

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

*My, Her, Our Stories: Survivance and Trauma Healing in Twenty-First-Century Biostories by
Native American Women*

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Introduction

The present piece acts as a thesis booklet that draws the cartography for my dissertation titled: *My, Her, Our Stories: Survivance and Trauma Healing in 21st Century Biostories by Native American Women*.

Antecedents

My interest in the topic of my discussion was motivated by the exiguity of attempts at opening the doors to Native American knowledge to call into question the cultural and literary representation of trauma in the Native American context in literature. The few that exist include Deborah L. Madsen's discussion of this overlap in her article "On Subjectivity and Survivance: Rereading Trauma through *The Heirs of Columbus* and *The Crown of Columbus*." Drawing on Kali Tal's groundbreaking chapter on subverting the Eurocentric bias in scholarship on trauma, Madsen advances reading Indigenous literatures through the prism of survivance, thus subverting the models of trauma therapy paradigms that replicate the conditions that occasioned it in the first place. Critical studies examining the imbrications between trauma studies and the autobiographical genre while employing the analytical concept of survivance are yet to receive scholarly interest. A few attempts combining different critical strands and speaking from an Indigenous position call to mind Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson's compelling book chapter, "Tellin' it Straight: Self-representation within Indigenous Women's Life Writings," where she establishes subjectivity as a "site of activity, meaning, and resistance" (n.p.), as well as acknowledges life narratives by Indigenous women as conducive to looking back at the colonial gaze inherent to anthropological discourse. Deanna Reder offers a riveting personal testimony about the power of contemporary Indigenous herstories as a literary tradition rooted in Cree and Métis storytelling in *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition: Cree and Métis âcimisowina*. Alternatively, and non-Indigenous perspectives include Julia Emberley's advancement of the idea of working against "the ontology of victimry." In contrast, Annette Angela Portillo's *Sovereign Stories and Blood Memories: Native American Women's Autobiography* which builds on the notion of "blood memory" emphasizes the inherited nature of Native American stories in "canonical" nineteenth-century "as-told-to" autobiographies. Other notable antecedents to my topic include a monograph by Martina Horáková titled *Inscribing Difference and Resistance: Indigenous Women's Personal Non-fiction and Life Writing in Australia and North America*. Further inspirations come from Hertha Dawn Wong's book chapter "Native American Life Writing" in *The Cambridge Companion to*

Native American Literature (2006). Although these contributions provide an insightful basis for the discussion of personal narratives by Native American women and make visible women's stories and lived experiences, they remain insufficient because of their Western-centric approach. With their fixation on the survival of trauma as a natural outcome to self-expression through the life writing platform, these discussions perpetuate the rhetoric of victimry.

Objectives

I situate my discussion within the overarching field of critical Indigenous Studies. The aim of my dissertation is twofold. First, it proposes reorienting the emphasis away from settler colonial narratives of victimry towards Indigenous stories of survivance in the manner of Eve Tuck (Unangax), who prescribes a desire-based approach to research in opposition to the damage-based one that imprisons Native American communities in the narrative of victimry. Autobiographical practice is an important component in the history of Native American literatures. Scholarship pertaining to Native memoirs primarily covers historical memoirs, conspicuous in Indigenous Studies critics' fascination with the "as-told-to" narratives and ethnographically-minded works, despite the potentialities that this mode of expression offers in terms of analysis and themes. Therefore, this thesis attempts to update the scholarship pertaining to Native American autobiographical writing by exploring their practice of decolonization regarding memory and trauma.

Second, my dissertation investigates the areas where Western trauma theories perpetuate the very structures that created trauma, especially regarding its definition and the therapies deployed to "work through" it. Assuming that the life writings to be analyzed are survivance narratives, I explore how they problematize the "literature of dominance" (Vizenor qtd. in Madsen, "On Subjectivity" n.p.) inherent to the reading of contemporary trauma, and suggest that a key aspect of this problematization is translated in women's engagement in the act of survivance. In what can be seen as an adoption of decolonizing strategies, autobiographical texts, by virtue of their self-expressive propensity, unsettle the Eurocentric cultural representation of Native American subjects, including their experience of trauma, using Native American methodologies, namely, survivance stories. Starting with the texts' departure from the conventional conceptions of subjectivity dominating the Euro-American autobiographical tradition, they (re)consider the centrality of storytelling, gender, memory, and restoration in the representation of and healing from trauma. The second part of my dissertation

examines aspects of survivance as a restorative approach and how it is implemented in life stories.

Methods

The method I implemented is qualitative, supported by close textual analyses and drawing on an interdisciplinary approach, encompassing a wide variety of interpretive lenses, including, but not limited to, Indigenous feminism, trauma theory, survivance, and life writing studies. The texts I analyze are *My Body Is a Book of Rules* (2014) and *White Magic* (2021) by Elissa Washuta (Cowlitz), *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground* (2019) by Alicia Elliott (Tuscarora), *Carry: A Memoir of Violence on Stolen Land* (2020) by Toni Jensen (Métis), *Poet Warrior* (2021) by Joy Harjo (Mvskoke), and *Gichigami Hearts: Stories and Histories from Misaabekong* (2021) by Linda Le Garde Grover (Anishinaabe).

Chapter Description

I dedicate Chapter 1 to the theoretical background of my thesis. Since Native American decolonization of research requires “new ways of theorizing by Indigenous scholars” (L.T. Smith 38), I provide a cartography of the theoretical background and the attendant concepts relevant to each theoretical strand that guides me through analyzing the selected primary texts and helps me attain a coherent conclusion.

Chapter 2, “‘The Soul Wound’ in the ‘Ruins of Representation,’” delves into the ways Western literary trauma theory has failed to come to terms with Native American traumatic experiences. The chapter proposes, instead, the application of decolonial thought to discuss these experiences using the interpretive lens of survivance that fosters healing in Indigenous terms.

The focus in Chapter 3 entitled “Balancing Harm with Memory” is on fostering healing through re-membering, restorying, and storytelling as a way to “play out” trauma. I introduce “acting out” and “working through,” two processes adapted by Dominick LaCapra from Freudian psychoanalysis to trauma studies as responses to traumatic experiences. Nevertheless, I depart from them by using memory as a counter-performance and brings to light what Kline refers to as “technologies of memory” (qtd. in Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 23), congruent with Indigenous epistemologies.

Chapter 4, “The Tribalo(autobio)graphical: A Necessary Act?” starts with women’s reclamation of the “rhetorical space” to articulate their politics of memory. Here, I am greatly influenced by the relatively recent “genre,” where bio (life) meets story. The two terms conflate in the concept of *biostory*. I highlight the idea of restoration through restorying, using the form-enabled “genre” of biostory. I posit that the adoption of this new act of storying is in itself a reclamation of the autobiographical practice that ossified the narrative of Native American women in a deficient mode of being.

Reading Native American trauma involves studying the incontrovertible connection between Indigenous people and land. Chapter 5, “Restor(y)ing the Land and Rethinking the Map,” is a critical exploration of space as figured in women’s biostories, where they engage with colonial spatialities and restore Indigenous kinship with the land to pursue curative ends and assert claims to sovereignty. Similarly, Chapter 5 reads Native American biostories’ thematization of the land/body connection. Native American authors’ pressing for “the healing of soil and water in partnership with the healing of our bodies, spirits, and minds” (S. Hall n.p.) has guided my reading of biostories as it highlights how women writers restore the balance through reversals of the colonial discourse that subjugated their sexualities.

Finally, Chapter 6 continues with the restorative project, covering maternal subjectivities’ reclamation by highlighting rematriation. In their life stories, Indigenous mothers enact a subjectivity defiant of the one constructed by settler colonialism. In “‘Bring Her Home’: Rematriating Maternal Subjectivities,” I advance the idea that rematriation is the continuance of Indigenous feminism as it shakes the very grounds upon which the patriarchal structure of colonialism was established. I explore how rematriation is enacted in contemporary Native American biostory by foregrounding mothers’ resistance to settler colonialism through an analysis of how performativity, positionality, and relationality are articulated in the life stories.

Limitations

My discussion does not claim to provide a pan-tribal panacea for healing from colonially-induced traumas and its ongoing forms. It, however, attempts to open the space for stories to be heard. My choice to analyze books by women writers from different tribes cannot atone for the overlooking of other tribes and Nations.

I do not claim to be fully aware of the complexity and sophistication of Native American cultures, but my subject position as a post/neo/colonial woman with North African Indigenous

roots has equipped me with a cultural sensitivity that I believe would create transatlantic connections with women of the world in the face of colonially-imbued forms of violence, notably inflicted on women and, generally, on racialized and othered subjects.

Since not all life writing forms are equally positioned (memoir, autobiographies, autoethnographies), I argue that recently-penned and published Indigenous women-authored biostories lend themselves to being read as survivance narratives, especially with the current situation of social, environmental, racial, and political activist projects led by women, together with the emergence of new autobiographical acts and practices that intersect with gendered positionalities and relations. While survivance can be implemented as an analytical lens for reading life narratives by different othered subjects, it remains context-dependent, and its universal transferability is not completely achievable at this point lest the concept's specificity be diluted as it is rooted in Indigenous histories and worldviews.

In no way does this discussion claim to hold absolute truths nor push for reform. It is, however, an attempt among many other scholarly ones to advance Indigenous resurgence and return to culture through reactivating Indigenous feminist tenets.

Academic Results

- Restorying old stories and presenting them in a new context fosters survivance and cultural resurgence.
- Remembering in and through stories, akin to Vizenorian *sovenance* arises as a vital method for healing from trauma.
- The cultural trauma of settler colonialism and its recursions in systemic racialized forms of erasure and gendered othering are all evoked as the direct consequences of this system. Women authors awaken memories in pursuit of questioning the past and illustrating how the latter creates a temporal continuum in the present, yet they deploy counter-memory to trigger a process of healing.
- Implementing a desire-based approach to trauma instead of the Eurocentric damage-based one fosters the decolonization of research.

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Conference Papers

2025

- Indigenous Perspectives on Healing, Well-being and Care, Katowice – “*Women’s Biostories, Healing, and Cultural Resurgence Storying Survivance*”
- Minding the Gaps, Brno — “Bring Her Home: Rematriating Subjectivities in Tribalographic Expressions.”
- American Corner, Debrecen — “A Workshop on Native American Representations in Movies” (co- presentation).
- 46th American Indian Workshop, Madrid – “Rematriating Subjectivities in Tribalographic Expressions” (poster).

2024

- RIAS Conference, Middelburg — “Tribalographic Acts: Methodologies for Decolonizing Literary Trauma and Indigenizing Healing.”
- ESSE Conference, Lausanne — “Survivance Narratives: Biostories by Native American Women.”
- Doctoral Symposium, Lausanne — “My, Her, Our Stories: Survivance and Trauma Healing in 21st Century Biostories by Native American Women.”
- HAAS Conference, Szeged — “Biostories by Native American Women: Healing on Indigenous Terms.”
- Scottish Association for the Study of America – 25th Annual Conference, Stirling — “Mapping Indigenous Narratives: Literary Cartographies and Spatial Decolonization in 21st Century Memoirs by Native American Women.”
- Ruhr Symposium, Essen/Dortmund — “My, Her, Our Stories: Survivance and Trauma Healing in Memoirs by Native American Women.”

2023

- 2nd International Anthrozoology Conference, Debrecen — “My Story is All My Relations’ Stories.”
- Feminism(s) in the Media, Ghent — “Idle No More: Restoring Indigenous Feminism(s) in Pop Culture.”

- Doctoral Symposium, Milan — “My, Her, Our Stories: Survivance and Trauma Healing in Memoirs by Native American Women.”

2022

- 16th Biennial HUSSE Conference, Miskolc — “Decolonativizing Representation in the Streaming Service Industry.”
- View from the Anthropocene Conference, Debrecen — “Indigeneity and Healing the Anthropocene.”
- 44th American Indian Workshop, Budapest — “Mémoires de femmes, mémoires de peuples” (poster).
- 15th Biennial HUSSE Conference, online — “Humor in Contemporary Native American Visual Arts.”



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Foreign language Hungarian book chapters (1)

1. **Ayari, H.:** Auto(bio)graphy(story): The Necessary Act?

In: Topics in American Studies: History, Literature, and Culture 2. Eds.: Réka M. Cristian, Zoltán Dragon and Ágnes Zsófia Kovács, AMERICANA eBooks, Szeged, 133-154, 2025, (Szeged Series in American Studies, ISSN 6156872086 ; 5) ISBN: 9786156872081

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2. **Ayari, H.:** Book Review. "Aesthetically Sovereign" - Barker Debra K. S. and Conie A. Jacobs, Eds.

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3. **Ayari, H.:** Narrative Cartographies of Native American Resurgence: Women's Self-Constructions,

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List of other publications

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4. **Ayari, H.:** Decolonativizing Representation in the Streaming Service: Towards Visual Sovereignty.

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