

FEMALE NATIVE AMERICAN STORYTELLERS AND CONTEMPORARY NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS: LESLIE MARMON SILKO

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Abstract

The role of Native American women has been extensively debated. Much has been said about their relationship with men and their relevance within the tribe. One of the most important tasks they had was that of storytellers. Storytelling is one of the pillars of Native American culture since it helped to transmit their values and folklore and keep them alive and that is why women's role as storytellers is fundamental for the survival of the tribe. Although this role has often been shared with men, it seems that the relationship of women with storytelling is more complex, valuable and relevant than that of men. This is shown in their characterization in traditional Native American myths or in the fact that old traditional Native American women and storytellers became the source of inspiration of many contemporary writers, such as Silko, Erdrich or Allen, who took them as models for their novels. Silko exemplifies with her novels *Almanac of the Dead* and *Ceremony* this fundamental role of Native Women and the influence they had on her life and writing.

Keywords: Native American women, storytelling, storytellers, Leslie Marmon Silko.

Resumen

El rol de la mujer Nativo Americana ha sido extensamente debatido. Mucho se ha dicho de su relación con los hombres o de su relevancia dentro de las diferentes tribus. Sin embargo, uno de las tareas más importantes es la de cuenta cuentos. La tradición oral es uno de los pilares de la cultura Nativo Americana ya que ha ayudado a transmitir sus valores y folklore y mantenerlos vivos, y por eso el rol de la mujer como cuenta cuentos es fundamental para la supervivencia de la tribu. Aunque este papel también lo ha llevado a cabo el hombre, parece que la relación de las mujeres con la tradición oral es más compleja, de mayor valor y más relevante que la del hombre. De hecho, esto se manifiesta en la caracterización de la mujer en mitos Nativo Americanos, o en el hecho de que estas mujeres Nativo Americanas y cuentacuentos se convierten en la fuente de inspiración de muchos autores contemporáneos, como Silko, Erdrich o Allen, que las toman como modelos para sus novelas. Silko ejemplifica con sus obras *Almanac of the Dead* y *Ceremony* este papel fundamental de la mujer Nativo Americana y la influencia que ha tenido su vida y su obra.

Palabras clave: Mujeres Nativo Americanas, tradición oral, cuenta cuentos, Leslie Marmon Silko.

“The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” said Thomas King. For him, as well as for Native American people, the word story represents everything human beings are formed by: history, traditions, emotions, family and life in general. Indeed, throughout history there have been multiple definitions of what story and storyteller mean. However, they all seem to coincide at one point: oral stories are the base of our present society, as we know it today, and storytellers were our first teachers. It was also the base of Native American culture and traditions, the main form of transmitting knowledge from generation to generation, and a powerful medium of entertainment, imagery and teachings that provided the tools to protect their values and folklore.

With stories, native storytellers were able to carry lessons across time, guard old beliefs, establish norms of behavior, and pass on religious stories, tales about their origins, and information about the importance of nature and of taking care of Mother Earth. They told about the need of keeping in touch with their ancestors and their history as they never forget who they are and where they come from. However, when one thinks of a storyteller, the first imagery that comes into our minds might be that of an old grandfather sitting on an armchair telling tales to his grandchildren. What happens when that image is not that of a grandfather but that of a grandma, as it was usually the case in Native American tribes?

The role of storyteller in Native communities has often been one of Native women’s main tasks, because of the intrinsic features of tribal work distribution and because of their natural characteristics as women to do it. My contention in this article is twofold: first to prove that Native American women’s role within the tribes was and still is as important as that of men, and second to show how female storytellers contribute to avoid cultural loss by reconnecting people to their cultural heritage to finally demonstrate how this is reflected in the literature of female contemporary Native American authors such as Louise Erdrich, Paula Gunn Allen and especially Leslie Marmon Silko. In order to do so, three of her main works, *Ceremony*, *Almanac of the Dead*, and “Yellow Woman” will be studied here.

Traditionally, trying to determine Native American women’s relevance within their corresponding tribes has been a difficult task. Most documents that chronicle the experiences of Indian and white people were written by male European writers who controlled the historical records and were interested in male facts, such as wars and trade but who did not pay much attention to women and their roles. Because men and women lived separately, male foreigners who visited the tribes had little contact with women and therefore, little knowledge or access to their rituals and works. This seems to be one of the main reasons why little has been known about Native North American women and their functions within the tribe. In fact, it was usually believed that they had no social input, no opportunities to choose their spouses and no respect, and that they were inferior to men and only necessary for sexual contact and for maternity. This inferiority of native people in general and native women in particular, was explained in the first colonial texts. Native women were described as monstrous in their aspect

and with a sexual behavior that was out of what it was considered normal (Trexler 2). They were marked as 'Others' for two reasons, they were non-European and they were women. They were described as "the epitome of sexual aberration and excess. Folklore saw them, even more than the men, as given to a lascivious venery so promiscuous as to border on the bestial" (McClintock 22).

All this seemed completely erroneous, according to chronicles written afterwards. Generally speaking Native women were not simple housewives or did not simply look after their children. Their functions included building, fighting as warriors and working as farmers or craftsmen. They were in charge of animals and of gathering materials and food. They also participated in the hunting process, not only accompanying men, but also skimming, cutting or cooking the animals. They played a role in the political structure of the tribe and made relevant decisions. Their presence in social, political and economic life of the tribe could be considered even more prominent than that of European women. Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, for instance, wrote about the period he spent living with Native American people performing what he considered female tasks, such as picking up the crops, being a trader, carrying heavy loads, digging and carrying firewood, watering to the dwellings and "other important needs" (71). Cabeza de Vaca does not make any reference to sexuality and presents Native women more as mothers than as women (85).

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

However, it was not only because of the distribution of work that Native women assumed the role of storytellers. It was also because of their own nature as women that they did it. For Native American people, women symbolized creation and perpetuation and this is what storytelling does, creating and perpetuating. In Native American mythology, most female characters are related to the creation of the world, the gift of life and the survival of the tribes. Spider Woman, Changing Woman, Yellow Woman and Buffalo Calf Woman are some examples. They all symbolized the Earth, were creators of the first human beings, controlled the natural order of the universe, the path of seasons and taught different skills to human beings, such as cooking or making fire, among many other things. Attending to this mythology, they were essential in the formation of the tribes and without them, the world would have been very

different. If one follows this definition of Native goddesses, the same criteria could be applied to Native women. They seemed completely relevant for the formation of their children, for the transmission of knowledge and for the maintenance of traditions and culture. Without them, tribal life would be very different and many oral stories would have been lost. In native tribes, the figure of the mother was essential to find one's identity and its lack could mean your loss too. As Paula Gunn Allen says, "Who is your mother?" is a serious question in Indian country and the answer is equally important. The answer enables the questioner to place the respondent correctly within the web of life, in each of its dimensions: cultural, spiritual, personal, historical. Failure to know one's mother is failure to know "one's significance, one's reality, one's relationship to earth and society. It is being lost" (209).

This connection between women and nature that native tribes establish is closely related to a movement that emerged in 1974, Ecofeminism,¹ which connects feminism with ecology. Land is usually celebrated as feminine and Ecofeminism criticizes how both land and women are abused. The movement bases on the same standards of equality between genders and makes strong associations between women and nature. Throughout history nature has been considered female and the physiological characteristics of women make them be more strongly related to it than men. Women's relation to birth, child care and menstruation remind of the elements of Nature and this qualifies them to speak on nature's behalf. Ecofeminism focuses on these links but also criticizes them. For them, these connections devalue both women and nature. They consider that patriarchal structures are based on dualistic hierarchies (male/female, human/animal, culture/nature, white/non white, among others). Until these oppositions are dismantled, humanity will remain divided and abusive systems will continue manifesting their powers. Charlene Spretnak states that many of the men and women in charge continually "remind everyone that the proper orientation of civilization is to advance itself in *opposition* to nature" because "we are entangled in the hubris of the patriarchal goal of dominating nature and female" (9). Traditionally Native American communities have been considered patriarchal too, as some colonial and European reports stated, although many contemporary Native American women writers have been interested in demonstrating that the role of women within the different communities is as important, or even more important, than that of men, and some of their ideas are somehow related to the ideals of Ecofeminism as well. Their works present women who are strongly linked to nature and they relate this to storytelling to.

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

¹ A term coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*.

culture is gynocentric and feminist and bases this argument on the presence of woman, represented as mother, grandmother, Spider Woman, Thought Woman or Yellow Woman in Native American tradition and folklore. Besides, according to Van Dyke, all Allen's work draws upon her own experience as a Laguna Pueblo woman and it "calls attention to her belief in the power of the oral tradition now embodied in contemporary Native American literature to effect healing, survival and continuance" (69). She takes into account the importance of women not within native societies but also across the Native American panorama and through time. Indeed, in *Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women*, Allen compiles twenty four pieces, some stories that range from oral tales to examples of stories told by contemporary Native American authors, including a high number of well-known Native American women storytellers, such as Zitkala-sa, Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, Anna Lee Walters, Ella Cara Deloria, Linda Hogan LeAnne Howe, Misha Gallagher, Humishima or Mary TallMountain. She compares them to Grandmother Spider in Cherokee culture as they have the "same light of intelligence and experience" (1). Allen considers that the stories she includes in this work are the stories that she has read and cared about and that reflect the variety of Indian women's voices and experiences (18). That is, she is deeply convinced that the role of women as storytellers is essential for Native culture to survive and that those Native American communities are matriarchal and matrilineal and as Ecofeminists, critiques patriarchal and colonial attempts to destroy tribal gynocratic societies and women-centered communities. In general, her work offers tools to read and understand Native women and traditions frequently related to women.

Leslie Marmon Silko stated that "Human identity, imagination and storytelling were inextricably linked to the land, to Mother Earth, just as the strands of the spider's web radiate from the center of the web" (*Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirit* 21). With that she is strongly connecting storytelling and nature, and if nature is linked to women, one may think she is also linking women and storytelling. Silko also connects domination of nature and women in her works, but focuses on the oppression of Native Americans and poor people too. This is consistent with the Ecofeminists' concern for "the liberation of all subordinated Others" (Gaard 5). Native women were also considered Others because they were Native Americans, and because they were women.

Silko deals with the importance of female storytellers in her family and explained that she became familiar with the culture and folklore of Laguna people and learnt about most of their myths and stories from her paternal great grandmother, Marie Anaya Marmon (to whom she refers as Grandma A'mooh) and her great-aunt Susan Reyes Mamon (Aunt Susie), who had a tremendous effect on her, and Silko remarks in a conversation held with Ellen Arnold:

My sense of that, the hearing and the giving, especially with *Almanac*, was that there was a real purpose for that. I had to take seriously what I was told. There was some kind of responsibility to make sure it wasn't just put away or put aside. It was supposed to be active in my life. (16)

The two women helped raise Silko and impressed the role of the storyteller on her. She described them in very kind ways and says her Grandma was the person who told her about the old days, about family stories related to relatives who had been killed by Apache riders, and

Best of all they told me the hummah-hah stories, about an earlier time when animals and humans shared a common language. In the old days, the Pueblo people had educated their children in this manner; adults took time out to talk to and teach young people. Everyone was a teacher, and every activity had the potential to teach the child. (*Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirits* 61-2)

This seems to prove the important role of women as storytellers but also the relevance stories had in the daily life of Native American people. This is clearly appreciated in “Yellow Woman,” in which a woman is looking for oneness. Apparently in this short story we are told about a common Native American woman who has a short affair with a man whose name is Silva but who returns home after discovering that he is a criminal. However, a deeper analysis shows different things. It is the story of a woman who looks for individualism, for a new perception of reality. She needs to reconnect to her spiritual heritage, forgotten a long time ago, and in this vein, she will rediscover her identity. Allen stresses the fact that this woman seems to be cut off from her culture. Indeed she remains unalterable although she is having a sexual affair with someone who is not her husband, or when she thinks of her family, or even when she decides to go back home. She seems not to care whether life will continue without her. She seems to be lost. The only thing she actually remembers is the old story his grandfather used to tell her about Yellow Woman. This is the only element that seems to make her feel something. At the end of the story she says “I was sorry that Grandpa wasn’t alive to hear my story because it was Yellow Woman stories he liked to tell the best” (“Yellow Woman” 374). It is the only moment in the story that she feels sorry about something, and it has nothing to do with her behavior, but with the fact that her story will not be the Yellow Woman story, but she will change it for that of a Navajo kidnapping. The unnamed protagonist probably wants to be as the real Yellow Woman that Silko admires so much. In the real tale, Yellow Woman is triumphant, because she saves the Pueblos from starving and because she gets a sexy man for herself. In “Yellow Woman,” however, the unnamed protagonist is not triumphant. The woman has an adventure but she is a simple housewife, and her lover is a criminal and a thief. She is sure that everybody will continue their lives without her. When she imagines that she is Yellow Woman, her adventure acquires a greater meaning. This is what moves her and this is why she feels sorry that she cannot tell that story, but change it for that of being kidnapped. She needs the Yellow Woman tale to provide a new meaning to her life, to feel that she is not simply a housewife who looks after babies. She needs this story to reconnect with her own life. Paradoxically, the story she needs to fulfill her own wishes is that of a mythological woman, showing once more the relevance of women within native tribes.

Besides, because of the use of first person narrator, Silko turns the unnamed protagonist of the story into a storyteller too. She is the teller of her own story and will also tell the rest of her family about her adventure. Using first person, the reader has a clearer idea of how this Yellow Woman feels. According to Elizabeth Hoffman Nelson and Malcolm A. Nelson, the Yellow Woman is familiar with the traditional Yellow Woman stories and this familiarity adds to the confusion and ambiguity she feels when she realizes she is becoming part of these stories. She is searching for identity and sexual freedom and with that she comes to a growing awareness of the land around her, and her place in it, and a “further understanding of the importance of stories” (124). For them, Silko gives a multilayered story because the narrator was told about Yellow Women by her grandfather and now she becomes Yellow Woman herself, a renewing set of stories. When she returns from her adventure with Silva, she is a storyteller (127). The realization about the land they refer to is what links the protagonist with nature and stories too and connects the work to Ecofeminism. Yellow Woman is usually associated with the image of a river that snakes its way along the southeastern corner of old Laguna (Nelson 248). In the story, there is a large use of imagery related to water. Yellow Woman meets Silva by the river and their first sexual encounter also takes place by the river bank. Indeed, as Melody Graulich states in the introduction to *Yellow Woman*, water imagery is central to all of Silko’s work and she portrays the river as a special place where anything could happen and where young people experiment with behavior on the fringes of acceptability (3). The narrator in the story uses naturalistic images to show her opening to herself. She comments on the moon reflected on the river, representing sexual desire, the images of flowers she refers to evoke the female body and when she first made love with Silva before dawn, she opened to a yellow light, a new awareness. In the cactus’ flowers she can see all the colors of human races “suggesting the universality of the Yellow Woman stories,” (Graulich 15) and “by coming to understand and accept her desires through her connection to Yellow Woman, and acting upon them, the narrator becomes the yellow blossom, an image of awakening” (Graulich 15). All this relation with the earth connects her with the stories as she would later become a storyteller too.

In her novel *Ceremony* Silko also uses female characters as storytellers and Silko herself becomes a storyteller too. From the very beginning she detaches herself from the role of author or storyteller and gives this role to Thought Woman. Traditionally, Native American legends tell that the earth and humankind originated as thoughts in the mind of Grandmother Spider, and today they communicate through stories. When Silko attributes the novel to the thoughts of this mythic character she also turns into a storyteller. According to TuSmith, in this form she identifies her authorial role as an augments and transmitter, rather than as originator. “In the style of oral performances the teller of *Ceremony* is conveying a story that is traditional and through her acts of telling, also new and unique. As Thought-Spider Woman is creating a story by thinking and naming, Silko the teller is conveying, interpreting, and augmenting” (122). Because of the way in which she narrates her novel and because of the stories she tells and the relevance they have for the Pueblo community, she can

be considered a storyteller. She is an active participant of the story she tells for others to read. So although initially Silko is an outside observer who uses third person narration, she will also place herself in the center of this myth and this turns her into a storyteller in the novel.

Silko moves in and out of the many parts of the story with ease. She can create a voice and arouse interest instantly. While other storytellers may just be getting ready, lighting their pipes or opening a beer, she is off and going. She merges one story with another, fades them in and out, stops them on one another like a bard, or like a Spiderwoman, a weaver. (Sayre 9-10)

Apart from this, Silko makes use of contemporary history as a narrator, and also shows it through the tribal vision of her characters, as a storyteller. When she deals with Tayo as a damaged World War II veteran, who is mixed blood and who is also living in a reservation close to Los Alamos, where atomic tests are taking place, she is referring to contemporary facts. However, at the same time she is grounding her novel in, and paralleling it with “Lagura–Keres and allied story: creation myth, witchery, sickness, vision quest, healing. This sustained interaction, a double fiction doubly told” (Lee 107), as a storyteller would do.

In this novel Silko also reflects the importance of women within her tribe by including some mythological goddesses in Lakota folklore such as Yellow Woman, Thought Woman and Corn Mother. They all are connected to Earth, are literal embodiments of earth and also literary represented in some female characters in the novel. This is coherent with the traditional view of Earth as feminine that Ecofeminist refer to. Although Thought Woman is the first reference we have, Yellow Woman seems to be Silko’s favorite in the novel. When the readers know about her, the first image that comes into their mind is that of Ts’eh, who embodies many of the features that characterize Yellow Woman: she is surrounded by color yellow, linked to rain, and lives with Hunter. The Yellow Woman in this novel is completely different from that presented in “Yellow Woman.” Here Ts’eh is a real triumphant. She is sexually active, unlike the unnamed protagonist, she gives a new end to the story, and she saves Tayo. The most important thing is her intervention in Tayo’s recovery, as she helps him finish his ceremony. Moreover, she seems to embody all the features related to the earth in mystical ways. In *Ceremony*, Tayo completes his return crossing the river from the southeast. Indeed, Silko seems to go beyond and provides her with even more power than the medicine man Betonie, because she will be able to heal Tayo, something Betonie could not achieve completely. His healing occurs when he returns to mother, to earth and this happened when he had sex with her, with his literal return to womb.

The main parallel or similarity between Ts’eh and other Yellow Women is perhaps the relevance they provide to stories. At the end of their meeting, Ts’eh advises Tayo about the importance of finishing the story and trying to avoid the negative influence of witchery:

The end of the story. They want to change it. They want it to end here, the way all their stories end, encircling slowly to choke the life away. The violence of the struggle excites them, and the killing soothes them. They have their stories about us-Indian people who are only marking time and waiting for the end. And they would end this story right here, with you fighting to your dead alone in these hills. (*Ceremony* 215)

Ts'eh tells Tayo that he must remember stories in order to survive. Thanks to Ts'eh's advice, Tayo is able to understand the need of learning about his people in order to be healed and above all, in order for his people to survive too.

It is also important to notice here the relation of male characters with women in the novel too. Tayo, the main protagonist is literally motherless. Attending to the importance mothers have in Native communities, it is not strange to think that he is probably lost because of that. He lacks a sense of belonging to one place and is completely disconnected from the earth. However, unlike many other male characters in the novel, he does not want to destroy the earth, or women, if the parallelism is established. He needs to return to them in order to recover his identity. He loves both land and women and wishes to live in harmony with nature. In the novel, white society wants to end up with the voice of nature with miners who take uranium from the earth to make atomic bombs and when the soldiers see Native women only as prostitutes and servants, a very Ecofeminist view. However Tayo rejects all this. Unlike Emo, Harley, Pinkie and Leroy, he believes in the importance of both women and nature to survive. The other characters have deepened their hate for both and show it in the novel. Harley abandons his family cattle to go from bar to bar, Pinkie sells his sheep to buy a new harmonica and other useless things, Emo believes that white women are just a body and all of them laugh when he says "they took our land, they took everything! So let's get our hands on white women" (*Ceremony* 55). For him, these women have no face and even Mother Earth is empty. Because they have no land now, they can mistreat women, equaling them once more. But Tayo does not want to agree with him. He does not want to believe that women are just reproductive beings. On the contrary, for him making love is sacred and Silko compares it to getting into a river. Indeed, the two times he has sex in the novel are with Ts'eh and Night Swam, both considered Yellow Women, who, as said above, are represented by a river. This Ecofeminist view of nature and women is part of his ultimate happiness. At the end of the novel Tayo is successful, while the rest are not. This may show that nature and women have to survive to help others survive too.

In *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko illustrates the relevance of women as storytellers in the character of Old Yoeme, the protagonists' grandmother. She is the Yaqui woman who relates old and new ways and lives. Old Yoeme is able to transmit her granddaughters the knowledge they need, and which the tribe also needs to learn in order to survive. She possesses the old almanac that explains their past and which Lecha and Zeta have to keep as an invaluable possession and transcribe, as all Yoeme's knowledge was transmitted to them through oral tales. She only reappears in the story when she considers that her granddaughters

are old enough to understand the meaning of the stories she has to tell them, ensuring that they will preserve them. Indeed, by telling her granddaughters about the existence of the almanac and the need to keep it, Yoeme establishes a grandmother-granddaughter relationship which is very typical of the Pueblo culture and basic for Native American storytelling techniques. Charlene Taylor Evans explains this saying that for the past twelve thousand years, most cultures have practiced the tradition of passing on the explanation of 'being' and 'becoming' to their offspring. "While this function is not gender specific, the recipient of this information must have full faith and confidence in the one who is teaching as in many cultures women carry the ontologies to their offspring" (172). When Old Yoeme transmits this knowledge to her granddaughters, she is also preserving culture and ensuring that it will survive and that the following generations will be able to learn from it.

It is important to notice, however, that despite Old Yoeme consider Zeta and Lecha strong enough as to deal with the responsibility of transmitting such an important message to the next generations, they are probably not ready for such a mission, at least at first sight. They are weapon dealers and suffer from profound disorders, a lack of love in their hearts which is not very typical. Like Tayo in *Ceremony*, the twins grew up without a mother figure, as she died when they were children. Like him, they also lack a connection to earth and feel lost. When Old Yoeme reappears to make them legitimate bearers of the tribal secret, they do not feel the need of having to do with it. It is not until they discover what she means that they will ultimately appreciate its value and will go back to earth and to their lives. They go through a similar process to that of Tayo. When the giant stone snake appeared in New Mexico, nobody except them understood its meaning. They reached then the point of returning to their heritage.

According to the gardener, religious people from many places had brought offerings to the giant snake, but none had understood the meaning of the snake's appearance; no one had got the message. But when Lecha had told Zeta, they had both got tears in their eyes because Old Yoeme had warned them about the cruel years that were to come once the great serpent had returned. Zeta was grateful for the years she had had to prepare a little. Now she had to begin the important work. (*Almanac of the Dead* 702-3)

Though maybe not as specifically as in *Ceremony*, the novel *Almanac of the Dead* also presents some female deities who reveal the importance of women within native communities. Angelita la Escapia is considered a Yellow Woman too. Unlike the unnamed protagonist of "Yellow Woman" and like Ts'eh in *Ceremony*, she is triumphant too. She is sexually free, graduated, overtly political and establishes a relationship with El Feo based on her own power that he understands and accepts. Her main aim was recovering the land their ancestors had been stolen and transmit this desire to those who surrounded her. "A great 'change' is approaching; soon the signs of the change will appear on the horizon." Angelita's words filled El Feo with rapture. The earth, the earth, together they would save Earth and her sister spirits" (*Almanac of the Dead*

468). For her, like for most native people, the earth is such important that it deserves violence. She cannot accept it is destroyed by white people. Her connection with earth comes, then, in a different manner from that of other female protagonists in Silko's novels, but it is not less important. Protecting the land with fight or with stories seems to have the same ultimate objective.

The misogynistic attitude of some male characters in *Almanac of the Dead* is easily identifiable and it is something closely connected to the exploitation of women and nature that Ecofeminists complain about. With their clear hate towards women, Serlo and Beaufrey, overtly homosexual and proud of belonging to the European lineage, want to remove them from procreation line, and create a superior bloodline that does not include women. For Serlo, a child can be destroyed by mother's defects: "even the most perfect genetic specimen could be ruined, absolutely destroyed by the defects of the child's mother. Serlo believed the problems that Freud had identified need not occur if a child's "parents" were both male" (*Almanac of the Dead* 542). He even considered the possibility of creating an alternative Earth, self sufficient as long as energy is generated. "Once sealed, the Alternative Earth unit contained the plants, animals, and water necessary to continue independently as long as electricity was generated by the new "peanut-size" atomic reactors" (*Almanac of the Dead* 542). His disdain for women and Earth was immense, so again a connection could be established among the two. Similarly, Beaufrey manipulates everyone for his own purpose and his jealousy for his lover's son ultimately leads him to his kidnapping and probably to killing him too. With them Silko creates characters who are opposed to what she struggles for, the veneration of women and Earth as elements intrinsically linked to humanity and progress. They are the opposite to Tayo in *Ceremony* or even to El Feo, who "understood he had been chosen for one task: to remind the people never to lose sight of their precious land" (*Almanac of the Dead* 524), of their traditions and of their heritage, it could be added.

Though it was not easy to determine the role of women within Native American tribes, especially because of the erroneous chronicles that abounded, it seems clear that one of their main tasks was that of storyteller. They transmitted their children lessons through oral stories that taught them the importance of feeling proud of being what they are. They contributed to a true reduction of differences between them and promoted native life as active. It could be because of the different works assigned to women and men in the tribes, or because of the natural features that characterize women and link them to the earth, which symbolizes creation and perpetuation as storytelling does, the truth is that it was women the ones who performed this role and succeeded in doing that. Thanks to old female storytellers and their inheritors, contemporary native female writers such as Silko, have put their own plural image and words into print and the borders between worlds have become more permeable, moving from tradition to a more transcendental ambiance. With works such as "Yellow Woman," *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead*, readers understand the importance of women in native communities, the relevance of oral stories, and the connection

of native women to earth and storytelling and how this helps people find their way in the world.

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