The Ethical Pact: Storytelling in Contemporary Autobiography

by

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To my mother whose tutoring sessions on the kitchen table, drummed by a wooden spoon, have lead me here.

And to Flavio Rizzo, my Guida, my river.

Abstract

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In the last thirty years a body of work has developed about autobiography as a literary genre and its ontological value. Philippe Lejeune's essay "The Autobiographical Pact" is now a classic in autobiographical studies. The essay was published in 1975 and translated into English in 1989 when it was anthologiesed by Paul John Eakin with its revision "The Autobiographical Pact (bis)" in which Lejeune revisits his original formalist definition of autobiography. James Olney's edited volume *Autobiography, Essays Theoretical and Critical* published in 1980 is generally recognized as the beginning of autobiography studies in the United States. The book, which does not include Lejeune's essay, represents an important ground for the study of autobiography and for its place as a genre distinct from the novel, a genre that, as Olney states, "like the life it mirrors refuses to stay still long enough for the genre critic to fit it out with the necessary rules, laws, contracts, and *pacts* [my emphasis]; it refuses, simply, to be a literary genre like any other." (*Autobiography, Essays Theoretical and Critical*, 25)

In his introduction to the collected essays, Olney relates his experience in reading, and later translating, the 1956 important essay "Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie" by French critic Georges Gusdorf, "In translating 'Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie' into English for the present volume, I have been repeatedly astonished at the overwhelming similarities between that essay and my book." (*Autobiography, Essays Theoretical and Critical*, 10). With this statement Olney endorses Gusdorf's problematic views on autobiography as an act of "conscious awareness", not possible "in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not, properly speaking, exist. But this unconsciousness of personality, characteristic of primitive societies such as ethnologists describes to us, lasts also in more advanced civilizations that subscribe to mythic structures, they too being governed by the principle of repetition." ("Conditions and Limits of Autobiography", 31)

Gusdorf's view leaves out the rest of the nonwestern world and creates an image of the autobiographical self as male, isolated, individualistic.

In my dissertation I seek to further discuss Eakin's work on the relationality of the self. I will show how in a small group of 20th century autobiographies such as *Dust Tracks on a Road*, *Family Sayings*, *Borderlands/LaFrontera*, *Storyteller* and *Keeping House* stories come to express or represent the relation between the identity of the self and the community. I will examine the ways in which these relations are manifested in the body of the text. Stories of mythological figures as Yellow Woman in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* and stories of family members as in Natalia Ginzburg's *Family Sayings* passed down from one generation to the next, provide the foundation of the history of a community and/or a family. As Mary Mason observed, female authors use stories to affirm their identity, but the stories used by the authors aforementioned, come straight from the traditions, myths and rituals shared with the community to which they

belong and form an essential point of junction with its members. These autobiographies besides representing the story of the life of the author, delineate and affirm the history of a family and a community; they take on the characteristics and functions of storytelling, those of counseling, teaching, comforting and critiquing.

Contents

Introduction

In story sixty-two of Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron,* a royal lady wants to be entertained and asks the people in her court to tell amusing stories. A young woman, who goes first, begins a story about a woman falling into the hands of a brutal man who sneaks into her bedroom in the middle of the night, gets undressed, and slips into the poor woman's bed. His desire is so strong that he forgets to take off his boots. Terrified, the woman tries to escape from the grip of the intruder, but nothing stops the man from getting what he wants. When a maid walks into the bedroom, he leaps out of bed as fast as he can in order not to be noticed, but one of his boots gets caught on the top sheet and with one pull the young victim remains completely naked and uncovered. Up to this point the royal lady seemed bored but a sudden change in the "subject" spins the story around and arouses the interest of the listeners. Just as the man in the story accidentally uncovers his victim, the young woman's subject pronoun of the story slips from a "she " to an "I": "No woman has ever been as embarrassed as I was, when I found myself completely naked"[1]. This is enough to make the royal lady break into a laugh. Bored before, she now finds the story very amusing. The young woman thought that the story of herself as another would have pleased the royal lady, but in fact what becomes true is exactly the opposite: as soon as the young woman accidentally (or voluntarily?) reveals herself to be the protagonist of the unhappy story she is telling, the royal lady is captivated by the embarrassment of the woman caught in her confession and finds the outcome highly entertaining.

The young storyteller finds herself the object of pleasure both within the story and in the moment she is telling it. The simple switch of subject pronouns from "she" to "I" has unleashed

[1] Matguerite De Navarre, *The Heptameron.* Tran. P.A. Chilton (New York: Penguin Classic: 19944) 85

amusement and judgment from her society: she is at once the story and the story is herself. What moved the storyteller to change "she" to "I"? And why does the story told by the young woman to the royal lady become entertaining only after the change of pronoun? How does the inappropriately personal revelation destabilize the position of the audience? What is the relation of storytelling to telling/writing of the self?

In *How our Lives Become Stories*, theorist Paul John Eakin argues that all selfhood is relational[2] and it is in these terms that autobiography as a genre, he affirms, must be reconsidered: "'You' and 'I' and 'she' and 'he' and 'we'-the dialogic play of pronouns in these texts tracks the unfolding of relational identity in many registers, in discourse with others and within ourselves. The lesson these identity narratives are teaching, again and again, is that the self is dynamic, changing, and plural."[3] Storytelling in these terms becomes the way the self is written, represented, created. The shift from "she" to "I" in the story of the *Heptameron*, is a clear allusion to the border between fiction and non fiction, between story and autobiogragraphy, a line which has been defined by critics and crossed by writers. The nature of storytelling provides a perfect location between these two over determined creative dimensions. In fact, while storytelling is in fact a practice of telling stories of others, or personal, or mythical ones, it is also a way of building an identity formed around the episodic or fantastic elements of the stories told. To remain faithful to the metaphoric image of the border, storytelling comes to represent a threshold between the self and the community, providing a way to conceive autobiography other than an individualistic narration of the self. The autobiographies I have chosen to discuss are centered around the theoretical assumptions that the self is not isolated and

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[2] Paul John Eakin "Relational Selves, Relational Lives: Autobiography and the Myth of Autonomy" in *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1999) 50

[3] "Relational Selves" 98

asbsolute, but it is a creation constantly negotiated with the other and storytelling, as a process of imaginative and historical reproduction of reality is one way in which negotiation can take place.

In my dissertation I seek to further discuss Eakin's work on the relationality of the self. I will show how in a small group of 20th century autobiographies such as, *Family Sayings* by Natalia Ginzburg, *Borderlands/LaFrontera* by Gloria Anzaldùa, *Storyteller* by Leslie Marmon Silko and *Keeping House* by Clara Sereni, stories come to express or represent the relation between the identity of the self and that of the community. I will examine the ways in which these relations are manifested in the body of the text. Stories of mythological figures as Yellow Woman in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* and stories of family members as in Natalia Ginzburg's *Family Sayings* passed down from one generation to the next, provide the foundation of the history of a community and/or a family. As Mary Mason observed, female authors use stories to affirm their identity, but the stories used by the authors aforementioned, come straight from the traditions, myths and rituals shared with the community to which they belong and form an essential point of junction with its members. These autobiographies besides representing the story of the life of the author, delineate and affirm the history of a family and a community; they take on the characteristics and functions of storytelling, those of counseling, teaching, comforting and critiquing.

My first chapter will be a brief review of contemporary autobiographical theory and criticism, with an emphasis on the "autobiographical pact" and the "relational self." I will also provide a cultural, historical, literary and social overview on the tradition of storytelling and the storyteller. In this same chapter, through the works of Foucault and Adriana Cavarero I will illustrate the ethical relation between storytelling and autobiography. My analysis of the autobiographies mentioned previously will be an in-depth look at the particular ways in which

the ethical is played out within the autobiographical. Foucault's work on the care of the self will become an element of the paradigm for the "ethical pact" between the writer and her community. What I seek to show is that the consciousness of the self appears simultaneously with that of others and it is presented as moments of communion. These moments are represented by the stories the authors share in the pages of their autobiography. I view these works of literature as examples that propose a model of collectivity and relationality rather than one of individualism and isolation.

Since the publication of her first novel *Ceremony* in 1977 Leslie Marmon Silko has become one the most prominent Native American novelists and poets. Her entire work is greatly influenced by her experience as a member of the Laguna Pueblo community and its oral tradition. *Storyteller* is a collection of stories heard and rewritten that have defined Silko's identity as Laguna Pueblo, as a woman and as a writer. This chapter will be a study of *Storyteller*, a text in which Silko presents stories first as they were heard from her aunt, then as they evolve in the imagination of the author who takes the place of the storyteller, but it also presents stories describing a land and a context in mutation. Stories are adapted to the new necessities, ancient myths are characters voicing the struggles of Laguna Pueblo against the exploitation of their land by the white people. What becomes evident Through Silko's work is that stories and life are interconnected. Silko states that storytelling is a ritualistic summoning of events and people, it is remembering and reliving. Is she telling us that in fact storytelling is an autobiographical act? Are we as readers supposed to be looking for the self within the adapted stories?

As its Italian title *Lessico Familiare* (*Family Sayings*) suggests, it is through a body of sayings, stories, poems and songs recalled by the mother during the Italian writer Natalia

Ginzburg's childhood and throughout her life as an adult and a mother herself, that the author tells the story of her family before, during and after World War Two and which is the subject of my third chapter. The antifascist activities of her brothers and her husband, Italian intellectual Leone Ginzburg and the Jewish descent of her father, put the family in constant danger; however, within the turmoil and chaos of the fascist regime and the war, there is a language, a lexicon, capable of establishing a comforting and familiar zone for the members of the family. This language recreated and reported by Ginzburg in the pages of her book is a reiteration of a collective sense of belonging, a call to her family members, an account against forgetfulness, a sign of her commitment to remember.

While Leslie Marmon Silko's alteration of myths and mythological figures is the proof of the organic evolution of stories, Gloria Anzaldùa's archeological and ethnographic study of the Mexican pre-Columbian era represents the rediscovery of those ancient sacred symbols which were transformed by the catholic missionaries during the Spanish Colonization and later by the U.S. Anzaldùa's work is presented as a way for the author to "carve her own space," to stamp her own uniqueness within the Chicano-Mexican tradition exfoliated of its cultural prejudice. It also a program for "her people," the Chicano-Mexican, living on the border between Texas and Mexico, in order for them to find their voice within the Anglo-Saxon American dominant culture. As such it is a declaration of legitimacy and a demand for recognition. Anzaldua's personal trajectory is one that does not renounce her origin, but rather looks for a greater bonding through its ancient myths and stories and presents herself as a shaman, a poet, a healer.

In her introduction to *Keeping House*, in Italian *La Casalinghitudine*, Giovanna Miceli Jeffries says that after its publication in 1987 the book "quickly became a cult favorite for a

generation of Italian women in the late 1980s and 1990s."[4] Two aspects of this autobiography, organized as a book of recipes inherited, invented or modified, are relevant to my research on this last chapter: one is the assemblage of house chores and recipes to the life stories of the author that create the space of individuality through a form of care (cooking, preparing, cleaning, gardening, etc.), and the other is the reiterated claim for recognition that leads to a compromise, a middle ground between the self and the various groups of belonging.

My analysis of these autobiographies does not seek to redefine the genre, nor to establish a conclusive form, but rather to present a non-individualistic perspective from which to view a desire to write life, so compellingly present in all of us.

[4] *Keeping House* 1

CHAPTER 1

Storytelling as Autobiography, Autobiography as Storytelling

"And this, Lily thought, taking the green point on the brush, this making up scenes about them is what we call "knowing" people "thinking" of them "being fond" of them! Not a word of it was true; she had made it up; but it was what she knew them by all the same. She went on tunneling her way into her picture into the past. Another time, Paul said he "played chess in coffee houses." She had built up a whole structure of imagination on that saying too"

from Virginia Woolf *To The Light House*

Theory of Autobiography

"If the autobiographical discourse encourages us to place self before language, cart before horse, the fact of our readiness to do so suggests that the power of language to fashion selfhood is not only successful but life-sustaining, necessary for the conduct of human life as we know it."

From James Olney's *Metaphors of Self*

In the last thirty years a body of work has developed about autobiography as a literary genre and its ontological value. Philippe Lejeune's essay "The Autobiographical Pact" is now a classic in autobiographical studies. The essay was published in 1975 and translated into English in 1989 when it was anthologiesed by Paul John Eakin with its revision "The Autobiographical Pact (bis)" in which Lejeune revisits his original formalist definition of autobiography. James Olney's edited volume *Autobiography, Essays Theoretical and Critical* published in 1980 is generally recognized as the beginning of autobiography studies in the United States. The book, which does not include Lejeune's essay, represents an important ground for the study of autobiography and for its place as a genre distinct from the novel, a genre that, as Olney states, "like the life it mirrors refuses to stay still long enough for the genre critic to fit it out with the necessary rules, laws, contracts, and *pacts* [my emphasis]; it refuses, simply, to be a literary genre like any other."[5]

In his introduction to the collected essays, Olney relates his experience in reading, and later translating, the 1956 important essay "Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie" by French critic Georges Gusdorf, "In translating 'Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie' into English for the present volume, I have been repeatedly astonished at the overwhelming similarities

[5] James Olney, *Autobiography, Essays Theoretical and Critical*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press,1980) 25

between that essay and my book."[6] With this statement Olney endorses Gusdorf's problematic views on autobiography as an act of "conscious awareness", not possible "in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not, properly speaking, exist. But this unconsciousness of personality, characteristic of primitive societies such as ethnologists describes to us, lasts also in more advanced civilizations that subscribe to mythic structures, they too being governed by the principle of repetition."[7]

Gusdorf's view leaves out the rest of the nonwestern world and creates an image of the autobiographical self as male, isolated, individualistic.

In her crucial essay "the Other Voice: the Autobiography of Women Writers" Mary Mason proves, through an analysis of the early period writings by English women, that in women's autobiographies the subject reveals itself through the story of others. This new position will open up a space for a vision of autobiography not only as the "story" of the life of an individual and his self consciousness, as theorized by Gusdorf, but one of an individual linked to the life and experiences of others, who needs the other in order to tell her own story. Although Olney was the first to anthologize Mason's essay in his volume, Georges Gusdorf's configuration of autobiography as white, male and western in his essay "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" remained a solid ground until deconstructed by Susan Stanford Friedman in her landmark essay "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice", published in 1988 in the anthology *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* and edited by Shari Benstock, in which Friedman states that "The very sense of identification, interdependence, and community that Gusdorf dismisses from autobiographical

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[6] *Autobiography, Essays Theoretical and Critical* 10

[7] George Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" in Trans. James Olney. Olney, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980. 31

selves are key elements in the development of a woman's identity." Basing her critical analysis on theorists like Rowbotham and Chodorow she ends her essay by reversing one of Gusdorf's assertions and stating that in women's autobiography the "autobiographical self often does not oppose herself to all others, does not feel herself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythm everywhere in the community."[8]

What Mason's and Friedman's work show is that in autobiography where the "I" as the subject and the author's name coincide – as Lejeune pointed out as part of the "pact" – the relation of the self to the other is exhibited in the writing of the self through writing about others, where the others represent the possibility to find one's own identity through what Mary Mason calls a pattern of "alterity and equality." This means that in stories whether true or invented the other is presented as "an overwhelming model or ideal that has to be confronted in order that the author's identity be realized."[9]

I have developed the term "the ethical pact" from Lejeune's landmark essays, "The Autobiographical Pact" and "the Autobiographical Pact (bis)." In his second essay Lejeune tries to come to terms with poststructural critics like Roland Barthes who quarreled with his earlier definition of autobiography as "the retrospective prose narrative that someone writes concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality." Lejeune's autobiographical pact is a "contract" between the author and the reader based on the presentation of the text, its cover and the name of the author. According to the pact,

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[8] Susan Stanford Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice" in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* and edited by Shari Benstock. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 79

[9] Mary Mason, "The Other Voice", *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, Ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998) 127

once the reader has established that the name of the author, the protagonist and the subject of the autobiography are the same, he/she will not ask (even if tempted) whether what is written is true or not, but will be inclined to look at the process of writing which will reveal that "desire", the impulse to write the truth about the self. Thus the reader will immediately enter into a mode of reading that will solve the problematic question of factuality and fiction. "Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as a complete subject – it is a fantasy. In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing. Perhaps, in describing it, I in turn took my desire for reality; but what I had wanted to do was describe this desire in its reality, a reality shared by a great number of authors and readers."[10]

In his foreword to Lejeune's *On Autobiography* (1989) foremost theorist of autobiography Paul John Eakin says that "Putting the slippery ethic of sincerity safely behind him…as he shifted the fulcrum of the genre from the extratextual state of authorial intention to *the sign of that intention* present in the text, Lejeune was well on his way to establishing a reader-based poetics of autobiography"[11]

In his 1999 book *How Our Lives Become Stories*, Eakin outlines the critical points about Lejeune's first definition of autobiography. After an analysis of various works by both female authors and male authors and reviewing the theories about the relational self as postulated and explained by psychologists John Shotter, Daniel N. Stern and Jessica Benjamin among others who, in Eakin's words argue against the view of "individuation as a progressive movement away from a state of undifferentiated union with the mother"[12], Eakin comes to the conclusion that "all

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[10] Philippe Lejuene, "The Autobiographical Pact (bis)," in *On Autobiography*. Ed. Paul John Eakin. Trans. Katherine Leary. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989)131-132

[11] "The Autobiographical Pact (bis)," ix

[12] Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories.* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1999) 68

identity is relational, and [that] the definition of autobiography, and its history as well, must be stretched to reflect the kinds of self-writing in which relational identity is characteristically displayed."[13]

After presenting examples of autobiographies as "relational paradigms", Eakin continues to explain the ways in which according to Shotter "identity is socially and discursively transacted." Shotter's theory of social accountability explains that the "I" is formed through the process of making an account of oneself. In his words "the capacity to be addressed as a 'you' by others is a preliminary to the ultimate capacity of being able to say 'I' of oneself."[14] This process of accountability in our society has always been viewed as one that does not recognize the importance of the other in shaping one's identity but rather as the individualistic capacity of making the self accountable. Shotter, as Eakin himself affirms, "is only one of the most recent in a long line of commentators seeking to undo the conceptual legacy of a culture of individualism that has blinded us to the relational dimension of identity formation."[15] What Eakin proposes in this chapter of his book is to look for examples of those autobiographies where the formation of the "I" occurs as an extension of the "we."

Stories of mythological figures as Yellow Woman in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* and stories of family members as in Natalia Ginzburg's *Family Sayings* passed down from one generation to the next, provide the foundation of the history of a community and/or a family. As Mary Mason observed, female authors use stories to affirm their identity, but the stories used by the authors aforementioned, come straight from the traditions, myths and rituals shared with the community to which they belong and form an essential point of junction with its members. These

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[13] *How Our Lives Become Stories* 44
[14] *How Our Lives Become Stories* 143
[15] *How Our Lives Become Stories* 64

autobiographies besides representing the story of the life of the author, delineate and affirm the history of a family and a community; they take on the characteristics and functions of storytelling, those of counseling, teaching, comforting and critiquing.

Let's return for a moment to this statement "Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as a complete subject – it is a fantasy. In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing. Perhaps in describing it, I in turn took my desire for reality; but what I had wanted to do was describe this desire in its reality, a reality shared by a great number of authors and readers." What Lejeune theorizes in this later essay is a pact between the reader and the author based on the mutual desire to communicate the truth about the self. For Lejeune the audience of an autobiography reads the text with the desire to see and to understand the self, the author's and his own, believing in the possibility of telling the truth. In this sense the reader of an autobiography partakes in the making of the author's self through the process of reading.

Included in the audience of the autobiographies I have chosen are the people who belong and share the culture and identity of the author herself. My dissertation will show how in this context a different type of pact is in place one that binds the author to his responsibility as a representative who, in proclaiming her own uniqueness, is also bound to her role as a member of the community. By responsibility I mean the role the author as the representative of a family and a community has in describing its members and their history. Responsibility refers to the function of the author in voicing the life and history of a minority oppressed by western cultural dominion as well as to his function in proposing and making change. "On December 2nd when my sun goes into my first house, I celebrate *el dìa de la Chicana y el Chicano* […] On that day I bare my soul, make myself vulnerable to friends and family by expressing my feelings. On that

day I affirm who we are. On that day I look inside our conflicts and our basic introverted racial temperament. I identify our needs, voice them. I acknowledge that the self and the race have been wounded. I recognize the need to take care of our personhood, of our racial self."[16] Responsibility refers also to the change the author is compelled to make within herself in order for a change in the community to take place. The Ethical Pact is established through the shared stories representing both the author's identity and that of his community and family. The signs of this desire to describe oneself and the other are determined by the moments in which the author directly addresses his people, recalls their stories, asserts their identity.

[16] Gloria Anzaldùa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987)110

Storytelling and the Storyteller

*"*This is all hear-say. Maybe, some of the details of my birth as told me might be a little inaccurate, but it is pretty well established that I really did get born. The saying goes like this"
From Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*

In *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, Silko underlines the following important and essential belief in the Pueblo consciousness: that viewers are part of the landscape and not separate from it. This very concept reiterates the non-hierarchical position the Pueblo carry in the world and in their practices which includes storytelling. The communal practice of storytelling is based on the listeners'contribution, who have a responsibility to speak up when noting the omission or inaccuracy of important details or facts in a story. This very aspect, throughout time, has assured the equal participation of the teller and the listener in the communal effort to achieve truth, not absolute truth, but communal truth. Stories, Silko, specifies, served various purposes in the Pueblo community: as geographical maps, for instance, by describing a territory and its changes over time, as comforting agents during times of loss, for teaching various skills, for locating water, for hunting by describing deer migrations, for geographical orientation, and for providing a sense of identity. The stories of migration, creation and emergence are particularly important in reaffirming the link between landscape and cultural identity, "the eight miles, marked with boulders, mesas, springs and river crossings, are actually a ritual circuit, or a path, that mark the interior journey the Laguna people made: a journey of awareness and imagination in which they emerged from being within the earth and in all-included in the earth to culture and people they became, differentiating themselves for the first time from all that had surrounded them, always aware that interior distances cannot be reckoned in physical miles or in calendar

years."[17] The stories connected with differentiation, delineates the complexity of the relationship between human beings and the natural world, and it is through the found principle of harmony that the Pueblo have emerged as a distinct group. "Only at the moment the requisite balance between human and *other* was realized could Pueblo people become a culture, a distinct group whose population and survival remained stable despite the vicissitudes of the climate and terrain."[18] This very relationship is manifested in the way stories are formed and told, geographical spaces recall stories just as stories describe and identify geographical spaces. Storytelling therefore becomes an interpretation of the world and of experience, thus bringing people into an interdependent existence: "It was always as an individual simultaneously bonded to family and clan by a complex bundle of custom and ritual. You are never the first to suffer a grave loss or profound humiliation."[19]

Stories create a sense of familiarity with space, a certain imaginative knowledge of a location or a person. Silko describes this particular feeling while walking in the hills and mesas present in her Aunt Susie's stories: "I felt as if I had actually been to those places, although I had only heard stories about them. Somehow the stories had given a kind of being to the mesas and hills, just as the stories had left me with the sense of having spent time with the people in the stories, though they had long since passed on."[20] It is in the stories that both the group and the individual, Silko affirms, understands his/their existence. Through myths and memory an identity linked to the surrounding landscape is created.

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[17] Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) 37
[18] *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* 38
[19] *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* 39
[20] *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* 42

In the section "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Perspective", Silko notes some important characteristics of oral tradition. At Laguna Pueblo, she explains, many words used in storytelling have their own original story, this is why a storytelling session ends up being, at times, structured in the circularity of a story within a story. This very characteristic is maintained also in the writing tradition and it verifies one simple aspect of storytelling itself, the idea that a story never really ends, but evolves and continues in its unfolding as life itself. Storytelling is an important part of a child's experience as through stories, a child will build a sense of belonging and identity as a member of a clan. "In pueblo culture these family stories are given equal recognition. There is no definite, preset for the way one will hear the stories of one's own family, but it is a very critical part of one' s childhood, and the storytelling continues throughout one's life."[21] The memory and collection of old and new stories allow a family to create a bonding, but also to generate a web of support for the community: "Keeping track of all the stories within the community gives us all a certain distance, a useful perspective, that brings incidents down to a level we can deal with."[22] Isolation can be prevented by making an individual as part of a communal and shared existence where the experience of one is related to that of others, where one does not feel alone in his feelings. Therefore self-formation and individuation is a process that simultaneously will take place through this ancient practice.

Storytelling as a form of struggle against colonization, has been also the ungraspable, uncontainable resistance born and living within the memory and the voice of the singular individuals, and it has been an essential and vital practice in trying to preserve the Native American identity. "The story depends upon every one of us to come into being. It needs us all, needs our remembering, understanding, and creating what we have heard together to keep on

[21] *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* 51
[22] *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* 52

coming into being. The story of a people. Of us, peoples. Story, history, literature (or religion, philosophy, natural science, ethics)—all in one."[23] The storyteller is the historian and prophet to whom his listener will not ask if the story is true or false. He/she will spin the magical, the imaginative, the real and the remembered creating a story "which may be said to stand outside the hierarchical realm of facts."[24] Trinh T. Minh-ha's brilliant writing on storytelling illuminates an essential distinction between storytelling in the West (and the West's insistence on factuality and truth), and in non-western parts of the world. She underlines the fact that in the West storytelling is maintained as a teaching method relying on the fantastical of tales to "mold ideals" and "illuminate facts" in children, it is a demonstration that "in the "civilized" context, only children are allowed to indulge in the so-called fantastic or the fantastic-true. Children are perceived as belonging to a world apart, one which adults (compassionately) control and populate with toys […] the forms of constraint that rule these bigger people's world and allow them to distinguish with certainty the false from the true must, unquestionably, be exactly the same as the ones that regulate the smaller people's world."[25] And if the stories are controlled by the mind—"Woman and magic. Her power resides in her belly. He who understands the full power of woman and/in storytelling also understands that life is not to be found in the mind nor in the heart, but there where she carries it"[26]—the story will not allow unconformity, it will shape into the hearts and minds of children as a predetermined program. Fact, truth. Trinh T. Minh-ha points out to the ethical and poetical life of stories which come from everyday life "not to instruct nor to discipline. But to kindle the zeal which hibernates within each one of us."[27]

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[23] Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 119
[24] *Woman, Native, Other* 121
[25] *Woman, Native, Other* 123
[26] *Woman, Native, Other* 136
[27] *Woman, Native, Other* 132

Minh-ha's storytellers are the Great Mothers healers and protectresses of women and children who will continue the chain of preservation not as the continuation of a fixed predetermined, absolute truth or knowledge, but as a process that involves the imagination, "for understanding means creating."[28] According to African traditions, words generate from a woman's sexual part, move to the ear, and continue their cycle to the sexual part encircling the womb, making speech as a force of creation. "Life is a perpetual to and fro, a dis/continuous releasing and absorbing of the self. Let her weave her story with their stories, her life amidst their lives. And while she weaves, let her whip, spur, and set them on fire. Thus making the sing again. Very softly a-new a-gain."[29] The storyteller weaves life into story creation, bonding, preserving, destroying and regenerating.

Benjamin's description of the storyteller is of a man who "has counsel for his readers," someone whose wisdom is determined by the act of weaving counsel into the fabric of real life through the sharing of experience, his own or that of others. His practice, differently from that of the isolated novelist, links him to others who participate in the telling by listening. But according to Benjamin storytelling dies in an environment in which the listener is not able to practice self-forgetfulness, the key to the gift of listening. A story enters the psychological depth of his listener, whose self is momentarily forgotten, abandoned in order for the narration to be absorbed and integrated into the web of his own life. This self-forgetfulness Benjamin says, is found in relaxation, which he calls boredom and that I interpret as stillness, the space where creation can occur. In his almost nostalgic description of a disappearing storyteller, Benjamin delineates the ancient figure of the sage, the teacher, who carries within himself "a whole lifetime [that]

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[28] *Woman, Native, Other* 121
[29] *Woman, Native, Other* 128

comprises not only his own experience but no little of the experience of others; what the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to his own. His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life. The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story."[30] Stories therefore become carriers of multiple lives of a "singular plural," borrowing from Jean-Luc Nancy's work *Being Singular Plural*.

An interesting interchangeable relationship could be defined here, one that sees storytelling as autobiography and autobiography as storytelling. The works I have decided to study provide a counter discourse to the individualistic and capitalistic model, they form a bridge to the "other" and not a mythical vision/ preoccupation of the self.

Gloria Anzaldùa says that her stories "are acts encapsulated in time, "enacted" every time they are spoken aloud or read silently" and that they contain the presences of others.[31] A very similar description is the one that Ginzburg gives of the family sayings when she refers to them as her hieroglyphs, as an ancient language that when spoken will forever evoke an entire history, and identity. "There are five of us children. We live in different cities now, some of us abroad, and we do not write to one another much. When we meet we can be indifferent and aloof. But one word, one phrase is enough, one of those ancient phrases, heard and repeated an infinite number of times in our childhood. […] for us to pick up in a moment our old intimacy and our childhood and youth, linked indissolubly with these words and phrases. These phrases are our Latin, the vocabulary of our days gone by, our Egyptian hieroglyphics or Babylonian symbols.

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[30] Walter Benjamin "The Storyteller" in *Illuminations Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Tran. Harry Zhon (New York: Schocken, 1969) 17

[31] *Borderland/La Frontera* 89.

They are the evidence of a vital nucleus which has ceased to exist, but which survives in its texts salvaged from the fury of the waters and the corrosion of time." [32]

Storytelling is the liaison, the unity, the historical and collective, the threshold where the consciousness of the self is simultaneously realized with the consciousness of the other. Within this dynamic lies the possibility to instruct, change, heal and exhort. Each of the authors in this book present the subtle complex dynamics embedded in the union between the individual and the collective.

Telling for Silko is a responsibility linked irrevocably to the memory of a story and of her people. "As with any generation/ the oral tradition depends upon each person/ listening and remembering a portion/ and it is together-/ all of us remembering what we have heard together-/ that creates the whole story/ the long story of the people."[33]

[32] Natalia Ginzburg, *Family Sayings*. (New York: Little Brown, 1963) 23-24
[33] *Storyteller* 7

The Care of the Self and the Practice of Ethos

> "Perhaps most importantly, we must recognize that ethics require us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human. To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance – to be addressed, claimed bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient "I" as a kind of possession. If we speak and try to give an account from this place, we will not be irresponsible, or, if we are, we will surely be forgiven."
>
> from Judith Butler *Giving an Account of Oneself*

Foucault sees the care of the self as a 'practice of ethos' defined as well as the practice of freedom. However, freedom exists because power games and structures exist, therefore, one cannot know his/her own freedom until that freedom is practiced in life; freedom in this sense is the unending trajectory of tension or extension of the self with the other (individuals, family, institutions). I recognize in the act of telling the following exchanges: through telling I give and in giving I receive pleasure or relief. I expose myself, I form myself, I celebrate my uniqueness or I conceal it (in repetition, in the exaltation of the ceremonial and the communal), I maintain authority or I deface it. The impulse of telling resides in the space between self and other, as an ethical pact the self makes with society. It is a threshold of transformation or maintenance of societal norms and a process of reinvention of one's own identity. The woman in the story of the *Heptameron*, in the story that Marguerite de Navarre reported in the introduction, is faced with the impulsive desire to tell, and as many other stories of rape in the *Heptameron*, this one is told, against the silence imposed by society, through this formula: "If I cannot tell my story I will tell a story". But why is it that the story told by the woman to the royal lady becomes embarrassing and therefore highly entertaining only after the change of subject? Is it because it becomes personal and real? Has the inappropriately personal destabilized the position of the audience?

The autobiographies I have chosen to study occupy exactly this space of ambiguity between the personal and the collective, the fictional and the non-fictional. They escape any form of categorization, or definition, choosing to reside in a position that will maintain the self as an interdependent being whose life and experience is formed within those of others, as interpretations and reenactments of personal ones and viceversa. The audience's reaction to the slipped "I" in the story of the *Heptameron*, unleashes amusement and embarrassment by bringing the personal voice against a social background that condemns rape as a woman's weakness, but what remains fundamental is the process that transformed the personal event into a story which reenacts and reinterpret the space of the personal.

In telling, defined earlier as a Foucaultian 'practice of ethos', the implication is that the personal lands in the space that interests and regards also the other and in doing so the self is involved in a relationship of responsibility with herself and the other. As Judith Butler points out in *Giving an Account of Oneself,* "This account does not have as its goal the establishment of a definitive narrative but constitutes a linguistic and social occasion for self transformation"[34] and I would add an appeal that solicits the other to the practice ethos. "When I tell the truth about myself, I consult not only my 'self' but the way in which that self is produced and producible, the position from which the demand to tell the truth proceeds, the effects that telling the truth will have in consequence, as well as the price that must be paid"[35]—embarrassment and judgment being examples of that price, but also the unpredicted and unforeseen change that can occur, "[…] And when we do act and speak, we not only disclose ourselves but act on the

[34] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself.* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) 130
[35] *Giving an Account of Oneself* 132

schemes of intelligibility that govern who will be a speaking being, subjecting them to rupture or revision, consolidating their norms, or contesting their hegemony."[36]

In *Relating Narratives*, Adriana Cavarero affirms that each individual can be understood as a *what* and as a *who*. The *what* is the set of characteristics and attributes of an individual, those that can be shared by others, the universal. The *who* is the 'undisclosed uniqueness', it is what assures the unsubstitutability of each individual, not as exceptionality, but precisely as what ontologically makes the self one and not another. Cavarero affirms that this uniqueness is unknown to the self and revealed to the other. It is through exhibiting and appearance to the other that the *who* (uniqueness) is revealed. This means that, given the existence of the other, the existence of the self is fundamentally based on the other and that appearing/exhibiting means existing. The relation with the other thus becomes the essence of existence and the affirmation of one's own identity. According to Cavarero's theory our existence is dependent, because it desires recognition, on the presence of the other and on the possibility to exhibit, to act. It is in fact the other who, recognizing our uniqueness, will embark into the biographical narration. It follows for instance that the hero "simply has the privilege of a spectacular scene of exhibition, which assures him, at the same time, a high probability of narration"[37] the hero "is excessive in all of his actions. He places emphasis on both action and autobiographical narration."[38]

Cavarero affirms that every human being is aware of a 'narratable self' because he/she perceives it in the other even without knowing the other's story; thus the other is the mirror of self's narratability. "The narratable self –as the 'house of uniqueness' –[…]is rather the familiar sense [sapore familiare] of every self, in the temporal extension of a life-story that is this and not

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[36] *Giving an Account of Oneself* 133
[37] Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives.* Tran. Paul A. Kottman. (New York: Routledge, 2000) 33
[38] *Relating Narratives* 29

another. […] the narratable self is not however the product of the life-story which the memory recounts. […] She coincides rather with the uncottrollable narrative impulse of memory that produces the text, and is captured in the very text. […] But the familiar sense of the narratable self is not a result of the text itself, neither does it lie in the construction of the story. It lies rather in a narrative impulse that is never in 'potentiality' but rather in 'actuality', even when it refrains from 'producing' memories or 'reproducing' past."[39] Following Cavarero's discourse, in autobiography the narratable self is not constructed in the text but rather precedes the text as an impulse to make the narratable self into a story. Text and narratable self are not bound to a relationship of coincidence: the narratable self is not the text, the text does not produce the narratable self. As Lejeune, Cavarero's theory is based on the existence of a desire, described by Lejeune as a desire to tell the truth about oneself, and by Cavarero as a desire for unity, as a desire for narration and identity, of exposing one's own uniqueness. "Appearing is the whole of being, understood as a plural finitude of existing. This goes above all for human beings, who have the privilege of appearing to one another, distinguishing themselves in their in-born [in-nata] uniqueness, such that, in this reciprocal exhibition, a who is shown to appear, entirely as it is. As Jean-Luc Nancy also emphasizes, 'for the one who exists, what matters is existence, not essence.'"[40] Therefore, for Cavarero the relational character of identity and the expositive character are indistinguishable, making identity, at a pure corporeal level, depend upon the presence of others. This desire for unity appears as a mirroring effect with another as a desire to narrate or have one's own story narrated "What is essential is the familiar experience of narratability of the self, which not by chance, we always perceive in the other, even when we do

[39] *Relating Narratives* 89
[40] *Relating Narratives* 20

not know their story at all."[41] Cavarero summarizes the narratable self in the following statement "I know that I have a story and that I consist in this story – even when I do not pause to recount it to myself, 're-living' through the memory some episodes through a sort of interior monologue. I could not nevertheless not know myself to be narratable unless I were not always already interwoven into the autobiographical text of this story. […] But the familiar sense of the narratable self is not a result of text itself, and neither does it lie in the construction of the story. It lies rather in the narrating impulse that is never in 'potentiality' but rather in 'actuality,' even when it refrains from 'producing' memories or 'reproducing' past occurrences."[42]

Cavarero's theory of existence as exposition, and narratability as identity, brings us to understand the relation between storytelling (as a form of self narration) and ethics. In her words "The narratable self thus re-enters into what we could call a relational ethic of contingency; or, rather, an ethic founded on the altruistic ontology of the human existent as finite. […] This ethic finds therefore a fundamental principle in the recognition that every human being, whatever qualities, has her unjudgable splendor in a personal identity that is irrefutably her story."[43] In this reciprocity is a fundamental recognition that the presence of others is indispensable and necessary for the appearance of the "who" (described by Cavarero as exposed, relational , and altruistic). Once again we are faced with the demystification of an individualistic theory of self identity as a mysterious hidden inner core, as essence. "The altruism of uniqueness is neither sacrifice nor dedication, nor mortification, nor renunciation. It is rather the ontological status of a who, which is always relational and contextual, for whom the other is necessary."[44] In this very

[41] *Relating Narratives* 34
[42] *Relating Narratives* 35
[43] *Relating Narratives* 87
[44] *Relating Narratives* 90

last definition we find a self who is not fixed, absolute, or universal, but who is rather in constant change within its relational context.

Autobiography is the manifestation of the desire to be narrated in the presence of the other, through the stories of others. Not a desire to be remembered, immortalized against death and history, but a desire for identity. Cavarero notes that unlike the stories of the Greek epic Hero, whose death becomes the occasion for his immortality, the stories of the storyteller Scheherazade from *The Arabian Nights* are told in an effort to postpone death "Scheherazade lives in order to tell stories – and in order that other women live."[45] While Cavarero describes the infinite cycle of the young storyteller as a trap, as an illusion which traps the reader to the text, where "it is not lives that produce stories; it is rather the stories that produce the characters who believe that they are alive."[46] She also ultimately comes to understand the *Arabian Nights* as "the life-story that is constitutively interwoven with many other stories.[…] The stories that result from self-exhibiting of unique beings within a plural scene are already inextricably interwoven with one another."[47] Both Homer and Scheherazade become the narrators-historians by making their heroes narrators who tell stories which will in turn initiate other stories. Like Scheherazade, Anzaldùa, Ginzburg, and Silko embark on the cycle of telling, but through those of others, they will add those of their own and their interrelational narration identity is formed, "Silko's transmission of other people's stories, stories that are in turn versions of a shared body of myths

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[45] *Relating Narratives* 123
[46] *Relating Narratives* 124
[47] *Relating Narratives* 124.

Here Cavarero quotes from Arendt "the disclosure of the "who" through speech and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt. Together, they start a new process that eventually emerges as the unique life-story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life –stories af all those with whom he comes into contact.' (Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957, 184)

and legends, is properly understood as an act of self-definition. In Storyteller there is a radical equivalence between self and other at the level of narration: Silko's own story and the stories of others are one and the same. Storyteller is what she does and who she is."[48]

The ethical question Silko, Sereni, Ginzburg and Anzaldùa's work bring forward, in relation to life and autobiography, regards not only their individuation but their dialogue with a community of readers/listeners, whose stories belong to the narration and with whom the writer is in relation of tension/extension. Sereni's *Keeping House* further illustrates the bonding of recognition, problematizing further the gender implications.

I'd like to return to the "practice of ethos" as described by Foucault in *The Care of the Self* and discussed in the interview "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom" collected in *Michel Foucault Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*. When asked the question on the work of the self on the self as a form of liberation and therefore freedom, Foucault emphasizes that liberation is a process not to be considered sufficient in order to define freedom. In his words "I emphasize practices of freedom over processes of liberation."[49] In order to describe this practice, Foucault takes the ancient Greek concept of ethos as a way of being and as behavior reflected on the appearance, the speech, and the wisdom of a person. "For the Greeks this was the concrete form of freedom; this was the way the problematized their freedom […] But extensive work by the self on the self is required for this practice of freedom to take shape in an ethos that is good, beautiful, honorable estimable memorable, exemplary."[50] This practice, also named as a care of the self, is considered an ethical relationship to the self and simultaneously to others. "Ethos also implies a relationship with others, insofar as the care of the

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[48] Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) 80
[49] *Michel Foucault Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth,* edited by Paul Rabinow, tran. Robert Hurley and Others. (New York: The New Press, 1994) 283.
[50] *Michel Foucault Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth* 286.

self enables one to occupy his rightful position in the city, the community, or interpersonal relationships."[51] The care of the self requires a relationship with the other as a master, teacher who can be "a counselor, a friend." Foucault presents an individual who is not in opposition to others, or separate from others, but one who practices his freedom (the care of the self) by entering in a relationship of process and practice with others and not over others. He explains that for an ancient Greek citizen, the practice of freedom meant knowing what one must fear and not fear, what things should matter and what things should not matter, and also and very importantly, that one should not be afraid of death. Obviously, one should not overlook the contextual ground on which Foucault's analysis on freedom is based. He talks of masters of households, citizens of a city, teachers masters, and philosophers, it is clear that his examples are drawn predominantly from masculine paradigms. But if we consider Foucault's analysis of freedom, transcending it from the context on which his study was drawn, what appears to be absolutely essential is its validity as a definition of freedom, not abstract and metaphysical, but as an actual practice entailing almost a form of training and guidance of oneself which included "abstinence, memorization, self-examinations, meditations, silence, and listening to others."[52] During his studies, Foucault found that in the pre-Christian western world, great deal of stress was given as well to writing as a personal exercise, but also, and particularly in the form of correspondence, as a practice that will engage in counseling, advice, comforting, companionship and sharing with others. However such process, which can seem as an excessive indulgence into the realm of the self, is in fact resulting in quite the opposite way, as Foucault would discover that "If you take proper care of yourself […] you cannot abuse your power over others. Thus, there is no danger. That idea will appear much later, when love of self becomes suspect and

[51] *Michel Foucault Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth* 287.
[52] *Michel Foucault Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth* 208.

comes to be perceived as one of the roots of various moral offences. In this new context, renunciation of self will be the prime form of care of the self […] the care of the self cannot in itself tend toward so exaggerated a form of self-love as to neglect others or, worse still, to abuse one's power over them."[53] It appears as though, Foucault work is pointing to ethics as a practice of the self, in which the self is abandoned, in which there is listening to and counseling others, in which there is learning and self reflection, characteristics that are common to Benjamin's, Minha's and Silko's description of the practice of storytelling. Storytelling is the threshold of identity formation that—as we will see in the autobiographies following this chapter—appears as a simultaneous process between the self and the other "it is the development of an art of existence that revolves around the question of the self, of its dependence and independence, of its universal form and of the connection it can and should establish with others"[54]

Can autobiography be explained as a 'practice of ethos.' Ethics is the moment in which faced with oneself against memory as reality and the immediate space and time, one can start that ongoing dialogue that is called identity.

How then does autobiography differ from any given thought about oneself?

The process of writing will imply a relationship of responsibility of the self with the self and of the self with others (others as the 'reader' and as the 'stories').

The moment in which the 'I' is set to write for an audience, the 'ethical pact' with oneself and others has already begun:

With the self: I am ready to face and to reinvent.

With others: I am ready to tell

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[53] *Michel Foucault Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth* 288

[54] Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self. The History of Sexuality* Volume 3. Tran. Robert Hurley. (New York: Vintage Books, 1988) 238

The process of reinventing oneself through writing is part of the 'ethical pact.' The writer makes an 'appeal' to the reader through the invention of the self. Writing as the intimate personal act. Autobiography is the 'practice of ethos' in which the self reinvents itself against memory. "What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? […] From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence we have to create ourselves as a work of art […] we should not have to refer the creative activity of somebody to the kind of relation he has to himself, but should relate the kind of relation one has to oneself to a creative activity."[55]

In a very Foucaultian sense, Anzaldùa's reinvention of the self sees the creation of a new community of self and collective consciousness. As she urges her reader to change, she also builds a space for those changes to exist. Her double pact with the Chicano reader is manifested in her commitment to voice the legitimacy and recognition of her people, as well as in her historical and creative appeal to them to accept the new *mestiza* identity "Chicanos need to acknowledge the political and artistic contributions of their queer. People listen to what your *jotería* is saying."[56]

Keeping House, Borderland/La Frontera, Family Saying and *Storytelling* propose storytelling as a form of autobiography. In the process of narrating, the authors entrust their life's stories to others, their listeners, their readers, but not only. "What matters is that lives do not serve as models; only stories do that. And it is a hard thing to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts. They

[55] *Michel Foucault Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth* 315
[56] *Borderlands/LaFrontera* 107

may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmuring of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives."[57]

They have also bound their relation to those who are part of their own stories. In this cycle of exposition, to use Cavarero's terminology, existence is presented in the form of storytelling and the narratable self is, in these autobiographies, exposed within the oral and written stories re-written and retold in the texts.

> It is therefore wise not to turn to philosophy at all if one truly wants to save the accidental that is in every life, or rather the accidentality [*accidentalità*] of being 'this and not another.' Which happens to everyone as the *given* of their being-here. Rather than salvation, the accidental needs care. To tell the story that every existence leaves behind itself is perhaps the oldest act of such care. The story is not necessarily one that aspires to immortalize itself in the literary empire […] but rather the type of story whose tale finds itself at home in the kitchen, during a coffee break, or perhaps on the train, when even those who do not want to hear it are forced to listen. In the kitchen, on the train, in the corridors of the schools and hospitals, sitting with a pizza or a drink – women are usually the ones who tell life-stories. […] Throughout the ages, the aptitude for the particular makes them excellent narrators. Cornered in weaving rooms, like Penelope, they have, since ancient times, woven plots with the thread of storytelling. They have woven [*intessuto*] stories, letting them casually tear the metaphor of the *textum* of professional men of letters. Whether ancient or modern, their art aspires to a wise repudiation of the abstract universal, and follows an everyday practice where the tae is existence, relation and attention.[58]

[57] Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Norton & Co. 1988) 59
[58] *Relating Narratives* 54

CHAPTER 2

"Carrier of the dream wheel": Storytelling as Autobiography, Autobiography as Storytelling

> Don't bother the earth spirit who lives here. She is working on a story. It is the oldest story in the world and it is delicate, changing. If she sees you watching she will invite you in for coffee, give you warm bread, and you will be obligated to stay and listen. But this is no ordinary story. You will have to endure earthquakes, lightning, the death of all those you love, the most blinding beauty. It's a story so compelling you may never want to leave; this is how she traps you. See that stone finger over there? That is the only one who ever escaped.
>
> Joy Harjo in *The Pueblo Imagination Landscape and Memory in the Photography of Lee Marmon. With Writings by Leslie Marmon Silko, Joy Harjo, and Simon Ortiz.*

Scholar of Native American oral traditions and religion Cynthia Carsten in her essay on Silko's *Storyteller* poses the following questions: "Is Pueblo autobiography possible? Can a genre historically given to establish the self distinctly over and against the communal lend itself to the pueblo worldview? How does one talk about the self in terms integral to the "group," to "all else in the Pueblo world?" Yet this is what Silko does."[59] Then she concludes and answers her questions with the following statement "In *Storyteller*, the self is emergent from the ethos of the community, its people, its history, its landscape. Silko draws on the resources of her Laguna Pueblo community, subtly weaving her self-inscription out of the stories and the history of her people. Unlike conventional Euro-American autobiographies that place the "I" at the center, her autobiography locates the self within the web of the interconnected Pueblo universe."[60]

What interests me in Carsten's affirmation, is firstly the centrality of the debate around the genre of autobiography and the Euro-American dominating definition of the genre founded within the paradigm of the individualistic "I", and secondly her attention to the relation between the genre and the ethos of the community, which I often refer to in my own work as responsibility. Parallely, is a concern to the overwhelming reference to the island of the "I" as the only place where individuation is ultimately possible. My study of *Storytelling* and the other autobiographies I have chosen to include in my present work, will hopefully prove an alternative, that individuation is a process that can take place simultaneously within the space of the "I" and the "other" at the same time, in a context where difference is not an opportunity for prioritizing or for hierarchical evaluation of the world, but rather a point of view from where new

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[59] Cynthia Carsten "*Storyteller*: Leslies Marmon Silko's Reappropriation of Native American History and Identity." In *Wicazo Sa Review* (2006 University of Minnesota Press) 109
[60] "*Storyteller*: Leslies Marmon Silko's Reappropriation of Native American History and Identity" 102

perspectives and understandings simultaneously coexists with one another. Within this principle I conceive existence.

I found most essential, in my study of Silko's *Storyteller,* to research the Pueblo history and its oral and literary tradition, in order to try to understand not only the references to myths and stories present in the poems and short stories written by Silko, but also to root any concept of self and identity within a context vastly different from the Euro-American one. Works by Silko herself, including her father's photographs of the Acoma and Pueblo communities, and those by poets and critics Paula Gunn Allen and Kenneth Lincoln, have been immense sources to contextualization and they provided a clear landscape to Silko's world. Therefore context will be the ground on which my questions will be established.

The Laguna Pueblo has occupied the high desert plateau of the Southwest of the United States for more than fifteen thousand years. The people of this community have learned how to survive in an environment often prone to long lasting droughts, and to coexist in harmony with other forms of life, rare in such harsh territory. During the thousands of years in which they occupied the high plateau, the one form of teaching through which they have been able to instruct, heal and form the young of the community and each others, has been storytelling. Silko remembers the village in her early years as a "learning institution"[61] where the teaching came from adults and older children in the form of stories. "if an adult noticed children playing with fire at the dump of wading near quicksand in the river, immediately the adult intervened (firmly but without anger) to explain the danger and recount stories of children burned or drowned, so children never forgot to be wary of those dangers."[62] Education was established as an integral

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[61] *The Pueblo Imagination Landscape and Memory in the Photography of Lee Marmon. With Writings by Leslie Marmon Silko, Joy Harjo, and Simon Ortiz*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003) 9
[62] *The Pueblo Imagination* 9

part of the culture and not only entrusted to an institution, everyone in the community had a role as an educator, "school was everywhere, taught by everyone and everything."[63] This circular chain of transmission secured the survival of the teachings within a concept of time, not viewed as a progression of a past, present and future, but as the continuation of the present. "The Laguna language has only one verb tense, the present tense. "I breathe" in the present moment now, "I breathe" in the present moment tomorrow, or "I breathe" in the present moment yesterday. All we know is the present moment continues—it is always now, the present; human consciousness itself exists only in the present. All the while the cycles of the seasons and the planets continue."[64] In her introduction to her father's collection of photographs, Silko informs us that racism did not take hold among the old-time people because they only attended US schools for a brief period and it was there that racism was taught. This is just one of the many elements regarded as detrimental in the life of the Laguna Pueblo, and not only enforced by the Anglo-Europeans. In her invaluable book *The Sacred Hoop* Paula Gunn Allen envisions a time of healing symbolized by the image of the sacred hoop, broken during the time of destruction and war, and now being mended together in the new climate of reawakening and healing for American Indians. While the book is a recovery of the feminine in Native American traditions, it is also a profound reconstruction, through a personal, historical, literary perspective, of the many misconceived and misconstrued visions of the Native American notions of identity, family and religion carried into the literary tradition of the last twenty years and highly informed by oral tradition. Her first step towards the recovery of the feminine, starts right from the beginning, right where the preexistent matriarchal system in place for thousands of years, suddenly appeared to be threatening to the European colonizers; American Indian women, in their ability to take

[63] *The Pueblo Imagination* 9
[64] *The Pueblo Imagination* 9

charge of various aspects of life and communal organization, became feared by the patriarchal conquistadors who ruthlessly imposed their own views with clear consequences in the women's identity and their relationship with the community. "In times past as in times present women carried enormous burdens with aplomb. We were far indeed from the "weaker sex," the designation that white aristocratic sisters unhappily earned for us all."[65] Allen observes that most Indian American women she has known, suffer like her of a bicultural bind. "We vacillate between being dependent and strong, self-reliant and powerless, strongly motivated and hopelessly insecure. We resolve the dilemma in various ways: some of us party all the time; some of us drink to excess; some of us travel and move around a lot; some of us land good jobs and then quit them; some of us engage in violent exchanges; some of us blow our brains out. We act in these destructive ways because we suffer from the societal conflicts caused by having to identify with two hopelessly opposed cultural definitions of women."[66] This contradiction, which Allen considers as an ineradicable consequence of colonization, goes hand in hand with the binary story describing the American Indian. "No Indian can grow to any age without being informed that her people were "savages" who interfered with the march of progress pursued by respectable, loving, civilized white people. […] By the time I was through high school I had the idea that Indians were people who had benefited mightily from the advanced knowledge and superior morality of the Anglo-Europeans. At least I had, perforce, that idea to lay beside the other one that derived from my daily experience of Indian life, an idea less dehumanizing and more accurate because it came from my mother and the other Indian people who raised me."[67] In this context the writer, and the storyteller, exist and continue their practice, in a context very

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[65] Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop. Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) 48.
[66] *The Sacred Hoop* 48.
[67] *The Sacred Hoop* 49.

different from the Western tradition in many aspects. Allen points out in fact, that unlike the Western literary traditions, the purpose of traditional American Indian literature is never serving pure self-expression. "The tribes do not celebrate the individual's ability to feel emotion, for they assume that all people are able to do so. One's emotions are one's own; to suggest that others should imitate them is to impose on the personal integrity of others. The tribes seek—through song, ceremony, legend, sacred stories (myths), and tales—to embody, articulate, and share reality, to bring the isolated, private self into harmony and balance with this reality, to verbalize the sense of the majesty and reverent mystery of all things, and to actualize, in language, those truths that give to humanity its greatest significance and dignity."[68] This definition presents the American Indian's work as one that is not envisioned as a self sustained act generated by a desire to fulfill an aesthetic desire or an emotional impulse, but one that has a larger breath than one's own, that creates a plot in which humanity can reflect upon itself and find the space to understand its existence. "In this art, the greater self and all-that-is are blended into a balance whole, and in this way the concept of being that is fundamental and sacred spring of life is given voice and being for all."[69] One fundamental element that Allen underscores in her review of the American Indian literary tradition, is the assumption that the tribespeople make about the essential harmony of all things. Tribespeople see all things as having equal value in the scheme of things "denying the opposition, dualism, and isolation (separateness) that characterize non-Indian thought."[70] The American Indian's spiritual and philosophical understanding of life—in

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[68] *The Sacred Hoop* 55
[69] *The Sacred Hoop* 55

[70] *The Sacred Hoop* 56-57.
I'd like to point out here the similarity of the Indian American spiritual and philosophical view with the Buddhist one, especially in its principle of non-dualism and opposition. Another example is the symbolic circle of all things, here, as we have seen represented by the Sacred

its entirety that includes animals, vegetables and minerals—is important in understanding the way stories are narrated, their structure, their purpose, and their significance. Important is also the American Indian view of space as spherical and of time as cyclical, unlike the western view of the former as linear and the latter as sequential. The cyclical concept of time provides all points to have equal value. Allen here gives the example of the Christian concept of "salvation" which implies a thrust toward a time/space in the future, more valuable and important than the rest. Such a concept is nonexistent in the American Indian spiritual belief for which all beings are considered cocreators and parts of "an ordered, balanced, and living whole." What one can infer here is an interesting subversion of the hierarchical organization of the world, one that rules many, if not all, parts of the social, political and religious aspects of the western world. The American Indian sees intelligence and awareness as an attribute to all beings and not "peculiar of one species, but, because of a sense of relatedness to (instead of isolation from) what exists, the Indian assumes that this awareness is a natural by-product of existence itself."[71] Therefore, for the American Indian, sickness is a condition that occurs because of a separation from the state of wholeness of the natural and the supernatural, and ceremonies and chants are envisioned to restore that unity. The same concept of wholeness is also reflected in the literary tradition including dance, prayers and stories. Particularly interesting in discussing Silko's *Storyteller,* is Allen's explanation of the purpose of a ceremony: "the purpose of a ceremony is to integrate: to fuse the individual with his or her fellows, the community of people with that of the other kingdoms, and this larger communal group with the world beyond this one. A raising of

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Hoop, and in Buddhism suggested by the wheel of the Dharma and the cycles of rebirth, and particularly in the Tibetan tradition, by the Mandala a symbol of the impermanence of all things.

[71] *The Sacred Hoop* 60

expansion of individual consciousness naturally accompanies this process."[72] The very first story by Silko, that gives the name to the entire book, represents a reification of this very purpose, but I shall return to the story in a little while.

It is essential for Allen to clarify the use of repetition in the ceremonial forms and she does so by taking issue with Astrov's definition of repetition as a device that quiets a child's desire thus exercising control over the external phenomenal world. While of course Allen dismisses the first part of this statement, asserting that shamans and other participants to ceremonies are not children, she also presents repetition in a very different light, not necessarily disregarding the idea of a separation with the external world, but pointing out that the American Indian sees this separation as an internal creation—and not as an "objective" division between the internal world and the external one—and he/she strives to find unity through the practice of ceremony. Such explanation is also key in understanding the importance of symbols not as metaphors, but rather as simultaneously physical and mystical representations. "The color red, as used by the Lakota, doesn't stand for sacred or earth, but it is the quality of being, the color of it, when perceived "in a sacred manner" or from the point of view of the earth itself. That is, red is a psychic quality, not a material one, though its has a material dimension, of course."[73]

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[72] *The Sacred Hoop* 62

[73] *The Sacred Hoop* 69.

A similar understanding can be viewed in the following writing by the Japanese Zen Master Dogen:

"There are mountains hidden in treasures. There are mountains hidden in swamps. There are mountains hidden in the sky. There are mountains hidden in mountains. There are mountains hidden in hiddenness. This is complete understanding.

An ancient Buddha said, "Mountains are mountains, waters are waters." These words do not mean mountains are mountains; they mean mountains are mountains.

Therefore investigate mountains thoroughly.

When you investigate mountains thoroughly, this is the work of the mountains.

Such mountains and waters of themselves become wise persons and sages."

The concept of unity and wholeness is one that is pervasive in the world of the American Indians who see "life as part of oneself." In this vision, every being participates and is equally responsible to "the working of the universe" and its creation. In this collaborative effort contemporary writers who have contributed in the preservation of the traditional forms also belong. "Ritual rather than politics or language forms the basis of the tribal world and contemporary novels by American Indian writers reflect this grounding. […] Traditional tribal narratives possess a circular structure, incorporating event within event, piling meaning upon meaning, until the accretion finally results in a story."[74] Informed by their vision of time, American Indian stories don't follow the Western structure of linear time line, main character or event, but they are "tied to a particular point of view—that of the tribe's tradition—and to a specific idea—that of the ritual tradition and accompanying perspective that inform the narrative. Ritual provides coherence and significance to traditional narratives as it does to traditional life."[75] This very characteristic appears in Silko's opening story "Storyteller".

The story begins at a jail in what we can suspect to be northern Alaska, where Silko spent some time. We see, through the eyes of an Eskimo girl from inside a cell, the whiteness of the land surrounding the portable building transformed into a jail; a sky almost indistinct from the earth, a frozen sun. The frost has embraced everything, even forcing the Gussucks—a Yupik name for the non-indigenous people working in these lands—to stop drilling for oil. Silko moves parallel in time, repeatedly creating a cycling rhythm which drums on the present even when referring to the past, to the time when the girl was forced to attend boarding school and was

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(translated Arnold Kotler and Kazuaki Tanahashi, in *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen*, North Point Press, 1985)

[74] *The Sacred Hoop* 79
[75] *The Sacred Hoop* 79

whipped repeatedly for not speaking English, and to her return home to find her grandmother dead and the old man still there—the one who abused her and had lived with the grandmother. We see her wondering about the Gussack "she wanted to know how they moved. They would be something different from the old man."[76] And then the old man's words, his story about the hunter and the bear, the one he used to tell in winter from inside the bed. He explains why the Gussucks are there in this small village "They only come when there is something to steal. The fur animals are too difficult for them to get now, and the seals and fish are hard to find. Now they come for oil deep in the earth. But this is the last time for them."[77] The old man continues to tell the story over and over about the hunter being stalked by a white bear in the Bering sea ice. But there is another story the girls would like to know from the grandmother, the one about her own parents and how they were poisoned and died by a bottle of alcohol sold by the Gussucks, and the one about the red stain she saw across the river on the day they died, but the grandmother will not talk about those. And finally there is one more story, but this one, Silko notes, the girl did not yet know about. We follow it as it unfolds in the season, when the grandmother is fishing in the river and the girl looks under the grass for a trace of the red material and then stops to look at the cold coming from the sky, bringing the ice and the death of the old man, and fading all the boundaries "He did not recognize her anymore, and when he spoke to her, he called her by her grandmother's name and talked about people and events from long ago, before he went back to telling the story. The giant bear was creeping across the snow on its belly, close enough now that the man could hear the rasp of its breathing. On and on in a soft singing voice the old man caressed the story, repeating the words again and again like gentle strokes."[78] Until his final

[76] *Storyteller* 21
[77] *Storyteller* 22
[78] *Storyteller* 27

words are pronounced clearly "It will take a long time, but the story must be told. There must not be any lies."[79]

And so with the coming of winter, the first frost over the river and the engulfing whiteness merging the earth with its horizon, the girl returns to the Gussuck one more night. She enters into the store again, even though indigenous people are not welcomed inside. She can feel the man raging with desire, but she ignores him and when he is finally ready to hit her for belittling him in front of everyone, she grabs the parka and puts a mitten over her mouth to cover her lungs from the icing cold, and runs out into the cold and towards the river. The story that was unknown to her, is now unfolding, she sees the red mark, where it had always been—reminding her of the death of her parents or all the others before them, as the undeletable stain of their unjust death—a guiding mark. As the hunter becomes the hunted in the old man's story, the Gussuck, unaware of the approaching cold, becomes the victim of his own doing, but only in the eyes of the attorney general. In the girl's mind the story must be told the way its is, "he lied to them. He told them it was safe to drink. But I will not lie […] I will not change the story, not even to escape this place and go home. I intended that he die. The story must be told as it is."[80] And thus Silko presents herself as the storyteller, taking up the practice she herself has learned from her aunt and her grandmother. She will continue the vital circle of storytelling as life itself, and as life itself, the stories will unfold, maybe modified, but they will be told as they are within their context, webbed with each other and linked to all. As in her novel *Ceremony*, where the character Tayo becomes the warrior who is able to restore the land and to heal its people and himself, so does Silko's character of the story "The Storyteller" become the voice who brings the story back into life by telling it the way it has been told, the way that it can only be valuable for

[79] *Storyteller* 27
[80] *Storyteller* 31

its listeners. Silko's story is not only one that identifies the importance of orality, but it also touches upon one of the most binding subjects among all Native Americans: colonization, destruction, segregation and exploitation of the land. The Gussuck versus Eskimos depiction is not a stereotypical one of good versus evil, the contradictions of conditions speak for themselves. A land that is austere to its inhabitants, but respected by those who have lived it for generations, takes an unpredictable turn towards those who intend to dominate it rather than cherish it. The old man's behavior is stained by his sexual abuse toward the girl, and his clear voice before his death reports the coming of the telling, almost as a prophetic vision. The girl accesses the story by living it and by living it she tells it. It's a story of colonization, of abuse, of the destruction that followed, of the many deaths, of the suffering with its paradoxes and contradictions. The girl laughs at the Gussuck knowing the ending, the way she has prepared for it "[…] he didn't know about the ice. He did not know that I was prowling the earth, or that it had already pushed its way into the sky to seize the sun."[81] By the end of the story, Silko has presented simultaneously her power and legacy as a storyteller with a narration itself webbed within the cycle of repetition and life itself and the photograph of her grandmother "A'mooh" in the kitchen reading to Silko's sisters and immediately following the story, is once again a reaffirmation of her legacy.

In interpreting American Indian writings, Allen proposes, one cannot separate literary forms. Therefore a book such as *Storyteller*, made of songs, stories, poems, autobiographical writings, and photographs, presents an interesting debate on the question of genre. *Storyteller* is presented in a rectangular shape to host the many photographs of long views of the Laguna mesas and landscape. In the text one can find short stories, poems, and short poems, autobiographical poems, poems inspired by traditional stories, retelling of one story within

[81] *Storyteller* 29

different contexts or as remembered by Silko as told by her aunt Susie. The first picture on page two is one of her great-grandfather holding her grandfather Hank, and it's a first hint to a lineage and to memory. Following this photograph, is her introduction to her aunt Susie, her father's aunt who had been sent to Indian school and then to Dickinson College, and who, when returned to Laguna, continued her studies of history and her writings. She is remembered by Silko as a woman absorbed in her family duties and her own intellectual work, who had realized that the altered conditions brought by the Europeans, had made storytelling hard to continue, simply because children were sent "away from the tellers who had/ in all past generations/ told the children/ the entire culture, an entire identity of a people."[82] And this is why she took it upon herself to continue the cycle. It is because of her aunt Susie that Silko can remember the stories she reported in *Storyteller*.

"I remember only a small part.

But this is what I remember."[83]

Silko writes, confirming the solid principle on which storytelling survives: through memory. And at the same time she claims her own distinct voice as a storyteller now working within the written text. Her undertaking includes themes of survival, of creation, of migration, of myths, it also includes new stories, and new poems and songs informed by the oral tradition and ceremonies. Silko's rewriting of the story of Yellow Woman, of which I will talk in a little while, is the demonstration of "remembering as understanding," (the story "Storyteller" is a clear example of this concept: story as interpretation of one's self identity and the identity of the tribe), as well as the claim that, once oral, these stories have now entered into the narrative of

[82] *Storyteller* 6
[83] *Storyteller* 7

contemporary Native American writers-storytellers. "Literature, which includes ceremony, myth, tale, and song, is the primary mode of the ritual tradition. The tribal rituals necessarily include a verbal element, and contemporary novelists draw from that verbal aspect in their work."[84] Paula Gunn Allen describes the many existent stories of Yellow Woman as having in common the fact that they are always female-centered and told by Yellow Woman's point of view. Another name for Yellow Woman is Kochininako, which means Woman-Woman as the color yellow among Keres is for women, the color of Mother Corn Woman. Allen identifies these stories as being about many things: "abduction, meeting with happy powerful spirits, birth of twins, getting power from the spirit worlds and returning it to the people, refusing to marry, weaving, grinding corn, getting water, outsmarting witches, eluding or escaping from malintentioned spirits, and more."[85] She characterizes Yellow Woman as being a sort of "Spirit of Woman" with her story of being different, feeling alienated, refusing to marry.

The first story Silko tells of this traditional female figure is from the point of view of a Pueblo woman who, while bathing by the river, sees a man and decides to take off with him, leaving behind her family. His name is Silva and he steals cattle from ranches. The woman's telling goes back and forth to another story, told by her grandfather, and known by everyone, about Yellow Woman and how she had been kidnapped by a Navajo, lived with him for a long time and returned with twin boys. Silva calls the woman Yellow Woman, but in her own mind the woman is not certain she can be her "because she is from out of time past and I live now and I've been to school and there are highways and pickup trucks that Yellow Woman never saw." [86] While lying next to Silva and feeling his warmth, this thought coexists in her with another one:

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[84] *The Sacred Hoop* 80
[85] *The Sacred Hoop* 225
[86] *Storyteller* 56

what must have been for Yellow Woman to meet the spirit? "This is the way it happens in the stories, I was thinking, with no thoughts beyond the moment she meets the ka'tsina spirit and they go"[87] Silva and the woman ride together up the hills with pieces of a slaughtered cattle hanging in a pouch attached to the horses, until a white man catches them and Silva urges the woman to turn around and escape, while he stays with the man. Once down the hill, the woman turns the horse around and continues her journey back home on foot. Only then she decides that she will tell the story as it had always been told, that she was kidnapped by a Navajo, "but I was sorry that old Grandpa wasn't alive to hear my story because it was the Yellow Woman stories he liked to tell best."[88]

Paula Gunn Allen explains that the stories of Yellow Woman are also stories about unconformity, of breaking the rules, as ways to raise questions about the concept of propriety, possession, conformity. Silko once again depicts in this story the interconnectedness of storytelling and personal journey. The story of Yellow Woman, for the speaking voice, becomes the interpretation of her own experience. By imagining Yellow Woman and wondering if she knew that she would become part of the stories, the woman character weaves her own story, as if through imagination and memory she could understand her own experience. We are left to imagine no conflict or alteration within the family. The woman returns home hearing the mother instruct the grandmother how to fix jell-O, while her husband is playing with the baby. It is the adventurous, wondering spirit of her character that is underlined, but also her courage, her capacity to read the landscape and find the path back home. Silko plays here with the ambivalent relationship between reality and fiction, a line clearly not understood as the triumph of logic or

[87] *Storyteller* 56
[88] *Storyteller* 62

linear succession of cause and effect, but rather as the cycle of repetition and imagination, thus the ultimate path of memory. In the face of the story, reality does not cease to exist, the woman returns home with a discovery about herself, through the story of Yellow Woman, to find her mother, grandmother and husband attending to the house and the children, as it was and as it will continue: story and life weaving the path.

The second story of Yellow Woman, Kochininako, is in verses and entitled "Cottonwood." Here Silko once again tackles the theme of leaving and returning, this time though not through the point of view of Yellow Woman. The first part called "Story of the Sun House," is told by a voice that tells and one that maintains the urgency of clarification—rendered within the text in parenthesis— creating a sense of orality throughout the entire poem. The plot, lyrically unfolded, is highly influenced by the one from the previous story of Yellow Woman, only this time the leaving is connected to the cycle of autumn and winter, as a story of migration and sacrifice for the wellness of the clan and its survival.

"it was the season

to go again

to find the place.[…]

you must

though the people may not understand."[89]

Here is a woman who leaves behind the personal, individualistic dimension, to do what must be done "for the world to continue"; she will, "out of love for this earth", endure a freezing long night and,

"before the winter constellations

[89] *Storyteller* 64

closed around the sky forever

before the last chill silenced the earth"

she will have found the sun so that the earth can continue "as it has since that time." Silko's closing line alluding to the cottonwood as the place where the sun can be found, maintains that symbolic meaning Allen describes: the coexistence of metaphorical allusion and reality of one element that can return harmony:

"Cottonwood

cottonwood.

So much depends

upon one in the great canyon."[90]

The "Buffalo Story," the second part to the Cottonwood poem, is a retelling of Yellow Woman being kidnapped and ultimately becoming closely attached to the Buffalo people. After being rescued by her brother, who from the top of a cottonwood tree kills the buffalo people claiming the return of his sister, Yellow Woman reveals her suffering to her brother and he decides to kill her so to allow her to stay with them. When the family is told of Yellow Woman's death, they mourn the fact that she chose to stay with the Buffalo people, leaving them behind, but do not condemn the brother for having killed her. Then, they all walk to the cottonwood tree where all the buffalos are lying and they cut up the meat to make jerky which will last them for a long time. This is the way they were able to survive the dry winter, and from then on, during the periods of food scarcity, the hunters would walk to the Buffalo People and bring back the meat so not starve their families. All this was possible

"because

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[90] *Storyteller* 67

one time long ago

our daughter, our sister Kochininnako

went away with them."[91]

Through both, the Cottonwood poems and the first story of Yellow Woman, Silko presents an essential point about communal life. By placing the personal journey of self discovery side by side the story of sacrifice, she shows us "that personal and communal fulfillment need not be mutually exclusive."[92] Critic Bernard Hirsch, extends this coexistence to the oral and the written word, claiming that "the same is true of oral tradition and written word as ways of knowing and of expression. To attain this harmony requires a powerful inclusive vision, one receptive both to internal and external demands and the diverse languages which give them meaning."[93] The vision that Hirsch refers to is the entire un-exclusive network of relationships to the land, the stories, the people and oneself. This very particular exploration of the individual versus the community is extended throughout the text. Autobiographical stories are placed in dialogue with other fictional stories, as in the case of the cottonwood story and Silko's memory of hunting with her uncle and father when she was thirteen. Here, as in the story about the Buffalo People, the practice of hunting is told with an immense respect and gratitude for the animals, as a practice of survival. Silko's personal account of seeing the shape of a bear while walking down a mountain during hunting, and not being sure, but being afraid, is yet another allusion to the works of imagination and its connection to life's experiences. Reality and imagination are simultaneously alive in her while she walks down the mountain wondering if the

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[91] *Storyteller* 76

[92] Bernard A. Hirsch""The Telling which Continues": Oral Traditon and the Written Word in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*." In The American Indian Quarterly Journal of American Indian Studies, volume XII, number 1 winter 1988, 17

[93] ""The Telling which Continues 17

giant bear is in fact sleeping or dead, and thinking at the same time that she would not tell anyone because "they don't let people who see such things carry .30-30 or hunt deer with them."[94] Through the next story immediately following this one, Silko, subverts the knowledge of linearity of memory, reclaiming once again the intertwining of life and story, of reality and imagination:

"As I cut across the south slope to reach my Uncle
I realized it was middle afternoon almost the same
time of day as before, except this year no snow
had fallen yet.
I walked past the place deliberately.
I found no bones, but when a wind moved through the
light yellow grass that afternoon hurried around the
hill to find my uncle.
Sleeping, not dead, I decided."[95]

Cynthia Carsten points out that "Silko's writing technique is one that subverts the Euro-American aesthetic expectation of temporal continuity and chronology of plot, as she draws upon the narrative patterns of her indigenous Laguna Pueblo oral tradition and captures the experiential qualities of her community's oral tradition and its reflection of Pueblo orientation in time and place.[96] In choosing to experiment with multiple genres, Carsten affirms, "Silko intentionally rejects the literary conventions of Euro-American genres because they inherently unsuited to the inscription of Pueblo worldview and lived experience. In addition, these

[94] *Storyteller* 78
[95] *Storyteller* 79
[96] "*Storyteller*: Leslie Marmon Silko's Reappropriation of Native American History and Identity."107

conventions have historically served to maintain and propagate ideologies of domination over American Indian cultures."[97] Therefore, Carsten considers Silko's *Storyteller* an autobiography which resists the conventional Euro-American model of the autonomous self linked to the values of individualism, and proclaims it a work that "provides insight into the formation of Native American individuality in complex and ongoing relationships: tribal, personal, and cross-cultural," thus challenging "the monologic character and the authoritative voice of Euro-American autobiography"[98] with the polyphonic voice of oral tradition. The "relational self,"—to borrow the term from the works of Friedman and Paul John Eakin—is a self that develops individuality within a context of communality with others, not in opposition to, but in a complex interrelation that keeps in consideration the presence and the context shared and made with others. In the Cottonwood poems, Silko makes clear that in the tribal community, sacrifice is at times important for the survival of its people, but in the other Yellow Woman story, she clarifies that the individual's realization is also equally valued. Furthermore, Silko's emphasis on the coexistence and interconnection between reality and fiction, as we have seen, is a technique drawn from the Native American literary tradition which is more concerned "with the distinction between truth and error rather than that between fact and fiction"[99]— this particular characteristic is made evident in Silko's story "storyteller" where both the old man and the young woman character keep repeating that "story must be told the way it is." As well as in her own vision of self identity. The two traditional literary elements described and present in

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[97] "*Storyteller*: Leslie Marmon Silko's Reappropriation of Native American History and Identity." 107

[98] "*Storyteller*: Leslie Marmon Silko's Reappropriation of Native American History and Identity." 108

[99] "*Storyteller*: Leslie Marmon Silko's Reappropriation of Native American History and Identity." 110.
Carsten draws from from Arnold's Krupat *For Those Who Come After: a Study of Native American Autobiography*.

Storyteller, reiterate the centrality of the essential concepts of harmony and non-dualism. By turning the importance towards truth and error, we veer from the personal, hierarchical, exclusive, classification of the world, to the matter of human experience, where the focus is rather on intention—the ethical relationship. This very characteristic is present in Buddhism as well, in the non-dualistic vision of the world for which the separation between good and evil is turned into the practice of skill and unskill.

Carsten's research reports the work by Krupat on Native-American autobiographies in which he explains that the first autobiographies presented western characterizations of native people as tragic heroes, as "conquerors of the frontiers." By acquiring this story for self representation, early Native American autobiographies, created a narrative that obscured the voice of resistance by defining once again the Native American existence between the civilized versus the savage discourse.[100] Against this historical evaluation is Silko who, by rejecting to conform to the western model of autobiography, reaffirms an entire history of resistance. Carsten explains that by refusing to save herself and to claim her innocence in the death of the Gusssuck, the woman character in "Storyteller," is in fact rejecting "institutions of the dominant culture that would prevent them from interpreting their lives according to their own system of value."[101] Silko the autobiographer wants to be viewed as an agent of resistance and not as a victim. *Storyteller* is not a text that focuses on the west in order to reestablish its own space, as if confirming/requesting legitimacy. It is rather the autobiographer's willingness to begin the rewriting of a community by looking from within. "Silko also demands dialogue with her audience by forcing her readers to participate in a worldview different from their own. Unlike

[100] "*Storyteller*: Leslie Marmon Silko's Reappropriation of Native American History and Identity." 113
[101] "*Storyteller*: Leslie Marmon Silko's Reappropriation of Native American History and Identity." 113

conventional autobiographies, which follow patterns of deployment that meet the literary expectations of Euro-American readers, Silko forces her readers to enter into a dynamic process much like oral tradition."[102] Carsten rightly points out that by introducing her family lineage with her aunt Susie, Silko once again "makes evident that the patriarchal family structure is a Euro-American imposition that does not apply to Laguna Culture."[103] This particular characteristic both as a resistance to the western patriarchal structure and as a reaffirmation of the matriarchal one, is also present in Gloria Anzaldùa's work *Borderlands/La Frontera*. And we will see it return also in Ginzburg's *Family Sayings,* and Clara Sereni's *Keeping House* as a lineage of choice, as an act for self representation, regardless of the family cultural structure.

Silko's autobiography is grounded on the understanding that the truth of mythical stories speak of the human experience in the present. This is evident in the story of the witchery context, a meeting of all witches come from all over the world, in a time where "there were no white people" and where "there was nothing European," a world that was "already complete/even without white people." "In the Beginning."[104] According to the story, all the witches at the context present their incredible magical feats "dead babies simmering in blood/circles of skull cut away/all the brains sucked out./Witch medicine/to dry and grind into powder/for new victims."[105] But against all these demonstrations there is one by a witch, standing in the back of the cave whom no one could identify as a man or a woman, and who proved to be the most terrifying of all magicians.

"*What I have is a story*."

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[102] "*Storyteller*: Leslie Marmon Silko's Reappropriation of Native American History and Identity." 114
[103] "*Storyteller*: Leslie Marmon Silko's Reappropriation of Native American History and Identity." 115
[104] *Storyteller* 130
[105] *Storyteller* 132

At first they all laughed

But this witch said

Okay

go ahead

laugh if you want to

but as I tell the story

it will begin to happen."[106]

The story is one all of Silko's listeners will recognize: "white skin people,"

They see no life

When they look

they see only objects.

And then,

They will hear what they find

They will fear the people

They will kill what they fear.

They fear themselves.

Entire villages will be wiped out

They will slaughter whole tribes.

Corpses for us

Blood for us

Killing killing killing killing.[107]

[106] *Storyteller* 135
[107] *Storyteller* 135

Upon listening to this terrifying story, the rest of the witches tell the storyteller to stop and call it back, but it is too late.

It doesn't sound so good

We are doing okay without it

we can get along without that kind of thing

Take it back.

Take that story back.[108]

The work is complete.

It's already turned loose.

It's already coming.

it can't be called back.[109]

Through witchery an entire history of oppression and destruction is prophesized and retold from the perspective of Native Americans. Silko's drumming repetition about the blood as object for the witches and blood from the killing of Native Americans, is an encompassing echo to the civilized versus savage discourse. By presenting history as told by a witch in a witchery demonstration, Silko, again resists the models of established literary and historical modes of narratives, and self narrative. By presenting a communal history side by side a self narrative "Silko rejects the Euro-American model of individualism and autonomy as an appropriate vehicle of Pueblo identity. She chooses instead to inscribe the self as existing in the complex interrelationality of Pueblo Cosmology as it is expressed in oral tradition."[110] In Storytelling,

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[108] *Storyteller* 137
[109] *Storyteller* 137
[110] "*Storyteller*: Leslie Marmon Silko's Reappropriation of Native American History and Identity." 123

Silko writes an autobiography that questions the argument around truth within the literary genre, by weaving together the mythical, the communal as representations of an interrelational self.

"The *Niya,* or "life-breath," is the body's soul in Lakota belief, and through the "life-breath," the world's powers can be called, prayed, sung, chanted, ceremonialized, even reasoned with or admonished, if the petitioner lives rightly, in accord with natural rituals. These daily rites, "sending a voice," align with the passage of sun, stars, planets, animals, winds, season, visions, winter counts, peoples, and timeless generations of spirits, passed on, passing on. Such voices make up tribal cultures, past and present; their oral and written literatures are acknowledged in this book."[111] With this paragraph Kenneth Lincoln introduces his work *Native American Renaissance*, a milestone for the study of contemporary Native American writings. The voices he is referring to are those of the storytellers who, by telling stories, transfer an entire history, knowledge, and identity of a community, and by default it is the voice of the writers and poets who are active parts in the reawakening of Native American literature risen in the sixties. Lincoln explains that in the early sixties, from English boarding schools, and Universities, a group of Native American writers whose writing language was English, started to emerge and give rise to what he himself names as the "renaissance" of Indian American writers who, like Silko and Allen, despite having been integrated into the American life, maintained strong ties to their tribal culture and languages—a characteristic which is reflected in the writings as well. Lincoln presents his study as an hybrid, as a work that intends to understand "a multi-cultural event," and therefore "methodologically is interdisciplinary collating literature, folklore, history, religion, handcraft, and the expressive arts." Like Silko, Lincoln "demands of the scholar and the

[111] Kenneth Lincoln, *Native American Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) 1-2.

reader a cross-referenced mind,"[112] while he looks for the dialogue between Indian and non-Indian writers. He explains that writers like Momaday, Welch, Silko and Ortiz, in the sixties were "recognized as outside of the great traditions of Western literature," but in turn they "were shaped by what they recognized and relearned from contemporary literature, as non-Indian modernists had been discovering native art forms."[113] In particular, he points out to Allen's reference to finding Indian echoes in "Pound's clarity of language, in Williams' search for an American idiom, in Gertrude Stein's firm lines, in Olson's "glyphs," and in Allen Ginsberg's chanted poetry."[114] By claiming that "Literature was no longer strictly formal in America, but form in some measure shaped by content,"[115] Lincolns provides a lineage to the American verse of Olson, Creeley, Levertov, Duncan and other contemporary poets, and to the contemporary Native American poets. In addition, borrowing from Pound's view that a "progression from ritual, through dance and music to poetic language made sense […] among the troubadour poetries of southern France, the Confucian odes of Ancient China, the Homeric epics of classical Greece, the courtly literature of Renaissance Italy, or the ballad traditions of England and America," Lincoln asserts that "the native ground may well be terra firma for literary traditions in any culture."[116]

The relationship between Indian and non-Indian contemporary writers is further developed by Lincoln in the chapter named "Crossings." Here he explores the influence of Native American tradition in the writings of Olson, Snyder, Creeley, just to name a few. Lincoln's analysis of the work by these poets underscores their common necessity, in his words

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[112] *Native American Renaissance* 9
[113] *Native American Renaissance* 7
[114] *Native American Renaissance* 8
[115] *Native American Renaissance* 8
[116] *Native American Renaissance* 8

"to go native," in order to seek a more vital relationship with their land, and they achieved that through the myths, poetry, ceremony and rhythms they observed and studied from the American Indians. "These poets seek to reinvent, on their own cultural terms, an original relationship to the spoken word, a sensitivity to spirit of place and natural environment, a responsive bond with a tribal audience."[117] Williams had set the ground to a poetics of space and locality with his work *Paterson*, a collection/recollection of stories—archeological discoveries found among people—or part of a collective memory, visions. He began the terrain for an alternative understanding of American identity. In the *Maximus Poems*, an ongoing epic poem, Charles Olson carries a closeness to the poetics of space of *Paterson* by making Gloucester, Massachusetts, the microcosm, the point of depth, "The glyph," which conveys and contains an entire political and geographical understanding of land, history, identity, through time, not a linear time, but time as a sound entering the crust of the earth and speaking from its layers and the bones of its dispossessed. This is some of the thematic raised by this group of poets who developed a relationship to land, history, and existence informed by the Native American philosophy and experience. Olson's "glyph" is directly connected to his observation and experience with the Mayan myths during his time in Mexico. Poet and critic Dale Smith in his article on *The Shoshoneans*—a cross-genre text with writings by poet Ed Dorn and photographs by Leroy Lucas, a personal, philosophical, anthropological and poetic account of their experience among the Shoshoni of the Basin-plateau—writes: "Dorn put himself there with the Shoshoni because he felt that he didn't have a country "any more than they" (*Views,* 107). He found in them too the active consequences of that dispossession he sensed inside himself."[118] This very understanding

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[117] *Native American Renaissance* 30

[118] Dale Smith, "Edward Dorn Out: Forms of Dispossession" in Exquisite Corpse issue 9. Website: http://www.corpse.org/archives/issue_9/critiques/smith_dale.htm

that Dale Smith captures in Ed Dorn's writing—his original sense of being dispossessed, of feeling an outsider within the American mainstream writers and poets—is the ultimate condition that leads him to "seeing the looking," which Dale Smith explains as the "transhuman quality of the self," the capacity to perceive his own sense of otherness at the same time as being viewed as other, a sense "derived from a naked disposition and reduction of intellect or western self"[119]—a departure from the ego to a more understanding of self as spirit, as breath. Dorn perceives wholeness and circularity behind the Shoshoni's ceremony and prayer, recognizing them as the bridge to an understanding of his sense of dispossession and the dispossession of the American Indians: "at that moment it seemed to me here was the contrary of my own Western notion that one goes through the portal of death alone to greet some large blank which hopefully might be an extension of a 'personality,' whether that be God or oneself as a continued state. Thus wrapped in the service of their ritual antiquity, they formed an effective edge of the real, an area of existence both life and death, neither morbid nor quite quick. A substantial prayer of flesh, plasma, spirit, all one fluid. And so, if this all sounds religion, I hope it does in no orthodox sense, more *religare*--to tie back: the nearly absolute briefness of ceremony, its power an intense spark, renewable as each time it reconstitutes the entirety of creation, the *Every Thing*"[120] And finally, Olson's response to Ed Dorn in "a Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn," reads in capital letters "BECEAUSE THE LOCAL AND THE SENTIMENTAL IS HOW HUMANISM COMES HOME TO ROOST IN AMERICA, THIS IS ENOUGH OF A PREFACE. "TO GET TO THE OTHER SIDE," IS THE ONLY MORAL ACT WHICH CAN POSSIBLY CORRECT THE

[119] "Edward Dorn Out: Forms of Dispossession"
[120] I have taken this quotation from The Shoshoneans from Smith's article.

WEST, AS EITHER GREEK OR U.S."[121] All the parallels drawn here form a context in which to place the work of contemporary American Indian writers. Kenneth draws out a clear statement, almost a manifesto, when he says "It is a time when words empower ethical ways of living, good medicine, secular entertainment, spiritual vision, utilitarian arts, politics, and the skills of surviving each day."[122] The role of the poet, Lincoln says, as a voice that maintains the survival of language, identity and history, with his songs "unassuming and dignified" performs the ceremonies crucial in tribal life. His/her work is communal, "The song-poet's aesthetics are no less than useful, as the singer believes that tribal life needs beauty daily. Art is a function, then of tribal necessity, and functional creativity is a daily staple. Among the Keres pueblo "good" and "beautiful" are the same word."[123]

In these terms Lincoln delineates the ethical relationship between the artist's work and his community, a relationship not founded on the idea of imposing order, taming, or controlling nature, but rather on the attempt "that unites the people, other earthly creatures, the gods, and nature, in one great tribe." Silko the writer and storyteller is at once the artist embracing a poetics of kinship to the world and a witness to its unfolding story.

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[121] Charles Olson, in *Collected Prose* eds. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 299
[122] *Native American Renaissance* 42
[123] *Native American Renaissance* 44

CHAPTER 3

"I am the existence of others in me": Orality in Natalia Ginzburg's Family Sayings

We are made of time.
We are its feet and its voice.
The Feet of time walk in our shoes.
Sooner or later, we all know, the wind of time will erase the tracks.
Passage of nothing, steps of no one? The voices of time tell of the voyage.
"Time Tells" in *Voices of Time. A Life in Stories*
by Eduardo Galeano

Natalia Ginzburg's preface to *Family Sayings* is presented to the reader as an instruction on how to read the text as well as a justification for the gaps and falls that memory may have left in the process of recording her family history. There are two parallel processes occurring in writing her family history, she confirms, one based on reality and one on memory. Neither is completely reliable in rendering a story, as reality appears to be only "faint reflections and sketches" while memory in Ginzburg's words "is treacherous." Therefore, she advises her readers to consider the book as a novel "without demanding of it either more or less than what a novel can offer."[124] As Lejeune, Ginzburg has created in the very first pages of her book a mode of reading, a pact that will enable to submit all preoccupations on factuality or truth; as readers we are asked to access the text as "the record of a family" (a biography?) and a novel, and as critics we are faced with the impossibility to locate the text into a genre. "I have set down only what I myself could recall. Consequently if this book is read as a chronicle of events it may be objected that there are omissions. Although the books is founded on reality, I think it should be read as though it were a novel, that is, read without demanding of it either more or less than what a novel can offer."[125] In this sense with *Family Sayings,* Ginzburg, in a less playful fashion than Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, makes any assumption on the genre of auto/biography collapse. Reading *Family Sayings* as a novel, Ginzburg imagines, will allow the reader to navigate into the text not as a detective but rather as a witness who participates in the unfolding and repetitions of a collective history. *Family Sayings* however escapes the lejuenian definition of autobiography, for the simple fact that it is not the story of a personality. It may fulfill the requirements of a standard model of autobiography in its narrative chronological intention and in its desire to historicize, but it subverts the requirements in its characteristic of being propelled

[124] Natalia Ginzburg, *Family Sayings*, (New York: Little Brown, 1963) Preface.
[125] *Family Sayings* Preface.

towards the "other" where the self is disclosed/undisclosed within the sketches, the voices and the stories of others.

Despite the author's instructions, I propose a reading of *Family Sayings* as example of an autobiography that in fact subverts the definition of the genre as individualistic. Natalia Ginzburg takes the role of the storyteller who retrieves a language no longer existent in her time and space, residing solely in her memory as a collective history, and in her recreation of voices she ends up reproducing the world of storytelling whose main voice and transmitter in her lifetime was represented by the mother. Through repetitions of sayings and sketches the author will present a work partly oral partly written, blurring once again, as in the preface of the book, the relationship between author/reader and storyteller/listener. In a time when consumerism is rampant in postwar Italy, when the family entity and unity is threatened by the American individualistic and capitalistic model of prosperity and success, and when television is slowly annulling people's chances to communicate, Ginzburg talks about words, sayings and stories as the essence of life, as that which remains after the storm has passed, perhaps offering a testimony of a time disappearing. Through this testimony made of voices, she will lay out the trajectory, made of intricate relationships, incommunicable sentiments, and unexpressed desires, that made her a writer.

Family Sayings is in part the story of the Levi family before, during and after World War Two. The first half of the book is distinguished by descriptions of the family members directly from the subtle voice of young Natalia, the youngest of five, and by the liveliness of a domestic environment of an apartment in the city of Turin, made of friends and readings of poetry and Proust, never attended by the father who would rather discuss matters of science, mountaineering or politics. The patriarch, a professor of biology, is immediately depicted as a vociferous

authoritarian, and very devoted to the memory of his mother. His scientific investigations never bring him to feel the desire to walk on a different path or have a conversation with people with whom he does not share common friends. Yelling and screaming must have been a great part of the personality of Natalia Ginzburg's father who would burst with insults and reprimands to his children and his wife at the table or during hiking expeditions loathed by everyone, except for Gino his favorite, and that the mother called "the devil's idea of fun for his children."[126]

This is how the author describes the father during a return from a vacation in the mountains outside of Turin:

"After a couple of hours in the mail-cauch we arrived at the station and took our places in the train. Suddenly we realized that our luggage had been left on the platform. The guard raised his flag and shouted 'Away she goes.' 'Oh no she doesn't,' my father roared with a shout that echoed through the whole coach, and the train did not move until the last of our bags was on board."[127] However, it seems that shouting did not occur only as a desperate measure, but as a way for the father to communicate, a way that of course always appeared enraged and despotic. For instance in a scene Ginzburg explains how her father named her mother's young friends with babies 'the babas' and then she says "When supper-time was approaching, he would shout from his study, 'Lydia, Lydia! Have all those "babas" gone? And the last 'baba' could be seen slinking in terror down the passage and slipping out through the front door."[128] The father's roaring, especially towards his wife as in this case, appear to be a reaffirmation of his order and structure, the voice of ruling.

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[126] *Family Sayings* 10
[127] *Family Sayings* 16
[128] *Family Sayings* 16

While the first spoken words by the father that we encounter are "behave yourself!" "You people don't know how to sit at a table," or "Don't be negroes," the mother's are the short sentence "Lovely, lovely. Too long in the neck" uttered by a big-chested man standing in front of a hairdressers' window, or the verses of an opera she had written when she was in boarding school where she stayed until the age of sixteen. Ginzburg notes that her mother's ordinary speech was constantly colored by reproductions of phrases she heard from people, family or friends, which then became familiar sayings known and shared by the entire family. Almost as if the mother lived the present always accompanied by the comforting familiarity of the past that, at the same time, lived constantly within her in the form of voices, songs and sayings, as maps and points of references guiding her world. Giuliana Minghelli describes Natalia Ginzburg as the "scrittrice/cantastorie" who in telling/writing recovers the primordial knowledge/language made of sounds, words and stories heard in childhood. This oral language, that in the text has become her writing, finds its source in the parent's voices, stories and sayings; however while the father's language, comes to represent the language of negation with his continuous bursts of authority and judgment, the mother's with her recollections becomes her primary inspiration. [129] "My mother on the other hand enjoyed telling stories—storytelling made her happy. Turning to one or other of us at the table she would begin a story. Whether it was about my father's family or her own, she became radiant with pleasure, and it always seemed as if she were telling that story for the first time to ears that had never heard it."[130]

Teresa Picarazzi brilliantly illustrates the relationality of the "I" in the writings of Natalia Ginzburg through a reading based on the object-relations theory that poses attention to the

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[129]Giuliana Minghelli, "Ricordando il quotidiano. Lessico famigliare o l'arte del cantastorie." in *Italica* (Volume 72 Number 2, 1995) 33

[130]*Family Sayings* 23

lineage of identification between mother and daughter. She calls *Family Sayings* an expression of maternal desire. The lost relationship between mother and daughter caused by the universal ideal of man, pervasive in the intellectual and social order, Picarazzi explains, disrupts the pre-oedipal bond between mother and daughter, creating a desire, which in Natalia Ginzburg, is expressed in the form of writing. "That expression of maternal desire is the articulation of voice, the appropriation of an "I," the act of writing itself (or of telling one's own life story). Maternal discourse thus unfolds as an attempt to recuperate or reason what has been lost, and also to situate that "I" relationally."[131] While Susan Stanford Friedman uses the object-relations theory to justify women's relational autobiographies with communities and other groups in a more general term substituting the mother for other presences in a woman's life, Picarazzi draws in to the theory's fundamental idea of identification and disidentification between mothers and daughters and proposes it in her collection of critical essays titled *Maternal Desire Natalia Ginzburg's Mothers, Daughters, and Sisters* as an interpretation of Natalia Ginzburg's entire work. Picarazzi's analysis of Ginzburg's work is grounded on this affirmation: "our understanding of the term *women's autobiographical writings* is one that considers intersubjective and relational gender and voice, and embeddedness in an other."[132] Although much of my theoretical discourse is framed within this affirmation, I will also add that a certain focus on individuality when referring to the genre of autobiography, is a symptomatic characteristic of a political and economic background informed and governed by consumerism and capitalism for which self identity is thought of as a meritorious affair and an example of

[131] Teresa Picarazzi, *Maternal Desire Natalia Ginzburg's Mothers, Daughters, and Sisters* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002) 18
[132] *Maternal Desire* 26

success, rather than as a process of shared existence as this passage from *Family Sayings* may want to suggest.

"There are five of us children. We live in different cities now, some of us abroad, and we do not write to one another much. When we meet we can be indifferent and aloof. But one word, one phrase is enough, one of those ancient phrases, heard and repeated an infinite number of times in our childhood. […] for us to pick up in a moment our old intimacy and our childhood and youth, linked indissolubly with these words and phrases. These phrases are our Latin, the vocabulary of our days gone by, our Egyptian hieroglyphics or Babylonian symbols. They are the evidence of a vital nucleus which has ceased to exists, but which survives in its texts salvaged from the fury of the waters and the corrosion of time."[133] Ginzburg's identity is made of the memory of a lost lexicon rescued in the pages of this text. It is in language and through language that the "I" becomes a "we" like a domain of recognition, a place of unity, where the "I" is not denied but validated in its vitality and correspondence with others.

Italian Poet and critic Luigi Fontanella interpreted Ginzburg's archival recalling as a form of nostalgia.[134] While it may be appropriate to imagine the author's desire for recreating the familiar environment that was linked to happy as well as tragic times, constantly accompanied by the orchestra of her parents' sayings and her mother's stories, as nostalgic, this would also overlook the author's role as rescuer of a family's history told by her mother, informed and motivated by what I call her sense of responsibility. "It was my mother who used to tell these stories of Grandmother Dolcetta's egg and of 'our Rosina,' because my father told them badly

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[133] *Family Sayings* 24

[134] Luigi Fontanella, "A reading of *Le voci della sera* and *Lessico Famigliare*" in *Natalia Ginzburg A Voice of the Twentieth Century*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000) 37

and made a mess of them by breaking in with thunderous snorts of laughter."[135] In rewriting these stories Ginzburg as a daughter-storyteller takes the responsibility to pass on the family history at the same time as writing herself and her identity.

"The narratives (the narrator) assumes the same cathartic function as a psychoanalytic 'talking cure' in that they are retrospectively recreating and ordering their family stories, as the narrators construct their own writing selves. Through their choice of friendship, lifestyle, career as writer or intellectual, and dress, these daughters are separating from the family while at the same time writing it."[136] While the boastful voice of the father follows in the background, Ginzburg takes her role as a daughter/storyteller and through the voice of the mother she breaks the silence. Unlike her mother though, who in the author's words, "did not like talking about death", Ginzburg fulfills the gap of the unspoken loneliness and tragedy of loss. To the family sayings and stories she adds her own about the death of her husband Leone Ginzburg, an antifascist intellectual tortured and killed by fascists, the suicide of Cesare Pavese, a friend, a poet co-founder of the publishing house Einaudi with Leone Ginzburg, and a fervent antifascist, the terror of escaping the Nazis with her children in the hills of Abbruzzo, and the anguish of loneliness. Her desires and fantasies become other stories to add to those already existing in her memory. In her soft-spoken voice Ginzburg marks her identity as a daughter/sister/mother as well as as a writer and intellectual.

Natalia Ginzburg spent her entire writing vocation, followed later in her life by a participation in the Italian Parliament, depicting the disintegration of the nuclear family and the loss of values in society. Immediately after the war in Italy the Democrazia Cristiana (DC) sided by the Church, and the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) began contending the participation of

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[135] *Family Sayings* 23
[136] *Maternal Desire* 96

women in their advertisements. While the DC advocated its influence through solidarity, associationism, and traditional moral and religious values, the PCI pressed women to be part of the work force at the same time as maintaining a very tight affiliation to the traditional family values. "In some ways, caring for orphans and the poor could be seen by women as an extension of their traditional, maternal role, but through the associations such work was politicized and given recognition, blurring the boundaries between public and private."[137] However, the effects of American consumerism fully embraced and validated by the DC started to take a toll on these values.

> "At an ideological level, traditional Catholic social theory lay uneasily along side liberal individualism. The Vatican had consistently warned against the effects of industrial society, and the Christian Democrats, especially those who had been part of Dosetti's faction, preached the need to safeguard Catholic values in a changing society. Solidarity (*Solidarismo*), charity and associationism, the state's duty to protect the family, the weak and the poor, were constant themes in their propaganda. However while the DC paid lip-service to these values and ideas, in practice the majority of the party fully espoused the cause of 'modernization.' Here the key themes, strongly shaped by American influences, were the liberty of the individual and the firm, the unfettered development of technology and consumer capitalism, the free play of market forces. Thus *laissez-faire* ideas of developments of the economy and society clashed with those of Catholic integralism, which emphasized the need for society to have to correspond to and reflect Catholic valued."[138]

The American consumeristic ideology brought an ideal that altered all aspects of cultural and social life including the representations of motherhood and womanhood. It sustained and composed a model of womanhood in the sphere of domesticity pushing women to purchasing new appliances, compiling a set of essentialistic characteristics tied to the way of finding domestic happiness through how-to manuals—building up instructions and tips to domestic,

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[137] Penelope Morris, *Women in Italy, 1945-1960: an Intredisciplinary Study* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2006) 8

[138] This is a quotation from Paul Ginsborg's *A History of Contemporary Italy*, 153-154 that was placed in a note to her introduction by Penelope Morris.

social and family life—and in the end reducing women "to the essential whatness of motherhood."[139]

In her essay, Rebecca West analyzes the *Enciclopedia della donna* published in 1950, a 987 page compile of essays and entries on the subject of being a woman. In this essay "The Woman in the House, in the Family, and in Social Life," the author writes that the article distinguished itself from other manuals for its modern perspective of women. The first part of the essay, dedicated to the home, announces that women are no longer "angels of the hearth," but rather they are "on the same level of equality and regarding duties and rights" as men. However, this achievement is not considered as a fully positive one, but rather as an adjustment to the changes of modern society determined by a "crisis of the masculine world." Despite the author's claims of having progressive views, it still presents a traditional belief when it comes to motherhood "even on the level of intellectual and work-related equality, women will never be fully themselves if they do not have the experience of maternity."[140]

The essentialistic view of womanhood was one that penetrated into all aspects of Italian society and even in Natalia Ginzburg's family it certainly dominated the views of her parents. "Gino worked hard at school and so did Mario. Paola did not work at all but that did not worry my father. She was a girl, and my father thought that id did not matter if girls did not try at school, as they would get married afterwards."[141] Motherhood is a subject often tackled by the author in her novels and short stories. In *Family Sayings* her experience as a mother goes hand in hand with that of being a writer. Ginzburg finds a balancing of her two roles though with

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[139] Rebecca West, "What as Ideal and Who as Real: Portraits of Wives and Mothers in Italian Postwar Domestic Manuals, Fiction, and Film" in *Women in Italy, 1945-1960: an Intredisciplinary Study* 26

[140] This quotation is reported in Rebecca West's analyses of *the Enciclopedia delle Donne*.

[141] *Family Sayings* 57

difficulties and doubts and the short story "Worn out Shoes" is a clear example of uneasiness in her double role, expressed with an avid desire for that which is degraded, inadequate and the consumed. In this sense the author creates an alternative to the mother/writer experience of Isabella Aleramo in her autobiography *Una Donna* in which she ultimately abandons her child in order to pursue her vocation as a writer. Scholar Sharon wood describes Ginzburg as:

"a writer whose beguiling simplicity of style and narrative technique mask a complex view of the world [...] she nonetheless takes issue with radical feminism, as did so many other writers of her generation. She shares the neorealist compulsion to direct representation, but rejects a preoccupation with class struggle, heroic resistance, and heroic poor [...] Ginzburg presents history in the lower case; her characters are not heroic protagonists but drift on the eddies created by events played out elsewhere. [...] Ginzburg refuses to set before us sociological or historical vision of Fascism, war, or Resistance, refuses the engaged political stance of neorealism, even while she later became a member of Parliament as an independent voice on the left. Ginzburg, like Elsa Morante or Günter Grass, takes a worm's eye view of history, her characters caught up in events which they can barely comprehend, while the antifascism of some characters in the novel is seen to be rooted in the complex and muddy personal experience as much as in political ideology."[142]

It is in her reappropriation of "stories" that the author declares both her neorealist vision and her appeal to writing as a commitment to reality, the reality of those narratives forgotten by history that yet make history. As a young aspiring writer she discovered the essence of poems and described them as "semplici, fatte di niente; fatte delle cose che si guardavano" ("simple, made of nothing, made of the things one could see").[143]

In her essay "Experience", Joan W. Scott draws an excursus on the value, the function and the meaning of experience in the making of history in which she affirms that,

"When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence upon which explanation is built. […] The evidence of experience then becomes

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[142] Sharon Wood "Women's Writing in the Postwar Period"150

[143] My Translation. The original translation revealed a discrepancy with the original text in Italian. *Family Sayings* 46

evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world […] The project of making experience visible precludes analysis of the working of this system and its historicity."[144] The shift of focus from knowledge to the process of making experience 'material' for historicity is essential in order to understand history as an operation that employs subject, language and experience.

"It is to refuse a separation between experience and language and to insist instead on the productive quality of discourse. Subjects are constituted discursively […] And have agency. They are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them. Being a subject means being "subject to definite conditions of existence, conditions of endowment of agents and conditions of exercise" […] Subjects are constituted discursively, experience is a linguistic event, but neither is it confined to a fixed order of meaning. Since discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual. Experience is a subject's history.Language is the site of history's enactment. Historical explanation cannot, therefore, separate the two."[145]

It is through language and its contextualized subjective origin that experience becomes history. *Lessico Famigliare* is the possibility of writing about oneself through the determination of 'others', it is a process of self identification that starts from outside of oneself and slowly moves in, it is the contextualization of oneself and the idea that 'we are who we are (or who we are not) because of where and with whom we experienced our life'. Using Joan Scott's definition it could be said that the enactment of writing her own story in a familiar collective language

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[144] Joan W. Scott, "Experience" in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, (New York: Routlege, 1992) 25
[145] "Experience" 34

makes this autobiography a collective experience of the self, while becoming an interposition between personal/particular and historical/universal for the reader.

Ginzburg's representation of family dynamics in her autobiography as well as in her novels, highlights the importance of the exploration of family relationality as an exploration of one's identity. While the new generation of the sixties, trying to turn the page from the experience of their parents under the fascist regime, was looking to sever from the institution of the family in order to find new models of community life different from the traditional ones reinforced by the fascist ideology, by the Catholic influence, or those created by the economic boom, Ginzburg proposes the narrative of a woman whose vocation as a writer is organically webbed within that of a mother/daughter/wife/intellectual who returns to the family as an observer, exploring the self from the threshold of stories and sayings offering a different experience of motherhood with its doubts and difficulties. Ginzburg continued to work in the publishing house established by her husband Leone for years after his death and continued to pursue her work as a writer at the same time. Her essays "My Vocation" in the collection titled *The Little Virtues* provides a profound reflection on the subject of writing and motherhood. "[…] then my children were born and when they were very little I could not understand how anyone could sit herself down to write if she had children […] I began to feel contempt for my vocation. Now and again I longed for it desperately and felt that I was in exile, but I tried to despise it and make fun of it and occupy myself solely with the children. […] Because the feeling I then had for my children was one that I had not yet learnt to control. But then little by little I learned, and it did not even take that long. I still made tomato sauce and semolina, but simultaneously I

thought about what I could be writing."[146] As her experience as a mother develops, so does her ability to reestablish her sense of self as separate from the life and necessities of her children that is ultimately manifested in Ginzburg as the capacity to remember, seeing and imagining. "I started writing again like someone who has never written, because it was a long time since I had written anything, and the words seemed rinsed and fresh, everything was new and as it were untouched, and full of taste and fragrance. I wrote in the afternoons while a local girl took my children out for a walk […] I put a few invented people into my story and a few real people from the countryside where we were living; and some of the words that came to me as I was writing were idioms and imprecations local to that area and which I had not known before and these new expressions were like a yeast that fermented and gave life to all the old words."[147]

Her attraction to non bourgeois contexts had been part of her adolescent years when she would seek out "the dreariest places in the city, […] the most desolate public gardens, the most squalid milk-bars, the grubbiest cinemas, and the barest and emptiest cafés"[148] to meet with three friends who lived in poverty and with whom she could escape the well ordered bourgeois life she lived with her parents. She admired the way two of her close friends "had constructed their own code of living in which paternal authority had no value and which consisted of only occasional querulous remonstrance"[149] and together sitting on a cold bench, they would imagine being untied ships drifting on the sea. Her fascination with the unprivileged is a demonstration once again of her commitment to sever from the sanitized life of a bourgeois environment and to immerse in reality made of unheroic individuals and dysfunctional families like "tribes in

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[146] Natalia Ginzburg, "My Vocation" in *Little Virtues* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1985) 63
[147] "My Vocation" 63
[148] *Family Sayings* 113
[149] *Family Sayings* 114

centrifugal movement that find brief moments of respite, then move on again, and end up decimate. Their various components – widowers, estranged spouses, surrogate mothers, old aunts, lovers, lover's relatives, neighbors, children of various age, and step-relatives – are very precariously and unconventionally linked. They cling ferociously to each other, but they are invariably poised to escape into solitude and distance, obsessed by their own unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable, problems."[150]

In her essay "Ricordando il quotidiano. *Lessico famigliare* o l'arte del cantastorie" ["Remembering the Quotidian. *Lessico famigliare* and the art of storytelling"][151] Giuliana Minghelli describes the book as follows "*Lessico famigliare* non e` un romanzo, ne una cronaca di eventi e persone, e` si` un testo della memoria ma non un'autobiografia, il libro e` semplicemente la storia della famiglia Levi."[152] [*Lessico famigliare* is neither a novel nor an account of people and events, it is a text of memory but not an autobiography, the book is simply the story of the Levi family][153]. Minghelli thus defines *Lessico famigliare* not as an autobiography but as a biographical account of the author's family. In Minghelli's analysis, Ginzburg's narrative structure follows the marking of the "cantastorie", of the storyteller, initiated in the Italian literary tradition with the *Novellino* and that influenced the distinguished works of Boccaccio's *Decameron* and later of Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron*.

"La storia della famiglia Levi e` una storia fatta di storie, una storia scandita da un'operazione di raccontar storie che lungi dal rispettare un qualsiasi svolgimento temporale (una trama con inizio, centro e fine) segue capricciosamente, ma dovremmo aggiungere anche inesorabilmente, il suo proprio ritmo segreto ritornando piu` volte su se stessa e riraccontandosi

[150] *Family Sayings* 77-78
[151] My Translation
[152] "Ricordando il quotidiano."157
[153] My translation

all'infinito. Queste storie narrate, nella migliore tradizione dei cantastorie, 'per ammazzare il tempo' finiscono per catturarlo, vale a dire rappresentarlo. La storia della famiglia Levi e la storia del tempo e spazio del suo raccontarsi, la casa e il quotidiano, ed indirettamente la storia dei suoi cantastorie che, come insegna Scheherazade, raccontando, sfidano il tempo e la morte. "[154]

[The story of the Levi family is one made of stories, it is a story defined by a practice of telling which is far from being observant to any temporal linearity (a plot with a beginning, a middle and an end), it is one that capriciously, and maybe we should also add inevitably, follows its own secret rhythm returning over and over upon itself and therefore eternally retelling itself. These stories, narrated in the best traditional ways of the storytellers, "to kill time," end up capturing it, that is representing time. The story of the Levi family is the story of the time and space of its telling, the home and the quotidian. It is also indirectly the story of its storytellers who, as Scheherazade did, through telling, challenge time and death.][155]

Minghelli, guided by Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" explicates that the location that Natalia Ginzburg occupies as a narrator is in fact the one of storyteller, a space that Minghelli identifies as being in between, caught between the role of the transmitter of a collective history unmarked by the sense of ownership and subjectivity, and the one of the autobiographer; the latter though only in her practice of recovering through narration her passion for storytelling and for 'the world of words'[156]. "L'autobiografia, se ancora di autobiografia si vuole parlare, e quindi scritta attraverso un'operazione di sottrazione, e creata attraverso la definizione di cio` che in disegno e` chiamato spazio negativo, lo spazio che imprigiona la figura nel mondo. Il cantastorie realizza questa rappresentazione spostando l'attenzione dalle persone alle loro storie e parole, un

[154]"ricordando il quotidiano" 157-158
[155] My Translation
[156] Minghelli calls it "il mondo delle parole"

patrimonio collettivo di conoscenza che non ha un marchio di proprieta (soggettivita) e che la narratrice si incarica semplicemente di trasmettere. Se ci si chiede chi sia infine il soggetto della narrazione, se la figura o lo spazio che la circonda, a questo punto la risposta piu accurata sarebbe ne l'uno ne l'altro, piuttosto l'incerto e mutevole contorno che li separa: l'aria dove le parole risuonano tuttora, sospese e fissate anche quando gli attori del dialogo e la loro cantastorie hanno ormai lasciato le scene."[157] [The autobiography, if we still want to refer to it as being one, is written through a process of subtraction, and it is created through the definition of that which in drawing is called negative space, the space that captures the figure of the world. The storyteller achieves this representation by shifting the attention from people to stories and words, which are the collective heritage of knowledge unmarked by subjective ownership and that the narrator simply takes upon itself to transmit. If we are wondering whether the subject of the narration would be either the figure or the space that surrounds that narration, at this point the most accurate answer should be neither one nor the other, the answer should rather be the uncertain and changeable surroundings that separates them: the air where the words still echo, suspended and fixed even after the actors of the dialogue and their storyteller have left the scenes.][158] Minghelli sees in the return to the maternal lineage the realization of the maternal desire of familiarity transmitted by the mother through her stories. For Minghelli, *Lessico famigliare* is an attempt to recreate the quotidian in a time of war. Thus it is through her writing and the reappropriation of the maternal language and teaching that Ginzburg experiences and fulfills her return to childhood. "*Lessico famigliare* e` il riconoscimento di un debito e costituisce il tentative di assolverlo. Ma l'assoluzione forse non puo` andare oltre il riconoscimento, che e` riconoscimento del desiderio infantile come desiderio della madre: ritorno al suo insegnamento,

[157] "Ricordando il quotidiano" 159
[158] My Translation

appropriazione della sua parola."[159]

[*Lessico famigliare* is the acknowledgement of an indebtedness and it represents the attempt to absolve it. However, the absolution may not go beyond its acknowledgement which is the acknowledgement of a child's desire for the mother: a return to her teachings, the reappropriation of her word.][160] Is What Minghelli identifies as an indebtedness in fact a sense of guilt? She refers to it as a moral indebtedness (not a responsibility) that Natalia Ginzburg may or may not fulfill by retrieving and reconstructing her memory and that manifests itself through a child's desire for the mother. Seen in this way, Ginzburg's autobiography (her repetitions and reappropriation) will remain confined into a frame that sees it as a personal, as individualistic trajectory, as the nostalgic longing for the warmth of childhood memories and of maternal love; while instead the author's attempt to save, collect, transmit, and report in fact shifts the work into the domain of the collective and will place the autobiography on the threshold of existing for itself and the other at the same time. In this sense it is the autobiographical that needs to be reconsidered as other than the isolated practice of recovery and reconstruction, but as that practice that will bring the self and the other in a simultaneous coexistence within the retelling of the stories, as the quotation from Ginzburg about the stories as hieroglyphics wants to suggests.

"Truth is when it is itself no longer. Diseuse, Thought-Woman, Spider-Woman, griotte, storytalker, fortune-teller, witch. If you have the patience to listen, she will take delight in relating it to you. An entire history, an entire vision of the world, a lifetime story. Mother always has a mother."[161]

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[159] "Ricordando il quotidiano" 160

[160] My Translation

[161] Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989) 121

In the 1964 republication of his original 1946 neorealist novel *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, Italo Calvino, a friend of Ginzburg and a colleague at the Einaudi Publishing House, writes the Preface to his book in an almost explanatory tone as an attempt to provide the political and literary context for his first novel, written purely in line with the neorealist poetic of Vittorini and Fenoglio, a novel that he comes to explain as autobiographical and that will end up being completely distinct from all the rest of his successive fictional work. In that Preface Calvino says:

"The literary explosion of those years in Italy was not so much an artistic phenomenon, more a physical, existential, collective need. […] The fact of having emerged from an experience – a war, a civil war – which had spared no one, established an immediacy of communication between the writer and his public: we were face to face, on equal terms, bursting with stories to tell […] the greyness of everyday life seemed something that belonged to another epoch; we existed in a multi-coloured world of stories. The result was that those who began writing in that period found themselves dealing with the same subject matter as the anonymous storytellers: not only did we have the adventures that each one of us had endured personally or witnessed, but there were also tales which came to us already formed as narratives, with a voice, a cadence, a facial gesture to accompany them."[162] Calvino attributes parts of his novel to this newly born oral tradition. The experiences of the war became the "raw material" for the writers of that period who felt pressed by the urge to express. "Characters, landscapes, shoot-outs, political messages, dialect words, swear words, lyric passages, violence and sexual encounters, all these were but colours on our palette, notes on our scale […] we claimed to be a school of objective writers, but

[162] Italo Calvino, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* (Harper Perennial, 2000) 8

there were never such effusive lyricists as us."[163] One of the major objectives of neorealist writers was to retrieve the Italian dialects which were considered the language of the immediacy and of the quotidian, dialect represented an essential characteristic for an Italian identity. "The style was very uneven, at times bordering on the precious, at other times just written down as it came, aiming solely at immediacy of expression; it became a kind of documentary archive (including local sayings and songs) which bordered folklore…"[164] But the most crucial part of the Preface is Calvino's analysis on the historical and political context that shaped the consciousness of the postwar neorealist writers. "But I was not so culturally ill-informed as to be unaware that the influence of history on literature is indirect, slow and often contradictory […] We all knew that, we were not that naïve, but I believe that when one has lived through a significant historical epoch or taken an active part in momentous events, one feels a particular responsibility…."[165]

In his novel Calvino had wanted to represent the anti-hero, the "marginal people, the lumpenproletariat! […] What do we care about someone who is already a hero, someone who already has class-consciousness? What we ought to be portraying is the process by which those two goals are reached! As long as there exists a single person who does not have that awareness, our duty must be to concern ourselves solely with that person!"[166] This was the spirit with which he wrote the novel and these were the ideals he shared with Pavese, Ginzburg, Vittorini and Fenoglio. Although Calvino's novel is purely about the Resistance, many are the neorealist poetic intersections between the early Calvino of *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* and Ginzburg's *Family Saying:* the focus on reporting stories, the immediacy of language, and the choice of a

[163] *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* 13
[164] *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* 13
[165] *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* 17
[166] *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* 17

child's eye as the prospective through which to make sense of the surroundings – the latter a key element masterfully developed by De Sica in his 1948 film *Ladri di Biciclette*. Ginzburg had retained in her work that early commitment to reality and as Calvino, twenty years later she returns to those early years, to the language and work produced immediately after the war. *Family Sayings* is for Ginzburg a new study of the roots and truth of language and consciousness.

> At that time two styles of writing were fashionable: one was a simple enumeration of facts, in the wake of a grey damp reality in a bare lifeless landscape; the other was a violent delicious mingling of facts and tears, deep sighs and sobbing. In neither one or the other was there any selection of words, because in the first the words were absorbed into the greyness, and in the other they were lost amid the groans and sobs. The mistake common to both was a belief that everything could be transmuted into poetry and language, which meant that ultimately there was a revulsion from poetry and language, so strong that it carried with it true poetry and a true sense of language. Everyone was reduced to silence, paralysed by ennui and nausea. We had to go back to choosing words, examining them in order to see whether they were true or false, to see if they had true roots or only the transitory roots of the common illusion. Writers were obliged to take their work seriously. The time that followed was like a hangover, a time of nausea, lassitude and boredom, and everyone felt in one way or another that they had been cheated or betrayed. This was equally true of those who lived in the real world, and those who possessed or thought they possessed means of describing it. And so everyone went their own way again, alone and discontented.[167]

While the storm of the war was happening outside the Levi's home – and inside with the family participation in antifascist movements – and the appearances of well known intellectuals, politicians, artists, and activists in the house is a quotidian affair, Natalia Ginzburg's interest remains focused on human relations and in people's sense of solitude, which she describes as a prison no one escapes from and that is augmented by the pressure of the fascist agenda. When the war ends and many friends disappear, Ginzburg observes, her mother suddenly began to feel disoriented and lost. "Her geography was all confused after the war. She could no longer think calmly of Grassi or Polikar. They had had the power to transform distant countries into

[167] *Family Sayings* 142

something homely, ordinary and cheerful, to make the whole world a town or street which she could go down in a moment in her thoughts, in the steps of those few familiar reassuring names. After the war the world seemed vast, unknowable and boundless."[168] This experience marks a reversal in the relationship between mother and daughter; Ginzburg understands she can no longer expect the protection of her mother but rather needs to be protective of her fragile state. Ginzburg's return is moved by the desire not to experience the warmth of the now lost quotidian family life, but her willingness to reorder and rediscover her memories as an adult who now understands relations through the eyes of compassion. "And now we are really adults we think, and we are astonished that this is what being an adult is – not in truth everything we believed as a child, not in truth self confidence, not in truth the calm ownership of everything on earth. We are adult because we have behind us the silent presence of the dead, whom we ask to judge our current actions and from whom we ask forgiveness for past offenses: we should like to uproot from our past so many cruel words, so many cruel acts that we committed when, though we feared death, we did not know – we had not yet understood – how irreparable, how irremediable, death is: we are adult because of the silent answers, because of all the silent forgiveness of the dead which we carry within us."[169] And it is with compassion that she looks at her mother's relationship made of undisclosed sentiments, her mother who would substitute a saying for a word of acknowledgment, a saying as an evocation, a calling "I rejoined my mother in Florence. Misfortune always made her feel cold and she wrapped herself in a shawl. We did not exchange many words about Leone's death. She had been very fond of him, but she did not like talking about the dead; her constant preoccupation was bathing the children, combing their hair and

[168] *Family Sayings* 140
[169] "Human Relationships" in *The Little Virtues* 93-94

keeping them warm. 'Do you remember the spindleshanks? and Villi?' she asked. 'What do you think has happened to them?'"[170]

"She had never treated me as an equal but had always been maternal and protective"[171] With a forgiving mind she reevaluates her past and the people "who lived through those times with *her* [me]"[172] and states "All our life we have only known how to be masters and servants: but in that secret moment of ours, in our moment of perfect equilibrium, we have realized that there is no real authority or servitude on the earth. And so it is that now as we turn to that secret moment we look at others to see whether they have lived through an identical moment, or whether they are still far away from it; it is this that we have to know. It is the highest moment in the life of a human being, and it is necessary that we stand with others whose eyes are fixed on the highest moment of their destiny."[173] This "perfect equilibrium" as "the highest moment in the life of a human being" is realized in the pages of an autobiography in which the self stands not as an authority by as a presence among others and is created within the complex web of relational existence. "Human relationships have to be rediscovered and reinvented every day. We have to remember constantly that every kind of meeting with our neighbor is a human action and so it is always evil and good, true and deceitful, a kindness or a sin. […] and though we know all the long road we have to travel down in order to arrive at the point where we have a little compassion."[174]

Lessico Famigliare is neither an autobiography nor a novel or a biography. It is perhaps all of these genres together under the common characteristic of being a 'family historical novel'.

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[170] *Family Sayings* 138
[171] *Family Sayings* 116
[172] *Family Sayings* Preface
[173] "Human Relationships" 94
[174] "Human Relationships" 95

The lives narrated speak for themselves in a collective realm that expands from the particular to the universal, from the personal to the historical, never to be fixed on one event but rather to absorb the complexity of history, of the history found in history books. Its language is that of memory and eternity imprinted in family sayings that escape the presence and their immediacy to become voices of an eternal past. It is the story of a family that lives and witnesses the changes of society before, during and after one of the most tragic historical times, but is also the story of its author becoming a writer/mother and that of finding 'self'. There is no beginning, no middle and no end to this structure of memory, but only the form in which it appears at times linear at times contorted into an a-temporality either mistakenly present or nostalgically passed; it is a memory contained into a realm space/time that begins and ends in the pages of the book but that breaths and expands into history. This recollection springs out in one long shot never cut or edited to take a definite or finished shape. It is a work "a bassorilievo" on which the passing finger touches one figure after another in its particular shape but never to separate it from the rest of the piece without which it would have no meaning, no life. It's a light that spies, but never reveals. It is fairly molded around the conviction that everything counts, equally and for this reason there are no protagonists, no major characters. *Lessico Famigliare* is not a chronicle of events, but an open awareness that sucks in all that is relevant in order to understand what is out and inside oneself. It is an attempt to cope and establish a relationship with the past, a reconfiguration of life and of narrative.

Reading *Lessico Famigliare* means to drop any expectation and to let language mold its own unique and meaningful form. Through language the reader is able to place parts together and to form the entire picture. The story is restated through the familiar language, sayings, expressions, songs and poems and each member of the family, living or only alive in the

memory, is brought to a physical re-existence by voice and its presence; each member is never to be concealed and forgotten, once voice has become language. Its language penetrates in the world of imagination and of reality, involving mind, senses and sound with the ultimate intention of braking a silence. Behind a sharp, direct, idiomatic or invented expression, there is a space filled by history and story. Jack Spicer said that language is the parasite the poem is invading[175]; in this reversal the poem exists in a world that is both outside of language and that communicates to the rest of the world through language, connecting peoples.

Story and History in *Lessico Famigliare* are entered into the reader's mind through a language that only speaks (through a voice) that does not reveal or explain leaving a void that becomes a silence or a simple inkling to a new anecdote. And so one is left to imagine what is behind the expression such as "sbrodeghezzi" or "la Paola, che sempia" used by the father for instance. Characters are described in terms of their relationship with the rest of the family members, but through the things they say and do, remembered by the author. There is never an attempt to reveal and disclose the specific significance behind a saying, even the language of narration is colloquial, more a form of spoken language, for instance the article in front of a person's name is typical of colloquial Italian in certain regions: "Il Silvio, la Rosina, la Paola", and syntactical/linguistic examples such as the following, suggest a willingness to maintain the narration into a form of 'oral literature':

"Era stata in passato, mia nonna, molto ricca"[176]

[My grandmother had been very rich in the past][177]

"Mia nonna era da giovane, a suo dire, molto ricca"[178]

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[175] Jack Spicer, *The House that Jack Built:The Collected Lectures*, Ed. Peter Gizzi, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998) 34

[176] *Lessico Famigliare* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1963) 11

[177] My Translation

[My grandmother used to say to be very rich when she was younger][179]

"Mia nonna era da giovane, a suo dire, bellissima"

[My grandmother used to say she was beautiful when she was young][180]

"Era, questo zio Cesare, tutto diverso da mio padre, tranquillo, grasso e sempre allegro;"[181]

[Uncle Cesare was very different from my father. He was clam, chubby and always happy][182]

"Avevano, il nonno Parente e la nonna Dolcetta, una figlia, chiamata Rosina."[183][Grandfather Parente and Grandmother Dolcetta had a daughter named Rosina][184]

"Non c'era a quell'ora, nel suo laboratorio, nessuno"[185] There was no one in the lab at that time][186]

In her analysis of Lessico Famigliare, Clara Borrelli affirms "Appaiono rugiadosi i costrutti nei quali la scrittrice, spostando a sinistra il verbo, dimostra insistente la disponibilita` a lavorare con inversioni e segmentazioni la frase." And further " Gli esempi riferiti certo possono vivacizzare la pagina, rendere il linguaggio parlato, ma non sono troppo insistenti e finiscono per fare rigida l'espressione, ben altro che spontanea, fresca e vivace."[187] [The sentences where the author moves the verb to the left, appear affected phrases in which she demonstrates her insistent availability on working with inversions and fragmentations.][188] Borrelli, in other words, observes that this kind of construction (verb before the subject) gives the text a sense of coarseness, but

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[178] *Lessico Famigliare* 11
[179] My Translation
[180] My Translation
[181] *Lessico Famigliare* 21
[182] My Translation
[183] *Lessico Famigliare* 23
[184] My Translation
[185]*Lessico Famigliare* 32
[186] My Translation
[187] Clara Borrelli, *Notizie di Natalia Ginzburg* (Napoli: L'Orientale, 2002) 65
[188] My Translation

the fluidity of the language will be sustained precisely by the use of these strategies if one is willing to look at this work as an 'oral representation', as, in other words, the immediacy and the characteristic that connects memory to the past. Through the colloquial language the reader is able to enter the private life of the Levi Family, while it is through the sayings (voices) that he/she is able to recognize each character as through a call.

The examples reported earlier then validate a stylistic choice that give a sense of an immediacy linked to memory .

Music and memory become the central point in Nicoletta Simborowski's work on Natalia Ginzburg. Her analysis on the musicality of *Lessico Famigliare* is very detailed. The family sayings and their repetitions, she affirms, intervaled by descriptive narrative moments, create a "melody" of voices and silences. "To summarize my view of the 'music' of *Lessico Famigliare*, then, there are two kinds of style, but they are linked in terms of musical idiom: what has been called the 'cantilenato gemito ininterrotto', 'cicaleccio', or background music, is in fact a melody consisting of the Lessico, whilst the 'realistic' prose narrative is a kind of silence; Ginzburg seeks silence at the most poignant moments, since she dreads the wrong or inadequate expression. Her references to Proust signal the use of musical memory-prompts, but also clarify her technique of shutting out the personal voices of memory when dealing with the strategies of other people, however closely they touch her and indeed particularly when they touch her closely." [189] She also refers back to a statement that Natalia Ginzburg made regarding *Lessico Famigliare*. "Lessico Famigliare e` un romanzo di pura, nuda, scoperta e dichiarata memoria

[189] Nicoletta Simborowski, *Secrets and Puzzles Silence and the Unsaid in Contemporary Italian Writing* (Oxford: University of Oxford 2003) 90

[…]. Scriverlo era per me del tutto come parlare."[190] [Lessico Famigliare is a novel of pure, crude, discovered and declared memory […] writing it was for me the same as speaking.]

This is an assertion that explains the use of a so called 'ordinary' language or 'colloquial language' she chooses in her narration. But this 'linguaggio parlato', not only creates a musicality of voices, but it also gives the narration the orality that transforms it into storytelling, into a form of narration that is both informative and entertaining, as well as a moment of reflexion and of exteriorization. And the pauses that Nicoletta Simborowski calls "silences" become moments of closure in which the narrator takes the reader from the individual life into a collective presence. The descriptive instance functions as a 'break' of yet another type of silence, that of the self. The sayings and the repetitions exorcise any reference to the self (the voices reported only belong to family members and friends) while creating a 'coral' reconfiguration of the author's family, it is only through the 'musical pauses' that the author takes a position of authority and presence in the text. It is also significant to see that these descriptive moments coincide, in the text, with a time in history when families separated, people stopped talking for fear, and friends disappeared. The war in Italy destroyed cities and life, it silenced the voice of culture leaving as the only channel of communication underground newspapers and clandestine meetings. Her silences coincide with the loss of her husband, Pavese's suicide, and the confusion of the post war years. In this latter section, marked by her marriage to Leone, there is a distinct change in rhythm and a less 'vocal participation'.

In *Family Sayings* there is a desire to trace, to make the path visible. Do the stories and the sayings sound different at the end of the autobiography? Time has passed but the sayings remain to haunt that hallway between the threshold and home. The stories and the sayings are

[190] *Secrets and Puzzles* 79

reported as they have become: reverberations of familiar voices. Ginzburg's archeological retrieval of sayings occurs without any infiltration of the author's consciousness and that makes the dialogue reveal 'the power structure' through an objective method. She stands outside of the dialogues and lets the voices speak; she allows the readers to bear the authoritarian behavior of the father, the fastidious absentmindedness of the mother and the silence of Leone. She allows the readers to reconfigure the dynamics of relationships, the antagonisms, the struggle for recognition, the desire to leave and to distance oneself from the familiar. There is a magical split that occurs between the stories and the self, a split that allows the invention of oneself against them: where did I fit in the stories? What did I think of them? How did they affect me? Why where they told? How did they shape me? How much of them is still left in me? How much of those stories will I allow to be in me?

CHAPTER 4

Gloria Anzaldùa: The writer as Shaman

"From the Great Above she opened her ear to the Great Below.
From the Great Above the goddess opened her ear to the Great Below.
From the Great Above Inanna opened her ear to the Great Below."
Inanna Queen of Heaven and Earth.

"[…] Mother Mask open your set wooden mouth
Please open your carved wooden protruding
live dead mouth & let your green
bronze dark light skin shimmer with
life death, close open your eyes & close open
your mouth & be dumb speak to us
be still to us, tell us an old old new one
an old new story truth lie of our own life deaths
our peace wars, tells us our own old story we don't
know it any more, haven't had a
Mother, a Mask Mother, a wood real
mother for forever"
Mother Mask by Alice Notley

In Borderlands/La Frontera, Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldùa talks about an ability, a faculty to capture the depth of the soul which she identifies as the non-essentialist, but rather evolutionary self. This faculty, *la facultad*, which breaks the habitual modes of seeing reality and the patterns of consciousness, she says, does not reside in reason but in the body.

Anzaldùa explains that those who have suffered oppression "the females, the homosexuals of all races, the darkskinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign" are more likely to develop this sense as a "survival tactic" that allows them to capture danger, a threat, or even anger and depression right through the smell of another, or through a tingling on the skin. What Anzaldùa is presenting is another form of understanding the world within and without, that is dislodged from ever-dominant reason and located instead in the body where she affirms, this sense has been dormant from long-ago times. "This shift in perception deepens the way we see concrete objects and people; the senses become so acute and piercing that we can see through things, view events in depth, a piercing that reaches the underworld (the realm of the soul). As we plunge vertically, the break with its accompanying new seeing, makes us pay attention to the soul, and we are thus carried into awareness—an experiencing of soul (self)."[191] Fear, illness and death, she concludes, can increase this *facultad* precisely because they represent a point of rupture with the everyday "safe and easy ignorance" and "mode of consciousness," they shatter "defenses and resistance" and it is then that the journey through the soul in the depth of the underworld, the pit, a realm of birth and death, can begin.

Anzaldùa reconstructs and unpacks the Mexican myths of goddesses, deemed evil and inappropriate by the Spanish Christian missionaries, with the meticulousness of an archivist and the sentiment of a dispossessed, and reestablishes them as the interpreters of a collective

[191] Gloria Anzaldùa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987) 30

consciousness/unconsciousness suppressed by the Spanish colonialists. She chooses the ancient Aztec goddess of life, death and rebirth Coatlicue as the archetype through which regeneration and change occurs, and by reinhabiting these ancient myths she at once finds her own individual space and reestablishes the genesis of her relatedness to her community.

Borderlands/La Frontera, written in Chicano and English without any translation, has become a manifesto of Chicano identity, it is an understanding of borders, from geographical ones, precisely as those that have divided and defined the US and Mexico, to cultural borders which segregate communities and individuals because of ethnicity, language, religion, gender, and sexuality. The latter are the borders Anzaldùa is mostly concerned with. With its annexion of Mexican territories that now represent the State of Texas, and after the US-Mexican war, The US became responsible for the separation of entire communities and families which overnight became citizens of a country with a different language and a different culture. In 1830, Mexico, closed its frontiers to the illegal settlement of US immigrants and in 1836 General Lopez de Santa Anna centralized his government establishing a dictatorship to which many states, including Texas, rose against. This signals for Texas the beginning of the war for its independence from Mexico. In 1846 the US invaded more territories in Mexico forcing the nation into a war and to finally concede the territories of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and California. Soon cultural differences in the annexed territories, marked the establishment of a hierarchy that instituted a white supremacy not only in the social and political structures, but also in cultural ones. Similar to Native Americans, Chicanos became victims of injustice and segregation still present today. “Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens—whether they possess documents or not, whether they are Chicanos, Indians or Black. Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed strangled, gassed,

shot. The only 'legitimate' inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with white."[192] To this territory, caught in its paradoxical modes of oppression, is also added the illegal migration of Mexicans who attempt to cross the border to the US. "Those who make it past the checking points of the border Patrol find themselves in the midst of 150 years of racism in Chicano barriors in the Southwest and in big northern cities. Living in a no-man's-borderland, caught between being treated as criminals and being able to eat, between resistance and deportation, the illegal refugees are some of the poorest and the most exploited of any people in the U.S."[193]

In this context Anzaldùa was raised by a family of farmers, and was the first of six generations to ever leave her homeland. As for Ginzburg and many other women autobiographers, also for Anzaldùa the return takes place in the process of writing, where the self after distancing, reestablishes a new relationship with the past and the present, and therefore with the community and the family. "To this day I'm not sure where I found the strength to leave the source, the mother, disangage from my family, *mi tierra*, *mi gente*, and all that picture stood for. I had to leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me."[194] This first rupture from the familiar represents for Anzaldùa the beginning of the journey in building her own identity that, as we will see later, will be both distinct from the set of preconceived cultural expectations and ideas of her community, and linked to it through a path chosen and rediscovered by the author.

Anzaldùa describes how during the time of her growing up the general expectations for any woman of her community were very precise: a woman could either become a mother, a nun,

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[192] *Borderlands/LaFrontera* 25-26
[193] *Borderlands/LaFrontera* 34
[194] *Borderlands/LaFrontera* 38

or she would turn into a prostitute. She also points out that in time the path of education opened up the possibility to become independent. This was in part the path she chose for herself but not without judgment and resentment from her community. Along with the social structure that sees women as perpetuators of men's supremacy, she sees a more subtle and profound structures that has been part of her cultural tissue, the spiritual and religious image of womanhood.

"Humans fear the supernatural, both the undivine (the animal impulses such as sexuality, the unconscious, the unknown, the alien) and the divine (the superhuman, the god in us). Culture and religion seek to protect us from these two forces. The female, by virtue of creating entities of flesh and blood her own stomach […] by virtue of being in tune with nature's cycles, is feared. Because according to Christianity and most other major religions, woman is carnal, animal, and closer to the undivine, she must be protected. Protected from herself. Woman is the stranger, the other."[195] To this concept of womanhood followed also a 'sanitized' versions of the mythological stories of Mexican gods and goddesses implemented by the Christian Missionaries, which were to represent the feminine and that will be discussed further in this essay. Along with these interpretations, was the confused message that came directly from the model of the mother whose creed was to be protective of the child at the same time as being submissive to men. This particular behavior, Anzaldùa explains, was perhaps the consequence of a tribal structure that necessarily sought the survival of the clan over that of the existence of the individual. And it is precisely this understanding, along with the realization of her own sexuality, that raised in the author questions of belonging, legitimacy, of exclusion, and conformity. "There is something compelling about being both male and female, about having an entry into both worlds. Contrary to some psychiatric tenets, half and half are not suffering from confusion of sexual identity, or

[195] *Borderlands/LaFrontera* 39

even from confusion of gender. What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other. It claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better. But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the *hieros gamos*: the coming together of opposite qualities within."[196] From this very specific condition comes Anzaldùa's poetics of borders, as a clarification of an existence on the threshold of any definition, a shifting ground where the self is not built on legitimacy or conformity, but rather on its plurality— a plurality that for Anzaldùa is specifically connected with the oppressed and the outcasts. In an interview, the author calls this being-in-the-world, the Nepantla state and describes it as follows:

"a stage that women and men, and whoever is willing to change into a new person and further grow and develop, go through…Nepantla, which is a Nahuatl word for the space between two bodies of water, the space between two worlds. It is a limited space, a space where you are not this or that but where you are changing. You haven't got into the new identity yet and haven't left the old identity behind either—you are in a kind of transition."[197] For Anzaldùa this process of change—the Nepantla—occurs also as a stage in writing, where an individual while composing an autobiographical or fictional story, draws the fragments of experience in order to compose a reality, a culture, an identity. "The art of composition, whether you are composing a work of fiction or your life, or whether you are composing reality, always means pulling off fragmented pieces and putting them together into a whole that makes sense." [198]

Therefore the self is written in the symbols, the images and the stories as a construction made of a plurality of other existences and cultures, as a self involved in a journey towards new

[196] *Borderlands/La Frontera* 41
[197] *Borderlands/La Frontera* 237
[198] *Borderlands/La Frontera* 238

boundaries. The self here is viewed as a process never fully realized and not as an ontological essence. It is interesting to note that the Nepantla state is one that involves a spiritual undertaking which is initiated by suffering and followed by meditation on an image or symbol, making this state one that involves the realm of the spirit. The author makes a clear parallel between the power of writing and that of a shaman.

"When I create stories in my head, that is allow the voices and scenes to be projected in the inner screen of my mind, I 'trance.' I used to think I was crazy or that I was having hallucinations. But now I realize it is my job, my calling, to traffic in images. Some of these film-like narratives I write down; most are lost, forgotten. When I don't write the images down for several days or weeks or months, I get physically ill. Because writing invokes images from my unconscious, and because some of the images are residue of trauma which I then have to reconstruct." This power is not limited to the suffering and questioning of the self, but it is directly connected to that of others, as the author clearly affirms in the following statement "I am playing with my Self, I am playing with the world's soul, I am the dialogue between my Self and *el espiritu del mundo*. I change myself, I change the world."[199]

Jungian writer and psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés in her work *Women who run with the Wolves* furthers her study of female archetypes and their stories in order to interpret women's unconscious. In particular she takes mythical stories of goddesses from around the world to reconstruct the archetype of the Wild Woman—a technique she uses in her psychoanalytic sessions, where the stories become forms of interpreting the self. Estés' work represents an interesting study on the role of storytelling in self formation, as a guidance to an understanding of the self, which in her case for women, she identifies as the wild archetype of la

[199] *Borderlands/La Frontera* 92

Loba, the wolf, the wild woman. "So what is the Wild Woman? From the viewpoint of archetypal psychology as well as from the storytelling tradition, she is the female soul. Yet she is more: she is the source of the feminine. She is all that is of instinct, of the worlds both seen and hidden."[200] Estés emphasizes clinical and developmental psychology and uses "the simplest and most accessible ingredient for healing—stories."[201] Though an examination of fairytales, folktales, legend, mythos, dreams and personal narratives, she looks for the clues which will elucidate on the deeper path of instructions in order for a woman's development and healing. "Stories are embedded with instructions which guide us about the complexities of life. Stories enable us to understand the need for the ways to raise a submerged archetype."[202] As an ethno-clinical psychologist, a Jungian analyst and a collector of stories, she provides many examples on the function of self formation in stories. The story of La Loba, the woman who lives in the desert and walks around collecting bones of wolves on which she breathes over in order to bring them back to life for instance, can be used as a teaching of the transformative function of the psyche.

"The wild woman archetype can be expressed in other terms which are equally apt […] but because it is tacit, prescient and visceral, among cantadoras it is called the wise or knowing nature. It is sometimes called the 'woman who lives at the end of time,' or the 'woman who lives at the edge of the world.'"[203] Through reading and performing stories, among which is the story la Llorona[204], which Anzaldùa herself had been attracted to, individuals interpret their own lives uncovering the complex and obscure realm of the unconscious, but they also reveal a much deeper connection with a collective, forgotten history.

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[200] Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996) 13
[201] *Women Who Run with the Wolves* 14
[202] *Women Who Run with the Wolves* 16
[203] *Women Who Run with the Wolves* 8-9
[204] For a summary of the story of La Llorona see note 28.

"stories are medicine […] they have such power; they do not require that we do, be, act anything—we need only listen […] The remedies for repair or reclamation of any lost psychic drive are contained in stories […] Stories are embedded with instructions which guide us about the complexities of life. Stories enable us to understand the need for and the ways to raise a submerged archetype."[205] In particular, what is interesting about Estés' work is the focus on the shaman as the storyteller. Anzaldùa like Estés grew up in the south-west of the United States, on the border between Mexico and Texas, and from a young age had been exposed to many of the stories of mythical goddesses Anzaldùa talks about in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Her field work in the indigenous villages in central and south America, among the Native Americans from Inuit to the pueblo, and in the Bahamas, brought her in contact with storytelling and its functions.
"The trance-teller calls on El Duende, the wind that blows soul into the faces of listeners. A trance teller learns to be physically doubled-jointed through the meditative practice of story, that is training oneself to undo certain psychic gates and ego apertures in order to let the voice speak, the voice that is older than the stones."[206] The storyteller in her trance locates herself in the world in between, at the edge of self and others, abandoning the ego in order to open up to change, but she also becomes a healer, a singer, and a voice to her listeners.

Anzaldùa affirms that for the ancient Aztecs the poet was able not only to communicate with the divine through poetry and its recreation of truth through images and symbols, but also to reconcile the world above with the one of the underworld. She interprets this as a process in which the "metaphorical mind precedes analytical consciousness," and by reinhabiting this function, she defaces the western order of thought and knowledge formation. With such statement Anzaldùa tries to undo centuries of western appropriation of indigenous culture.

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[205] *Women Who Run with the Wolves* 15-16
[206] *Women Who Run with the Wolves* 20

"Ethnocentrism is the tyranny of Western aesthetics. An Indian mask in an American museum is transposed into an alien aesthetic system where what is missing is the presence of power invoked through performance ritual. It has become a conquered thing, a dead 'thing' separated from nature and, therefore, its power." [207] In the paragraph that follows, the author strongly condemns the behavior of the white American towards the people of color and calls for an anti-Cartesian understanding of the relation between man and the world, one not in opposition or in superiority. "Instead of surreptitiously ripping off the vital energy of people of color and putting it to commercial use, whites could allow themselves to share and exchange and learn from us in a respectful way. By taking *curanderismo*, Santeria, shamanism, Taoism, Zen and otherwise delving into the spiritual life ceremonies of multi-colored people, Anglos would perhaps lose the white sterility they have in their kitchens, bathrooms, hospitals, mortuaries and missile bases…Let us hope that the left hand, that of darkness, of femaleness, of 'primitiveness,' can divert the indifferent right-handed, 'rational' suicidal drive that, unchecked, could blow us into acid rain in a fraction of a millisecond."[208]

It is interesting to deepen the connection between Anzaldùa's work and the practice of the shaman as it is there that the "threshold" of an ethical pact with her community and her listeners/readers is found.

In "The religious Vision of Gloria Anzaldùa. *Borderlands/La Frontera* as a shamanic space*"*, Davíd Carrasco and Roberto Lint Sagarena explore *Borderlands/La Frontera* as a documentation of Anzaldùa's power as a shaman and provide an historical and cultural contextualization of the practice. "The career of the shaman's ecstatic life has been described as commonly beginning with a spiritual crisis and rupture from society. The lifelong career of the

[207] *Borderlands/La Frontera* 90
[208] *Borderlands/La Frontera* 91

shaman, which may include personal oscillation between severe illness and healing, is often dedicated to service to the community through healing."[209] The authors approach the usual question that a study on shamanism tends to raise in a western reader—the same question Mircea Eliade will attempt to answer in his book *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries,* and that is, the parallel between shamanism and nervous pathologies. "One question that accompanies many studies of shamanism is the pathological nature of ecstatic initiation: people take magical flights, talk with spirits, go into sustained trances, and uncover other modes of consciousness. Are shamans inhabited by psychological illness, or profound *locura* [madness]? While we are using the term *loca-centric* to describe Anzaldùa s writing, we do not intend to reduce her work to locura. We emphasize that it is precisely her wild serpentine visions that ground her and allow her to produce her creative language that she employs to heal and reconstitute herself in the chaos of la frontera [...] Anzaldùa's description of her shamanism tell of her spiritual journey through disequilibrium and the development of a spoken or written poetics that reflect and contain the pain of these ordeals."[210] The authors, in their attempt to clarify Anzaldùa's shamanic practice are well aware of the preconceived ideas such topics have historically raised. And in order to further elucidate this point I would like to turn to the study of shamanism by Mircea Eliade.

In the first part of his work on myths, dreams and mysteries of the ancient world, Mircea Eliade devotes a large space to the introduction and contextualization of the shaman. Here is what he provides as the ways in which an individual begins the path as an 'apprentice':

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[209] Davíd Carrasco and Roberto Sagarena. "The Religious Vision of Gloria Anzaldùa: *Borderlands/La Frontera* as a Shamanic Space." in Espinosa, Gastón and García, Mario T. eds. *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, and Culture.* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008) 10

[210] "The Religious Vision of Gloria Anzaldúa", 12

"One becomes a shaman (a) by spontaneous vocation— the 'call' or 'election'; (b) by hereditary transmission from shamanist profession; (c) by personal decision or, more rarely, by the will of the clan. But whatever the method of his election, a shaman is only recognized as such at the end of a twofold instruction: first, of the ecstatic order (dreams, visions, trances, etc.) and secondly, of the traditional order (shamanic techniques, names and functions of the spirits, mythology and genealogy of the clan, secret language, etc.)."[211] As the author explains, there is a ''training" which is accompanied by power and predisposition towards shamanic practices. He also identifies traits and characteristics common to individuals who have the will to pursue the path. "The future shaman marks himself off progressively by some strange behavior: he seeks solitude, becomes a dreamer, loves to wander in woods or desert places, has visions, sings in his sleep, etc."[212] The period of wandering and solitude, which may be painful and physically demanding, is followed with a return to the village with a realization and a responsibility of possessing a divine power which is not only an essential, respected and devoted attribute by the inhabitants, but that it is also vital in the equilibrium of their life. Therefore,

"Far from being neuropaths or degenerates, shamans are, from the intellectual point of view, evidently superior to those around them. They are the principal custodians of the rich oral literature: the poetic vocabulary of a Yakut shaman comprises 12,000 words, whilst his ordinary speech—all that is known to the rest of the community—consists of only 4,000. Among the KasakhKirghizes the baqca, 'singer, poet, musician, seer, priest and doctor, seems to be the guardian of the popular religious traditions, the custodian of legends several centuries old.'"[213] The shaman as here described by Mircea Eliade is far from being a victim of a psychological

[211] Mircea Eliade. *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1960) 75
[212] *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* 75
[213] *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* 78

imbalance, he/she is a source of collective knowledge, of healing, of spiritual guidance, yet he is also a human being, who shares with all the rest of human beings a life on earth, a characteristic that makes him/her he/she a member of a non-dualistic world.

After the decision of becoming a shaman and having declared the will to be a seer, as a shaman is often considered, the training will be completed when the aspirants will have had the experience of death and resurrection. It is through this experience that the shaman will find the illumination that will allow him/her to navigate through darkness, the future and the secrets of other souls. In Indo-Tibetan tantrism, in central Asia and in the Eskimo, this experience of living one's own death and complete bodily disintegration is called a "contemplation of the skeleton," "where reduction to a skeleton constitutes, for the hunting peoples, a symbolic-ritual complex centered in the notion of life as perpetual renewal." [214] One needs only to look at the great poetic works by Dante, Homer, Gilgamesh, Inanna, as examples directly liked to such vision of spiritual endeavor: the experience of loss and search as often the descent into the underworld signifies, followed by a rebirth, a regeneration which finds its meaning in the civic communion—Dante's journey for the salvation of the corrupt Florentines and Odysseus to save Ithaca from the assault of the suitors. In the Sumeric epics of Gilgamesh and Inanna we clearly see the transformation of the individual into a man and a woman for his people. Gilgamesh returns to Uruk with a new understanding of his duties and appreciation of his kingdom, while Inanna represents the initiation to equilibrium between two reigns (the underworld and earth), symbol of a state of fertility and wellness as well as the personal journey to face the question of life and death. Contemporary poets Alice Notley and Diane Di Prima have been greatly influenced by the study of storytellers, poets and shamans. In Notley's *Descent of Alette*, the poet undertakes a journey,

[214] *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* 83

resembling the one of Inanna in the underworld, in the underground of New York city subway system, and it is here, among the voices—so compellingly present and evident in the unique form of Notley's verse made of a rhythm of quotation marks—that a reconciliation with the story of her deceased Vietnam veteran brother takes place. In an interview with the Editor of the *Kenyon Review* David Baker she affirms "After a couple of people dear to me died in the '80s, I read a lot of books by Mircea Eliade that asserted that the response of indigenous peoples to any crisis was to recite their creation stories, to sing the world into being once more, but each time being always the first time. I seem to have incorporated this idea into my own procedures. But I'm always, also, trying to find out what really happened at the beginning. I don't accept any of the stories I know, though I find some of them quite interesting: I'm looking for my own, true version. And I'm looking for the perfect singing of it, the exact and perfect rendering. Of course a beginning can be a later one too, an *in medias res* beginning: It's something like, This is the beginning of my great change, my truest becoming, my deepest understanding of the world. This is what is really going on."[215] Diane Di Prima's *Loba,* whose mythological goddess is identified as a bone gatherer and recreator, is in this work made to represent the voices of women lost within the dogmatic western thought. In her retrieval of other myths, Di Prima tries to recreate new roles for women. For both Notley and Di Prima the intention was to return to a voice, a true personal voice, that was both deeply connected to a communal knowledge and that it also suffered privately.[216]

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[215] "Evident Being: A Converstation with Alice Notley" in *The Kenyon Review*. ed. David Baker. October 2009. http://www.kenyonreview.org/kro_full.php?file=notley-interview.php

[216] Alice Notley, "The "Feminine" Epic" in *Coming After*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005) 171

The return to myths and goddesses of ancient times by some American poets and writers of the seventies was a way to find a new interpretation of the world's order, other than the one presented by the western thought and Anzaldùa's work finds its place as well in this context.

I'd like to return for a moment to the practice of the "contemplation of the skeleton" as I believe that it is in its explanation that we can find a trace of Anzaldùa's *facultad*.

The bone, all that remains in the process of death, is the ultimate source of new life and therefore Mircea Eliade explains, it symbolically represents the "non-temporal source of life", or the capacity for renewal. The ascension or descent, which in shamanistic studies is named "magical flight" is the process through which the Shaman undertakes the journey either through the underworld or in heaven. "It is agreed that the theme of *Magische Flucht* is one of the most ancient motifs of folklore: it is found everywhere, and in the most archaic of cultural strata. Strictly speaking, what is in question is not a 'flight' but a dizzy trajectory, mostly in horizontal direction, as one would expect if, as the students of folklore think, the fundamental point of the story is the escape of a young hero from the kingdom of death, pursued by a terrifying figure who personifies death itself."[217] What seems to strike Mircea Eliade in his study of the "flight" is its universality. The presence of mythical figures that embark in a journey, Mircea Eliade affirms, is found across the world, and although he expresses a fundamental belief on the contemplation and recognition of difference, he theorizes an intrinsic characterization of the experience as a whole. "Now, if we consider the "flight" and all the related symbolism as a whole, their significance is at once apparent: they all express a break with the universe of everyday experience; and a dual purposesiveness is evident in this rupture: both *transcendence* and, at the same time, *freedom* are to be obtained through the "flight." Needless to add, terms

[217] *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* 103

denoting "transcendence" or "freedom" are not to be found at the archaic levels of culture in question—but the experience is present, a fact that has its importance. On the other hand, it proves that the roots of freedom are to be sought in the depth of the psyche, and not in conditions brought about by certain historical moments."[218] What Mircea brilliantly describes is an interpretation of the "flight" as the human desire to break with the limitation of oneself and achieve the freedom to exist, transcending his ties with the world. Mircea underlines as well that this desire is not caused by an historical condition of uncertainty, but it is inherent in all human beings as a desire to be "above" earthly limitations, to find a unique existence. This capacity and desire to flee for Mircea Eliade is a spiritual longing, and what is such longing if not an understanding of human existence outside of any rational and historical explanation?

Mircea Eliade sees history as the obsession of the West, just like a vivid remembrance of life is present in an individual facing his inescapable death, so is the West's obsession with the recording of its history in fact a symptom of its own perceived decline. Of course this clinging that Mircea Eliade sees in the anxious behavior of the West is also linked to an understanding of death as an end and a closure (or of course the ultimate exaltation of the ego), while in other parts of the world death is in fact seen as part of life. For Anzaldùa however, history is where everything begins, *Borderlands/La Frontera* begins with the history of Mexico, as an attempt to collectively reorganize fundamental events, Anzaldùa wants to name those who are responsible, and in this aspect her idea differentiates from Mircea Eliade; for Anzaldùa the desire to transcend is in fact one born from the historical limitations, her 'flight' is born in her own body.

"The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds

[218] *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* 106

merging to form a third country—a border culture."[219] Her writing as much as it is a medicine for the wounds of the past offered to her people, as a shaman would do, is also a call to consciousness and to change and therefore it has all to do with history and human condition. That deeper understanding of reality she calls *la facultad* is a capacity risen from the conditions of living on the border, she describes it both as a survival tactic and an opportunity to see one's surrounding differently, with a new awareness. Despite the fact that Anzaldùa discerns an oppressive structure of culture (and a political one as well), she believes in a self that is free and not discoursely generated.

Many years I have fought off your hands, *Raza*
father mother church your rage at my desire to be
with myself, alone. I have learned
to erect barricades arch my back against
you thrust back fingers, sticks to
shriek no to kick and claw my way out of
your heart And as I grew you hacked away
at the pieces of me that were different
attached your tentacles to my face and breast
put a lock between my legs. I had to do it,
Raza turn my back on your crookening finger
beckoning beckoning your soft brown
landscape, tender nopalitos. Oh, it was hard,
Raza to cleave flesh from flesh I risked

[219] *Borderlands/La Frontera* 25

us both bleeding to death. It took a long
time but I learned to let
your values roll off my body lie water
those I swallow to stay alive become tumors
in my belly. I refuse to be taken over by
things people who fear that hollow
aloneness beckoning beckoning. No self,
only race *vecindad familia*. My soul has alsways
been yours one spark in the roar of your fire.[220]

By choosing her own identity as she does, and as we will see in a little while, she declares choice as the essential practice of freedom and existence. In this sense Anzaldùa's philosophy of identity is closely influenced by Sartre's existentialist idea of freedom and responsibility for which existence precedes essence and for which actions are rooted and connected with our environment and with others. Anzaldùa does not solely point the finger at the white man for his imperialist behavior, she also condemns her own people who have internalized and normalized those forms of oppression.

Russian philosopher Alexander Spirking in *Dialectical Materialism* writes "Responsibility is a state of consciousness, a feeling of duty towards society and oneself, an awareness of the purpose of the actions performed, their consequences for a certain social group, class, party, collective and oneself. Responsibility is society's necessary means of controlling the behavior of the individual through his consciousness. As an integral attribute of the socially developed personality, responsibility takes the form of the spiritual aspect of all forms of the

[220] *Borderland/La Frontera* 195

individual's activity in the moral, political, civic, legal and other spheres. There are no forms of non-responsible activity inasmuch as there is no activity whose consequences do not affect the interests of the individual himself, the social group or society as a whole."[221] Spirkin talks of responsibility as "the spiritual aspect of all forms." The shaman depicted by Anzaldùa who changes herself in order to change the world is the ultimate embodiment of this ethical pact with the world.

Anzaldùa tells us that La Virgen De Guadalupe, venerated by many in Central and South America, is said to have appeared on the spot where the Aztec goddess *Tonatsi* had been worshipped by the Nahuas and where they had erected a temple in her honor. La Virgen identified herself as *Maria Coatlalopeuh* "the one who has dominion over the serpent" reinterpreted by the author as "the one who is at one with the beasts." Because the name was homophonous to the Spanish Guadalupe, Coatlalopeuh was soon identified by the missionaries as the Virgen. Today Guadalupe is the most venerated in Mexico as "the symbol of ethnic identity and of the tolerance for ambiguity that Chicano-mexicanos, people of mixed race, people who have Indian blood, people who cross cultures, by necessity possess."[222]

The author explains that the three spiritual archetypes very present in the life of the Mexicans are *Guadalupe*, *La Chingada* (*Malinche*, the raped one), and *La Llorona* (the weeping one). The Christian missionaries manipulated the existence of these three women figures in order to tame and convert the Mexican colonized population. "Guadalupe has been used by the church to mete out institutionalized oppression: to placate the Indians and *mexicanos* and Chicanos. In part, the true identity of all three has been subverted—*Guadalupe* to make us docile and

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[221] Alexander A. Sprirkin. *Dialectical Materialism*. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983) 72
[222] *Borderlands/La Frontera* 50-52

enduring, *La Chingada* to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and *la Llorona* to make us long-suffering people. This obscuring has encouraged the *virgen/puta* (whore) dichotomy."[223]

Further in her analysis of pre-Columbian America, Anzaldùa tells us that the symbol of the serpent, whose dominator becomes the Christianized *Maria Coatlalopeuh,* was considered sacred by pre-Columbian populations, it was believed to be the creative womb from where everything was originated and returned. The veneration of the serpent is in fact linked to the concept of regeneration and rebirth. In a poem immediately following this passage, the author describes in

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[223] *Borderlands/La Frontera* 52

In order to understand the manipulation of these spiritual figures it is important to know their story. Here is a quick summary of the story of La Malinche.

According to Bernal Díaz del Castillo's account La Malinche (whom he calls by her Spanish name, Doña Marina), was born into a royal family but sold into slavery when her mother and stepfather decided she might threaten their son's position as sole heir to their throne. Therefore they deiced to give her as a slave to a group of itinerant traders from Xicalango, who then sold her to a Tobascan chief, who in turn gave her as a gift to the conquistador Hernán Cortés. Since she had lived among many different tribes, La Malinche had an incredible knowledge of various native languages. She also quickly learned Spanish and became extremely important in Cortés' expeditions. He called her "*mi lengua*" ("my tongue" or "my language") and used her facility with native languages to negotiate with the tribes throughout Mexico. She became his mistress and mother of his child.

The story of *La Llorona* as told by Clarissa Pinkola Estés in her book *Women who Run with the Wolves*:

"A Rich *Hidalgo*, nobleman, courts a beautiful but poor woman and wins her affections. She bears him two sons, but he deigns not to marry her. One day he announces that he is returning to Spain where he will marry a rich woman chosen by his family, and that he will take his sons with him.

The young woman is crazed and acts in the manner of the great shrieking madwoman throughout time. She claws his face, she claws her own face, she tears at him, she tears at herself. She picks up the two small sons and runs to the river with them and there throws them into the torrent. The children drown, and La Llorona falls to the riverbank in grief and dies.

The Hidalgo returns to Spain and marries the rich woman. The soul of La Llorona ascends to heaven. There the master of the gate tells her she may come to heaven, for she has suffered, but that she may not enter until she recovers the souls of her children from the river.

And that is why it is said today that La Llorona, the weeping woman, sweeps the riverbanks with her long hair, puts her long stick fingers into the water to drag the bottom for her children. It is also why living children must not go near the river after dark, for La Llorona may mistake them for her own children and take them away forever. (Clarissa Pinkola Estés *Women who Run with the Wolves,* p. 302)

first person an experience of death as a passing through the insides of a serpent. The poem opens with the voice of a doctor pronouncing her death on an operating table. From this moment on her journey in the dark depth of the serpent's mouth begins.

curled up inside the serpent's coils,

the damp breath of death on my face.

I knew at that instant: something must change

or

I'd die

Algo tenía que cambiar.

The author realizes that the serpent, a vision she recalls having had more than once, was in fact "the mental picture and symbol of the instinctual in its collective impersonal, pre-human."[224] These visions become for Anzaldùa moments of realizations, as the last sentence of the poem wants to suggest, an awareness of reality and the self not from rationalization, but from psychic experiences. "Like many Indians and Mexicans, I did not deem my psychic experiences real. I denied their occurrences and let my inner sense atrophy. I allowed white rationality to tell me that the existence of the 'other world' was mere pagan superstition. I accepted their reality, the 'official' reality of the rational, reasoning mode which is connected with external reality, the upper world, and is considered the most developed consciousness—the consciousness of duality."[225] Anzaldùa recalls having had the *Coatlicue* state the first time when she was two or three years of age. She describes this state as being "a rupture in our everyday world. As the

[224] *Borderlands/La Frontera* 57
[225] *Borderlands/La Frontera* 59

Earth, she opens and swallows us, plunging us into the underworld where the soul resides, allowing us to dwell in the darkness."[226]

Like for Mircea Eliade's shaman, the experience of the underworld, is the beginning of empowerment and regeneration.

I hardly ever set foot on the floors below.

Creaking wood expanding contracting,

erratic ticking of the furnace

wild animal kicking at its iron cage

frighten me

I don't know what impelled me to go down.

I should have waited till morning.

The stairs were dark

dust devils eddied in the corners

and the fringes of unraveling carpet

nagged at one like an abandoned child

Left too long in soiled diapers

Dust streaking down my nightgown.[227]

Anzaldùa's journey through the darkness symbolizes her realization and acceptance of being different. "Our greatest disappointments and painful experiences—if we can make meaning out of them—can lead us toward becoming more of who we are. Or they can remain

[226] *Borderlands/La Frontera*,68
[227] "I Had to Go Down" in *Borderlands/La Frontera* 189

meaningless. The *Coatlicue* state can be a way station or it can be a way of life."[228] As a Mother Earth the Coatlicue will devour and create life from her womb, thus being the symbol of death and life, a fusion of all opposites.

A gnarled root had broken through
Into the belly of the house
And somehow a shoot
Had sprung in the darkness
And now a young tree was growing
Nourished by a nightsun.
Then I heard the footsteps again
Making scuffing sounds
On the packed dirt floor.

It was my feet making them.
It had been my footsteps I'd heard.[229]

The journey into rebirth is described by Anzaldùa as the realization of a human existence which transcends class, race and sexuality. "And someone in me takes matters into our own hands, and eventually, takes dominion over serpents—over my own body, my sexual activity, my soul, my mind, my weaknesses and strengths. Mine. Ours. Not the heterosexuals white man's or the colored man's or the state's or the culture's or the religion's or the parents'—just our, mine."[230] From this journey, the shaman is complete. "The ability of story (prose and poetry) to

[228] *Borderlands/La Frontera* 68
[229] "I Had to Go Down" 191
[230] *Borderlands/La Frontera* 73

transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer, is a *nahual*, a shaman."[231] The author here enters into her role and defines her work as the '"who" and the "what" that contains the presences of the persons, that is incarnations of gods or ancestors or natural and cosmic powers."[232] As a contemporary shaman, her work (performance) is in writing, where the imagination takes the language of the border, "the wild tongue." Writing as storytelling is transformative, is healing, is joyous, is transference of meaning, but it is also the creation and death of the self, a self which is constantly changing "When I write it feels like I'm carving bone. It feels like I'm creating my own face, my own heart—Nahuatl concept. My soul makes itself through the creative act. It is constantly remaking and giving birth to itself through my body."[233] And just as one cannot separate the shaman from her/his life, writing is life; therefore Anzaldùa's activity becomes her ultimate sacrifice, an offering and a responsibility.

We Mexicans are collective animal This I
accept but my life's work requires autonomy
like oxygen. This lifelong battle has ended,
Raza. I don't need to flail against you.
Raza india mexicana nortamericana, there's no-
thing more you can chop off or graft on me that
will change my soul. I remain who I am, multiple
and one of the herd, yet not of it. I walk
on the ground of my own being browned and

[231] *Borderlands/La Frontera* 88
[232] *Borderlands/La Frontera* 89
[233] *Borderlands/La Frontera* 95

hardened by the ages. I am fully formed carved
by the hands of the ancients, drenched with
the stench of today's headlines. But my own
hands whittle the final work me.

This final consideration leads me to an essential question, who are then Anzaldùa's listeners?

In *Retrieving Experience. Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics*, Sonia Kruks surveys the last twenty years of feminism and its shift towards a poststructuralist thought and precisely toward a Foucaultian view of the self (and therefore womanhood) as discursively generated and fragmented, in order to underline the failure in addressing the differences in the experiences of non-white western women. In her analysis she proposes a return to an existential understanding of self as "being situated" as theorized by Sartre, Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty. Kruks follows her study into a discussion of 'identity politics' which she defines as "a set of propositions that are only loosely formulated or even tacitly presupposed"[234] and under which a feminist ''legitimacy'' and group solidarity are often based. She summarizes an understanding of 'identity politics' in five major points and propositions: 1) The still existent and pervasive formulation of a claimed universal condition by a white, male, western, upper class, heterosexual elite which in the end only serves as an interpretation of the reality of its elite. 2) The groups that have been left out and subjugated should now be taking a position of authority for the interpretation and understanding of knowledge and morality. 3) Following the first two points, the authority of moral and political judgments by these groups do not derive from a universal understanding of humanity, but rather from one that differentiates between identities. 4) The most political action is one that seeks to 'deconstruct' and 'unmask' the elitist/universalist

[234] Sonia Kruks. *Retrieving Experience. Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) 81

discourse. 5) Finally,she concludes that this work should be extended to all radical movements including feminism.[235] Kruks talks about the various degrees of interpretations in which identity politics comes to play a role, she brings the example of essentialist Debora King who "sees identity as constituted by inborn and ineradicable attributes that define the self" and P. H. Collins who maintains the ineradicable attributes within the context of a socially constructed self.

What seems to be problematic for Kruks is the level of choice that is or is not admitted in these claims. "How far can (or should) an identity be embraced in an affirmative choice of self? How far are even 'given' identities open to reformulation or redefinition? Some authors (recapitulating Beauvoir's account of the ambiguity of 'becoming' a woman) argue that identities are both ascribed and chosen. Shane Phelan, for example, claims that lesbian identity is both a matter of 'ontology' and to be positively 'achieved' through the political strategy of building a lesbian community. Similarly, Cherríe Moraga, a light skinned, mixed-race 'Chicana' who can 'pass' as white, talks of her Chicana identity as both 'birthright' and political choice."[236]

What we can conclude from these statements is that political action and identity become essentially the same. However, Kruks notes how the understanding of identity as resistance has been criticized as an idea that conflates a woman the status of 'victim' once again erasing differences. Kruks explains that identity politics has served as a way to bring forward a different voice but it has also created divisions detrimental to important issues such as women's health and the fight against violence.

In an interview with Karin Ikas, Anzaldùa recounts her experience in the Feminist Writers' Guild in San Francisco predominately made of white women. She remembers her struggle to express her oppression in a group that was constantly trying to interpret her words

[235] *Retrieving Experience* 80
[236] *Retrieving Experience* 80

through their ideas and points of view from the white women's context. "They didn't understand what we were going through. They wanted to speak for us because they had an idea of what feminism was, and they wanted to apply their notion of feminism across all cultures…their idea was that we all were cultureless because we were feminists; we didn't have any other culture. But they never left their whiteness at home. The wanted me to give up my Chicananess and become part of them; I was asked to leave my race at the door."[237] *This Bridge Called my Back* is her response to this experience, the text soon became the manifesto of women of color and their oppression. For Chicana women the work that Anzaldùa completed in the *This Bridge* first and in *Bordelands/La Frontera* later, was an establishment of their legitimacy. Anzaldùa describes with contempt both the reaction towards her work from the graduate department where she studied, and her advisor's view of Chicana literature as not being a discipline, and despite these aversions, with her commitment, choice of language, and subject, she ended up generating a sense of recognition for the writers who followed her footsteps. As Kruks rightly points out, the kind of recognition Anzaldùa was after is not one that would provide an inclusion in the universalist vision of humanity, but rather one that would accept and respect the cultural differences of a group. She specifically calls this form of recognition a cultural recognition which she differentiates from retributional or restitutional ones that instead seek a transformation of institutional organizations and socioeconomic change. For Anzaldùa what was needed was a recognition that would enable participation and therefore acceptance in culture formation. In this sense the book has become a corner stone for Chicana literature studies. A new phenomenon though arises after a voice from the margin has found the possibility to speak, we can call this phenomenon a form of blind assimilation that drains the voice of its impetus by absorbing it into

[237] *Borderlands/La Frontera* 231

the canon (mainstream), nullifying its original voice. This is a force that tends to homologate all forms of differences, and Anzaldùa was well aware of its danger. Kruks illustrates this phenomenon in the following passage where, after quoting Sartre's understanding of assimilation in the United States, she provides her own interpretation: "Liberal universal humanism thus puts 'others' in a double bind: it demands that they abandon an identity that, while oppressive, is also constitutive of their existence. And it also obscures the dynamics of oppression behind the assertion of a universal human essence that 'we' all share. Liberal ideology and Western humanist tradition, as well as 'canonical' philosophy and political theory, have indeed all frequently functioned as exclusionary discourses."[238]

Clearly we must look at *Borderlands/La Frontera* not only as a work addressed to the white western audience, or to those who have been oppressed and found a voice in Anzaldùa's work, but also to the Chicano readers who, having entered into a mode of oppression and denial, will still not accept a feminist lesbian identity. Her work is the claim to an existential understanding of freedom as a choice, and she takes it upon herself to transfer this realization to her listeners.

> Not me sold out my people but they me. So yes, though 'home' permeates every sinew and cartilage in my body, I too am afraid of going home. Though I'll defend my race and culture when they are attacked by *non-mexicanos, conozco el malestar de mi cultura*. I abhor some of my culture's way, how it cripples its women, *como burras*, our strengths used against us, lowly *burras* bearing humility with dignity. The ability to serve, claim the males, is our highest virtue. I abhor how my culture makes *macho* caricatures of its men. No, I do not buy all the tribes into which I was born […] So don't give me your tenets and your laws. Don't give me your lukewarm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three cultures—white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber, my bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture.[239]

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[238] *Retrieving Experience* 94
[239] *Borderlands/La Frontera* 44

CHAPTER 5

Recognition and Compromise in Clara Sereni's La Casalinghitudine

"La donna non va definita in rapporto all'uomo. Su questa coscienza si fondano tanto la nostra lotta quanto la nostra libertà - L'uomo non è il modello a cui adeguare il processo della scoperta di sè da parte della donna -Identificare la donna all'uomo significa annullare l'ultima via di liberazione - La donna come soggetto non rifiuta l'uomo come soggetto ma lo rifiuta come ruolo assoluto e autoritario."

[A woman should not to be defined in reference to a man. On this consciousness are founded our struggle and our freedom - Man is not a model to which adjust the woman's process of self discovery – To identify woman to man would mean to annul the last path towards liberation – woman as a subject does not refuse man as a subject but refuses him as absolute and authoritarian role.][240]

Sputiamo su Hegel Carla Lonzi

[240] My Translation

In her intro to the translation of *La Casalinghitudine*, entitled in English *Keeping House*, Giovanna Miceli Jeffries talks about Clara Sereni's autobiography[241] in recipes as a cult for Italian women of the eighties and nineties. She locates the author within the pioneers of a narrative that has now achieved its place in academic specializations as "food in literature." In 1989, just few years after *Keeping House* had been released, the novel *Como agua para chocolate* by Mexican writer Laura Esquivel was published, creating a succession of interests within the women studies departments. In her article "Hispanic American Women Writers' Novel Recipes and Laura Squivel's *Como agua para chocolate* (*Like Water for Chocolate*)," Janice Jaffe describes Esquivel's treatment of the kitchen as one that reconfigures it from a place of restriction or confinement into a place of rebellion, creativity and liberation. Two years earlier Clara Sereni with *La Casalinghitudine* had depicted home-making as a laboratory for caring and reinventing. The recipes, some of which are part of a family tradition, are weaved into the self narrative as a communal knowledge which evolves and changes adapting to the circumstances of life and history, and which places the author in relation to her uniqueness (self consciousness) and her relationality, serving the function of a collective heritage, as an expression of care-for-the-other, and as a form of care-of-the-self. Clara Sereni's recipes, become bridges that question the relation between the collective—in its various realms from the political group activities to family relations—and the individual, through the intimate and perhaps overlooked practice of caring such as cooking and home making. In this sense recipes are a return to the space of domesticity as a laboratory where the reality of the self and the other are negotiated under one the most essential of human needs: food.

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[241] Although the translation is published with the under title of "a novel in recipes", it remains unclear whether it is in fact an autobiography. I have treated *La Casalinghitudine* as an autobiography in virtue of the challenges and propositions that such writing brings into this open, indefinable genre. See my chapter on theory of autobiography.

In the first part of my essay I will delineate the narrative structure of Sereni's book, pointing out some the important and basic scenes and events that will then be elaborated in the second part.

At a first glance *Keeping House* follows the structure of a cookbook, however, the very first chapter titled "For a Baby" presents a peculiar difference from a standard book of recipes. In fact it is in this very first chapter that Sereni establishes a fundamental thread to an understanding of the rest of the work; her experience of motherhood is presented in the entirety of *Keeping House* as another form of caring-for-the-other played out within the psychological and social platform of recognition and/or compromise. Our first direct encounter with Sereni's experience of motherhood is one that reveals anxiety, fear, and preoccupation. "Tommaso cried all the time."[242] Confused and inexperienced Sereni and her husband turn to friends and doctors for advice and what they gather is a list of suggestions, anything from letting the child cry in order to prevent him from becoming spoiled, all the way to using antihistamines. "Everybody talked about the whims of children, little monsters always ready to take advantage of us."[243] The experience culminates in the office of a pediatrician, schooled in Catholicism, who admonishes both parents for being too indulgent with a child who clearly needed strict measurement and a diet. This event is described by Sereni directly in contraposition to another, a final solution to Tommaso's cries, at the office of an homeopath dressed in "house slippers and corduroy"[244] who, after playing with Tommaso and making him laugh while checking him, concludes that the child is simply starving. What seemed to be a quite obvious observation by the homeopath, passed completely unnoticed by all the rest of family members, friends and doctors who considered the

[242] Clara Sereni, *Keeping House* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005) 22
[243] *Keeping House* 23
[244] *Keeping House* 23

child as a spoiled baby to be disciplined. From this very moment we are not only drawn into Sereni's experience as a concerned, tired and caring mother, but we are also aware of her relationship with food, or better, the function that food represents in her experience as a mother. She concludes this very first chapter with a clear hint to the continuous existence of this relationship "But he did not stop crying at night with the sorrowful, terrible cry of a child who seemed to have lost something."[245]

Although the author never reveals her name and the names of both the husband and the son are fictional, we are confronted in this text with autobiographical events and stories. The translation has been published as a "novel in recipes" but the book has been defined as an autobiographical fiction in the same way as *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. Even though the names cannot be verified in the fashion of a lejeunian theory—through a direct accordance of subject, author and narrative voice—I propose a reading of *Keeping House* as an autobiographical act, as a speech act that escapes any formal rule or definition.[246] The following is an example of the hybridity of this text.

The closing line of the chapter "For a baby" alludes to a fundamental event in Sereni's life which is treated more closely in *Passami il Sale,* but that here is perhaps loosely alluded. The late knowledge of the son's psychological condition is in fact for both Sereni and her husband the acknowledgement of a social failure by the Italian government in treating and in creating a social web of support for disabled children and adults capable to introduce them into society.

In a article from one of the most prominent Italian Newspapers *Il Corriere della Sera*, Sereni affirms "Ci siamo scontrati con quella che chiamo la sindrome dell' "io ti salverò", di chi

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[245] *Keeping House* 24

[246] see Elizabeth W. Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre.* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1976)

arrivava pensando "qui si è sbagliato tutto, ora vi faccio vedere" […] che teneva Matteo fuori dall' aula, gli faceva preparare la pizza per i compagni... Invece, pure a chi non può imparare niente serve come il pane stare con gli altri. E viceversa: non aiutare a confrontarsi con la diversità è un danno irreparabile."[247] [We clashed with what I call the syndrome of "I will save you" of those who arrive thinking "everything was done wrong, let me show you how to do it", of those who kept Matteo outside of the classroom preparing pizza for his classmates, while even those who cannot learn anything need to be with others like they need bread. And vice versa: one creates dire consequences in not fostering a confrontation with diversity.][248]

Sereni here underlines an important aspect of the Italian school reform, whose cut on education inevitably resulted in cut of teachers and therefore in less and less regard for children who need more attention. This very experience pushes Sereni and her husband to found the organization "La città del sole" in the Umbrian hill of Monte Peglia, where they have created a place and a way for caring and to work with psychologically disabled people of different ages and gravity of disability. The allusion to the constant cry, repeated in several parts of the book, could therefore be related to this very overwhelming experience in the author's life, an experience she chose though not to discuss in *Keeping House*. At the same time, it is the very diagnosis of her son's sickness as starvation that introduces this book of recipes perhaps as a cure, as a remedy, as a way to fulfill a loss, and as a possibility for healing.

With the recipes "Savory Crostini" and "Semolina Gnocchi" we are introduced to the second important connection between food and the author's life story. Sereni's paternal

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[247]Gabriela Jacomella "Matteo e quell'elenco di pregiudizi lungo 30 anni" (20 Ottobre 2008 Corriere della Sera) Website: http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2008/ottobre/20/Matteo_quell_elenco_pregiudizi_lungo_co_9_081020005.shtml

[248] My Translation

grandparents lived in Israel and moved to Italy before World War II. Her grandmother Alfonsa had an unmarried sister, Aunt Ermelinda, who lived with them and who had always chosen a nephew or a niece to look after and to whom she would commit to transmitting all her passions. When Sereni was born she chose her and as soon as she was old enough Ermelinda gave Clara piano lessons and passed to her all the necessary knowledge to make her into a person of genius. Although Sereni's father had left the Jewish community after his important position within the Italian Communist Party, Aunt Ermelinda had continued, despite his objections that Sereni never had to witnessed or suffer through the years, to teach Sereni songs and biblical stories which became for the author an important element in building her own identity, even when as an adult she chose to be a non practitioner. "When Tommaso was born, and a new interpretation of the world began for me, the fact that my son had a surname that was not Jewish made me feel safe from certain dangers. But there was so much ancestral pride in hearing him go around the house singing '…one and only creator *barush*, *barushemà*…'[249]

Aunt Ermelinda became an important presence in Sereni's life especially after her mother's death when she was still a child, and the "Semolina Gnocchi," the only dish Aunt Ermelinda would ever make for the special occasion of Yom Kippur, is a direct tribute to her love and teachings. "Family memories pass on an image of Ermelinda Pontecorvo Sereni as a woman who was hard, stingy, despotic, all in all not very pleasant. Unbearably frivolous, she had not given up her extravagant jewelry even during the war […]. For me, Aunt Mela remains a scent, an elegant gesture, the feeling of someone who demands much, but who is ready to give, the warmth of feeling special and unique."[250] The warmth of feeling special and unique represents an interesting contrast to the constant lack of approval from Sereni's own father. In

[249] *Keeping House* 40
[250] *Keeping House* 40

this sense Aunt Ermelinda becomes an essential model of individuality, a model she could not find in her father who, in his expectations had become highly critical of her. This is how the author describes Aunt Ermelinda: " 'Io ti chiedo molto, perché ti voglio bene, ti stimo molto, perché tu sei unica per me'. Questo era quello che mi trasmetteva mia zia: allora sí, puoi essere anche molto esigente, ma con lei non ho mai avuto il terrore che ho sempre sentito con mio padre e che corrispondeva all'angoscia del poterlo deludere. Il messaggio di mia zia era sempre e comunque: 'Per me tu sei unica.'"[251] ['I ask a lot of you because I love you, I have great esteem for you because you are unique'. This is what my aunt used to communicate to me. Thus, one could even be demanding, but with her I never felt the terror that I always felt with my father and that corresponded to my anguish and fear of disappointing him][252].

Very different instead is the author's position towards her Grandmother Alfonsa. Sereni describes her as a thrifty woman who could recycle anything to make a low cost meal, this is why she used to make crostini with stale bread. Here is what Sereni adds at the end of her recipe "When I started to make *crostini* in my own home, for a while I used fresh bread instead of stale bread, a conscious act of waste in order for me to cut the umbilical cord."[253] This moment represents the first introduction to a detachment from the family bond, a desire for her own uniqueness—symbolized by the conscious alteration from her paternal grandmother's recipe—and her individuality, characterized and embodied in her relationship with Aunt Ermelinda. As for Silko, Ginzburg and Anzaldùa, also for Sereni it is a female family presence who inspires her sense of bond with her heritage and a personal identity. For Sereni, Aunt Ermelinda comes to

[251] Clara Sereni, *Da un Grigio all'altro*. (Roma: Di Renzo Editore 1989) 15
[252] My Translation
[253] *Keeping House* 28

embody an alternative threshold of family identity, to the authoritative voice of her father and at the same time a possibility for individuation.

The rest of the recipes in the appetizer section are quick solutions at times put together with leftovers—a trait perhaps come directly retained from her grandmother— associated to the time when she had been introduced to "the group," a circle of political activists and intellectuals, mostly university students, engaged in the discussions during the late seventies and which Sereni describes as monolithic and without contradictions[254]. The leader of the group, whose name is Aldo, is ironically described by the author as a highly critical militant who has no sympathy for those who indulge in bourgeois luxuries such as, as in this scene, a house in the country side or a fine bottle of wine, but who at the same time "absentmindedly" at the table of a house in the country rented by Sereni and other friends, would eat a large quantity of liver pâté. What Sereni underlines in this scene is a fundamental problem present within the dynamic of the group. "The nearly full pot sat at the center of the table. We were discussing politics when we should have been talking about ourselves."[255] She introduces Aldo as an individual from whom initially she desired recognition, the same recognition she searched for in her father. However, in retrospect, after looking at the political activities that had been a source of renewal and questioning, what the author sees in the group dynamic is the lack of individual space and recognition. She realizes that the question of individuality, namely the personal, was not a subject of discussion and it was often silenced by the macro political debates that seemed to have been considered always "more important". In the late sixties, in the universities and outside of the universities, the students felt the necessity to create a united voice that could become a solid entity towards change. In this sense it was the group that had to prevail over the individual. Even more acute at times was the

[254] *Keeping House* 35
[255] *Keeping House* 35

lack of voice available to women. Sereni offers an example of this in her description of her friend Marta and her boyfriend Lucio. "Marta was beautiful, elegant, full of vitality. Next to her Lucio looked like a bloodless wren whose power inside their relationship came to him from his political past (he had been a national party executive and Marta a little 'red guard') and from a rigorous, militant culture. Marta was hesitant and unsure, her voice acquiring definition only when she was talking about her work as a teacher. Like many relationships, theirs was not an easy one."[256] The author highlights here a problematic present within part of the student movement which, although born with ideals of equality, found itself adopting patriarchal models. This contradiction is well presented by historian and writer Luisa Passerini in *Autobiography of a Generation*, a collection of interviews with post nineteen-sixty-eight students, alternated by personal reflections in the form of a diary entry—now a landmark study on the connections between the Fascist era, and the nineteen-sixty-eight student uprising which resonates with some of the inquiries raised by Sereni in her work. "The Theatrical game, the ability to divide oneself in two and observe oneself, is part of the formation of subjects. But what internal images guided the woman in this appearance before the footlights? One strong impulse was negative: to distance themselves from their mothers, to reject their model completely. The new models offered by the most visible movement of women were mediated by an idea of liberation that was partly masculine, partly androgynous."[257] By placing the new models directly in relation to a masculine one, the new groups recreated a split already present in the Italian family and social structures. It also reiterated a more fundamental conflict already existent, but now more problematic, between mother and daughter and between women. Graziella Parati in her study of

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[256] *Keeping House* 34
[257] Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996) 24

women's autobiographies clearly states the issue in question in her affirmation that holding the value that youth belongs to the father or to an almost ephebic androgynous hero "supplies a more tender form of discourse for women involved in the political struggle of the time, but it also displaces attention from difference to homogeneous and misleading universal identity that cannot be translated into practice, into the still-dominated hierarchical divisions in the movements of the sixties."[258] Passerini's analysis of the student movement of the late sixties converges into the realization that although it created a ground for change and questioning of the dynamic between private and the public radically connected to the condition of the individual, it was fundamentally grounded in the same divisions and practices of exclusions. It is not until the first women's movements are born in the seventies that a new vision will completely de-center the male defined order of transgression and will formulate new models of self understanding for women by placing the body in the center of discussion. From her interviews with post nineteen-sixty-eight women students, Passerini discovers a deep desire and lack of feminine points of references that will become the core of later women movements. "I wanted to have a positive female figure, because I had this tragedy inside, of not being able to find some important female point of reference, that might somehow give me peace."[259]

In her work *Sputiamo su Hegel* (*Let's Spit on Hegel*) which became a manifesto of the Italian Feminist Movement, philosopher Carla Lonzi identifies this problem and the complexity of the relation between Marxism and Feminism, acknowledging that "La chiave femminista operava come una rivelazione. Il bisogno di esprimersi è stato da noi accolto come sinonimo stesso di liberazione. *Sputiamo su Hegel* l'ho scritto perché ero rimasta molto turbata constatando

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[258] Gaziella Parati, *Public History, Private Stories: Italian Women's Autobiographies*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 136

[259] *Autobiography of a Generation* 100

che quasi la totalità delle femministe italiane dava più credito alla lotta di classe che alla loro stessa oppressione."[260] [The feminist key operated as a revelation. The need to express ourselves was welcomed as a synonymous of liberation. I wrote *Let's Spit on Hegel* because I was troubled by the realization that almost the totality of Italian feminists gave more credit to the class struggle than to their own oppression.][261] Sereni therefore highlights a problematic that was evident in the larger group dynamic but that in her narration is played out within the intimate and domestic realm. She presents an essential and fundamental aspect necessary and perhaps parallel to the group existence, a process of individualization that would eliminate all the preconceived ideas of role playing within the family, other institutions and of course within relationships as well, and that would allow the subject to navigate and establish new grounds of recognition. In this sense of course women, for the nature of their existing roles and categorizations, needed this space of debate and confrontation even more. Almost as an example of what "should have happened" Sereni's own process of individualization takes place within these two distinct events: on one hand is her detachment from the family environment and confines, and on the other is her experience of motherhood. The scene about "Pasta e Fagioli" clearly illustrates this point.

Alone and without any money, Sereni feels a strong desire to eat "Pasta e Fagioli," a nutritious and low cost meal with which her father threatened Sereni every time he was faced with her decision to live alone. With her friend Enrico seated a the table and about to eat the infamous dish, Sereni has a moment of satisfaction "We were seated face to face at the light blue table, with the beans in the center—delicious—feeling our togetherness and the assurance of that distant complicity we had always shared. What revenge on my father's white beans, and on my

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[260] Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel la donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale,* (Milano: Rivolta Femminile, 1974) 11
[261] My Translation

brother-in-law, who had warned me when I left home: 'Go ahead, go live by yourself: you don't know what it means to live on *pasta e fagioli*.'"[262] After the birth of Tommaso she continues to make "Pasta e Fagioli" substituting can beans with dried beans soaked the night before, and concluding that "organizing and planning ahead are more important now than improvising."[263] Planning here can be clearly identified with care, a sense of understanding her role as a mother, and it is placed in contraposition to a life of fear, risk and adventure, distinct of the years before Tommaso was born. This reversal, turning a peasant dish such as "Pasta e Fagioli" into a "banner" of her life and identity, is a statement directly related to her choice of living a life of fewer means, carefully settled within the sphere of every day's micro events equally present in her with the macro events of history, and that she places as a response to the experience with the monolithic, masculine group. Sereni's struggle to balance her political life, dominated by masculine structures, with the rest of her life, has been and it still is an ongoing concern. "Sia nella mia esperienza politica che nella mia vita ha sempre dominato la componente maschile, decisive e sbrigativa, mentre ho sentito fortemente la mancanza di quella femminilità fatta di piccole cose, come la gioia del superfluo, che non e` il mero consumismo, insomma quell'aspetto che definirei 'agio', ossia il semplice prendersi cura di se stessi."[264] [Both in my political experience and in my life, I always strongly felt the lack of a femininity made of small things, like the joy of the superfluous, which is not mere consumerism, but that I would define more as an "ease," as the simple act of taking care of oneself.][265]

Sereni's struggle with the masculine political world is represented first by the father, an important figure in the Italian Communist Party, and later by Aldo, the leader of the student

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[262] *Keeping House* 43
[263] *Keeping House* 43
[264] *Da un Grigio all'altro* 33
[265] My Translation

movement. In order for the author to fully realize her own individuality, a detachment from the father and therefore from the family is felt as a necessary step. A much less painful act is the one to distance from the group, but it is in the group dynamic that her analysis of subjectivity is played out. For Sereni however, a separation from the father is consequently transformed into a lack of desire to participate in any conventional family life all together. And in the context of her Italian husband's family this lack of desire for any family involvement, soon becomes a clash and a platform for new understanding of herself. After several occasions in which her husband's mother tries to attract Sereni by sending her food dishes, she decides that it is finally necessary to accept an invitation for dinner. In the midst of family gatherings, complicated dishes, and a fully patriarchal environment, Sereni immediately feels a sense of discomfort. She is particularly bothered by the petit-bourgeois behavior of her in laws, but she quickly attributes her fastidiousness to her social wealthier, more privileged background, turning her discomfort into class realization. A seemingly uneventful family dinner becomes for Sereni a laboratory of political consciousness and personal awareness. "I observed dispassionately, unconsciously bothered by the petit-bourgeois habits that for the first time were revealing themselves to me, from the vantage point of my *Luisa Spagnoli* clothes, albeit sale items, and social privileges I possessed of which I completely unaware. The one thing that struck me was Massimo's father's great desire to talk about the *Comintern*."[266] More concerning and unsettling is instead the realization of her mother in law's attachment to Sereni's husband. Sereni's fear is that her overwhelming and imposing behavior would suck her husband "back into the family, into the

[266] *Keeping House* 49

dependency, into the delicacies, into the perfectly ironed shirts that never had buttons missing."[267]

Her mother in law epitomizes the average, perhaps stereotypical, Italian mother who becomes a pulling force in her son through the creation of a relationship based on overprotection and emotional dependency. Sereni's fear is to fall back into the struggle for space, uniqueness and full autonomy as much as into the conformity of a petit-bourgeois environment. What seems to be evident here again is her ongoing negotiation between the family structure and her individual space. We see this sense of ambiguity of belonging played out over and over in various contexts of her life, but always constantly reflecting the contradictions of the relation between group and individual. In the collection of essays and interviews *Da un grigio all'altro*, she offers a clear understanding on the responsibility the family dynamic in Italy plays in the social and cultural status of the country. "L'Italia è un paese culturalmente bloccato, probabilmente proprio perché vi impera la legge della famiglia, un'arma a doppio taglio che, se da una parte assicura un rifugio sostanziale e una rete di supporto per il singolo, dall'altra ha un effetto frenante sullo sviluppo, perché sono pochi quelli disposti ad abbandonare la certezza del proprio habitat pr tentare nuove strade."[268] [Italy is a country culturally obstructed, probably because the law of family reigns over people. If on one side the family assures a substantial place of refuge and a web of support for the single individual, it is also a double sword that has halting effects on development, precisely because only few of those would abandon the certainty of one's own home and environment to find new roads.][269]

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[267] *Keeping House* 49
[268] *Da un grigio all'altro* 48
[269] My Translation

The conflict reproduced and enacted in the scene about Massimo's mother, describes well the dynamic beneath family relations reported above here. Massimo's mother's 'home-makerness', which Sereni identifies as "bold, aggressive, chaotic, resourceful, pervasive", poses a threat to her own which she struggles to control with reason. The fear is the same Passerini underlines in *Autobiography of a Generation*. It is the fear of being relegated to the prison of domestic environment. Passerini underlines also the need for a redefinition of a relationality between domesticity and motherhood. The generation of students up until the late seventies resented the silence and dependency that a mother came to represent and this, Passerini concludes, became one of the major voids in establishing women's movements. The lack of positive feminine models ended up transforming into fear of becoming "like one's mother" and into bringing women against each other. Sereni affirms that her mother in law's behavior of "making herself busy and needed" is threatening to her. "The apparent irrationality that always causes her to turn the entire kitchen upside down, even for the simplest things—buttered pasta and cutlet, for example—answers to an iron-clad logic, to a making herself busy and needed that resounds threateningly inside of me."[270] This conflict between herself is played out on a political ground, with her rejection of a petit-bourgeois and consumerist life, symbolized by the processed foods and heavy sauces used by the mother in law, but they are also played out within a psychological level with Sereni's own fear of becoming like her mother in law. "What weighs on me is the impossibility of building a relationship with them, and at the same time the constant sense of inadequacy that I have inside me. I detest women who live to please, but this does not mean that I have resolved my own conflicts."[271]

[270] *Keeping House* 49
[271] *Keeping House* 123

Her constant awareness of the domestic dynamic as paradigms of political structures is the motivation to an acting that takes her into conceiving change as alteration. At the end of a scene in which she is finally happy to take a break from the excessive mother in law and all the domestic everyday life chores, and after having left Tommaso behind for a business trip, she affirms "I left in Cagliari my last—perhaps pernicious—illusions of being able to do without the umbilical cord that ties me to my son. Even though Tommaso may be born into the world, I will always find it impossible to deliver him completely from me. While I emptied my suitcase my mother in law smiled at me uncertainly, halfway between relief and distress: I had stepped down from my pedestal, but she did not gloat."[272] In this moment she reveals all the contradictions that are present and necessary for a constant revaluation and alteration of the self and its relationality. Sereni understands her attachment to her son recognizing it as something almost impossible to explain, and perhaps this very human experience is what opens the possibility to altering a relationship that was based on fear. "She came down from her pedestal too, for her actions are never casual: for lunch she recycled dry bread in her mother's soup, the poor, simple soup of the town where she was born, revealing for the first time a glimpse of the roots that until that moment she kept hiding underneath heavy cream, processed cheese, sauces, condiments."[273]

Later in the book Sereni affirms that among the affection, love and protectiveness showed by the husband's family she "clung for dear life to my [her] being strong and independent, intellectual and atheist. Different."[274] What follows is the realization that goes to the root of a dilemma that had been pervasive in the construction of her own identity. "Little by little, with some effort, along the way, I came to understand their reasoning. For their chain of solidarity and

[272] *Keeping House* 51
[273] *Keeping House* 51
[274] *Keeping House* 90

affection is not so different from that interest in the world which made me reject family and life as a couple, only to realize later that even these are part of it. In order for the foliage to burst open it is not necessary to cut off the trunk and roots. They were right. I know it now from my son Tommaso, for whom the 'three-day Christmas marathon' is the greatest event of the year, full of warmth in spite of disagreements and consumerism. I know it for myself, because when the patriarch's illness threatened the ritual, I began taking charge of the big Christmas Eve supper. With my tuna loaf, naturally, but also with the fried food, and with all the other nonnegotiable dishes of the unmodifiable menu."[275]

This paragraph has represented for me the most problematic of the entire text. I reread the passage in which she says "in spite of disagreements and consumerism" wanting to understand this affirmation as more than a compromise or even a form of assimilation. I had looked at Sereni as an example, a model for the women who read her work: a woman who is able to leave her father's home with his imposing voice and scrutinizing character, to build a place of her own. A woman who is able to detach herself from the giant figure her father represented socially and politically, and who created instead a political path of her own. This choice went hand in hand with that of not abiding to the social conventions and moral obligations often manifested as sense of guilt, that come from the family structure, specifically an Italian one. The compromise I was reading in the words of Sereni were not representing and voicing the feminist spirit and thought I looked for in Sereni's work. And yet there was in her words something that spoke sincerely and directly of the fears and experiences of being a woman. By choosing to talk about food, home-making and family relations, Sereni took an important and needed step towards confronting an essential experience in women's lives and what it represented within the larger landscape of

[275] *Keeping House* 90

subjectivity. Without fear of relegating women in the domain of domesticity, she tackled this space and rediscovered it as a laboratory for understanding the self. *Keeping House* evokes the care of the self necessary in order to recover and rediscover the mechanism and the social structures that dictate our relationship with others. Food, in its simple essentiality, is the ultimate symbol of the nourishment that an individual needs, and his/her link to the world and the other at the same time. The mother in law's richness of ingredients reveals more than a consumerist behavior. It is the unaware desire to please by giving more and more opulent meals in an attempt to fulfill perhaps the void of silence. Sereni openly debates her contradictions: the desire to be independent and the need to remain connected with a family made of conventional celebrations and unmodifiable menus, and to which she is willing to compromise for the sake of her son Tommaso. She abandons the radical decapitation of family ties by embracing the uncertain and constant path of negotiation and tolerance. In addition, as yet another paradox with respect to the radical feminist movement and its conflicting relationship to motherhood, it is only after Tommaso is born that these reflections become alive: mothering and tending to food are equally forms of caring and giving, but only if not allowed to become prisons of loneliness and silence. "A small corner that is constantly changing, for its stillness would mean death, and recipes are only a base on which to build new flavors, new combinations every time. Reinventing is the only possible way to escape our boundaries, reinventing so as not to tread over the same ground, reinventing so as not to eat one's earth out."[276] Sereni presents this autobiographical work out of the silence from the space in which women's voice has been relegated. And in that space of domesticity, of everyday life, she finds the possibility to reinvent herself. Cavarero's definition of autobiography reported in my first chapter finds here its realization.

[276] *Keeping House* 142

"It is therefore wise not to turn to philosophy at all if one truly wants to save the accidental that is in every life, or rather the accidentality [*accidentalità*] of being 'this and not another.' Which happens to everyone as the *given* of their being-here. Rather than salvation, the accidental needs care. To tell the story that every existence leaves behind itself is perhaps the oldest act of such care. The story is not necessarily one that aspires to immortalize itself in the literary empire […] but rather the type of story whose tale finds itself at home in the kitchen, during a coffee break, or perhaps on the train, when even those who do not want to hear it are forced to listen. In the kitchen, on the train, in the corridors of the schools and hospitals, sitting with a pizza or a drink – women are usually the ones who tell life-stories. […] Throughout the ages, the aptitude for the particular makes them excellent narrators. Cornered in weaving rooms, like Penelope, they have, since ancient times, woven plots with the thread of storytelling. They have woven [*intessuto*] stories, letting them casually tear the metaphor of the *textum* of professional men of letters. Whether ancient or modern, their art aspires to a wise repudiation of the abstract universal, and follows an everyday practice where the tae is existence, relation and attention."[277]

Sereni's ultimate solution to survival—a word repeatedly used by the author and coming to represent precisely the struggle with our fragile relational experiences—is reinvention. A functional life, the authors says, without "gesti di agio", "little luxuries", without "odore di cura" literally "the smell of care", "special care," is impossible to live. Because caring means being present for changes, attentive to needs, awake in the occurrences of everyday life. A life lived in care is one which involves creation, reinvention, renegotiation, one not fixed in dogmatic structures of believes. Domesticity in *Keeping House* comes to represent a space where the care of the self and the other is played out through the gestures and duties performed every day, every minute. From changing the filter of the dishwasher to changing the batteries of Tommaso's toys, the self is faced with the choice of functionality or care "Reinventare per non rimasticare, reinventare per non mangiarsi il cuore"[278] [Reinventing so as not to chew over and over again, reinventing so as not to eat one's own heart][279]. Functionality, the blinded acceptance of things as they are, is the ultimate ground on which loneliness and mediocrity thrive. "And so my

[277] Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives Storytelling and selfhood* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 4
[278] *Keeping House* 165
[279] My Translation

aerial self sinks into the jars, into the liqueurs, into the potted plants on the terrace, into the sweaters and blankets with which I would like to ensnare the world, into the freezer. Because in my life, pieced together with ill-fitted bits, in the mosaic of my life (as in everyone's, but more so women's) keeping house can also mean a little warm place. A small corner that is constantly changing, for its stillness would mean death, and recipes are only a base on which to build new flavors, new combinations every time."[280]

Sereni's negotiation for individuality becomes a desire for recognition that finds its origin in the relationship with her father, in particular in his lack of support and communication. The first time we encounter this desire is among a group of mothers who decide to take turns cooking food for the forty children of the kindergarden school Tommaso was attending, rather than giving them unhealthy and cold snacks in lunchboxes. "The first year my desire for recognition was bitterly frustrated: for all the effort I put into it, the children were finicky, I was a beginner, and the pressure cookers that I used to transport the food came back almost full, along with disapproving looks from the teachers, heavy feelings of guilt, and Tommaso who could not boast about his mother."[281]After a first unsuccessful attempt to serve food from a pressure cooker, Sereni decides to switch to soup even despite the doubts expressed by the teachers. But after tasting it, one of the teachers finally gives her approval, recognizing the good taste and quality of Sereni's recipe. "I had been told that children did not like soup, but it was the thing I knew best, and with which I felt most confident. I was feeling a little less sure, however, when I arrived at the school with the pots, and the teacher who opened them said: 'Soup,' raising her eyebrows.

[280] *Keeping House* 142
[281] *Keeping House* 45

She tasted, paused, and smiled: the first door had been opened, and she announced a delicious soup. The children had seconds; Lisetta put the bowl on her head hat-like to show her appreciation. But Tommaso refused to take part in my success."[282]

Although her desire for recognition is met with minimum compromise, her son denies her a complete sense of fulfillment, leaving her with yet another empty, unresolved sense of recognition/validation. Even here, a seemingly uneventful everyday activity, becomes for Sereni another platform for finding the threshold of belonging, of bonding. Fear of inappropriateness and exclusion are repeatedly present in her relation with others (groups).

The most significant scene that illustrates the powerful impact of the author's father's influence in forming her own individuality, is when during a summer he is presented with four different recipes made by his daughter. Because the maid was away on vacation, Sereni and her mother decide to rotate to prepare meals for the family. The scene is introduced by the following statement "When I was an adolescent the term 'anorexia' was not yet fashionable; that must have been the reason why my fasting did not carry serious consequences. I was, however, always very thin […] and my last period of life at home with my parents was marked by a radical refusal of food; I was throwing up almost everything I ate."[283] Here a very different relationship with food is presented, one of conflict rather care. Because the doctor in order to cure her sickness, diagnosed as colitis, had forbidden Sereni to eat any bread or fat, Sereni had to be extra inventive in making good meals without the use of any ingredients containing fat. On the first day she makes a chicken in salt that her father eats all the while talking about other things and then simply adding at the end of the meal "Not bad. This is similar to the chicken-in-a-paper-case

[282] *Keeping House* 45
[283] *Keeping House* 71

mammà used to make […] but something is missing,"[284] deviating from commenting at all on the efforts of Sereni's work. On the second day she has the idea of preparing a grill, since they often ate outside in the summer. She marinates the steaks and adds only one clove of garlic. As soon as the family stars to eat, the father bursts out into his objections: "how many times have I told you, the salt has to be put in afterwards, otherwise the meat gets tough."[285] The third day Sereni decides to take a big risk by preparing a dish made often by her grandmother Alfonsa, stuffed zucchini. However, even in this occasion the "but" arrive once again " 'The 'but' arrived once more, I don't remember about what. I ate with false appetite, obstinate, thinking without the courage to say so, that my zucchini was better than Grandmother's."[286] Undoubtedly Sereni that night has a colic attack and throws up everything. "It must have been the oil I used to fry the zucchini, suggested Giulia, as she held my head. She looked powerless and sorrowful, unable to mediate between her divided loyalties."[287] Despite the constant disapproval and the colic attack, Sereni returns into the kitchen on her fourth day with the determination to prevent her father's "but." "All my life, under my father's gaze, there was an unavoidable 'but,' and each of my attempts to assert independence, freedom, take an intellectual position, would clash against his fury, or a conceited smile. In his greener years he had done, and better than I, all the things I was trying to do: studying, establishing relationships, politics, even cooking."[288] She creates her own recipe of a baked rolled meatball mixture stuffed with carrots, hard boiled eggs and chicken breast. When the moment to slice the roll comes, Sereni realizes with surprise that the dish looks exactly like Grandmother's stuffed chicken and, knowing that it was too late to change her recipe

[284] *Keeping House* 72
[285] *Keeping House* 72
[286] *Keeping House* 72
[287] *Keeping House* 72
[288] *Keeping House* 72

now, she attempts to mask it by decorating it with parsley and other fresh herbs. At the table the father pronounces the following sentence:

" 'This is good […] Where did you find the recipe?'

'I made it up' I answered without hesitation.

Too defeated to display my usual provocative style, I lowered my head, expecting a hailstorm of 'buts.'

'Really good,' my father concluded.

I went to my room and cried all my tears."[289]

At last her father's recognition of her effort and work comes but at what cost. By the end his words are no longer a validation but a reiteration for Sereni of the immense struggle and sufferance in making her voice heard. The constant disapproval from her father creates in Sereni a profound sense of inadequacy, evident as well in her eating disorder, a form of self punishment, a forceful act to control and dominate that which keeps her alive. But in *Keeping House* quite the reversal is in place. It is interesting in fact to note that after her father's death it is through food that she chooses to stamp her uniqueness, to tell her own story, not by rejecting it, as in the past, but by carefully preparing it, by reinventing new flavors, and by sharing her recipes. Her entire relationship with others is viewed and interpreted through food and this very scene illustrates the very subtle dynamic of relationality between the act of caring, giving and being. The concept of recognition in psychological and philosophical terms can be lead back to Hegel's Master and Slave dialectic, an analysis on our own sense of subjectivity and its link to the reciprocal subjectivity of the other. In *Patterns of Intersubjective Recognition: Love, Rights and Solidarity*, Axel Honneth says about Hegel's theory on recognition:

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[289] *Keeping House* 73

"for Hegel, love represents the first stage of reciprocal recognition, because in it subjects mutually confirm each other with regard to the concrete nature of their needs and thereby recognize each other as needy creatures. In the reciprocal experience of loving care, both subjects know themselves to be united in their neediness, in their dependence on each other. Since, moreover, needs and emotions can, to a certain extent, only gain 'confirmation' by being directly satisfied or reciprocated, recognition itself must possess the character of affective approval or encouragement. This recognition relationship is thus also necessarily tied to the physical existence of concrete others who show each other feelings of particular esteem. The key for translating this topic into a context of scientific research is represented by Hegel's formulation, according to which love has to be understood as 'being oneself in another'"[290]

Sereni's need of approval and encouragement is an indication of a lack of recognition within her immediate family that results in a constant sense of inadequacy with others, as we have seen in the examples of the political group and the kindergarten mothers. In *Da un grigio all'altro* the author openly states that her father and her second mother never showed their concern, a form of recognition of a person's vulnerability, but instead loaded her with more and more responsibilities which aggravated both her relationship with them and her physical state when, as a result to the constant pressure, she became anorexic. Her words in describing her difficult years as an adolescent reveal a slight resentment.

"I miei si saranno pure preoccupati, ma non l'hanno mai dato a vedere, mentre un tantino mi sarebbe servito, vederli preoccupati, probabilmente era quella l'unica cosa che volevo

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[290] Axel Honneth, *Patterns of Intersubjective Recognition: Love, Rights and Solidarity*. (1995. Polity Press) as found on this webpage:
http://ethicalpolitics.org/blackwood/honneth.htm

d'avvero"[291] [Maybe my parents were worried, who knows, but they never showed it, while a bit of concern would have been helpful, seeing them concerned was perhaps the only thing that I really wanted from them.][292] Very different is instead the memory of her mother who passed away when she was only five years old and that in her book can only be told by the author as a fairytale made of affectionate gestures, loving exchanges of what she names as "the before". In the same fairytale she also describes an imaginary incident in which her father, concerned by the high fever of young Clara as they are traveling back to Italy from Russia, exerts all his influence in getting a *stracciatella* soup. The warmth of this dish, made of simple ingredients, is associated to this fantasy, and it's here that, in a similar fashion as for the *Pasta e Fagioli*, we can find another example of the function of recipes as locus of memory, creation, and self formation. Sereni tells us that her mother was considered by the family as a saint, a heroine, a martyr. She was the daughter of a revolutionary socialist who died in Russia before the 1905 Revolution, and of a Turkish Greek woman who had been active in the Revolution by carrying bombs in her shopping bag. And although both Sereni's mother and her grandmother were writers, neither the essays, nor the memoirs could be enough for her to really understand and know her mother. So the only thing she could rely on is her own imagination made of the love and care that had existed between her parents before she died. And it is imagination that allows her in the end to create a different identity. "Mia madre morí che io avevo cinque anni e mezzo, ma è sparita da me molto prima, perché era spesso all'estero, in clinica; ogni tanto tornava, ma per poco. Credo che, comunque, quella sua breve presenza mi abbia, in una certa misura, salvato la pelle perché, malgrado tutto, deve essere riuscita a darmi un imprinting: non so come abbia fatto, ma se cosí

[291] *Da un Grigio all'altro* 14
[292] My Translation

non fosse stato, la mia storia sarebbe stata diversa."[293] [My mother died when I was only five and half years old, but she really disappeared from me a long time before then, because she was often abroad in a clinic; every once in a while she would come back, but only for a little while. I believe though, that her brief presence has, in a certain way, saved me, because despite everything, she must have been able to give me an imprinting: I don't know how she did it, but if she hadn't, my life story would have been different.][294] This passage, immediately following the one in which she describes her anorexia and loss of weight, is leaving us to conclude that the recreated memory of her mother gave her a possibility to imagine herself in other terms, and that perhaps becoming a writer is in part the imprinting that her mother left in her. Equally important, as we have seen before, is her relationship with her aunt Ermelinda "preziosissima, alla cui memoria, ogni volt ache la nomino, accendo otto candele, perché credo che senza di lei non sarei qui a raccontare la mia vita." [295] [my most precious aunt Ermelinda…everytime I name her I light eight candles, because I really think that without her, I wouldn't be here telling my life.][296] Thus what becomes evident in *Keeping House* is that the necessity for a non-authoritarian masculine model was met by the enthusiastic and bizarre figure of aunt Ermelinda and by the fantastic memory of her mother. And while a discussion about writing is completely absent in this book, one is left to think to what extent this early experience placed a role in writing a book about recipes and life, treating, in doing so, an important subject in the feminine life experience. In one video interview Sereni says that when she wrote *Keeping House* she did nothing else but to capture something "that was in the air" (che era nell'aria) within the feminist discussions: a necessity to return to a ground closer, more intimate to the everyday personal experience, but

[293] *Da un grigio all'altro* 15
[294] My Translation
[295] *Da un grigio all'altro* 15
[296] My Translation

also in the search for creating new references in order to understand womanhood. The Italian feminist Carla Lonzi stated this necessity in her now and then famous feminist manifesto *Sputiamo su Hegel:*

"La donna non va definita in rapporto all'uomo. Su questa coscienza si fondano tanto la nostra lotta quanto la nostra libertà. L'uomo non è il modello a cui adeguare il processo della scoperta di sé da parte della donna. La donna è l'altro rispetto all'uomo. L'uomo è l'altro rispetto alla donna. L'uguaglianza è un tentativo ideologico per asservire la donna a piu alti livelli. Identificare la donna all'uomo significa annullare l'ultima via di liberazione. Liberarsi per la donna non vuoi dire accettare la stessa vita dell'uomo perché è invivibile, ma esprimere il suo senso dell'esistenza. La donna come soggetto non rifiuta l'uomo come soggetto, ma lo rifiuta come ruolo assoluto. Nella vita sociale lo rifiuta come ruolo autoritario."[297] [A woman should not be defined in reference to a man. Our fight and freedom is based on this consciousness. A woman is the other with respect to a man. A man is the other with respect to a woman. Equality is an ideological attempt to render a woman subservient to higher levels. Identifying the woman to a man means annulling the way towards liberation. Liberation for a woman does not mean accepting the same life as a man because it's unlivable, but it means to express her own sense of existence. A woman as a subject does not refuse a man as a subject, she refuses him as an absolute role. In the social life she refuses him as the authoritarian role.][298]

Clara Sereni left her home when she was seventeen, leaving behind the authoritarian voice of her father, while nourishing within herself the murmur left within her by the mother. She began a trajectory that resonates to the one Carla Lonzi envisioned in her manifesto.

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[297] *Sputiamo su Hegel* 11
[298] My Translation

"Il mondo dell'uguaglianza è il mondo della sopraffazione legalizzata, dell'unidimensionale; il mondo della differenza è il mondo dove il terrorismo getta le armi e la sopraffazione cede al rispetto della varietà e della molteplicità della vita [..] La donna non ha piu un appiglio, uno solo, per aderire agli obiettivi dell'uomo. In questo nuovo stadio di consapevolezza la donna rifiuta, come un dilemma imposto dal potere maschile, sia il piano dell'uguaglianza che quello della differenza, e afferma che nessun essere umano e nessun gruppo deve definirsi o essere definito sulla base di un altro essere umano e di un altro gruppo. L'oppressione della donna è il risultato di millenni: il capitalismo l'ha ereditato piuttosto che prodotto. Il sorgere della proprietà privata ha espresso uno squilibrio tra i sessi come bisogno di potere di ciascun uomo su ciascuna donna, intanto che si definivano i rapporti di potere tra gli uomini."[299] [the world of equality is the world of legalized abuse, of the one-dimensional; the world of difference is the word where terrorism throws its arms and abuse cedes to respect the variety and the multiplicity of life […] The woman no longer has a foothold, not even one to adhere to the man's objectives. In this new stadium of consciousness, the woman refuses both equality and difference, as a dilemma imposed by the man's power, and affirms that no human being and no group should define or be defined on the basis of another human being or of another group. The woman's oppression is the result of thousands of years: capitalism has inherited more than having it produced. The rise of private property expressed disequilibrium between sexes as a need of power from each man over each woman, meanwhile the power relations between men was being defined.]

The parallels between such statement and *Keeping House* are evident in the discussion of the groups and its internal unobserved contradictions, in the militant figure of Aldo and in the rigid figure of the father. The trajectory Sereni is leading toward is one of liberation summed up

[299] *Sputiamo su Hegel* 119

by the final statement in which she affirms that “Everything has already been said, everything has already been written”, but what is more significant in Sereni is the notion of reinventing as a necessity to reprocess what has already been given, to understand its contradictions, its hidden subtle dynamic, its connections to oneself. In order to discover new flavors one should reinvent on the basis of what already exists, trying new combinations, new ingredients, and in this process finding the possibility to discover oneself as another. If everything has been already written and said, we can find the space to begin to focus on process and not on its end. Sereni captures in a most sincere and tangible way what in the feminist vision would remain as a chimera: liberation not as severance but as the creative scope where equality and difference are played out bare in our most familiar and accustomed spaces.

Conclusive Remarks

I began my studies on women's autobiographies after I encountered Silko's *Storyteller* and Ginzburg's *Family Saying* and realized the impossibility to contain the forms of these works within Lejeune's first definition of autobiography and Gusdorf's proclamation of the equation: autobiography equals individuality. Therefore I began to search for both theoretical definitions and practical examples that would become parallel voices to what I considered relational and collective autobiographies.

My study began with the very basic question: why does one write an autobiography? And turned into a survey of the forms in which this genre exists, the same forms that turn a definition of autobiography into a fleeting attempt. From the confessional, to the instructive, from the heroic to the historical, autobiography's subject remains the self. But not only. Silko's, Ginzburg's and Anzaldùa autobiographies are in fact based on the non-western principle of selflessness in their abandoning of the isolated corner from which to tell their story, for the chorus of voices they enter and interpret. A selflessness then, not as blind forgetfulness of one's context and origin, but rather a principle of openness, creation, immediacy. The ultimate conundrum then—autobiography without self. Suddenly the genre of the Gusdorfian isolated individual is turned into the space where the relationality of a community and the individual is played out within the community, and the self is transformed into a mutable, impermanent being made of stories, voices, anecdotes. "No self/only race *vecindad familia*" Anzaldùa says, "I remain who I am, multiple/and one."[300]

At the end of my journey, a space for telling has been therefore established, where the self, free of attachment, stays with its plurality and tells an old new story made of the plurality of

[300] *Borderland/La Frontera* 195

stories heard, told, lived. And maybe from this threshold one could envision an autobiography of the non-self, where the stories' voices will tell our own despite our-selves.

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