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**From the Monologic Eye to Healing
Polyphonies: Dialogic Re/vision in Native
American Narratives**

Silvia Martínez Falquina

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From the Monologic Eye to Healing Polyphonies: Dialogic Re/vision in Native American Narratives

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Abstract

As within the field of New Literatures in English or minority writing, two main models of fiction and critical discourse can be found in Native American texts. On the one hand, an essentialist or national model reproduces old images of the indian by favoring a separatist approach that reinforces dichotomies and hierarchies as it affirms differences. Both Alexie's *Indian Killer* and Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* are shown to be examples of this trend. On the other hand, there is a more global, hybrid and relational model, which, while it can become strategically essentialist, relies fundamentally on dialectics. As an example of this trend, Erdrich's *Tales of Burning Love* provides a holistic approach that favors the dialogue between texts and reality, allowing us to perceive

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truth as the sum of a series of points of view, and redefining subjectivity as polyphonic and reciprocal. It is the point of this paper to show that, besides a productive re/vision of the categories of gender and ethnicity that allows for the simultaneous deconstruction of conventions and the affirmation of differences, this second approach allows us to reinterpret Native American texts as the result of a series of open dialogues between ethnic and canonical, masculine and feminine, old and new.

1. Analysing Native American Literatures: An Introduction

The presence of two inherently opposed impulses in the socio-cultural characterization of the contemporary world, namely, the renewed strength of nationalism and the affirmation of globalization, makes it particularly urgent to define new, appropriate ways of approaching cultural phenomena, including the articulation-or the simultaneous reflection and construction-of reality through literary texts. Within the field of what have been called “New Literatures in English”, such impulses respectively correspond to an essentialist model that stresses ethnic and gender differences and to a hybrid model that strives to deconstruct them. A nationalist motivation characterizes the definition of minority literatures as intrinsically different to those originating in the center of power. This is a separatist, conservative move that vindicates

an essence marked in terms of ethnicity or gender; it identifies political commitment with biology, stressing issues of authenticity. Unfortunately, this trend favors a radical opposition to canonical power that ultimately reproduces the hierarchies established by it. On the other hand, globalization can be associated to theoretical tendencies such as deconstruction or the attention to cultural hybridity, which subvert the authority of gender and ethnic discourse, as well as the essentialist myths of Western and patriarchal power. By applying poststructuralist strategies, in principle accessible to both Western men and minority groups, these theories analyse language and deconstruct conventions. Their main disadvantage is that they can easily be appropriated by the dominant power, particular differences melting in a general hybrid reality, which would once more entail an erasure of the voice of the other.

The hierarchies that each of the two critical movements risks perpetuating make it imperative to recognize the inadequacy of such either/or choice between oppositional and hybrid perspectives: it is just as necessary to question and subvert the oppositional models of gender and ethnicity as it is to define a series of epistemological and ontological certainties that allow for an articulation of a positive identity for minority peoples. As I intend to show in this paper through the particular ex-

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ample of contemporary Native American texts, it is possible and desirable to articulate a holistic strategy of resistance that recognizes that “essentialist and hybrid approaches to cultural identity need not be seen as inherently opposed political strategies, but can co-exist in a combined strategy of productive simultaneity” (Hutchings, 1997: 177). My proposal aims at combining an attention to the hybrid, constructed nature of language and reality, while simultaneously recognizing the differences that are thereby established and which have an effect on people’s lives. The purpose of this is to articulate an adequate approach to the contemporary Native literatures of the United States, while specifying their place within the New Literatures in English field.

The preference for a holistic criticism of Native texts reflects the presence of a holistic kind of discourse in contemporary Native writing. As is shown in this paper, there is still a good number of texts which favor an essentialist or nationalist model, reproducing old images of the Indian by favoring a separatist perspective that reinforces dichotomies and hierarchies as it affirms differences. This is the case of works of fiction such as Alexie’s *Indian Killer* and Silko’s *Gardens in the Dunes*. Erdrich’s *Tales of Burning Love*, on the other hand, is a good example of holistic re/vision, which entails a recognition of the

fundamental hybridity of the text while it admits the necessity to affirm differences in a strategic kind of essentialism. Of the two tendencies, the latter is seen as the most productive in the search for an adequate way to articulate new models of gender and ethnicity.

2. Stressing Native and Female Difference: Alexie and Silko

The definition of the Native literatures of the United States has often been understood in terms of separation from canonical texts in order to affirm a differential gendered ethnic identity. Two recently published examples of this tendency are the novels *Indian Killer* (1996), by Sherman Alexie, and *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999), by Leslie Marmon Silko, which to a great extent reproduce the established images of the warrior male and the mother earth Indian woman that were constructed by the colonizers. *Indian Killer*, by Spokane/Coeur d'Alene writer Sherman Alexie, shows the persistence of old images of the Indian in the voice of a successful contemporary Native American writer. The dedication that opens the novel, "we are what we have lost" (Alexie, 1996), announces the nostalgic component of an identity that is constructed on loss, which responds to a perspective of the Indian as a victim who is about to disappear. It also recovers the essentialized monolith

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of the Indian that silences the actual diversity of precolumbian tribes, for, although Alexie does mention the names of several cultural groups, such as Spokane or Cherokee, they are not described as different nations with their own traditions but just classified under the umbrella term *Indian*, a creation of the Western system of definition.

The Natives in this novel are mainly the victims of a process of colonization in which they have lost their connection to the land and the stories that used to provide them with a cultural identity. This justifies the racial hate that moves the Indians to radical resistance through a mass murderer of white men who is terrorizing the inhabitants of Seattle. It is an Indian killer that responds to the stereotype of the warrior moved by revenge, an image so common in popular culture, including an outstanding number of movies. Alexie does not explain the content of cultural differences, he does not depict habits, traditions or beliefs. Instead, he just takes racial difference for granted, and shows it to be essentialized in the color of the skin and physical features. John Smith is the most obvious example of this; he is a profoundly disturbed character, to the point of wanting to kill a white man in order to claim revenge for his condition, and he finally commits suicide. His problems are merely explained as a result of a displacement caused

by his Indian origin-with his internalized virtues of beauty, nobility and warrior nature-and his early adoption into a white middle class family. The racial difference between John and his adoptive parents, characterized as tolerant and willing to teach so-called Indian values to their son, is an insurmountable border that does not allow them to live together or understand each other at all, but this is a fact that Alexie assumes rather than explains: "the stark difference in their physical appearances was a nagging reminder of the truth" (Alexie, 1996: 114). Such truth is simply race seen as the result of biological inheritance, a static label that symbolizes a different reality and which establishes an unavoidable separation between whites and indians. This is the key element around which Alexie constructs *Indian Killer* as a series of racist dialogues on both sides of the border: from the extreme, even grotesque racism of radio presenter Truck Schultz, to the words that Spokane college student Marie devotes to white men, with a series of youngsters that fight and torture people from the other racial group characterized between the two extremes. As a series of other figures in the novel show, those who cross the racial boundaries are condemned to destruction, either self-inflicted or inflicted on others, in such a way that the Native identity that he provides is a closed circle with certain limits that cannot and should not be transgressed, the

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result of such separation being the justification of racism and, ultimately, its perpetuation.

In *Gardens in the Dunes*, Leslie Marmon Silko provides an illustrative example of the Indian woman's image. This is the story of a Sand Lizard girl called Indigo, who witnesses the end of her traditional world by the hands of white colonization at the end of the nineteenth century. Her tribe is reduced to its last women, who live in a garden spot in the middle of the desert, balancing their vital cycle with that of plants and animals. When Indigo is forced out of her world and taken to a boarding school in the city, she tries to escape and is luckily saved and adopted by Hattie, a white middle class woman who takes her to Europe on a Grand Tour. Hattie is married to Edward, a botanist and explorer, and she is a rebel in her own world since she decides to study the role of women in old church history and is expelled from the academia and called hysterical for that reason. The main motive around which the whole novel is structured is the basic union of all women, Native or Western, in a harmonious worldview in perfect balance with nature that keeps them apart from men. Indigo and her family, Hattie and the women they encounter in their journey, all share a passion for gardens that brings them together and relates them to mother earth and the mythologies previous

to Western colonization worldwide. In contrast with them, the men are greedy for power, they are dishonest and use natural resources for their own individual and even selfish purposes, establishing a relation to the environment in which they consider themselves superior to it and capable of dominating it. The earth according to the feminine/Native vision is what brings all women and Native peoples together and helps define them in opposition to patriarchy and colonization, which implies a subversive reappropriation of old images of the Native woman.

Alexie's warriors and Silko's mother earth women fit comfortably in a scheme, originally devised by Western men, according to which white and Indian, man and woman, mind and body, and ultimately, civilized and savage are dichotomized, separated terms where the first is privileged and the second is seen as inferior. The strategy observed in these texts is a clear reversal of such dichotomies, in such a way that the previously marginalized element in each pair, that is, Indian, woman, body and savage, is now considered to be superior to the other, articulating a change in the definition process that intends to recover a position of power for Native Americans and for women. The same differential tendency can be observed in both Native American and Western literary critics, most of

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whom look for intrinsically Indian qualities in Native works such as the relation to the environment, the communal nature of identity, the importance of storytelling, and Native myths and cultural referents. Such a separatist move is a common trend in Native American narratives, as in other contemporary ethnic and women's literatures. Obviously, the need to recreate a differential voice should not be underestimated: minorities have been silenced and are still discriminated against, and it is more than just a question of literary characterization, for the fact that they have been defined, labeled, classified and controlled ultimately has a seriously negative effect on people's daily lives. Hence, the affirmation of the Native and female difference becomes an unquestionable necessity. However, this approach risks perpetuating hierarchical relations: while differences are positively stressed, dichotomies are also reinforced, and it is a fact that separation only leads to further separation, opposition to simplification and essentialization. Moreover, the corresponding characterization of Native literature can derive in a conception of the other as inaccessible and representative of the dark, which will easily lead to exoticism. The center of power is still appropriating the margin and its difference, silencing and classifying it according to its own motivations and needs, for this approach is still about the Indian and the Indian woman as seen through the

Western eye. In fact, according to the modern conception of knowing in the West, knowledge is directly related to the eye, an organ that reduces everything to a unique point of view (Adell, 1998: 25). Knowledge is therefore based on a subject of vision who does not hear the voice of the object of his sight or looks behind him to perceive anything that might fall outside his field of vision. This also corresponds to the patriarchal conventions of visual pleasure, the “pleasure in looking [that] has been split between active/male and passive/female” (Mulvey, 1975: 309), and where both women and colonized peoples are taken as objects and subjected to a controlling and curious gaze (307). It is obvious that this epistemological context has derived in the Western and patriarchal creation of ethnic and gender stereotypes, but what is not always recognized is the fact that such stereotypes are often reproduced and sustained from the point of view of the margin too.

3. Introducing Dialogic Re/vision: Erdrich’s *Tales of Burning Love*

In order for the affirmation of ethnic and gender difference not to fall in the trap of the Western eye, it is convenient to expand it with the concept of re/vision, a palimpsestic term that includes several layers of meaning around the notion of vision and its reinscription. While vision refers to a particu-

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lar worldview, re/vision underlines the process of examining all previously admitted ways of knowing. A dialogue is therefore established in such a way that all established visions and conventions, specifically, ethnicity and gender hierarchies, are criticised and reinscribed, deconstructed and simultaneously reconstructed. This view is aimed at a dismemberment of Western and patriarchal power structures that were based on a particular way of seeing, of looking at the world and interpreting it. The first step to take is the recognition of the partiality of such model, at the same time that previously silenced subjects are affirmed, presenting their own particular points of view and adding them to the others in what conforms a dialogue of different visions. A basically visual relation is therefore replaced by a speech relation where every subject leaves a space for the other to respond. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, “everything means, is understood, as part of a greater whole—there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others” (Holquist, in Bakhtin, 1981: 426). In agreement with his dialogic model, re/vision implies a dialogue of voices in a relation of evaluation and response, misunderstandings and disagreements that lead to a relative and decentralized vision of reality and to a subversion of fixed authority. It is a plurality that “denies the absolutism of a single and unitary language” (Bakhtin, 1981:

366), subverting the monologic quality of the authorized discourse, in this particular case, patriarchy and colonialism.

Together with the emphasis on dialogue is the observation of the relation between language and reality and of the relational nature of both. This corresponds both to a poststructuralist belief in the constructed quality of all identity through language and to a traditional Native perspective, according to which “[l]anguage is the context of our experience. We know who we have been, who we are, and who we can be in the dimension of words, of language” (Momaday, 1997: 87). In Paula Gunn Allen’s words:

... human psyches and human societies [are] all but undistinguishable from texts. ... The intertwined nature of literature and human beings has not escaped the notice of the old Indian peoples; it has, at last, come to the attention of their younger relatives, writers and critics of the New World (1998: 11).

This productive combination of Native and Western ways of understanding reality and texts is ultimately observed in the belief in the transformational power of language, which interprets narratives as both a way to know and to recreate reality. According to a generalization present in Native cultures, “stories make things happen” (Krupat, 1989: 63), and this provides them with a transformational power: “Implicit is the

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power of words to heal, to bring together, if the listeners can participate and respond. This, of course, can be the power of literature, of ritual” (Van Dyke, 1992: 161). Literature can effectively transform reality and help in a person’s search for health, understood as a balanced relation of one individual to the others and to the environment. It can also lead to healing in the sense that texts require a sense of responsibility on the part of the reader, and often a radical change of their expectations, and of their relation to the text and to the Native American reality. Through a dialogic approach to Native works, the reader experiences a recognition of the nature of the other as a subject in a position similar to their own, of the place that each element occupies in the world and the relation that unites people as well as the particularities that distinguish them. Stressing reciprocity in storytelling and subjectivity construction processes, relationality is vindicated as a response to patriarchal and colonial individualism in order to recover a differential identity that responds to the fragmentation brought about by colonization.

Being both Native and non-Native in nature, this approach can be applied to other literatures too. It is, however, at its most productive when the generalization is combined with features intrinsic to the tradition where the works that are being ana-

lysed are set. In the case of Native texts, the most important aspect of the original cultures that is recovered is the character of the oral tradition through the practice of storytelling, which can be seen in contemporary works of fiction by Native writers. *Tales of Burning Love*, published in 1996, has not attained as much critical attention as other works by Anishina-be/German American writer Louise Erdrich, the more *Indian* ones such as *Love Medicine* or *Tracks*. However, it recovers the traditional Native conception of storytelling as it provides a re/vision of gender and ethnicity. The stories that compose *Tales of Burning Love* are a good example of linguistic and personal integration, for, through trickster discourse—a feature of contemporary Native literatures that revises the traditional figure of the trickster and storytelling, and which is characterized by chance, humor, its metafictional component, and its mediating motivations—, a relational, communal identity is articulated. (note 1)

In her fifth novel, Erdrich recovers one of the secondary characters that appeared in her first, and she tells the story of Jack Mauser, the man who, under the false name of Andy, married June Morrisey a few hours before her death in *Love Medicine*. Now, years later, Jack has recently married for the fifth time in his life and his new bride Dot meets three of his former

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wives, Eleanor, Candy and Marlis, at Jack's funeral. The four women have a differential ethnic and social background, but they have been brought together by the shared experience of their marriage to Jack. Such a situation originates some hilarious scenes where secrets are discovered, passions are liberated and the simultaneous unity and diversity of all the participating voices is underscored:

The exchange tightened down and suddenly they were screaming. And why not? They had all at one time been married to the same man. Each woman had seen the others as usurpers and killers, as thieves, as sluts driven by the same lusts that she treasured as sublime in her own heart, but despised emanating from any other source. They had boiled their hatred to a dense jam, enriched and condensed it over years. Nothing could contain it now, even the curved metal walls and breath-sealed windows of the car. Ripe fury had escaped and it was delicious. Hot, wholesome, filling (Erdrich, 1996: 199).

Brought together by the same man, and confronted because of what they believe are opposite feelings, which in fact merely reflect one another, these women's voices constitute a good, often comical example of the diversity of points of view around the same object of knowing: "'He was at least a full seven, maybe even *eight* inches-' Eleanor stated. 'You're off by-' Candice leaned toward Dot. 'He was small, please.

Undersize. I should know,' protested Marlis" (195). Realising the total subjectivity in their judgements of Jack, they have no choice but to admit that their own personalities and positionings have influenced the way they have perceived their husband, creating a different man in each marriage: "Jack probably showed a separate facet of himself to each one of us. Or we brought it out in him. Made him as different as we are from one another. In fact, it isn't entirely far-fetched to say that we each married a different man" (200). These words are uttered by Eleanor, an academic who criticises the process of creating texts and identities, and who reaches the conclusion that it is impossible to attain one single truth, which leaves reality open to a wide range of interpretations: "*No final truth, she jotted down, all is relative, personal, all is subjective and proof is fickle. ... Where all is not know, she wrote, there is much to be discovered!*" (446). In the multiplicity of voices and narrative rewriting, silence and blank spaces play an important role too, and they act like an added voice that prevents a unitary, perfectly homogeneous vision. Eleanor reflects on their role: "*Who has investigated the spaces between words? Any link to the messenger chemicals, connections in the brain?*" (44). In general, blank spaces require a participative response on the part of the reader, who needs to anticipate and remember

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in order to best interpret the text. They do not have, by definition, a fixed content, but they can be filled in different ways:

For this reason, one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill the gaps in his [sic] own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he [sic] reads, he [sic] will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled (Iser, in Woodward, 1991: 60).

Playing with the possibilities of a dialogue made up of antagonical voices with an important element in common, Erdrich traps the four women in the same car during a tremendous blizzard when they are coming back from Jack's funeral. They face a night when they are forced to be together and, because of the risk involved in falling asleep, they devise a survival plan in the tradition of Sherezade's *One and a Thousand Nights*, the classical Arab story cycle. Taking turns, each will tell her story with Jack, making it a tale of burning love: "Let's tell all. ... Pretend this car is a confessional" (Erdrich, 1996: 205). The narratives have an integrating effect, for, while they provide a saving voice for each of the women, they also join each other in a metaphorical tissue made out of words: "Each word that Eleanor spoke added to the icy fabric. The image struck her. They were, all of them, enclosed in the spoken words, both saved and cut off by the narrative trailing into the

dark and shaping itself into the larger, flatter, patterns of crystals collecting on the glass windows of Jack's Explorer" (228). The result of such a creation of a common text by joining each woman's separate narrative is a change from the initial opposition between them to their definition in relation: "Eventually, among the women there occurred a shift from antagonism to tentative sisterhood, and in that, there was a sad wisdom" (200-1). Therefore, it is in spite of and thanks to Jack—who has not really died but has only feigned his own death—that the women create an alliance. Eleanor and Dot are together in the pain caused by Jack's lies to each of them, and they create, in tears and then in laughter, "a different shape, alien, brilliant, ultra female, something he didn't want to look at" (79). Candy and Marlis, on their part, reject any further love relationships with men and become a couple, practicing communal motherhood with Marlis and Jack's son, which implies yet another threat for Jack: "His pride hurt. These bondings between pairs of his former wives were somehow humiliating" (107).

While, indirectly and unwillingly, Jack has constructed a relation between his ex wives, their union defines and recreates his own life, becoming the pro/creative force that makes "his whole life come together" (Erdrich, 1996: 404) and providing him with the perspective that he needs in order to analyse

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the structure of his story/identity: “Jack was now beginning to see, just catching at the design of his life. Bits and pieces of understanding he had carefully collected and hidden from himself were magically assembling” (380). In a female creation through words, Jack finds the healing integration that he has always looked for in the wrong manner, as can be perceived in his thoughts about his first wife June: “Once he entered, he would be safe. He would be whole. He would be easy with who he was, and it would all turn out. His life. By climbing into her body, he would exist” (9). A few hours after this scene, Jack and June go through an episode of frustrated sex that makes June leave his car and disappear in the middle of a blizzard. After many years of searching, Jack now learns that healing is not so much in the woman’s procreating body as in the transformational power of her stories, that is, in her creative power to integrate words and people, according to which “storytelling ... becomes a spiritual act, a means of achieving transformation, transcendence, forgiveness” (Schneider, 1992: 1). Erdrich is here vindicating a radical re/vision of the Western patriarchal model, where

... [p]rocreation is the antithesis of creation; to be procreant is not to be creative; and parturition is not symbolically equivalent to cosmogony. This polarizing means that procreation is relegated to elemental or physical or biological status, while creation-viewed

as spiritual or metaphysical or symbolic-becomes the valued paradigm for important rituals, customs, narratives, and belief systems. Both androcentrism and ethnocentrism figure in this opposition (Weigle, 1987: 427).

The creation/procreation dichotomy, assigned to men and women respectively, and representative of the basic mind/body opposition is one of the most explicit manifestations of gender inequality. Erdrich exposes the inadequacy and constructed nature of such classifications, subverting its understanding in opposition and providing her female characters with the power not only to procreate but also to create, specifically through the act of storytelling, which goes back to the role of grandmothers and women in general in the Anishinabe tradition.

Besides a vindication of the creative and integrating power of the feminine, the transformation of the group of women from antagonists to allies shows a transgressive change of another conventional patriarchal vision: not only are the women reinscribed as the subjects of definition but the whole process of seeing itself is transformed by a replacement of subject/object relations with the privilege of reciprocity. In her analysis of women communities as an idea in literature, Nina Auerbach sets the Graeae of Greek mythology as an example of the way the patriarchal vision has defined and excluded groups of

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women on the grounds of their monstrosity. The Graeae are three virgin sisters born ancient, who share one only eye to watch the entrance to the place where their sisters, the Gorgons, live. The hero Perseus, the masculine individual who confronts a malevolent female community, steals the eye that the Graeae share in complementarity and uses it to defeat the Gorgons. As Auerbach states, “[s]isterhood seems powerless against the hero’s theft of the communal eye” (1978: 3). Erdrich’s narrative in *Tales of Burning Love* can be interpreted as a re/vision of the community of women motive, threatening the hero’s independence by making it impossible for him to define himself autonomously: as has been shown, Jack is only aware of the significance of his life through the stories told by his four ex wives. On the other hand, Jack is transformed from a position where he is a masculine subject of vision, to being the object of a feminine communal vision: “He’d learned how to stare down others. But what to do when the other, the looker, regarded you from within?” (Erdrich, 1996: 47). The other, the looker, is not just one but several women, who see him from within and define him, separately and as a group.

It is also worth noting that the transformation of the process of seeing observed in *Tales of Burning Love* is not a simple in-

version of the subject/object positions, but a complete change of the process of looking, which becomes a reciprocal act. Therefore, while Jack is being observed and defined, each of the women has their own share too: "I still see myself, through his eyes" (290), says Candy. According to Bakhtin's dialogism, "self/other is a relation of simultaneity" (Holquist, 1990: 19), in which "in order to see ourselves, we must appropriate the vision of others" (28), assuming the twofold role of observer and observed, subject and object of definition. In *Tales of Burning Love* we are in the presence of the construction of a space where a relational identity characterized by intersubjectivity is articulated, a space "where two subjects meet, where both woman and man can be subject" (Benjamin, 1986: 93); and where both agency and receptivity are observed, which allows us to recognize that "in being with the other, I may experience the most profound sense of self" (92). By privileging an intersubjective perspective, eye and voice are combined and Erdrich establishes a transgressive re/vision of women's blindness in patriarchal terms that is replaced by a recovery of her vision, a change from the uniqueness of the communal eye to the multiplicity of voices in relation. The communal eye/voice is not defeated by the individual hero anymore: it is now the individual who must accept his or her own complementarity with respect to the communal eye/voice.

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Such a reinterpretation of the nature of subjectivity in reciprocal terms can also be associated to a re/vision of the concept of ethnicity. In *Beyond Ethnicity*, Werner Sollors distinguishes between two interpretations of the term. On the one hand, it refers to the distinctive features that qualify a race or nation, being an inclusive category of definition similar to age, sex, religion or social class, and according to which all people with no exception belong to one ethnic group. On the other hand, ethnicity also keeps its original meaning related to paganism, it reflects power relations and it is interpreted “as other, as nonstandard, or, in America, as not fully American” (1986: 25), which makes it a feature of all groups with the significant exception of the dominant. Following both Sollors’ choice and Erdrich’s own application in her texts, I consider ethnicity in the broad sense, which includes both racial and cultural features and in whose terms all groups are ethnic. This choice implies that the articulation of ethnic terms like Western and Native-characterized by originating hierarchies, by being articulated on borders, or rhetorical markers of difference, and by their study as constructions in contemporary theory-should be studied in interdependence.

Jack, who works in the construction business, is a Native American who has lost most of the connection with his tra-

ditions, keeping just a vague memory of his Native mother. Among the women only Dot, who is depicted as fulfilling different jobs at different times, is of Native descent, “of the has been, of the never-was, of the what’s-in-front-of-me people”, as she describes ironically in *Love Medicine* (Erdrich, 1993: 194), a background that she reinforces with her first marriage to trickster Gerry Nanapush. The other women are of non-Native origin and have different jobs: Eleanor is a college teacher and researcher of literature and women studies; Candy is a successful dentist, and Marlis is currently a waitress. It is significant to note that the ethnic and social diversity of the group is unified in the common participation in the narrative, relational identity being an element that is present in all the characters. This subverts a dichotomized view of subjectivity that commonly appears in ethnic and gender studies, according to which the white man is individualistic, whereas women and Native peoples favor a communal, relational kind of identity. **(note 2)** As Erdrich shows in *Tales of Burning Love*, identity can be predominantly relational or predominantly individualistic but these terms cannot be understood in clear opposition; on the contrary, they have to be seen as a question of degree, for there is a constant change between identification and difference in human relations that invalidates any essentialization. Hertha Wong’s definition of non-oppositional relationality

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is particularly useful here: she underscores the dissociation of concepts in the equivalence white man = individualistic / Indian woman = relational, and she reinterprets such terms “as points on a spectrum or points on a circle”, suggesting that

numerous kinds of relational subjectivities are possible, that a subject is not either individual or relational, but may be more or less individual or more or less relational in diverse contexts, and that subjectivity is not determined entirely by either biological or social-cultural discourses (1998: 169).

The re/vision presented by Erdrich in her novel can therefore be expanded to a general interpretation of the relations between men and women, whites and indians. According to James Clifford, “[o]nce cultures are no longer prefigured visually-as objects, theaters, texts-it becomes possible to think of a cultural poetics that is an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances” (1986: 12). Hence, the privilege of a unique, authoritarian language in direct correspondence to a dominant ideology is replaced by the act of recognizing the true multiplicity of languages and truths, and the voices uttered from groups of people other than those in the mainstream.

At the same time, we are presented with a re/vision of the relation between different narratives and between literature and criticism. Erdrich’s reflections on the process of storytelling,

seen both in the words of Eleanor and in the structure of the text, entail an emphasis on epistemological processes which gives her works a clearly metafictional character, an aspect that she shares with her Native traditions and other contemporary literatures, both Western and non-Western. **(note 3)** On the one hand, the metafictional component of these narratives allows for a productive transgression of the theory/literature dichotomy. Theory has traditionally been controlled by Western men, a privileged elite who uses an elevated language of limited access: "Theory oppresses, when it wills or perpetuates existing power relations, when it presents itself as a means to exert authority-the Voice of Knowledge" (Trihn T. Minh-ha, in Clarke, 1992: 31). For this reason, it is essential that marginalised peoples recover a space of definition where a new relation between fiction and theory can be articulated, allowing for a subversion of the monologic narratives that have excluded them. On the other hand, this kind of narrative requires every reader to participate in the construction of meanings by questioning his or her conventional ways of knowing and the contents embedded in his or her psyche. Readers are given a responsibility in the construction of meaning, and therefore, in the articulation of reality, transforming their ways of reading, seeing and knowing. Since, from a dialogic point of view, meanings are relative and fixed contents are questionable,

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the resulting re/vision will be one that includes all participating voices and silences that compose the inter and intra ethnic and gender dialogues. Significantly, this is a polyphony that does not exclude individual differences: on the contrary, all ethnic and gender particularities count in a creative combination of relation-of the reader with the text, language with identity, and of all the voices that are present-with the affirmation of differences, which culminates in “a vision of *communitas*, union through diversity” (Hafen, 1993: 164). Such combination is intrinsic to the healing process that is incorporated in this kind of literature: language saves from silence and heals the fractures of colonization and exclusion; it is relational, for it recreates a dialogic kind of identity, and it is inclusive, for it provides the opportunity to listen to different voices.

4. Conclusions: Native American Literature within the New Literatures in English

Tales of Burning Love is a good example of the definition problems posed by those contemporary narratives that have a marked ethnic and gender component. The main issue is whether this can be comfortably defined as Native American literature or whether, on the contrary, it is simply American literature. The main features that usually help define a national literature are language, the author’s identity, or the work’s

themes and literary strategies (Pascual Soler, 2001). In spite of the occasional presence of words and expressions in a particular Native language, English is the main language used in this and most contemporary works by Native authors. The latter category is also questionable, for considering Native identity as a pure or fixed category does not reflect the essentially mixedblood character of contemporary tribal cultures. Moreover, both the themes and literary strategies found in Native literatures cannot be said to be exclusively Native: the emphasis on storytelling and the presence of devices such as metafiction can also be extensively found in other literatures around the world today. In the particular case of Erdrich's fiction, even the label "women's literature" is questionable because of the fact that, until their separation in 1995, she wrote in collaboration with her husband and writer Michael Dorris, which gives most of her fiction a dual character in terms of gender.

Therefore, *Tales of Burning Love* does not strictly fit in any fixed label of analysis: it is not merely ethnic writing, a nationalistic term that would ultimately relegate it to the margin of definitions; it is not just American literature, for it does have a differential character with respect to the canon; and it is not simply women's literature for, besides the obvious intertextu-

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ality present in any work, Dorris' mind has participated in its creation directly. The only feasible alternative is to redefine this kind of narratives as the result of a dialogue between the three impulses and between all dichotomized terms present in their articulation: it is ethnic literature in direct relation to the center; it is Native American literature in dialogue with other new literatures in English; and it is women's literature that is closely related to men's texts.

Such a dialogue is included in the term "New Literatures in English", which can be applied to Native texts in a way that other parallel terms cannot. Categories such as "Commonwealth Literature", or "Postcolonial Literature", for example, do not adequately include either US fiction, which has clearly become a center of power itself and therefore shows features different to those of marginalised groups, or all the ethnic literatures within the United States. Moreover, due to the specific nature of American colonialism, neocolonialism, and migration, Native Americans, like African Americans, Asian Americans, or Latin Americans experience a relation to the canon which cannot be defined as strictly postcolonial. Hence, Native American literature seen as part of the New Literatures in English is, ultimately, a kind of literature with a potential for the re/vision of old and new views of gender and ethnicity in terms

other than those used in canonical texts and interpretations, and which provides the possibility of healing dialogues as an alternative to separation in human and cultural relations.

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1. For a detailed account of trickster discourse, see Vizenor 1993, Gates 1988, and Martínez Falquina 2003.
2. See, for example, Bevis 1993 and Allen 1992.
3. According to Dennis Tedlock, in traditional Native American storytelling, “We are in the presence of a *performing art*, all right, but we are getting the *criticism* at the same time and from the same person. The interpreter does not merely play the parts, but is the narrator and commentator as well” (in Vizenor, 1993: 199-200). This is obviously related to Patricia Waugh’s definition of metafiction in postmodern narratives, whose purpose “is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction” (1984: 6), and it plays a significant role in other new literatures in English too: see for example Gates 1988 for an account in African American literatures, and Fresno Calleja 2000 for an application to Maori fiction.