

Narrating American Gender
and Ethnic Identities

Edited by

Aleksandra M. Różalska and Grażyna Zygałło

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P U B L I S H I N G

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This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-4784-4, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4784-1

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

NATIVE-AMERICAN RESPONSES TO AMERICA: WILLIAM APRESS AND LESLIE MARMON SILKO

MANLIO DELLA MARCA

While most recent scholarship has analyzed how Euro-Americans exploited and experienced indigenous people, this chapter will attempt to chart how Native Americans also participated in the processes which shaped the United States as a nation, and America as an “imagined community.”¹ The forms this participation has taken include a multiplicity of positions, ranging from overt rejection of American nationhood to practices asserting the Indians’ right to be Americans. I am well aware that the word “participation” might be controversial, since it seemingly neutralizes the differences between the oppressors and the oppressed. Nevertheless, looking at the formation of the American national identity as a constructed narrative, a mobile force field shaped by the interactions—but also by the frictions—between the colonizers and the colonized, seems to me the best way to call into question the latest versions of American exceptionalism. In my “reverse-angle” reading strategy, I will focus on passages from William Apess’s “The Eulogy on King Philip” and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*.

Born in 1798, Apess was a Methodist minister who travelled as an itinerant preacher and activist throughout New England and New York. According to Barry O’Connell, who edited the complete works of Apess, he “seems to have been the first Native American to publish his

¹ For the expression “imagined community,” see Benedict Anderson. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 7. See also Cheryl Walker. 1997. *Indian Nation: Native American Literature and Nineteenth-Century Nationalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 4 and 11.

autobiography” (1997, x). However, the text I will be discussing is not Apess’s autobiography, but the “Eulogy on King Philip,” which was originally delivered as a lecture at the Odeon in Boston in 1836 and published later the same year.

As for Silko, she is one of the most important Native-American writers of the last few decades. She was born in Albuquerque in 1948 and grew up in the Laguna Pueblo Reservation in New Mexico. She currently resides in Tucson, Arizona. Besides *Ceremony*, published in 1977, Silko has also written many short stories, poems, and two other novels: *The Almanac of the Dead* and *Gardens in the Dunes*.

I have chosen to focus on Apess and Silko—both of mixed-blood—for two main reasons. The first is that they wrote within complex cultural contexts, at crucial moments in the US history marked by heated debates about the American national identity: Apess in the 1830s Jacksonian America and Silko in 1970s post-Vietnam War America. The second reason is that both authors developed contrasting attitudes toward America. By looking at their writings, I intend to examine how they deployed strategies of *inclusion* and *exclusion*, either to enter the discourse on American nationhood or to resist it. Particular attention will be given to the ways in which Apess and Silko address the complex relationship between *nationhood* and *war*.

“The Eulogy on King Philip”

The centrepiece of the “Eulogy” is the figure of King Philip, or Metacomet, the seventeenth-century Indian hero of “King Philip’s War,” the most destructive Indian war in New England’s history, which took place between the Wampanoags and the colonists from 1675 to 1676. As we know from his autobiography, Apess’s paternal grandmother was a full-blooded Pequot, who Apess claimed was descended from King Philip. However, in the “Eulogy” Apess meditates not only on his distant relation but also on the politics of exclusion in Jacksonian America, in particular on the consequences of Jackson’s 1830 Indian Removal Act requiring Indians’ forced resettlement to lands west of the Mississippi River. As Barry O’Connell reminds us:

In choosing Philip and early New England Anglo-Indian history as his emphasis, Apess had some precedent. Some Anglo-American writers had already provided portraits of those years that were sympathetic to the Indians, damned the Pilgrims and Puritans, and portrayed Philip as a noble and tragic hero. The difference has to do with Apess’s insistence on giving