepts of author, text and reader in connection with the autobiography.

Specifically, as an author, Silko doesn't explain herself in a unified way or what the individual contents of her work mean to each other. According to Brumble, "Like Momaday she expects us to see her as the sum total of the experiences that have become her stories" (179). In *Storyteller*, we do hear the autobiographical voice of Silko, but mostly we get to experience Silko's life.

Most Euro-American autobiographical authors explain themselves, and readers accept or do not accept what is presented to them. These authors lay out their lives between the front and back covers. That is, they interpret their own thoughts and actions. They want readers to be passive recipients who accept these interpretations. Whether they are forthright or not is always up for debate, but the difference is that they do present a version of their lives; readers may or may not accept it. According to Patricia Spacks in her "Selves in Hiding," Euro-American women autobiographers of the late twentieth century rarely took advantage of the self-assertion and self-display available to them in the autobiographical genre (113). They did not emphasize their own importance. Early Native American women autobiographers did emphasize their importance because it meant self, tribal and cultural preservation. However, these early autobiographers always emphasized the importance of their tribe as paramount to themselves. As an autobiographical author, Silko presents herself through stories. In the traditional autobiographical sense, she is greatly de-emphasized in *Storyteller* as she incorporates fictive voices as well as voices of different generations. This is not for the same patriarchal reasons that Euro-American women of her time fail to focus on their accomplishments. Silko is presenting herself in the oral storytelling tradition in which stories that she is not directly in still tell her life. Silko does not de-emphasize herself because she hasn't been freed by feminism. She de-emphasizes herself from a Euro-American perspective because her culture has taught her that her story cannot be told in isolation. When one understands her culture, Silko is not really de-emphasized in

*Storyteller* at all. She is an autobiographical author who reformulates what it means to be an autobiographical author because she uses the guidelines of her own culture to tell her story.

For readers of the work, *Storyteller* is different from the Euro-American concept of autobiography on many counts. The text is usually found on shelves under the broad category of “Native American literature.” The back cover of the one and only 1981 edition, clues us in by telling us that we are going to be reading “ancient stories,” “stories of her own family,” and “archetypal stories.” A book of stories then, we readers say to ourselves, stories that the back cover says “demonstrate that storytelling is not only alive but still imbued with the power to move and deeply affect us.” Again, the term *story* means different things to readers of different cultures. For non-Natives, a book of stories does not equate to autobiography. It is not that stories for Euro-Americans can never be true; but stories usually need the adjective *true* to clarify that they are not the usual fictitious kind. Furthermore, for Euro-Americans, an autobiographical story is expected to be one long chronological story of the author, not multiple stories—some of which do not even mention the autobiographer.

When readers enter *Storyteller*, we do so like a photo album because that is how it is shaped, and in fact this work contains twenty-six photographs. The most widely distributed paperback version of the work has a photograph of Silko on the front cover, suggesting that Silko is not just the writer, but the subject matter. However, she rarely speaks directly of herself, and she appears in only three of the photographs, pages

5, 108 and 267. Even as readers enter with Silko's face on their minds, Euro-American readers are likely unsettled by the lack of a table of contents, expecting to at least be told which stories are ancient, family and archetypal. In fact, the only distinction between the sixty-nine pieces is a star-like symbol. For Euro-American readers, the classification of autobiography fades further away as Silko first person voice comes and goes in text that looks like poetry.

The first piece that readers encounter is a brief dedication: "This book is dedicated to the storytellers / as far back as memory goes and to the telling / which continues and through which they all live / and we with them." A sense of community is immediately established among past and present storytellers who live indefinitely through their stories, and among storytellers and listeners who are bound through the process. For Silko, it is the "telling" through which all lives are connected.

Beyond the brief dedication and acknowledgements is what looks like an untitled poem. The first "poem," however, has the look of poem, but the flavor of an introduction or preface in which a writer explains his or her motivation for writing and/or justifies certain choices he or she made in the work. The third stanza says:

It wasn't until I began this book  
that I realized that the photographs in the Hopi basket  
have a special relationship to the stories as I remember them.

The photographs are here because they are part of many of the stories  
and because many of the stories can be traced in the photographs. (1)



Silko's justification for including photographs sets the tone of the work in that Silko is not going to adhere to usual Euro-American customs, and as Silko reveals in this introductory-like poem, in the writing of this work, she discovered the importance of photographs to storytelling. The unlabeled photographs, then, are not like the photographs in a Euro-American autobiography. They are not just a visual representation of the memories of the autobiographer, so that readers can see an autobiographer as a child, graduating, etc. Silko explains that "[a] photograph has "special significance / with the people of [her] family and the people of Laguna" and "is serious business [because] many people / still do not trust just anyone to take their picture" (1). This section also reveals that Silko's father is the photographer of most of the photos, a skill he learned in the Army. In fact, Lee H. Marmon is a professional photographer and another one of Silko's books *Sacred Water* (1993) features his photographs. Thus, readers can "read" the photographs to "hear" the story of Silko, and part of that story is that her father took photographs as she grew up, and that he is someone who contributes to her profession as a storyteller. She says in an interview with Frances Boos that "[o]ne of the reasons that *Storyteller* contains photographs was [her] desire to convey that kinship [with her family] and the whole context or field on which these episodes of my writing occurred" (137). The photograph of Silko near the end of the work was taken by Denny Carr, as the "Notes to Photographs" at the end of *Storyteller* explains. Carr, like Marmon, is more than just a photographer to Silko; as a one-time lover, he is part of her story. The other two photographs of Silko were taken

by her father – one of her as a little girl and one of her in a papoose. In a Euro-American chronological autobiography, the papoose picture would come first, but in Silko's autobiography, it is the picture of her as a little girl with her influential Aunt Susie that comes first. As the photographs pop up in this work, readers are learning what and who are most important to Silko, and we are in effect, experiencing what Silko experienced. Furthermore, because Silko realizes the importance of photographs only with the writing of this work, we are learning along with Silko their significance to storytelling.

The second and third entries of the text deal with Silko's Aunt Susie. Their presentation in poetic line-by-line form highlights each piece of information more than if all the facts ran together in paragraph form. Although somewhat contrived for the reader, the poetic format raises the ordinary information about Aunt Susie to almost sacrilegious heights, heights that rightly express Aunt Susie's importance to Silko. Specifically, Silko seems to chant the factual information about Aunt Susie:

She was married to Walter K. Marmon,  
my grandpa Hank's brother.  
Her family was the Reyes family from Paguete  
the village north of Old Laguna.  
Around 1896  
when she was a young woman  
she had been sent away to Carlisle Indian School

in Pennsylvania.

After she finished at the Indian School

she attended Dickinson College in Carlisle. (3)

Note that this is not factual information about Silko, which readers never get in detail. Aunt Susie's information opens this text. As an author, Silko may seem missing, but her reformulation of the concepts of autobiographical author and autobiographical reader are clear here; it is not the author's job to start with herself and the traditional—"I was born...." An autobiographical author can choose a person who has influenced her to begin with and readers must figure this out. Aunt Susie's influence is made clear in section 3 when Silko reveals: "I write when I still hear / her voice as she tells the story" (7). As an autobiographical author, Silko chooses to reveal a person who influenced her as a writer. Then, as readers hear Silko tell the story of "the little girl who ran away" as Aunt Susie would have, readers begin the process of understanding Silko as a writer. In other words, readers must do much of their own interpreting. Silko admits she hears Aunt Susie's voice when she writes, but this is only one line. The story of the little girl goes on for eight pages. At the end of the story, readers again hear Silko talking about Aunt Susie's way of verbalizing the story: "Aunt Susie always spoke the words of the mother to her daughter / with great tenderness, with great feeling / as if Aunt Susie herself were the mother" (15). Silko does not, however, reemphasize Aunt Susie's influence on her. It is up to readers to understand Aunt Susie's importance to Silko, and as readers read this story, they must picture Silko

hearing it and its influence on her. This is more work than most autobiographical readers are asked to do and less explanation than most autobiographical authors choose to give.

Silko's choice to reveal herself through the people who influenced her continues with her great-grandmother Marie Anaya. The first two photographs in the text are in fact of Silko's great-grandmother Marie Anaya and Aunt Susie. Section 4 is again more biographical than traditionally Euro-American autobiographical:

My great-grandmother was Marie Anaya  
from Paguete village north of Old Laguna.  
She had married my great-grandfather, Robert G. Marmon,  
after her sister, who had been married to him,  
died. There were two small children then,  
and she married him so that the children would have a mother.

(16)

In this section Silko goes on to tell a story about those children and their being kicked out of a hotel café. Their father, Silko's great-grandfather and the boys' father, "never would set foot in that hotel again / not even years later / when they began to allow Indians inside" (17). In section 4, readers must interpret the information about Silko's great-grandmother who became the mother of her sister's children and a great-grandfather with the conviction to boycott a racist establishment. Silko doesn't tell readers that these are the kind of people she comes from; the kind of people who made

her the person she is. It is up to readers to make that leap and to understand that Silko's understanding of herself comes from an understanding of how her story fits into the stories of others.

Throughout the autobiography, Silko returns to Aunt Susie and Marie Anaya. In section 5, Marie Anaya comes up again as Grandma A'mooh who took care of Silko as a baby, and in section 19, as an animated storyteller reading her granddaughters *Brownie the Bear* "the way a storyteller would have told it" (93). In section 53, Silko tells a story her Grandma A'mooh used to tell her about generosity. Marie Anaya clearly had a strong influence on Silko as an elder and as a storyteller who entertained and taught Silko morals. It isn't unusual for a Euro-American to focus so much upon the people who influenced her in her autobiography; it is just unusual if she does this more than focusing on her own actions and thoughts as Silko does.

In section 6 Aunt Susie comes up again after readers experience Silko as a storyteller as she tells a Laguna story about two sisters. At the end of this poem like work, Silko explains her ending by explaining that "[s]ome of the stories / Aunt Susie told / have this kind of ending. / There are no explanations" (42). It is readers' job here to not only broaden their understanding of Aunt Susie's influence but understand that the lack of an explanation in Silko's poem is mirrored in the autobiography's lack of extensive explanations. In section 57, talk of Aunt Susie again sheds light on Silko as a storyteller when Silko reveals that Aunt Susie often told her the same stories over and over again "but with changes in details or descriptions. The story was the important

thing and little changes here and there were really part of the story. There were even stories about the different versions of stories and how they imagined these differing versions came to be” (227). Readers again see this idea come to fruition in *Storyteller*; many of the stories in this work are Silko’s versions of stories she heard growing up and are, therefore, based upon Laguna stories or have a figure from her Laguna culture. As Silko explains to interviewer Kim Barnes, she is participating in a living oral tradition that is now evolving on the page as well as in spoken language. Readers see this as Silko tells her versions of Yellow Woman, Estoy-eh-mhuut and Kunideeyahs, and even a creation myth.

Continuing the mode of focusing on others, Silko writes about many other relatives, friends, and influential people throughout *Storyteller*, such as Grandpa Hank, Grandma Lillie, Aunt Alice, Grandpa Stagner, Grandma Helen, Nora, Silko’s father, Simon J. Ortiz, and Franz Boaz. There are also several poems dedicated to friends. There are not any sections in which Silko does not mention some other person, and there are only a handful of sections in which readers experience Silko from a traditional Euro-American autobiographical stance. Sections 13 and 14 are two charming sections in which readers learn of Silko’s encounter with a giant bear that is either dead or sleeping. Two years later Silko sees no bones: “Sleeping, not dead, [she] decided” (79). Perhaps because of the impact the situation had upon her, she uses the “I” pronoun, concerning herself, for an extended period, a rare occurrence. In other words, some

memories because of their intensity immediately transport you to the past. The idea of waking up a sleeping bear must have been shockingly scary to the young Silko.

*Storyteller* also includes two excerpts from letters, sections 32 and 56; in these sections, because of the nature of the epistolary voice, readers hear Silko's voice for an extended period talking about herself and storytelling to two specific people. In section 32, for example, she begins with first-person recent memories of the beauty of place in September where she saw "purple asters" and a "blue flower" (170). She then recalls memories of childhood where she heard stories "about places that were meadows full of flowers or about canyons that had wide clear streams" (170). Readers then experience an epiphany with Silko as she realizes that she "will remember this September like they remembered the meadows and streams" (170). She will tell stories of it to her grandchildren who "will also be amazed and wonder what has become of the fields of wild asters and all the little toads that sang in the evening" like she wondered as a child about what became of the places she heard about in stories (170). Readers are experiencing Silko growing into a storyteller. They are also learning about storytelling in general, that it can keep fresh what is lost. This text does not do what typical Euro-American autobiographies do. That is, a Euro-American autobiographer would tell/explain to her readers about the workings of her storytelling culture; Silko does do some explaining, but readers also experience her learning about and growing into a storyteller. As Silko explains in an interview with Kim Barnes that storytelling "is a

whole way of being—a whole way of seeing yourself, the people around you, your life, the place of your life in the bigger context” (86).

Near the end of the autobiography, the story/poem “Skeleton Fixer” is a trickster poem in which Old Coyote woman runs off without so much as a thank you after Old Man Badger reassembled her bones and brought her back to life. It is, however, also a means to understand what Silko was thinking when she put *Storyteller* together. First of all, she puts the idea of communal authorship to play in the written word. Communal authorship is a given in oral storytelling, as Silko’s dedication makes clear. She places herself among storytellers, “a tradition of telling, suggesting...that the stories to follow, Silko’s own stories, cannot strictly be her own” (Krupat *Voice* 163). For “Skeleton Fixer,” she took up the version that she heard Simon Ortiz tell, as she explains at the end of the poem --“A Piece of a Bigger Story They Tell Around Laguna and Acoma Too—From A Version Told by Simon J. Ortiz” (245). The bounds of communal authorship now cross between the oral and written word. Silko heard Ortiz’s version orally, and she continued the telling in a written version. Many of the stories of *Storyteller* work this way; they are Silko’s written version of oral stories. Likely, Silko does not feel it is necessary to give an oral storyteller credit, because stories aren’t owned; they do not belong to the storyteller. She specifically gives Ortiz credit because he is a well-known writer and a one-time husband of hers.

The subject of “Skeleton Fixer” itself is an analogy for the process Silko uses to construct *Storyteller* (Hernandez 55). Old Man Badger is gathering bones and



reconstructing a body, but the first stanza says: “Words like bones” (242). He painstakingly gathers the bones and puts them together. He knows “[w]ithout thinking” how the bones should go, and although he does not recognize them, “he loved them anyway” (242, 243). The bones are his past, his culture based in words that he is trying to recover and use. As Dharma Thornton Hernandez explains, “She is finding the lost words and stories of her past and revising the narrative schematic representations in order to reconstruct her identity and the identity culture of the Laguna Pueblo Indians” (55). This in turn will affect the narrative schematic for non-Native Americans.

It is at the end of *Storyteller* that readers finally find our safe “Contents” in which each entry is identified by title or more often first line. Using the first line as the identifier of a work, says Walter Ong, is how it is done in oral heritages; “label-like titles as such are not very operational in oral cultures: Homer would hardly have begun a recitation of episodes from the Iliad by announcing ‘The Iliad’” (123). The same is true for pre-literate Native American cultures. Furthermore, Ong points to title pages as “labels” that “attest a feeling for the book as a kind of thing or object” (123). This would be contrary to Silko’s goal of creating a living work. *Storyteller* is obviously the title of Silko’s work, but such a title is also Silko’s vocation and the most influential part of her Native upbringing. When we look inside the work, only half of the 67 written entries, mixed in with photographs, have titles.

When examining the work as a whole, a circular pattern reveals itself. Again the work is following Native American customs and reformulating the concept of autobiography. The entry “Long Time Ago” is in the middle of *Storyteller*, but from a chronological standpoint seems to be the beginning: “Long time ago / in the beginning / there were no white people in this world / there was nothing European” (130). Having the beginning in the middle of the text requires that one read the work in the circular, centrifugal pattern of a spider web. In her essay “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Perspective,” Silko explains the idea that “Pueblo expression resembles something like a spider’s web—with many little threads radiating from the center, crisscrossing one another. As with the web, the structure emerges as it is made, and you must simply listen and trust, as the Pueblo people do, that meaning will be made” (48-9). In her *Storyteller*, Silko is not recounting events in a linear pattern; she is creating a story, and even that “one story is only the beginning of many stories and the sense that stories never truly end” (“Language” 50).

However, when critics describe the work it is often as Brumble does with the word *discontinuous*. Brumble is not negatively criticizing Silko for such an organization; he is just filtering the work through Eurocentric expectations. The critic Bernard A. Hirsch tries to make the organization more palatable by making his own table of contents based on a thematic focus (35). He separates the work into the “Survival Section” (1-53), the “Yellow Woman Section” (pp 54-99), and a final section about “learning to see the land rightly” (35).

As a text, *Storyteller* is most often classified as a “mixed-media work,” of essays, short stories, and poems, and individually the pieces of the text look like and mostly conform to Euro-American literary genres. In fact, Silko accepts and works within the Euro-American literary genres. In the Barnes interview, Silko explains that for *Storyteller* she developed the stories she heard growing up “into prose, into fiction and into poetry” (70). Looking at the pieces individually, however, is what made it hard for critics like Bataille and Sands and make it hard for some critics today to see the work as a whole under the umbrella of autobiography. Silko draws heavily on the Euro-American genres, but by including them in this work side-by-side with each other and infusing them with Native American traditions, Silko has created a work that reveals her life in a literate and preliterate way, contributing to the Native American literary tradition. In section 57, Silko explains, “But sometimes what we call “memory” and what we call “imagination” are not so easily distinguished” (227).

Silko has never tried to pinpoint the work to one particular genre, and she makes it clear in the interview with Barnes that she was not trying to preserve old stories (71). Instead she explains what she is trying to accomplish. She explains in the Barnes interview that she wrote the work because she wanted to explore “the relationship between the spoken and the written” (70). She also explains that she wanted to “clarify the interrelationship between the stories [she] heard and [her] sense of storytelling and language that had been given to [her] by the old folks” (70). Silko is, then, participating in a living oral tradition that can be communicated through the written

word. What is communicated through *Storyteller* is Silko as a written and oral storyteller, as a Laguna Pueblo and Euro-American, and as a family and tribal member.

Again, Silko did not envision *Storyteller* as an autobiography. Why would she? The work does not fit the notion of Euro-American autobiography or even the notion of early Native American autobiographies. More appropriately how could she? As a Native American, does she even have the power to reformulate the Euro-American concept of autobiography? No; it is not until Euro-Americans call it an autobiography that it may reconceptualize our concept of autobiography. Again Silko does not purport the work as her autobiography, and the work is not autobiographical in the Euro-American sense, but it does reveal her with each turn of the page. Storytelling is the career and culture of Silko; this work recreates storytelling and thus reveals Silko the person. According to Krupat in his *The Voice in the Margin*, “The familiar pattern in which one discovers who one is as an individual [is] by discovering what one does socially, the pattern of identity as vocation” (162). “Self and role are here joined,” argues Krupat (163). Therefore, the idea of *Storyteller* as an autobiography works.

In 1984 Bataille and Sands suggest that there will “Not [be] many works that interlace personal narrative with fiction and poetry” (140). Over twenty years later, this is the case. In chapter 3, I will examine those few texts post-*Storyteller* that carry on this tradition. *Storyteller*, like Momaday’s *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, in some ways seems a unique result of the renaissance, a time when casting off acculturation in celebration of one’s culture made these works possible. A revival of Native American

oral traditions allowed Silko to invent a narrative strategy effective to communicate the stories of her heritage with the audience more consciously and effectively than her precursors (Fisher 22). Those oral traditions are still being revived but further acculturation has dulled the revival. *Storyteller*, in particular, works because Silko uses her skill as a writer to create her Native self on the pages of the text, a work that is her culture and herself. If there was ever a living text, it is this one.

Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup>There are no doubt other autobiographical texts that predate *Storyteller* that do not have an “I” that dominates, but I have found only one other. Alma Greene’s 1971 autobiography *Forbidden Voice* is included in Brumble’s *An Annotated Bibliography of American Indian and Eskimo Autobiographies*. It is not included in Bataille and Sands’ bibliography, possibly because it was originally published in London. As Brumble explains, “This book is like Momaday’s *The Way to Rainy Mountain*...in that Greene gathers together mythic tales and personal, tribal, and family history in an attempt to define both herself and her people. Until the last few pages, the autobiographical passages are in the third person” (66). Greene writes on the second to the last page: “I have had a long life, and I am a grandmother now, and these are memories and stories I have hoarded all that long time up till now” (156). This autobiography does fit the criteria of Bataille and Sands’ definition of autobiography in that all the parts are connected to Greene specifically. Greene is *Forbidden Voice*, and even though she uses third person, she connects herself to every myth, legend and story in the work. She

ends the first section as follows: “Forbidden Voice is an old lady now, and this book shall reveal the things she has seen and heard which have never been told before” (17). This statement connects Greene/Forbidden Voice specifically to everything in the work that follows. She also uses introductory sections to explain how she came to hear a particular story, myth or legend. For example in the introductory section of chapter 3 “Myths and Legends,” she explains how she came to hear the myths and legends: “She was allowed to listen because she was a princess and perhaps a future clan mother, and needed to know everything she could learn about the politics of the Six Nations Confederacy” (34).

## CHAPTER 4

### EXPANDING THE GENRE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

#### 4.1 A Talking Autbiography

As discussed in chapter 2, “Skeleton Fixer” was Leslie Marmon Silko’s version of a story she heard Simon Ortiz tell. They are both part of a community of Native American storytellers who have expanded the concepts of author, text and reader in connection with autobiographical writings. Specifically, they have mixed genres and often chosen to forgo a linear organization and a complete first person focus. All of these qualities reveal Native American cultures, especially the importance of community. An examination of a large group of post-*Storyteller* Native American women’s autobiographies reveals that some are very similar to Euro-American autobiographies, whereas others continue to push the boundaries of the genre. Thus, recent Native American women’s autobiographies do not fall easily into a group but more along spectrums.

Recent Native American women’s autobiographies can be put along a spectrum of attention and concern for traditional ways. At one end is a work like the 1969 *Sah-Gen-De-Oh: The Chief’s Daughter* by Lucille Winnie, which devotes little attention to or concern for traditional ways. Winnie blames the Seneca-Cayuaga and all Natives in general, particularly when connected to tribal politics, for the problems on the

reservation. At the other end is a work like Marie Potts *The Northern Maidu*, 1977. Potts is a traditionalist who believes her work is important because in it she writes not only about her own life but about the history of her people.

A spectrum more relevant to this dissertation is one of structure. At one end are those works that tell it straight, that is they tell their lives in a mostly monologic way, using first-person and a linear organization, such as Maria Campbell's 1973 *Halfbreed*; Crying Wind's 1977 *Crying Wind*, Bobbi Lee's 1975 *Bobbie Lee: An Indian Rebel*, and Allison Hedge Coke's 2004 *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer: A Story of Survival*. At the other end of the spectrum are works that use more than one genre. Examples are Diane Glancy's 1992 *Claiming Breath*, Louise Erdrich's 1995 *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year*, Anita Endrezze's *throwing fire at the Sun, water at the Moon*, and Linda Hogan's 2001 *The Woman Who Watches Over the World: A Native Memoir*. Glancy's and Erdrich's works cover only a year of their lives with a mix of genres; Endrezze and Hogan use memoir, history, essay, and stories to cover different times of her life. This chapter will focus on works like these that do something to "violate" the Euro-American's understanding of the genre of autobiography, or in other words it will include works that push the boundaries of what all readers understand as autobiography while revealing how some modern Native American women conceive of self in their multi-cultural world.

Two positively reviewed autobiographical works that mix genres are Anna Lee Walters' 1992 *Talking Indian* and Luci Tapahonso's 1993 *Sáanii Dahataal/The Women*



*Are Singing*. Reviewer Lisa Nussbaum recommends *Talking Indian* for public libraries, and Andrea Lockett in a 1993 review for *Belles Lettres* calls the work “an extraordinary testimonial” (152 and 49). Reviewer Kenneth Roemer calls Tapahonso’s *Sáanii Dahataal/The Women Are Singing* a moving collection that “[sings] songs that bridge gaps between her and our personal lives” (431). Both of these multi-genre works mix fiction and non-fiction in the storytelling style common to Native Americans, and thus expand the concept of author, text and reader in connection with the genre of autobiography.

Walters and Tapahonso are both authors of multiple books in multiple genres. Writing is one of their trades. As professional writers, their creativity and skill give them an edge in finding ways to make their autobiographies reflect their cultures. The works I have chosen to examine are not the only ones of theirs that give readers a fresh look at what can be accomplished through writing, but for the sake of this dissertation, I have chosen their particular works that reformulate the concept of autobiography.

In her autobiography, Walters employs essays, stories, historical tribal documents, and photographs; Tapahonso uses poetry, songs, prayers and anecdotes. Neither Walters’ nor Tapahonso’s autobiography, however, is labeled officially by the mainstream as autobiography. As discussed in chapter 2, labels are still the trend. When most enter a text, they feel somewhat unsure when they don’t know *what* they are about to read. For example, many expect to feel more moved by what they assume to be true in a biography than what they assume to be basically fiction in a novel. A

torture scene in a well-written biography would make most readers queasier than a torture scene in a well-written novel. Not knowing the genre of a particular text leaves them hesitant about what to feel. Native American texts are profoundly affecting our ability to neatly label all writings. It is not my intention to pigeonhole these two works as only autobiographies; it is my intention to show readers that texts by Native Americans that seem impossible to label, and thus fall to the weigh side, can fit many of the Euro-American established genres if we expand our thinking about those genres. If we accept that autobiography should be a genre that allows people of many different cultures to present their lives in different forms as well as different contents, then we can accept that autobiographies can be more than factual, first person linear monologues. This kind of change would not be one just for academics; it would show an acceptance of minorities that may reduce racism.

Specifically, Walters' *Talking Indian* is most often classified under the vague category of nonfiction. Tapahonso's *The Women are Singing* is primarily labeled as fiction--poetry and short stories. When one understands the basic concepts of Native American cultures that I have been examining in previous chapters, these works can also be understood as autobiographies because they contain writings included or created which define each woman writer and allows her to express her communal sense of self and participate in a new kind of oral tradition. People are drawn to the truth, and in our voyeuristic, reality-crazed society, these works are even more interesting and compelling, and more likely to be read, through the lens of autobiography.

The titles of these works do not use the word *writing*, but “talking” and “singing.” However, it is the act of writing that allows these two women to recapture the oral tradition, and they feel no hesitation in claiming this Euro-American medium to their advantage; their autobiographies are the place and the practice for them to feel a part of their cultures again. Writing is no longer the enemy; it allows Walters to feel “whole and free” and Tapahonso to experience “rejuvenation” (53 and xii).

Books and schooling are traditionally the great alienators for Native Americans. Walters writes in *Talking Indian*, “The instruction and values received in school... seemed to contradict earlier tribal teachings. With each higher grade, I felt a bit more out of sync with the tribal worlds I came from” (52). Walters goes on to admit she was drawn to books, but when she looked for Indian people in them, she was alienated even more from her culture:

Imagine how it felt to read the lies and distortion! Imagine how it felt to discover the omission of an entire race of people! Imagine my rage toward the adults who were in control of these things! The schooling process and books seemed to have a common goal: to deny the continuing existence of Indian people. (52)

It is not until she began to be the creator, the writer, at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, that she finds a sense of power and a means to rewrite what schooling had written on her young mind. Writing for Walters “released years of oppression” (53). With the power of the pen, Walters was not only able to find her

voice, but she, ironically, began to feel Native American again. Hertha Dawn Wong calls this “an act of self-reconstruction in which a Native American conceives of himself or herself anew” (116). In Tapahonso’s case, living away from her homeland made her feel alienated and less in touch with her Navajo culture, and many Native Americans are in the same situation, she suggests. Tapahonso freely admits that it is writing that is her and other Natives’ “mean for returning, rejuvenation, and for restoring...spirits to the state of ‘hóhzó,’ or beauty, which is the basis of Navajo philosophy” (xii). Such renewal contributes to the survival of Native American cultures. For Walters and Tapahonso, the written words of an autobiography are one site of that survival, a site that shows the necessity and willingness of Native Americans to adapt.

In *Talking Indian*, Walters explains her life in a first-person monologic way, but she also lets traditional and new stories explain it through a variety of voices. Like all the autobiographies discussed in this dissertation, this is a sophisticated text. There are three sections. Section I is titled, “Black Bear Creek”; it has four parts, containing first person essays on important topics to Walters: “Oral Tradition,” “World View,” “History” and “Identity.” Each part is intermingled with italicized stories and is followed by a longer story that is connected to the essay topic. The next section of the autobiography is a group of family photographs; the last section, titled “Indian Time,” contains five essays that detail Walters’ tribal and family history. The combination of all these genres is not common in Euro-American autobiographies. Walters, as a Native

American woman writer, does not limit herself to just the Euro-American way; she mixes genres, using many voices and pulling from past writings of her own and others. Like Silko's *Storyteller*, Walters' *Talking Indian* is not just about her as a writer, but is an example of her as one. She does talk about herself as a writer, but she also shows readers/listeners herself as that writer when the text moves into an italicized story within an essay or moves from an essay to a separate short story.

The last five essays in the "Indian Time" section are the most "autobiographical" in nature as they are primarily narratives of her tribal and family history. The first one, "The Preface," immediately stands out because of its placement in the autobiography. Prefaces are traditionally introductory statements or essays, and although Walters' "The Preface" does introduce the "Indian Time" section, this section comes at the end of the work. In "The Preface," Walters explains that Indian time "is not required to be exact" (133). Walters is putting Indian time to practice in her non-linearly organized autobiography, and in "The Preface," she draws readers into that time. Walters explains that "Indian time conveys an old grasp of time and life, perceived and experienced collectively by Indian people" (133). It is not individual time marked by one's own personal experiences alone; it is the time of the group(s) to which one is a part. Walters is a part of many groups whose time is her time, and the next three essays give the histories of those groups and her connection to them. Her mixed cultural heritage is found in the essays: "The Pawnees," "The Otoes," and "The Navajos." These are respectively her mother's, father's and husband's tribes. The last

essay of the autobiography “The Fourth World,” discussed later, deals with Walters’ life.

While Walters’ “The Preface,” introduces the communal concept of self, a justification for the contents of this autobiography, it offers readers a chance to listen and thus step into that time. Three times in this short essay Walters italicizes the word *here* (134 and 136). The first time she uses the word she uses a singular first person pronoun: “I find myself *here*” (134). The second and third time she uses a plural pronoun: “we find ourselves *here*” (136). The emphasized “*here*” conveys the living, immediacy of Indian time found in the oral tradition and counteracts, along with Walters’ specifically stated ideas, the point that Indians are ““gone”” or “locked safely away from the mainstream of society in time and cultural gaps” (134). For readers, Walters and American Indians come to life as a real people of the present, not relics from the past. In addition, Walters’ movement from the singular to the plural pronoun that readers experience works as a strategy to reveal her understanding of herself as primarily part of a “we.” Her sense of self is that of a group who is “meant to endure and survive” and to “move on” (136).

Her idea of self is further expressed “The Preface” when she writes: “I am American Indian, but this simply does not say enough to satisfy the past, present, or future” (134). Walters’ identity does not include just her past, the typical formula for autobiography, but her people’s past, present and future. In an interview with Rhoda Carroll, Walters says, “my future is in my past, the values and visions of a collective

past” (72). Walters emphasizes this point in her essay “World View” from the first section of her autobiography, and she explains the journey she takes to reach this point. Browdy de Hernandez in her essay “Writing for Survival,” points out that Walters, in “World View” uses the visual metaphor of a photograph to express this emotional journey. In childhood Walters conceived of her identity as a “three-dimensional picture or snapshot that reflected the physical terrain of [her] home and the people who made it home” (43). Readers can imagine Walters’ belief in tribal identity as she describes the picture:

I always saw the entire tribe moving in the background as in a motion picture, with other relatives and ancestors in the foreground...At the center stood my grandparents. Sometimes my image was in the picture, standing in the shadow of my grandparents, or sometimes at its border.

(44)

Walters is not alone in the picture nor is she the focus, but she explains, in the course of this essay while continuing to use the trope of the picture, that at times she questioned this communal belief in herself: “Apart from the tribal world, where did my individuality and space begin? What thoughts, experiences, and beliefs were my own?” (44). By the end of “World View,” Walters has led readers on her journey back to the unflappable belief in a tribal view of herself, and this was accomplished through this piece of writing and through Walters’ choice to write in general. In particular, the voice she found when in a writing class “released years of oppression” and taught her to stop

“trying to follow the mainstream [and to stop] denying the tribal essence of [herself]” (53-4). Walters is made whole again in the last line of the essay proper when she starts “listening for the familiar voice of tribal oral tradition” (54).

“World View” then includes an italicized poem that also expresses her journey and her “renewed self” and pulls readers into the living oral tradition (53). The poem begins with the present tense line: “*My name is ‘I am living’*” (54). It also ends with a similar present tense line repeated twice: “*My name is ‘I am living.’ I am here*” (55). The middle of the poem uses past tense as Walters explains her realized connection to her people and their land in lines like, “*So I listened to all its [stream] flowing wisdom / and learned from it a song*” (54). These tense shifts take readers on Walters’ journey to tribal selfhood, and they emphasize, like the italicized words in the essay, the immediacy of Walters’ presence. Thus, in “World View,” readers experience the mingling of Walters’ selves. She uses the first person narrative style of the Euro-American autobiography combined with italicized words and an italicized poem that give life to the Native American oral tradition because of their contrast to the non-italicized words. Italicized words are words meant to be heard, even if only in a reader’s mind. “World View” is indicative of Walters’ style, a mixture that allows her to express and readers to experience her bi-cultural self.

The last essay in the “Indian Time” section and in the autobiography, “The Fourth World,” begins: “The hills of Oklahoma have given birth many times. I was born there in what was once part of the old Cherokee Strip” (189). This approximately



30 page section at the end of 222 page book is where most Euro-American autobiographies begin. The placement of this section reveals that Walters views her birth near the end of her life story instead of at the beginning; everything that came before is what defines her. Everything that came before her is the beginning of her story, and it is the oral tradition that merges Walters' life into all that came before her. Walters' communal sense of self is based in the tribal oral tradition. She explains, in her essay "Oral Tradition," the first essay of the work, that "The Pawnee voice of the oral tradition...is our voice and the voice of our ancestors, and yet it is something more, something larger. We cannot separate ourselves from it because it is impossible to know where it ends and we begin" (18). The oral tradition is not just voices from her past; it is where her Native American cultures reside, and Walters' sense of self has been enveloped in it in such a way that she doesn't think about her life in a linear way with a beginning and an end.

Walters does begin her autobiography with her own memories in this same essay "Oral Tradition," but these memories are used as a tool to point out the influence of the oral tradition on her: "My first memories are not so much of *things* as they are of *words* that gave shape and substance to my being and form to the world around me. Born into two tribal cultures which have existed for millennia without the written languages..." (11). Other Native Americans also have this experience of remembering words/stories before objects. N. Scott Momaday's first memory is of the Arrow Maker story in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. The rest of Walters' essay deals with not only the

Pawnee and Otoe influences on her listening and writing, but her grandparents' influence on the same. Again, Walters uses italics to set off certain parts of the essay to highlight the oral tradition whose voices she calls genderless and "ethereal" (15-16). For example, she includes an Otoe creation myth whose italics give it distinction, a pulse.

In the essays "History" and "Identity" from Section I, Walters illustrates how her storytelling often explains an idea better than an essay can. She doesn't hesitate to change to this voice to make a point. In her essay "History," the narrative moves from her first person voice into an italicized story about an epidemic that is ended when one man dreams of what to do. There is not introduction to the story; it just seems to happen organically after Walters has been discussing how one or two people in a tribe usually are experts on its history. The story begins "*Let me tell you a story,*" and ends "*That is a true story, a story of my grandfather*" (77). These lines are not in Walters' voice, but in the storyteller's. That is, readers aren't just given the story, but the storytelling experience. When the story is finished, Walters explains that it is told by a Missourian historian and elder Truman Dailey. For Walters this story is an important example of story as history because "it says something about storytelling. It describes an actual epidemic that the people went through. It talks about song compositions, traditional ideas of healing and wellness, and morals and ethics of the people" (79). Walters' way of explaining history is to show how stories contain history. She also uses excerpts from her own published work to further express her ideas on history. She

prefaces one excerpt with: “some of my concerns about history and historians are seen in my novel, *Ghost Singer*” (83).

In Walters’ essay “Identity,” readers further experience Walters’ identity as a storyteller/writer. At one point, as she moves into an italicized section, readers may feel like they are a witness to her actual transformation from someone talking about writing, to someone actually writing. She prefaces this section of fiction with “because I have become a grandmother, I find myself writing about grandchildren and time” (100). Walters’ use of the present tense makes it seem as if she is transforming into a writer at that very moment in the text when she begins a story: “*The grandmother sat now on the edge....*” (100). As the grandmother and granddaughter of the story share a special moment, readers are lost in that moment of storytelling. When it is over and readers return to Walters’ essay voice, they know that they have experienced Walters as a gifted storyteller.

The four stories that follow the essays in first half of the autobiography are not in italics, but the narrative voice that Walters uses can be understood as a fictional creation, as in Euro-American cultures, or as Browdy de Hernandez proposes about the stories in autobiographies like *Talking Indian* and *Sáanii Dahataal / The Women are Singing*, a “series of permutations of an ‘autobiographical’ self, a self that is infinitely fluid, endlessly subject to change” (46). These women writers do not talk about themselves in exclusively non-fiction first-person. The narrative voices of these autobiographies shift between the individual and communal storytelling perspectives.

Each Native American woman's story is a piece of a bigger story of her people, and this big story resides in the oral tradition that contains all kinds of myths, legends, tales, and songs. It fits with their culture, for Walters and Tapahonso to use many permutations of voice to explain their communal concept of self.

Fictional stories are one variation of their concept of self. Fiction as discussed in earlier chapters does not have the same sense of falseness as it does for Euro-Americans. Often when one encounters non Euro-American works, especially by women, the idea of a made-up narrator falls away. These women do not feel the need to make up a voice to tell a story, a poem. A fictional story, then, can have a non-fictional narrator. In other words, the Native woman conceives of herself as the voice telling a story instead of creating a separate narrator. For example, as discussed in chapter 2, Silko conceives of herself as a storyteller; her vocational voice, then, is the one telling the stories. Oral storytellers in Native American cultures generally do not take on false personas to tell a story and neither do these women. The exception to this is the Native American trickster(s) who is usually vulgar and untrustworthy, but also sacred and often a revealer of truths. The trickster can be found in traditional oral tales, but variations of the trickster can also be found in early and contemporary Native American literature. Gerald Vizenor has even taken on academe using the trickster. For Native American women autobiographers in particular, the trickster is not used as a false persona, but a strategy either subversively as in early literature or more obviously in contemporary works to negotiate a place in American culture. They write about tricksters in their

stories, but they are also trickster writers themselves, creating trickster like narratives. According to Jeanne Rosier Smith in her book *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature*“:

Gerald Vizenor's description of the trickster's function in Native American oral tales illustrates the trickster's relationship to the storytelling process. The trickster's multivalence and elusiveness suggest that because no one point of view is all-encompassing, all points of view, including those of the author, the narrator, the characters, and the reader or listener, together create the meaning of a story” (*Writing* 23).

Vizenor sees the trickster as a "communal sign" that makes the story a communal experience by connecting the various points of view ("Trickster Discourse" 193).

In the early twentieth century autobiography *American Indian Stories* by Zitkala-Ša, the trickster shows up as actual characters in her stories, and as a “disembodied” presence in very the narrative of the work. As a character, the trickster reveal the potential for chaos, such as the Iktomi-like young Native men who swindle Blue-Star woman out of her land in “Blue-Star Woman,” or for cultural survivor, such as Tusee in “The Warrior’s Daughter,” who saves her captured lover. In her autobiographical sketches, her “insistence of writing from the gap between tradition and assimilation” placed her in the position of trickster Iktomi (Smith, Jeanne 57). As Jeanne Smith argues, “Her education, her writing career, her move to Washington, and her success in a white world represent a rejection of her mother, [while] her writing

themselves challenge assimilation and preserve the very traditions which with she herself can longer live” (56).

Contemporary women autobiographers have more freedom and more say in their own literary production. As Bonnie TuSmith notes, in contemporary texts, "tricksterism is as much a conscious artistic technique as it is the result of an oppressive publishing environment" (*All My Relatives* 31). Contemporary Native American women autobiographers as trickster writers use many voices and many genres to reveal their lives and expose the narrowness of traditional canons and genres. Jeanne Smith explains tricksters as a rhetorical principle, allowing for the analysis of the very narrative to understand the trickster (12). Contemporary Native American women autobiographers are not hiding behind trickster masks; they use the very form of their text to blatantly say that there is no "absolute" perspective on the individual, and this kind of trickster-like function in language is a postmodern and cultural critique of the most far-reaching kind.

The concept of the separate, unreliable narrator, then, does not always apply. As Walters argues, “The points for reference in oral tradition...are not recently contrived inventions or devices incorporated into the works...simply for literary purposes or effects” (*Neon* viii). The same can be said about the points of reference from which Native Americans write. Walters is writing from her Native American oral traditions; she only need call up a voice from her people’s past, present or future and she has her narrator. Furthermore, the fictional works are not fictional in the way Euro-

Americans understand them because Native Americans conceive of stories as an acceptable and “truthful” way to explain something about themselves. The truth for them lies not in the details but in the idea that the story explains the way things are; they contain absolute truths.

Walters includes four long stories in *Talking Indian* that reveal such truths for her. The stories are told in both first and third person. When she uses third person to tell a story, readers can imagine her in the role of storyteller/writer, so the narrator is not a fictional person, but the Native American woman herself telling a story from her tribal history, or a new story that she wrote based on the absolute truths she holds about life. For example, in “Talking Indian,” the story after the first essay, readers experience Walters as a storyteller from her Native American tradition. This is a real life role for Walters, a role in which she “trust[s] the power and vitality of [her] own words as they leave [her] and float out into the universe” (27). In other words the preceding essay “Oral Tradition” reveals how seriously Walters takes the role of storyteller. She is writing to better her people’s world. She only has to look at her tribes, its people, histories and cultures to find the material for her stories, stories that are now part of the Native American oral tradition. This means that her storytelling voice is not hers alone, but emanates from her ancestors and her people of the present. Readers can listen and experience Walters as a storyteller, and this is akin to experiencing a part of her cultures.

With the power of her people in her voice, Walters writes stories like “Talking Indian” that explain to readers that “talking Indian” extends far beyond just speaking a native language. Talking Indian is a way to interact with the world that allows one to understand the world in a specific way. Specifically, the story focuses on just how important humans’ relationships with animals are, as explained by a hundred-year-old man who warns that it is not too late to reclaim such a vital relationship: “They say that the four-leggeds still talk the way they always have. It’s we who’ve forgotten how to listen. I guess we lost a lot when we quit talking Indian” (32). Next in the story, a young woman, Maxine, hears two dogs talking and thinks she is crazy until her grandparents explain that all animals talk and that her hearing them makes her special. Walters does not make readers ponder what she means; the message of this story is made clear: humans are worse off because talking Indian is a rarity and they should change that. Readers understand Walters better because as the storyteller, this is a message she believes in, and Walters accomplishes what she earlier explains the oral tradition does: “the voice of the oral tradition endures because its teachings reconcile and connect different periods and generations in a very cohesive way by focusing on larger tribal vision and experience” (19).

When Walters uses the first-person in her stories, the Native woman writer may not be specifically speaking as the character, but that first person character in the story from her tribal history or tribal present is connected to her life. When she uses first person, the story often hits closer to home, as in her story “Buffalo Wallow Woman”



that follows the essay "World View." In "Buffalo Wallow Woman," Walters writes the story of an elder woman who is locked away in a mental ward because she has been perceived as a "crazy old woman" by Anglo society because she refuses to give up her traditional ways. As in "Talking Indian," what is crazy to the White man would have made her honored by her Native culture. She tells Tina her young Indian nurse:

"All my life, I have been told by the whiteman that I am crazy because I see things that other people do not. I hear voices that no one else does. But the craziest thing I do, they tell me, is take these visions and voices seriously. This is the way of all Buffalo Wallow Women ...I structure my life around the visions and voices....I am never alone because of this. It is my inheritance from Buffalo Wallow Woman, from my own flesh and blood, from the visions I have received, and from my identity as this kind of person." (68)

She needs Tina's help to enter the spirit world. Tina expresses her insecurities because like many younger Native Americans, such as her earlier character Nadine and Walters herself, she does not know all the traditions. Tina explains that she "went to school... [and] can't speak [her] language because of this" (71). Buffalo Wallow woman encourages her, and she does perform the ceremony that releases Buffalo Wallow woman to the spiritual world. Walters is a Buffalo Wallow Woman and the one-hundred-year old man, and Maxine's grandparents; in other words, she is the one who knows the traditions and the right way to live, but she is also like Tina, "a hybrid

character who is at home in both the spiritual world of Native elders...and the scientific, pragmatic world” (Browdy de Hernandez 51). As a hybrid character, Tina, Maxine and Walters must all find a suitable combination that allows them to maintain as much of their Native traditions as possible.

The oral tradition gives Walters entry into all of her people’s ideas and words. She is simultaneously the elder and the young one; she speaks for all when she speaks in the oral tradition, because Walters believes that all are a part of her. However neither Walters nor I believe that the written word participates in the oral tradition in exactly the same way as oral stories and songs. Walters’ written words are an adaptation or continuation of the oral tradition; it is a voice, as Walters explains that is “both inclusive and exclusive of the oral tradition, one that picks up *after* the pause of oral tradition and carries on the story” (100). Walters believes her written words to be “a counterpart...to the voice of oral tradition” (100). This doesn’t stop her from mourning a life in which the oral languages of her tribes swirl around her with stories, songs, and prayers. Still, writing has been a successful force in Walters’ life; she reveals, “Through my writing activities, I have been able to grow in ways that I did not dream possible” (100). Walters, then, understand her role as author as one that allows her to continue many of the goals of the oral tradition. She can entertain, teach and even make changes in her own and others’ lives through her written words, akin to the results of a Native American ceremony. Walters’ role as author, a Euro-American concept, is one that she adapts to her Native American cultures; she makes her written words reflect her cultures

through stylistic renderings. Her Native American beliefs about storytelling adapt the role of author in a different way. It is not an adaptation that can be analyzed solely in a New Critical way because it is based in the belief that words have power, the power to change the writer and reader. This change can be akin to the results of a Native American ceremony or it can simply be the change words make in a tribe as they join the oral tradition, strengthening its people's beliefs and bond with each other. Walters believes, then, that her written words can have the immediacy of the oral tradition.

Walters' beliefs as an author and the changes she makes in her text to reflect these invite certain responses in readers that cannot be predicted. *Talking Indian* is a sophisticated text with multiple genres, voices and time shifts. As readers of *Talking Indian* move through the work with the idea that it is autobiographical, the genre of autobiography reformulates for them. They learn to understand Walters in different ways, not just through her first-person voice telling them who she is. And if readers begin to listen to Walters "talk" and not just read the words on the page, they can begin to experience her through the immediacy and power of her words and understand that for many Native American writers writing and talking are more closely linked than in non-Native texts.

#### 4.2 A Singing Autobiography

Luci Tapahonso in her *Sáanii Dahataal/The Women Are Singing* also avoids "the chronological, egocentric life history model of autobiography, substituting instead a discontinuous, polyphonic narrative that blurs the boundaries between self and the

other, past and present, history and fiction” (Browdy de Hernandez 45). Her stylistic choices and beliefs about her work, like Walters, make for a reformulation of an autobiographical text, author and reader. Readers in her case experience the link between singing and writing.

Stylistically, Tapahonso’s autobiography is very different from Walters. The work contains poems, prose poems, prayers and stories. Specifically, this autobiography contains stories Tapahonso heard as a child, stories told by relatives, friends and colleagues, and other poems and stories based on actual events (x). The entries in this work are not then creations from one artistic mind. In order to reveal herself, Tapahonso must let many voices speak through her. She makes this clear in her Preface: “This writing...is not mine, but a collection of many voices that range from centuries ago and continue into the future” (xii). Like Walters, Tapahonso writes from the oral tradition, reaching into the past, present and future to find the voices that make up who she is.

*The Women are Singing* does not equate to Tapahonso’s chronological life story. It does not begin with her birth, nor does it detail the Euro-American’s idea of the important points in her life. What her autobiography does do is to invite readers hear the voices that Tapahonso hears, and speak the words she speaks. In other words, through this work readers can experience what Tapahonso does; they are not just passive readers. Tapahonso encourages readers to become listeners, hearing the stories and prayers as Tapahonso hears them from others; and storytellers, retelling those

stories as she does in different forms. Readers thus engaged must accept that an autobiographer does not have to give chronological details about herself. Tapahonso does not think of her self or her life in the same way as Euro-Americans; therefore, her autobiography would logically not be the same stylistically. Instead, an autobiographer can reveal herself in a way that reflects her cultures, as Tapahonso does, and engaged readers must be willing to experience her in the way she chooses.

Euro-American readers of the autobiography have certain expectations; they want particular information from the autobiographer. These expectations are based upon the view they have of themselves as Euro-Americans. They are the lead in their own stories, and they expect the autobiographer to be the lead in her story. An autobiographer such as Tapahonso is not the lead in her story, nor does she lead readers through her story. The autobiography is not titled *The Women are Singing*. This is not to say that Tapahonso could not write an “I was born...” type of autobiography. It is not her capabilities as a writer that drives her; it is her understanding of herself. She is a Navajo woman who sees herself in family and tribal portraits from the past, present and future, not in an individual portrait. She can and does focus on her own particular story, but this story wouldn’t be her story if it were not next to family and tribal ones.

*The Women are Singing* looks like a book of poems and stories, and thus looks fictional, but the way Tapahonso places her words on a pages, her typography, should not exclude the autobiographical label. Tapahonso explains in an interview with Joseph Bruchac that her “poems are memory poems—things people have told me or memories

from my own life” (275). Using the privileged poetic form, Tapahonso raises the importance of the subject matter of her poems. Although like some of Silko’s entries in *Storyteller*, the result is somewhat contrived; generally, Tapahonso’s subject matter when she uses poetic form is worthy of that form. For example, In *The Women are Singing*, the first poem is about the birth of her granddaughter. Tapahonso dedicates this first poem, “Blue Horses Rush In,” to her granddaughter: “For Chamisa Bah Edmo, who was born on March 6, 1991” (1). Chamisa’s name goes beyond the dedication; it is the name of the newly born child in the poem: “Chamisa slips out, glistening wet and takes her first breath” (1). Poetry and stories in Euro-American literary traditions have a separate fictional narrator, but in “Blue Horses Rush In,” the border between the voice of Tapahonso in the dedication and as the narrator in the poem blur. Throughout *The Women are Singing*, Tapahonso shifts between first and third person, but she is the narrator. Alicia Ostriker in her *Stealing the Language* argues that the strict training we have all received to remember the “I” in a poem is the persona, not the author, has its limitation in connection to women’s poetry. She believes that when a woman poet today says “I,” she is most likely speaking for herself, “as intensely as her imagination and her verbal skills permit” (12). This assertion can be applied to the first-person and third person poems and stories of Native American women like Tapahonso who are not researching and writing about a culture outside of their own; they are writing about their own people, and although the form and style of the poem is artistically created by the Native American women, the subject matter stems from her reality or the absolute truths

she holds. She doesn't need a created narrator, so, as in Euro-American autobiography, readers can allow themselves to imagine the Native American woman writer speaking as they read all the genres in her work.

As an author, Tapahonso has not set out to revolutionize the genre of autobiography by foregoing a chronological first-person narrative. She is a storyteller/writer who works in multiple genres, but she makes these genres autobiographical not because she is experimenting thematically, but because as a Native American she feels a responsibility to her people. She is fighting for her cultures' survival. That this is done through the written word is an adaptation of Native American cultures, but her writings do contribute to the survival of her cultures. The autobiographical, then, touches all she writes in different degrees whether she uses first-person or not. When history tells the Native American's story properly and when Native Americans today do not face cultural extinction and extreme social struggles, then Native American women writers can write about issues that don't affect non-Natives. Until then, they fight for their families and their people, and Native American women writers do this by participating in the oral tradition through the written word. Tapahonso explains this power storytelling has in her interview with Bruchac: "Part of the whole thing about storytelling is that it is done in order to draw strength and in order to go on and see ourselves...in a community" (276).

An important part of the storytelling process is the listener, and this equates to the reader in this context. Brill de Ramirez explains the reader's role in Native

American writings this way: “The conversive reading of these poems involves a responsibility on the part of the reader, much as any person would have certain responsibilities as a guest in someone else’s home” (76). Writings, then, are a site of personal space, and readers have access to that space. They are not just told by Tapahonso about the birth of her granddaughter in “Blue Horses Rush in.” Readers are invited into the joy and magnitude of that moment as the mother “moans ageless pain and pushes” (1). “This is it!”, Tapahonso exclaims, pulling readers into birthing experience with her use of the present tense and exclamation mark (1).

Readers are guests in Tapahonso’s life, and as guests, they hear her poems and stories, but they also are privy to the storytelling context. In the third entry, “Just Past Shiprock,” for example, Tapahonso doesn’t just tell the story of the baby girl who died and was buried in rocks at the bottom of a mesa, making those rocks “special” (6). No unlike autobiographies of non-Native Americans, she sandwiches the story with her account of the time as a child when she heard this story. She was riding in the back of a truck with many other children, including an older cousin Mary who becomes the storyteller as they pass the mesas of Shiprock. “Then Mary told this story,” Tapahonso remembers (5). By letting Mary tell the story, Tapahonso puts herself in the role of listener and pulls readers in with her. When Mary asks the other children, ““See those rocks at the bottom?”” (5). The children stop playing immediately because they know that “the question was the opening for a story” (5). Readers experience Tapahonso as an enthusiastic child who is excited enough by the prospect of storytelling to stop her



playing. This enthusiasm infects readers who feel like children in the back of the truck with Tapahonso. After the story, readers hear the adult storytelling voice of Tapahonso as she reveals that “since that time we have told the story many times ourselves” (6). Then she invites readers to feel like storytellers themselves, imagining that if they ever drove past the mesas of Shiprock, they would feel compelled to tell of the baby girl who died too soon. Lastly, readers hear Tapahonso’s autobiographical voice fighting for respect for her cultures, particularly their connection to the land: “This land that may seem arid and forlorn to the newcomer is full of stories which hold the spirits of the people, those who live here today and those who lived centuries and other worlds ago” (6).

Throughout *The Women are Singing*, Tapahonso feels compelled to write about and in some cases rewrite Native American history. “In 1864,” the fourth entry in the work, Tapahonso writes about the Navajos’ captivity at Fort Sumner. This prose poem is introduced with an italicized factual explanation:

*In 1864, 8,354 Navajos were forced to walk from Dinetah to Bosque Redondo in southern New Mexico, a distance of three hundred miles. They were held for four years until the U.S. government declared the assimilation attempt a failure. More than 2,500 died of smallpox and other illnesses, depression, severe weather conditions, and starvation. The survivors returned to Dinetah in June of 1868. (7)*

As upsetting as this factual information is, it does not compare to the emotional tug of the poem which contains two stories. Like “Just Past Shiprock,” this poem sandwiches the stories within a context that adds to their power. In both case, Tapahonso is driving her daughters, and when she passes the turn to Fort Sumner, she begins the storytelling. Readers feel like they are in the car with her as listeners, but as the story begins, and is introduced with the definitive colon, readers also feel like the storyteller. In the first story, an electrician working in the present day near Fort Sumner quits his job because “the place contained the pain and cries of his relatives” (8). He is the only one that can hear their “wailing” (8). When this story ends, Tapahonso and her daughter stop for a coke and chips before “the storytelling resumed” (8). Tapahonso is using the storytelling to pass time and entertain her daughter during the simple act of driving and snacking, but she is also teaching her about the past and how it affects the future. The daughter will certainly hear the wailing and tell the story herself, and readers just might do the same.

In the second story, Tapahonso continues the tradition of storytelling to remember and honor the past. When she begins, she recalls that her aunt always began it: ““You are here because of what happened to your great-grandmother long ago”” (8). Using the first-person, Tapahonso begins:

They began rounding up the people in the fall.  
Some were lured into surrendering by offers of food, clothes,  
And livestock. So many of us were starving and suffering. (8)

She goes on to be an eye-witness to Navajos who were shot, drowned, or simply died after they fell behind on the march to the fort. Through this story, readers experience Tapahonso as a niece, hearing the story from her aunt; as a storyteller, telling it to a daughter who is moved to tears by the end; and as a Native American on the march to Fort Sumner. Tapahonso has captured the multi-generational nature of the oral tradition. Furthermore, Tapahonso has rewritten history, making the event more than just a blurb in an encyclopedia, and subsequently highlighting a whole era of Indian-white relations. Most have probably heard of the “Trail of Tears,” but this is only the best known march during years when tribe after tribe was removed and forced to march away from their homeland.

The prose poem, however, does not end there. Tapahonso’s daughter cannot speak as tears stream down her face, but Tapahonso offers her the same kind of hope that kept many of the Navajos of 1864 alive. Many of those early Navajos survived because they believed in themselves and were committed to stay together; “We will be strong as long as we are together,” they promised each other (10). Tapahonso shows her optimism to her daughter as she explains all that was gained during the four years in captivity:

Then I tell her that

it was at Bosque Redondo the people learned to use flour and now  
fry bread is considered to be the “traditional” Navajo bread.

It was there that we acquired a deep appreciation for strong coffee.

The women began to make long, tiered calico skirts  
and fine velvet shirts for the men. (10).

Tapahonso focuses on the adaptability of the Navajo people who stayed together and even forged new traditions during a trying time. The moving story that Tapahonso tells, and her daughter and readers hear, finishes on even higher note as all admire the Navajos' ability to survive beautifully; Tapahonso tells of the Navajo tradition of sewing silver coins to clothing: "It is always something to see—silver flashing in the sun / against dark velvet and black, black hair" (10).

Readers learn about Tapahonso in other ways as well. In poems like "It Has Always Been This Way," Tapahonso details some of the beliefs and practices of her people. In this kind of entry readers hear Tapahonso the autobiographer explaining cultural information, but they also experience Tapahonso participating in her culture. "It Has Always Been This Way" is a chant-like poem/prayer that imparts valuable cultural information related to raising a child with "care and attention" (18). Readers learn a variety of information, such as the importance of putting a pinch of pollen a baby's tongue when she is born to assure "strong lungs and steady growth," and a pinch on her tongue and head when she goes off to school so that she will "think clearly" (17, 18). Tapahonso, however, is not just depositing information for her non-Native readers' cultural curiosity; she is participating in the oral tradition by repeating cultural information in order to teach, maintain and preserve traditions among her people. There is also another element to her participation in the oral tradition, and that is the

immediacy of this tradition. It is not just a storehouse for traditions; it is about being in the moment. When someone prays, the words of the prayer transport that person to a different mindset because she believes they are powerful. The same is true for much of the oral tradition. In the case of “It Has Always Been This Way,” readers can feel Tapahonso praying. Every word seems deliberate and said with honor. There is also repetition of the line “It has been this way for centuries among us” that adds to the prayer-like quality of the poem (17-18). This particular line is repeated six times, once at the end of each section, and twice in a row at the end of the poem. Each time readers read this line it adds a certain power and credibility to the lines before it, and by the time it is repeated twice at the end, readers can hear Tapahonso praying that the traditions she speaks of *will* continue for centuries to come.

An important part of the oral tradition is entertainment and there are many entries with a touch of humor and sweetness that reveal to readers these qualities in Tapahonso’s Navajo culture. One such entry is “Little Pet Stories.” In the span of one page, Tapahonso tells three pet stories, about a dog, kitten and rabbit. The kitten story is a simple one about Tapahonso’s father finding a stray kitten and bringing it home to Tapahonso and her siblings. They named the kitten Polly, and Polly had many kittens for family members to enjoy. This simple, sweet story lets readers imagine Tapahonso as a young girl smiling at her father’s surprise of a calico cat, and then playing with her as children do. The brevity of this part also fits with the sweet, simplicity of this memory that is sacred in its own way. As Tapahonso explains:

The stories contained in ordinary objects...and the recognition of daily activities, such as children playing in a water sprinkler, remind us how the sacred exists in daily life. These stories remind us of our own childhoods, they remind us to spend time with our elders, and they tell us to remember that many of our blessings are not tangible but instead lie in our home and family life. (25)

The oral tradition, as Tapahonso explains in her Preface, includes daily conversations as well as ancient stories and everything in between. All “strengthen” the Navajo people, Tapahonso believes (x). This pet story has the flavor of a spontaneous conversation that makes all who are present smile at the memory, and in that shared smile a bond is maintained.

The last section of the autobiography is titled “What I am.” Such a title seems very autobiographical in the Euro-American tradition, and Tapahonso does write about specific relatives and dated events, but only a reader with knowledge of Tapahonso’s life would know this for sure. These three stories from 1935, 1968 and 1987 are just that—autobiographical stories. In only the middle story does Tapahonso take the first-person position. Instead, Tapahonso situates her identity in the voices of her female relatives, spanning four generations. Her grandmother, mother and daughter are the women who most define and shape her. Tapahonso does not have to say this; she lets the women in her stories say it. As Roemer argues, “The two most significant (and most interrelated) motifs examine complex relationships between mothers and daughters and

the circular patterns of (to borrow Ursula Le Guin's phrase) always coming home" (431). Readers experience Tapahonso as both a daughter and a mother coming home.

Tapahonso begins with the third-person story of her grandmother Kinlichii'nii Bitsí waiting for her son Prettyboy to come home, but the next day she dies and Prettyboy must go back out in the snow to tell of her death. Kinlichii'nii Bitsí was a woman dedicated to her children, and on her death bed, she "talked incessantly about her children and grandchildren" (88). Tapahonso's grandmother's dedication to her children is a quality found in Tapahonso's immediate family and is a quality found in Native American women in general. The Navajo are a matrilineal culture and its members are heavily influenced by women role models. Changing Woman is the foremost deity in Navajo religion. She gave the tribe their first clans and guidelines for how they should live their lives. She represents woman's continual transformation through the many roles she takes on in her lifetime. Through Changing Woman, the matrilineal system of the Navajo was established. Navajo Laura Tohe, from the Navajo Sleepy-Rock clan, explains:

Diné women have always worked to help support the family, even before the reservation system was established.... We didn't need to fight for our place in our societies because it surrounded us constantly....There was no need for feminism because of our matrilineal

culture. And it continues. For Diné women, there is no word for feminism. (104, 110)

Tapahonso explains the Navajo woman's role in her interview with Andrea Penner:

In traditional culture, or even like with my own family, my mother is the person who keeps everything together. She's the oldest female, and everybody respects her. Whatever she says goes, and she is in charge of everything. You can go to her for advice, or ask her for help if you need help. (2)

Although this story is only a page and a half long, it illustrates the Navajo matrilineal culture more poignantly than an essay could. It, like the other stories uses dialogue that communicates who Kinłichíí'nii Bitsí is. Specifically readers feel her anxiety as she waits outside for her son to return in a snowstorm. Her other children call her in out of the cold, but she keeps returning to watch for him, “insisting that she wasn't cold” (87). When he does return, she rushes around to prepare food for him. Readers can understand why Kinłichíí'nii Bitsí felt she had to watch for her son. She felt responsible for him and she wanted to be prepared for his return. By morning Kinłichíí'nii Bitsí has a fever, and she talks “incessantly about her children and grandchildren” (88). Even as she is dying, she is thinking of them. For Tapahonso, this story must be important because it is about the day her grandmother died and that she died because she was watching out for her son—caregiving. In the next story, readers learn that although Tapahonso never met Kinłichíí'nii Bitsí, through stories she grew to



love her: “Even if I had known Kinlichii’nii Bitsí, I couldn’t love her more than I do now—knowing her only through stories and my mother’s memory” (90).

The next story is titled “Nineteen hundred eighty-seven. The great-granddaughter of Kinlichii’nii Bitsí.” Each subsequent generation is presented in relation to Kinlichii’nii Bitsí. This presents the generations as cumulative, a community, instead of separate individuals. In this story, readers hear Tapahonso’s first person voice telling of her uncle Prettyboy’s death, and layered in this story is one by Tapahonso’s mother telling about the day she learned of her mother Kinlichii’nii Bitsí’s death. The 1968, fifteen year-old Tapahonso wants to hear this story over and over because it gives her a sense of definition about whom she is and where she comes from. Each time her mother tells her the story, they cry together. Through the repetition of this story, Tapahonso came to love her grandmother and respect her mother’s teachings even more, as her mother tells her over and over: ““Having a mother is everything. Your mother is your home”” (89). Again in this story readers experience anxiety as Tapahonso’s mother knows that something is wrong on the day she finds out her mother has died. All day she knows something bad has happened. She sees her brother in the distance and must wait and pray that nothing is wrong, even though she knows something is. Her brother Prettyboy comes to crying out “our mother is gone!” (90). The dialogue makes this moment immediate and painful

Lastly, in another first-person story, readers hear Tapahonso’s daughter’s voice as she accepts her identity as a Native American during a trip to Europe. As she is

leaving, readers her grandmother tell her, “Remember who you are. You’re from Oak Spring, and all of your relatives are thinking about you and praying that you will come back safely” (91). Readers experience the drama of this moment as Tapahonso’s daughter must leave in order to find out where she belongs. They also experience Tapahonso’s daughter’s anxiety as she leaves, afraid she will be arrested in customs for the corn pollen her grandmother gave her or be mugged in a big city like Paris. Upon returning to the United States, she realizes that she is only “home” in her mother’s arms (92). Readers, then, assume that Tapahonso taught her daughter the same things and told her the same stories as her mother told and taught her. Thus, the four women in this section have basically the same story to tell; just the details are different.

Tapahonso knows the details of her grandmother’s, mother’s and daughter’s lives. This was partly achieved through storytelling. Tapahonso tells readers that she hears the story of her grandmother’s death through her mother’s eyes over and over; she must have also heard the story of Kinlichí’nii Bitsí last night through her aunts and uncles, and the story of her daughter’s time in Europe. She must have heard all of them enough for them to become part of her story. Thus, all the anxieties, happiness, pain, and even epiphanies are her own. It is Tapahonso waiting for Prettyboy, dying of a fever, hearing of her mother’s death, and going to Europe. This seamless taking on of voices in “What I Am” and throughout the autobiography separates Walter’s style of autobiography from that of Euro-American autobiographies.

One last crucial element of this autobiography is the Navajo language. Tapahonso's inclusion of her Navajo language in her autobiography is an argument that her language is not gone. In her Preface, Tapahonso relates that during family gathering stories where "told entirely in Navajo and other times in a mixture of Navajo and English" (x). She reveals, "I feel fortunate to have access to two, sometimes three languages, to have been taught the 'correct' ways to use these languages" (xi). David Treuer in his *Native American Fiction* suggests that the Ojibwe language in Louise Erdrich's novels often "functions as an ornament, not as a working part of the [their] machinery" (61). However, he goes on to argue that the Ojibwe words "signify...how culture is an idea that the characters don't possess but want to possess" (65). For Tapahonso's autobiography, the Navajo words, although sparingly used, are not just "museum pieces" on display (Treuer 62). She explains that "most of the pieces originated in Navajo, either orally or in thought, and the English translation appears" in the text (x-xi). For example, "Dít'óódí," is a love poem in which the ear becomes extraordinary, as it is where the breath and words of a loved one enter: "Your words, your life swirls inside / the dark depths of my own body" (35). The only Navajo word in the poem is also the title - Dít'óódí. According to the *Navajo-English Dictionary*, "Dít'óódí" means "soft; tender; fragile; pliable; perishable (as fruit)" (Wall 80). This Navajo word is a working part of the poem. When the word Dít'óódí first appears in the poem after the first line of English - "The skin behind one's ear is exquisite: thin, delicate" - reader/listeners slow down and take pleasure in the image of the soft delicate, fuzzy

fruit-like skin behind the ear (33). This is the only word on the second line and it is repeated twice and spaced out, giving emphasis to the exquisiteness of the skin of the ear and turning it into a chant-like worship of this part of the body. Without this word, it would not be as powerful or as beautiful of a poem. Because Tapahonso conceived the poem in Navajo and titled it with this Navajo word, it is this word that guides the poem. When the word is repeated again in the poem with same format as in the second line, reader/listeners can almost feel the caress of her lover's words as they travel to her ear. English is the foremost language of this autobiography, but Navajo is the driving force.

Readers experience Tapahonso through humorous stories, passionate poems through her relatives, friends and tribal members. And though I have to read the "About the Author" to obtain Euro-American autobiographical details about Tapahonso, as a reader, I feel I have experienced her through her written storytelling. As Tapahonso explains, "The element of storytelling remains vital today. In this instance, the medium has changed, but the skill and respect that have always been associated with good storytelling remain strong," (25).

The written word is not a replacement for the oral tradition, but the oral tradition has found resurgence in the written word. As Sands argues, "Native women's autobiography has come a long way since the first examples were collected and published...They are pushing the boundaries of the genre by overtly calling attention to the creative nature of the process of life inscription" (Sands 49). Native American

writers, like Walters and Tapahonso, have found creative ways to translate those oral voices into writing. However, not all voices are translatable. In her Preface, Tapahonso reveals:

Many of these poems and stories have a song that accompanies the work. Because these songs are in Navajo, a written version is not possible...This is very much a consideration as I am translating and writing—the fact that the written version must stand on its own, even though I know that it is the song which makes it complete” (xi).

Readers know, then, that what they are reading is not the ideal presentation of the woman’s life. Browdy de Hernandez explains that “what we are reading is an ‘incomplete’ written version of Tapahonso’s autobiographical text, the absent songs marking the insurmountable limitation of the written narrative in communicating an oral tradition-based sense of self” (45). The autobiographical form is, however, a Euro-American one. Native Americans do not have a tradition of trying to present their lives in one unified form. Therefore, readers do not have to see these works as incomplete, but as the result of the merging of cultures. The “incompleteness” of Native American women’s autobiographies make an important contribution to the genre because they invites readers to be especially aware that no autobiography, Indian or non-Indian, can be complete. One could imagine an electronic text on or off the internet that could include those songs, but that doesn’t make these solely written texts inferior. In fact, they are in many ways a revelation to the writers who are able to express themselves in

ways that honor their cultures and to readers who can absorb those cultures. In an interview Walters says she wants everyone to “experience another view of the world... There’s magic in doing this, and enrichment. I hope that my stories reflect another perspective that is rewarding to receive” (Walters 72). Recent Native American women’s autobiographies are rewarding as the autobiographers adapt storytelling to the written word in order to express themselves, and in doing so reformulate the concepts of author, text, reader and self for their reading audience.

## CHAPTER 5

### SPEAKING TOGETHER

#### 5.1 Autobiographical Compilations

In this chapter, the community that the other Native American women autobiographers stress in their works is a reality. Joy Harjo's and Gloria Bird's 1997 autobiographical compilation *Reinventing the Enemy's Language* is written by a community of Native American women writers; the single autobiographer has become the autobiographical community. The autobiographical text also continues to adapt, as each contributor writes about her life in various forms, and that life lives in a community setting, amongst the lives of all the other contributors, on the pages of this compilation. With the editorial focus in *Reinventing the Enemy's Language* on survival and how they continue to survive, the Native American women contributors ended up writing about writing in their lives. The importance of writing to their survival is expressed, then, not only through the very existence of each written contribution but in its subject matter. Writing is no longer strictly the enemy's tool; it has become a part of adapting Native American cultures, cultures that need Native and non-Native reader-participants to help solidify their cultural survival.

A work like *Reinventing the Enemy's Language* is akin to Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation, which was founded to collect and preserve the testimonies of the

Holocaust victims. Upwards of 52,000 survivors and sympathizers were filmed recalling their memories of that time. Native Americans do not have a champion as powerful as Spielberg, and their own Holocaust did not happen over a limited period of time. Furthermore, wide-scale physical threats to Native Americans by non-Natives are over a century removed; Wounded Knee in 1890 is considered the last major military confrontation. Native Americans of the twenty-first century have not had to face physical genocide in the same way, but they have faced and still do in many ways the effects of poverty and unemployment that threaten their physical existence. They also face an ongoing cultural genocide. Today, cultural genocide is not an obvious overt threat from the outside as it was when Native Americans were forbidden to speak their languages or practice their rituals during the “kill the Indian save the man” era; however, misinformation about Natives combined with a general apathy toward them is still a threat to Native American cultures. True, interest in the culture of Native Americans is growing; the new American Indian Museum in Washington attests to this, as well as the inclusion of Native American literature and history in schools thanks to anthologies (Roemer 3 *Cambridge*). There are, however, so many voices that need to be heard in order for Native Americans to be recognized and understood. The problem is that when they are heard, they are often still heard as outsiders; their cultures and troubles are as remote for most Americans as those in Africa. One way Native Americans combat this is by resisting categorization of themselves. This does not mean that Native Americans want to be seen as Westerners. According to James Wilson in



his *The Earth Shall Weep: A History of Native America*, “In scores of tribes, they have kept alive the historical knowledge central to any community—that despite everything, we are still *us* rather than *them*” (xxvii). Unfortunately, this leads Native Americans to be seen by most non-Natives as a primitive people and, therefore, an unequal people. The central belief among Euro-Americans is that Native Americans belong essentially to the past rather than to the present, and thus are incapable of change. The reality is that Native American cultures are in the “here,” as Anna Lee Walters would say (137). They have changed because of and in spite of colonization. Despite poverty, alcoholism, depression and land/language/cultural loss, Native Americans survive, and to them it is what Native American Joy Harjo calls “beautiful survival” (30).

*Reinventing the Enemy's Language* shows non-Natives this survival. For Native Americans, it is a “dialogue” that occurred before the writing of the book, orally “around a kitchen table,” and will continue long after the book, both in oral and written forms (19). Unlike the Shoah project, the dialogue of *Reinventing* is a written one of “poetry, fiction, personal narrative, prayer, and testimonials,” according to Harjo (23). Eighty-seven women from fifty different tribes, who live in both rural and urban areas, dialogue in *Reinventing* for over five hundred pages. According to Krupat, “Indian experience is not always and everywhere the same, nor is it unproblematically given to consciousness” (*Turn* 5). However, the majority of Native Americans have a strong sense of indebtedness or allegiance to their oral traditions. In *Reinventing*, their voices are both traditionally autobiographical and non-traditionally autobiographical. Their

participation in this work creates the oral tradition in written form, and the oral tradition is the context of their Native American cultures. Thus, Native American women's voices in *Reinventing* are autobiographical.

This work, however, is not the first work to gather Native autobiographical voices together. There are many works of as-told-to narratives that primarily Natives and non-Natives gathered together, including *Nevada Indians Speak*, 1954, edited by Jack Forbes (Powhatan); *Stories of Traditional Navajo Life and Culture by Twenty-Two Navajo Men and Women*, 1977, edited by Broderick H. Johnson; *I am the Fire: Voices of Native American Women*, 1977, edited by Jane Katz; *Messengers of the Wind: Native American Women Tell Their Life Stories*, 1995, also edited by Jane Katz; and *everyday is a good day*, 2004, edited by Wilma Mankiller. The first work mixes as-told-to and written works by Nevada Indians together. The second work is also tribe specific; the last three examples combine women's voices of many tribes together. Mankiller's work is particularly interesting because it was conceived by a Native American woman, but none of these works exclusively contain the written words of Native Americans.

A 1987 a compilation did solicit written contributions from Native Americans. *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*, edited by non-Native Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat, includes "literary autobiography" contributed by Native women and men. In 2000, after the publication of *Reinventing*, a follow-up compilation to *I Tell You Now* by Krupat and Swann was published. This compilation, *Here First: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*, includes once again

the contributed autobiographical essays of Native American male and female writers. *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*, however, is unique in that it is the first work to gather Native American women's voices together in a mixed-genre text that was conceived and edited by Native American women.

Harjo and Bird have dual roles as editors and contributors of *Reinventing*. In the two Krupat and Swann compilations, the editors do speak outside of the introduction, but as only biographers, interviewers, and historians. They introduce each writer with biographical information, "factual information," as they call it (xiii). Krupat and Swann, in their introductions, insist that the words of a Native should not be tampered with; therefore, they "resisted the temptation to edit" (xiii). These editors are cognizant of how problematic the non-Native editor/Native writer or speaker relationship has been and still can be. Therefore, I am not suggesting that these editors have somehow failed Native Americans. I am suggesting, however, that a work like *Reinventing* is especially worthy of examination because Natives control the work in its entirety, and what Native American women in this work reinvent are many Euro-Centric views of life and how it should be understood and lived; writing, particularly the Euro-American idea of literary genres and the separation of orality and literacy; and English as a language that only speaks for the Colonizer.

The reinvention begins in the introduction of *Reinventing* when readers hear Harjo's and Bird's editorial voices discussing how problematic that role is for them. Readers do not often hear Native American women in such a role. The editor, usually a

non-Native, is the one who holds the spotlight on the subject--often the Native American-- making it the object of scrutiny. In this case, Native American women editors are holding the spotlight, but since they are contributors as well, the spotlight works more to illuminate Native American women rather than examine them. Harjo and Bird as editors did, however, have decisions to make, including what defines an Indian and what makes good literature. Furthermore, they had to contend with “space considerations” and their own personal preferences. The identity issue was a particularly difficult one because identity, in this situation, needed to be defined for readers to make the work credible. Identity was a simpler issue for pre-contact Indians who identified themselves on the bases of tribe, band, clan and family affiliations. This same idea of identity continues today for many Native Americans, but non-Natives need more than the way a person identifies him or herself; they need written proof. Harjo and Bird finally settled on the requirement that contributors be “enrolled in Indian tribes” (27). They justify this act of autobiographical definition by saying they must “ensure the integrity of the anthology” (27). As editors, Harjo and Bird were forced to set such a parameter; they could not rely on a loose definition such as Momaday’s: “An Indian is an idea a man has of himself.” Apparently they wanted to avoid doubts about the “legitimacy” of any of the contributors, a concern for any editor but a concern for Native Americans that has been around since they began to write, as seen in chapter 1. Harjo and Bird do, however, reveal in their introduction that this editorial definition of an Indian is not one that they carry beyond that role.

In asking themselves what makes good literature, these Native editors were pulled into the world of Euro-America beliefs. Bird speaks of her training in creative-writing workshops and in university literary courses, both of which preference “written literature over oral literature” (28). Bird had to “learn to read differently, or to unlearn the critical aspect of reading” she was taught in such situations (28). In this case, as opposed to the Western editorial decision she and Harjo were forced to make about whom an Indian is, Bird rejects the ideas of only judging the worth of the submissions “through conventional Euro-American standards of what constitutes good literature” (28). She rejects the role of a Western editor for that of a Native American one. According to Hertha Dawn Wong, “Pre-contact native people tended to narrate their lives as they were living them. Rather than shaping a past life in the present, they shaped a present (and sometimes future) life in the present moment” (17). This process is “more like that of a diarist capturing the immediacy of the recent moment in a diary entry than that of a memoirist pondering and reformulating the long-ago past into a unified and chronological narrative” (Wong 17). Bird and Harjo made their selections based on works that have this sense of immediacy from the oral tradition. They wanted the contributors to look at how they “continue to survive,” and for these Native Americans women contributors, writing, as an adapted version of oral storytelling, plays a big role in that survival (26). The women write about how they came to write, what they write about, and why they write. These writings are most often linked to

discussions of oral storytelling. Writing is linked to survival because these writers link writing to the tribal tradition of storytelling.

As evident in the content of their italicized and creative sections, the contributors also accord their survival to their familial and tribal past. Most of the Native women contributors discuss or write creative pieces about experiences from their tribal and/or family history. The writers reveal that stories about others help define them and give them strength now. The result is that this work stands as Harjo and Bird say in their introduction, as a “testimony, more in the way of journal writing,” through its content and its actual written words (28). It also stands a tribute to the past that gave these women a foundation on which to survive.

Using their definition of an Indian and not rejecting pieces based on Euro-American literary traditions, Harjo and Bird still had to work under the constraint of space considerations, a consideration not as relevant in the oral tradition. Their personal preferences came into play here. Bird admitted that she is adverse to the style of “explaining ourselves” (29). Such a style was prevalent in early Native American writings, and Bird’s aversion is understood because explaining oneself is tantamount to justifying one’s existence and one’s culture. Both of which are humbling.

This compilation is about reinvention and power, not explanation and pity. Thus, the editorial issues that Bird and Harjo faced are not staunchly defended. They admit the complexities of all of these issues. At one point, Bird questions her right to silence the women who were excluded from *Reinventing*. She says, “I don’t think this

issue was ever totally resolved in my mind” (28). As editors they must define their diverse tribal people in one definition, and they must silence some. However, as editors they create something important. They know their choices mean “defining native women’s literature” and “inventing a truly native literary criticism” (29). Other Native American women have written on this issue, such as Paula Gunn-Allen, Beth Brant, and Leslie Marmon Silko; these women have also written creative works that serve as examples of Native women’s literature. *Reinventing* reveals a Native women’s literature and demonstrates a Native literary criticism not through one woman’s voice, but through a wide variety of Native women in the same text who speak together for themselves and about themselves.

In other words, Harjo’s and Bird’s editorial voices do not enter the narrative in the same way as Krupat’s and Swann’s. In *Reinventing*, tradition Euro-American biographical information is included in the back of the book in the “Contributor’s Notes.” Throughout the text, however, the Native women contributors are not introduced by Harjo and Bird; each Native American woman introduces herself and her relationship to writing, making the introductory pieces for each contributor autobiographical instead of biographical, as in the Krupat and Swann works. Editors Harjo and Bird turned these into italicized sections that preface each Native women’s entry, yet preface is a misleading choice of words, as it suggests the italicized sections are extra information; these sections stand as creative equals beside the non-italicized sections. When Harjo and Bird do enter the narrative beyond the introduction, it is as

contributors. Bird is the first entry in section I, “The Beginning of the World” and Harjo is the last entry in section IV, “Dreamwalkers” The Returning.” Harjo and Bird show up multiple times throughout the narrative as contributors, Native women just like all the other contributors.

When reading an introductory section and then a creative piece from a Native woman contributor, readers do not feel like they have switched from academic writing to creative writing because the introductions are often creative in style. For example, an Arapaho, Debra Calling Thunder’s italicized section is as follows:

*I am an Arapaho, a woman of  
the Blue Sky People, a nation from long ago. And we love  
words because words are life, binding all things sacred—the  
heavens and earth and generations.*

*Words sing in our blood. They are the prayers and entreat-  
ies that ascend to the Creator Above, the songs our grand-  
mothers and grandfathers cried from the edge of genocide, the  
circle of dreams that whisper of eternity.*

*Words are the breath of time, and we love words because  
we love life and because words are in us.*

*May our words and the words of all grieving nations be  
Strong. (292-93)*



This introductory piece by Calling Thunder does not give her birth date or a list of her publications or even her occupation. Her “introduction” is more reminiscent of invocation, prayer or poetry that honors words. Furthermore, the introductory piece has much in common with her creative entry “Voices of the Invisible,” which can best be classified as memoir or prose poetry. Specifically, the spacing is similar, one sentence stanzas/paragraphs, and the tone is similar as well in that both pieces speak of the power of words and how words help one remember, stay strong and endure. The third stanza:

The air is crowded with words—wondrous and beautiful words  
that rise invisible and unheard and then are swallowed by time.  
The air is crowded with words—words that bind us to eternity,  
that carry the stories and dreams that are the gifts from generations  
past, the songs of victory and mourning that compel us to seek  
tomorrow. (293)

Another example is the entry by Nila Northsun, a Shoshone/Chippewa poet who is known for using lowercase letters in her mostly tragically comic poetry. This same style and tone is used in her italicized section and her creative section. The second paragraph of her italicized section states:

*a turning point in my life that involved the act of writing  
was when i got this word processor. before i kept a spiral note-  
book under my bed and wrote at bedtime and usually got too  
sleepy to put very much down, or if i had alcohol in me i*

*couldn't read my writing.* (394)

The image of Northsun drunk and unable to read her own handwriting is as tragically comic as the theme of the poem that follows in which the narrator has to reinvent *Cosmo's* suggestion of 99 things to do before you die. Her new list includes such things as: “stop drinking alcohol” or “be an extra in an Indian movie” (396). The italicized piece and the submitted piece are both creative and allow Northsun to present herself through words unedited.

The difference between the introductory sections of *Reinventing* and the Krupat and Swann compilations is made especially clear when one reads an entry from a writer who is in both a Krupat/Swann work and *Reinventing*. Wendy Rose is in the anthology *I Tell You Now*, and she is twice in *Reinventing*. In *I Tell You Now*, the biographical piece added by Krupat and Swann is what is expected, including her birth date, tribal affiliation, publications, and career highlights. In *Reinventing*, Rose writes in her introductory section:

*I am raising cactus and succulents, collecting dolls and figurines of female superheros and villains, married twenty years to Arthur now, and have a cat named “Nudge” who just moved in one day.*

Her autobiography here is sparse, similar to her chosen mode of creativity—poetry. If one reads the essay in *I Tell You Now*, one can surmise that Rose would prefer to write about herself in poetry. In that collection, she admits that everything she writes is

“fundamentally autobiography” (253). About writing the autobiographical essay she continues: “to state my life in an orderly way with clear language is actually to restate, simplified, what has already been said. If I could just come right out and state it like that, as a matter of fact, I would not have needed poetry” (253). Rose explains near the end of her *I Tell You Now* essay that “she agonized for months about writing this essay, and now that it is finished I am afraid of it. I am certain I said too much...” (261). An “exorcism” is what she calls the piece but is not comfortable with such a public exorcism (261). Rose has a public way to share herself—her poetry in which she can reveal just enough. The essay form she was asked to write obviously called for further explanation and made Rose uncomfortable. Certainly, Krupat and Swann cannot be blamed for Rose’s pain, and as critic I too am glad for every word she says that enlightens her work, but that is a separate problem. Rose likely felt compelled to write the essay because it was another way to tell about a Native American life, and each telling is precious in a society that has heard about so few lives. The traditional autobiographical form has, using Rose’s words, a “simplified,” “come right out and state it” agenda that does not necessarily reveal the life of a person better than a different form (253). Furthermore, for Native Americans, like the one who bowed out of the *I Tell You Now* project, what may be more important is to forefront not the individual self, but the “person as transmitter of the traditional culture” (xii). The not so straightforward way (poetry, fiction, prayer, songs, and some memoirs) allows Native Americans to move beyond facts about themselves and even beyond facts in

general to write about themselves in ways that also let them write about their tribe and culture, as the “I” or the character(s) is simultaneously the autobiographer and every Native American.

In *Reinventing* what follows her italicized autobiography is her autobiographical poem “The Endangered Roots of a Person”:

The healing of the roots  
is that thunderhead-reeling;  
they change and pale  
but they are not in danger now. (270)

Rose’s Hopi roots are firmly established for her now, and she reveals this in the poetic form. For Euro-Americans, poetry is not the recognized form of telling one’s story. Although many Euro-American poets use their lives in their poems in this same way, prose is the recognized and accessible form to get the “facts” across. Rose accomplishes her goal of telling about her life, by using a creative form that allows the roots of the poem to refer to not just her specific roots, but to the roots of many Native Americans who have established a firm connection to their Native culture.

Not only are the introductory autobiographical sections that the Native women write integral to the work, but Bird and Harjo’s introduction is as well. Their introductory dialogue sets the tone; they say, “We welcome you here” (19). Such a statement stops readers own sense of time, and invites them to join this dialogue in their own “here and now.” This specific dialogue is not over at the book’s publication in

1997; readers are “here,” joining the dialogue that continues on with them. Walter argues that print culture turned books into “a kind of thing or object” (123). *Reinventing* loses some of its fixedness, its feeling of being finished and closed with the idea that it is a dialogue that happened before the book and will continue on after the last page. The introduction accomplishes this with its use of drama like dialogue indicators, JH: for Joy Harjo and GB: for Gloria Bird. The end of the book accomplishes this because Harjo’s poem “Perhaps the World Ends here” ends with the future tense: “Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table,/while we are laughing and crying,/eating of the last sweet bite.” (557).

In their introduction, Bird and Harjo reveal that they wanted to create a narrative that “was also part of an even larger narrative” (29). Many non-Native writers think of their publications as dialogues, but the difference may lie in the fact that they hope their work will spark a dialogue or join a dialogue, but for Bird and Harjo the dialogue began before the book and will continue as long as the oral tradition is alive. Furthermore, individual women make repeat appearances in the compilation, giving the work a feel of a real conversation that does not just allow everyone to speak only once, but is a back and forth. In Krupat and Swann’s works, the entries are arranged chronologically in the first volume and alphabetically in the second. There is not sense that the work is a narrative whole, although the choice of chronology was deliberate to giver readers “a sense of continuity and change in the life experiences of Native writers” (xiii). In *Reinventing*, the arrangement of the work adds to the feel that it is a narrative whole.

The narrative conversation begins with the Introduction, which covers issues that real Native women and Native women writers face, including the loss of and hope to recover Native language and the challenge of using a written language in an oral culture. Then the entries are arranged in four sections: “The Beginning of the World,” “Within the Enemy: Challenge,” “Transformation: Voices of the Invisible,” and “Dreamwalkers: The Returning.” Although the editors could have put the entries in random order, they chose this circular arrangement which suggests more than just the editors need to organize. Harjo says of this arrangement:

We began to see within the internal structure of the anthology the cycle underlying each process of creation, a cycle that is characterized by the phases of (1) genesis, (2) struggle, (3) transformation, and (4) the returning. We realized that we are involved in this process together, as individual humans struggling toward knowledge, as persons born into our families, tribe, nations, as literary artists involved in the creative act. This form appeared to be the most natural structure for the shape of the anthology. (29-30)

These entries are not rushing toward some linear point; they are individually and communally involved in the same circular pattern, much like the structure of Simon Ortiz’s *Going for the Rain* in which in the poems at the end of the third section and the fourth section are hopeful in contrast to the “dislocations” of the second and third

sections (Roemer 72 “A Touching”). The similarity with Ortiz’s work is not surprising, considering that they were once married and it was hearing him read his poetry that inspired Silko to write her own.

Even before these four sections, the narrative conversation continues as a prayer contributed by Grace Boyne. Her italicized section and her “Invocation: Navajo Prayer” encapsulate the issues that dominate *Reinventing*. In the first paragraph of her italicized entry, she points out the difficulties of translating Navajo into English; she says, “It loses a lot in the translation. You must have a good command of both languages to be able to go back and forth” (33). The struggle to use English, even when it is the Native woman’s first language, is a recurring theme in the work. Another recurring theme is the importance of retaining or learning their Native language; nothing is completely right without it, not prayer, not storytelling, not life. In her second paragraph, Boyne speaks of the importance of clan recognition, and introduces clan affiliations. Identifying their clan and/or tribal affiliation is something that all of the women in this work do. It is a reminder to readers and to themselves that they are still part of their individual tribe, and not just under the one label of Native Americans. The last two paragraphs of her italicized section discuss the oral and the written word. Boyne speaks of the “necessity of the written expression” and how it is “required” (32). She is also compelled to point out that such expression is not as powerful as oral expression; “Thus, it is more meaningful to speak rather than to place the words on paper” (32). The power of the oral over the written is a recurring theme as well, but

within that theme is the attempt to make the written more powerful because as Boyne says, “I expect I will do more writing in the upcoming years” (32). Such a statement reveals the transition Native American writers are still making in respect to the written word. Native Americans write, but some still view it as a second-class art form. Boyne’s entry, especially the prayer that follows her autobiographical section reveals that she is able to make her writing powerful, even if she doesn’t realize it. Boyne grudgingly admits that she will do more writing in the future because “it is required,” but what Boyne has done is write in a way that combines the written and the oral (32).

Boyne’s prayer “Invocation: Navajo Prayer,” that follows her autobiographical introduction, in particular signals the conversation is changing into something more powerful. An invocation is an appeal to a higher power for assistance, a reminder for Boyne and most Native Americans that “the Indian poet does not consider himself the originator of his material but merely the conveyor. Either he has heard it from an elder or he has received it from a supernatural power...Indian poetry, then, is usually attributed not to an individual but to his culture” (Bierhorst *In the Trail of the Wind* 4-5). Invocations are typical at the beginning of Navaho ceremonies, and since Boyne asks that the words that follow be blessed, readers with knowledge of Navaho ceremonies might enter the collection as if they were participating in a ceremony. The prayer begins: “We ask for your blessing on this act of creating beautiful words” (33). Ong contends that literate cultures no longer feel when they are reading that they are “actually speaking aloud” (26). Native American cultures are not only literate cultures;



therefore, Native Americans, and most non-Natives when the genre is prayer, feel like they are speaking aloud when reading prayer because prayer is so often spoken aloud. Ong says, “Oral formulaic thought and expression ride deep in consciousness and the unconscious, and they do not vanish as soon as one used to them takes pen in hand” (26). For Native Americans like Boyne who grew up with the oral tradition, literacy can never smother orality, only dilute it. Ong says that written words are dead, but that they are “subject to dynamic resurrection” (33). This is especially true for prayer. In addition, this prayer has many of the qualities of the oral tradition. It is similar to the Navajo Blessingway, a ceremony that recounts the events of Navajo creation. It uses repetition; it gives due time to directions, and it uses the word ‘beautiful’ or ‘beauty’ numerous times in English and in Navaho, Hóhzo in an attempt to preserve a state of beauty/hóhzo /blessing.

The prayer also speaks of the power of words. Those words are simultaneously oral and written:

Create the words that beautify

Create the words that bridge misunderstanding

Create the words that enlighten

Create the words that bring harmony (33)

This prayer calls to mind oral words being created because that is how the Beautyway is carried out, but “create the works” also refers to the kind of words written in English because that is what the prayer precedes and how it is presented to readers. Therefore,

this prayer illustrates that one way Native American writers reinvent English is by resurrecting the still words on a page and imbuing them with some of the potency, the action, and the dynamics of the oral word. This poem also implies that written words can become “sacred words”:

Through the sacred words we shall create the beauty  
Through the sacred words we shall create harmony  
Through the sacred words we shall create enlightenment  
Through the sacred words we shall create understanding (33)

The oral is not forgotten, but the written word can work and must work in a similar way if it is to work at all.

The Native women in *Reinventing* did not tell their stories orally to Harjo and Bird. Each wrote her own entry and wrote it in English. Such a decision comes at cost for Native Americans, but as Harjo claims, “to speak, at whatever the cost, is to become empowered rather than victimized by destruction” (21). The cost Harjo refers to is possibly losing one’s Native language. One statistic from an April 9, 1998 *New York Times* article suggests that out of the over 200 indigenous languages of the United States, only around twenty are not in danger of becoming extinct in the next fifty years (Brooke 1A). Harjo says that writing in English, which historically meant some kind of loss, “is a [also a] dichotomy [Natives] will always deal with as long as [their] cultures are predominantly expressed in oral literature” (20). By writing and writing in English, these Native women are not just reinventing English but reinventing writing. In the

introduction, the tense that Bird and Harjo use in discussing the reinvention of English is both in the past tense and the continuous tense. The title is “reinventing,” suggesting that this is an ongoing process. Bird says this anthology is “only a beginning”; “something is emerging and coming that will politicize as well as transform literary expression” (22). She explains that there is “a long way to go” (25). Harjo uses the past tense: “We’ve transformed these enemy languages” (22). The point is not to compare their perspectives; it is to point out both. The reinventing will continue, but is has begun, as this work testifies.

Bird, in the Introduction maintains that “the moment we are able to identify the source of pain, we are free of its power over us” (Bird 22). This may not be completely true, identifying alcohol as the enemy is only step one in AA., but *Reinventing* does prove that when Native Americans write creatively in English that both English and writing become part of their evolving Native American cultures. Harjo concurs, saying that it is when Native Americans “began to create with this new language that [they] named it [theirs]” (Harjo 23-24). Simon Ortiz claims this creating is inevitable because a person writes based on his or her culture. He believes: “The language I use is English. Nevertheless, my English language use is founded on the original and basic knowledge of myself as an Acoma person” (Coltelli 107). Harjo also argues of English that it is “a language we [Native Americans] have chosen to name our own” (Harjo 23). The key is that English is a choice. This also may not be exactly true. English is needed to succeed in America; however, to name English as the language of creative expression is a choice

for some Native writers. For others, like Bird, English is the only language they have ever spoken. One's only language is one's only choice. Bird speaks, however, of being "impoverished" for not knowing her Native language. She speaks in English but has retained "a particular way of perceiving the world" from her Spokane culture (24). Ironically then, English is one cause of the damage and the "site" to "undo some of the damage" (24). Bird does not believe that English can ever be a "new Native language" because it only "incorporates a native perception of the world in limited ways" (25). This suggests that Bird wants to present a Native perception in a wholly Native way. In other words, she wants Natives to write in their Native languages, and points out that there is only one volume of poetry written in totally in a Native language. Bird seems to be of the same mind as Ngugi wa Thiong'o whose 1986 *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* is a farewell to critical writing in English; he gave up writing fiction in English at an earlier date. His choice allows him to control his own self-definition, allowing him as a representative of his Kenyan people to assert some control over his and their future. As an English-only speaker, this is not a step that Bird can take easily. She admits that Natives have "a long way to go" in regaining and writing in their languages. The alternative, however, is more costly than imaginable. Efforts are being made to preserve and teach Native languages. In 2006 issues 1 and 2 of *American Indian Quarterly*, Volume 30, edited by David Treuer, were dedicated to this topic. John Hunt Peacock Jr's "Lamenting Language Loss at the

Modern Language Association” informs readers of the Modern Language Associations recent stance on this issue:

This “Statement on Native American Languages in the College and University Curriculum” was approved by the MLA executive council on May 21, 2005. The association now officially urges that colleges and universities teach the languages of Native American nations in their regions grant credit for the study of Native American language when undertaken to fulfill undergraduate and graduate requirements in foreign languages . . . include, where appropriate, Native American languages in the curriculum in the same manner as foreign languages grant proficiency in Native American languages the same full academic credit as proficiency in foreign languages encourage research to create and update dictionaries, grammars, orthographies, curricula, and other materials to support the teaching of Native American languages . . . especially languages for which they have never been developed [and] work with Native American language communities and with Native American educational and governing bodies to implement these recommendations. (149)

Regaining their Native language is important, as language is culture. English is not a substitute for Native languages, but until Natives can regain their languages, if they ever

can, they, including Bird, are making English part of their evolving culture by reinventing it, making it “tough and beautiful” in a work like *Reinventing* (24).

Even Craig Womack in his 1999 *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* does not advocate a boycott of English. In speaking of Creek Indian writers who have found a recognizable Muskogean literary conceit in English, Womack argues that “Indian worldviews are possible in English” (64). Womack even takes this point to the extreme:

English ceased to be the language of the colonizer the minute it landed in the New world where it acquired vocabulary from Indian tribes, creole words from the Caribbean, African words from slaves, and many other features unique to the Americas. The colonizer lost control of his mother tongue. It may be that Indians, and other groups, colonized the English rather than the other way around. (12)

I don't agree that new vocabulary completely un-colonizes the colonizer's language; however, Native Americans whose cultures are not found in English have taken steps to make their worldviews exist in the English language by mixing in untranslatable words like the Navajo word *Hóhzo*. Furthermore, when English is the second language, English will show “traces of the structure and idioms of their ‘native’ language” (Krupat 36). When critics like Womack, Ortiz, Bird, and Harjo talk about reinventing English, they are really talking about endowing English and Western forms of writing with perspectives, worldviews and metaphors that are uniquely Native

American or tribally specific. Again for Ortiz, raised with the Pueblo language, this is a natural process. He argues, “I couldn’t fail to use language according to my own original identity” (Coltelli 107). For Vizenor in his *Manifest Manners*, the use of English and its literary forms is ironic and subversive, and it can lead to liberation from one-dimensional, stereotyped views of Native Americans:

The English language has been the linear tongue of colonial discoveries, racial cruelties, invented names, the simulation of tribal cultures, manifest manners, and the unheard literature of dominance to tribal communities; at the same time, this mother tongue of paracolonialism has been a language of invincible imagination and liberation for many tribal people in the postindian world (105).

Before I entertain this point further, I want to make the point that I haven’t encountered any Native piece of writing that proposes Natives go back to a strictly oral culture. Maybe Native Americans agree with Ong who says that “without writing human consciousness can never achieve its fuller potential” (14). Perhaps, this is colonialism par excellence. Perhaps, like the Mayans, more Native Americans tribes may have in time developed a written language, and in fact, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Cherokees did develop the Cherokee syllabi. Most Native Americans regretfully realize that as Ong says, “a literate person cannot fully recover a sense of what the world is like to purely oral people” (12). Native Americans are no longer a purely oral people, and according to Ong, “Verbal performances of high artistic and human worth...are no

longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche” (14). Most Native Americans who participate in the oral tradition would disagree with this. Many Native Americans do not just want to imbue their writing with the sense of orality; they want to continue to participate in the oral tradition. They want the choice to be able to code-switch between orality and literacy, English and Native language. If Natives actually regain or put a stronghold on their languages and continue their oral traditions, then they have some of the choices colonization took from them.

The Native women writers in *Reinventing* describe their writings in ways they would normally describe their oral tradition, and they write as if their writings will be spoken. These are some of the ways they endow writing with Native American worldviews; and this is part of what Harjo and Bird mean by reinventing the enemy’s language to create a Native women’s literature and a Native literary criticism. Native women’s writing in *Reinventing* demonstrates oral traditions, and should be examined from the tenants of those traditions. Native Americans struggle with the task of giving the written word the power they believe the spoken word contains. In the italicized sections as a whole, Native American women reveal that writing, particularly poetry, can be powerful and beautiful like the oral tradition. Harjo explains in her contribution: “We instinctively loved the rhythmic, undulant language that was called poetry” (54). Sweet concurs: “The language of poetry is no less sacred and, for me, holds that same power and beauty” as oratory (496). Silko also explains: “From the spoken word, or storytelling, comes the written word as well as the visual image” (195). Betty Bell



explains, “I write because it is there I speak with conviction and connection” (75). These women then go past their italicized autobiographies to write in varied forms that reveal their lives and the power of orality and literacy in those lives.

Navajo Laura Tohe, for example, contends in her italicized section: “The voices of my grandmothers and ancestors are part of that oral tradition from which I write. They are all there helping me create; I never do it alone. The act of writing is claiming voice and taking power” (41). Her poem “She Was Telling it This Way,” that follows begins with the same words in Navajo: “Shimá Shił hoolne” (42). The “she” is Tohe’s/the Navajo woman’s mother, and throughout the poem Tohe mixes in italics when her ancestors seem to be speaking though her mother. The telling reverberates back in time and is propelled forward as well because Tohe writes these words that readers hear. She is now the one claiming voice and taking power by telling it this way, and her telling and listening are integral parts of her story.

The Native women of *Reinventing* reinvent with the subject of their autobiographies as well. James Ruppert in his *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*, states that all Indians are bicultural, literally, or just by living in American culture. He proposes that they are using the best of both cultures in an act of “mediation” (viii). Mediation, according to Ruppert, is “an artistic and conceptual standpoint, constantly flexible, which uses the epistemological frameworks of American Indian and Western cultural traditions to illuminate and enrich each other” (3). This

confirms the now current assumption that Native cultures can enrich Western ones, and not just the other way around. Caskey Russell suggests:

American Indian writers play a crucial role in reinventing the metanarratives that America holds sacred, suggesting that another way Natives reinvent the enemy's language is by critiquing their worldviews by presenting Native ones. For example, Manifest Destiny, Western cultural superiority, and Man's superiority over the animals and the environment are all called into question by American Indian writers. (38)

Russell uses Nora Dauenhauer's poem "How to Make Good Baked Salmon from the River," from the "Within the Enemy: Challenge" section, to illustrate how it reinvents the idea of man being supreme over animals and the environment. In the "Directions" section of the poem, there are instructions about the right thing to do with the salmon's innards: "Gut, but make sure you toss all to the seagulls / and the ravens, because they're you're kin, / and make sure you speak to them / while you are feeding them" (203). Such directions suggest that the salmon is not there just for humankind, who have their part to do in the cycle of all life on earth. In the "To Serve" section: "And think how good it is / that we have good spirits / that still bring salmon and oil" (205). According to Russell, this section indicates that the "individual is connected in a myriad of ways (social, physical, spiritual, and cultural) to the surrounding environment, both flora and fauna, and therefore cannot shrink responsibility for the maintenances and well being of the environment" (37). The content of this poem

teaches Native Americans, specifically Tlingits, about the specifics of how to cook a salmon, and it challenges everyone to live life honorably by living in harmony with nature. Furthermore, it speaks to the reality of Native Americans continuing their traditions today through adaptability. Dauenhauer gives options in this poem – if you don't have fresh berries, “think about how nice the berries / would have been after the salmon / but open a can / of fruit cocktail instead” (204). The tone is not sad but practical and even lighthearted. The tradition of fresh salmon and berries may have changed to tuna and fruit cocktail, but the feelings associated with it are still available. Dauenhauer even offers a substitute for the tradition of storytelling—“small talk and jokes with friends will do” (206). This is not a poem that laments the past, but reveals the present as one that can still offer Native Americans a sense of culture.

Furthermore, like many modernist and post-modernist writers, Native American writers like Dauenhauer are reinventing writing by experimenting with different kinds of texts. This means specifically not feeling limited by the expectations of a particular genre. Krupat and Swann say their compilations *I Tell You Now* and *Here First* that the entries follow “no fixed format” (xiii). They call them autobiographical essays, but the entries often morph out of essay and into other modes, such as poetry and/or traditional and contemporary stories. The essays of *I Tell You Now* and *Here First* are according to Krupat and Swann, Native literary expression “in its traditional and—most particularly—contemporary forms” (xiv). Although the editors follow a fixed format, the Native contributors do not. This is true for *Reinventing*, as well. Each entry is organized

similarly, but what happens in those entries is hard to classify. Harjo and Bird in the introduction name the entries in general as ones of “poetry, fiction, personal narrative, prayer, and testimonials,” but they don’t specifically name each entry as one thing or another (23). Because all creative work is in some sense autobiographical, Krupat in the introduction to *I Tell You Now* argues that we should focus on “*how* the text a poet or novelist specifically classifies as autobiography differs from the texts he or she does not so classify” (xi). Krupat is speaking of professional writers; the women in *Reinventing* do not classify their work as one genre over another or explain the how of that difference. Bird says that Native women “often write in first person. They appear to have no need to construct or reinvent themselves to accommodate a literary form outside themselves” (28). Each entry does not follow the rules of one genre. Dauenhauer’s poem is not just a poem; it is also autobiography, recipe, reminiscence, and even, as Russell argues, “part oral directions from an elder to her younger relatives” (41-42). Her italicized section prepares readers for this reality, as she reveals that growing up her “way of life included traditional Tlingit foods” (202). All of these Western defined genres reveal Dauenhauer’s life and are her autobiography. Bird and Harjo introduce these Euro-American genres, because they are mixed in each entry and because this compilation puts all entries together as one narrative, the walls of genres are weakened and even irrelevant. Autobiographies are written the way the Native women are compelled to write, and their lives are revealed. Harjo and Bird also imply that genres are an “arbitrary category” for arranging the entries. Separating the work by

genre, first of all, would have been impossible, as each entry doesn't just stay put. As discussed earlier, they chose what they call a "natural structure for the shape of the anthology" (30).

Central to the editors and the contributors' definition of a truly native literary criticism is its "usefulness to the community" (29). The multiethnic women of this anthology have similar "concerns based on community" (23). Jace Weaver in his *That the People Might Live* proposes that "what may distinguish any people's literature from that of any other group is...worldview; ...a feature that cuts across various Native worldviews is the importance of community" (26, 37). Weaver terms Natives sense and commitment to community as "communitism" (43). The women writers of *Reinventing* repeat such concerns in their italicized introductory sections in which they speak of writing that should be ethical and instructive, both qualities essential to the oral tradition. Bird contends in her contribution: "I hear people say that poetry won't make any difference, but I know that isn't true" (39). Gladys Cardiff explains: "I think of writing as both a creative and an ethical activity" (259). Jeannette Armstrong concurs: "The purpose of my writing has always been to tell a better story than is being told about us" (498). Kim Caldwell also concurs: "It is now our responsibility to reach out to the young women and encourage them to not be afraid to lift their voices and be heard" (530). Lastly, Haunani-Kay Trask explains: "I write to resist, to tell my people how resistance feels, to guide them through our pain to the triumph of our vision" (520). These Native women feel a responsibility to one another and to Native Americans in

general. These women, like the early writers discussed in chapter 1, speak to non-Natives to “tell a better story,” adding their written voices to the voices of non-Natives. They also speak directly to their people, to whom they feel a responsibility, participating in their own way in the oral tradition by telling their lives in ways that teach valuable cultural information that let Natives know they are not alone, and that may just encourage other Natives to continue to survive.

Harjo asks in the introduction: “what are other aspects of this [Native] criticism?” (29). She and Bird suggest the issue of survival as central. For the women of *Reinventing*, it is about personal and cultural survival. Writing is about storytelling, and storytelling is about giving and teaching to others in your tribe, and for these women about giving to themselves, recapturing their history. The contributors reveal:

Janice Gould: “I feel that writing is an act of survival” (52).

Tiffany Midge: “My writing became the center of my salvation” (2110)

Luci Tapahanso: “Writing is a...way of survival” (315).

Linda Hogan: “For me, the act of writing comes out of my deepest wanting of justice and survival” (331).

Connie Fife: “It is the act of having survived” (479).

Harjo notes, “We are coming out of ...a war that hasn’t ended” (21). *Reinventing* allows Native American women to manifest critically and creatively their awareness of this war. Native women continue to “persist through” this war” (Harjo 30). This

autobiographical compilation shows that persistence while celebrating the ongoing journey.

*Reinventing* works for Native American people, explaining and arguing to readers the issues important to Native Americans – physical and cultural survival and prosperity, including the oral tradition, Native languages, and community. Simultaneously, the way the text accomplishes all of these ideas adds a further dimension to what it achieves. It is not just purporting ideas; it is realizing those ideas in its form. In chapters 1 and 2, I argue that the single authored autobiographies require a reformulation of one's ideas of author, text and reader because of their form and Native worldviews. In these texts a communal self was present but manifested through one woman. In *Reinventing*, the community is present. In the texts of chapter 1 and 2, genres were mixed and in the case of *Storyteller* even reinvented. In *Reinventing*, genres are again mixed by different women who interpret those forms, discard, or reinvent them at their discretion. In the texts of chapter 1 and 2, I argued the chronological, linear structure was not a prerequisite for autobiographies. In *Reinventing*, such a structure would not only be impossible, but would be irrelevant to the goals of the autobiography of multiple women. In chapter 1, readers begin to learn that they are an essential part of the experience of the text as they are asked to rethink their ideas and values and even take specific action. In chapter 2, readers take part in the text as they realize their role as listeners in creating Silko's storytelling identity. In *Reinventing*, the tasks of the readers are that of both chapters 1 and 2 as readers are

asked to enter the text with specific attitudes and competencies that make them different from a general reading audience and take part in the storytelling process as they listen to the voices and lives of all the Native women of the text.

Autobiographer typically means one person is telling her story, but earlier chapters reveal that for Native Americans that story is never just about herself; the community is involved as the women tell their tribal histories, legends, stories, and traditions, and even serve as as-told-to narrators. Through *Reinventing*, the community literally no longer means that that person has to stand alone to tell her story or that she has to tell it in a specific way. The author of an autobiography, then, does not have to be a single individual. For the Native American contributors of *Reinventing* and for readers who accept that it is an autobiography, author means community and autobiography can mean community story.

As for the women contributors to *Reinventing*, in their changing environments, community is often an abstract belief, instead of an everyday reality. Some of the contributors do live on reservations, but many others live rural, urban or suburban lives with tribal, pan-Indian, traditional and/or Christian beliefs. Wendy Rose believes that “most Indian writers probably are more similar to each other than they are to other members of their tribe who are not writers” (Coltelli 128). Through *Reinventing*, the women writers all got a chance to participate in community; even though they wrote their submissions alone, they knew their words would not stand alone. The Native



American community, then, lives on indefinitely in written form with this autobiography.

## CHAPTER 6

### LITERATURE WITH A PURPOSE

Robert Dale Parker in *The Invention of Native American Literature* argues that critics often forget to say that they study Indian literature for the aesthetic value as well as the urgent social motives. Parker writes “We *like* this writing. We like the rhythms and resonances of its phrases, sentences, episodes, and ideas” (2). Native American literature is the most moving literature I have read, with its aesthetic qualities and social motives highlighting each other. It is a great loss that more works are not encountered by the mainstream reading population. The voices I have heard in Native American women’s autobiographies have changed my views about literature, writing, and self revelation. Native American women want to survive and survive beautifully, and most who read these works will want that for them too. To survive, these autobiographers have embraced writing through works that also entertain, and their medium, autobiography, has allowed them to fuse their ancient cultures with the Euro-American dominant culture in unique ways. In other words, through writing Native American women have found a way to be double-voiced in such a way that not only contributes to their survival but does so beautifully. Their lives, their tribes and their cultures are inseparable and are revealed in the content and the form of their autobiographies.

As critics we want to approach Native literature with the literary knowledge we have already established in dealing with Euro-American literature. This knowledge is our cultural reality, but Native Americans keep insisting that we approach their literature with their cultural realities. As we begin to do this our own cultural realities can change. The interactions of cultures through the written word found in Native American autobiographies are complex, and the successful intermingling invites all involved to change their beliefs. In other words, what Native Americans do with English and writing is boomeranging back to affect colonizers. Arnold Krupat translates French writer Martine Charlot: “The right to difference is a concession the majority grants to certain minorities...on the condition that hierarchical relationships remain intact. The right to difference never results in equality” (25 *Turn*). Most Native Americans embrace their difference; it is up to non-Natives to value and subsequently honor, learn and benefit from those differences and to eventually construct a mutually respectful equality. In the words of Vine Deloria Jr (Standing Rock Sioux), *We Talk You Listen*. This 1970 book finds Deloria proposing group identity and community development as solutions to the troubles of the sixties. Early and contemporary Native American women’s autobiographers also talk this talk, as the same solutions are apparent in the theme and form of their works.

Environmentalists are looking to Native American cultures, as Sidonie Smith reveals: “Indigenous peoples’ ideas and beliefs about the origins of the world, their explanations of the environment, often embedded in complicated metaphors and mythic

tales, are now being sought as the basis for thinking more laterally about current theories about the environment, the earth and the universe” (159). Native American cultures, then, can help people to respect the environment, and one place those cultures can be found is in the literature. Furthermore, as Native American literature helps readers recreate their concept of Euro-American genres like autobiography, a chain reaction is set off that will expand their concepts of the role of the author, the reader and the very understanding they have of themselves.

For Native American readers, writings by other Native Americans can be a site of cultural information no longer shared through the oral tradition. Native American readers can go to an autobiography of a tribal member and learn or remember information about his or her tribal culture, including its history, practices, and stories. These writings, however, are more than just storehouses; they can act in the place of a waning oral tradition. Jace Weaver believes:

Writing prepares the ground for recovery, and even re-creation, of Indian identity and culture. Native writers speak to that part of us the colonial power and the dominant culture cannot reach, cannot touch. They help Indians imagine themselves as Indians. (44-5)

As Native Americans read works by other Native Americans, which often use techniques deriving from oral ones, they are in some ways recovering and recreating a new kind of oral-like tradition, if one understands this tradition in a broader sense. They are acting like “listener-readers”; as they read, they are like listeners “participating

in an oral storytelling event” (Brill de Ramirez 1). In this case, the listener-readers are listening to autobiographers who teach and entertain just as oral storytellers do, and Native readers can remember themselves as Indians, either from a distant childhood or for the first time. They may even be inspired to become storytellers themselves. I wouldn’t go so far as to suggest that Native American literature can or should replace the oral tradition; for example, it cannot replace a sacred ceremony, but many works because of their form and content do possess a quality that makes them living/immediate in such a way that Native Americans can participate with, and not just read, the literature.

For non-Native readers, reading Native American works, like reading other post-modern fiction, can also be more than a passive experience. Non-Native readers can also become reader/listeners, and listeners are never extras in Native American cultures; their listening is a vital part of what makes the words powerful. As listeners they can become activists who may aid Native Americans. Readers, however, also have a vital role during the reading experience. Most readers view religious documents as living texts and prayers as words with the power to affect change, but through many Native American texts, authors invite readers to experience a similar kind of living text in which the immediacy of the language, accomplished through content and form, allows readers to participate in the oral tradition as listeners, bringing back the vitality of the oral tradition in a new way.

The inclusion of the Native American women's autobiographies of this study into the Euro-American autobiographical genre, like other women's autobiographies, such as Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, can entertain readers, teach them and even allow them to participate in another's culture, but inclusion means that all of our understandings of literature expand. Writers should not be defined by previous canons; they should have the freedom to write works that define literature, and many Native American women's autobiographers are redefining the genre of autobiography.

Most importantly, through the autobiographies of this study, we not only see the genre of autobiography grow, including the autobiographical author and reader, but subsequently the concept of self. Readers can begin to envision themselves through their families and communities, not just as an "I," but as a "we." A new sense of self that makes one see beyond his or her self can better all of our lives, and this sense is beautifully expressed when Native American women write.

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Kristin Rozzell was born in Dallas, Texas and began her academic studies at The University of Texas at Arlington where she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English in 1990. She then worked as a Graduate Teaching Assistant and Texas Woman's University where she was awarded a Master of English degree in 1995. Also in 1995 she earned her Texas Teaching Certificate. After teaching ESL and American literature in Nara, Japan for two years, she returned to UTA where she earned her Doctor of Philosophy in Literature in 2006. During the time she worked on her doctorate, she was a tenure track assistant professor and Director of the Writing Center at the University of the Virgin Islands for two years. Her areas of specialization are Native American literature, composition studies, contemporary American literature, and Caribbean Literature. She plans to pursue a full-time position at a four-year university.