

Trabajo Fin de Grado

The Influence of Mythology on Cultural Discourse: The Role of Creation Stories in the Formation of Western and Native American Ontologies

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Resumen

Los mitos abrahámicos de la creación, al igual que las ideas humanistas, contribuyen al desarrollo de cosmovisiones antropocéntricas. Estas ideas se ven reflejadas en el libro del Génesis y son contrarias a la visión igualitaria del mundo que encontramos en las historias de la creación nativo americanas. En ellas los animales tienen roles activos y son iguales o superiores a los humanos. Este trabajo pretende analizar el libro del Génesis en comparación con las historias de la creación de los iroqueses, hopi y cheroqui para valorar sus implicaciones culturales. Para ello, utilizaré los recursos que nos aporta el posthumanismo crítico. El paradigma posthumano aboga por la deconstrucción de ideas humanistas desde un punto de vista post-antropocéntrico. Como se argumentará en este trabajo, las ontologías nativo americanas coinciden con el pensamiento posthumanista, lo que permite una reconsideración de las historias de la creación nativo americanas como textos importantes desarrollados en la línea del zoe-igualitarismo que define Rosi Braidotti pero que sin embargo se consideraron inferiores, otros y fueron silenciados como resultado del colonialismo y el imperialismo cultural. El análisis dará lugar finalmente a una reconsideración de la crisis medioambiental que vivimos hoy en día. Por último, se reivindicará que las mitologías nativo americanas nos ayudan a reevaluar ideas humanistas y a reconocer la manera en la que humanos y no humanos deberían relacionarse.

Palabras clave: mitología, historias de la creación, posthumanismo, post-antropocentrismo, igualitarismo.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Book of Genesis and Native American creation stories work as cultural products that define our societies. These myths are influential texts whose aim is to explain the origin of the world and/or a given nation. Scholars of myth such as Barthes, Dundes, Lévi-Strauss, Lincoln, and Schrempf have claimed throughout the twentieth century that myths do not simply offer fantastic stories, but rather they establish the basic principles of how we organise our cultural lives (Thompson 15). One of the many aspects that creation myths contribute to shaping is our ontology with regard to other living beings. In the words of Tok Thomson, “[t]he categorical differences in human/animal ontology in the categorization of the numinous can be traced to the cosmogonic myths, the sacred stories of how the world (and other things) came to be” (11).

For Western societies, the Book of Genesis has been interpreted as a sacred text that explains not only the origin of the world, but also the relationship between humans and what surrounds them. Humans are animals, and we are aware of it at a scientific level, but our resistance to apply the term ‘animal’ to ourselves proves the power of the myth, as in the Book of Genesis humans are represented as superior beings. What is more, to use the term ‘animal’ when talking about a human being has negative connotations. As Haraway explains, “[t]he Animal is forever positioned on the other side of an unbridgeable gap, a gap that reassures the Human of his excellence by the very ontological impoverishment of a lifeworld that cannot be its own end or know its own condition” (*Species* 77).

It is worth pointing out, however, that human exceptionalism has traditionally been granted to a very limited number of humans. For centuries, Western societies have misrepresented Native American cultures and have ignored their background. The Eurocentric vision of Native Americans presents them “as savages, obstacle to progress,

and most importantly, as cultural inferiors” (Oshana 47), ideas that were emphasised in Westerns and other cultural products of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Colonialism plays an important role in this sense, as Western societies have considered Native American nations inferior and exerted their dominion upon them. An effect of this has been cultural imperialism. In this line, Native American creation stories have been historically disregarded and underrated because they were thought to belong to a “childhood stage of religious development” (Thompson 17). This is because, according to Western societies, talking animals, which very often appear in Native American creation myths, cannot carry such a valuable message as the creation of the world and, therefore, they are dismissed as stories for children.

Abrahamic myths of the creation of the world carry an andro- and anthropocentric worldview and are the pillar of Western societies (Eurocentrism). Indeed, these stories confirm Fox’s claim that “nature/culture dualism [...] sidelines many non-Western ontologies that recognise humans as integral to ‘environment’ reinforcing Eurocentric and colonialist knowledge and perspectives concerning ‘nature’” (121). In contrast, Native American creation stories provide a more egalitarian description of the creation of the world, granting active roles to both humans and animals. This has cultural implications that shape how the different societies that are influenced by these creation stories behave and understand the world that surrounds them, as well as interpret their place in the world.

This dissertation aims to look at the Book of Genesis and the creation stories of the Iroquois, Hopi, and Cherokee nations and reflect on how myth “is a dramatic narrative which relates a primordial event” that “guarantees the meaning of life, portrays a saving power, provides a paradigm for action, and is enacted in ritual” (Degenaar 3), and as such it has implications in cultural discourse. The role that these narratives give to animals is

different, as in the Book of Genesis they are in a subordinated position whereas in the Native American creation stories they are given more active roles. This dissertation will resort to the analytical tools provided by the notions of the posthuman developed in recent years in opposition to Humanist ideas. This context will be later on applied to the analysis, which consists of an introduction to the significance of mythology, followed by a description of the Book of Genesis, the Iroquoian, Hopi, and Cherokee creation stories. The analysis will close with a more analytical section in which the ideas established in the theoretical framework will be applied to the texts. To conclude, the final part will seek to establish connections with the current environmental crisis.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The condition of the human as it is understood nowadays has been shaped by the influence of the ideas developed during the Enlightenment. It is during this period of reason, science, and progress that Man is placed at the centre of the universe and the idea of God as sovereign is rejected. This idea does not only depart from the previous centrality of religion and God, but also points at humans (widely understood to mean white men) as the ones representing reasoning and self-possession (Crosson 5). In turn, according to Descartes, “animals [...] were seen as completely separated from hominids, not even sharing basic fundamental qualities like thought processes, emotions, memories, etc.” (Thompson 16). The position of Man in relation to the rest of the world during this period was a privileged one, considering human rationality as vital to define the perfectibility of Man. As a result, the definition of humanity that has prevailed from the Enlightenment onwards is the “reflection of a particular group of elite men’s perception of themselves in opposition to those they rule over and classified as their others: animals, women, foreigners, disabled people, and more” (Weitzenfeld 8).

Defining the term humanism is a complicated matter. According to the American Humanist Association, it is “a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism and other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfilment that aspire to the greater good of humanity” (americanhumanist.org). The British equivalent affirms that “the Humanist view of life is progressive and optimistic, in awe of human potential, living without fear of judgement and death, finding enough purpose and meaning in life, love and leaving a good legacy” (www.humanism.org.uk). Both definitions take into account the positive effects of humanism in relation to progress. However, the humanist writer Salvatore Puleda claims that “humanism is used to indicate any current of thought that affirms the centrality, value and dignity of the human being or that manifests a primary concern in the life and situation of the human being in the world” (in Han-Pile 118).

With this understanding of the condition of the human and its place in the world comes the notion of (hu)man superiority in relation to any other living beings. This belief has shaped Western societies for centuries and does not only apply to non-human beings, but also to humans that are defined as “the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized others [...]” and that “are reduced to the less than human status of disposable bodies” (Braidotti 15). As Haraway points out in her book *When Species Meet* (2008), “[t]he discursive tie between the colonized, the enslaved, the noncitizen, and the animal—all reduced to type, all Others to rational man, and all essential to his bright constitution—is at the heart of racism and flourishes, lethally, in the entrails of humanism” (18). As she further argues, “gods, machines, animals, monsters, creepy crawlies, women, servants and slaves, and noncitizens in general. Outside the security checkpoint of bright reason, outside the apparatuses of reproduction of the sacred image of the same, these “others” have a remarkable capacity to induce panic in the centers of power and self-certainty” (10).

Freud described three historical wounds to human exceptionalism: the Copernican wound, the Darwinian wound, and the Freudian wound (Haraway, *Species* 11-12). It is in this process that Man's unique excellence is deconstructed by removing him from the centre of the universe, connecting him to other living beings, and by considering an unconscious that "undid the primacy of conscious process, including [...] reason [...]" (Haraway, *Species* 11-12). Martin Heidegger, with his *Letter on Humanism*, further paved the way for a rejection of the old values developed during the Enlightenment, giving rise to a philosophical trend known as anti-humanism. In the words of Rosi Braidotti, anti-humanism means, "de-linking the human agent from this universalistic posture, calling him to task, so to speak, on the concrete actions he is enacting. Different and sharper power relations emerge, once this formerly dominant subject is freed from his delusions of grandeur and is no longer allegedly in charge of historical progress" (23). Antihumanism emerged during the 1960s and 1970s as a result of social movements such as feminism, de-colonization, and anti-racism (Braidotti 16), and it is considered one of the sources for posthuman thought (Braidotti 25).

Where anti-humanism stands for the rejection of Man's superiority and the defence of the 'other', posthumanism takes a step beyond and tries to bring post-anthropocentrism to the centre stage. Critical posthumanism is a contemporary paradigm of thought that foregrounds questions regarding what constitutes the human and its others. Donna Haraway's work inaugurated the field by addressing the aforementioned crisis in humanism through the cyborg as a metaphor for our posthuman condition. In her seminal essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985), she proposed that a series of three interrelated "boundary breakdowns" (151) between the human and the animal, the organic and the machinic and the physical and the non-physical have transformed the figure of the human into a hybrid being. Thus, she brings attention to the ambiguity of the boundaries that

separate these binaries, opening up new, posthuman perspectives and possibilities. In her book *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), she emphasises humanity's co-habitation and co-evolution with other species, arguing that "to be one is always to *become with many*" (4; emphasis in the original). As she had done before with the aforementioned key western dualisms, in this book she deconstructs the nature/culture divide.

Rosi Braidotti's starting point is also the nature-culture continuum, which provides the basis for her exploration of the posthuman condition. In *The Posthuman* (2013), she establishes a connection between posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism. Braidotti claims that the posthuman in the sense of post-anthropocentrism,

deconstructs [...] species supremacy, but it also inflicts a blow to any lingering notion of human nature, *anthropos* and *bios* as categorically distinct from the life of animals and non-humans, or *zoe*. What comes to the fore instead is a nature-culture continuum in the very embodied structure of the extended self. (65; emphasis in the original).

In this understanding, "post-anthropocentrism displaces the notion of species hierarchy and of a single, common standard for 'Man' as the measure of all things" (Braidotti 67).

It is within this context of posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism that posthuman animal studies emerge, displacing "the dialectical scheme of opposition, replacing well-established dualisms with the recognition of deep zoe-egalitarianism between humans and animals" (Braidotti 71). As such, the field focuses on the essential role that the connection between humans and other non-human animals plays, rejecting hegemonic understandings in regards to human-animal interaction. In *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species and Posthumanist Theory* (2003), Cary Wolfe addresses the anthropocentrism that characterises the discourse of humanism, focusing on the "unexamined framework of *speciesism*" (1; emphasis in the original) and questioning the humanist assumption that "the subject is always already human" (1).

Wolfe emphasizes the connection between human and non-human forms of life, or, as he says, their “constitutive co-dependency” (66).

It is during the second half of the twentieth century that “the issue of ‘animal rights’ has gathered momentum in most advanced liberal democracies” (Braidotti 76). However, to focus exclusively on Western advanced liberal democracies means to deny what is true about many Native American nations: that before being influenced by Eurocentrism and cultural imperialism, they already included egalitarian conceptions of animal-human relations. In many genres in Native American culture “[a]nimals play central roles [...] – in stories, dances, clothing, songs, names, and of course the religious observances regarding maintaining the proper relations with the spirit realm, with its many animal denizens” (Thompson 18).

3. ANALYSIS

Mythology and history have been regarded as binary opposites, perceiving myths as a rejection of facts (Berger 490). However, the Romantics already considered that myths could express the reality of nations and “were in some respects more truthful and revealing than the study of the past” (Berger 491). The Bible is often excluded from the label of “mythology,” but it functions in the same way as Native American creation stories: they explain the past in order to make sense of the present. Mythology exerts an effect on cultural discourse by helping to develop a specific cosmovision and shapes the understanding of reality.

Unlike the Bible, which works as a quasi-universal standard for the creation of the world, most Native American creation stories function to define the origin of particular nations and groups of people. As such, they are significantly linked to the land. Even though Native American nations tend to be reduced into a homogenised group by the

Eurocentric cosmovision, the reality is that they are diverse and unique, and each one has its own understanding of the world as a whole and their nation in particular. Nonetheless, Native American creation stories share some beliefs that oppose Western ideology, especially in relation to the connection that exists between humans and the surrounding world.

3.1. The Book of Genesis

The Abrahamic faiths of Judaism and Christianity comprise almost the third of the human population. Thus, the Book of Genesis is acknowledged as one of the most well-known creation stories in the world. The Book of Genesis attempts to explain the creation of the world as understood by the Judeo-Christian tradition. In it, God is in charge of the creation of the cosmos, the world, man, and woman. It is divided into two chapters that contradict but also complement each other. Genesis (chapter) 1 explains how God created the universe in seven days: on the first day, he created the light; on the second, the clouds, seas, oceans, and rivers; on the third, the dry land and the plants; on the fourth, the sun, the moon, and the stars; on the fifth, the birds and fish; on the sixth, land animals and human beings; and on the seventh, he rested. Here, the creation of man and woman in his image is understood as the culmination of his creation. However, in Genesis (chapter) 2 it is explained how Adam is created before the animals from clay, and he is the one that names them, proving in this way his superiority over them. In view that none of the animals resemble him, God takes one of Adam's ribs and creates Eve (González 11).

Thus, as Clines explains, the Bible presents a hierarchical system that sets God at the top, Adam following him, created to carry on the maintenance of the garden that the master-gardener has planted. Following Adam is Eve, who had not originally been thought of but had been created out of Adam as a 'helper' once all the animals had been paraded before Adam without a single helper being found among them. And beneath Eve,

were the animals, unsatisfactory as helpers (Clines 1). As a result of all this, many scholars claim that the story of Genesis not only explains human relation to other living beings, but also our dominion. This notion is further supported by the fact that God is a humanised entity, as the following lines of The book of Genesis suggest: “And he said: Let us make man in our image and likeness: and let him have dominion over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and the beasts, and the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moveth upon the earth” (Douay-Rheims Version Gen. 1.26).

If we take this idea and the combined outcomes of the two Genesis stories, we can deduce that Western societies have used this interpretation of the Bible to justify human superiority over other living beings and the natural world. Humans are closer to God, following him, and non-humans are lowered into an inferior class and, hence, dominated by humans. The Book of Genesis has been interpreted for centuries as a sacred text, “historically material” that “has been taken [...] as a figurative paradigm of social and political power” (Sculd 125). This means that its sacred quality has been used to define and justify anthropocentrism, and not only as a source to explain human superiority from its roots, but also as a way of favouring this feeling of human superiority.

3.2. Native American Creation Stories

Regarding Native American creation stories, no myth of which we have evidence goes back to the first act of creation, but all start out with a world and living creatures already in existence, though not in their final form and condition (Mooney). As Christopher Vecsey puts it, “their myths are depictions of the essential parts of tribal culture,” portraying “the societal, environmental, and supernatural matrices upon which tribal lives depend” (*Hopi* 69). Native American creation stories, rather than focusing on what divides humans from non-humans, focus on the fact that they “are part of the same continuum of energy that is at the heart of the universe” (Aftandilian 197). According to

Native American creation stories, their nations would not exist if it was not for the action of animals.

3.2.1. Iroquoian Creation Story

The Iroquoian Confederacy is integrated by five nations: the Senecas, Cayugas, Onondagas, Oneidas, and Mohawks. Originally, they occupied the area from the northeast of lakes Ontario and Erie around the St. Lawrence and Ottawa rivers, then south of the lakes, and eastward almost to the Hudson rivers (Cusick 19). Each nation has different stories that define the Confederacy, but there is a unity to be found among them: “its grounding in human nature and human problems; its rules of ritual propriety; its incorporation of seemingly conflicting forces; its hope of transforming individuals and groups” (Vecsey, *Iroquois* 79). The creation story of the Iroquoian Confederacy is known from fragments dating from the eighteenth century. However, there is a well-known version written by David Cusick in 1892, who belongs to the Tuscarora nation (admitted as the sixth participant of the Iroquois Confederacy).

According to “The Iroquois Creation Story; A Tale of the Foundation of the Great Island, Now North America;--the Two Infants Born, and the Creation of the Universe,” a woman who falls from the sky lands on an island created from a turtle and gives birth to the twins that will shape the world, Tarenyawagon (the good creator) and Tawiskaron (the contrary-minded). This creation story explains how, in the beginning, there were two worlds, the lower one full of darkness, and the upper one inhabited by mankind. The lower world is described as possessing monsters, but it is the action of animals that saves sky woman from falling into the terrors of the great water. In this creation story, animals are presented as positive and creative beings. Even though it is the woman that gives birth to the twin brothers that will later on create the world and humans, the unity of animals is what guarantees her survival. When sky woman begins to fall, animals assembled

together and “made consultation” (Cusick 21) on how to save her. In the end, a turtle became a great island where the sky woman could fall and not get harmed. Thus, as we can see, in this creation story, the role of animals is more active than the one we can find in the Bible. What is more, they are shown to have a subjectivity, autonomy, agency and a will of their own, as well as to be rational beings, characteristics traditionally reserved for the human in the humanist discourse.

However, we can also find some commonalities with the Christian creation story of the Book of Genesis. The opposition or duality of the good and the bad mind can be read as God and the devil. In addition, the good mind can be understood as a counterpart of God, as both are considered creative entities. Even though Cusick’s Iroquoian creation story is widely known, it is not completely accepted by all Iroquois. Some believe that this work must be investigated “as an example of how Iroquois writers attempted to combat a false savagism and as an example of the fissures of subjectivity that US foreign policy and missionary activity created within Iroquois nations” (Kalter 2). Cusick’s interpretation of the creation story may not be that accurate, and it can be understood as the result of transculturation. The Tuscaroras “were traditionally friendly to the British settlers, even to the point of helping them fight other Indians” (Pritzker 568). As a result, they were much in touch with the Christian religion, which is thought to have affected Cusick’s writing.

3.2.2. Hopi Creation Story

The Hopi are the westernmost of the Pueblo people, composed of three mesas that are located on the Colorado Plateau between the Colorado River and the Rio Grande, in northeast Arizona (Pritzker 42). According to the “First Tale” (Merrick 1), the creation story of the Hopi, Tawa (the sun God) and Spider Woman (the Earth Goddess) controlled both the Above and the Below and decided who lived. Soon, they agreed to create more

gods to help them by dividing themselves. As a result, they created gods such as Man-Eagle or the Great Plumed Serpent. Then they created the earth and all the living creatures. However, they realized that the creatures they had made were not alive, so they decide to give them a spirit, a soul. They decided to create man and woman next, in order to rule and enjoy the other creatures that inhabited their world. These were divided into tribes, and Spider Woman chose a creature to lead each clan to a place to build their house: puma, snake, antelope, deer, and horn would be the names received by each clan. In addition, the roles of men and women are also established here, claiming that the woman is the one who should build the house and the family name belongs to her, while the man shall create weapons and provide his family with game.

As the above summary shows, in this creation story we find Spider Woman, who is “one of the most beloved of traditional Hopi deities” (Vecsey, *Hopi* 76). Her role is crucial because she was the one who decided that animals were to lead the different human groups inhabiting the world. In addition, she is the Earth Goddess, so she is mostly connected with the land and what populates it. The problem that we can find with the Hopi creation story is that there is no clear-cut creation legend as such. It was Mrs Mullett, the first to reconstruct Hopi history by perceiving their myths and legends as literature, who developed this creation story, and it is believed that it “provides Spider Woman with a more important role than most Hopi will admit today” (Merrick xi). Either way, the relevance of this figure also lies in the fact that she is both woman and spider. Indeed, in some Hopi stories she takes the shape of an old woman, and in others that of a common spider, but she is always a leader for the Hopi, and a bringer of medicine and good things.

3.2.3. Cherokee Creation Story

The Cherokee is the largest native nation in the United States. They used to live in the mountains of the South, occupying an area of about 40,000 square miles which is now included in the states of Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama (Pritzker 530). Nowadays, most of them live in north-eastern Oklahoma, while a minority of them remain in western North Carolina (Pritzker 530).

The creation story of the Cherokee, “How the World was Made” (Spence), describes how the nation came to appear in the upper Ohio Valley, in the Great Lakes region, or someplace else in the north (Pritzker 530). According to the creation story, “the earth is a great island floating in a sea of water, and suspended at each of the four cardinal points by a cord grow hanging down from the sky vault, which is of solid rock” (Pritzker 680). The story explains how, when there was no island, animals lived in the sky, in Gălûñ’lăti, and needed of more space. Dâyni’si, the little Water-beetle, dove to the bottom of the ocean and came back with soft mud which later grew and became the island that was then secured to the sky with four cords. The birds were the first to get to this new land, and then the Great Buzzard. While he was examining the land, he reached the Cherokee country and shaped the valley with his wings creating the mountains that we can find in the area nowadays. The story also explains how they got the sun and put it in a track until they put it seven handbreadths high in the air. In addition to this world, there is another one located under it, equal in all aspects but with different seasons.

This creation story does not acknowledge how animals and plants were created, but it says that they were asked to watch and keep awake for seven nights, which only the owl, the panther, and one or two more were able to do, giving them the power to see and go about in the dark. Of the trees, only the cedar, the pine, the spruce, the holly, and the laurel were awake until the end, and were gifted with the quality of being always green

and to be greatest for medicine (the rest lost their hair every winter). Something remarkable about this creation story is the fact that men came after animals and plants, as we can find in the previous creation stories. Brother and sister were created, he struck her with a fish and told her to multiply, and in seven days a child was born, and then another every seven days, until they were too many and they decided that women could only have one child.

Thus, the creation story of the Cherokee provides animals with a relevant role which is crucial for the emergence of the nation. In it, the position of animals is a superior one with respect to humans. Not only is the earth itself created thanks to an animal, the Water-beetle, but The Great Buzzard's wings are believed to be what shaped the land that would later become the mountains and valleys of the Cherokee country. According to Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz, "the stories of human creation and the bringing of culture reflect in myriad ways a common belief that people are living part of a natural world, brother and sister to the grain and the trees, the buffalo and the bear" (in Thompson 12).

3.3. Comparing Mythologies

The three Native American creation stories analysed here share with the Book of Genesis the fact that animals are created before humans. However, the role that animals play is completely different. In the Book of Genesis, animals are attributed more passive roles, and the creation of humans at a final stage is what gives them more importance. However, in the Native American creation stories, animals are presented as more powerful than humans and as having "more practical and spiritual knowledge than humans do" (Aftandilian 195). Their actions are crucial to the emergence and survival of the nation. This understanding of animals as "creators, and makers of the cosmological realms, the conception of animals as people to whom we are related, and the belief in the spiritual

power of animal” (Aftandilian 199) has led to what Native Americans call “natural laws,” a set of principles that humans must follow that include: “showing respect to animals, and restraint in hunting them; the need for reciprocity, or giving back in return for what the animals give us; and renewing the world ritually on behalf of all beings” (Aftandilian 199). Disobeying them may have negative consequences.

These views present a clear contrast to the anthropocentric ideas that characterize the Book of Genesis. The hierarchical system that can be found in the Abrahamic myth has led to the othering of nature and has defined humans in terms of “self- and world-forming character” in contrast to all non-human beings, which “are regarded as merely in the world, bound by natural law” (Weitzenfeld 6). During the Enlightenment these ideas were given even greater centrality, and humans were defined by a particular group of elite white men that perceived “themselves in opposition to those they ruled over and classified as their others: animals, women, foreigners, disabled people, and more” (Weitzenfeld 8). This view of humanity as exceptional would soon give rise to humanism, associating a number of characteristics with human beings exclusively, which in effect separates them from other living beings.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Western societies have rejected the significance of Native American creation stories due to their link to animism. According to Wallace, animism has an “analytical capacity to illuminate how traditional people, then and now, envision nonhuman nature as ‘ensouled’ or ‘inspired’ with living, sacred power” (7). It makes reference to how different cultures understand the relationship between humans and non-humans, considering the subjectivity of the latter and bringing to the fore the fact that human society is dependent on the spiritual relationship that exists with the natural world. In the Native American creation stories discussed above, the role that animals play in the creation of the different nations is decisive, and they are not reduced to a second

level as in the Book of Genesis. Furthermore, animals are granted a number of characteristics that have in the Western and humanist tradition been exclusively assigned to (some) humans, such as agency, autonomy, reason and a will, as well as a soul. Finally, in some Native American stories, the boundary between human beings and animals is further erased through the existence of hybrid, shape-shifting figures at the crossroads between the human and the non-human.

Crucially, this understanding of the creation of the different nations in relation to animism explains why Native American societies have a more egalitarian worldview towards the environment. Western societies have historically used the term “animism” with negative connotations to refer to indigenous societies and as an argument to belittle Native Americans during the colonial enterprise. From a Eurocentric and imperialistic point of view, these creation myths are considered stories for children that lack historical importance. Despite this historical rejection, “both traditional indigenous worldviews and contemporary Pagan and philosophical understandings of the subjectivity of the ‘other-than-human world’ are thought to contribute to a way of life that is more ecologically sustainable than the dominant paradigms of modernity” (Rountree 22).

In the last decades, western societies have experienced the development of a “new animism,” according to which the Earth is seen as “full of persons, only some of whom are humans, and [that] life is always lived in relationship to others” (Rountree 23). This “new animism” poses an alternative that is positive in light of the environmental crisis and is considered “a thoughtful engagement that depends on respect for indigenous peoples’ valuable insights and ways of knowing, rather than seeing them as ‘primitive superstition’ and ‘childish category errors’” (Rountree 27). This new animism resonates with key posthuman notions as it considers human existence in relation to the connection and interaction between humans and non-humans and not by themselves. Posthumanism

and postcolonial philosophy attempt to deconstruct the established principles upon which Western societies stand by means of deconstructing species supremacy. It is in this context that we interpret the Native American creation stories described above: we must consider their assessment of moral relations between humans and non-humans.

The emergence of a new animism and the rise of posthumanist thought help to deconstruct established anthropo- and androcentric ideas that can be perceived in the Judeo-Christian tradition. They further allow to consider Native American mythologies as proof of material in which men, women, and nature occupy an equal position in the world. As Wallace claims, “Indigenous people celebrated, and continue to celebrate, relations with other-than-human communities of beings that are alive with spirit, emotion, desire, and personhood” (10). By contrast, Western societies distinguish between the animate and the inanimate, and when it comes to animate beings, they differentiate between plants and animals (defining the human as something external or superior to the animal), and between human consciousness and the rest (Wallace 9). As a result, the discourse that dominates in this respect is the one inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition, transformed by humanism and defended as ruled by reason. It is through the questioning of hierarchical humanist and anthropocentric beliefs that posthuman animal studies become relevant and significant in the recognition of zoe-egalitarianism between humans and animals (Braidotti 71). Through the study of Native American creation stories, it becomes evident that this zoe-egalitarianism that posthuman theory foregrounds already shaped Native American cultures.

The egalitarian attitude that we can find in the creation stories described above not only applies to the relationship between humans and non-humans, but also to the relationship between man and woman. The Book of Genesis presents man (Adam) not only on top of animals but also on top of women (Eve). This is especially perceived in

the second chapter of the Book of Genesis, where Eve is to be created from Adam's rib and because none of the animals was a significant companion for him. By contrast, in the Native American creation stories, we can find feminine entities whose roles are decisive in the formation of the nations. For instance, in the Iroquoian creation story, sky woman gives birth to the twins that will later on create the world; in the Hopi creation story, Spider Woman appears not only as a creative entity but also as an organising entity, establishing the roles that animals play.

However, a number of considerations need to be discussed. While it is clearly the case that Native American creation stories present an egalitarian view of the roles of men and women, it is important to consider the effect of ideology on translation. Scholars that have analysed the Hebrew Bible claim that some of the translations are not accurate and lead to misinterpretations. It is believed that a reading of the text in the context of humanism and anthropocentrism has affected its real message. For instance, when God says "Let us make *man* in our image and likeness: and let *him* have dominion over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and the beasts, and the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moveth upon the earth" (Douay-Rheims Version Gen. 1.26; emphasis added), scholars that have read the Hebrew version conclude that "'ādām" has been translated as "man", but "him" is not an adequate translation because the Hebrew word (*yidru*) implies collectivity. From here, scholars have reached the conclusion that the original text considered "'ādām" neither man nor woman, but humanity, and that translators were the ones to apply their own humanist worldview when interpreting the text (Clines 16-17).

Similarly, when dealing with Native American texts, some problems may arise regarding their authenticity. As a culture that is based on orality, some of the main traits associated with the transmission of the different stories can be lost. Not only this, but

sometimes the task of writing down these oral narratives is carried out by people that have not been in full contact with the nation or that have little knowledge of the origins of the story. In addition, we may find that the written texts are the result of transculturation and encapsulate a combination of both the original tale and the ideology of the different cultures the nation has been in contact with. For instance, in the Native American creation stories analysed above we find some traits of the Judeo-Christian tradition that are the result of being written down after being exposed to European contact and colonisation.

4. CONCLUSION

Every myth of creation has cultural implications within its own nation and functions as a guide on how to consider human being's position in the world. This dissertation has evaluated the Book of Genesis and three Native American creation stories. The analysis leads to the conclusion that the four texts manifest a different understanding of the world and the creatures that inhabit in it and, therefore, the ontologies that emerge from them are very different. As has been proved, the Judeo-Christian myth of the creation of the world carries an andro- and anthropocentric worldview, whereas Native American creation stories provide a zoe-egalitarian viewpoint. This fact aligns them with posthumanist thought, highlighting the need to deconstruct humanist values and texts that justify human supremacy and to embrace the system of co-dependency in which humans and non-humans exist.

Western societies have historically shown an anthropocentric behaviour towards the natural world, and this behaviour has been supported by the interpretation of master narratives such as the Bible. The Book of Genesis has provided the pillar of Western society, later on absorbed, transformed and extended by the discourse of humanism.

Colonialism, cultural imperialism and Eurocentrism have been responsible for spreading these ideologies, to the detriment of other (Indigenous) worldviews. Mythology proves to have the power to influence cultural discourse. It creates ontologies, but not all of them are acknowledged as realities. The power sovereignty associated with Western societies has made it possible for our cultural discourses to rise above any other belief. As a result, colonised cultures and their discourses have been excluded, considered of inferior value. Humanist and anthropocentric ideologies are now part and parcel of the capitalist system that has led to a critical situation for the preservation of the Earth. In recent years, global warming has put a spotlight on the relationship between humans and the environment: “[w]e now talk in terms of ecosystems, and ecological balances, yet these are terms relatively new to our scientific discourse” (Thompson 21). In contrast, Native American cultures did already consider a more egalitarian vision of the world, as their creation stories reflect. These not only explain the origin of their nations, but also portray animals in active roles, acknowledging them as equal constituents of their nations.

Still, to try to change the whole basis of Western societies and their Eurocentric cultural discourses is not an easy task. To understand that the human is not separated from the environment carries with it the necessity to reconsider pre-established assumptions of human (white man) supremacy. The anthropocentric ontology that separates the human from nature needs to be replaced by an Indigenous, post-anthropocentric and posthuman one. In order to challenge this understanding of reality, we need to reassess humanist ideas connected to anthropocentrism, including also a self-critique on modernity and taking into account notions provided by non-Western and Indigenous cultures (Zapf 8). Silenced alternative ontologies need to be brought into discussion in order to consider a different way to relate to the world that surrounds us, and a way to do so is by engaging and revaluating Native American mythology.

Native American worldviews show interesting connections with recent posthumanist notions. In the words of Braidotti, “the posthuman condition introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet” (1-2). To consider a new understanding of human existence in relation to the rest of the world should not be regarded as a new discourse, but should be acknowledged as a re-interpretation of Indigenous discourses such as the creation stories analysed in this dissertation. If, as a result of the environmental crisis, we aim to become economically, biologically, politically, and ethically viable humans, we need not to forget that there are already cultures that considered this definition and based their societies upon these beliefs.

As Jean-Luc Nancy states in his book *Being Singular Plural*, “being [...] [is] determined in its Being as being with-one-another. This is the singular plural in such a way that the singularity of each is indissociable from its being-with many” (in Ferrández-Sanmiguel 11). The boundaries between the human and the non-human need to be reassessed in a different light from Western anthropocentrism in order to reach an egalitarian understanding of our ontology—one that acknowledges man, woman, and the biosphere as co-dependent, co-evolving and co-constitutive, one that sees non-human animals and the more-than-human world as part of us.

5. WORKS CITED

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