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## Threshold writing: interweaving indigenous theory and life

In: Horáková, Martina. *Inscribing difference and resistance : indigenous women's personal non-fiction and life writing in Australia and North America*.  
First published Brno: Filozofická fakulta, Masarykova univerzita, 2017, pp.  
83-111

ISBN 978-80-210-8531-2

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/136905>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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## CHAPTER 3

# THRESHOLD WRITING: INTERWEAVING INDIGENOUS THEORY AND LIFE

Some women write themselves free.  
Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (112)

Even though there is no doubt that writing as a creative expression can be empowering for any writer, regardless of their cultural background, social position, or personal history, Indigenous writing is often perceived as a site where personal empowerment overlaps with political empowerment, reflecting the collective identity of an ethnic minority. It is a form of expression that addresses the individual writer's experience as well as the transgenerational political struggles originating in the colonial histories. Indigenous writers often use textual space as a powerful tool for pointing out the unequal distribution of power in the settler cultures of the United States, Canada and Australia, and effectively inscribe social and historical injustices, calling for their redress. In addition to rewriting their histories, they can also use "the power of words" to draw attention to cultural representations of Indigenous people and "counteract the negative images of [them]," as Native Canadian writer Kateri Damm observes (24). It is in this sense that, in Paula Gunn Allen's words, Indigenous writers become "word warriors" (*The Sacred Hoop* 51). In this light, Indigenous personal non-fiction and life writing, while still maintaining the aesthetic of a literary text, is dominated by both personal and political resistance to the colonial policies of defining and controlling Indigenous peoples' lives, histories, cultures, and spirituality. This embedded resistance often leads to the view that Indigenous literature is inherently political (Hulan, Introduction 10; Ruffo 118; LaRoque, "Preface, or Here Are Our Voices—Who Will Hear?" xviii), a kind of a signpost on the path of the marginalized group to political and cultural sovereignty. While this reading of Indigenous literature is certainly reductive in the sense that it neglects its literary qualities, it is nevertheless imperative to



remain attentive to the collective aspects of Indigenous literature which stem from the common historical experience of European colonization. From this perspective, the writers' experiences, as projected in their writing, contribute, in one way or another, to communicating the collective historical experience. When Deleuze and Guatarri theorize their concept of minor literature in relation to Kafka's oeuvre, noting its characteristics of deterritorialization of language, its political nature, and its collective value, they describe minor literature as "literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism" (17). It is this kind of solidarity, I would suggest, that complements the sense of empowerment communicated by Indigenous women's writing. The following paragraphs, therefore, address the ways in which the act of writing becomes a vehicle for empowering Indigenous women and for inscribing their difference by employing a particular style combining techniques of oral tradition and storytelling, auto/biographical and personal narratives, and contemporary forms of writing scholarly criticism.

The concept of the politics of empowerment in relation to minority literatures has been elaborated, for example, by African American feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1991), Collins provides a detailed overview of the development of Black feminist thought from its construction, definition, and subjugation by mainstream epistemology to its self-definition and empowerment. Collins' study is instructive in the ways it traces Afrocentric feminist epistemology that stems from African American existence anchored in the everyday experience of Black women in North America. Collins argues that Afrocentric feminist thought has contributed to the understanding of important connections among knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment on two levels: first, by treating the paradigms of race, gender and class as interlocking systems of oppression, it "reconceptualizes the social relations of domination and resistance;" second, it offers subordinate groups new ways of knowing their own experience, allowing them to define their own reality, which further empowers them (222). Collins' way of theorizing about Black women's writing may be extended to Indigenous women's personal non-fiction and life writing which, in addition to shaping Indigenous feminist thought, empowers Indigenous women by placing their experience in the center of the analysis and by providing appropriate and realistic self-definitions and self-representations, as well as epistemological tools to theorize about their existence and draw conclusions about their position as a marginalized group.

In Indigenous cultures, most of which draw largely on oral tradition and storytelling, writing acquires a special meaning. It has become a means of having one's voice heard, one's story read, one's life recognized. As an act of empowerment, it operates on both personal and political levels. On the personal level, through inscribing their own lives and personal experiences into their texts, Indigenous women construct their own subjectivities outside hegemonic definitions. From



this point of view, Indigenous women's personal non-fiction and life writing offer narratives of coming to power through writing, with authors frequently commenting on the role that being able to write and publish plays in their personal and professional lives. When Patricia Hill Collins observes in her analysis of Celia from *The Color Purple* that "some women write themselves free," she underlines the fact that the act of acquiring a voice through writing, "of breaking silence with language," can actually lead to taking action and liberating oneself (112). What permeates many Indigenous women's reflections on the writing process is the idea that writing makes them free, gives them at least a limited sense of power, and allows them to control their own self-representations and communicate with a wider community of Indigenous women. This is also a significant aspect of Allen's, Maracle's, and Huggins' writings.

On the level of political and collective empowerment, writing provides Indigenous women with access to public discourse and an opportunity to reach a wider audience, establishing alliances across communities. Referring to Métis writer Maria Campbell, author of the critically acclaimed autobiography *Halfbreed* (1973), Janice Acoose characterizes the power of writing in the following way: "the act of writing is a political act that can encourage de-colonization. In this context, Campbell is one of the first few Indigenous women who appropriated the colonizer's language to name her oppressors ... and subsequently [to] work towards decolonization" ("A Revisiting of Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*" 140). By publishing their life stories and sharing personal experiences with a reading community beyond their immediate circle of listeners, Indigenous women writers in fact challenge the mechanisms sustaining the dominant settler society, even though they can rarely undermine these mechanisms completely. But their stories do have the power to counteract certain images and representations, at least in the sense of Carolyn Heilbrun's definition of power as "the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter" (18). Similarly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty also relates writing to power when she reminds us that "written texts are also the basis of the exercise of power and domination" ("Cartographies of Struggle" 35). Thus Indigenous women's personal non-fiction and life writing narratives do have the power to "intervene in the public sphere, contest social norms, expose the fictions of official history, prompt resistance beyond the provenance of the story" (Schaffer and Smith 4). It is precisely this intervention in and the contestation of the public sphere, be it historical discourse, cultural representations, or political ideologies, that is the most potent feature of these narratives. Through writing, as Moreton-Robinson argues, Indigenous women writers become not a "site of a mastering gaze," but rather the voices that are "reclaiming Indigenous experience as the locus of relationships" (*Talkin' Up* 2).

Although writing can be an empowering experience for many Indigenous women writers, it is not always an easy and straightforward process, as some of



them face tensions when speaking and writing from the position of what may be considered the privileged, educated elite (which, however, does not obliterate their marginalization within the dominant settler society). For Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle, and Jackie Huggins, their reflections on the writing process mirror the fact that they are all professional writers and scholars who have been quite prolific and committed in their writing careers to their work as public intellectuals. Yet, they also demonstrate how much the idea of coming to one's voice through writing has influenced their understanding of power and freedom. While they certainly have the knowledge, education, and ability to gain access to and participate in the public discourse, they also reveal, especially in the autobiographically-oriented passages, their own struggles with having to mediate between the values embedded in their Indigenous background and the Western system of producing and disseminating knowledge. The potential dilemma stemming from this conflict is, I would suggest, counterbalanced by the proliferation of a writing style that interweaves writing theory with writing life, and thus remains truthful to their Indigeneity while simultaneously reaching out to a non-Indigenous audience. Obviously, access to education and intellectual resources provides authors such as Allen, Maracle, and Huggins with competence and authority to use various critical theories alongside non-Indigenous academics but they also deliberately inscribe their difference with the help of a writing style that seeks to combine their ancestors' knowledge with their academic research. In this way, they demonstrate that it *is* possible to interweave theoretical discourse with the identity politics that still inform many Indigenous women's lives. Therefore Allen, Maracle, and Huggins also function as mediators between academia and Indigenous communities without access to educational resources and theoretical discourse.

Discussions regarding the extent of the (in)commensurability of Western and Indigenous epistemologies are complex and multiple. A number of Indigenous scholars have commented on various degrees of resistance to Western theory; one of the most obvious reasons for this resistance is aptly summarized by Gordon D. Henry, Jr: "Theory represents discourse, interpretations, worldviews, systems, and models that are implicated in Eurocentric attempts to dominate Native people. By this allegory, theory must be resisted. It represents domination of Indigenous people and their relations to spirit(s)" (9–10). In their critical responses to mainstream feminist theory, "women of color" have, among other things, accused the theory of being too detached from everyday life and too abstract to inspire underprivileged and multiply-disadvantaged minority women. Indigenous women themselves have expressed their suspicion and skepticism towards mainstream feminism because for them it is too theoretical, too embedded in Eurocentric discourse, and therefore too distant to address their own reality. For example, in one of the essays in *Sister Girl*, Jackie Huggins explains her response to a conference question about Aboriginal women's reasons for not participating in the theoretical debates within feminism



in Australia: “The theoretical issues and writings seem far too abstract at this stage to form some kind of bridge that we can get together to cross to overcome and start talking as women” (*Sister Girl* 59). As a result, these women turn instead to a concept that might be described as “writing theory from experience,” i.e. theory involving abstraction and drawing general conclusions but based on initiating dialogue, addressing real-life problems, paying attention to cultural differences and local contexts, and respecting traditional and communal knowledges. This concept is not exclusively tied to minority women’s narratives; it also grows out of the tradition of women’s and/or feminist writing which has embraced “the personal turn” and subjectivity in writing. Anne Brewster argues that this “personal turn,” which draws on personal narratives and first-person accounts, is employed “in an effort to deconstruct the binaries between public and private memory, between ‘objective’ and subjective modes of discourse and between specialized knowledges and everyday life” (“Writing Whiteness” n. pag.). It may be argued, then, that the focus on the community, on everyday life, on stories told by friends, and on family genealogies in Indigenous women’s personal non-fiction and life writing may be the common ground shared with Anglo-American mainstream feminist writing which at one point also foregrounded interweaving theory and women’s life experience.

In spite of Indigenous women’s still visible distance from and distrust towards Western theoretical discourse, recent developments seem to demonstrate a tendency to synthesize the two epistemological approaches, emphasizing the restoration of Indigenous knowledges while also taking advantage of Western intellectual frameworks. As the First Nations scholar Marie Battiste (Mi’kmaq) points out, this synthesis of the two systems of knowledge is more than a matter of choice; it is vital for further survival and development of Indigenous thought: “By harmonizing Indigenous knowledge with Eurocentric knowledge, they [Indigenous peoples] are attempting to heal their people, restore their inherent dignity, and apply fundamental human rights to their communities” (Battiste 209). In my view, the combination of writing life and theory is one of the ways to harmonize differences in attitudes. Indigenous women writers and scholars have shown that exploring the complexity of ideas presented in both scholarly thought and knowledge based in everyday life can be presented in a way that does not make these arguments less powerful simply because they are less theoretical. On the contrary, the conclusions become more accessible to the groups they speak to, for, and about. This style of writing theory and life contributes, as Patricia Hill Collins has shown, to the challenge it poses for “both the ideas of educated elites and the role of theory in sustaining hierarchies of privilege” (Collins xii).

A number of studies by Indigenous scholars have posited Indigenous methodological frameworks and theoretical backgrounds as distinct from, if not incompatible with, mainstream research methods. In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith proposes a concept



of “researching back,” invoking a well-known strategy of ‘writing back’ adopted by many postcolonial authors. “Researching back” involves, in Smith’s words, “a knowingness of the colonizer and a recovery of ourselves [Indigenous peoples], and analysis of colonialism, and a struggle for self-determination” (Tuhiwai Smith 8). Smith’s study provides, among other things, an overview of the ways in which Western research and theory have marginalized Indigenous people, contributing to intricate ways in which “indigenous languages, knowledges and cultures have been silenced or misrepresented, ridiculed or condemned in academic and popular discourses” (21). Smith goes as far as claiming that “Indigenous people have been, in many ways, oppressed by theory” which, driven mainly by the anthropological impulse, “ha[s] not looked sympathetically at us [Indigenous people]” (39). While Smith warns that Western theories may still be perceived with a suspicious mind by Indigenous scholars and activists, and that the relationship to Indigenous peoples that Western research has generated “continues to be problematic” (41), she is far from rejecting Western science as such. Similarly to Battiste, rather than advocating the separatist stance for Indigenous theory and criticism, Smith prefers a “dialogue across the boundaries of oppositions” (40), while welcoming recent developments in Indigenous critical theories which are “grounded in a real sense of, and sensitivity towards what it means to be an indigenous person” (39). Ultimately, if Indigenous scholars are to offer an alternative to the critique of Western theory, they must “struggle[e] to make sense of our own world *while also* attempting to transform what counts as important in the world of the powerful” (Tuhiwai Smith 40, emphasis mine).

One of the ways to initiate and continue this transformation is, in Smith’s view, to recover Indigenous “epistemological foundations” as well as “the stories of the past” (40). It is, however, not only the stories of the past that are being recovered but also the strategies for telling these stories. Such strategies, which include various storytelling techniques stemming from oral tradition, then inform many of the Indigenous theoretical accounts. Writing theory through stories thus becomes one of important concepts deliberately employed by a number of contemporary Indigenous authors whose aim is to offer alternative ways of theorizing. Elvira Pulitano claims that writers such as Paula Gunn Allen, Greg Sarris, Louis Owens, and Gerald Vizenor “adopt storytelling strategies that, while pushing the boundaries of theory itself, teach their audiences significant new ways of reading and listening” (Pulitano 43). Ways of telling stories are in this sense used as a means of keeping strong ties to cultural traditions and also of expressing a difference, an alternative to Western ways of theorizing. According to Sium and Ritskes, stories are not “depoliticized acts of sharing” but they must be recognized as “acts of creative rebellion” (v). In this way they are also capable of inscribing resistance: “storytelling as knowledge production, engaged in creative scholarship ... works counter to colonial ways of knowing” (Sium and Ritskes viii).



Apart from interweaving writing theory with storytelling, Indigenous women writers also frequently integrate personal experience and auto/biographical accounts in their personal non-fiction and life writing, where it becomes one of the tools of expressing their cultural difference. One of the reasons for such integration may be ancient traditions of storytelling and performances in which it was common “to include a commentary on themselves, thus practicing metafiction and self-reflexivity long before (post)modernism” (Martínez-Falquina 192). As a result, many of the non-fictional writings by Indigenous women are carefully framed with stories of their origin, of their placement within a wider kinship network, and of their authority and credibility within the community. This is not just the case of earlier life writing accounts but also of more recent critical and scholarly writing by contemporary Indigenous women. In the texts analyzed in this section, all three writers, Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle, and Jackie Huggins, follow this convention by always explaining, through a series of auto/biographical acts, where they come from, who their ancestors are, and what their life story is.

Another reason for Indigenous women, as well as other “women of color,” to look for different ways of writing theory is their preference to stay close to the practical goals of promoting social justice, human rights, and sovereignty, and of drawing attention to the histories of the oppression and underrepresentation of Indigenous women in welfare and social services, to the recurrent stereotypes of Indigenous women in the mainstream media, and to their continuing exclusion from various resources. This is not to imply, however, that Indigenous women cannot theorize in the Western tradition of critical thought. Rather, what they come to implement in their writing style is a kind of alternative way of theorizing which reflects a different cultural background and different system of knowledges. What African American theorist and writer Barbara Christian claimed in 1987 in her principle essay “The Race for Theory” remains true today for Indigenous women’s non-fiction writing:

People of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western forms of abstract logic. ... I am inclined to say our theorizing ... is often in narrative form, in the stories we create, in riddles, and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamics rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. (Christian 349)

While the texts by Allen, Maracle, and Huggins are situated as scholarly contributions and primarily constructed within the theoretical academic discourse that stems from each author’s educational training—literary-critical in Allen’s case, sociological in Maracle’s, and historical in Huggins’, they never disregard the everyday, personal, and/or community- and environment-oriented experience. The strategy of incorporating the knowledge/wisdom of family and friends, stories of community members, mythological tales, and autobiographical elements, comple-





ments the conventional Western theoretical discourse. In this sense, these writers manage to establish a “creative dialogue between storytelling and criticism,” an approach identified as most useful and desirable when interpreting Indigenous texts (Martínez-Falquina 191).

Another way of thinking about Indigenous women’s writing style in their personal non-fiction is through the notion of liminality and in-betweenness. Inspired by Victor Turner’s theories of liminality, Ana Louise Keating uses the concept of “threshold identities” to talk about the ways in which three multicultural women writers, Paula Gunn Allen, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Audre Lorde, move in “transitional, in-between spaces where new beginnings and unexpected combinations can occur” in order to “establish new connections among apparently different people” (2). Her description of what best characterizes the position of these women writers is also relevant for Lee Maracle and Jackie Huggins, as well as for a number of other Indigenous women writers. Keating argues that they:

adopt ambivalent insider/outsider positions in relation to a variety of cultural, professional, gender, and sexual groups. The specific worlds each writer slips through and the revisionary tactic she deploys often reflect the specific details of her regional, ethnic, and economic background—as well as other differences like native language, religion, age, education, and skin color. ... They engage in to-and-fro movements between multiple worlds, thus illuminating the limitations in all pre-existing identities. (Keating 2)

This threshold position “between multiple worlds,” Keating goes on to explain, is performative, as it allows these writers to employ the written word in a way that “draws on language’s performative acts and deconstructs conventional western dualisms” (4). This may be a maneuver employed by a number of women writers in general, but what is distinctive about Indigenous women writers is that they tie these strategies to precolonial oral traditions, which allows them to “simultaneously spiritualize and politicize their words” (Keating 4). As a result, Keating argues, these women writers activate what she calls “transformational identity politics” which rely “on transformational epistemologies, nondual ways of thinking that destabilize the networks of classification that restrict us to static notions of personal and collective identity” (5).

I would argue that not only Allen (as is exemplified by Keating) but also Maracle and Huggins employ in their writing what Keating calls “threshold theories” which “cross genres and mix codes, combining language with action, activism with aesthetics, and individual identity formation with collective cultural change” (15). It is in this sense that I refer to “threshold writing” in the title of this chapter, as the personal non-fiction of the three Indigenous women analyzed in this section manifests the characteristics Keating holds as key in her study. Allen, Maracle and Huggins do not try to resolve the contradictions which appear in their



writing, contradictions stemming from their positions and interests in various, sometimes overlapping, sometimes separate groups. Rather, these contradictions are explored and negotiated in their writings. As Keating says, by inscribing their lives in their writing, “they reinvent themselves, and enact new forms of identity, nondual modes of subjectivity that blur the boundaries between apparently distinct peoples” (4). It is this kind of what I call threshold writing that empowers them as women, as writers, and as Indigenous people and that will be explored in more detail in the following sections dedicated to Allen, Maracle, and Huggins’ non-fictional writing.

## Paula Gunn Allen | *Mestizaje Écriture Féminine*

Stories, whether narrative or argumentative in nature, tell us not who we are, not who we are supposed to be, but instead describe and define the constraints of the possible.

Paula Gunn Allen, *Off the Reservation* (11)

For Paula Gunn Allen, the empowerment of Indigenous people stems from re-creating a tribal vision of existence anchored in spirituality, gynarchic social structure, and oral tradition. The relationship between the notions of tribal spirituality and female-centered society is foregrounded in Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop* repeatedly: indeed, Allen puts “women at the center of the tribal universe” (264). In the concluding chapter, in which Allen prophesizes about the future prospects of Indigenous women and Indigenous literature in North America, she argues that by shifting the focus from the male-centered to the female-centered in the sphere of literary narratives, or, in her understanding, from extinction to survival and continuance, the future of Indigenous communities also shifts from pessimistic to optimistic (262). As for Indigenous women writers, Allen predicts that they will be empowered by a greater access to networks of female relationships and female creativity, networks which will serve as sources of inspiration and mutual support. In addition, Indigenous women writers would benefit, in the process of their empowerment, from greater participation in public discourse. In this respect, Allen’s career serves as a good example: like Maracle, who builds her activism on her personal experience of political engagement, and like Huggins, who writes from a position of authority as a trained historian familiar with archival and historical research, Allen speaks from the position of a respected academic well-versed in literary criticism and scholarly research. But in my view, the main appeal these three writers hold for other Indigenous women is their writing strategy: they present historical, sociological and literary analyses alongside their own observations of the past and present conditions of Indigenous communities across the globe,



while always enveloping the facts and theories in personal experience and writing their own lives in—whether in the form of personal memories, autobiographical sketches, recollections of everyday events, or family connections. This is certainly a writing style with which many Indigenous women, writers and readers alike, might identify.

As a literary critic and a fiction writer, Allen dedicates a lot of textual space in *The Sacred Hoop* to analyzing Native American literature and exploring how both traditional and modern Native American literatures empower Indigenous cultures. First and foremost, Allen emphasizes the importance of the oral tradition, which she perceives as a source of literary inspiration and distinctive aesthetics:

The oral tradition, from which the contemporary poetry and fiction take their significance and authenticity, has, since contact with white people, been a major force in Indian resistance. It has kept the people conscious of their tribal identity, their spiritual traditions, and their connection to the land and her creatures. Contemporary poets and writers take their cue from the oral tradition, to which they return continuously for theme, symbol, structure, and motivating impulse as well as for the philosophic bias that animates our work. (Allen, *The Sacred Hoop* 53)

Elsewhere, Allen identifies ceremony and myth as two basic forms in Native American literature (61) and she elaborates that one of the functions of storytelling is giving people the opportunity to enter the “more obscure ritual tradition” (100). By this she means an entry into the narrative tradition that enables people to be aware of the fact that their lives are part of a larger entity which, according to Allen, is linked by “a particular psychospiritual tradition” (100). It follows from this perspective that Native American literature can actually help other Indigenous people realize that their individual experiences of marginalization, oppression, or alienation are not isolated but interconnected with the lives of those who share similar historical, political and cultural backgrounds embodied, for example, in violent and traumatic colonization. This may certainly become a source of personal empowerment for many Indigenous people as their literature helps them secure a sense of collective identity and history.

As a scholar deeply immersed in the tribal history of Laguna Pueblo, Allen presents stories that mainly stem from this cultural background. These stories include various myths and creation stories embedded in Native American spirituality, stories told to her by relatives and community members, and her own memories of growing up at Laguna. This background finds its way into passages offering Allen’s analytical observations on the character of Native American culture and its connection to tribal societies. For example, in order to support her claim about the social construction of an Indigenous view of oneself and one’s tradition, Allen includes an old Keres song with a fitting metaphor of intermin-



gling breaths as a way of explaining the Indigenous principle of “good living,” i.e. fulfilling all relationships as well as individual lives (*The Sacred Hoop* 56). Allen also interweaves her Laguna background and theoretical approaches to literary texts in her analysis of Native American literature, such as when she analyzes a Keres tale about the Yellow Woman, or Kochinnenako (in Allen’s spelling)—one of the stories typical for the communities living in the area of Laguna and Acoma Pueblos in New Mexico—and offers diverse literary interpretations: a traditional Keres, a modern feminist, and a feminist-tribal interpretation which is, according to Allen, the most appropriate and rewarding (*The Sacred Hoop* 227–40). This fusion of various overlapping perspectives is an original strategy for interpreting a Native American story from a theoretical point of view, examining critically various approaches to an Indigenous text. This strategy of using “indigenous rhetoric along with the instruments of Western literary analysis” (Pulitano 3) reveals one level of hybridity that Allen adopts in her writing: she is explicit about drawing on both Indigenous and Western epistemologies in order to make the most of her traditional upbringing at Laguna and her Western academic training: “So you see, my method is somewhat western and somewhat Indian. I draw from each, and in the end I often wind up with a reasonably accurate picture of truth” (*The Sacred Hoop* 7). Keating presents similar transgressions in Allen’s work in terms of a threshold position, as was shown above; in Keating’s view, *The Sacred Hoop* is

based on her interactions with feminist, lesbian, academic, Native, and contemporary spiritual communities. By incorporating this threshold perspective into her work, she simultaneously challenges her readers to examine the ways homophobia, sexism and racism have misshaped their perceptions of Native American cultures and expands existing definitions of Native, lesbian, gay, and female identities. (Keating 4)

While this kind of threshold writing is visible enough in *The Sacred Hoop*, it becomes a driving force in *Off the Reservation*, Allen’s rather experimental collection of essays published more than ten years later.

In this hybrid and deliberately ambivalent text which, like *The Sacred Hoop*, combines essay, mythology, history, literary analysis, poetry, and autobiographical writing, Allen positions herself at the “confluence” of various streams: in the Introduction, titled noticeably “Don’t Fence Me In,” she emphasizes the “braiding” (*Off the Reservation* 3) of her Laguna Pueblo, Maronite Lebanese, and Celtic Scottish backgrounds, foregrounding her “mixed-blood, mixed-culture status” (6); she also takes pride in her geographical and linguistic *mestizaje*, where Laguna Pueblo is at the “crossroads of cultural exchange” and a “migration cycle” (2), and Cubero, her Spanish-speaking native village (5), is responsible for her bilingualism and clearly pronounced alliance with Latina and Chicana feminist writers, particularly Gloria Anzaldúa and her concepts of *borderlands/la frontera* and *mestizaje*, both of



which Allen embraces in her own writing. Migration, which according to Allen runs “in [her] blood” (3), is not only a spatiotemporal concept for her, but also a stylistic device as she crosses languages, genres and styles: “like the half-breed, hybrid, mixed-blood woman who has composed them, these essays resemble the oral tradition of the Laguna world and the essayist tradition of the orthographic academy by turns” (7). Allen seems to use “orthographic composition” as a synonym for the Western style of writing and criticism based on textuality, on interpreting printed rather than spoken words, while having clear “laws and assumptions” (7) and “some sort of linear organization” (8). It is not, however, something she tries to defy, but rather something she integrates into her writing, arguing that while her perspective remains firmly rooted in “Native philosophical sets and subsets,” the essays included in *Off the Reservation* are also “equally a product of Western thought” (6). In a playful way, using poetic vocabulary, Allen previews the nature of her writing, as if trying to prepare the reader for the unruly, disorderly, and deliberately resistant style that follows. The essays, Allen warns, “cross borders between and within paragraphs; bust boundaries of style, image, argument, and point of view; and at the best of times careen wildly about the ship of utterance” (7). Similar descriptions abound in Allen’s text, and her writing style in the remaining essays confirms them. Allen’s point in this matter seems to be her conviction that creative work by “women of color,” or “*las desapareadas* (and *desperadas*)” as she calls this group (164, original emphasis), offers a distinctive aesthetic experience because it originates in “multiculturality, multilinguality, and dizzying class-crossing from the fields to salons, from the factories to the academy, or from galleries and the groves of academe to the neighborhoods and reservations” (166). Thus Allen employs a metaphor of the (creative) void out of which “women of color,” too invisible and marginal for the mainstream criticism of the 1970s and 1980s, write: “we, writers on the interface/frontier between modern and timeless, are the void, the place of endless possibility. It is that site—which is a dynamic flux rather than a fixed point—that is identified as *Iyani*” (*Off the Reservation* 11), a Keres term for sacred (10). Elvira Pulitano, drawing on the Anishinaabe writer and scholar Kim Blaeser, contends that the *mélange* of storytelling and theory—a hallmark of Indigenous women’s personal non-fiction as I would argue—can “teach critics new ways of seeing how the literary and the academic are intertwined with the sacred and the daily while redefining the boundaries of Eurocentric theory itself” (20). The “dynamic flux” that Allen refers to seems to fit in with what Keating identifies as the “transformational possibilities” in her analysis of Allen’s, Anzaldúa’s, and Lorde’s works (5); this is a quality that I find also pertinent to the narrative styles adopted by Maracle and Huggins in their personal non-fiction.

In *Off the Reservation*, Allen reiterates her earlier concerns about Indigenous resistance to Western-based theory, founded, in Allen’s view, on the principles of “patriarchal positivism” (172). Her harsh critique of Western intellectual tradi-



tion, dismissing its Eurocentrism and marginalization of everything that escapes its aesthetic paradigm, is most vocal in the essays dedicated to literary criticism in which Allen alludes to a number of texts by Native American as well as mainstream American writers, ranging from Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman to Thomas Wolfe and Ernest Hemingway. Even though some of her literary critical investigations offer an illuminating and original comparative analyses, most notably in the essay “Who’s Telling This Story, Anyway?” which juxtaposes Hemingway’s “Nick Adams” stories with N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* as “mov[ing] in their inner conversation” (*Off the Reservation* 161), it is clear that Allen comes to advocate a new kind of criticism, a “system that is founded on the principle of inclusion rather than on that of exclusion, on actual human society and relationships rather than on textual relations alone, a system that is soundly based on aesthetics that pertain to the literatures we wish to examine” (171). This system of critical thought will allow scholars to interpret more accurately the texts by “women of color” who write “from a profound state of gnosis and personal experience” (172) and who are “necessarily concerned with human relationships: family, community, and that which transcends and underlies human meaning systems” (177). In other words, Allen desires to witness the emergence of criticism that can be juxtaposed with Western ways of theorizing, criticism that would acknowledge other, “non-Western modes of consciousness” (167). Allen uses Henry Louis Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey* (168) as an example offering a complex system of critical vocabulary and theoretical concepts based on an Afrocentric system of thought. Where Gates proposes interpreting African American texts within the framework of Ifa, the sacred narratives of the Yoruba, and through the trickster Esu, Allen suggests interpreting Native American texts through the trickster Coyote and within the Keres concept of the sacred, Ianyi, where the primary texts are “the myths and ceremonies that compress and convey all the meaning systems a particular cultural consciousness holds” (168). The primacy of ceremonies, rituals, and oral tradition as a foundational interpretive framework was already developed in *The Sacred Hoop*, so *Off the Reservation* serves as an extension of Allen’s theoretical thinking.

Compared to *The Sacred Hoop*, Allen’s writing in *Off the Reservation* is certainly more open towards a dialogue with the mainstream discourse of American academia (albeit often taking the form of a harsh critique), mediating different perspectives and also including voices of other “women of color,” particularly those of Chicana, African American, and Asian American backgrounds. On the other hand, many themes work as an elaboration of the arguments presented in *The Sacred Hoop*. For example, the first section in *Off the Reservation*, titled “Haggles/Gynosophies,” elaborates on Allen’s gynocentric vision from *The Sacred Hoop*,<sup>19</sup>

19 This is not surprising since the essays included in this section were written in the period spanning from the 1960s to the 1980s, so the intellectual milieu informing them coincides with that behind *The Sacred Hoop*.



the core of which is recovering the feminine in Indigenous tradition. Nevertheless, Allen invents new terms to describe her “method of inquiry,” such as *gynosophy*, defined as feminine wisdom incorporating ecological, spiritual, and political perspectives (*Off the Reservation* 9). Another example is Allen’s stronger emphasis on ecological and ecofeminist concerns in *Off the Reservation*, which is perhaps not surprising in the context of her own Laguna Pueblo culture’s affinity with the land as well as matrilineality. Even some critics of the theoretical and ideological positions Allen presents in *The Sacred Hoop* admit that the ecofeminist aspect helps *Off the Reservation* “move beyond the hypersentimentalism and nostalgia that characterize the gynocentric perspective of *The Sacred Hoop*” (Pulitano 46).

As in the earlier collection of personal non-fiction, in *Off the Reservation* Allen describes the ways in which theorizing often takes a different course in Indigenous discourse: “critical theory in Indian Country consists of the often subtle junctures of story cycles” (11). The genre of non-fiction, Allen explains, is “simply another way of telling a story”: it has “a narrative line, a plot if you will, and that line must unfold in accordance with certain familiar patterns, just as any story must” (10). The “plot” is often provided by Allen’s autobiographical narrative, which often complements the strategy of telling theory through stories. It is perhaps not a coincidence that in the book’s composition, the first section, featuring essays on the feminine-centered Indigenous tradition, and the second section, dedicated to exploring both American and Native American literature, are followed by five essays in the section titled “*La Frontera*/na[rra]tivities” which consist mainly of Allen’s personal narrative, family stories, and life stories of her ancestors—in other words “the autobiography of a confluence,” as the title of the first essay in this section foreshadows. “Confluence” becomes a convenient metaphor for this concluding section: besides connoting water and hence the fluidity of Allen’s thematic and stylistic migration, it also refers to the cultural confluence of the American Southwest with its Indigenous, Spanish/Mexican, and Anglo-American palimpsest-like history, as well as to the confluence of family stories and Allen’s personal journey, including her academic career. The essays also transgress the focus of *The Sacred Hoop* in the sense that they explore Allen’s paternal ancestors. For example, the essay “Yo Cruzo Siete Mares” adds another layer to Allen’s multicultural background by honoring her father’s Lebanese background and Arab influence on American culture in general, while also problematizing the narrative layers when a large portion of the essay consists of her father’s re-telling of the life journey of his grandfather, Allen’s paternal great-grandfather, from Lebanon to America in the 1880s, his consequent migratory life in the Southwest, and short episodes and anecdotes from his life that are passed on in the family line. It soon becomes clear that this section is a transcription of a recorded interview between Allen and her father, as Allen’s occasional questions and prompts remain included, as well as her short explanatory comments. This narrative frame of a recorded interview is



even more complicated by featuring Allen's episodic, self-reflective commentary in bold italics. This layer is then framed by Allen's other, essayistic voice which begins and ends the text. This narrative layering may be compared to the narrative complexity of the dual voice implemented in Rita and Jackie Huggins' *Auntie Rita*, as is explained later.

These examples attest to the experimental style in *Off the Reservation* and Allen's "fluid writing," which Pulitano describes as "continuously shifting from the analytic to the poetic and to the personal" (49). At first, Pulitano attempts to relate Allen's style to the French *écriture féminine*, paralleling Hélène Cixous' manifesto in "The Laugh of the Medusa" daring women to "write through their bodies" and Allen's call for "writing 'feminine(s)'" which would transcend the Cartesian separation of body and soul (Pulitano 48). But then, aware of Allen's skepticism of European theories, Pulitano allies Allen's writing style with that of her fellow writer, activist, and scholar, Gloria Anzaldúa, arguing that the hybrid writing in *Off the Reservation* shares many features with the writing of other "women of color." Again, in this assessment Pulitano draws on Keating's comprehensive study of Allen's work which takes into account not only Allen's multicultural background but also her lesbianism as distinctive marks of her textual experimentation. Keating herself perceives Allen's style as an example of *mestizaje escritura* (122), modifying the famous French concept to fit the culture-specific needs of ethnic minority women writers who explore oppositional forms of language and style to undermine not only the phallogentric but also the colonizing system of distributing knowledge and power. Pulitano argues that by "weaving in and out of the theoretical, the mythic, and the personal, Allen envisions a *text* that, while resembling contemporary poststructuralist expressive modes, perfectly conveys the web-like complexity of oral narratives" (Pulitano 50, original emphasis). Indeed, turning the personal and family stories, poetry, and myths embedded in Indigenous oral tradition into an integral part of her theoretical and literary-critical writing creates a powerful, although not always easily reconcilable style which allows Allen to experiment with and test the limits of Western theoretical frameworks.





## Lee Maracle | Oratory

If we enjoy a position of privilege, we may engage ourselves in personalizing the journey of the story and resent the challenge to place. In seeing ourselves through story, we become part of the journey.

Lee Maracle, "Oratory on Oratory" (59)

In her interview with Hartmut Lutz, Lee Maracle makes an observation on the character and importance of writing for Indigenous women in North America, underscoring the necessity of mutual support and interconnectedness:

When we write, I believe that what we are doing is reclaiming our house, our lineage house, our selves ... That's how we see each other's work, and we want to read each other, and see each other, and to experience each other, because the more pathways we trace to the center of the circle, the more rich our circle is going to be, the fuller, the rounder, the more magnificent. ("Lee Maracle" 176)

Reclaiming Indigenous women's selves is conceived by Maracle, as it is by Allen and Huggins, as a process that can be informed and shaped by writing because writing empowers Indigenous women's voices. Unlike the Western notion of writing as a solitary venture taken up by an individual author, Maracle puts emphasis on the wider community of Indigenous women writers and supporters whose network enhances a sense of collective identity but also foregrounds a diversity of narratives so that the "circle" of Indigenous women's experience, reminiscent of Allen's concept of the sacred hoop, can reach, in Maracle's words, richness, fullness, roundness, and magnificence.

Maracle is clearly aware of her privilege in being a published author and a leader in her community, thus encouraging other Indigenous women to follow her example. In the preface to *I Am Woman* she writes about her "original intention ... to empower Native women to take to heart their own personal struggles for Native feminist being" (vii). Although Maracle never denies the liberating impact that the writing process has had on her, she frequently points out that her task as a writer is to empower her people, especially Native women, rather than herself. The first chapter of *I Am Woman*, entitled "I Want to Write", describes her efforts to collect stories from other Native people in order to have Indigenous voices recognized: she scribbles them down on paper napkins and paper bags in restaurants, buses, and meetings (3). This method of gathering her material acknowledges the fact that her text is, on the one hand, conceived as incorporating her own life experience and therefore bearing strong autobiographical elements, but, on the other hand, it is also a compilation of other people's stories that Maracle decides to present as representative images of Native North American women. Where her



own experiences end and the stories collected from others begin is not, however, clear. But it may be argued that the blurring of many kinds of boundaries is one of the deliberate strategies Maracle employs in her text.

Writing is a ceremony which adds a spiritual element to Maracle's relationship to words on a page (Maracle, "An Infinite Number" 177). This is something that refers back to Paula Gunn Allen, who advocates a return to tribal-centered writing and criticism with strong spiritual connections, drawing on oral traditions (*The Sacred Hoop* 53, 55, 61), and forward to Jackie Huggins, who sees writing as an "expression [that] flows from the very core of the spirit" (*Sister Girl* ix-x). At the same time, however, Maracle makes it clear that she views writing as a privileged, almost luxurious activity. Like many other Indigenous women writers, she faces the dilemma of being torn between the need to write and speak for themselves and their communities and the perception of writing as a self-indulgent exercise in which the others, being busy with everyday survival, simply cannot afford to get involved. In the passages reflecting on the meanings of the writing process, Maracle reveals a sense of guilt at having been privileged in this way, recounting a conversation with a female friend: "You have your writing to keep you alive. What have ordinary Native women got?" my friend asked" (*I Am Woman* 142). Maracle thus exposes a potential risk that Indigenous women, who are published authors and whose work is perhaps included in higher education curricula, must cope with: although they write from the position of a marginalized author, they might also be perceived as having privileges (education, prestigious jobs, the luxury of writing) that many Indigenous people still lack.

Like Allen in *The Sacred Hoop* and *Off the Reservation* and Huggins in *Sister Girl* and *Auntie Rita*, in *I Am Woman* Maracle uses a strategy of imparting theory through story. Apart from autobiographical sketches, she occasionally inserts fictional stories and poems which are based on her own and/or her female friends' experiences. Like Allen and Huggins, Maracle gathers her inspiration from the "kitchen table stories," as she calls the life stories of Indigenous women who have shared their wisdom, experience and ideas with her:

From around the kitchen tables of the people I have known have come stories of the heart. Great trust and love were required to enable the bearer to part with the tale. If I wrote for a lifetime I could never re-tell all the stories that people have given me. I am not sure what to do with that, except that I shall try to grasp the essence of our lives and to help weave a new story. (*I Am Woman* 6)

Among the three authors, Maracle stands out as a writer who deliberately refuses to include any secondary historical or archival materials or theoretical sources in *I Am Woman*. This seems to be a consciously implemented strategy, as she confirms in her explanatory piece "Oratory: Coming to Theory," where she admits



she is aware that conventional academic discourse would probably condemn her writing style for lack of evidence, citations, and support for her claims (10). But Maracle explains that Native readers would probably despise the “inherent hierarchy retained by academics, politicians, law makers, and law keepers” as they “use language no one understands” (“Oratory: Coming to Theory” 10). In spite of its absence of academic jargon and secondary sources, Maracle insists that *I Am Woman* is a theoretical text:

It [the book] was arrived at through my meticulous ploughing of the fields of hundreds of books on the European colonial process—capitalist theory, decolonization, law, and philosophy—from the perspective of Indigenous law, philosophy, and culture. My understanding of the process of colonization and decolonization of Native women is rooted in my theoretical perception of social reality, and it is tested in the crucible of human social practice (“Oratory: Coming to Theory” 10).

To be “empowering and transformative,” Indigenous women’s writing must be, in Maracle’s view, “guided by theory presented through story” (“Oratory: Coming to Theory” 10). The stories and poetry, told in the “language of people” and interwoven in the fabric of her non-fiction, “bring the reality home and allow the victims to devictimize their consciousness” (“Oratory: Coming to Theory” 10). Thus inscribing her own and other Indigenous women’s lives as a foundation for more general sociological observations takes priority over complying with conventional Western research methodologies. This also resonates in *I Am Woman* where Maracle asserts that “their [Native women’s] lives, likewise, are a composite of the reality of our history and present existence. Their feelings about life are my own. Their teachings are ancient and as closely accounted for as I can remember” (*I Am Woman* 6). Maracle’s strategic style of using story and poetry to present theory allows her to “move from the empowerment of [herself] to the empowerment of every person who reads the book [*I Am Woman*]” (“Oratory: Coming to Theory” 11), as well as to defy the image of a privileged Indigenous author who is out of touch with the everyday reality of her community. It also enhances her concept of oratory, which is outlined in the following paragraphs.

Maracle argues that while for European scholars “theory is separate from story”, for Indigenous people it is story, rather than theory, that is “the most persuasive and sensible way to present the accumulated thoughts and values of a people” (“Oratory: Coming to Theory” 7). In her view, Western theory is dehumanized because it erases people, passion, and the human spirit from theoretical discussions. In addition, it often relies on too much jargon and inaccessible language, which has the effect of excluding certain groups of people and retaining hierarchy: “By presenting theory in a language no one can grasp, the speaker (or writer) retains authority over thought” (“Oratory: Coming to Theory” 9). Maracle



refuses to perpetuate the distinction between orality and literacy, a dichotomy often used to maintain the illusion of the superiority of European colonizers over the “primitive” natives (Fee and Gunew 206). In an interview with Margery Fee and Sneja Gunew, Maracle explains that for her people, words are sacred and language must be transformed “to suit the Salish sensibility” because that is the only way to counteract the predominant Western system of knowledge (qtd. in Fee and Gunew 211). This is Maracle’s way of “talking back” to this system and reclaiming the Indigenous knowledge system which, as a result of colonization, was “expropriated and distorted, bowdlerized, and then sold back to us [Indigenous people] in transformed form” (qtd. in Fee and Gunew 211).

Maracle uses the concept of oratory to explain her idea of telling theory through story in Indigenous critical discourse. As mentioned before, she contrasts Western theory (which in her view is separate from the story, incomprehensible, dehumanized, devoid of emotion, perpetuating hierarchy, and sustaining patriarchy) and Indigenous oratory which she perceives as a “place of prayer,” an attempt to “persuade” which is “unambiguous in its meaning” and represents “accumulated knowledge, cultural values, the vision of entire people or peoples” (“Oratory: Coming to Theory” 7). The task of Indigenous orators is to “humanize theory by fusing humanity’s need for common direction—theory—with story,” and they have an awareness that “words governing human direction are sacred, prayerful presentations of the human experience, its direction, and the need for transformation in the human condition that arises from time to time” (“Oratory: Coming to Theory” 9). They do this precisely through stories which become “a means of intervention preventing humans from re-traversing dangerous and dehumanizing paths” (“Oratory on Oratory” 60). So, because Maracle’s concept of oratory puts people at its center—something that Indigenous scholars suspect is denied by the Eurocentric “objectivity” of research and theory production—telling theory through stories and personal grounding works toward problematizing scholarly rigor and theoretical credibility, as well as “redefining scholarship as a process that begins with the self” (Sium and Ritskes iv).

In her paratextual article titled “Oratory on Oratory” published in 2007, which is a revision and development of the earlier concept of oratory from the early 1990s, Maracle elaborates on her theory of “telling theory,” the process of study, and passing on knowledge from the Salish perspective. Oratory, in Maracle’s view, is the main object of study, a way to see; as opposed to Western theory, it is also relational, it is “a human story in relation to the story of other beings, and so it is fiction, for it takes place in, while engaging, the imagination of ourselves in relation to all beings. Oratory informs the stories of our nations in relation to beings of all life” (“Oratory on Oratory” 64). As such, Maracle explains, oratory is responsive and transformative, leading to “continuous growth” (“Oratory on Oratory” 60). Maracle is also very precise about the role orators perform in creat-



ing and maintaining Indigenous critical discourse. She sees them as “mythmakers, storiers, [who] are present to bear witness, see, and understand the subject under study, and serve as adjuncts to the process, so that they may story up each round of discourse in a way that governs the new conduct required to grow from the new knowledge discovered” (“Oratory on Oratory” 57). Indeed, in Maracle’s vision the orators “story up” the study/theory in order to pass on the accumulated knowledge. It is the method that she herself perceives as central to her role of a writer who mediates knowledge. Thus she sees herself as a “mythmaker” and a “storier,” as she explains in an interview: “... my whole orientation is to take a story that’s a traditional story or a ceremony that’s a traditional ceremony, ... taking that and creating story from it, like a mythmaker, create new myths out of the old myths” (qtd. in Fee and Gunew 218). In her discussion in *The Sacred Hoop* of the nature and use of myth and vision in Native American literature, Paula Gunn Allen similarly relates myths and stories, perceiving them as intrinsically interconnected, when she argues that Indigenous mythology functions as a reflection of tribal identity as it “guides our attention toward a view of ourselves, a possibility, that we might not otherwise encounter” (*The Sacred Hoop* 116). Where Maracle presents the concept of oratory, Allen sees the concept of vision and/or ritual as playing a central part in Indigenous tribal worldview. Both oratory and ritual are characterized by their transformative power as well as their collective/communal and holistic nature. Thus Allen defines ritual as transformative in terms of anthropological liminality, as “a procedure whose purpose is to transform someone or something from one condition or state to another” (*The Sacred Hoop* 80). In addition, “storied” myths become a way to share experience and to become whole, as Allen explains:

For in relating our separate experiences to one another, in weaving them into coherence and therefore significance, a sense of wholeness arises, a totality which, by virtue of our active participation, constitutes direct and immediate comprehension of ourselves and the universe of which we are integral parts. (*The Sacred Hoop* 117)

Similarly, Maracle understands oratory, or Salish study, as a collective process which “requires many different sets of eyes, many different minds whose histories are known yet different, whose journeys have led them along adjunct but disparate paths, whose understandings and whose emotions/spirit/mind/body are determined to be travelling in the direction of relationship and good will” (“Oratory on Oratory” 65). As was shown above, Maracle refers to this collectiveness in *I Am Woman*, for example, when she comments on her deliberate strategy of collecting life experiences from her (mostly) female friends and “storying them up” in order to illustrate her analysis of the current conditions of Native women in CanAmerica. Another strategy she uses in *I Am Woman* is presenting facts from “[her] own emotional,



spiritual and visual perspective” (5), which corresponds to her commentary on the character of oratory, in which everything is interconnected: “The desire is to find the connections, to create the webs between the disparate points of view, images, and stories, and to ensure that the end of the journey is the spiralling down to a moment of peace and recognition” (“Oratory on Oratory” 65). Reading Maracle’s personal non-fiction, such as *I Am Woman*, alongside her commentary in “Oratory: Coming to Theory” and “Oratory on Oratory” reveals that what she is describing, consistently and repeatedly, is a complex system of Indigenous education, of learning, collecting, and passing on knowledge, which in many ways departs from how Western education is perceived and knowledge imparted.

For instance, Maracle integrates oratory in the chapter “Black Robes” in *I Am Woman*. The chapter begins as a semi-fictional story of a young Indian girl listening to an exchange between her father and “Black Robe”—a collective term referring to missionaries in Canada who frequently insisted on and pressured Indigenous communities to send their children to mission or residential schools where they would receive a “Western” education. By replaying the conversation between two characters representing two very different cultures, presenting the arguments put forward by Black Robe and then the counter-arguments of the girl’s father, Maracle basically explains the complex educational system of her community in its entirety. What begins as a simple story, at the end of which Maracle herself enters as the first-person narrator, revealing that the girl from the story is now an old woman who herself had to later in her life separate from her children sent to a mission school (65), is in fact a theoretical treatise on the differences between Salish and Western education and the tragic impact of the separations on the Indigenous community as a whole. While Maracle’s voice slips into an educational tone providing commentary on European colonialism, she also integrates autobiographical fragments. For example, she relates how she herself almost suffered the same fate of children who were being sent to a convent in the 1950s but in the end she was sent to the “European” school with an “ordinary white woman” as a teacher (66). This decision, on the one hand, confronted her with the non-Indigenous world, but it also allowed her to spend her childhood among her family. In addition, the story from the beginning of the chapter and the autobiographical account are complemented by two short poems at the end, one commemorating the history of diseases which brought the devastation of Indigenous communities (68), the other dedicated to the power of Indigenous grandmothers who, in spite of being silenced, pass the tribal knowledge on to the next generation (69). In this way, Maracle “stories up” the theory by using semi-fictional, autobiographical, and poetic elements, creating an oratory in which the Indigenous method of mediating knowledge is given preference.

Thus in her personal non-fiction as well as her theoretical commentary on oratory, Maracle has demonstrated that the stories she presents in her personal non-



fiction are “more than a lesson, a teaching, or even an historical account. Their conscious and knowing agreement directly extends to our [Indigenous peoples’] philosophies, thoughts and actions” (Watts 26). In other words, stories and storytelling function not only as personal narratives, but also as political tools for expressing alternative methodologies. In their introduction to a special issue of *Decolonization: Education, Indigeneity & Society*, Sium and Ritskes argue that Indigenous storytelling plays a role of “resurgence and insurgence,” as it disrupts “Eurocentric, colonial norms of ‘objectivity’ and knowledge” (i). It works as a strong resistance to colonial power because telling stories that are rooted in Indigenous epistemologies recovers knowledges and methodologies that were, supposedly, erased by colonialism. Sium and Ritskes further explain that “in this way, stories as Indigenous knowledge work to not only regenerate Indigenous traditions and knowledge production, but also work against the colonial epistemic frame to subvert and recreate possibilities and spaces for resistance” (iii). In this interpretation, Indigenous storytelling is an active agent in knowledge production, what Sium and Ritskes call a “theory-in-action” (ii). This notion supports what Emma LaRocque, the Cree Métis scholar from Canada, perceives as characteristic of Indigenous cultural fluidity and continuity: “Whatever it is that we are telling, whether it is *atowkehwin* (myths and legends) or *achimoowin* (factual or non-fictional type of ‘stories’) or *ehmamtowaytameb* (thinking, reflecting, analyzing), and however we do it, orally or in writing, as long as we are doing it, we are expressing a live and dynamic culture” (LaRocque, “Reflections” 162). Writers such as Paula Gunn Allen and Lee Maracle do all of that in their personal non-fiction but, in addition, they combine all these kinds of stories in one textual oratory.

## Jackie Huggins | Dual Voice

*During the book’s writing, we have had many arguments (fighting with our tongues, as Rita calls it) and some of this has not been resolved, continues and remains evident in these pages.*

Rita and Jackie Huggins, *Auntie Rita* (3, original emphasis)

The presentation of theory through story and personal experience winds through *Sister Girl* just as it does through Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop* and *Off the Reservation*, and through Maracle’s *I Am Woman*. *Sister Girl* interweaves Huggins’ own experiences as an Indigenous woman in Australian academia (for example when presenting her observations from a mainstream feminist conference); her own life story of growing up in urban (predominantly racist) Brisbane in the 1950s; and the life story of her mother Rita, adding an intergenerational aspect. All this personal input is juxtaposed with her commentary as a trained historian and scholar.



In her research on Aboriginal women domestics in the 1920s and 1930s, which includes interviews with six Aboriginal women, Rita Huggins—Jackie’s mother—is one of the interviewees. What in Western methodology would perhaps seem biased is in Indigenous discourse an asset, a source of credibility. Huggins’ personal memories, life experience, and family background directly inform her research methods. Although this personalized supporting “evidence” is important for Huggins’ argument, it is not given preference over the archival materials which complement the mainstream historical discourse. This shows in the passages in which Huggins juxtaposes Aboriginal women’s first-person accounts with quotes from the Aboriginal Acts or studies by mainstream historians and feminist scholars (*Sister Girl* 6–20, 23). In the essay “Writing My Mother’s Life,” included in *Sister Girl* and written shortly after Jackie Huggins finished writing her mother’s biography in *Auntie Rita* in 1994, Huggins uses her mother’s biography to reflect on the difficulties of transcribing one’s life, especially if the life in question is that of a family member. She also stresses the importance of oral tradition when written evidence of the colonial oppression of Aboriginal people is scarce. In addition, Rita Huggins’ life account serves Jackie Huggins in her exploration of the history and everyday activities of the Cherbourg mission school where Rita was placed after having been separated from her family (*Sister Girl* 41–44). In this specific essay in *Sister Girl*, Jackie Huggins’ mother’s life story functions as an illustrative example of one Indigenous woman’s experience in a particular period of Australian history and as a source of her further theoretical observations on the position of Aboriginal women in this period, on the construction of female Indigeneity, on the common stereotypes at that time and mainly on the various mechanisms of racial oppression.

Apart from personalizing her writing in *Sister Girl*, Huggins also reflects on the various meanings of writing in her life, similarly to Allen and Maracle. In the opening pages, she celebrates her chance to write as a gift: “Writing is my greatest joy. It frees the mind, heart and soul in a manner that only a writer can understand. For me, it is a process in which expression flows from the very core of the spirit and enables others to take a glimpse inside the writer’s world view” (ix-x). Like so many other Indigenous women writers, Huggins relates artistic creativity, spirituality, and liberation, reiterating this connection later in her book when she notes: “Thinking back, I believe writing was so important to me because it was a liberating experience. Issues of race, class and gender began to appear much clearer” (*Sister Girl* 108). It seems that for Huggins, writing was enlightening; it helped activate her political awareness and elaborate her ideas and visions, as if the process of writing holds the power to illuminate the dark corners of one’s personal and collective history.

Nevertheless, Huggins’ writing is not restricted to transcribing her family’s lives or to reflecting on a writer’s role in this process. Equally important is her





task to write down Aboriginal women's history in Australia from an Indigenous perspective and to voice her political activism (*Sister Girl* 57). The key concept that permeates Huggins' discourse on the nature of the writing process is "reclaiming": Huggins hopes that writing down her mother's biography—that is "reclaiming her stories and putting them in print"—will "enhance Aboriginal history and, also, the writing being done by Aboriginal women" (*Sister Girl* 97). In the introduction to *Auntie Rita*, Huggins also claims that "the writing of this book was an attempt to reclaim the history of our people" (Huggins and Huggins 4). Reclaiming and empowerment, in this case, become synonymous.

When Allen and Maracle theorize writing as empowerment, it is almost always perceived as a deeply personal issue and Huggins confirms this. In her commentary on the writing process, she returns time and again to her ambivalence about her commitment to writing an "objective" study which is a result of her scholarly research and her training as a historian on the one hand, and her obligation to writing a personal story which stems from her experience as an Indigenous woman on the other. This dilemma is used productively in the sense that it becomes the driving force behind the narrative frame in *Auntie Rita*, posing important questions about negotiating authorship between two narrative voices as well as between subjective and objective narrative style: how does one write about "something so personal while striving for some objectivity at the same time?" asks Huggins in the paratextual essay "Writing My Mother's Life" about writing *Auntie Rita* (*Sister Girl* 46). Her answer suggests a direction which makes it possible for a writer to engage in both personal and scholarly writing. On the one hand, Huggins claims that because she is her mother's daughter, having a close relationship with her and clearly admiring her as her role model, she can write her life story with a sense of intimacy and trust as no one else would have been able to do. The implication is that the nature of their relationship makes it easier for her to approach her mother's life as a biographer and respond to it adequately. The closeness is openly declared and forms an indispensable part of the narrative. On the other hand, as a professional writer and scholar, Huggins must sometimes distance herself from the object of her study and keep the narrative voices separate. In a comment expressing her awareness of how precarious the position she finds herself in is, Huggins says: "[Y]es, it is her [her mother's] story, not mine. I have to constantly remind myself of that fact. How much is 'I' the writer?" (*Sister Girl* 47).

The narrative organization of *Auntie Rita* demonstrates that Huggins managed to turn this ambivalence and potential weakness into strength by writing herself *in* her mother's biography, which makes her position in the writing process transparent—a strategy that clearly alludes to and undermines the common methods of writing in the earlier Indigenous life writing narratives in which the non-Indigenous biographers and editors more often than not wrote themselves *out* of the final text, obscuring their editorial interventions. This transparency in



*Auntie Rita* is embedded in the narrative structure, in which Huggins' double-edged and ambiguous role situates her both as a historian and commentator explaining and contextualizing events of Rita Huggins' life, and simultaneously as a daughter-biographer who by writing about Rita's life returns her mother's "love, strength, wisdom and inspiration" (*Sister Girl* 47). In another essay in *Sister Girl*, Huggins describes this complex negotiation of the narrative voices as having been shaped by "fighting with our tongues" (95). Huggins elaborates on the concept of the "mothering tongue," alluding to a dualistic principle of nurturing, sustaining, and affirming a sense of enduring female Aboriginality on the one hand but also leaving space for expressing differences and competing strategies. The mothering tongue may be opposed by the "daughtering tongue" but, as Huggins explains, in the end the "mothering/daughtering tongue allows a fluent and honest appraisal to be *mutually* articulated" (*Sister Girl* 96, original emphasis).

It is illuminating to compare different subjectivities that Jackie and Rita Huggins inscribe in their narrative sections, revealing a creative tension stemming from the close collaboration. In her article on the dialogic form in *Auntie Rita*, Rocío G. Davis argues that the text discloses "dialogic selves," which she defines as "dual voices with separate perspectives, within the context of Bakhtinian notions of double-voiced, continuing deconstruction of narrative structure and tradition executed on the level of narration" (Davis 279–280). Indeed, Rita's narrative authority is complemented by an equally authoritative Jackie's voice which sometimes supports but sometimes subtly challenges Rita's perspectives and opinions. This intersubjectivity, described by Jackson as "a site of conflicting wills and intentions," reveals the dynamic of the relationship between the two autonomous subjects (qtd. in Davis 278). This relationship is then placed in the center of the narrative structure. It could be argued that the dialogic structure embedded in *Auntie Rita* is a more visible manifestation of the dialogic nature of the narratives examined in this section; in the sense of speaking across to someone and integrating other voices, dialogic features are certainly present in the personal non-fiction by Paula Gunn Allen and Lee Maracle who engage critically in a dialogue with mainstream feminism but also incorporate perspectives of other Indigenous women.

The following analysis examines in detail the ways in which the two Indigenous women employ their narrative authority in *Auntie Rita*, establishing the "dual voice" as an example of innovative strategy which represents yet another version of telling theory through story. Rita Huggins emphasizes her agency and narrative authority in the foreword: "This book tells the story of my life. These are my own recollections. I speak only for myself and not how others would expect me to speak" (Huggins and Huggins 1). Aware of the extent to which Aboriginal people have been misrepresented in the mainstream discourse, Rita Huggins makes a claim to her own voice as a subject, not as an object of another's gaze, as had so



often been the case. In her narrative, she asserts control over her memories and the textual performance. However, the foreword introduces Jackie Huggins' voice which makes the following comment on her role during the writing of the book and thus problematizes the whole process:

*After getting many of Rita's memories on tape, I began, through naivety, to translate my mother's voice, trying to do it justice while knowing that this book would have a predominantly white audience. This was my first cardinal sin. ... Although Rita speaks a standard English, her voice often got lost amid my own as I attempted to 'protect' her from non-Aboriginal critics. (Huggins and Huggins 3, original emphasis)*

This suggests Jackie Huggins' complex position in the collaborative process. Similarly to the earlier white ethnographers, anthropologists and editors, she first assumed the role of the "translator" of an oral account that she had taped and then transcribed, taking control over the narrative. However, in the end Jackie admits that she resisted this impulse to "translate"—i.e. adjust her mother's voice—in order to preserve her Aboriginal way of speaking. What complicates Jackie's approach is that in contrast to her mother, Jackie makes it clear that she anticipates a "predominantly white audience" (Huggins and Huggins 3), while Rita contends that the story of her life is told primarily for Aboriginal people—for her family, children and grandchildren—with the aim of passing on Rita's memories to a younger generation. This discrepancy between Rita's and Jackie's expectations of the readership makes Jackie want to "protect" her mother from non-Aboriginal critics when transcribing her mother's voice speaking the "Aboriginal way" (3). Jackie Huggins has to negotiate the seeming paradox of keeping her mother's voice intact, transcribing it in an appropriate and respectful way and yet, at the same time, inviting the non-Indigenous readers to connect with the text. In addition, she decides to inscribe her own self in the final text. In the end, Jackie does exercise certain power over the voice of her "subject," as she "organizes, prompts, supports, contradicts, corrects, explains, and generally constructs that narrative" (Davis 281). In other words, while Rita is a central subject of the narrative, Jackie becomes its dominant framing voice.

The complexity of the dual voice in *Auntie Rita* is further enhanced by a split in Jackie's own voice, a commentary that is textually marked off by italics throughout the entire text. On the one hand, Jackie Huggins' remarks reflect the perspective of a university-educated historian and a political activist in Aboriginal causes, and this voice provides, in a rather detached way, explanatory notes to Rita's memories of her life, embedding them in the wider socio-historical context. For example, Rita's account of her community's removal to the reserve, a very personal and moving account, is complemented by Jackie's voice adding historical background to the system of surveillance of Aboriginal people in Australia in the first half of



the twentieth century. Jackie even includes archival documentation of the period legislation, such as the Aborigines Protection Acts (e.g. 14, 33). In these passages, Jackie steps into her role as an Aboriginal historian taking a clear political stand, denouncing contemporary racism in Australia, and actively contributing to Australian counter-history. This strategy of integrating the wider context of Indigenous history into one's life story has been adopted by a number of Aboriginal life writers, including Doris Pilkington and Anna Lee Walters, whose writings are examined in the second section.

In contrast to what could be called Jackie's "professional" voice, in the passages in which she directly addresses her mother, Jackie's voice changes to become much less formal, deprived of its academic and explanatory tone. This voice is much more personal, soothing, and supportive, occasionally stepping out of Standard English to incorporate Aboriginal English. It is these passages that expose the self-reflective and introspective character of Jackie's commentary. The intimacy between the two women manifests in particular when Rita recollects painful memories from her life, such as when she had to give up her second child as a young single mother working as a domestic servant. Here Jackie responds with compassion and sympathy, addressing her mother directly and even introducing her own personal narrative. In this way she weaves the two life stories together by emphasizing their mutual Aboriginality and the mother-daughter bond. Jackie confides:

*I can just imagine what it must have been like in your time to be a single mother, not once but twice. ... You were hardly more than a child yourself when you ran away from your family to a strange town. ... For me, being a single mother has meant independence, freedom, choice, acclaim, unreserved happiness, status and power over my own life, among other things. All of which you were never afforded. ... All I want to say to you is that it's okay. All your children and grandchildren love you, understand you and forgive you because being a single, Black and penniless pregnant woman in your time was your greatest test and punishment. (Huggins and Huggins 48, original emphasis)*

This "intimate letter to Rita," as Brennan calls this passage (158), combines a very personal conversation with a public statement which appeals to dominant classes in Australia, reminding them of very different life experiences, in particular those of a "single, Black and penniless pregnant woman."

Jackie Huggins' narrative agency reveals yet on another level—in the moments when Rita, as the subject and narrator of her story, chooses not to tell certain details of her life story, details that still carry painful significance and shame for her. Obviously, the silences and gaps can be interpreted as a way of dealing with repressed memories and the reading of Indigenous life stories in the light of trauma studies posits them as testimonies that bear witness to the colonization



trauma. But a different contextualization of Indigenous life writing within the history of collaboration between Indigenous informants and white editors demonstrates that self-censure and deliberate withholding of information from the outsiders, especially information concerning sacred and religious knowledge, the geographical locations of certain sites or groups of people, or the identification of white fathers, has been a powerful means of resistance (Muecke 128; Jacklin 35). Having suffered from long-term exposure to white authorities and anthropologists' pressure to speak, Aboriginal people have developed what Stephen Muecke calls a "discursive strategy [in] the form of *non-disclosure*" (128, original emphasis). The significant difference between the collaboration with non-Indigenous editors and the collaboration with the Indigenous community and family members in the more recent Indigenous life writing is that Indigenous writers and editors who shape the final text can usually recognize and respect their elders' silences.<sup>20</sup>

*Auntie Rita* offers an intricate treatment of sharing or withholding information: at times, Jackie chooses *not* to respect her mother's silences, preferring instead to provide the correct historical context for Rita's painful memories. At other times, however, she chooses to remain complicit in her mother's self-censure, such as when it comes to revealing more information about the fathers of Rita's two eldest daughters. Those of Rita's silences that are explained by Jackie's interventions, concern, above all, the regular beatings and lockups as a form of punishment for "misbehavior" in the mission school, which resulted in Rita's internalized self-hatred and self-blame. In spite of the obviously close relationship between the two women, it is also possible to interpret Rita's silences as a resistance aimed not only at readers, but also at Jackie herself, simply showing that certain aspects of Rita's life cannot be shared, even if the listener/writer is a close person. On the other hand, as resistant and selective as Rita may be about sharing some of these particular details with her daughter/the reader, her authority is sometimes explicitly subdued by Jackie's intervention. Rita herself comments on this: "There are some parts of my life that I probably didn't want to have in the book because to me they are shame jobs. But they are part of the story and Jackie tells me, in her loving way, that I don't need to feel ashamed" (Huggins and Huggins 2). All in all, it is clearly indicated that Jackie's insistence on including certain details from Rita's life that Rita herself would exclude is not driven by a desire to violate or appropriate Rita's voice but rather by a desire to confront the white audience with the shameful history of the treatment of Aboriginal people in the missions. Thus by

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20 One example of such ambiguity in terms of respecting one's silences and self-censure is provided in Sally Morgan's *My Place*, in which Morgan is in the process of writing her family's life stories and describes the difficulties in persuading her grandmother, Daisy, to tell her life story to be taped and publicized. In the end, after a lot of persuading, Sally does get Daisy's story on a tape; however, she has to come to terms with the fact that certain things from Daisy's life, such as the identities of her father and grandfather, will never be shared with her.



offering her own perspective and by her attempt to open up some of the silences, Jackie is consciously alluding to, and resisting at the same time, the silence that generations of Aboriginal people have been forcibly confined to.

To conclude, although a major portion of the book is dedicated to Rita's first-person narrative, Jackie's account is by no means secondary. By presenting two narrative voices in this auto/biographical experiment—the "I" of Rita's autobiographical account alongside the "I" of Jackie's introspective passages and historical commentary, which is further complicated by an ambivalence depending on whether the addressee is her mother or the readers—*Auntie Rita* resists the conventional notion of the auto/biographical self as something central, unified, individual, and transparent. This strategy of inscribing two separate voices—each speaking for its own self, yet presenting them as one dual voice, a confluence of two perspectives—is truly innovative.<sup>21</sup> In this respect, Huggins' narrative not only exemplifies but even transgresses the notion of the dialogic and collective self.

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21 In Australian Indigenous literature, another, more recent text that uses a very similar strategy is *Kayang and Me* (2005) by Kim Scott in collaboration with his elder, Hazel Brown. In the book, Hazel Brown's passages, which re-tell her life story as well as the story of Noongar community in the south-west of Western Australia, alternate with first-person commentary by Kim Scott, which is, like Jackie's voice in *Auntie Rita*, also marked off by a different font throughout the text.

