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Representations of Violence Against Native American Women

Christine York

Representations of Violence Against Native American Women

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ABSTRACT

Christine York, M.A., University of South Alabama, July 2024. Representations of Violence Against Native American Women. Pat J. Cesarini, Ph.D.

It is the aim of this study to provide detailed attention to the representation of violence against Native American women throughout American films and literature. Native American women have been persecuted against since the times of colonization; however, there has been a recent uptake in this crime. This crime has been seen throughout many forms of art, but has not often been a focal point to these artforms. In order to argue that the violence these women experience needs to be central to the texts they are seen in, a comparison between three different texts is imperative. These texts are *Wind River* directed by Taylor Sheridan, *Almanac of the Dead* written by Leslie Marmon Silko, and *Shell Shaker* written by LeAnne Howe. This comparison involves summaries of each text, utilization of secondary sources, and analysis that identifies and explains the harmful effects of not providing this issue with adequate representation. This study aims to conclude that by providing the issue of violence against Native American women attention, the issue can hopefully become known across the United States. This, in turn, could potentially allow for resources to be administered to help diminish this issue and provide an appropriate understanding of Native American issues, culture, and life.

INTRODUCTION

In present-day America, there is an epidemic of physical and sexual violence against Native American women and girls. This epidemic is known as Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). Although the issue of MMIWG has recently received some serious public attention—including in the three texts I will examine—the phenomenon of violence against Native women has been a problem for a long time. In fact, this violence has generally been related back to the times of colonization. However, there has been a recent spike in this issue. In an article published by the Urban Indian Health Institute, they state the following: "The National Crime Information Center reports that, in 2016, there were 5,712 reports of missing American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls, though the US Department of Justice's federal missing persons database, NamUS, only logged 116 cases" (2). Even with this staggering report, little has been done to bring attention to or solve this problem. In the Urban Indian Health Institute's findings, they found that only 27 news articles were printed in the world that covered only 21 cases of murdered Indigenous women—all of which happened on a reservation—and none of the articles dealt with missing Native women (18). Not only is this statistic dismaying, but also it overlooks the crimes done to Native women and girls who live outside of reservations, a category of tribal people known as Urban Indians. Although there is little attention focused on this issue, three different modern texts—which I will examine here—have attempted to provide significant insight into this epidemic.

My own personal education regarding Native American history and culture was virtually obsolete before my graduate studies here at the University. In fact, the only memory regarding Native American history within my education was a kindergarten production of Thanksgiving. The white children were dressed as Pilgrims while the non-white children were dressed as Indians. While this was virtually innocent at the time, I have come to realize the problems with this play as it did not portray Native Americans in an appropriate or accurate manner. In the rest of my academic career before the University level, I learned about Native American history at a minimal level. I had to rely on my own research to understand the history of America that has clear deep ties with Native American people.

During my first year of graduate school, I enrolled in a Native American fiction course. In this course, I was exposed to different works of literature created by Native authors. In one of these novels—*Almanac of the Dead*, which I discuss in my thesis—I was introduced into reality that many Native American women and girls experience on a daily basis. My own curiosity prompted further research into the violence these women experience. I was appalled at the outcome as there was little attention regarding this issue. In fact, the only attention on this issue was found when I researched the specific details. Otherwise, it was not produced in modern media. This resulted in the work for my thesis: examining representations of violence against Native American women.

As this problem is central to my argument, I must address Native American feminism. Andrea Smith, a feminist and activist who has publicly claimed to be Cherokee—although she has no federal ties to a Cherokee tribe—has written a critical essay titled "Not an Indian Tradition: The Sexual Colonization of Native Peoples." Smith

begins her essay by defining rape as a patriarchal tool used to control women of color, specifically Native American women in this instance. Smith then determines how sexual violence is not only an attack on a Native woman's gender and sexuality, but also it is an attack on her identity as a whole, race included. Her essay examines how the colonist's patriarchy was different from Native societies. According to Smith, European societies possessed a deep hatred for women that can be seen in the many accusations of witchcraft as witchcraft is mostly associated with women(76). This hatred is directly contrasted with the formation of Native societies as they were egalitarian that held women in equally high regard as the males. Smith argues that Native emphasis on gender egalitarianism was seen as a threat to the European societies, for it provided an example to colonial women of how they could be treated. To combat this threat, European settlers used savage stereotypes and sexual violence to oppress this egalitarian society. Smith provides an excerpt from an 1899 edition of the *Syracuse Herald-Journal*. The journal features a Mrs. Teall who writes about the Iroquois, a Native society that she has seen and experienced:

> They had one custom the white men are not ready, even yet, to accept. The women of the Iroquois had a public and influential position. They had a council of their own . . . which had the initiative in the discussion; subjects presented by them being settled in the councils of the chiefs and elders in this latter council the women had an orator of their own (often of their own sex) to present and speak for them. There are sometimes female chiefs. . . The wife owned all the property. . . The family was hers; descent was counted through [the] mother (Lopez qtd in Smith 77).

The truth about women's status in some Native societies was far different from what most non-Natives assumed. There was no Native American feminism as the women were already equal with the men. The stereotypes forced upon them are combated by this quotation from 1899 which shows the egalitarian society Native Americans possessed. Because matriarchal society was overtly present within Native American communities, this could have easily posed a threat to the patriarchal European settlers. The truth of Native American societies was then buried by the need to control white women and keep the patriarchal society ever present and thriving. Smith concludes her essay by stating that the sexual colonization of Native people, especially the women, will continue as they pose a threat to the conquering of the land and the legitimacy of the history of our nation (82). It is this importance of the taking of Native land that often overshadows the abuse Native American women experience as the conquering of Native land is the more well-known crime that occurred during colonization. Indigenous bodies are used as collateral damage in the important battle over land.

It is this issue of collateral damage that I wish to focus on in this project as the women in the texts I have chosen are regarded on different levels of gender equality. I have chosen three texts to examine, each of which attempts to bring light to the issue of MMIWG and Native female autonomy. These texts are Taylor Sheridan's film *Wind River*, Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Almanac of the Dead*, and LeAnne Howe's novel *Shell Shaker*. These texts all attempt to focus on the issue of violence against Native American women; however, the portrayal of this issue often becomes overshadowed by the different narratives being presented in each text. It is these three forms of text that

portray the treatment of women vastly different according to their setting and overall theme of their work.

Wind River, directed by Taylor Sheridan, attempts to bring attention to the violence many Native women and girls experience. Throughout the film, the protagonist—a white male—is investigating the murder of a young Indigenous girl. However, the story turns out to have very little to do with the murdered Native girl. Instead, its narrative is built mainly around the white protagonist's own connection to the tribe and the crime. The white protagonist within the film is connected to the tribe due to his relationship with a Native American woman and the children they have. However, one child, their teenage daughter, is mysteriously killed. As they never solve the mystery of her death, the white protagonist is spurred by the main investigation in the film to solve the murder of the Indigenous girl as he could not do so for his own daughter. While this is admirable in itself, this poses a problem for the film's message. One of the main messages of Sheridan's film is to bring light to the issue of the violence many Native women and girls experience. However, the message is soon overshadowed by the white protagonist's personal vendetta against the perpetrators within the film. *Wind River* very quickly revolves itself around the life of the white male protagonist, his trauma and love life included. This is problematic for the issue of MMIWG as it becomes a mere subplot within the film, which focuses on the white character's actions in the investigation. Although he means well, Sheridan's direction of the film becomes more in tune with the white savior narrative—a white character saving non-white characters from different misfortunes—than with MMIWG. This provides an unrealistic expectation for halting the MMIWG epidemic as it does not provide a realistic solution. The narrative portrayed in

this film, though seemingly harmless, ultimately distracts from the stated concern with MMIWG. The audience is not able to connect with the Native women within the film, the victim included, because the story is told from the perspective of a non-Native character. While *Wind River* does provide an insight into the violent crimes committed against Native women and girls, it does not portray accurate depictions of and/or solutions for MMIWG.

Almanac of the Dead, written by Leslie Marmon Silko, provides a deeper insight into the Native mindset during a time of political uprising. Silko's novel is set throughout the lower half of the United States and part of Mexico. Her novel is written in a non-linear format that examines a multitude of characters and their relationships with one another. However, the main plot of the novel is the conflict between Euro-Americans and Native Americans. This conflict is seen through the Indigenous fight for reclaiming the land as the Euro-American characters have been abusing the land and those around them. In fact, this abuse committed by Euro-Americans is a subplot within the novel. Many of the characters, especially Native characters, provide a backstory of the abuse they were forced to endure by their Euro-American counterparts. All of the female Native characters within Silko's novel have been victimized throughout their lives. Yet this is not the main plot of the novel. Silko writes this abuse vividly; however, she does not provide any resolutions or solutions for the violence the Native female characters experience. Instead, all of the characters within the novel are primarily focused on the political uprising that is happening around them. By having the reclamation of land as a central plot within the novel, the Native female characters are not given a chance to cope with the violence they were subjected to. Instead, they use the violence they experienced

as a type of weapon against those around them—specifically the Euro-American characters. The female characters become just as violent as the men around them. Because the violence the women experience in the novel are not as central to the plot as the message of reclaiming Native land, Silko's novel provides unrealistic expectations for Native women that have been abused. Rather than having the Native female characters cope with the violence they experienced, Silko proposes that the reclamation of land would solve the abuse the women experienced. By the Natives reclaiming the land, the Euro-American characters would be forced out, and with it, their influence. Although Silko provides significant insight into the life of Native Americans—she being Native herself—she does not provide a realistic solution to the issue of MMIWG as the reclaiming of land is not currently possible.

LeAnne Howe's novel, *Shell Shaker*, provides the most accurate representation of the MMIWG issue than the other two do. Howe's novel transcends different time periods as it examines different Native women of the same lineage experiencing different forms of abuse. This examination is central in Howe's novel. These Native women not only experience individual instances of abuse, but also abuse that threatens to harm their respective tribes. In order to protect themselves and their tribes from further abuse, the Native women within the novel act as leaders against the threats of those opposed to them. This establishment of leadership roles is not something that was present within the other two texts. Howe writes the Native female characters as being equal to their male counterparts. They are able to be in positions of power—in both their family and tribes—without it being considered unnatural. The men within the novel recognize the Native women as equals entirely capable of being in positions of power. Even so, the female

characters within the novel are subjected to violent (sexual) abuse. However, they do not allow this abuse to define them. They do not define themselves as victims (as the term is normally associated with weakness); instead, they continue to hold their positions of power in order to protect themselves. Howe's characters do not experience these horrible acts of violence without further examination; instead, they are able to work through this trauma and continue living their lives freely. The Native female characters allow themselves to cope with the violence they experience, which allows them to place themselves back in society without it harming themselves or those around them (as seen in the violence to which Silko's women turn to). Howe's narrative presents Native women with full agency over their own lives. The women in Howe's novel are central to the plot and are capable of determining their own lives without the trauma of their past completely influencing their decisions. Thus, Howe's narrative provides a more realistic and hopeful portrayal of this current epidemic.

CHAPTER II – NATIVE STEREOTYPES IN THE FILM *WIND RIVER*

In the film industry, representation of Native Americans is mostly seen within Western films. A majority of these Western films portray Native Americans as the stereotypical savages they are said to be. Outside of this Western genre, there are not a lot of films that portray Native communities and their issues more sympathetically. One recent film that does is Taylor Sheridan's *Wind River* (2017), a mainstream film that focuses on a story partly about the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). While I believe that Sheridan's film portrays its Native characters sympathetically, I will ultimately argue that he erases the very Native characters whose plight motivated him to tell this particular story. The film is set in Wyoming on the reservation of Wind River—the two Indian nations in this reservation being Eastern Shosone and Northern Araphao—and follows the protagonist Cory Lambert (Jeremy Renner), who works as a wildlife officer on the Native American reservation. Even though Cory Lambert is white, he has a deep tie and connection to this community because of his past relationship with a Native woman and the children they had; his older daughter was killed while his younger son is still alive. While looking for a predator that is killing the community's livestock, Cory stumbles upon the corpse of a young Native teenage girl—who is later identified as Natalie (Kelsey Asbille)—from the community deep in the mountains. This discovery spurs an investigation in which an FBI agent, Jane Banner (Elizabeth Olsen) joins Cory in an effort to solve the mysterious death of the young girl.

Even though there are signs of sexual assault, Natalie's death is ultimately not ruled as a homicide because the cause of her death was a collapsing of her lungs from

running for miles in below freezing weather. Neither Cory nor Jane are satisfied with the coroner's decision and decide to continue the investigation into the girl's death in order to bring her killers to justice. They begin their investigation by questioning the parents of the victim, which is where Jane is exposed to a supposed tradition of their Native community that shocks her. Jane walks in on the mother crying in her bedroom and cutting herself in deep grief. Upon seeing this, Jane runs out of the room to where Cory and the grieving father are; neither of them is shocked to hear of this grieving process, for they are both knowledgeable about their community. After comforting the father, and assuring him that he will not rest until the killers suffer a similar fate, Cory leaves the house with Jane in tow.

As the investigation develops, they discover that Natalie was dating a white man who worked as part of a security force on a drilling site near their community. On their way to interrogate those on the site, Cory discovers the body of Natalie's boyfriend face down in the snow. As Jane, along with some tribal police who accompany her, is conversing with the heavily armed security force at the drilling site, the movie shifts into a flashback in order for the audience to receive the full story of the night Natalie died. Natalie was visiting her boyfriend at his housing on the drill site when his coworkers/roommates walked into their trailer drunk. After seeing Natalie, they started harassing her and her boyfriend—one of them being much more aggressive than the others. When she tried to escape, Natalie was knocked unconscious as the other men beat her boyfriend. As he lay unconscious on the ground, the men started raping Natalie, but she began to awaken. The boyfriend, seemingly spurred by this, awoke and tackled the

men, driving them away from Natalie. While he fought them off, Natalie ran out into the wilderness in order to escape this assault.

Back in the present, the Native and assisting non-Native police officers, Jane, and the men who assaulted Natalie are in a shootout. Although Jane is shot, she is still alive and hides underneath a trailer while the rest of the police officers are brutally killed by the drill site employees. Returning just in time, Cory uses his skills as a wildlife officer to snipe the men from a distance, managing to kill all but one of them—Natalie's rapist. After making sure that Jane is alive, Cory goes after him and after capturing him, Cory makes him run in the snow until he dies the same way Natalie did—although he does not make it as far as Natalie did before he collapses. The film then cuts back to the reservation, and, in the final scene, we see Cory and Natalie's grieving father looking off into the distance and supporting each other through this hard process. As they are looking off into the distance, a final quote settles upon the screen: "No one knows how many are missing," to remind the audience that the film is, in its own way, about the problem of MMIWG.

Since the film is relatively new, there are few critical essays that focus on it, but there are two that offer interesting readings of the film's gender and ethnic politics. The first, Jeff Firmin's "*Wind River* and the New (Old) Action Movie," focuses on how Sheridan's film fits less into the Western genre than into a sort of meta-genre that features the importance of white masculinity within films and how it is this masculinity that will save those in a racial minority from the world that oppresses them (84). Firmin begins by focusing on how Sheridan utilizes white masculinity instead of the Native American issues—specifically the violence the women experience. A vast majority of

Firmin's critique tends to summarize scenes within *Wind River*, which he then follows with an extensive examination of how Sheridan is redefining the problematic history between Native Americans and the American colonizers. Firmin focuses on the white characters within the film, how they are represented, and how although the film is about Native issues, the film ultimately represents a white audience by utilizing typical Native American stereotypes. I agree with Firmin's argument. While Sheridan may be attempting to focus on the issue of violence within Native American communities, his film seems to be much more interested in the interpersonal relationships between men within the film. Firmin continues by stating that this meta-genre insists it is portraying the real American lifestyle of Native and non-Native cohabitation; this claim is reflected in the beginning of the film, which states that it has been inspired by true events (84). Because of this statement, the audience is predisposed to believe *Wind River* is a realistic depiction of Native American life. While Sheridan meant to call attention to the missing women in Native communities, he makes a film that focuses more on the strengthening of the male relationships within the film. Although a majority of Firmin's critique—i.e., that since this film is made by a white man, it reflects a white man's values—is one that I share, his lack of focus on the trauma of people of color, in this case the Native American people within the film, does not correspond with my own argument. A fuller reading of the film will benefit from examining the portrayal of Native characters within Sheridan's film instead of focusing so much on how whites are represented within the film.

The other critical work on *Wind River*—focusing more on the women than the men, as Firmin does—is Robert Spindler's "Western Nostalgia, Revisionism, and Native American Women in *Wind River* (2017)," a chapter included in the book *Women in the*

Western, edited by Sue Matheson. The beginning of Spindler's chapter sums up his argument when he states that the majority of films with Native Americans are eager to portray Native women as reliant on the white male protagonists (137). Spindler's comparison of *Wind River* with the long tradition of films portraying Native female dependance on white males is intended to show that although Sheridan's film is progressive, in the sense of making the Native American experience known to the general public, his film nevertheless fails to escape the generic limits of the Western. Spindler quotes Will Wright to further define the Western genre that *Wind River* falls victim to, being the classical Western plot that is "the story of the lone stranger who rides into a troubled town and cleans it up, winning the respect of the townsfolk and the love of the schoolmarm" (142). Cory, the lead, who is accompanied by Jane, is the "lone stranger" who rides into the "troubled town" to clean up their mess. Even after the shift of Western films post 9/11—which saw an attempt to revise the classic Western that focuses on proto-American values—*Wind River* still fits into the classic narrative of the Western genre in which Native American women suffer because of their ethnicity and their gender. Spindler's focus on the gender and racial roles in the film has more relation to my argument. I agree with Spindler's statement that *Wind River*'s plot is "banal and repeats the classic motif of the deceased Indian maiden, failing to essentially revise the treatment of Native American women in the (neo-)Western" (145). This claim supports the argument that Sheridan's film, although somewhat progressive, continues this harmful narrative that depicts Indian maidens in need of rescue. In fact, Spindler makes brief mention of how the Native women within the film (four women including the murder victim) receive little screen time compared to the protagonist, Cory. In fact, all the Native

women in the film receive under ten minutes of screentime—including the flashback of Natalie's assault—compared to Cory's involvement in every scene in the almost two-hour movie. However, Spindler's final claim is a stretch compared to the rest of his argument. He states that the implied pairing of the white characters Cory and Jane at the film's end suggests that the overall plot of the film has been resolved because there is a possible union between these white characters. This union reveals that harmony can be restored outside of the reservation; those left on the reservation are left to their own devices (Spindler 145). This final claim diminishes Spindler's argument throughout the rest of the essay because he is refocusing the film on relationships between two white characters. Although the two protagonists of the film, Cory and Jane, are both white and seemingly begin to have a relationship, this is not the main focus of the film. Instead, this supposed happy ending is only a happy ending for the two white characters in the film; the rest of the Native community is left with pieces they need to place back together. Although Spindler does dedicate parts of his criticism to Sheridan's portrayal of Native American women, his work primarily focuses on how *Wind River* fits into the Western genre while also attempting to identify the Native stereotypes within the film. While I agree with various parts of Spindler's criticism, I believe that both Firmin and Spindler do not dedicate enough of their work to the Native women in the film.

Before analyzing how *Wind River* fits into the current film industry, Western films and Pro-Indian films—two of the genres that Sheridan is implementing in his work—must be defined. John A. Price's essay, "The Stereotyping of North American Indians in Motion Pictures," provides an extensive background of the portrayal of Indian figures from the era of silent films until today. Price's essay does so by highlighting the

different stereotypes seen throughout each genre of film and then providing examples of each for analysis. Price begins his work by explaining the typical stereotype of an Indian as a wild savage who has personal vendettas against the white protagonist, such as one sees in the film *Redskin* (1929). This savagery includes, but is not limited to, being barely clothed, having a strong desire to be involved in warfare, having an adverse reaction to alcohol, and participating in gruesome tactics in battle (Price 153). This, of course, is not the case for Native Americans today as it is no longer true. It also was not necessarily the case for Native Americans in the past; Eurocentric Americans often overlooked their own savage behavior while casting judgment on the unknown culture before them. Yet because of this stereotype that has been continuously used throughout Western films, the audience of these films often drew faulty conclusions about real Native Americans based on the Indians they saw in these films. As a result, they would often categorize Native Americans as a dangerous "other" needing to be ostracized from white society. This issue caused a dark future for Western films as they continued to use this savage Indian stereotype. However, as society began to grow and lose interest in these types of films, the definition of Indians in movies began to evolve. In the late 1940s, a shift towards Pro-Indian movies began to take place—seen in the film *Rio Grande* (1950). It is in these films that the Native American characters are viewed through the eyes of a sympathetic white character who now strives for peace and cooperation between the two people (Price 159). This development in the relationship between Native Americans and the Euro-American characters allows for a change in the mindset of the audience; they will now be influenced to view Native Americans as people who had suffered but were not wholly prejudiced against white America. While this is a groundbreaking development in

Western films, there are other issues beginning to develop in these films, such as the white savior narrative.

Sam Pack, author of the essay "The Best of Both Worlds: Otherness, Appropriation, and Identity in '*Thunderheart*,'" addresses this issue of the white savior. After providing information on stereotypes seen in Pro-Indian films—fake Native spirituality, the Native American Other, etc.—Pack gives a brief summary of the film: "*Thunderheart* tells the story of a mixed-blood FBI agent (Ray Levoi) who ventures into the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota to solve a murder but finds his identity in the process" (97). Pack's analysis provides clear connections to Sheridan's *Wind River*. Both films are set around a murder, are based on a true story, have positive depictions of Native Americans, are set in contemporary times, and yet they also promote familiar stereotypes of native spirituality and tribal connection. This shows a clear recycling of plot and tropes within Pro-Indian films. This recycling leads to a greater focus on the success of the film and audience perception rather than on presenting a film with accurate Native American life and culture. Instead, the audience is presented with a familiar character—a white man—who has come to rescue a person of color. This type of film is not Pro-Indian as it is presenting an incorrect representation of Natives as people incapable of acting to protect themselves. Only the white man is capable of saving them from outside forces and themselves.

Wind River does try to break out of this white savior mold; however, it continues to fall victim to old Western film tropes. Firmin states,

> Of initial interest here is the clarity of the white-saviour narrative structure. This is a much-used storytelling trope, with a long

> history, in which a white guy enters a world of downtrodden minorities and saves them from some misery or another, establishing (or re-establishing) himself as the person they should depend on; it's obviously a narrative freighted with patriarchal and racialized beliefs about the kind of guy who should be in power and the kind of people who should be subservient to that guy (85).

Firmin establishes that *Wind River* continues to follow the format of a typical Western film—one that portrays white men as the ones with power who should be depended on by those with less power. The same can be seen in Pack's analysis of *Thunderheart*. Cory is this established "white guy," who brings a sense of protection to the reservation. He was already established as someone for the community to rely on because of his work as a wildlife officer, and yet this murder case allows him to reestablish himself within the community. He is able to do something that the other Natives in the community have not been able to do: bring justice to their women.

In the last moments of her life, Natalie was sexually assaulted by multiple white men. Spindler cites Elisa Marubbio on how Natalie "embodies enhanced sexual and racial differences that results in a fetishizing of the figure . . . [*sic*] she becomes the female representation of the ignoble savage" (Spindler 137). Because Natalie was sexually liberated—seen in her consensual relationship with her boyfriend, Matt—and Native American, she is seen by her white attackers as the ignoble savage. While the men working on the drill site view Natalie in a negative light, she also has positive attributes given to her by the "good" characters within the film. The "bad" men in the film fetishize Natalie because of her sexual and ethnic attributes. They treat her as something primal

and savage—falling into the typical Native American stereotypes—as they continue to abuse her. To the men who assault her, Natalie is something savage and primal; she is an object to be used for their own personal needs and desires. The positive attributes given to Natalie by Cory and others as they reconstruct her fate are reflective of her final moments. She is deemed a warrior and a hero for braving the below freezing weather in order to survive. Here, the audience is given two parallel images of Natalie within the film. She is simultaneously both a hero and a sexualized savage depending on the characters whose perspective is featured. Although Natalie is deemed a hero by Cory and other "good" characters, she dies at the end of her fight for survival. Since Sheridan is working with the classical Western trope wherein Indian maidens are dead or dying, Natalie has no chance of survival. In short, she is a victim of this Western trope. While Natalie plays a central role as the main victim in the film, the scenes of her in the movie are scarce. Natalie and the other Native American women in the film are marginalized due to the focus on the revenge plot whose protagonists are Cory and Martin (the victim's father).

We see this marginalization not only in the case of Natalie—which is understandable since she has passed before the film's action begins—but also with other Native women in the film who are both alive and close to the other characters. Cory's Indigenous ex-wife, Wilma, is introduced in the beginning of the film before Natalie's body is found. When Wilma is shown, she is portrayed as a stoic, secluded woman who no longer wants to be a part of her tribe. Although they are divorced, Wilma is not seen except for one small scene with ex-husband Cory. By not allowing Wilma to have more screen time, the audience cannot associate her with any independence that she might

have. From my analysis, I see Wilma as a woman traumatized by the loss of her daughter. When she is seen on the screen, she is reserved and hesitant. In the first scene between Wilma and Cory, she tells her ex-husband to make sure their son does not leave his eyesight while on the reservation. Although Wilma grew up on the reservation and is bound to the community by blood, it is Cory who continues to live on the reservation. But to Wilma, after losing their daughter, the reservation signifies danger. She can no longer feel a sense of community and instead asks the white male to protect their son. While Spindler provides a great analysis of Sheridan's film, he fails to mention Wilma beyond the fact of her being Cory's ex-wife. Instead, he believes that Cory and Wilma's dead daughter, Emily, has more significance because of her relation to the more recently dead Natalie. To further support this connection, Sheridan included many small references to the friendship between Natalie and Emily. While I do believe Cory and Wilma's deceased daughter is important, she is seen in the film less than Wilma. There are no flashbacks of their daughter; instead she is only seen through brief scenes where her picture is shown in photographs at Cory's home and in Natalie's bedroom. Her importance is emphasized by Spindler because she is the reason that Cory throws himself into the investigation of Natalie's death. Cory is spurred by his personal vendetta against those who harm young Native girls while Wilma is secluded with no sense of satisfaction or relief from her grief.

The other living Native woman represented in this film is the victim's mother, Annie. When Annie is first seen in the film, Jane demands to speak to her about her daughter's disappearance and death. However, as mentioned earlier, what she finds is the mother performing an act of self-mutilation while crying in grief. Jane is immediately

disturbed by this, and she runs out of the room apologizing to the grieving father. Spindler notices how out of place this scene of self-mutilation is as he notes how Annie is portrayed as hysterical in her grief (144). Spindler states that Sheridan is playing into the stereotype of a wild woman that is bestowed upon Native American women. While this scene is portrayed to the audience as some necessary grieving practice for Indigenous people, there is no information to suggest that this is an actual practice for some Native tribes. While every mother would be stricken by grief over the loss of a child, Sheridan takes it to the extreme by having a mother cut herself during her own mourning, deepening the stereotype of a wild woman disabled by her grief. Much later, after all of the men who assaulted Natalie are killed, Annie is shown again lying in her deceased daughter's bed when she is found by Cory. This time, she is not cutting herself but sleeping. Although this is the second time Annie is shown, viewers only see her body wrapped in a blanket and facing away from the screen. Her face is not presented to the viewer. Again we see a Native woman who does not have any individuality outside of her grief. Like her daughter, Annie is more of a stereotype or a "flat" character than a fully fleshed-out individual character. Annie, along with the other Native American women in the film, has not received any type of character development by the end of the film. While Natalie receives some sort of peace and justice after her death, Cory's ex-wife and Annie do not have any silver lining. The movie ends with them both stuck in their ways, stuck in grief.

Compared to the Native American women, Jane is the only woman in the film who has a significant amount of screen time. Spindler writes that although this is so, her character revolves around Cory as she is meant to support Cory in his endeavors

throughout the film and remind him of life outside of the reservation (142). Jane represents something Cory used to know before he integrated into the life and culture of the reservation. Throughout the film, she is seen as an outsider by all characters because of the outside, Euro-American threat she poses to what Indians represent. However, it is Cory who guides her through the case of Natalie and the Native American way. After the shootout on the drill site with Natalie's assailants, Jane is seen recovering in the hospital with Cory by her side. During their last scene together, Jane and Cory return to discussing Natalie as they both refer to her as a hero and a warrior. Before this, however, Jane is also called a hero by Cory for saving her own life. So although these two women are both defined as heroes and fighters, only one of them survives: the white one. As I quoted Spindler saying earlier, the end of the film suggests that some order is restored between Cory and Jane because they have united on a racial level by forming a fully white relationship with one another. This supposed union between Jane and Cory is meant to bring a sense of hope and peace to the audience. However, this hope and peace comes at the cost of turning one's back on the reservation and the people who live there. It leaves the audience with the impression that those left on the reservation will continue to suffer while those outside the reservation can go back to thrive in their own environment. After this hospital scene, Cory returns to the reservation to visit Martin to inform him of the death of Natalie's assailants.

Before analyzing Cory's character, his unique stance within the film must be explained. Spindler's chapter in the book *Women in the Western* states that "[a] recurring topos . . . is the interracial marriage or partnering of native female and white male, which functions as a lever to bestow a hybrid 'Anglo-Native' status upon the male. This status

legitimizes his function as a patronizing 'messenger' for Native Americans, in a mainstream film produced for, and by a white majority" (137). Since Cory was married to a Native American woman from this community (Wilma) and has a son who seems to be fully accepted by them, he is now included as a part of the community as the hybrid "Anglo-Native," as Spindler states. In fact, I believe that he is the one whom the people inside and outside of the Wind River reservation look to in their times of need. While Cory's ex-wife Wilma also lost a daughter, she does not seek revenge as her husband does. Instead, Wilma forgoes the life of a Native American woman and moves off the reservation with her young son. It is her ex-husband, Cory, who stays on the Wind River reservation and keeps the connection with her people growing. His Anglo-Native status continues to hold even after the woman connecting him to the Native community leaves. Later in the film, after he leaves Annie sleeping in her grief, he searches for Natalie's father. Of this scene, Spindler writes the following:

> Even the final scene does not manage to take away this feeling of a downward spiral, although Cory sits down side by side with the war-paint wearing father of the victim, Martin Hanson (Gil Birmingham), to mourn in unison the deaths of their daughters: in contrast to Martin, Cory was the active part who hunted down the rapists, and he looks forward to a silver lining on the horizon, the union with Jane. Martin, however, is left with his wife's shattered psyche. (142)

Cory's Anglo-Native status is what allows him to comfort the grieving Martin. He is able to understand his ways of grief, as Cory has experienced similar grief, while also

supporting the supposed Native practices of grieving. Martin also willingly accepts this comfort as he has grown to accept Cory as an important part of their community.

Although Spindler does implement some analysis of the film's male characters, Firmin does a more adequate job by primarily focusing on the white-saviour narrative and masculinity within *Wind River*. Throughout the film, Cory is the only one who is seen providing comfort to Martin, the victim's father. As both of these men have gone through very similar tragedies, Cory is able to offer advice to Martin on how to keep living while also being able to grieve his daughter. Regarding the final scene of the film where Cory sits side by side with the victim's father, Firmin believes that this scene implies there is a racial harmony between those of European and Native ethnicity and that that harmony is portrayed as a realistic conclusion to the film. Here Firmin is faulting Sheridan's film as this conclusion is false to the true history between Native Americans and the dominant white man. Instead of addressing the issues and the vast history that these two men have between them, Sheridan attempts to promote a shared peace between the two although their individual endings are vastly different. I tend to agree with Firmin because this film is a male-dominated film. It focuses on the violence that men committed for their own personal desires and the violence the male protagonist committed for his personal vengeance. While the Native American women in the film are what the purported occasion for the film is about, *Wind River* ultimately slips into a broad focus on the male characters. Sheridan fails to make his film focus on the issues with MMIWG and instead has this issue portrayed as an afterthought behind the male-dominated, revenge-plot film.

Although I agree with Firmin's analysis of the film, one of his ending comments does not correlate with my argument. Firmin writes that these films are made by white men with the intention of targeting a white community. Because of this intentional targeting of a specific audience, the white men who made the film actively rewrite the narrative to reflect the white characters as central protagonists within the minority communities (87). While Sheridan is a white man who created and directed this film, I do not think he wanted to solely focus on the white male within the film. Credit should be placed where it is due, and Sheridan does utilize his popularity and his knowledge of the Western people and Native Americans to bring attention to the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) to mainstream media. *Wind River* does also provide viewers with a sense of satisfaction in seeing the revenge killing of the preparators of violence done to the Native women in the community. The good guys prevail, leaving the viewers with satisfaction and hope that there is a silver lining for the future. While the treatment of native women in this film falls into a harmful narrative, Sheridan's mission of bringing attention to this epidemic needs to be acknowledged. However, I do not believe that this acknowledgement of Sheridan's work should overshadow the negative portrayal of Native women in the film. The only satisfaction to be gotten from the film comes from the genre of the revenge trope, for Sheridan fails to portray Native women and girls as individuals capable of protecting themselves and living normally. Instead, Sheridan uses the typical trope of an Indian maiden being rescued by a white male, which leaves little room for hope for Native women and girls.

CHAPTER III – PATRIARCHAL VIOLENCE IN *ALMANAC OF THE DEAD*

Although the Western genre has changed since its beginnings in the nineteenth century, many of the same tropes persist across time. Many novelists, especially Native novelists, have been challenging these tropes by producing new ones in their work. The common Western trope of Natives needing a white savior is replaced by Native protagonists being able to save themselves. However, the fact of Native American women being subjected to violence is still incorporated in many Native novels. One novel that particularly incorporates the epidemic of violence Native American women experience is *Almanac of the Dead* by Leslie Marmon Silko. Taking place in the Southwest of the United States and in Central America in the 1980s, Silko's novel centers around the conflict between Native Americans and Euro-Americans. This conflict is represented as a looming, disorganized political uprising—an Indian revolution—against Anglo-Americans, primarily men, who have been destroying the land taken from Native Americans. A majority of the characters in the novel have some connection to the revolution that is taking place, whether directly or indirectly. This connection to the political uprising allows for Silko to explore a vast variety of different characters and their relationships to the Indian revolution. Silko writes a non-linear narrative: each subplot within the novel has flashbacks to events that happened throughout each character's life. The novel's main plot centers around ethnic and class politics that focus on the relationship between those of a lower class, specifically Native Americans, and those of a higher class, the Euro-American force in the novel. It is the fight between these

two races and classes that drives the novel and its characters—a fight by the Native characters and their allies to reclaim the land from the white, mostly male, stealers, exploiters, and destroyers of the land and of Indigenous identity. However, a major sub-plot of the novel is the violence Native American women experience at the hands of their male counterparts. Silko implies that a total gender separation would eliminate the violence Native women experience. This solution, however, can only be achieved through the reclaiming of Native land. It seems that the reclaiming of Native land will provide a deeper connection to their culture that will reinforce their good character. With the land being abused by Euro-American, the outsider cultural influence has been imposed on Native people, which has caused them to behave in the same often violent and selfish ways as the Euro-American. This chapter will argue that even though Silko's novel provides significant insight into the violent crimes Native women experience, while also depicting Native women as main characters in charge of their own agency, ultimately the novel allows this violence to be seen as resolved by the beginning of the Indian revolution. However, the resolution Silko presents is problematic because it suggests that the gendered violence within the novel is solved by the economic and ethnic politics—i.e., the retaking of the land and reclaiming of Indian heritage—without providing a solution to the gendered violence.

After providing a plot summary of the novel, which introduces the main characters I will analyze, I will establish my argument that Silko's novel ultimately provides an unsatisfactory solution for the abuse of the Native American women who are at the heart of her plot. I will then introduce and outline a secondary source by Janet St. Clair who presents Silko's novel as a loveless society where the characters are incapable

of healthy relationships due to their violent pasts. St. Clair argues that the abuse Native American women experienced in the novel renders them incapable of forming bonds with those around them. The only hope she sees within the novel is the hope of reclaiming Native land. This, however, directly opposes my argument. While the abuse the Native women experience in the novel is extensive, this does not totally render them incapable of love. It is this love for themselves and their close familial relationships that allows them to be capable of action—the action to protect themselves and their family during the political uprising. Ultimately, St. Clair fails to acknowledge the agency the women possess within the novel and instead deems the women as stationary victims.

The first fully Native character that is introduced in the novel is Yoeme, a Yaqui Indian. Yoeme is first introduced through the eyes of her twin grandchildren (Zeta and Lecha) whom she has never met. She has never met her grandchildren because she separated herself from society due to the abuse she experienced in her past at the hands of Guzman, her husband, a Spanish-American male influenced by his European comrades. It is after meeting and forming a relationship with her granddaughters that Yoeme entrusts them with the ancient almanac, which contains stories of great importance to their native history and future including prophecies for their people. In fact, Yoeme has hidden her own story of abuse within the final pages of the almanac for her granddaughters to find.

After meeting their grandmother, Zeta and Lecha lose their mother. With her death, the twin sisters are then forced to travel to meet their father. It is during this traveling to meet their father that Silko reveals the sexual abuse the twin sisters experienced at the hands of their Uncle Federico. After their father soon passes away, they are left with a ranch in the Tucson Mountains. As they grow into adulthood, the

sisters lead two different lives: Zeta takes care of the ranch their father left them while Lecha travels around the United States exchanging one lover for another lover. Once this early adulthood ends, the sisters dedicate the rest of their years to transcribing the almanac their grandmother has given them.

In the second part of the novel, the audience is introduced to Angelita La Escapía, an Indian activist in Mexico. La Escapía is a colonel in the Army of Justice and Redistribution who uses her mastery of oratory to keep the flame of the revolution alive. However, this rank in the military does not prevent her from constantly being sexualized by the men around her. This constant sexualization does not affect La Escapía's sexual escapades, nor does she let this affect the mission of the revolution: to reclaim the land and drive out the European settlers. It is this duty to the revolution that shows La Escapía's use of violence to protect her people.

In the final parts of the novel, each character has different connections to the rising of the revolution. Yoeme has long passed, but her legacy lives on within the pages of the almanac. Zeta and La Escapía have decided to continue supporting and leading the revolution, even with the promise of more bloodshed. Lecha, however, decides to flee until the revolution has calmed down. The novel ends with the promise that the revolution--i.e., war and the reclaiming of the land--has truly begun.

Although I believe Silko has created an interesting novel with a strong focus on the political plot of reclaiming the land, I do not believe she brings adequate attention to the violence the women in the novel experience. While she does include this issue within her novel, which needs to be acknowledged, Silko tends to place that sub-plot in her work without any further development or mention of it. Instead, it seems that the violence

directed towards the women in the novel serves as further support of her pessimistic view of male and female relationships under the influence of European culture. This sub-plot is more of a driving force for the female characters in her novel to work towards the Indian Revolution. Silko does not write the female characters in the novel as coming to terms with the violence they experienced; instead, she writes the violence Native women experienced in the novel as resolved over the promise of reclaiming the land, making it seem that the reclaiming of the land can cure the violent and abusive past her female characters experienced while also securing a better, non-oppressive future for them—a future that can occur only when the Anglo-Americans are eradicated from Native land.

While some critics focus on feminism in Leslie Marmon Silko's other novels, there are few who focus on the female characters and their pasts in *Almanac of the Dead*. This seems to be so because of the focus on Native American politics—reclaiming of the land—throughout this novel. However, Janet St. Clair provides an insight into the characters she believes are void of love in her critical essay "Death of Love/Love of Death: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*." The overall focus and claim of St. Clair's work is that every character within Silko's novel is incapable of love due to her selfish tendencies. I diverge from this argument because St. Clair fails to understand fully the effect the sexual abuse has on the female characters in Silko's novel. St. Clair begins her work by highlighting and analyzing the amoral society and characters that Silko portrays in her novel. She makes clear that the primary villains in the novel are Euro-American males, both in their violence towards women and the racial violence against Indians. After establishing this base for her argument—the egotism the men possess causes them to lack the ability to achieve personal relationships—St. Clair claims

the men in the novel are completely self-absorbed, which renders them incapable of love (143). Yet she transitions to stating similar claims about the women in the novel. St. Clair believes that although the women are not as egocentric or violent as the males in the novel, they are as equally incapable of love because "survival among misogynists has given them few choices" (146). While I do agree with St. Clair's claim that the sexual violence Lecha and Zeta experienced throughout their childhood places them in unhealthy relationships in the future, I do not agree that it completely renders them incapable of love. Not only is there an instance in the novel where Zeta confesses her love for her nephew, but also the twin sisters have a deep connection with each other because they constantly look out for each other, especially at the end of the novel. St. Clair also only dedicates one paragraph to the sexual relationships the Indian women in the novel partake in as adults. After a few pages dedicated to the women in the novel, St. Clair herself falls victim to the *Almanac of the Dead*'s plot; instead of continuing her focus on the women characters in the novel, she begins to focus on the Native American political plot instead. A character that is a part of the Native American political plot is Sterling, an Indian male who works for the sisters on their ranch. He not only serves as a teacher of Native history to the potentially, non-Native reader, but also as a character with clear roots to his community. In fact, it is Sterling who is featured at the very end of the novel realizing an Indian revolution has truly begun to unfold according to the prophecies from the almanac. St. Clair ultimately concludes that through Sterling's narrative there is a ray of hope provided by the almanac for the characters in the novel to successfully overthrow the Eurocentric government and reclaim their Native land and roots. In fact, this is the only hope she sees within the novel. Instead of separating the

generational abuse Native people have experienced from the violence Native women are currently experiencing, Silko should have focused on both of these acts of abuse as her current emphasis on them places one as more important than the other. Although I do believe the political plot Silko provides throughout her novel is a great story that brings the generational abuse Native people have experienced and their desire for reclamation of land to the forefront, the violence the women experience within the novel is ultimately overshadowed by the prophecy of the almanac coming true in the form of a hemispheric political revolution.

Beginning again with the twin Indian sisters in the novel, Lecha and Zeta were both subjected to sexual violence at a young age. Before defining each sister's sexual identity, Silko makes a quick reference to the sexual abuse they experienced at the hands of their Uncle Federico by having the sisters discuss his "big finger" (119). It is through the continual sexual abuse throughout their childhood that the twin sisters are rendered, according to St. Clair, incapable of love (148). While there are a number of factors that can affect an adult's interpersonal relationships, the main factor that I am referencing in this case, for the Indian sisters, is childhood sexual abuse. To challenge the idea presented by St. Clair that the twin sisters are unable to partake in sexual relationships or experience love, I refer to a study by Erin C. Walker et al. entitled "Childhood Sexual Abuse, Other Childhood Factors, and Pathways to Survivor's Adult Relationship Quality." In this study, Walker and her co-writers state that there is a "direct relationship between childhood sexual abuse and lower relational quality in adulthood. . . . Women with a history of abuse, particularly sexual abuse, were also more frequently found in 'transitory unions'" (398-99). Walker et al. define these "transitory unions" as

relationships that never last for a long period of time; a woman will be transitioning from relationship to relationship instead of staying committed for a longer time period. With this in mind, it seems that the sexual abuse Lecha and Zeta experienced in their childhood is meant to be taken as a direct cause of the scarce interpersonal relationships they possess in their adulthood. As a result of this abuse, the twin sisters take two separate routes in their sexuality. Silko writes Lecha as sexually promiscuous, continually in transitory unions throughout her lifetime. She forms no connection with the males around her. Instead, Lecha disposes of the men whenever she wishes. This disposal of the men around her shows that Lecha sees no use in these men other than her sexual needs. In fact, even the experience of pregnancy and the need to provide for a child she does not want does not negate Lecha's strong desire to continue her promiscuity. After giving birth to her son Ferro, Lecha leaves her baby with Zeta and continues her current journey to Los Angeles (Silko 125). She does not return until Ferro is an adult, making no claim on her relation to him. Zeta, on the other hand, has the opposite reaction to the childhood sexual abuse. Instead of searching for sexual partners, Zeta decides to give up on men because of the wearisome repetition of sexual activities (Silko 134). Zeta's childhood experience provides her with the inability to enjoy sexual relationships. She instead commits her time to the ranch, her career, and translating her section of the almanac provided to her by Yoeme. Silko presents Zeta as achieving peace once she has secluded herself from the men around her. The only contact she has with men is with those who work for her, those whom she is in control of. In fact, Zeta is often seen as temperate throughout the novel; she does not let her emotions get the best of her. St. Clair refers to this in her work, stating how Zeta has made it clear to Ferro, Lecha's son, that she is

motivated by duty, not by her affection for him (149). As St. Clair claims, the lack of emotions Zeta seems to possess towards Ferro suggests her inability to love. However, this claim is distinctly disproven towards the end of the novel. As the culminating events of the revolution and the almanac are taking place, Zeta directly states her for Ferro (Silko 702). So while Zeta may be incapable of romantic and sexual relationships due to her childhood trauma, she is perfectly capable of loving and caring for those important to her—in this case Ferro. She even seems to regret how she parented him. Yet this insight into Zeta's affection for Ferro is, towards the end of the novel, seemingly spurred by the political uprising that is happening around them. It leaves one to wonder if the relationship between Zeta and Ferro is Silko's way of interpreting the political uprising: because of the Eurocentric oppression the Native people are experiencing, Zeta was too influenced by the patriarchy and the abuse that comes with it to be capable of love. However, with the promise of the almanac and a restoration of Native power and ownership, her feelings are made known. It is dismaying that the promise of the revolution is what spurs Lecha and Zeta to become more aware of the love they hold for those around them. It seems that with the revolution starting, the characters are freed from the loveless patriarchy forced upon them by the European settlers. This solution presented by Silko is unrealistic as the resolution has only just begun; the end of the revolution could have the opposite effect the Indian characters want, bringing about a deeper loss of love and culture.

In their early childhood, the twin sisters are introduced to their Indian grandmother, Yoeme. St. Clair only mentions the character of Yoeme four times throughout her critical essay; one of the times explains how Yoeme's character is defined

by a lifetime of oppression at the hands of white men, especially her husband Guzman. This seems to align him with the many other Euro-American male villains within the novel—they are the violent and misogynistic ones, not the Native American males. In one of the scenes featuring Yoeme, she focuses on telling her two granddaughters the story of how her husband, Guzman, whom she was forced to marry, enslaved and executed thousands of Indians. In retribution for this act, Yoeme burns the trees that Guzman held dear—which happened to be the same trees the Indians were executed on. Yoeme held clear disdain for her ex-husband because of his actions, and yet she was one of the main female characters who was able to resist male power and seek her own revenge. However, she is still separated from her family—including her children. Silko writes that Zeta had "overheard them [her uncles and aunties] wishing the old woman [Yoeme] had died" (114). Yoeme does not have a good connection with her family, as Silko makes clear, because they are not fully Indian and are even identified with the white power and worldview that executed her people. Since her children took after their father, she decided that she could not remain, as "Guzman's people had always hated her anyway. Because she was an Indian" (Silko 117). As St. Clair briefly mentions, Yoeme leaves her family behind in order to continue to fight for her survival as an Indian. Yoeme is only able to receive peace when she has separated herself from the Spanish-American male, with Anglo-Americans connections, who have abused her and her people. Contrary to what St. Clair argues about Yoeme's character solely focusing on the reclaiming of land, I believe that Yoeme is capable of love. The reason behind her abandonment of her children is because they are not fully Indian like herself; they hold too much of Guzman within them. However, Yoeme comes back for her granddaughters,

Lecha and Zeta, because she believes they are fully Indian in terms of their ethos. It is not an incapability that possesses Yoeme but an overpowering love she has for her people that causes her relationship with Euro-Americans to fail. Yet the distancing of Yoeme's character from her family is unsatisfying because it presents the black and white choice of choosing one's tribe and culture over one's immediate family. Silko does not allow for any resemblance of a peaceful coexistence between Euro-American citizens and Native Americans. She does, however, allow for revenge and her idea of a revolution to be a focal point within her novel.

After Lecha finishes transcribing her pages of the almanac, she realizes that Yoeme has included the story of her own deliverance within the pages. Upon reading the tribulations that her grandmother went through at the hands of her own family—Yoeme was convicted and condemned to death for the burning of Guzman's trees before extraordinarily escaping jail—Lecha plans to avenge her grandmother by desecrating the graves of her family. While preparing to disturb their graves by digging up and scattering their bones, Lecha reflects that she "had endured them for more than sixty years, but she damn sure didn't have to lie there for eternity with them" (Silko 583). What is particularly interesting about this section of the novel is not Lecha's decision to destroy the bones of her family, but when she makes this decision. It is only after reading about the near-death deliverance of her grandmother that Lecha is spurred into action. Throughout the novel, Lecha tends to avoid all memories of the sexual abuse she endured as a child. Even in her adulthood, Lecha does not allow the sexual abuse to burden her sexual relations with others in adulthood. Yet upon reading her grandmother's story, Lecha is able to enact a form of justice for the human (Indian) members of her family as

they were all abused in some way by their white (non-native) family members. To bring her grandmother peace and, I would argue, to also bring peace to herself, Lecha destroys the graves of her white relatives so they will not be able to peacefully rest for eternity.

The other Native American female character is Angelita La Escapía, one of the leaders of the Indian Revolution. St. Clair mentions that La Escapía only has sex with men who are weaker than she is; however, this is not the case (149). The man St. Clair seems to be referring to is Bartolomeo, whom Silko describes as physically weaker and smaller than La Escapía. Bartolomeo was La Escapía's professor, turned sexual partner, at the Marxist school run in Mexico City. While the claim St. Clair makes in this regard is true, she does not mention the relationship La Escapía has with the Indian leader El Feo. El Feo, meaning "ugly" in English, already had an army before he met La Escapía. Although La Escapía has great skills as an orator, El Feo has the bodies needed for the revolution that the Mexican Indians have been discussing. This does not make him weaker than she—he is also never described as weak in Silko's novel. They eventually begin to have a sexual relationship with each other, although La Escapía still has sex with whomever she wants. Like the other Native American women in the novel, La Escapía has been subjected to sexual harassment. Partly because of this sexual harassment, men often disregard her mind while they objectify her body. La Escapía does not have strong personal connections within the novel. Outside of the connection with her people, ironically the deepest connection she has is with Karl Marx. This is because Marx is the only white man who had views towards those of European descent that are similar to the Indians' view of them. While La Escapía does not mention love within the novel, as St. Clair also notes, she does have a strong drive to protect her people and their land from

those who have harmed them. It is this connection to the Indian people that Yoeme and La Escapía share.

In part four of the novel, El Feo, La Escapía's comrade, recounts his first encounter with La Escapía. El Feo "used to watch her face and watch the faces of people in the market crowds who listened to her . . . [m]en probably watched to see her big breasts heave and jiggle. But the women listened because they had never heard a woman like her before" (Silko 468). Although La Escapía is considered a master orator, she is disregarded and sexualized by the men around her. Her intelligence is non-essential to these men because her body is the most important part of her. Again, Silko shows a clear difference of ideals between the men and women in her novel. The men in the novel, regardless of ethnicity, typically abuse and overtly sexualize the women. The women, however, see each other as human beings equally deserving of respect. The resolution that Silko seems to be implying, yet again, is the complete separation of men and women in order to achieve true peace. But it is hard to see how (and Silko does not say how) that utopian resolution could be compatible with the new, Native-centric and anti-patriarchal society that the novel more overtly calls for.

While I agree with parts of St. Clair's analysis of the novel, I cannot fully agree with the argument she is presenting. St. Clair's primary focus is on how egotism affects the lives of the male characters within the novel. While she does critique the violence they commit, she fails to focus on the woman's perspective. Her focus on the egocentric males within the novel and the political plot that Silko is presenting overshadows her brief analysis of the women in the novel. This overshadowing allows for important details from the novel to be omitted such as Zeta's love for her nephew Ferro and Yoeme's love

for her people. While these details were omitted from St. Clair's argument, she makes it clear that the underlying hope in the novel is reliance upon the reclaiming of land. This reclaiming is seen at the end of the novel with the character of Sterling realizing that the prophecies from the almanac have begun. The love that Silko writes some of her characters possessing is not relevant to St. Clair since she believes these characters are completely incapable of love because they are driven by their own selfish greed. By describing the Native characters as incapable of love, St. Clair is damning them to a life of isolation. The Native characters within the novel are fully capable of experiencing deep interpersonal relationships. However, this can only be achieved by providing the female characters who were abused a chance to work through their trauma. Silko does not fully provide her female characters with autonomy as they are all working towards or spurred by the political uprising that is occurring around them. This does not give the women an opportunity to reflect on the actions that were done against them. Because of this, her characters are seen as loveless and selfish. Analyzing the entire life of these characters would allow for a deeper understanding of why these characters act the way they do. The characters can be vicious and selfish, but it all seems to be for the greater purpose of reclaiming the land. This purpose is so important to these characters that they are often not able to focus on the violent past they have experienced. Even at the end of the novel, the characters cannot focus on their past as an apocalypse has begun around them. While I do believe that Silko's novel is an important piece of literature that helps shed light on the many difficulties and crimes Native Americans have experienced and continue to face, the novel does seemingly tend to overlook the details of violence the Native women in the novel experience as the promise of the revolution has begun. The

resolution that Silko promotes in her novel for the women to be removed from the violence they have suffered is a total separation of the two genders. Because it is not clear how the women will be protected by this separation, it is unrealistic and does not attempt to help solve the basis of its subplot—that being the real sexual violence Native American women are presently experiencing. Instead, it is a vague suggestion that is meant to be held together by the hope of Indian and European separation. While this novel showcases more of a cultural war between modern America and Native American society, Silko and St. Clair's lack of focus on the violence female Native characters experience is again overshadowed by the Euro-American villains within the novel.

CHAPTER IV – THE STRENGTH OF NATIVE WOMEN IN *SHELL SHAKER*

A novel that provides significant insight into the issue of tribal feminism and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) is *Shell Shaker* by LeAnne Howe. While all three texts--*Wind River*, *Almanac of the Dead*, and *Shell Shaker*--attempt to call the viewer's attention to the issue of violence against Native women, Silko and Howe make Native characters and Native history central to their novels. However, Silko makes this violence peripheral to her plot while Howe makes it central. The violence Native American women experience within Howe's novel has not been critically studied, even though Howe purposefully emphasizes this in her plot. Howe's novel renders the Native characters within her novel more in tune with their ethnic background while also providing the female protagonists with full autonomy. This allows for Howe's female characters to be seen as equally important as their male counterparts, even when they are discriminated against by men. It is through this novel that the strength of Native American women is revealed to be a crucial part of Native culture.

Shell Shaker is set in present-day Oklahoma and in the eighteenth-century Southeast of the United States, alternating between scenes set in the 1730s and in the 1990s. It is revealed that the characters in the 1990s are essentially reenacting the events that took place in the 1730s. The primary tribal focus in this novel is shown through the lens of the Choctaw nation, specifically in Oklahoma in the 1990s. The very first chapter begins before 1738 with the introduction of a Shell Shaker, *Inholahta*, who is known as the first peacemaker of the Choctaw nation—this information being presented by the character Shakbatina, the mother of one of the main characters in the 1730s. This chapter

is a recounting of the clash between Natives of the region and the DeSoto invasion of 1540-1551. The first Shell Shaker is not given a name, but her history is told. After hearing that a dangerous enemy is coming to kill the tribe, the Shell Shaker's husband, Tuscaloosa, begins to prepare for the invasion. Because of this, the Shell Shaker ties empty turtle shells around each ankle as she dances in silent prayer for four days and four nights, hence the name Shell Shaker. After living through the warfare, and ultimately losing her husband, the first Shell Shaker decides to become a peacemaker for her tribe.

Once this background is revealed, the story picks up in the 1738 setting with Shakbatina, a descendant and successor to the original Shell-Shaker and the mother of a woman named Anoleta. Anoleta has married Red Shoes, a man whom she claims to be *Imataha Chitto*, the greatest giver who would reunite all the tribes. Red Shoes is also married to another woman in another tribe. This woman accuses Anoleta of stealing her husband and then later she is found brutally murdered. Since Anoleta is very public about her marriage, the opposing tribe believes Anoleta was the killer. In order to save her daughter, Shakbatina, as peace-maker, offers herself as a sacrifice to appease the Chickasaw tribe, a sacrifice that will allow Anoleta to be free of all crimes. After her mother's death, Anoleta understands that she and Red Shoes are each other's *nan i hullo* (true love). But it turns out that Red Shoes is not the *Imataha Chitto* as he wants to create war between the tribes, so even though Anoleta loves him, she knows she must kill him. With great remorse, for both her family and Red Shoes, Anoleta dances with Red Shoes around a fire one final time before her younger sister pushes him into the flames and kills him. However, Red Shoes' spirit will not rest.

In 1991, the character of Auda Billy is introduced. Auda Billy is experiencing a vision of Shakbatina dancing the shell shaker dance when she remembers the events that happened to her moments prior. Redford McAlester, the seventh Chief of the Oklahoma Choctaws, has just sexually assaulted Auda in his office. Auda, like her ancestor Anoleta, believes Redford to be the *Imataha Chitto*. After remembering this assault, Auda hears a voice telling her that her time has come. With this voice in her mind, she races back to Redford's office where she shoots him and then loses consciousness. When Auda awakes, she learns that her mother, Susan Billy, has confessed to the crime Auda committed, just as Anoleta's mother had done for her in 1738. During this time, Auda continues to see visions from the past; she keeps connecting Redford in 1990 to the 1738 Red Shoes. After an attack that leaves her unconscious, Auda speaks with Redford while in her drugged state. They now realize that they are simultaneously Anoleta and Red Shoes—a past repeating itself. In order to put Redford's spirit to rest, Delores, Auda's aunt, and Uncle Isaac plan to offer themselves as a sacrifice to keep Redford's spirit at bay for generations to come. Back with Auda and Redford, Redford (Red Shoes) reveals that he was the one who killed his wife in 1738 in order to protect Anoleta. The two cry as they realize they will be separated forever; however, Auda cannot choose between her love for Redford and her love for his death after what he has done to her tribe. Once they say their final goodbyes, Auda awakes in the present world. Three weeks later, no one is tried for Redford's death as there is no solid evidence of murder. The novel ends with the Shell Shaker revealing that it was both she and Auda who killed Redford. The Shell Shaker then reveals the Choctaw are life everlasting as the novel comes to a close.

Although this novel was released in 2001, there are very few critical essays that focus on the women in the novel. Instead, most of the critical works regarding *Shell Shaker* tend to focus on Howe's usage of multiculturalism and tribalography[1]—a new term coined for Howe's *Shell Shaker,* meaning an extensive biography on a certain tribe. Monika Barbara Siebert's "Repugnant Aboriginality: LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker* and Indigenous Representation in the Age of Multiculturalism," stands as an example of the non-feminist criticism that occurs when even a very perceptive critic overlooks the novel's specifically feminist focus. After providing an introduction to the gruesome death that occurs at the beginning of Howe's novel, Siebert introduces the idea of multiculturalism within Indigenous work. Multiculturalism introduces the issue of how to interpret Native societies within a contemporary view—something that Native writers are also struggling with, according to Siebert. There is a main model presented in order to interpret Native culture: *saming* and *unsaming*. Siebert utilizes this idea from Chadwick Allen to show that *saming*— an approach to Native culture as though it is similar to Euro-American culture—and *unsaming*—an approach to Native culture as though it is radically different from Euro-American culture—present a dilemma that American Indian writers must confront (96). The dilemma that Siebert introduces is a supposed reluctance to categorize Native societies as different out of fear of exoticizing or making Indigenous people "other." However, Sibert believes that Howe confronts this dilemma head on within *Shell Shaker*. Siebert believes that both of these moves, *saming* and *unsaming*, are a risk within the multiculturalist paradigm because they, normally, cannot simultaneously

[1] Seen in "Talking Tribalography: LeAnne Howe Models Emerging Worldliness in 'The Story of America' and *Miko Kings*" by Carter Meland.

exist as one. To adhere to the rules of *saming*, one must suppress what is unique about one's culture in order to fit into the overall multicultural society in America. However, if a culture were to utilize *unsaming,* it would be ostracized as it would not be able to fully integrate into the multiculturalist society. Siebert states that Howe utilizes both of the moves to keep the tension in her novel unresolved. Howe depicts a Native society open to other cultures (*saming*) while also depicting the gruesomeness (*unsaming*) that can be accompanied by certain societies and their practices. While I agree with the importance of confronting this dilemma, I diverge from Sibert's argument because she fails to emphasize the importance of female autonomy within the novel. After establishing the background information on multiculturalism, Siebert transitions back to the novel. Siebert argues that Howe ultimately uses violent scenes, particularly the execution in the beginning of the novel, to caution against multiculturalism. Howe uses the repugnant to showcase Allen's *saming* and *unsaming*—both Native and non-Native cultures can partake in savage stereotypes. However, this is not Siebert's only argument. She also believes that Howe uses a narrative structure that transcends time in order to present two different Native cultures that are not radically different. Both cultures exist as dynamic societies open to multiple networks of economic and political alliances while also showcasing feminist qualities (Siebert 96). Siebert believes that Howe passes a "test" of multiculturalism by being able to write about another Native society without its being too similar to the other Native society she presents.

While I do agree with the work Siebert is presenting, I do not believe Howe's main purpose in the novel is to caution against multiculturalism. Instead, the representation of women in the novel should be considered jointly with the specific

tribalography of Choctaws that Howe is presenting. In regard to the other Native American novel, *Almanac of the Dead,* Silko seems to fail this test because her novel does not provide proper attention to both issues—violence against Native women and crimes against tribal culture—in contemporary and tribal settings. Instead, Silko seems to choose one over the other which, in turn, marks one element as more important than the other. And yet, Howe is able to overcome this test by allowing both attacks on Native people and culture to be emphasized in her novel, for both of these attacks are seen within contemporary and tribal settings. This allows for a more realistic example of the crimes happening against Native people today as it is both an attack on women and culture.

While there are few critical essays focusing on the feminist outlook of *Shell Shaker*, there are scholarships that regard feminism in Native American tribes as an outside ideal. This implies that feminism was not originally in Native American societies as it came much later in Euro-America history as it was a way to fight the patriarchy instilled in society. In M. A. Jaimes Guerrero's essay, "'Patriarchal Colonialism' and Indigenism: Implications for Native Feminist Spirituality and Native Womanism," she focuses on the Native perspective of early feminism. Jaimes Guerrero states that Euro-American society viewed the matriarchal society of many Native nations as an artifact of the past that will change with the influence of Euro-American patriarchy. Euro-American society feared that the matriarchal society in Native cultures would influence the English women to become more outspoken, possibly wishing for leadership roles. Because of this fear, the men in Euro-American society enforced their ideals of patriarchy upon the Native nations they came across. Because of this patriarchal colonialism, as Jaimes

Guerrero defines it, Native American women were forced to adhere to both racist and sexist attitudes from the Euro-American colonizers with continual discrimination based on their prejudices (67). Native American women later perceived the early feminist movement by classifying it as an adverse reaction to the Euro American patriarchal society white women lived in. Jaimes Guerrero then concludes by showcasing how Native feminism is tied in with Native spirituality; they are both a part of the central identity of what it means to be Native which is seen this ideal in the beginning of *Shell Shaker* when the women use their spirituality to help fight in the war. The essay also ends with the call for the agency of Native Womanism across the United States, which, in turn, would help preserve the sacred kinship among Indigenous people (Jaimes Guerrero 68). As I hope to show, Jaimes Guerrero's scholarship provides a crucial insight into the feminist and matriarchal society of certain Native American tribes that critical essays focusing on *Shell Shaker* overlook.

Before analyzing the death scene of Shakbatina, the granddaughter of the very first Shell Shaker, it is important to examine the battle that first took place in the beginning of the novel, which I think determines the feminine strength that is so central to Howe's vision. In the first chapter of the novel, the great strength of the *Inholahta* women—Choctaw female peacemakers—is shown. During the time of 1738, Shakbatina recalls that there was a great battle occurring between a residing tribe, the Mabilans, and Hispanic invaders led by the infamous De Soto. In a moment during the battle, the first Shell Shaker realizes that her husband has been killed. Howe writes that "[the first Shell Shaker] told her sisters they would mourn their husbands after they were safely away from the invaders. All agreed. The women put away their sorrow until the time was right

and they could properly mourn for the dead" (14). Instead of losing the battle because of their grief, these women begin to pray. These women do not succumb to the typical Western stereotype of a fallen Indian maiden; instead they pray to a higher spirit in order to win the battle. The higher spirit placed favor upon these women, specifically Shakbatina's grandmother, because she had endured four days and nights of painful dancing and praying for her people. The first Shell Shaker shed blood and lost her loved ones, a sacrifice acknowledged by a spirit, in order to ensure the survival of her people, a reality that is the polar opposite to the Western stereotype often portrayed in American media.

Continuing the cycle of sacrifice, Shakbatina takes the place of her daughter in order to preserve her daughter's life. As the Chickasaw executioner's club strikes her, the Choctaw Shakbatina "feel[s] an icy hot explosion in [her] head. Deafening. Blood gurgles from [her] mouth," as she grieves for her daughters and their wailing at the loss of their mother (Howe 34). Howe begins her novel with a strong female character. Instead of having Shakbatina focus on the pain of her death, she writes Shakbatina as grieving for the daughters she will leave behind. She is not a selfish character, but a character full of agency who willingly places herself in the role of a death sacrifice in order to save her daughter. Howe is reimagining the past in a way that focuses on the women and the importance of their roles for the life of the tribe. In the very first chapter, Howe has provided the audience with two strong, autonomous female characters. While Siebert ultimately believes this scene fits more into a repugnant aesthetic meant to contrast the savage stereotype of Native Americans with tribal traditions, she does make reference to the importance of Shakbatina's sacrifice. Siebert states that the first-person narration in

this scene invites the readers to admire Shakbatina in her final moments. However, this is one of the only acknowledgements Siebert gives to this strong character before she moves on to the importance of the collective history of Native Americans. Siebert ultimately glosses over the importance of Shakbatina's sacrifice in order to discuss the novel's multiculturalism. Siebert states that this scene allows for "Shakbatina's individuality [to] fold into the collectivity of her clan and her people" (94). Instead of acknowledging the specifically feminine roles that Shakbatina plays, Siebert sees her only as a person tied to her tribe. Siebert's interpretation of Howe's novel presents the female characters as incapable of autonomy as they seemingly exist only for their tribes. However, this is not what Howe is attempting to present. For the women in her novel, even when connected to their tribe, have important individual roles that support the overall collective of the tribe. Howe is not portraying her characters as radical individuals or as mere fractions of a tribal collective; instead, she is portraying female characters who are able to simultaneously live for the tribe while also living for themselves. Siebert highlights this "gruesome" scene because she believes Howe creates this scene in order to resist multicultural *saming*—seen in the savage stereotype placed upon all Native tribes. However, in the process of examining this scene, Siebert loses sight of the specifically feminine aspect of Shakbatina's role and action.

While Siebert makes an important point, I ultimately side with Howe herself in the interview with Kirstin L. Squint titled "Choctawan Aesthetics, Spirituality, and Gender Relations: An Interview with LeAnne Howe." In this interview, Howe states that Shakbatina's sacrificial ceremony sends a message to both communities involved which establishes peace between the Choctaw and Chickasaw tribes (217). The term *ceremony*

is important as it contrasts with Siebert's opinion. While Siebert believes that this scene with Shakbatina is described as gruesome in order to shock the reader, a shock Howe intended, Howe seems to be referring to Shakbatina's death as something beautiful. In her final moments, Shakbatina grieves for her daughters when she hears their rhythmic wailings (Howe 35). There is no fear involved in the scene. Instead, Shakbatina remains strong despite being weighed down with the knowledge that her death will be arriving mere moments later. The only regret that she seems to have is for her daughters as she hears their cries of grief. It is this beautiful strength that stands as a message to both tribes strong enough to evoke peace between them regarding this incident.

The strength that the earlier Choctaw women possess is made clear throughout the novel in multiple ways through past and present. In one instance, Auda is referring to the women of the past stating how it was the Choctaw women who "whirled their tongues like hatches and took up the fight" when the enemies were killing their "beloved men" (Howe 76). Howe writes the women in her novel to be as heroic as the Choctaw men. Her usage of the term "beloved men" directly contradicts the stereotype of a woman, specifically an Indian woman, needing to be rescued. In contrast, it is the women who are saving their fallen men. The women willingly used their bodies as a weapon and sacrifice to save the people. In Howe's novel, she is challenging a long-standing narrative within society: a narrative that depicts female characters as weak and incapable of full agency and male characters as fully autonomous rescuers. This narrative is vastly different from Silko's as it presents characters who are inherently selfless. The characters within Silko's novel often focus on their own personal goals and outcomes, save for the few who are connected to their tribe and lineage. Silko seems to be stating that native characters can

only be selfless when connected to their tribe. While Howe portrays instances of this kind of selfishness and tribalism as well, she is able to balance the personal relationships her characters have inside their tribe with those they have outside their tribe, a balance that allows them to possess a variety of strengths. Howe writes her female protagonists as being able to overcome this ideal of multiculturalism introduced by Siebert—the women are simultaneously able to possess both their individuality and tribal connections. This also allows the female protagonists to have an identity in both realms of their lives without having to choose one or the other.

The world that Howe has created is one in which women are never subordinate to males but are instead equally important, playing roles that help protect their tribe and themselves. In one scene, Auda reveals the reasoning behind her shooting of Redford to her family—Redford raped her. Upon revealing this to her family, "Auda can't bear to look at them. It doesn't help that they know, somehow it makes her feel worse" (Howe 82). Even with the strength each woman possesses in the novel, there is still tragedy and infirmity. However, this does not define the women in the novel; instead, it makes them even stronger. While Auda is ashamed of her story, she is not ashamed of herself—she is ashamed of what happened to her and ashamed of trusting Redford. Instead of allowing this horrible act to define her, Auda takes action to protect herself without her family's knowledge. Auda shoots and kills Redford in order to protect herself from further assault and to protect her tribe from a man capable of doing horrible deeds. Howe depicts Auda as a character capable of using the shame she experiences from her mistakes—trusting a corrupt, violent man—and the tragic events that have happened to and around her to motivate her to inspire change within her community. In this scene, which is referenced

throughout the novel, Howe is actively calling attention to the current issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, for she depicts a character victimized in realistic ways: i.e., rape victims are often assaulted by men they know. To emphasize the strength Native women possess, even when assaulted, Howe makes sure to include historical references to the matriarchal power within Choctaw society through a narrative that transcends time. She implements female characters in both time periods who possess autonomy and power even after being assaulted. Howe writes *Shell Shaker* with the clear intention of bringing attention to the gender egalitarianism she experienced growing up Choctaw—she does this by giving her female characters the same autonomy their male counterparts possess.

To outsiders unfamiliar with Native culture—perhaps only getting their views of Indians from films like Sheridan's—the idea of Native women being in positions of power is strange. While the Native women were not warriors, they did play important political and spiritual roles in tribal life. In fact, there are multiple times throughout the novel that Howe makes clear reference to the power that Choctawan women had within their community. In the contemporary years in the novel, Auda works tirelessly to ensure the election of their tribe's chief. She states that a candidate for chief must have the women on his side of chief if he wants to consider being elected, for in the end, states Auda, "It was the women—the Choctaw grandmothers, the young mothers, even the little girls—who collectively breathed Redford McAlester into existence as a warrior chief" (Howe 42). Howe uses the metaphor of "breathing into existence" to further clarify the power women have, specifically the women in the tribe. For it is a woman who is able to conceive life and bring that life into existence. The ability to bring life into the world is

directly juxtaposed to the ability to take life from the world as Red Shoes and Redford do. The Choctaw women use their power of bringing life into the world by breathing the life of Redford McAlester into existence; he is not a warrior chief until they create him as such. Siebert acknowledges the importance that Howe gives to the female as well as male characters in the novel—by briefly acknowledging their importance as narrators—but she ultimately ties this comment to her argument about multiculturalism: "Howe offers a female narrator with a high degree of awareness of her embeddedness in history and in a specific, politically inflected kinship genealogy" (94). But what is interesting about this genealogy connection that Siebert does not mention is how it traces through the lineage of the women in the family instead of the men. In non-Native society, tracing one's lineage is typically done through the paternal side—although tracing through the maternal side is also possible. However, Howe shows a clear connection between the women in the family, not the men, to show the importance of their familial role. Even one of the older males in the 1990s Billy family, Isaac Billy, understands the importance of women within the family. He states that Choctaw children always trace their lineage through their mother's family, claiming that this is because the women outlive the men (Howe 102). Isaac Billy's claim, however, is not unfounded. Jaimes Guerrero states in her research that it was normal for Native women to live longer than Native men and to assume the role of a tribal leader, or "Clan Mother," who assumed many roles of responsibility throughout their tribe (63). Jaimes Guerrero's work allows the reader to see that Howe's emphasis on the importance of women throughout her tribal community is not exaggerated or unfounded. Howe's portrayal of women places them in roles of leadership by their own personal achievements, as they are seen as peacemakers and

tribal restorers within the novel. Yet although Siebert's critical essay seems to focus more on how Howe actively wrote this novel in order to change the savage perspective of early Choctaws, what Howe puts in place of that stereotype—a variety of Native women participating in various leadership roles within their tribe across centuries—is what makes the novel so interesting.

Moreover, as opposed to Silko's idea of total gender separation, Howe continues to use Isaac Billy as a character who understands and values the maternal role of women within the Choctaw nation. This contradicts Silko's claim that a society of women can truly be safe and happy when completely separated from men. When learning about his sister's and niece's arrests, Isaac thinks that "like all other major events in his life, this must revolve around Indian women . . . if two jailed Billy women are so dangerous that Tonica and the Italians have raised an army of non-Indians to protect them, what will they do when four women come together?" (Howe 103). Two powerful enemies towards the Billy family, Tonica (interim Chief) and the Italians (the organized crime sources of financial backing for Redford's corrupt schemes) believed the Billy women to be so dangerous and so influential that they must hire outsiders to protect themselves. Isaac makes clear reference to the fact that the Indian women in his life are at the center of many major events. This directly opposes the idea of a helpless Native woman who functions only as the starting point of major events, as was exemplified in *Wind River*, for instance. In fact, Howe will continue to directly oppose this idea of a Native woman in need of help throughout her novel. Howe states that "today, there isn't an organization . . . or community group at home [i.e., on the reservation] that isn't run or managed by women. You want something done, go to the women. I see that as a continuance of

something very old" (Squint 220). Howe herself is a Choctaw woman in present-day America. With this background, she is wanting to reflect her knowledge of the culture within her novel. Howe seems to not only be reminding the Choctaw nation of their history but also correcting the wrong assumption Euro-America has placed upon Native American tribes and culture. Howe continues, stating, "I don't think that Choctaw women are subsumed by patriarchy . . . the power of the woman is not dead in the southeast. Follow our politics" (Squint 221). The challenge that Howe presents to Kirstin Squint and the audience of the interview is to remind them of the stereotyped views they potentially could have of southeast Native Americans. If they choose not to believe the truth coming from a Choctaw woman herself, then Howe challenges them to follow the facts of history by calling upon them to do their own research.

The feminist, contemporary society that Howe presents in her novel is set to combat the many stereotypes about Native society. She is attempting to reimagine the past while also presenting the realistic contemporary society that many Natives live in. Like Howe, Jaimes Guerrero also wishes to combat these stereotypes. Not only does Jaimes Guerrero believe that "Native Feminist Spirituality," is meant to advocate for the rights of contemporary Native women existing in this patriarchal society, she also believes that the purpose of this "Native Womanism" is to correct the distorted colonialist and patriarchal narrative that has been told about the pre-colonial Native society (67). It is through this "Native Womanism" that Native women are to reclaim their roles in the forefront of Native societies instead of being forced to play the role of an Indian maiden in need of rescuing, or helplessly grieving while white men save the day and restore justice. This stereotype is presented in *Wind River* and in Silko by the resisting all men as

if they all were the agents of colonialism. While European society seemingly thrived upon the oppression of women, forcing them to rely on their male counterparts, this was not the case for many Native societies. The truth was, as Jaimes Guerrero shows, that men and women were both valued in a gender egalitarian society in which women held roles of leadership and importance just as the men did (67). It is this type of society that Howe attempts to present in her novel to contrast with sexist Euro-American society, which has oppressed Native societies since colonial days and which came to overshadow the Native gender system.

It is dismaying that although Howe's novel has a clear focus on the role of women within an Indigenous society, this role is often overlooked by the tribalography. This is not to say that the role of women outweighs the importance of understanding the tribalography but that the role of women is an important part of the tribalography that is often overlooked. In the final part of her critical essay, Siebert states "the novel prompts an acknowledgement of contemporary indigenous nations, and the contemporary versions of indigenous traditionalism in particular, as viable forms of governance and sociality, forms that already successfully constitute political reality in North America" (114). The present setting of Howe's novel shows a contemporary society of Indigenous people who have acclimated into a Euro-American society all while maintaining the basic elements of their Native society. Howe wants to make clear in her novel that the role of women in the Choctaw society that she knows is one of these basic elements of Native culture. If we are to study the multicultural society of Native Americans, we must include this root of matriarchy in order to give justice to their society as a whole. In fact, Jaimes Guerrero makes this same argument at the end of her article, which calls for a reexamination of

precolonial and prepartiarchal times in order to promote a vision of gender-egalitarian tribes that emphasizes the importance of women as much as the importance of men (68). This reexamination would allow for many inhumane stereotypes of Native Americans to be combated by the truth of their history. While Howe's novel has many important elements, her emphasis on a woman's role in a Native society provides a continual realistic setting and hope for Native women and girls. *Shell Shaker* calls for its audience to reexamine its preconceptions about Native American communities and to be open to another society that may be the truth. Howe's novel not only allows current American society to see a glimpse into a Native society that directly contradicts preconceptions of savagery that have been taught, but also it provides a space for Native women and girls to feel represented in their proper historical status in their community as well as in their roles as both sufferers of sexual violence and healers of the suffering they may have experienced. Of the three texts examined, only *Shell Shaker* provides an accurate portrayal of and insight into MMIWG while also depicting female characters as equals of the men around them, and it does so in a way that is both emotionally and socio-politically responsible.

CONCLUSION

MOVING FORWARD

As I have shown, some artists in film and fiction have tried to represent the reality of violence against Native women and the reality of Native life in unbiased or less biased ways. This attempt at representing the violence Native American women experience is commendable as there is often a lack of focus on this issue. *Wind River*, directed by Taylor Sheridan, *Almanac of the Dead*, written by Leslie Marmon Silko, and *Shell Shaker*, written by LeAnne Howe, all attempt to place some light on the issue of MMIWG. Each of these sources, however, approaches this issue in radically different ways. Through a more thorough examination of each source, this study attempts to analyze the different approaches to the inclusion of the epidemic of violence against Native women. The result of this comparison concludes that one of the primary sources, *Shell Shaker*, is not only more responsible but also more hopeful when regarding violence against Native women. Howe's narrative presents the inclusion of MMIWG as a central plot while also providing autonomous Native female characters capable of protecting and defining themselves outside of the violence done to them.

Sheridan's *Wind River* expresses genuine concern about the violence Native American women experience. However, the film is based upon a white protagonist solving the murder of an Indigenous girl. Sheridan presents the Native women in his film as disposable figures since they are classified as "others" by the community around them. This damages the narrative Sheridan is presenting because there is a lack of autonomy given to the female native characters within the film. In fact, the vast majority of the film surrounds the investigation of the white protagonists, making them the heroes of the story

while the Native community is left in shambles. In Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, the female characters are given more autonomy than they are in Sheridan's film. The female characters within the novel control their lives; however, they are given a sense of false control as they often fall victim to their vices. When the women in the novel are sexually violated, Silko does not depict her characters as coping with the violence done to them. Instead, they continuously chase after their vices (drugs, sex, money, etc.) while also further distancing themselves from the men in the novel. One of the female characters in the novel seemingly receives happiness only when she escapes from the men around her. The narrative Silko presents obscures the epidemic that Native American women face because she implies that its solution could be a utopian world where men and women are separate. LeAnne Howe's novel *Shell Shaker* provides a more realistic and hopeful narrative. While Silko portrays her female characters as reluctant to form (or incapable of forming) deep relationships with the men around them, Howe allows her female characters to experience love even after being abused. Of these three mainstream-media works of art, only Howe's novel presents Native female characters as central to her novel; Silko's Native female characters, on the other hand, are often overshadowed by the action of reclaiming Native land. As opposed to Silko's characters, Howe's female characters face many obstacles—sexual assault being one of them—but they are able to overcome these obstacles. Howe depicts her female characters as fully autonomous. They experience horrible acts, but this does not defeat the fighting/survival spirit inside of them. Instead, the women are portrayed as equal to their male counterparts as they take action into their own hands to save themselves and their tribe. Howe's narrative provides

a more realistic insight into the issue of MMIWG while also providing a sense of hope to the reader.

In regard to future portrayals, I would hope to see more representation of and insight into the epidemic of violence against Native women and girls. This insight would allow for those outside of Native communities to recognize and reject stereotypes imposed upon them and turn to media (films, novels, television) that portray all Natives, and especially Native women, more realistically. Although society has come a long way, there are still savage-like stereotypes surrounding Native communities that portray these communities as being antiquated. By fighting this stereotype, filmmakers, novelists, and other artists can expose us to narratives that are more hopeful but also more realistic. By seeing or reading narratives that portray MMIWG, the modern viewer can understand and empathize with this issue. Hopefully, this exposure would allow for this epidemic to be examined and prevented. There is a more current example of a Native woman having full autonomy in order to take control of her life back after abuse: *Reservation Dogs*, a fully Native television show, recently published an episode that centered upon a character known as Deer Lady. Deer Lady was once a young Native girl who was forced to attend an Indian Training School. There, she and other Indigenous children were subjected to horrific abuse at the hands of their Euro-American abusers. After escaping one night, when her closest friend was taken to be beaten, Deer Lady made a deal with a deer spirit in the woods in order to protect herself. After making this deal, Deer Lady is sent on a mission to kill those who have harmed the innocent. This is seemingly spurred by the deer spirit, until the audience learns that her closest friend was beaten to death by her captors. The Deer Lady chooses to live her life saving others from the same kind of abuse

she was subjected to. Although this episode of *Reservation Dogs* has supernatural elements, we are given a part deer, part female character with full agency over her life. Even though her actions are not to be taken as morally correct, the Deer Lady serves as a warning to other people to treat Native women respectfully. She has become an urban legend to protect Native women—something she did not have as a child. The Deer Lady's agency influences her to protect others. Something similar is seen in *Shell Shaker* when Auda saves her tribe by killing her abuser. And, maybe more importantly, this is also seen by reestablishing a collective Native response—relying on women as much as men—to deal with abusers both within and outside the tribe. For further exploration there is an adjacent subject to my main research: I believe determining what makes Native works authentically Native is important to consider. One of my sources—*Wind River*— is directed by a white male. While this film does attempt to provide insight into the issue of violence against Native American women, it does not provide completely accurate Native depictions to its primarily white audience. This, in turn, could potentially promote an incorrect identity placed upon contemporary Native Americans. However, there is also the chance that a non-Native could produce work that accurately portrays Native American culture and life. Could this then be considered authentically Native even if it is not produced by someone who identifies as Native? The further exploration of this topic could allow for a deeper understanding of the reality that Native women and girls have to face while also providing more attention to the issue. By having Native individuals create Native works that bring insight to the issue of MMIWG, non-native people will hopefully be influenced to create more realistic narratives based on real Native American experiences.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Name of Author: Christine York

Graduate and Undergraduate Schools Attended:

University of South Alabama, Mobile, Alabama

Degrees Awarded:

Master of Arts in English, 2024, University of South Alabama

Bachelor of Arts in English, 2022, *magna cum laude*, University of South Alabama

Awards and Honors:

Graduate Assistant, Department of English, 2022

Graduate Assistant, Department of English, 2023

Teacher Assistant, Department of English, 2024