

Changing Women: The Cross-Currents of American Indian Feminine Identity

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Introduction

The Blanket Around Her

Maybe it is her birth
which she holds close to herself
or her death
which is just as inseparable
and the white wind
that encircles her is a part
just as
 the blue sky
hanging in turquoise from her neck
oh woman
remember who you are
woman
it is the whole earth

—Joy Harjo

Laguna novelist Leslie Silko begins *Ceremony* with one word—"Sunrise." The word is simple, yet it encompasses an entire body of culture and thought which revolves around the concepts of birth, regeneration, cyclicity and the union of masculine and feminine elements. Many American Indian world views speak of balanced "opposite" forces which combine as a dynamic

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whole to form the universe. One may extend the metaphor of "sunrise" further in reference to the contemporary "rebirth" of American Indian cultures, perhaps best illustrated in the growing body of literature by American Indian writers. Kenneth Lincoln makes such an analogy in his comprehensive analysis of American Indian literature, *Native American Renaissance*. Interestingly, Lincoln correlates the dynamics of this movement to gender as he writes, "Native Americans are writing prolifically, particularly the women, who correlate feminist, nativist, and artistic commitments in a compelling rebirth."¹

The "rebirth" is indeed compelling, though perhaps not unexpected. For too long, Indian women have suffered the burden of Euro-american stereotypes. Following the traditional European perceptions of Indian people as "Noble Savages," or worse, as "Bloodthirsty Savages," Indian women have been cast into a similarly bifurcated role: the "noble" Princess ("Pocahontas") or the more "savage" Squaw, a loathsome, unintelligent "drone." Countless Hollywood epics and dime-store Westerns have ingrained these stereotypes in American minds, and even today Indian women are frequently approached in terms of these stereotypes.

Importantly, then, contemporary Indian women writers are speaking out against these stereotypes and affirming their own concepts of femininity and "Indianness." Their artistic expressions frequently lean toward traditional beliefs, deeply rooted in the spiritual essence of tribal world views; other times, the same writers speak with an essential understanding of contemporary reality—"Indian" bars, urban ghettos, Ph.D. programs and Oklahoma pow-wows. In this seemingly contradictory mixture lies the essence of contemporary Indian literature: the active, forceful unity of the dual worlds in which Indian people *must* survive. Paula Allen comments accurately: "From the meeting of the archaic and the contemporary the facts of her life become articulate, and the fact that modern American Indians are both Indian and American becomes very clear."²

Perhaps one could say that "American Indian feminine identity" is itself a myth, for the diversity of tribal systems and world views is immense, and the thoughts and feelings of Indian women are equally diffuse. However, contemporary Indian women writers have chosen to express both the diversity of Indian people, and the centrality of an Indian "ethos" which

emphasizes "life," "motion" and "balance" against the polarized madness of Western technology. They have chosen to stress the critical "female principal" of the universal cycles, and use this natural power to refute the victimization and oppression which characterizes Western patriarchal power structures. By making these choices, these women writers have established a "voice" and an "identity" for the Indian woman which are grounded in the realities of the present, rather than the stereotypes of the past.

By objectively considering the social history of American Indian people and the autobiographical experiences of Indian women in conjunction with the current literature, a dynamic portrait of social change, cultural resilience and lasting power emerges for the American Indian woman. This portrait counters the American myth of the "Princess and the Squaw" with clarity and dignity, and, one can only hope, with finality.

I

As Patricia Albers notes in the opening chapter of *The Hidden Half*, the male image of the American Indian has always been dominant in the minds of white observers. The "Chief" in feathered regalia, the lithe bison-hunter poised above the prey—both images re-occur in American art and film. The Indian woman, eclipsed by such masculine glory, is either omitted entirely or considered in terms of dichotomous stereotypes—the "noble" Princess or the "savage" Squaw. These images of the Indian woman originated with the bifurcated, ethnocentric observations of early European explorers and traders. Their observations stemmed from the European ideology that Alice Kehoe terms "oppositional dualism,"³ or the stratified, hierarchical Western world view which perceived the universe as polarized and alienated in a set of opposing categories: "civilized" versus "primitive," "male" versus "female," "Christian" versus "Pagan." This world view was manifested in European society through social castes, gender inequality and the rigid dichotomy between the "public" or "market" sphere, versus the "private" or "domestic" sphere. Predictably, the entire system was transposed onto Indian societies by the early European observers, creating gender splits and inequalities which were previously unknown, and tainting Indian women with a version

of the "pure" versus the "fallen" woman categorization which had already been applied to European women.

When applied to women of a more "savage" race, as Indian people were considered, this moral categorization assumed significantly more harmful proportions. Rayna Green comments on the long-lasting effects of the "Princess/Squaw" stereotype in her article, "The Pocahontas Perplex: the Image of Indian Women in American Culture." Green traces the "Princess" phenomenon back to traditional European ballads about handsome male adventurers and the beautiful "pagan" (Arabian, Far Eastern) princesses who saved them from the wrath of the "savages" (often at their own personal expense). Green believes that this folktale tradition was transferred to America with the Pocahontas tale, and the subsequent variations of the story, which eventually came to comprise almost a specific genre of American fiction. The Princess was defined by her noble, selfless "love" for a brave white man. But following the European tradition of "oppositional dualism," the Princess received a negative counterpart, the Squaw, who was sullied by actual reference to sexual liaisons with white men.

Naturally, any vestiges of reality inherent in the social history of White/Indian contact became meaningless for the vast majority of Americans for whom the stereotypes became "truth." The "Princess/Squaw" dichotomy does not even approach the historical realities of Indian women, and may be more closely paralleled with what Rayna Green terms the "Virgin-Whore paradox," the categorization of European women as "pure" or "fallen." The primary factor in both perceptions of European women and Indian women became their definition in terms of their relationship with *males*. The Puritan Ethic accorded the European woman some status for being a "dutiful" wife and mother: faithful, submissive, pious, and hard-working. "Bad" women blatantly displayed the opposite traits: promiscuity, assertiveness, disregard for Christian precepts, laziness. Importantly, whether "good" or "bad," European women were expected to remain confined to the "private" sphere of love, sex, marriage and childbirth. Only men could become involved in the "public" sphere of politics, warfare and Church authority.⁴

Although the same social dichotomy has been applied to Native American groups from first contact to the 20th century anthropological studies, the distinction between "public" and "pri-

vate" spheres and gender-role differentiation often becomes meaningless in application to traditional Indian systems. As the studies of *The Hidden Half* emphasize, and Paula Allen affirms in *The Sacred Hoop*, gender roles were often flexible and adaptive among the various aspects of society in traditional Indian cultural systems. Perhaps the most dangerous characteristic of European gender categorizations is the tendency to rank "duties" into hierarchical layers of "status," thereby ascribing notions of "inferiority" to women's domestic duties, and "superiority" to men's roles in politics and warfare. Such "value judgements" invariably stem from assumptions of the "universal" attributes of the "male/female relationship."⁵ Although clearly many Indian societies did ascribe to a degree of task differentiation according to gender, the variable of "importance" attached to these tasks may be a purely European invention.⁶ Janet Spector's research on Hidatsa task differentiation reveals the vital role which women played in all phases of the agricultural process. Since the success of the crops often meant the critical difference between survival and starvation, one might perceive the real status which would accrue to competent agriculturalists. In this case, the work of the women complemented the hunting efforts of the men with equal importance.

Patricia Albers also discusses the native integration of "public" and "domestic" spheres in her article on the changing status of Devil's Lake Sioux women.⁷ Albers outlines the traditional Sioux ethic which promoted the ideal relationship between male and female as complementary and based on principles of individual autonomy and voluntary sharing. Because of this ethic, Albers claims that the concept of male "dominance" was meaningless for the traditional Sioux. However, Albers agrees with many other authors that U.S. Government policies which, according to patriarchal Euro-american tradition, recognized only male political leaders and only male adults as "head-of-household," eventually altered the traditional system to a certain extent. Paula Allen supports Albers' view with her discussion of the effects of European colonization on the "gynocratic" social and political systems of the Iroquois tribes and of the Cherokee.⁸ In such groups, the political and social structures were formerly guided by tribal women; however, in the advent of the Federal "trust" relationship, Indian groups were forced to follow the Anglo model of government which specified male leadership.

However, Albers disputes that the effects of Anglo patriarchy were of final significance. For most Indian groups, the "spheres" remain integrated even today. As Albers comments, despite the preponderance of males on the Devil's Lake Sioux Tribal Council, "To a large extent, tribal politics and domestic politics are the same. . . . The issues that tribal leaders have been faced with in recent years are dominated by domestic concerns that have been critical to both men and women."⁹ For many Indian groups, the traditional world views which emphasized a holistic, balanced universe continue to counter the Euroamerican emphasis on hierarchy and "dominant/subordinate" social roles.

Importantly, a primary distinction between the definition of women by Europeans and that by Indians was the Indian emphasis on individuality. While Europeans defined women in relation to male figures, American Indians generally perceived women and men as individuals with specific talents, abilities and clan-sanctioned roles. Because Europeans failed to realize this Native emphasis on individuality, they largely ignored the fact that Indian women often played key roles in all of the major political, religious and economic institutions of the tribe. In Robert Grumet's article on 17th and 18th century coastal Algonkian women, "Sunksquaws, Shamans and Tradeswomen," he maintains that all major tasks were cooperatively performed by men and women on the basis of ability, and that a "corresponding egalitarian sociopolitical organization" characterized most of the mid-Atlantic Algonkian groups during the Colonial period.¹⁰ Likewise, in "Farmers, Warriors, Traders: A Fresh Look at Ojibway Women," Priscilla Buffalohead contrasts the popular notion of Ojibway women as "drudges and slaves to men," with the reality of their dynamic roles in the "political, economic and social life of their communities." In addition to the more "expected" roles of food gathering, preparation and childcare, Buffalohead finds evidence of Ojibway women as recognized band leaders, as medicine women, and as warriors. She comments that Anglo officials often chose to ignore these women and deal with male members of the tribe instead. However, in the tribal view, these women were recognized and respected as leaders. Buffalohead concludes that Ojibway society placed a premium value not on gender, but on individuality: "Women as well as men could step outside the boundaries of traditional sex

role assignments and, as individuals, make group-respected choices."¹¹

The social and political power of Indian women was sanctioned by tribal religious traditions which often emphasized the vital role of female deities. Unlike the European Christian religion, guided by an omnipotent male God, most Indian religions revolved around co-equal deities who protected their "creations"—the Earth, sky, animals, crops and human beings. Because the Earth's natural system depends on cyclical regeneration, the "female" aspects of creation were particularly important. Hence, many of the primary deities were perceived as female. For example, Changing Woman in Navajo belief is a powerful creator-figure who is responsible for the growth of the crops and the birth of all new life. Changing Woman is also perceived as a powerful protectress of what she has created. To this day, the ideal of Navajo womanhood is modeled on the characteristics of Changing Woman. Jennie Joe comments on the strong, protective feelings Navajo women have for their land (which is passed down matrilineally through clan ties). Joe associates these strong traditional ties to the present resistance to Federal relocation policies, largely organized by Navajo women: "The defensive actions that these women . . . continue to take fit . . . their perceptions of [the] appropriate role for themselves. This concept includes the role of a warrior. For example, most traditional Navajo women have names that contain the word *baa'*, which signifies 'female warrior.' As a female warrior she is expected to fight off . . . whatever poses a threat to the well being of her family and home."¹²

Similarly, the Sioux believe that their Sacred Pipe Religion was given to them by White Buffalo Woman, a female deity who presides over the Four Winds, the primary natural powers of the Great Plains area.¹³ To this day, Sioux women are perceived as sacred and powerful. Grace Black Elk, an Oglala Lakota elder and spiritual leader, scoffs at the white feminists who see Indian woman as "slaves to their men." Ward Churchill records her opinions:

The Lakota have no word for 'sexist'

The White man does.

The Lakota does not put his name to his child.

White men do.

For the Lakota, property is the possession of the woman. The generations are the responsibility of the woman. Power is thus in the hands of women. . . .

Lakota women / are the strength of the people.¹⁴

Most tribes saw the strongest, most active and articulate tribal women as closely paralleling the traditional female deities. Indian women were accorded great status for their achievements in agriculture, hunting, and hide and meat preparation. Indian people felt that such abilities were divinely sanctioned, hence of the utmost respect; Europeans, on the other hand, perceived Indian women as exploited "work drones."¹⁵ Priscilla Buffalohead offers an interesting appraisal of the European attitude toward Indian women: "American Indian women appeared exploited to many 19th century writers if only because their ideal of woman, fostered by the privileged classes of Europe and America, was a frail, dependent person in need of protection."¹⁶ And, indeed, the 19th century Euroamerican "ideal" of the passive, self-effacing, delicate, useless woman (personified by Lily Bart in Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth*) was never observed by American Indians.

The disparity between European and Native American gender perceptions resulted in a continued Euro-american bias which clouded the realities of American Indian women as dynamic, interactive individuals in favor of the polarized "Princess/Squaw" stereotype. These stereotypes prevented any conception of the Indian woman as "real," "powerful" or even, at times, "human." Rayna Green notes that, "As some abstract, noble Princess tied to 'America,' and to sacrificial zeal, she [had] power as a symbol. . . . As the Squaw, a depersonalized object of scornful convenience, she [was] powerless. Like her male relatives she [could be] easily destroyed without reference to her humanity."¹⁷ Green associates these dehumanizing stereotypes with the tragic massacre at Sand Creek, and unfortunately history supports her conclusion with the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee, and the Baker Massacre of 1870, in which approximately 300 unarmed Blackfeet women, children and old people were slain by the U.S. Cavalry.¹⁸

The ethnocentric stereotypes of Euro-american explorers and traders were eventually employed by U.S. policy-makers and

military men to sanction policies of removal and genocide. And the stereotypes, which have persisted to the present day, reached mass acceptance among American people as they were popularized and promoted by 19th century writers.

II

Perhaps 19th century fiction concerned with Indian women explains more about 19th century Euro-american women than about Indian women; nonetheless, the stereotypes promoted in these early novels became the basis for many popular 20th century "Western" stories and movies, and therefore continue to dominant American perceptions of Indian women.

Karen Elliott discusses the role of Indian women in 19th century popular fiction in her doctoral thesis "The Portrayal of the American Indian Woman in a Select Group of American novels."¹⁹ Two of the novels she considers were written in the 19th century Romantic tradition, and these further reinforced the "Noble Princess" stereotype. Ann Stephen's *Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter*, and Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona*, were hailed by 19th century do-gooders as charitable contributions to understanding the "Indian Plight." In fact, they probably served more to assuage white guilt for the all-too-recent atrocities committed by the U.S. Cavalry on Indian people.

Initially, *Malaeska* provides no departure from the Pocahontas model. Her father is a "Chief" (hence she is a "Princess"); she marries a brave white man against the wishes of her family, and she has a child. Then—unexpectedly—the white hunter dies after giving instructions to his wife to take the child to his family in Manhattan. After a successful trip (by canoe, of course), she arrives in the city and the white family "allows" her to remain as a nursemaid to her son. Her true identity as his mother is carefully concealed for the shame it would cause, interesting proof of the 19th century taboos against miscegenation. The end of the story is rather predictable—*Malaeska* dies of a broken heart after her son commits suicide upon learning of his shameful, mixed-breed ancestry. Throughout the novel, several 19th century stereotypes are reinforced: first, *Malaeska* is only "noble" by virtue of her marriage to the brave white man; second, *Malaeska* has no basis in the reality of an American Indian identity—she

behaves in the passive, self-effacing, dependent manner of the 19th century Euroamerican woman; and finally, the 19th century view of the Indian as the "vanishing American" becomes reinforced, as Malaeska perishes while attempting to become "civilized" and is abandoned by her more "savage" relatives.

The Indian woman receives slightly different treatment in Jackson's *Ramona*, although it is not much better. Ramona is a half-breed, raised by a Spanish woman who keeps Ramona's heritage a secret from her until she falls in love with Alessandro, a young Indian ranch-hand. Ramona elopes with Alessandro, and to his "delight, she began to evidence real signs of her Indianness." In other words, she becomes "attuned to nature," and hears "the trees speak . . . the rocks . . . and the flowers," as all "Noble Savages" do.²⁰ Ramona and Alessandro live dangerously, preyed upon by evil white men, until Alessandro is murdered. Ramona falls into a deep depression, and from all expectation of 19th century romanticism, we await her death of a broken heart. But Ramona is rescued by her handsome Spanish stepbrother, whom she falls in love with and is duly married to. The Pocahontas Perplex is once again resurrected, along with all the other stereotypes: the helpless woman dependent on males for protection (and even for an existence); the pitiful inability of Indians to "make it" in the white world; and the ultimate, inevitable demise of "savagery" (however noble) in the face of "civilization." Interestingly, the Ramona story is still enacted yearly at a California pageant, and variations of her story and of poor Malaeska's story are still found in contemporary "pulp" novels and Hollywood productions.

However unfortunate, Ramona and Malaeska remain relatively "good" Indian women. They are not promiscuous; they are not alcoholic and they both care for white men. Slim Girl, in Oliver La Farge's *Laughing Boy*,²¹ presents an alternate image. La Farge's novel was written somewhat later than the previous selections, but the "evolution" of the Indian woman has been anything but positive. Slim Girl is the product of the boarding school: she has lost her clan and family ties, she has learned to sell her body to white men for money and trinkets, and to manipulate people for her own gain. Simultaneously aware of her cultural loss, she attempts to reintegrate herself with the Navajo way of life by marrying Laughing Boy—a handsome, naive and "noble" Indian. Slim Girl fanagles a marriage over the protests of Laughing Boy's

family, and manages to keep a firm hold on him at her small-town home with the help of small doses of "medicine" (whiskey doctored with oranges and sugar). However, Slim Girl continues to prostitute herself to a white man in town—a man who "would have liked to raise her to a position in which he could respect himself if he married her"²²—because she has learned to depend on the cash income. Although La Farge interjects Slim Girl's attempts to participate as a Navajo woman through the rituals and art of weaving, she never truly succeeds; and just as they are moving back to the reservation for good, she is fatally shot by a misfired bullet meant for Laughing Boy.

However well-intentioned, *Laughing Boy* perpetuates many of the most deleterious stereotypes of Indians, and particularly of Indian women. La Farge appears to support the notion that an Indian cannot successfully bridge two worlds, that the gentle, beautiful Indian woman who nurtures sheep, corn and babies will be corrupted by a white world she cannot fit into, and become the antithesis of a "good Indian"—a promiscuous, manipulative, materialistic creature with no salvation in either the Indian world or the white world. Hence, *Laughing Boy* both romanticizes the noble "blanket Indian" and denigrates the reality of cultural transition for Indian women. At any rate, the racism and sexism inherent in the Princess/Squaw stereotype lives on in *Laughing Boy*, and Slim Girl ends up the way a lot of "good Indians" did in the Anglo mind—dead.

Interestingly, *Malaeska*, *Ramona* and *Laughing Boy* have all been hailed as works which are "sympathetic" to Indians, and therefore of some benefit to their "plight." In reality, however, they all acted to misinform the American public on the true problems and possibilities which faced American Indian people. For example, white education was widely perceived by 19th century Indian leaders as necessary, and although the boarding schools were far from ideal, at one time they were the only "option" for Indian people who sought to learn how to manage in the white American world. As many tribes learned, complete ignorance of white ways often had profoundly negative effects, since the "Great White Father" frequently had only his own best interests at heart. Unfortunately, white boarding school teachers often reacted to Indian students in terms of the very stereotypes perpetuated in these novels. This early "conditioning" often influenced the Indian student's self-perception for the rest of his

or her life, a fact which must be considered as we examine the changing self-identity of the American Indian woman. Other issues of importance at this time involved the on-going dilemmas faced by tribes as they experienced increasing miscegenation, controversies over land rights and over their own right to practice Native traditions prohibited by Federal "assimilation" policies.

The scanty, romanticized plots of these early novels seem laughable when compared to the realities of the day. However, it is important to consider that policy-makers, influenced by the stereotypical biases of the novels, often applied the same ethnocentric, androcentric attitudes, as they formulated Indian policy. The changing realities faced by Indian women become apparent through analysis of autobiographical and biographical works. The real-life experiences of Indian women mediate between the Euro-american stereotypes and the profusion of issues currently addressed in the contemporary literature of American Indian women.

III

As Gretchen Bataille and Kathleen Sands comment in *American Indian Women, Telling Their Lives*, Indian women's autobiographies are quite different from the male-oriented European autobiographical model with its emphasis on flamboyant heroism and the dramatic recitation of historical events. The autobiographies of Indian women more closely correlate to the emerging American feminine autobiography, with the same tendency to "sift through their lives for explanation and understanding" in order to "clarify, to affirm and to authenticate" their own roles, as Estelle Jelinek has written.²³ However, the specific tribal orientations of American Indian women clearly receive the primary focus in their autobiographies. Bataille and Sands follow the interpretations of Vine Deloria, Sr., to suggest that, "Indian women have been repositories of tradition and concern for spiritual ideals, upholding the stability of the tribe through both spiritual and generative power."²⁴ A comparison of autobiographical experiences from the traditional past with the rapidly modernizing present reveals several important qualities of Indian women's identity which persist in contemporary literature.

Among the most important of these themes are the Indian women's unique relationship to the land, her place within the changing social relationships of her tribe, her perceptions of herself as a "traditional" Indian woman or as one influenced by non-traditional concepts and values, and finally, her honest appraisal of her hopes, dreams, and ever-changing, often painful reality.

The following discussion will include excerpts from Nancy Lurie's study of the Winnebago woman, *Mountain Wolf Woman* (born in 1884) the autobiographies of Anna Shaw (Pima, born in 1898) and Helen Sekaquaptewa (Hopi, born in 1898), and the biography of Acoma potter Lucy Lewis (born in 1890), as examples from a primary period of conflict between traditional tribal values and those of white government authorities. Their experiences will be contrasted with those of a more recent generation of Indian women, including Maria Campbell (Metis), the late Micmac activist Anna Mae Aquash, Jeela Alilkatuktuk (Inuit) and Pawnee-Oto writer Anna Lee Walters.

Mountain Wolf Woman's story tells of the tremendous changes and conflicts that faced the traditional Winnebago culture in the early 1900s when the Anglo culture was imposed upon them. *Mountain Wolf Woman's* experience reflects the impermanence of Winnebago life during the years following their successive "relocations" by the Federal Government. As Bataille and Sands note, "She was not tied down to a specific geographical location . . . [but] moved . . . from one location to another"²⁵ throughout her life. *Mountain Wolf Woman* exemplifies the transitional phase between traditionalism and adaptive change for Indian people.

The mediational role that *Mountain Wolf Woman* assumes between "old" and "new" is perhaps best illustrated by her conscious involvement with three religions: the traditional Winnebago religion, Christianity, and the Native American Church. As a child, *Mountain Wolf Woman* was advised by her father to "Go cry to the thunders." She relates, "We used to sing and scatter tobacco, standing there and watching the stars and the moon. We used to cry because, after all, we were hungry. We used to think we were pitied."²⁶ *Mountain Wolf Woman* kept many of the traditional customs, such as the menstrual taboos, and later participated in the traditional Winnebago ceremonies such as the Scalp Dance and the Medicine Dance. However, her

early education at Christian schools had a lasting influence, and when she finally attended the Native American Church, Mountain Wolf Woman found the synthesis of Indian and Christian ritual beliefs which held the greatest meaning for her.

Mountain Wolf Woman's story compares to the experiences of many Indian women who lived during her generation. The pressures to "acculturate" were tremendous, and many Indians responded as Mountain Wolf Woman did: they utilized parts of the White world in conjunction with their own traditional beliefs and value systems. Nancy Lurie comments that Mountain Wolf Woman saw herself in positive terms, as a link between "the historical life of her people and the future generations."²⁷ Lurie sees this perception as one generated by her traditional responsibilities as wife, mother and a woman of her lineage. In contrast, Lurie notes, the men of her same generation were affected negatively as their traditional roles in economic provisioning and political decision-making were assumed by paternalistic government agents.

The story of Helen Sekaquaptewa, a Hopi woman born in 1898 illustrates a successful "adaptation" to two worlds which parallels that of Mountain Wolf Woman. Sekaquaptewa was born in the ultra-traditional village of Oraibi, and her family was one of those expelled from the original village by the more "progressive" Hopi for their rigid resistance to white schooling, and "Americanization" in general. Sekaquaptewa remembers this violent expulsion and her subsequent (forcible) removal to the BIA boarding school. Her childhood was plagued by the factional disputes of her people, which carried over even to the boarding school. Sekaquaptewa remembers that the daughters of the "progressives" teased and tormented the "exiles" mercilessly.²⁸ And to complicate her "adjustment" to white education, her traditional relatives began to criticize Sekaquaptewa for being too "progressive."

The genuine pain of these conflicting worlds and their attendant value systems permeates the entire autobiography. As a small child, Sekaquaptewa was separated from her family for months at a time in an environment of loneliness, dietary change and exposure to disease that resulted in the deaths of many Hopi children. Sekaquaptewa learned to speak and read English, and developed the "leadership skills" that the Anglo teachers

stressed, but when she was sent back to her family, she faced "a household that looked to the elders, not children, for guidance . . . [and] to tradition, not change, for stability."²⁹ The two environments seemed mutually exclusive, and so, when offered the opportunity to go on to Phoenix Indian School, Sekaquaptewa accepted. She later married a Hopi man from a similar boarding-school background as herself, and details their experiences in the village, where despite their full-blood Hopi ancestry, they were considered "marginal" Hopi. Eventually, Sekaquaptewa emphasizes, she and her husband were accepted into the Hopi village and into the accompanying round of clan duties. However, the effects of their earlier experiences remain pronounced: Sekaquaptewa and some members of her immediate family convert to Mormonism, though it is practiced in conjunction with Hopi ways, and the family establishes an alternate residence at a cattle-ranch below the mesas, a marked departure from Hopi "tradition." Sekaquaptewa sums up the family's attitude: "We chose the good from both ways of living."²⁰

Naturally, the reader wonders just how much of Sekaquaptewa's life has been true "choice," and how much a destiny shaped by the conflicting attitudes and policies of Hopi society and U.S. government officials. However, it is important to remember that throughout this critical period, a period characterized by turbulent, accelerated change, Sekaquaptewa retains a sincere appreciation of her Hopi heritage and invariably practices the older system of ethics and values, even as she pioneers different experiences. In this respect she assumes a role similar to that of Mountain Wolf Woman: as a strong mediating force between generations and conflicting value systems. Importantly, Sekaquaptewa retains her love for the Hopi land, and her sense of connection to the matrilineal village of her birth. In that sense, she remains completely "Hopi."

Like Helen Sekaquaptewa, Anna Shaw was born in 1898. However Shaw came from a Christianized Pima family which had, in many respects, already adapted to white ways. Bataille and Sands comment that, in contrast to the forcible removal of Hopi children to the BIA boarding school, "For Pimas, school was an extension of the household—close, filled with friends and kin, approved of by tribal members."³¹ Anna Shaw's family supported her progress at school, and applauded her graduation

from Phoenix Union High School, the first Indian woman in Arizona to do so. She became the author of two books, *Pima Legends* and her autobiography, *A Pima Past*.

Although Shaw has been criticized for being the "ideal product of the acculturation process advocated in the Indian school system,"³² she stands apart from many other Indian "case histories" of the same generation by her apparent success in *both* worlds. She and her husband emphasized their Pima identity with pride, and did not attempt to "conceal" it as other Indians of the time often did for fear of prejudice. Anna Shaw's autobiography seems to prove what popular opinion seeks always to *disprove*—that an Indian can "make it" in the white world, yet still remain an "Indian." That Shaw achieves this goal seems apparent. After her husband's retirement they moved back to the reservation, where she became involved in reviving traditional Pima arts, edited the tribal newspaper and helped create a museum of Pima culture. Shaw seems to retain a strong appreciation of the value of the traditional ways and the need to pass them on, thereby refuting arguments of "assimilation," while still exercising her right to join the "modern world" on an equal footing.

It is important to consider Shaw's experiences in a regional and chronological context. The Pima, unlike some other tribes, were located in close proximity to the large urban centers of Phoenix and Tucson. Therefore, they possessed the ability to engage in commerce with the "white world" without necessarily forfeiting their traditional roles. In addition, Shaw completed her education at a time when total "assimilation" was actively encouraged by BIA teachers. Native ways were often denigrated and suppressed. That Shaw continued to nurture tribal traditions and in fact, sought to explain their importance to the American people at large, testifies to her confidence in her Pima identity, rather than her "compromise" to white values.

The story of Acoma potter, Lucy Lewis, contrasts with the experiences of Mountain Wolf Woman, Anna Shaw and Helen Sekaquaptewa. Unlike the other three women, Lewis did not attend white schools, nor did she ever learn English or live in an urban setting. In this sense, Lewis illustrates a far older tradition and lifestyle. Lest one equate "tradition" with a static refusal to permit "change," however, Lucy Lewis's story details both her traditional role as a Pueblo woman—the matriarchal "head" of her family and guarantor of spiritual and traditional continuity—

and her radical departure from that role as a widely recognized practitioner of pottery as a fine art form. Lucy Lewis was the first Acoma woman to experiment with different techniques and more detailed designs, and later, the first to "sign" her pottery (against the wishes of tribal leaders)³³ and display it at competitive shows such as the Gallup Ceremonials.

Because of her determination to revive an ancient art in a creative, fulfilling way, Lucy Lewis has inspired many other Pueblo women to learn the art of pottery, develop it through individual styles and receive acclaim and profit for their artistic achievements. At the same time, Lewis has served her children as a source of spiritual and cultural continuity with Acoma tradition. Many of her children have lived away from the Pueblo, and all have been educated in white schools, yet they do not feel threatened by their exposure to the white world because of their strong ties to their Acoma heritage.

It is essential to realize that maintaining one's ties to the traditional past, to the ritual and symbolic structures of one's culture, imparts a significant sense of "power." That power includes a sense of identity, connection and self-confidence. The power may vary, according to tribe, gender or age, but always it is there. In the Acoma tribe, Lewis's daughters explain, the women are inextricably tied to the past through their ritual duties and participation in the ceremonial cycle.

Clearly, each of the women from this generation—Mountain Wolf Woman, Helen Sekaquaptewa, Anna Shaw and Lucy Lewis—has had a strong and vital connection to the traditional past. Though in some cases educated in white schools, "converted" to Christianity, or pioneering a non-traditional role or art form, all of these women have maintained their tribal identities, clan obligations and traditional value systems. But what about the following generation? What happens when the "power" becomes transmuted through mixed-blood ancestry, birth in urban environments, and displacement from tradition? What happens when the "new ways" seem hopelessly and finally irreconcilable with an "Indian" identity?

Maria Campbell's story centers around conflicts of identity and "place" which are far more severe than those experienced by the women of previous generations. Campbell, a Metis or mixed-blood Cree, was born into the Canadian society of the 1940s, arguably even more racist than American society at this time. As

a Metis woman, Campbell suffered from both racial and gender-directed oppression. The Metis were victims of discrimination from Canadian whites, as well as from their full-blood Treaty Indian kin, who referred to their mixed-blood relatives as the "Awp-pee-tow-kooson," the "half-people."³⁴ The Metis held no treaty rights under Canadian law, and were forced to eke out a marginal existence poaching wildlife from Government parks, and "squatting" on strips of rocky, muskeg-covered land.

As a child, Maria Campbell was teased by white classmates for eating roasted gophers at lunch, and for dressing in old, mended clothes. For respite, Campbell dreamed of living in a big city like Vancouver, a place of "toothbrushes and pretty dresses, oranges and apples."³⁵ And eventually she did go to Vancouver as the wife of a young white man who left her there, battered and penniless and with a baby daughter to support. Too proud to return home to her great-grandmother, Cheechum, and her widowed father, Campbell plunged ahead in her dream of wealth and success; she became a high-priced call girl in a house of prostitution. She had money, satin dresses and jewels, and rich white men paid to "keep" her, but Campbell admits "Something inside of me died . . . I had married to escape from what I'd thought was an ugly world, only to find a worse one."³⁶ Failing to gain an identity which would answer her need for recognition and self-respect, Campbell turned to alcohol and heroin.

Campbell finally realized that by running away from what she was—a halfbreed—she was helping to destroy herself. She turned her anger away from herself and toward the society which had labeled Native people in opposing categories "Metis/Treaty Indian" to further divide and weaken them. Canadian society has done its best to reduce the number of Native "wards" under its care. And too often, the Indian woman has borne the major burden in this process. For example, under the "Indian Act" of Canada, a Treaty Indian woman loses her status if she marries a white, while a white woman gains Indian status and land if she marries an Indian.³⁷ The patriarchal biases of white bureaucrats together with the androcentric Christianity of the missionaries have dramatically altered traditional Indian perceptions of women. Campbell summarizes, "The missionaries had impressed upon us the feeling that women were a source of evil. This belief, combined with the ancient Indian recognition of the power

of women, is still holding back the progress of our people today."³⁸

Although, in a sense, Maria Campbell returns "home" to her ancestral past, embarking on a critical reunion trip to see her Cree great-grandmother, she realizes that for the Metis there is no "traditional past" with one set of values, rituals and attitudes. Years of colonial oppression and miscegenation have fragmented the Metis, and the only unity that remains, aside from certain shared cultural attitudes, is a modern politically-centered manifestation of Native solidarity. In the larger sense, then, Maria Campbell's "Indian" identity is created largely from the shared bitterness, frustration and poverty of Canada's diverse Native population. This sense of "Indianness" parallels the "pan-Indianism" that is apparent in large urban centers such as Los Angeles today, characterized by the unified "social consciousness" of Indian people from various tribes and regions, and with varying degrees of "Indian blood." But on a more personal level, Campbell seems to merge her identity with that of her Cree great-grandmother, assuming Cheechum's dreams for the rebirth of the Cree people in her own efforts as a political activist. Although the two women are separated by many years and several "worlds" of experience, they unite in a single spiritual current more ancient than tribal memory or "degree of blood." This spiritual current becomes apparent in the modern literature of authors such as Leslie Silko, Joy Harjo and Louise Erdrich, who are all of mixed Indian/white blood, yet demonstrate a tenacious attachment to their tribal heritage and a lyrical appreciation of the deepest qualities of that heritage.

Like their ancestors, contemporary Indian women display strong ties to the spiritual currents of the past and also to the political realities of the present. The contemporary Indian woman faces a bewildering array of misconceptions, prejudices and problems. Many Indian women in the last few years have refused to accept the "status quo" of society, and have actively resisted through direct political involvement, as Maria Campbell did, and/or through written works which illuminate their concerns.

In the political arena, Indian women who have been through the white educational system can often appreciate the sophistication of the problems which face their people. The real frustration comes from white bureaucracies and Native political

organizations built on the white model, which fail to recognize either the traditional power of Indian women or their modern skills as political facilitators. Jeela Alilkatuktuk, an Inuit woman raised in a traditional family but sent to boarding school as a teenager, explains: "I became involved in community affairs and was elected to the Frobisher Bay Hamlet Council at the age of 19. [While] The Council is supposed . . . to run the community for the people . . . in reality the territorial government controls all the money and all the personnel . . . the councils are [largely] powerless."³⁹ Alilkatuktuk relates this powerlessness to the breakdown of traditional political structures, significantly to the loss of position by women. She claims that in traditional times, the most respected persons were the old women, and many women exerted great influence over camp decisions. Now, Alilkatuktuk says, white men have transposed an alien political system on the Inuit people, along with their own negative attitudes about women. She concludes: "One of our greatest losses is that our young Inuit men are copying the white people in their attitude. Where a white woman can walk without fear an Inuit woman is harassed and propositioned."⁴⁰ Alilkatuktuk's statement is corroborated by Indian Health Service worker Phyllis Old Dog Cross for the Navajo. Old Dog Cross documents the dramatic increase of rape on the Navajo reservation (formerly almost unheard of among Navajos, who held women in high esteem, rape is now the number one crime on the reservation) with this explanation: "For the Indian male, the only route to be successful, to be good, to be right, and to have an identity was to be as much like the white man as he could."⁴¹ The modern conflict between genders, for many Indian groups, has largely resulted from patterns learned from white colonial authorities whose policies destroyed traditional egalitarian systems among Indian people.

Because the various government controlled agencies have failed to provide Indian people with a structure compatible with traditional beliefs, many young Indians have taken a more "militant" stance in an all-Indian organization such as the American Indian Movement. Unfortunately, the effects of patriarchal gender oppression often extend equally to these groups.

In *The Life and Death of Anna Mae Aquash*, Johanna Brand tells the story of a young Micmac woman from Nova Scotia who

became involved with AIM during the late sixties and early seventies, and was violently murdered under suspicious circumstances.⁴² Anna Mae's story substantiates many of the comments Jeela Alilkatuktuk and Maria Campbell make about the racism and sexism of Canadian officials toward their Indian "wards." Eventually, Anna Mae left her poverty-blighted reserve to go to Boston, where she became involved in various Indian-rights organizations, including AIM. Because of her outspoken endorsement of AIM's most militant activities, many Indian people allege, Anna Mae became a prime target in the FBI campaign against "anti-American agitators." When she was suddenly murdered, and the subsequent investigation conducted hurriedly and incompletely, many Indians became suspicious of political motivations for her death. After Anna Mae's death, many Indian women eulogized her as the "Brave-Hearted Woman," a female warrior in a violent, on-going war of genocide and oppression. But Brand's biography reveals a far more complex portrait of Anna Mae's struggle.

Brand indicates that Anna Mae was very idealistic about her identity as an Indian woman, and could not reconcile her deeply felt spiritual commitments to the realities of alcoholism, the fast-moving city life and the mounting political tensions within and around AIM. In part, the tensions were gender-based, because although AIM members claimed to have built their organization on traditional "Indian" precepts and values, it was apparent that some of the male "leaders" adopted a "macho" posturing which more clearly reflected the patriarchal Western mindset than the traditional egalitarianism which most tribes practiced. One reviewer of Beatrice Medicine's *The Native American Woman: A Perspective*, quoted a young AIM woman, Kathleen Smith, on her experience at Wounded Knee:

The AIM leaders are particularly sexist, never having learned our true Indian history where women voted and participated equally in all matters of tribal life. They have learned the white man's way of talking down to women and regarding their position as inferior. Some . . . actually don't believe women can fight or think, and gave us the impression that we were there for their use and that we should be flattered to

have their children. One man said he was helping Indian unity by having a girlfriend from every tribe. They want to keep women divided and fighting for men's friendship and attention.⁴³

Aside from gender differences, however, the goals of Indian activism clearly reflected the unified concerns of all Indian people. Shirley Witt, an Akwesasne Mohawk, wrote of Anna Mae's struggle as representative of many Indians who were tired of seeing their people incarcerated, unemployed, alcoholic and suicidal in racist border towns, who were tired of seeing their children removed to far-off boarding schools and "brainwashed white," and tired of having brothers and sons recruited for a white man's army that didn't care if they came back alive or not.⁴⁴ In the "struggle," both genders participated equally. In fact, Witt claims, after many of the male leaders had been jailed or were trying to escape incarceration in the mid-seventies, it was the women "warriors" who formed the stable core of the Indian movement and kept the concerns alive. And their "concerns" were substantial. Witt offers the statistics of Dr. Connie Uri, Cherokee, who claims that at the Claremore Indian Hospital in July, 1974, sterilization surgery was performed on 48 Indian women, most in their twenties. The Indian women activists were the first to bring the to attention this forcible sterilization of Indian women in government hospitals. Another area of concern at this time involved adoption procedures regarding Indian children, who were generally placed with higher income white families, rather than families of their own tribal background. The Indian Child Welfare Act has since been passed, modifying such policies to reflect greater tribal control over the placement of Indian children.⁴⁵

Women of All Red Nations (WARN), an all-women Native activist group, formed as a female counterpart to the American Indian Movement. Currently WARN investigates and calls to attention the various concerns of Indian women. In recent years, these concerns have centered around the massive contamination of Indian water by radioactive waste from uranium mines located on Indian land. Winona La Duke, an Anishinabe and founder of WARN, has assembled statistical evidence of the high birth defect rate on Indian reservations, apparently closely linked to the radioactive contamination of the land and water.⁴⁶

Contemporary Indian women are reasserting the traditional power of their female ancestors in many ways. Many have become strong political leaders for their tribes, such as Ada Deer, Menominee, who was largely responsible for the reinstatement of her tribe to Federal status after its disastrous "termination" by the government in 1961.⁴⁷ Other women choose to outline their concerns through written works which illuminate the struggles, failures and triumphs of their people. Interestingly, many of the "fictional" works written by Indian women are constructed on an autobiographical mode of presentation. Often a central character in the poetry or prose of the Indian woman author will be modeled on the author herself; her experiences become those of the protagonist. Paula Allen describes her novel, *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, in this way. Allen's novel centers around the quest of Ephanie, a half-breed Laguna woman, as Allen is, for an identity which answers modern realities and traditional needs. Allen observes that the novel "leans on the tradition of autobiography," and that Ephanie was constructed from "qualities and characteristics drawn from her grandmother, mother and herself, as well as fictional elements."⁴⁸

Two concepts are essential in understanding the work of contemporary Indian women writers. The first is to understand the sense of place that permeates the work, as it always has the lives of Indian people. Even among Indian women writers who were born or raised largely in urban environments, there is a strong sense of origin from a specific geographic region, and a concomitant identity which centers around this land. Tribal stories, American Indian autobiographies and contemporary literature by Indian writers all share this emphasis on "place." However, the Indian women writers perhaps exhibit the most central connections to the land, since, traditionally, the cyclical and regenerative characteristics of the earth were strongly linked to tribal women. To illustrate, Paula Allen refers to the "feminine landscape" of Leslie Silko's novel, *Ceremony*, with this inclusive remark: "We are the land, and the land is mother to us all."⁴⁹ Gretchen Bataille and Kathleen Sands comment similarly on the autobiography of Maria Chona, a Papago woman, "Like all works of American Indian literature [her] autobiography is permeated with a sense of place, the inextricable interweaving of language and landscape, the concept that the land is not merely

setting for the story, but that the story is formed and shaped by the land, and the land is given significance and vitality in the language."⁵⁰ This summary could be applied equally to the work of Leslie Silko, Joy Harjo, Paula Allen, Luci Tapahonso and countless other Indian women writers. The land unifies tradition and modern experience to reflect the "wholeness" of Indian cultures and nations.

However, along with this sense of "wholeness" and "place," there is a troubling sense of loss, of deprivation and sadness. The idealism which many people ascribe to Indian people via "traditionalism" is countered by the often ugly realities of Indian life on the reservation and in urban areas. Problems such as assault, family violence, alcoholism, incarceration and murder continually reassert themselves in Indian communities, largely due to widespread socio-economic deprivation and the significant degree of culture loss (reflected in the loss of tribal languages, rituals and clan relationships) which now threatens tribal groups. Indian women write consciously of both sides of life—positive and negative—to evoke the power of change and growth for Indian people. The language in the works may be lyrical and delicate, or it may be harsh and tense, as in this paragraph from a forthcoming autobiography by Anna Lee Walters, Pawnee-Oto:

I have seen handsome people become ugly and disfigured. I have been close when people have been murdered and women raped and given birth . . . I am familiar with people who have given their children away for a price, cash or a drink. I grew up with children whose parents fought and maimed each other by plan, no accident. I know of men who have given away their daughters.⁵¹

Walter's work will be an autobiography, but the realism compares to Erdrich's *Love Medicine* and Harjo's poem, "The Black Room."

The idealism of tradition and "place" and the realism of squalid alleys and border town bars may seem paradoxical and incompatible; but then, oftentimes so is the story of Indian survival and the tremendous adaptability of ancient cultures. Students of contemporary Indian literature might take this cue from Joy Harjo in reference to a modern "trickster" story told by a prison inmate:

Everyone laughed at the impossibility of it,
but also the truth. Because who would believe
the fantastic and terrible story of all of our survival
those who were never meant
to survive?⁵²

IV

In a metaphorical sense, the diverse works of contemporary Indian women writers combine as a collective whole to generate the rebirth of Native tribal energy and female power. Leslie Silko, Joy Harjo, Paula Allen and Luci Tapahonso are representative of the many contemporary women writers who have begun to assert this traditional power in written form. Joy Harjo says "we exist / not in words, but in the motion / set off by them,"⁵³ summarizing the power inherent in contemporary literary expression.

These women combine modern experience with an ancient past in a unified continuum, rather than a fragmented assembly of parts. This mode of expression mirrors what Paula Allen calls "The traditional tribal concept of time . . . timelessness," and the complementary understanding of "space" as "multidimensionality."⁵⁴ This complex understanding of time and space underlies the ritual construction of many Indian world views, as Dr. Alfonso Ortiz affirms in *The Tewa World*.⁵⁵

In conjunction with these concepts, many Indian groups perceive the individual as moving within the constant, natural motion of the universe in "dynamic equilibrium."⁵⁶ The relationship of an individual to the universe exists as an ancient, vital bond, as Joy Harjo explains:

I am memory alive
not just a name
but an intricate part
of this web of motion,
meaning: earth, sky, stars circling
my heart
centrifugal.⁵⁷

Similarly, the relationship of the individual to her ancestors is also continuous and "alive"; Luci Tapahonso writes of a woman

who looks into her young daughter's face, "knowing they breathe the same memories, the same blood / dark and wet circulating / forever into time and others."⁵⁸

This sense of connection to the ancient past transcends the modern realities of mixed blood-lines, gender splits, and urban settings, and often appears in modern literature as a surrealist blend of myth and reality. Possibly the best example of this appears in Leslie Silko's novel, *Ceremony*. Significantly, in *Ceremony* a great emphasis rests on the female principles of this universal motion, in accordance with the world view of the matriarchal Laguna people. On a more intricate level, as Paula Allen notes, while *Ceremony* is "ostensibly a tale about a man, Tayo, it is as much and more a tale of two forces: the feminine life force of the universe and the mechanistic death force of the witchery."⁵⁹ Allen's comment indicates a major philosophical thread which runs through Pueblo world views—the belief that each individual is comprised of both male and female elements, a balanced unity of "life forces" roughly equivalent to the oriental concept of Yin and Yang.

Interestingly, Silko chooses to use a male character to illustrate the competing values of the matriarchal Pueblo culture and the patriarchal Euro-american culture. Louise Erdrich uses a similar approach in *Love Medicine* with Henry Lamartine, Jr., a Chippewa newly arrived from the horrors of the Vietnam war. Tayo and Henry Jr. are both Indian men who have been mentally "raped" by a Euro-american culture which promotes death and violence and is in direct conflict with the traditional Indian life-force. Silko and Erdrich frame the dilemma from a male perspective to reinforce the contemporary realization that the victimization of an individual parallels the victimization of a culture and ethos, and therefore respects no gender boundaries.

Because of this understanding of victimization, which has been an intimate part of American Indian experience (both male and female), contemporary Indian women writers often do not observe the same dichotomy between male "dominance" and female "victimization" that white feminist authors do. Even in Joy Harjo's prose poem, "The Black Room," which concerns the literal rape of a woman, the "rape" is much more complex than a physical act, and can be correlated to "victimization" on a much larger scale:

Joey had her cornered. Leaned her up against the wall of her room, in black willow shadows his breath was shallow and muscled and she couldn't move and she had no voice no name and she could only wait until it was over—like violent summer storms that she had been terrified of.⁶⁰

When Harjo says "she had no voice / no name" she refers to what many people have called the "mute zone," the chronically passive "victim" mentality of those who have been stripped of identity (a name) and of power (a voice). Tayo and Henry Jr., though male, have succumbed to this victimization through Army indoctrination, much as female rape victims often do through societal judgments ("she asked for it"). For Tayo, the "ceremony" finally allows him to have a "voice." Previously, he has been nearly mute, numbly wading through an existential fog of pain and denial. At the height of his sickness, he perceives the world around him as vague and shadowy; even his own mouth he sees as "an outline . . . like all the other outlines he saw."⁶¹ For Tayo, at this point, the world has no substance, no vitality without the body of tradition and understanding which gives meaning to life.

Tayo learns to transcend the death force of the white witchery by relearning the spiritual power of his Laguna traditions, but Henry Jr. faces a different outcome. Henry Jr. is plagued by memories of the violence and inhumanity of the war he has just experienced. He remembers witnessing the rape of a Vietnamese woman by American soldiers:

She looked at him. They had used a bayonet. She was out of her mind. You, me, same. Same. She pointed to her eyes and his eyes. The Asian folded eyes of some Chippewas. She was hemorrhaging.⁶²

Henry Jr. has witnessed the violent rape of a woman, but he has been similarly victimized by his fellow soldiers, who destroy his own values and perceptions, and leave him "ghost-like," an empty shell of his former self. As his mother realizes: "All his life he did things right, and then the war showed him right was wrong."⁶³ The Euro-american world which allows the exploitation of women and "Third World" peoples in its quest for power

and gain, and then discards the victims without reference to their humanity, conflicts severely with the traditional Indian ethic of balance and mutual respect. Henry Jr., unlike Tayo, has no traditional healer to turn to, and he takes his own life by drowning in the river.

Throughout the works of Indian women writers there is powerful emphasis on transcending victimization to find one's own identity and voice. The initial step in this direction is to define oneself in one's own terms, rather than those of the outer society. For Indian women, this means discarding the anglo feminine ideal in favor of what Paula Allen appropriately calls "Recovering the feminine in American Indian traditions," in the full title of *The Sacred Hoop*.

Many American women have struggled to counter the 19th century feminine ideal—the beautiful, passive, subordinate woman who received her identity in terms of her affiliation to males. However, even today a "feminine ideal" persists in ad campaigns (the "Virginia Slims Woman") and beauty contests. Modern women are encouraged to adopt the make-up, hairstyle and clothing that society determines to be "feminine." The "Virginia Slims" woman must always be perfect, always illusive and mysterious. She cannot be "real" (with a "voice," a "name" or an "occupation") or she would destroy her allure and her commercial worth.

For the American Indian woman, the conflict between a traditional identity and the "feminine ideal" promoted by Euro-american society has assumed complex dimensions in relation to the contemporary search for identity. Maria Campbell discusses her aspirations to be a beautiful, revered "lady," which ultimately led her into prostitution and drug-addiction, and admits: "Dreams are so important in one's life, yet when followed blindly, they can lead to the disintegration of one's soul."⁶⁴ Louise Erdrich illustrates the same conflict through June, in *Love Medicine*. June searches for an identity which will make her feel good about herself, and as society has conditioned women to do, she looks to men for this identity. She maintains a thin veneer of physical attractiveness to cover her inner disintegration, but realizes sadly that she is "truly empty," and eventually walks to her death in a storm.

In *Ceremony*, Tayo's mother shares a fate similar to June's. Like

June, Tayo's mother seeks to establish her identity and importance through men; but eventually she faces reality when, "after she had been with them, she could feel the truth in their fists and in their greedy feeble love-making."⁶⁵ She grows to feel marginal and inadequate both with the Indian people, who feel shame for her promiscuity and alcoholism, and with the White men who feel contempt for her, and finally dies a lonely, alcoholic death. Both June and Tayo's mother illustrate the consequences of cultural loss and denial. Erdrich and Silko have countered these tragic images with strong Indian women such as Lulu, Marie and Albertine in *Love Medicine*, and Ts'eh in *Ceremony*, who embody the strength and resilience of their ancestral cultures, even as they adapt and persist in the face of severe opposition.

Defining a contemporary identity becomes critical in achieving such cultural resilience. As Indian women begin to counter the negative effects of the societally imposed "feminine ideal," they start to assert the older values and perceptions which have always allowed Indian women to maintain a sense of autonomy and self-worth. The process of gaining such an identity entails first, a realization of one's own oppression; second, the release of one's pain and often self-directed anger; and third, the realization of one's individual self-worth through connections to tradition and kin. This process of "going back home" permeates *Love Medicine* through Lipsha's search for his identity and kin, *Ceremony* through Tayo's ritual connection to his traditional past, and Harjo's collection, *She Had Some Horses*, through Noni Daylight's search for a "voice" and a "self" which can transcend her pain and nihilistic self-denial.

As Noni Daylight realizes, at the root of all pain is fear. For Indian women this may include fear of the cold, anonymous city, fear of going back to the poverty of the reservation, fear of racists and rapists, and of what the schools will "teach" the children, fear of what vision the next drink will bring, and fear of what will happen if there is no next drink. Noni Daylight lives with that fear. It grips her heart and dries her mouth and leaves her "a dishrag wrung out over bones":

Noni Daylight is afraid.

She waits through traffic lights at intersections
that at four a.m. are desolate oceans of concrete.

She toys with the trigger; the heartbeat
is a constant noise. She talks softly
softly
to the voice on the radio. All night she drives.⁶⁶

Noni Daylight is striving for *connection*, as are Maria Campbell, June, Tayo and Lipsha. Noni Daylight seeks a "voice," and needs to hear the "heartbeat" which tells her she is alive. But she cannot truly find her identity until she realizes, "It is not the moon, or the pistol in her lap / but a fierce anger / that will free her."⁶⁷ In these final three lines of "Heartbeat," Harjo discovers an important lesson which might be appropriately used by any person seeking to overcome victimization and assert an individual identity: anger must be used as energy, directed away from the self and worked through, if one is ever to achieve control over one's life. This realization has also received attention in the works of many white feminist writers. Importantly, Paula Allen and Joy Harjo have admitted the bond which all women, regardless of race, have in the struggle to overcome the patriarchal oppression and victimization of Euro-american society. Although both have recognized the significant departures between white feminism and traditional Indian beliefs, they choose to focus on the mutualities of women's experience.

A main tenet of modern feminist thought involves discarding the traditional "passive" role of the female in favor of a more autonomous "active" role. This breaks the "victim mentality," and allows the woman to feel confident about making her own choices and decisions. Adrienne Rich, a white feminist poet, outlines this concept in her acclaimed collection, *Diving Into the Wreck*. As critic Helen Vendler writes, "The forcefulness of *Diving Into the Wreck* comes from the wish not to huddle wounded, but to explore the caverns, scars and depths of the wreckage."⁶⁸ By taking this active step, one may discard the internalized anger which, as Rich notes, is often "converted into self-hate and despondency . . . the cause of paralysis."⁶⁹ By "paralysis," Rich describes the same numb denial which destroys June and Henry Jr., and threatens to destroy Tayo, and Ephanie in Paula Allen's *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*.⁷⁰

Joy Harjo correlates this "paralysis" to suicides, which often occur through a "passive" method (drowning, overdose, exposure) because the individual is incapable of making an active

decision. In "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window" Harjo describes a woman who:

. . . knows she is hanging by her own fingers, her own skin, her own thread of indecision . . .

She thinks she remembers listening to her own life break loose, as she falls from the 13th floor window on the east side of Chicago, or as she climbs back up to claim herself again.⁷¹

Harjo intentionally leaves the poem's ending ambiguous to indicate that it is the element of choice, the active power in taking the initiative to save oneself, that is the key to survival. That "choice" is the fundamental theme of the pivotal poem in Harjo's collection. "She Remembers the Future." In this poem, Noni Daylight finally confronts her "other self," the self she has long denied for fear of facing the intense pain and anger that, in fact, empower this self. Noni asks the complacent, passive self which contemplates suicide, "Should I dream you afraid / so that you are forced to save / yourself? / Or should you ride colored horses / into the cutting edge of the sky / to know / that we're alive / we are alive."⁷²

The act of unifying the two disparate selves, for Noni Daylight, involves the resolution of her seemingly polarized existence into one entity—her "self." Joy Harjo uses Noni Daylight to illustrate her own belief that the contradictions and "polarities" which often fragment Indian people must be reconciled into "an order that is harmonious, balanced and whole."⁷³ This passage from "She Had Some Horses" illustrates the vital resolution of polarity:

She had some horses.

She had horses who got down on their knees for any saviour.

She had horses who thought their high price had saved them.

She had horses who tried to save her, who climbed in her bed at night and prayed as they raped her.

She had some horses.

She had some horses she loved.

She had some horses she hated.

These were the same horses.⁷⁴

Harjo has realized that it is this sense of polarity, as she says, of "good/evil, sun/moon, light/dark," which fragments the modern consciousness into near insanity.⁷⁵ The Western world view revolves around polarity—"Christian/pagan," "Sacred/secular," "male/female," "technology/nature"—with an attendant imbalance in the judgments of one being superior to its opposite. In the traditional Indian view, as Paula Allen notes, the image of unified balance predominates in the form of the "Sacred Hoop." This view refutes the Western "polarity" which often seems paradoxical, even to Westerners. For example, a white man once asked an old Tuscarora why the polarities of "good and evil," like those of "genius and insanity," often seemed to be "just a hair's breadth apart." The Tuscarora man answered: "There is no such thing as polarity, except in the frail choice of man. If you take the line between your polarities and curve it into a circle, you would have your own answer."⁷⁶ It is this understanding of "polarity" which forms the core of American Indian world views. Today, the resolution of an artificially imposed polarity restores one to the "primordial center," as Betonie explains to Tayo. For Tayo this means finding the balance between modern life and the older traditions, between the mechanistic forces of technology and the life-forces of Laguna tradition.

Contemporary Indian women restore themselves to this balance as they find an identity more appropriate to their unique tribal traditions, and one which emphasizes their own special bond to the female life-forces of the universe. Because Indian women have always perceived their regenerative qualities in close concert with the earth's cycles, many contemporary Indian women writers use this theme in their work. Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan writes: "I teach my daughters, / that we are women, / a hundred miles of green / wills itself out of our skin. / The red sky ends at our feet / and the earth begins at our heads."⁷⁷ Hogan's image might well coincide with a Navajo sand-painting which depicts the circular universe, the unbroken continuum of earth and sky, the female deities arched over the land like rainbows, promising rebirth for a new generation.

In Indian tradition, the births of a woman parallel the other births which belong to the land. Luci Tapahonso explores this connection in relation to sunrise, the ultimate rebirth of the natural world. "The first born of dawn woman / slid out amid crimson fluid streaked with stratus clouds / her body glistening

August sunset pink / light steam rising from her like rain on warm rocks."⁷⁸ And Joy Harjo relates a human birth to the cycles of the land in much the same way:

. . . the ground spoke when she was born.
Her mother heard it. In Navajo she answered
as she squatted down against the earth
to give birth. It was now when it happened,
now giving birth to itself again and again
between the legs of women.⁷⁹

As Harjo writes "It was now . . . giving birth to itself again and again," she summarizes the temporal continuity of the Indian universe. This ability to include the traditional past with the changing present characterizes the works of American Indian writers. Linda Hogan offers a concise appraisal of this quality:

No one is much without the earth
in their hands
and I pick up the earth,
touch the people
the country
and the things we try to forget.⁸⁰

Indian women writers, in particular, are all too aware of the modern tendency to "forget" what should not be forgotten: the older traditions, the recent (painful) history, the harsh realism of the modern world. The older Indian people recognized the need to keep memory alive as they perfected the art of oral history. Today, the modern written works of many Indian women fulfill a similar function. Joy Harjo emphasizes the value of "memory":

Remember that you are this universe and that this
universe is you.
Remember that all is in motion, is growing, is you.
Remember that language comes from this.
Remember the dance that language is, that life is.
Remember⁸¹

Harjo correlates language and memory to the motion of life. She emphasizes that the past is the current to the future, but only if we allow it to be. In their respective novels, Silko and Erdrich describe what can happen when "memory" is allowed to die,

when the natural cycles are broken in the modern "death" of warfare and atomic technology. Just as Lipsha needs to establish his "kinship" to Gerry Nanapush, June and Lulu in *Love Medicine*, and Tayo must establish his kinship to his Laguna ancestors and traditions in *Ceremony*, so must we all establish our mutual kinship to the land—to the rocks which the Lakota call "Tunkashila" or "grandfather," to the rain-filled clouds which the Hopi call "Kachinas," their spirit ancestors—and to all the living beings which have been born to this land.

This sense of motion, regeneration and life permeates the work of contemporary Indian women writers. The written expressions of these authors might well be considered a powerful legacy of "survival" for the next generation. In the combined works of these women rests a strong vision for a better future.

In traditional Navajo mythology, a male deity associated with "thought" unites with a female deity associated with "speech" to create the preeminent deity of the Navajo people—Changing Woman.⁸² Changing Woman personifies the female life-force of the universe, and through her, the ritual structure of the Navajo people was born. Similarly, "thought" and "speech" combine for a dynamic rebirth of the traditional American Indian cultures and belief systems in the contemporary writings of Native American authors. And American Indian women writers have a vital role in this regenerative process. At the conclusion of *Seasonal Woman*, Luci Tapahonso places herself in this continuum of life, art and beauty with a final, gentle prayer:

bless me hills
 this clear golden morning
 for I am passing through again.
 I can easily sing
 for . . . time is mine
 and these ragged red cliffs
 flowing hills and wind echoes
 are only extensions
 of a never-ending prayer.⁸³

As Tapahonso realizes, the prayers of generations of people rest in those "ragged red cliffs" and "flowing hills." Their handprints and drawings often remain, etched ghost-like on rock slabs, though their words have long since faded into wind-echoes. However, the "essence" of their prayers remains, giv-

ing strength and continuity to a new generation, a generation passing through the "dawn"—once again.

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