

Horáková, Martina

**Inscribing difference and resistance : indigenous women's personal non-fiction and life writing in Australia and North America**

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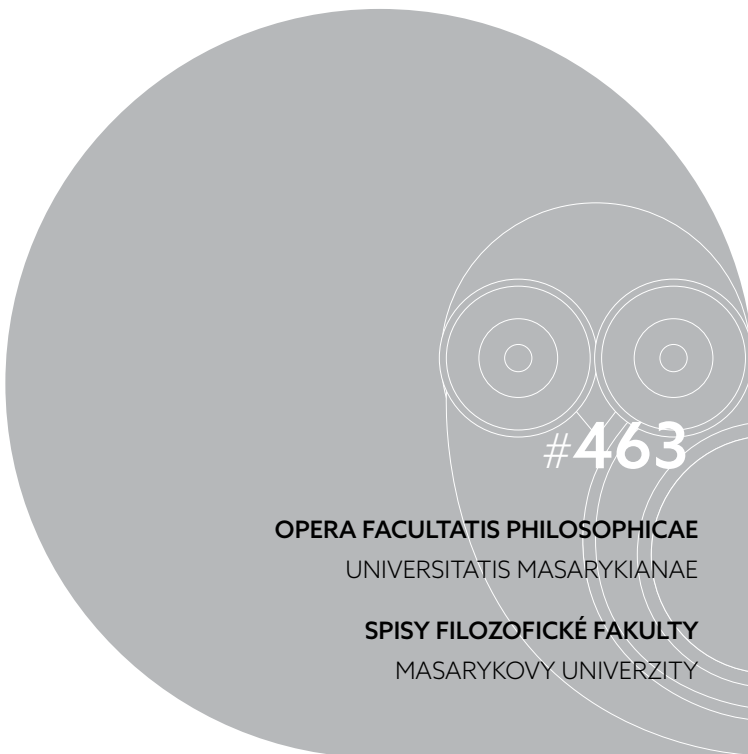
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# Inscribing Difference and Resistance

Indigenous Women's Personal Non-fiction  
and Life Writing in Australia and North America

Martina Horáková

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**FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA**  
MASARYKOVA UNIVERZITA

#463

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# INTRODUCTION

## **Narrating Precarious Lives**

In August 2016, the Government of Canada launched a long-awaited national inquiry into the high rate of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls whose number has been officially reported as 1,200 persons (as quoted by the 2014 Royal Canadian Mounted Police report on the missing women between 1980 and 2012) but is estimated as much higher by, for example, the Native Women's Association of Canada (Monchalin 184–185). The new Trudeau administration has repeatedly expressed its commitment to addressing the ongoing violence toward Indigenous women, promising to raise the budget for proper investigations and to review the legislation; meanwhile non-profit and Aboriginal organizations have increased the pressure to make the issue more visible.

Though the situation of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls is similar in scale in the USA, there seems to have been less pressure from the public (or more resistance from the authorities) to take action. As the recent investigations of cases of missing and murdered women in Minnesota in 2015 have shown, for example, Native American women are no less vulnerable to assaults than their counterparts in Canada, as they become twice as more likely victims of human trafficking, commercial sex work or family violence. As if this wasn't enough, those Indigenous women who do find the courage to report the assaults and disappearances face the challenge of being believed by the law enforcement authorities (Sullivan n. pag.), which results in a new kind of their voicelessness.

In Australia, Indigenous women's lives are similarly vulnerable to all kinds of risks, particularly to domestic and family violence and sexual assault, evident in the recurrent statistics of how many times more likely Aboriginal women are to

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become victims of domestic violence, more often than not failing to get adequate support and investigation, as has been, for example, reported in the 2015 ABC program (Boserio n. pag.). These parallels point to the fact that there always seems to be a strong impetus to sexualize and victimize Indigenous women's bodies; the "Indigenous woman's body," as Australian Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson claims, "has been positioned within white society as being accessible, available, deviant, and expendable" (*Talkin' Up* 168). This myth of the sexually promiscuous and always available Indigenous female body has become a trope in authorities' reports, media coverage, cultural representations as well as popular imagination over the last hundreds of years of European settlement in Australia and North America.

In spite of the grim reality, most sources we have about the status and position of Indigenous women before the arrival of European settlers to North America and Australia inform us that Indigenous women once held positions marked by gender equality, human dignity, respected knowledge, and power to make decisions about their lives and the lives of their extended families. What has happened that displaced all of this power so profoundly, leaving many Indigenous women in a state of extreme vulnerability and despair? What has changed that Indigenous women's voices are no longer listened to and their stories are no longer taken seriously? What has turned their once valuable and valued lives into this very precarious existence in the midst of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century wealth and privilege amassed by some of the most powerful countries in the world the representative elites of which do not seem to care?

While scholarly research and intellectual discourse can hardly pretend to make amends for global injustices, one of the ways of expressing our interest and care is by paying attention to and making visible again the stories Indigenous women tell about their own lives and the lives of their children, relatives, ancestors, community leaders, and even mythological figures. Listening to or reading these stories can be instrumental for understanding various intersections and webs of causes and consequences of the complex process of marginalization of Indigenous women over a period of several hundred years. While numerous studies and reports have repeatedly pointed to the vulnerability of their lives, Indigenous women also seem to manifest an extraordinary level of resilience, resourcefulness, and flexibility that help ensure their physical and cultural survival and continuance. Against all odds, they keep telling their stories—old and new, traditional and modern, mythological and fictional, written and oral, individual and communal. They continue narrating both the strength and precariousness of their lives and the ways in which they carry on and shape this tradition has become the central focus of this study.

Today no one disputes the fact that the political, economic, and social status of Indigenous women has undergone major changes since the arrival of European

settlers to North America and Australia (Kilcup 2; Hamilton 169; Mihesuah, “Commonality of Difference” 20), and the legacy of settler colonialism has also been identified as one of the factors of continuous violence toward Indigenous women in Australia, Canada and the USA. Intertwined with patriarchy and emerging capitalism, colonialism brought disenfranchisement into most Indigenous women’s lives across the globe and impacted not only individual lives, but also the social fabric of extended families and communities based on kinship structures. Colonization in settler colonies, on the most general level, “has involved [Indigenous women’s] removal from positions of power, the replacement of traditional gender roles with Western patriarchal practices, the exertion of colonial control over Indigenous communities through the management of women’s bodies, and sexual violence” (Huhndorf and Suzack 1). In addition, it affected more than one generation of Indigenous women and the fact remains that this transgenerational aspect has complicated the healing and recovery of younger generations of Indigenous women and their perceptions of how they can define and control spaces of their womanhood and motherhood, and function well within their families and relationships. Understanding their stories can therefore shed light on the mechanisms of the process that rendered them almost invisible in the dominant settler societies. Having also lost their voices within their own communities and having been disempowered in both public and private spheres, Indigenous women have begun to write down their stories and critical reflections in order to seize some of that visibility, voice and power back. The fact that they have been successful in this endeavor is confirmed by the Métis scholar and writer Emma LaRocque who explains how contemporary Indigenous women, against all odds, managed to persevere in continuing their traditional culture by adapting to new circumstances and, among other things, shaping their stories to fit the writing-oriented culture of today:

In the tradition of our grandmothers and mothers, Aboriginal women have continued to work for the preservation of our families, communities, and cultures, and, in so doing, are keeping our peoples and cultures alive and current. Writing is one such expression of both creativity and continuity. Since the late 1960s, Aboriginal women have been creating a significant body of writing, which serves in many respects as a vehicle of cultural teaching and reinvention as well as cultural and political resistance to colonialism with its Western-defined impositions, requirements, and biases. (“Reflections on Cultural Continuity” 155)

Indigenous women’s stories reflect the specificities of their lives, their cultures, and their tribal histories; yet, they also reveal some commonalities that unite, rather than divide, Indigenous women across the world. The dangers of homogenizing Indigeneity within so called pan-Indigenous discourse have been the subject of many scholarly debates and Indigenous scholars have, legitimately, warned

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against erasing local differences and specific contexts. At the same time, however, they also acknowledge that “although Indigenous women do not share a single culture, they do have a common colonial history” (Huhndorf and Suzack 3). Recent studies by Allen Chadwick, for example, propose adopting *trans-Indigenous* perspectives in order to recognize that discourse on Indigeneity indeed cannot be limited to national borders and that long before the term “transnational” became popular in academia, “Indigenous signs and sign systems travel[ed]” (Chadwick, “A *Transnational* Native American Studies?” 1). The point of trans-Indigenous inquiry, according to Chadwick, is “to invite specific studies into different kinds of conversations, and to acknowledge the mobility and multiple interactions of Indigenous peoples, cultures, histories, and texts” (*Trans-Indigenous* xiv), cautiously proposing something like “global Indigenous literary studies in English” (xv). In this context, the present study attempts to make connections among the textual production of Indigenous women’s writers from three settler colonies and note how certain images, styles, and narrative strategies can be paralleled.

Even though the critical analysis in this study is based on texts written and published in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, it is impossible to ignore the rich storytelling tradition of the orality-based cultures that all of the selected Indigenous women writers come from and interweave in their texts. The character and functions of Indigenous storytelling have been subject to a number of detailed studies but for my purposes two aspects that project themselves into contemporary Indigenous writing should be emphasized: first, writers adopt the storytelling tradition to express new realities and, second, they use it to articulate resistance to the long-term dispossession and displacement initiated by European invasion and settlement in North American and Australia. In their article on the nature of resistance in Indigenous storytelling, Aman Sium and Eric Ritskes revise the role of storytellers in keeping the cultural traditions alive: “Storytellers have never been silent in the face of colonial violence that subverted and neutralized various other forms of resistance; the storytellers and griots have never been idle, working through participatory mediums to maintain and sustain Indigenous ways of being and living. Here, the role of the storyteller is central to the exercise of agency and renewal” (v). Indigenous storytelling, in this perspective, is vital to decolonization, as it “works to both deconstruct colonial ways of coming to know, as well as construct alternatives” (Sium and Ritskes viii). Thus the selected texts confirm the survival and continuance of traditional forms of Indigenous orality and storytelling while at the same time creatively reworking these forms.

While much of modern critical scholarship has focused on Indigenous fiction, particularly the novel, non-fiction has attracted less attention, with the notable exception of autobiographical narratives, the long tradition of which can be traced back to anthropological recording and editing various accounts of Indigenous lives, visible, for example, in the so called “as-told-to” autobiographies. Yet, as Rob-

ert Warrior has shown in *People and the Word: Reading Native Nonfiction*, Indigenous non-fiction has always been central in constituting Native intellectual tradition and, in fact, precedes the flourishing of Indigenous fiction (xviii). Warrior also reminds us that it is the study of Indigenous non-fiction that reveals a “remarkable overlap between writers who seemingly share little in the way of geographical, chronological, and circumstantial realities” (xx), an affinity that Warrior calls “synchronicity” (xx). While I acknowledge the cultural and historical differences among the writers and texts selected for analysis, my primary aim is to put them into conversation and point to commonalities in certain tropes, strategies, style and political and theoretical aims, showing, in general, how these texts contribute to a stronger sense of Native intellectual tradition that Warrior talks about.

My own exploration of Indigenous women’s writing in this study is informed by a specific genre of personalized and subjective non-fictional writing, which I divide, in the two main sections, into personal non-fiction and life writing. The first section includes generically hybrid texts meandering between academic and critical commentary, biographical and autobiographical fragments, and sometimes fictional, sometimes mythological elements. The second section centers on texts which are life writing narratives in its broadest sense, narratives that tell an auto/biographical account, individual as well as communal. Both personal non-fiction and life writing present key notions reflected in the title of this book—incribing difference and resistance—which Indigenous women’s writing emphasizes: writing informed by personal experience (which does not mean being anti-theoretical); using this experience as a legitimate source of knowledge production; writing theory through a personal story; recording one’s life as a way of resisting the imposition of the dominant order’s values. Reading these texts relates, on the one hand, to the development of feminist readings of women’s personal narratives which validated personal, subjective, everyday experience as a valid source of knowledge; and, on the other hand, to the politicized character of minority literatures which foregrounds personal experience as a testimony to the history of settler colonization, cultural genocide, institutionalized racism, and state-sanctioned policies of assimilation.

\* \* \*

The present study explores representative examples of Indigenous women’s personal non-fiction and life writing in settler colonies published in the late 1980s and throughout 1990s. In the first section, personal non-fiction by Paula Gunn Allen (1939–2008) from the USA, Lee Maracle (1950–) from Canada and Jackie Huggins (1956–) from Australia is compared in order to demonstrate how these authors inscribe difference through their articulation of Indigenous feminism, their positions as Indigenous women in academia, and through their specific styles of writing. All three writers, I argue, use highly hybridized style of writing that draws on traditional orality-based Indigenous cultures and storytelling techniques



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while at the same time engaging with Western discourse and strategies of non-fiction. As a result, the analyzed texts transgress genre conventions by writing critical analyses and academic scholarship (including sociology, history, and literary theory) alongside very personal autobiographical and biographical fragments—in other words inscribing their own lives and the lives of their family relatives, elders, community leaders, and ancestors, developing a method that I would describe as writing theory through a life story and personal experience. In addition, the non-fictional writing at times alternates with fictional and/or mythological fragments: semi-fictional stories of their female friends, re-telling of old Indigenous myths and legends, stylized family stories. Thus Allen's *The Sacred Hoop* (1986), Maracle's *I Am Woman* (1996), and Huggins' *Sister Girl* (1998) illustrate a direction in Indigenous women's writing which may be characterized as articulating premises of Indigenous feminism while presenting them through a life story. This personalized writing reflects on the specific roles of educated and activist intellectuals in the modern world, showing how they constantly negotiate their positions as public speakers and educators on the one hand, and their cultural difference as Indigenous women on the other. Thus the intersection of gender and race informs all of the selected texts, both on the theoretical and personal levels.

The first chapter of the first section, titled "Talking Back, Talkin' Up: Voicing Indigenous Feminism," discusses how Indigenous women, alongside other marginalized women, intervene in the feminist movement that has until recently been dominated almost exclusively by white middle-class women's political and personal interests. I use theories of Patricia Hill Collins, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, and Andrea Smith to show the ways in which the so called "women of color" have consistently challenged and intervened in the mainstream feminist agenda by deconstructing the universal category of "Woman" which erases differences in race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexuality, etc. Indigenous women's personal non-fiction presents a very different point of view which is informed by the histories of colonization and cultural genocide, by social structures and systems of knowledge that are very different from those of settler white women. In addition, Indigenous women have also pointed to the settler women's complicity in the colonization and racial oppression. So Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle and Jackie Huggins all articulate alternative feminist discourses: Allen's main purpose in *The Sacred Hoop* is to recover the gynocratic nature of some Indigenous communities in pre-contact North America, which was forcibly erased by the imposed Western patriarchal system. Maracle's *I Am Woman* focuses on condemning any form of sexism and violence towards women within Indigenous communities, calling for a "re-feminization" while employing a rather radical feminist Marxist perspective. In *Sister Girl*, Jackie Huggins' critique of white feminism in Australia is primarily based on her analysis of the historical development of racial tensions between white and Aboriginal women.

The second chapter in this section, titled “Recreating the Circle: Reconstructing Indigenous Womanhood,” examines how the three Indigenous writers expose the mechanisms of (mis)representing female Indigeneity by the dominant American, Canadian, and Australian settler cultures. I argue in this chapter that the texts by Allen, Maracle, and Huggins contribute to problematizing the dichotomy by showing the spaces “in between” the two extreme positions—strong, independent and powerful womanhood in pre-colonial period on the one hand, and weak, dependent and disempowered womanhood in the post-contact period on the other. Their realistic portraits of Indigenous womanhood reveal both strength and vulnerability in the face of racial oppression in North America and Australia through self-representation, critical interrogation, de-masking of common stereotypes, and re-creating genealogies of and re-connecting with female ancestors—real women in their lives (mothers, grandmothers and more distant female ancestors) as well as mythological figures and female deity.

*The Sacred Hoop*, *I Am Woman*, and *Sister Girl* are instrumental in interweaving various narrative strategies and revealing a high level of hybridization. In the third chapter “Threshold Writing: Interweaving Indigenous Theory and Life,” I examine how Allen’s, Maracle’s, and Huggins’ other texts, *Off the Reservation* (1998), “Oratory: Coming to Theory” (1990) and *Auntie Rita* (1994) respectively, also contribute to inscribing their author’s difference by presenting a liminal, cross-generic style, a “threshold writing” which echoes Anna Louise Keating’s concept of minority women’s threshold identities. It is a style that mediates ancestors’ traditional knowledge and combines theoretical discourse with identity politics, where various, both complementary and conflicting strategies, tactics and transgressions form creative tensions. Critical reflection alternates with autobiographical episodes from the authors’ childhood and everyday life as well as personal memories of their relatives and ancestors. These may be in turn broken up by poems, short stories, legends and/or myths. What Elvira Pulitano says about Paula Gunn Allen’s non-fiction may be extended to Maracle and Huggins, as they “celebrate [their] multicultural experience both on a thematic and on a formal level, producing a multigeneric, hybrid text that blends myth, history, literary studies, philosophy and personal narrative” (Pulitano 43). I argue that these generic transgressions do justice to and legitimize the oral tradition and storytelling techniques that survive as reminders of traditional Indigenous cultures. Even though Allen, Maracle and Huggins develop different concepts and strategies that suit their particular purposes, namely *mestizaje écriture* (Allen), *oratory* (Maracle), and *dual voice* (Huggins), they all, through these hybrid writing styles, these textual “borderlands,” to evoke Gloria Anzaldúa’s terminology, become mediators between academia and Indigenous communities, writing theory through writing a story, writing a personal experience, writing a life.

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The second section centers on the genre of life writing which has a long history in Indigenous writing. In the selected texts by Doris Pilkington Garimara (1937–2014) from Australia, Shirley Sterling (1948–2005) from Canada, and Anna Lee Walters (1946– ) from the USA, telling history and telling peoples' lives is, like in many other Indigenous women's life writings, intrinsically related. These two activities originate in the tradition of storytelling which has been a primary mode of "passing knowledge, maintaining community, resisting government control, and sharing the burden of hardship" for Indigenous people (Schaffer and Smith 101). The confusion of the boundaries between historiography and life writing results in a subgenre which has become an important vehicle for both remembering the past and maintaining the storytelling tradition. Since this type of life stories is frequently based on oral accounts, it has sometimes struggled for recognition by the modern historiography based, typically, on the knowledge recorded in written documents. Yet, the recorded, transcribed and published life stories of Indigenous people have gained a momentum in the 1990s, becoming what Hodge and Mishra call "a particular grand narrative" (102) which influenced the public discourse and allowed the previously dismissed stories to be recognized as valid sources of knowledge *and* historical evidence. Therefore these accounts, even if they focus on individual life stories, also reveal a collective portrait of a particular group and a particular historical moment, in this case the Stolen Generations in Australia and residential and boarding school victims in North America. These stories are empowering because they communicate experiences of those Indigenous people who in spite of having been separated from their families, having gone through the institutional systems of education, and having been constantly forced to accept the dominant society's values, kept resisting the pressure and rather than fully assimilating often developed strategies of coping and/or maintaining even stronger links, no matter how fragmented, to their Indigeneity. Indeed, the analyzed narratives represent those cases in which the elaborate system of state intervention and assimilation failed. Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996), Sterling's *My Name Is Seepeetza* (1992) and Walters' *Talking Indian: Reflections on Survival and Writing* (1992) inscribe resistance to the forced removal of Indigenous children; to the state-sanctioned policies of assimilation in the native settlements, mission schools, residential and boarding schools; and to the trauma stemming from the experience of having been separated from their families. They do this by rigorously depicting the impact of these colonial policies, by textualizing the memories of times spent with the family in the community, and, generally, by recording alternative or counter-histories. This process becomes an effective, though double-edged, way of coming to terms with the trauma from separation and forced assimilation and signaling towards healing and reconciliation.

The three chapters in this section examine the most distinctive thematic and formal characteristics of each of the three narratives. The fourth chapter "Alterna-

tive (Hi)stories: Indigenous Resistance and Subjugated Knowledges” explores how the selected texts employ various ways of re-writing history from an Indigenous point of view, while re-working the official, nationally accepted histories of settlement in Australia and North America. Thus Pilkington records what I call the *counter-(hi)story* by juxtaposing the nationally celebrated history of settlement as the narrative of endeavor and hard work against the silenced Aboriginal version of settlement as cultural genocide, including events leading to the 1930s state-sanctioned policy of removing the “half-caste” children from their families. The discrepancy between the language of the state apparatus and the reality of the children in native settlements and mission schools is illustrated in Pilkington’s choice of specific vocabulary register which unmasks the brutality of the state intervention into Indigenous lives. In turn, Sterling’s residential school narrative resists the policy of assimilation by showing the functional, non-stereotypical Native family, its everyday activities, and little details that, like a mosaic, make up a relatively positive picture of a Native community of the 1950s. Sterling inscribes what I term *alterNative (hi)story* through a series of contrasts between the images of home and residential school, fully manifesting the uselessness and absurdity of the system in which the children were supposed to gradually forget about their Native background and assimilate into the dominant society but instead some of them developed an even stronger connection to their Indigenous heritage represented by the family, Native languages and community-oriented life-style. Finally, Walters writes a *tribal (hi)story* of her two ancestral cultures as a way of questioning mainstream American historiography. She is instrumental in blurring the sharp edges of her own self and the tribal universe, of the past and the present, of history and fiction. Thus her narrative displaces the chronological, linear and individual-oriented life narrative model with a discontinuous and polyvocal chorus.

Titled “Bearing Witness: Trauma, Testimony, Scriptotherapy,” the fifth chapter relates the selected narratives to the contemporary emphasis on issues pertaining to human rights violations and the way these issues are inscribed into literary texts such as life stories. It employs the notions of collective trauma, memory, remembering, forgetting, and healing, which have become crucial in exploring the testimonies of marginalized voices, in order to examine more closely the testimonial nature of Pilkington’s, Sterling’s, and Walters’ texts. Finally, I demonstrate the ways in which the traumatic experience of separation and assimilation in the Stolen Generation, residential, and boarding school narratives, can be healed through writing in what I term *scriptotherapy*.

The last, sixth chapter titled “Collective Subjects, Dialogic Selves” focuses on the collective subjectivities, dialogism, and polyphony embedded in the selected texts and the relevance of the often-discussed dichotomy between conventional Western auto/biographies and Indigenous life writing that is often characterized as promoting collective and relational, rather than individual-centered, selves.

## Introduction

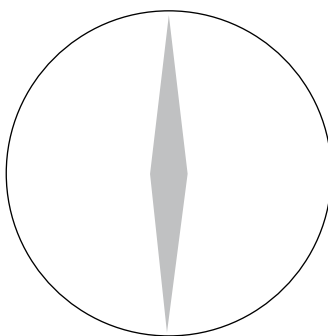
I use the theories of Arnold Krupat, particularly his concept of the *synecdochic self*, to argue that the three narratives by Pilkington, Sterling and Walters employ dialogic models of the self which is collective and based on the orality-oriented tribal cultures. They explicitly write back to the formal and thematic conventions of not only traditional Western auto/biographies but also of the structuralist models of cultural (auto)ethnographies and as-told-to auto/biographies. The result is a polyphony of voices, not only of the alternating narrators and various ancestors, relatives, friends, but visible also in the often collaborative nature of the authorship through working, more or less closely, with family members and/or community elders. The dialogic character also manifests in the ways the narratives maneuver between autobiographical and political-cultural texts, as well as between their individual “I”s and various forms of “we” in the presentation of their life stories. Finally, the testimonial nature of Pilkington’s, Sterling’s and Walters’ texts indicates another form of dialogism, that of the embedded relationship between a teller-writer and listener-reader. In the words of Michele Grossman, these texts “self-consciously ground [themselves] in ‘talk’ and dialogue while demonstrating an assertive commitment to and control over the written word at the levels of both text-as-social-relations and text-as-cultural-artefact” (“Xen(ography)” 286).

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From the perspective of a literary critic trained in mainstream Anglo-American literature and theory, the strength of the texts analyzed in this study consists in their potential to challenge and problematize conventional literary categories: as they re-define the construction of the self in auto/biographies; as they displace traditional genres and consciously hybridize them by blurring the boundaries between auto/biography, history writing, personal narrative, poetry and fiction; as they employ innovative narrative strategies through incorporating techniques of traditional Indigenous storytelling into Western narrative forms, Indigenous women’s personal non-fiction and life writing is a border-crossing venture. The formal and thematic innovations in these narratives contradict earlier critical analyses that have seen the personal accounts and auto/biographies of Indigenous storytellers and writers primarily as realistic documentaries and testimonies. Barbara Godard describes Indigenous women’s life narratives as “hav[ing] adopted entirely different formal strategies, discontinuous tales rather than coherently plotted quests, symbolic events rather than psychologized reactions. Moreover, they [Indigenous women] write miscellanies—hybrid genres—mixtures of sermons, narratives, poetry, ethnographical treatises” (190). Indeed, the word “miscellanies,” in the most positive sense, points to the precise character of Indigenous women’s personal non-fiction and life writing in Australia and North America published since the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. A comparative analysis and close readings of these narratives reveal their complex structure and multi-

layered character, demanding literary recognition not only for their contributions to political and resistance writing but also for their formal literary qualities. They do inscribe difference and resistance, after all, difference and resistance which do not threaten but rather enhance and creatively respond to the Anglo-American literary canon.





Inscribing **Difference**







## SECTION I

### **Indigenous Feminism in Personal Non-fiction by Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle and Jackie Huggins**

Writing in the feminine. And in a colored sky. How do you inscribe difference without bursting into a series of euphoric narcissistic accounts of yourself and your own kind? Without indulging in a marketable romanticism or in a naive whining about your condition? In other words, how do you forget without annihilating?

Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other:  
Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (28)

The opening quote by Trinh T. Minh-ha indicates some of the key concepts in this section which is informed by the intersections of gender, race, and writing difference in Indigenous women's personal non-fiction—a cross-generic writing that combines elements of life writing, memoir, creative non-fiction and scholarly criticism, writing that is also cross-methodological in the sense that it combines theoretical and critical thinking with personal and communal experience. The chapters that follow demonstrate how these various genre elements and modes of writing in selected Indigenous women's personal non-fiction from the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s have helped to articulate theoretical premises for contemporary Indigenous feminism as well as to rewrite and complement textual representations of Indigenous women and their knowledges. The argument underlying these chapters maintains that it is the personalized, communal and cross-generic mode of inscribing difference in representations of Indigenous womanhood, rather than conventional academic criticism and theory writing, that



has become both popular and effective among Indigenous women writers and scholars as a vehicle for giving voice to their subjectivities.

Indigenous women's writing, both fiction and non-fiction, has rarely been associated with the premises of the global women's movement or feminist criticism, for reasons that are explored in more detail in the first chapter of this section. Until now, only a handful of book-length studies have been published on Indigenous feminism. Despite the emerging generation of scholars and writers who employ feminist analysis in relation to Indigenous women as a legitimate analytical tool while also paying attention to particularities of Indigenous women's situations, it still remains a precarious field of study. As the authors of a major publication in this area, *Indigenous Women and Feminism*, confirm, "Indigenous women and feminist issues remain underexamined in contemporary feminist theory" (Huhndorf and Suzack 1), and there is still "little published scholarship" in the area of Indigenous feminism (2). When feminist forms of analysis *are* applied to the realities of Indigenous women, it is usually in areas of political activism and social issues, such as women's education and health care, domestic violence, or the role of women in their communities, tribal decision-making and securing sovereignty—where the aim is to achieve some material social and political change. Few critics, however, relate feminist criticism with Indigenous cultural production. Yet, both fiction and non-fiction literature can significantly transform the ways of how we perceive the stories of Indigenous women—stories that would otherwise remain invisible or susceptible to misrepresentation and stereotyping. In this way, Indigenous women's writing contributes to making Indigenous feminism more visible and worth further analysis. This notion informs the logic employed in this book: the stories Indigenous women tell about themselves and other Indigenous women in personal non-fiction and life writing reveal their self-representations, which leads to their empowerment and this in turn leads to gaining more sovereignty and authority to decide about their own destinies. Huhndorf and Suzack claim that cultural production by Indigenous artists "fosters critical consciousness by attending to the meaning of history and social relationships and imagining political possibilities" (9).

The focus of this section is on personal non-fiction by three Indigenous women writers: Paula Gunn Allen (1939–2008) from the USA, Lee Maracle (1950–) from Canada and Jackie Huggins (1956–) from Australia. Their life paths share a number of aspects, which justifies a comparative examination of their work. All three are professional writers and, having received university educations from prestigious institutions in their respective countries, they are also scholars with established academic careers. At the same time, they remain connected to their identities as Indigenous women, to their families and ancestry, as well as to Indigenous history and largely oral cultures. They are all politically engaged and active in their service, either directly through helping address ongoing social injustices



and racism facing contemporary Indigenous communities or indirectly through their writing. Although their work is intended for both Indigenous and international audiences, it is never detached from who they are in time and space. All three are empowered by the writing process, and they often reflect on the motives of their writing, encouraging other Indigenous women to write. Ultimately, Allen, Maracle, and Huggins share what Trinh T. Minh-ha highlights in the complex process of representing minority women's existence: they inscribe their differences, be it on the textual level, where they turn to a particular style which builds on Indigenous aesthetics; within the feminist discourse, where they respond to, critique, and engage with the global women's movement; in their ways of theorizing, where they employ a different set of knowledges and methodologies that draw on their Indigenous heritage and oral traditions; or in their self-representation, where they challenge and re-write the images of female Indigeneity imposed on them by the dominant settler cultures.

Interestingly enough, all three write extensively across genres—a feature shared by many Indigenous authors: in regards to fiction, both Allen and Maracle have been prolific, while Huggins has not yet published any fiction. Allen was an established poet and fiction writer, publishing six collections of poetry and a critically acclaimed novel, *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* (1983). Maracle, on the other hand, has published several novels and one poetry collection, *Bent Box* (1990). While their non-fiction and academic studies have included a number of standard edited anthologies introducing many Indigenous (women) writers and a great deal of academic articles and/or monographs, it is, I believe, the more experimental mode of writing that has become their trademark and a source for continuing scholarly interest in their work. These texts will also enrich and enhance the arguments in this section. In particular, apart from *The Sacred Hoop*, Allen's experimental collection of essays *Off the Reservation: Reflections on Boundary-Busting, Border-Crossing, Loose Cannons* (1998) informs my commentary on Allen's use of hybrid narrative strategies to articulate her theories through stories. It is, metaphorically speaking and in reference to Allen's emphasis on her hybrid origins, a "mixed-blood" collection of essays which "resemble the oral tradition of the Laguna world and the essayist tradition of the orthographic academy by turns" (Allen, *Off the Reservation* 7). Similarly, Maracle's *Ravensong* (1993) and "Oratory: Coming to Theory" (1990)<sup>1</sup> complement her writing in *I Am Woman* in the sense that *Ravensong*, among other things, previews Maracle's focus on the position of Indigenous as well as white women, while "Oratory: Coming to Theory" offers a theoretical background to her long-term interest in Indigenous methods of cultural production and passing on knowledge. Finally, Jackie Huggins published,

1 Maracle's short text *Oratory: Coming to Theory* was originally published separately by Gallerie Publications in 1990 as part of the Women Artists' Monographs series. It was later re-printed as an article in *Essays on Canadian Writing* in 1994. I refer to this later, journal publication throughout this book.



together with her mother Rita Huggins, a critically-acclaimed collaborative auto/biography *Auntie Rita* (1994), in which the dialogic nature of the narrative dual voice allows the two women to provide two equally important, both complementary and contesting, perspectives. Read together, all these texts present a mode of writing and genre diversity that continue to resonate strongly in contemporary Indigenous women's writing.

I have selected work by Allen, Maracle and Huggins as my case studies because it is my understanding that these texts represent voices of Indigenous feminist urban intellectuals and activists whose work in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s has significantly contributed to establishing a powerful alternative to mainstream expectations of what contemporary Indigenous women's writing should look like, to conventional academic criticism, and also to Western feminist approaches to literature. In addition, Allen's, Maracle's, and Huggins' narratives reveal similar structures, choices of themes, and impacts on Indigenous feminist discourse. In particular, they share the authors' ambivalent relationship to mainstream feminism: although the three writers are involved in feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial debates, they also openly distance themselves from and engage in critiquing mainstream feminism. Thus their work helps shed light on the role that Indigenous women's life writing plays in the contested space of Indigenous representations, subjectivities, and cultural differences. It also points out a new direction in which Indigenous personal and critical writing is currently heading. As the three texts go beyond the limitations of audience-commodified Indigenous life stories, they also transcend the conventional genres of autobiography and personal non-fiction by integrating poetry, storytelling, collective auto/biography, and critical writing. This hybrid and at times experimental character of *The Sacred Hoop*, *I Am Woman*, and *Sister Girl* leads me to argue that these are examples of a generation of Indigenous women's personal narratives that, on the one hand, broke with the previous writing style by deliberate hybridizing and, on the other hand, significantly shaped the coming generations of Indigenous women's writing.

In this section, Paula Gunn Allen's *The Sacred Hoop* (1986), Lee Maracle's *I Am Woman* (1996), and Jackie Huggins' *Sister Girl* (1998) are examined and compared, although other works of non-fiction by these writers also inform my investigation of Indigenous feminist modes of writing. The selected texts are relatively well-known and widely commented-on texts in their respective cultural spaces, but what this section attempts to foreground are the overlaps that underscore the claim that trans-indigenous comparative analysis may prove illuminating for current discussions of Indigenous feminism. Although the selected texts reflect particular locations, histories, and cultural differences, they share the following structural and thematic characteristics: they inhabit the space between critical writing, life writing, personal non-fiction, and fiction. They are academic and intellectual, yet very personal, drawing on lived experience and integrating strong autobio-



graphical elements as well as tribal, communal, and/or extended family histories. Although separated by geographical distance and cultural differences, reading them in succession invokes the sense of a conversation among three unique voices addressing similar topics and issues across time and space.

I analyze and compare the narratives of Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle, and Jackie Huggins on three basic levels: firstly as scholarly critiques that inscribe the authors' differences within the mainstream feminist discourse; secondly as self-representations of Indigenous womanhood, motherhood, and sisterhood; and thirdly as personal narratives that incorporate the "writing life" techniques and at the same time are political acts that allow the writers to empower themselves and their people by writing down both their lived experience and theory. In the three chapters that follow, I argue that a comparative analysis of these texts offers a more effective means of deconstructing the universalist and homogenizing category of "woman" constructed by mainstream feminism. Moreover, my analysis also problematizes the conventional and stereotypical notions of the genre of Indigenous women's life writing because it draws attention to multi-generic, experiential, and self-reflective writing, as well as to alternative perspectives on Indigenous women's identities, representations, and their common struggles in the late twentieth century. Interestingly enough, the nature of these texts makes it possible to analyze them both as primary (on the level of a personal and creative narrative) and secondary sources (in terms of the academic research input), which strengthens their potential to re-define the binary between personal writing based on lived experience and theoretical writing based on "objective" critical research. These aspects are precisely the kinds of categories that the writings of Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle, and Jackie Huggins defy.





## CHAPTER 1

# TALKING BACK, TALKIN' UP: VOICING INDIGENOUS FEMINISM

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized and the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice.

bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (9)

In her early, ground-breaking writing on Black feminist thought in the United States, bell hooks explains the importance of the concept of “talking back” and the impact it had on her when she was growing up in a family where “woman talk” was rich, poetic and intense but relegated to the kitchens of Black women and directed inwards, to the community of female friends and family, rather than outwards into the public sphere, as the voices of Black male preachers were (5). “Talking back,” characterized by hooks as “speaking as an equal to an authority figure,” as “daring to disagree” and “having an opinion” (5), is a strategy that many women of ethnic minorities had to learn to use in order to be heard and recognized as subjects capable of expressing their difference in an environment where the emphasis was more on assimilating difference in the name of the common struggle against patriarchy. A decade later, Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson used a very similar term to describe the act of Australian Aboriginal women’s talking back. The concept of “talkin’ up” gives title to her influential study of Australian white feminism through Indigenous women’s perspective. In a way reminiscent of hooks’ recollections of her growing up, Moreton-Robinson explains in her introduction to *Talkin’ Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (2000) that she was encouraged by her grandparents who raised her, as well as by





female elders of her community, to “speak [her] truth to white people,” to “talk up to white people” (xv). It is precisely this concept of “talking back” and “talkin’ up” that permeates my discussion of Indigenous feminism as it was voiced and articulated theoretically in Indigenous women’s personal non-fiction. For many Indigenous women, writing from their experience and talking back to mainstream feminism and, in some cases, to their own communities remains a “courageous act—an act of risk and daring” (hooks 5). The following discussion provides an exploration of how Indigenous women, alongside other marginalized women, intervened in the domain that had until then been dominated almost exclusively by white middle-class women’s political and personal interests.

Debates concerning the politics of difference and the intersections between gender and race have formed an indispensable part of feminist discourse. The period since the late 1970s has witnessed an important shift in the focus on this intricate relationship as diverse voices of women with different life experiences and cultural histories have challenged what has often been called “white” or mainstream feminism. This term has been increasingly employed to refer to the second wave of first-world, Western, or Euro-American feminist discourse. Julia Emberley’s characterization of Anglo-American feminism can be extended to generally describe the mainstream feminism which women with different life experiences questioned: it is “an institutional configuration, the practices and activities of which engage women in the project of furthering their access to ‘higher’ education, their empowerment through knowledge, and their entry into a professional managerial class” (81). As such, mainstream feminism, as a political and social activist movement, has primarily served white middle-class women’s interests. This conception has been challenged by the so called “third-world” women or “women of color”<sup>2</sup> who have responded with a critique that points to the racist and ethnocentric practices of mainstream feminism that tend to universalize women’s experience as that of an oppressed gender under the patriarchal system. In this way, mainstream feminism has, for a long time, downplayed or even ignored intersections such as gender and race, gender and class, or gender and sexuality. The notion of white feminism has also emerged in accord with developing critical race theory and whiteness studies which maintain that whiteness, as a structurally privileged and discursively invisible category, has become a norm against which other “non-white” experience and epistemology are judged in the construction of

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2 The terms “third-world” women and “women of color” are used interchangeably in this study to refer to all those women who have been excluded from participating in discourses of power, be it in a patriarchal context or in mainstream feminism. The terms are also employed in agreement with Mohanty’s claim that “women of color” are bound by “a common context of struggle” rather than by their skin color (“Cartographies of Struggle” 7). I am aware that this category is complex, problematic, and, as many critics have pointed out, homogenizing as it may erase cultural differences, local histories, and the diversity of life experiences. Therefore, I use the terms in quotation marks in my original text and without quotation marks where the secondary sources employ them in that manner.



identity, representation, subjectivity, nationalism, law, and culture (Moreton-Robinson, *Whitening Race* vii).<sup>3</sup> In this perspective, whiteness remains unnamed and uninterrogated as a difference or “the other.” This theoretical framework gives rise to what Moreton-Robinson, in her discussion of white feminism, calls “subject position white middle-class woman” (*Talkin' Up* xxii), a category constructed in order to make whiteness visible so that it can be theorized.

The responses of “women of color” to mainstream feminism have been numerous and diverse. The theoretical works of bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Patricia Hill Collins sprung from African American studies; Gloria Anzaldúa’s appeared within Latin American studies; and the works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have proved useful for postcolonial feminist criticism. Indigenous women have also contributed to the body of knowledge within this area by becoming involved in debates exploring the politics of difference and identity, intersections of gender and race, and the role Indigenous women play in what they often perceive as neo-colonial settler societies. In the United States, Canada, and Australia, they have participated in dialogues with other “women of color” as academics, public speakers, and intellectuals, challenging the race and class blindness within the feminist movement. An example of such alliances may be found among Native American women, especially from the South and Southwest, who sometimes collaborate with Chicanas or South American women. Aboriginal women in Australia, including Jackie Huggins, have occasionally referred to work by African American writers and theorists, such as bell hooks and Alice Walker. Increasingly, collaborative projects or edited collections which integrate the standpoints of “women of color” from various geographical regions are being published.

In her introduction to the influential study *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (1991), Chandra Talpade Mohanty offers an analysis of the challenges that “third-world” women<sup>4</sup> pose to mainstream feminism. These challenges include a reconceptualization of the ideas of resistance, community, and agency in daily life, and an integration of the categories of race and postcolonial discourse (“Cartographies of Struggle” 3). Mohanty demonstrates in detail how mainstream feminism has historically focused on gender as the only basis of struggle, ignoring

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3 It is in this sense that I use the term “white feminism” throughout this work, although I am aware that it is reductive and very much constructed for the purposes of theoretical discourse. By no means do I intend to imply an excessive homogeneity of the Western feminist discourse. I use the term explicitly where my sources use it too (e.g. Moreton-Robinson, Jackie Huggins); elsewhere I use it interchangeably with “mainstream”, “Western”, or “first-world” feminism.

4 Mohanty uses the term “third-world” to include women of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, as well as minority women, or women of color, in Europe and in settler colonies (“Cartographies of Struggle” 2). Although she does not mention Indigenous women explicitly as being “third-world” women, it is implied that they may be included in this group as they often face similar marginalization and political and cultural struggles within settler societies.



the racial, class, and sexual axis of oppression. Therefore, she calls for Western feminists to examine the construction of whiteness and its relation to power, and to engage more effectively in anti-racism and anti-colonialism. Mohanty's often quoted essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," which is included in the same publication, describes the ways in which a coherent and homogeneous category of "Woman" was constructed on the premise that women, because they share the same gender, also share the same oppression under patriarchy. Subsequently the movement has appropriated and colonized the pluralities and differences of "third-world" women's experience, thereby relegating them to the position of an object rather than a subject with agency. This latent ethnocentrism that Mohanty uncovers in her analyses of several white feminists' texts on the issues of "third-world" women is also responsible for projecting the stereotypes of the Other onto the category of the "third-world" Woman. Thus in Mohanty's view the "third-world" women tend to be represented as poor, uneducated, dependent, traditional, domestic, sexually restrained, family-oriented, victimized, and, importantly, as politically ignorant women who need training and education in Western feminism ("Under Western Eyes" 56–57). This process of "othering," not dissimilar from Edward Said's seminal analysis of the ways in which the West has constructed the Orient, may result in what Moreton-Robinson calls white feminists' maternalism, by which she refers to "the superordinate position of the white woman who has the right to judge and make recommendations" about Indigenous women, knowing that the "state will support her request" to, for example, remove children of mixed parentage to institutional care (*Talkin' Up* 25). Moreton-Robinson further argues that such forms of maternalism, allowing white women to maintain a position of superiority which is "informed by white masculine values of separateness and independence" is responsible for precluding positive relationships with Indigenous women (*Talkin' Up* 180).

Mohanty is aware of the danger of operating with the category of "third-world" women and insists that any focus on particular struggles must take into account complex, sometimes even conflicting historical and cultural contexts. In fact, she claims that "third-world" feminists have engaged in the "rewriting of history based on the *specific* locations and histories of struggle of people of colour and postcolonial peoples, and on the day-to-day strategies of survival utilized by such peoples" ("Cartographies of Struggle" 10, original emphasis). However, despite paying close attention to such differences, Mohanty is also aware of the need to use the category of "third-world" woman strategically as an analytical and political entity in order to theorize certain issues. To be able to do this, Mohanty draws on Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" to talk about an imagined community of "third-world" women where the oppositional struggles invite "potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries" ("Cartographies of Struggle" 4). This allows Mohanty to make useful connections between diverse



contexts of “third-world” feminist struggles—such as the history of colonization, economic exploitation, and race/gender oppression—and the construction of consciousness and identity in writing. In her words, “writing often becomes the context through which new political identities are forged. It becomes a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself” (“Cartographies of Struggle” 34). This is a useful notion which will inform my own analysis of the feminist texts by Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle, and Jackie Huggins and of the ways in which these three Indigenous women writers negotiate the ambivalences between their specific cultural backgrounds, their involvement in feminist movement, and the construction of their selves during the writing process.

The basic premise of Indigenous women’s critique of white feminism is expressed in Moreton-Robinson’s analysis in *Talkin’ Up to the White Woman*. Moreton-Robinson argues that “an Indigenous woman’s point of view is informed by social worlds imbued with meaning grounded in knowledges of different realities from those of white women” (xvi). She further explains that her own personal experience as an Indigenous feminist scholar has led her to challenge white feminism’s subject position of dominance and to seek alternative discourses among African American, Latin American and lesbian feminists. It is precisely these discourses, in Moreton-Robinson’s view, that contest the representation of the universal “Woman” as a white liberal middle-class woman, and propose instead models of diversity and heterogeneity, stressing cultural differences and specific particularities (xvii). In other words, Moreton-Robinson’s statement concerning the inherent difference of Indigenous women’s experience explicitly undermines the assumption made by the white feminists that regardless of their cultural background, women can be characterized as a singular group oppressed by the patriarchal system of values, which is also where Moreton-Robinson’s view comes close to that of Mohanty. Moreton-Robinson’s study, anchored in Australian historical and cultural context, is most useful in her argument that Indigenous women’s life writing, which foregrounds Indigenous women’s self-presentation, actually reveals the extent to which their realities and life experiences are grounded in different histories from those experienced by white women (*Talkin’ Up* xxiii). These experiences include, for example, government-imposed and sometimes unpaid work as domestic servants, which more often than not went hand in hand with sexual molestation or abuse by the white masters and work exploitation by the white mistresses. Other suppressed experiences concern state-sanctioned family policies, such as separating children from their Aboriginal families and forced sterilizations. In this way, Moreton-Robinson argues, Indigenous women’s life writing “unmasks the complicity of white women in gendered racial oppression” (*Talkin’ Up* xxiii). Like Mohanty, Moreton-Robinson points out that the history of white feminists’ relations with Indigenous women in Australia actually demonstrates the way Western feminists normalized and po-



sitioned themselves as knowing subjects, while constructing Indigenous women as the Other (*Talkin' Up* xxiv).

Mohanty's and Moreton-Robinson's works are only two examples of comprehensive theoretical studies by "women of color" which articulate issues important for Indigenous feminist debates, particularly the politics of difference. It has been noted by many Indigenous and non-Indigenous critics alike that Indigenous women have frequently resisted, challenged, or altogether ignored the Western women's movement and mainstream feminist discourse. This has been the case not because their identities are not anchored in a strong sense of womanhood and sisterhood or in a belief in women's alliances and solidarity, but because these women have found much of the Western feminist theory irrelevant to their everyday existence and life experience. From Indigenous women's perspective, the core of their lives is frequently in the everyday survival of their families and communities as well as in grassroots political work rather than in abstract theorizing (Little n. pag.; Felton and Flanagan 53; Tsolidis 37; A. Smith, "Native American Feminism" 121; Jaimes and Halsey 330–331). The reasons for this cautious response to mainstream feminism by Indigenous women include what they perceive as latent racism within the mainstream feminist movement, its negligence in addressing the complicity of white colonial women in the colonization process, and the overly abstract theoretical debates that fail to address everyday social injustices. Thus until recently, mainstream feminism was viewed by some Indigenous women activists and writers as a continuing imperialist project (e.g. Jaimes and Halsey 331–332). Therefore, in order to support Indigenous issues such as sovereignty and self-determination, Indigenous women tend to reject mainstream feminist politics. Consequently, they might be facing a considerable dilemma about what is often perceived as an either/or choice: their potential alliance with feminism can be viewed as colliding with their anti-racist struggles and politics of sovereignty, while their involvement in Indigenous rights movement sometimes involves suppressing their feminist agenda (Tsolidis 33; Jaimes and DeCora Means qtd. in A. Smith, "Native American Feminism" 117).

In the context of the Indigenous women's situation in North America, Devon A. Mihesuah warns that even though the agendas of feminist discourse and Indigenous research have recently grown and the integration of Indigenous women's studies and feminist theory would seem a logical step, it is not desirable unless mainstream feminist scholars become involved in "reciprocal, practical dialogue" with Indigenous women ("A Few Cautions" 1250). The obstacles preventing a deeper integration of Indigenous women's thought into mainstream feminism concern, according to Native feminist scholars, the speaking position of non-Indigenous scholars and researchers who in some cases tend to speak *for* Indigenous women. The implication is that there is an authoritative voice among Native North American women (frequently identified with traditionalist positions), while



this is obviously not so. Such assumptions have a rather damaging effect on Indigenous women's activism as it creates a superficial dichotomy between the so-called "traditionalist" women and the "assimilated" or "progressive" women (Mihesuah, "A Few Cautions" 1248), where the "traditionalist" Indigenous women are positioned as rejecting mainstream feminism as something alien to traditional Indigeneity, while the "assimilated/progressive" strand, on the contrary, allies with feminism. Thus the caution that Mihesuah calls for applies to both mainstream feminists who sometimes tend to disregard the diversity of Indigenous women's experience, and to Indigenous women themselves. As Mihesuah contends, "there isn't a single one [voice] among Native women, and no one feminist theory totalizes Native women's thought. Rather, there is a spectrum of multiheritage women, in between 'traditional' and 'progressive,' who possess a multitude of opinions on what it means to be a Native female" ("A Few Cautions" 1249). The complexity of Indigenous women's involvement with mainstream feminism therefore stems not only from the history of colonization and the imposition of the European patriarchal system onto Native communities, but also from the inevitable diversity of voices among Indigenous women themselves; as such, it is not possible to present Indigenous feminism as a monolithic position.

Although the critique of mainstream feminism by Indigenous women has certainly presented valid arguments, it is also important to stress that there are many Indigenous women who, if not embracing mainstream feminism, at least support some of its ideas. It is therefore misleading to conclude that Indigenous women can never endorse mainstream feminism and, at the same time, their particular communities' interests. In some cases, Indigenous women who want to engage with feminist issues may respond to mainstream feminism by creating their own feminist discourse and/or making allies with other marginalized feminist thinkers, particularly African American or Latin American women (Jaimes and Halsey 335). On the other hand, many Indigenous feminists emphasize that struggles for land and self-determination continue to carry the same weight as feminist issues, even preceding them in importance when the situation demands it. The more recent scholarship of Indigenous women, begun in the 1990s, especially promotes a less reductive and more complex analysis of the engagement of Indigenous women in the feminist agenda. One such re-defining discussion on this topic is offered in the work of the Native American activist and scholar Andrea Smith, who regularly addresses the interventions Indigenous feminism makes in other fields, such as American studies, ethnic studies, and gender studies, and examines their intersections. In her articles "Indigenous Feminism Without Apology" and "Native American Feminism, Sovereignty, and Social Change," as well as in the later work towards her project on Native Feminisms, Andrea Smith argues that "Native women's activists' theories about feminism, about the struggle against sexism both within Native communities and the society at large, and about the importance



of working in coalition with non-Native women are complex and varied. These theories are not monolithic and cannot simply be reduced to the dichotomy of feminist versus nonfeminist” (“Native American Feminism” 118). The forums that Smith organized in 2006 at the American Studies Association conference and in the ensuing special issue of *American Quarterly* in 2008 aimed at establishing a discussion group which would help articulate a theory of Native Feminisms. Native Feminisms “transform how we understand the project of sovereignty and nation-building in the first place. They challenge how we conceptualize the relationship between indigenous nations and nation-states, how we organize sovereignty, and how we tie sovereignty to a global struggle for liberation” (Smith and Kauanui 241). In other words, for Smith, Indigenous women can be both feminists and advocates of Native sovereignty.

In Australia, analyses of the ways in which Aboriginal women engage with feminism and examine the intersections of gender and race were available from the 1970s in the texts by, for example, Roberta Sykes and Pat O’Shane, but gained significant momentum in the 1990s. Scholars, activists and writers, such as Marcia Langton, Melissa Lucashenko, Catrina Felton, Liz Flanagan, Larissa Behrendt, Jackie Huggins, and, in particular, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, have all contributed to making visible the complexities of Indigenous women’s relationship to mainstream feminism, in particular they focused on “whiteness as a hegemonic ideology centered in feminism” (Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ Up* 174). Their critique of the white women’s movement in Australia is based on the premise that “incommensurabilities and irreducible differences exist between us [Indigenous women] and white feminists” (Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ Up* 151). Moreton-Robinson stresses that Indigenous women in Australia reject the accommodation of difference that is required by the feminist movement, and on the contrary demand that they be allowed to “maintain [their] cultural integrity in [their] struggle for self-determination” (151). White women’s history in Australia is perceived as history “of invasion, dispossession, destruction of culture, abduction, rape, exploitation of labour and murder” (Behrendt 29). This antagonistic discourse—established by Indigenous women’s political activists in the 1960s and 1970s, a time of significant political change for all Indigenous people in Australia—has been enhanced by another arena which was, at least in the Australian context, dominated by Indigenous women since the 1980s—the genre of life writing. This genre, materialized in dozens of Indigenous women’s autobiographies, testimonies, and transcribed oral life stories, influenced how Aboriginal women’s lives were perceived and represented. These images then contributed to challenging the discourse of mainstream feminists by showing Indigenous women as playing very complex roles in families, kinship structures, and communities; as occupying significant positions in the educational, political, and economic spheres; and recently as being co-responsible for passing on Aboriginal knowledge and practices (Brewster, *Literary*



*Formations* 42). By publishing their own and their families' life stories, they have taken up the task of recording Aboriginal family and community life, including women's accounts of gender-specific strategies of resistance through forms of family-based traditional knowledge. As will be demonstrated in the second half of this book through the analysis of North American and Australian Indigenous women's life writing narratives, in the face of excessive assimilationist policies and government surveillance, the preservation of the extended Aboriginal family became a site of resistance and survival.

An illustrative example of a specific project that promotes a complex *theoretical* Indigenous feminist approach in Australia, one that complements the Aboriginal women's cultural production, is the concept of "tiddaism" developed by Catrina Felton and Liz Flanagan in what they call "Tidda's Manifesto" (53, 57).<sup>5</sup> "Tidda" refers informally to "sister" in Aboriginal English, and Aboriginal feminist activists use this term to invoke a sense of sisterhood and solidarity among themselves and their common political and social struggles. Tiddaism has been designed to redress the need for an Indigenous field of analysis working towards "articulating our [Koori women's] experiences and analys[ing] the factors that shape our [Koori women's] reality" (53).<sup>6</sup> It addresses a variety of issues, such as eliminating oppressive impositions of white feminist domination, establishing Koori women's own political and cultural agenda, and developing appropriate methodologies for cultural analyses (53). Tiddaism also demands recognition of the fact that mainstream feminists often speak from a position of power that excludes Aboriginal women: "white feminists possess an inability to look outside their own cultural perspective. Yet they constantly speak with some apparent legitimised authority about our experiences" (Felton and Flanagan 54). According to Janine Little, tiddaism is situated not as a counter-discourse, but as an informing discourse: "To posit tiddaism as counter-discourse would leave the existing critical arena intact as an intellectual field that acknowledges an alternative voice through approaches that apparently work. As an informing discourse, tiddaism challenges the field to go to the informants and ask for whom the approaches work" (Little n. pag.). Although such work may still be perceived as marginal outside the Koori and Murri women's community that stimulated it in the 1990s, it nevertheless demonstrates the need to engage critically with mainstream feminism. Initiatives like this one

5 In addition to Felton and Flanagan's article, other influential writings in the 1990s addressed the relationship between Aboriginal and mainstream feminisms in Australia: Jackie Huggins' "A Contemporary View of Aboriginal Women's Relationship to the White Feminist Movement" (1994), Melissa Lucashenko's "No Other Truth? Aboriginal Women and Australian Feminism" (1994), Georgina Tsolidis' "Theorizing Ethnicity in Australian Feminism" (1993), Eva Johnson's "A Question of Difference" (1994), and Larrisa Behrendt's "Aboriginal Women and White Lies of the Feminist Movement: Implications for Aboriginal Women in Rights Discourse" (1993).

6 "Koori" refers to Aboriginal people of New South Wales, while the term "Murri" refers to Aboriginal people in Queensland.





were crucial in drawing attention to the hegemony of whiteness permeating the feminist movement in Australia, and they called for a new kind of feminism in which white women's racism and Indigenous women's experience of it would be acknowledged (Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up* 171).

Given the context of the development of Indigenous feminism outlined above, the following analysis of texts by Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle, and Jackie Huggins examines three different perspectives from which these Indigenous women writers critically respond to mainstream feminism and, simultaneously, articulate their own alternative versions of Indigenous feminism as they accentuate different issues. So, for example, Paula Gunn Allen's main purpose in *The Sacred Hoop* is to advocate the gynocratic nature of some Indigenous communities in pre-contact North America, which was forcibly erased by the imposed Western patriarchal system. But she also writes from the position of an Indigenous lesbian—a position that has often been repressed, if not ignored, in scholarly examinations of her work. Lee Maracle's *I Am Woman* focuses on condemning any form of sexism and violence towards women within Indigenous communities, while employing a rather radical feminist Marxist perspective. In *Sister Girl*, Jackie Huggins' critique of white feminism in Australia is primarily based on the historical development of racial tensions between white and Aboriginal women. She thus argues for opening a dialogue with Australian mainstream feminists which would be based on the recognition of this historical imperative. Although it is possible to suggest that Allen, Maracle, and Huggins generally reproach mainstream feminism for ethnocentrism and lack of commitment to anti-racist and anti-colonialist struggles, at times even advocating a separatist stance, it is obvious that their specific localities, histories, and cultures account for variations in the intensity and focus of these critiques. The following textual comparison, however, illuminates parallels and common strategies which provide an insight into Indigenous women's perspectives on the women's movement and feminist discourse. It is notable, for example, that none of the authors chooses to simply ignore white feminist discourse. Instead, they all engage intellectually in constructive criticism and initiate dialogues, if not alliances, *with* white women, hoping to bring an end to the injustices within the movement that has based its existence primarily on fighting oppression. By drawing attention to the clashes and contradictions between Indigenous women's experience and mainstream feminist theory, the three authors promote what Julia Emberley calls the "feminism of decolonization" (80).



## Paula Gunn Allen | Gynocracies

In the beginning was thought, and her name was Woman. ... She is the Old Woman who tends the fires of life. She is the Old Woman Spider who weaves us together in a fabric of interconnection. She is the Eldest God, the one who Remembers and Re-members.

Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop* (11)

The Native American author and scholar Paula Gunn Allen (1939–2008), who identified her cultural heritage mainly as Laguna Pueblo,<sup>7</sup> was a well-known scholar of Native American studies and a fiction writer, author of the acclaimed autobiographical novel *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* (1983) and of several collections of poetry. She also edited, among other things, an influential anthology, *Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women* (1989), and published a textbook of course designs for Native American studies programs, *Studies in American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs* (1983). But most of all she is recognized for her groundbreaking collection of critical essays *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (1986), arguably the first book-length study exploring gender issues from an Indigenous perspective. *Off the Reservation* (1998), a cross-cultural collection of essays blending history, myths, autobiography, and biography, has also drawn critical attention. Apart from these publications, Allen's writing includes many anthologized short stories and poems, as well as articles, essays and editing. Her academic career, which involved positions at several prestigious U.S. universities, centered on Native American literature, mythology, oral aspects of storytelling, and Native feminist approaches to literary texts. Generally, Allen's writing and academic careers exemplify the life journey of a public intellectual with a Western university education who is at the same time strongly attached to her Indigenous background and land, drawing in her work on the tribal culture of Laguna Pueblo and her identity as an Indigenous woman.<sup>8</sup>

In my analysis of Allen's response to mainstream feminism, I rely primarily on *The Sacred Hoop* which has now become a classic of its own kind, judging from numerous references to it in studies on Native American women and their writ-

7 The daughter of a part Laguna-Sioux mother and a Lebanese-American father, Allen grew up in Cubero—a Chicano village in New Mexico, close to the Laguna and Acoma pueblos (Pulitano 22). She identified strongly with the region of New Mexico and the pueblo culture of the Southwest, but also voiced her truly multicultural identity in, among other things, her bilingual Spanish/English writing ("Paula Gunn Allen").

8 Allen received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing from the University of Oregon and her doctorate in Native American studies from the University of New Mexico. She held academic positions at the University of California at Berkeley, San Francisco State University, University of New Mexico, and UCLA.



ing, as well as on Indigenous feminism. In this pioneering work of Native American criticism, Allen introduced a new theoretical framework for reading Native American literature. Several of her concepts, such as the “feminine principle” and “gynocracy,” are still frequently referenced. Elvira Pulitano, despite her critique of Allen’s theoretical position in *The Sacred Hoop*, acknowledges her undeniable influence on shaping Native American critical theory and developing “discursive strategies concerning Native American culture and literature, strategies that suggest a theory of reading generated largely, although by no means exclusively, from Native American cultural and intellectual traditions” (2). Alongside writers such as Craig Womack, Robert Warrior, Greg Sarris, Louis Owens, and Gerald Vizenor, Allen, according to Pulitano, contributed to producing

a corpus of works that could represent the beginning of a Native American critical theory, a complex hybridized project that, while deeply embedded within the narratives of Native American oral tradition and Native epistemology, inevitably conducts dialogues with the larger critical discourse of contemporary theory and significantly disputes the scholarly assumptions of a resistance to theory within Native American studies. (Pulitano 3)

Similarly, Kathleen M. Donovan hails *The Sacred Hoop* as a text which initiated “valuable discussion of individual writers’ relationships to the oral tradition,” in which oral traditions provide “new ways of knowing through a dialogic potency that is accretive rather than linear” and “emphasis on continuance rather than extinction” (Donovan 9). I would also suggest that Allen’s contribution to forming Indigenous feminist thought from an Indigenous woman’s perspective is undeniable; this section will focus on a discussion of the major features of Allen’s feminist thought and, most importantly, will relate her position to that of mainstream feminism in order to identify certain overlaps as well as divergences. In addition to shaping Native American criticism and feminism, *The Sacred Hoop* offers an insight into Allen’s personal memories of her childhood spent at Laguna, the beginning of her academic career, and her personal views on being a Native woman in contemporary American society. It is this aspect of the text that allows me to include *The Sacred Hoop* in the study of Indigenous women’s personal non-fiction and life writing.

Allen’s engagement with feminism as a theoretical as well as activist stream of critical thinking is expressed throughout *The Sacred Hoop*, both in her literary criticism and personal recollections. As suggested above, Allen presents theoretical concepts related to the female-centered worldview of some traditional Indigenous communities, most notably the concept of *gynocracy*, which Allen describes as “woman-centered tribal societies in which matrilocality, matrifocality, matrilinearity, maternal control of household goods and resources, and female deities of



the magnitude of the Christian God were and are present and active features of traditional tribal life” (*The Sacred Hoop* 3–4). The notion of gynocracy is then extended in Allen’s later collection of essays, *Off the Reservation: Reflections on Boundary-Busting Border-Crossing Loose Cannons* (1998) in which Allen introduces her idea of *gynosophy*, loosely defined as feminine wisdom focused on the “ecological, spiritual, and political” knowledges characterizing *gynarchy* (*Off the Reservation* 8, 10). Apart from assigning importance to the status and power of women in traditional social structures, *The Sacred Hoop* also foregrounds the role played by Native female deities, female-oriented rituals and myths, and creation figures such as Spider Woman and Thought Woman. In this perspective, woman is at the center of all creation, life, and continuance. It is not surprising that this argument has drawn much criticism from other Indigenous women, as well as from non-Indigenous scholars, for its sweeping generalizations about the category of a “Native Woman,” its insistence on the essentially gynocratic nature of Native American cultures, and its overestimation of the role gays and lesbians play in “traditional” Indigenous societies (e.g. Jaimes and Halsey 333; Pulitano 30–34; Donovan 9–10).

Another strong argument permeating *The Sacred Hoop*, perhaps as controversial as the one stressing the typically gynocratic nature of Native American tribes, is the imposition of European patriarchal values on Indigenous peoples in North America, destabilizing the tribal cultures to such an extent that it led to their physical and cultural genocide (*The Sacred Hoop* 3). On many occasions, Allen reiterates the massive changes European colonization brought to Indigenous social structures. In the chapter “How the West Was Really Won,” she emphasizes “a progressive shift from gynecentric, egalitarian, ritual-based social systems to secularized structures closely imitative of the European patriarchal system” (195). As a result of this shift, Allen continues, women, but also gay men and spiritual and ritual leaders, lost their status and power in the traditional communities (195). This argument has also been attacked for its essentialism and for reducing the differences among the many Native American tribes’ social and kinship structures, even though this claim, in my view, is more substantial in terms of evidence than Allen’s insistence on gynocracy as the foundational form of Native American social structures. Nevertheless, in retrospect it seems that Allen’s generalizations had a point—to account, in a simple and persuasive way, for the devastating effects of colonization resulting in the break-down of many Indigenous tribes and villages. On the other hand, Allen does not highlight the disastrous consequences of the European arrival in the Americas at any cost. She is also careful to point out a strong sense of spirituality, continuance and survival, which she identifies, among other things, as major issues in Native American existence (*The Sacred Hoop* 2).

In *The Sacred Hoop*, Allen often reflects on both overlaps and clashes between the mainstream feminist agenda and the Native American worldview. The chapter



titled “Who Is Your Mother? Red Roots of White Feminism” gives voice to the stream in Native American thought that maintains that feminist principles as such have always formed an inseparable part of the Indigenous worldview and social structures, and that feminism as a concept has actually been borrowed from Indigenous women (A. Smith, “Native American Feminism” 119). Allen’s call for the return of the repressed female power may be related to the later published Lee Maracle’s *I Am Woman*, even though Maracle’s sense of what she calls “re-feminization,” does not underscore the return to traditional spirituality, as will be shown later. Allen’s insistence on returning to tribalism sometimes leads her to promote romanticized and nostalgic visions of pre-contact Native American societies:

During the ages when tribal societies existed in the Americas largely untouched by patriarchal oppression, they developed elaborate systems of thought that included science, philosophy, and government based on a belief in the central importance of female energies, autonomy of individuals, cooperation, human dignity, human freedom, and egalitarian distribution of status, goods, and services. (*The Sacred Hoop* 211)

However, such an idealized vision of pre-contact tribalism may run the risk of not only excluding contemporary Indigenous urban dwellers, those who have involuntarily lost touch with traditional cultural heritage, or those who have consciously chosen to assimilate into the mainstream society, but also of inviting critiques accusing Allen of being complicit in perpetuating what Elvira Pulitano calls “ethnographic discourse” (21). This kind of discourse, Pulitano argues, builds on “constructing Indianness from the seemingly romantic, sentimentalized perspective of Eurocentric thinking, the same thinking that for more than five hundred years has defined the Indian as the Other of Euramerican consciousness” (21).

In terms of relating her feminist thought to mainstream feminism in the US, Allen voices the most severe critique when she situates mainstream feminist practice as complicit with the general American tendency to privilege the rejection of the traditions and cultural ties of the incoming immigrants in favor of assimilation, which, Allen claims, is at the heart of the American experience. In Allen’s view, this tendency “to forget” is in stark contrast to the Native American imperative “to remember” and it results in the loss of memory, which Allen sees as a major factor contributing to the repression, if not the loss, of female power embedded in Native tribal societies (*The Sacred Hoop* 210, 213). Allen provides historical cases of the codification of women’s power in decision-making, political, and economic spheres. For example, in the Iroquois Confederation of the 1600s, the “tribal feminists” demanded concession of power from the Iroquois men in order to take an active part in the tribal decision-making (Steiner qtd. in Allen, *The Sacred Hoop* 213). Based on these instances, Allen believes that by demanding universal empowerment of women, mainstream feminism turns a blind eye to the historical



realities of many Indigenous tribes who did value women's power in a variety of spheres. Therefore, mainstream feminism, in Allen's view, endorses the popular images of Native North American women as "beasts of burden, squaws, traitors, or, at best, vanished denizens of a long-lost wilderness" (214). This drives Allen to conclude that "the price the [mainstream] feminist community must pay because it is not aware of the recent presence of gynarchical societies on this continent is unnecessary confusion, division, and much lost time" (213). Consequently, Allen demands that mainstream feminists be aware of the continent's history and cultivate memories of origins, specific cultures, and histories, as well as the line of female ancestors.

Allen's feminist position is best characterized by notions of hybridity and strategic ambivalence, as it oscillates between separatism and a call for cooperation based on mutual respect. Like Maracle and Huggins, Allen is suspicious and skeptical of some aspects of mainstream feminist theory and practice, but more lenient in others. On the one hand, *The Sacred Hoop* presents statements that keep recurring, in one way or another, in many Indigenous women's accounts of their relationship to mainstream feminism: "Many Indian women are uncomfortable with feminism because they perceive it (correctly) as white-dominated. They (not so correctly) believe that it is concerned with issues that have little bearing on their own lives" (224). Allen certainly does not shy away from criticizing mainstream feminism when she believes the movement has been complicit in oppressing or ignoring Native American history and culture, expressing her concern that this can lead to "serious misunderstandings ... and in the process become a new racism based on what becomes the feminist canon" (283n6). It is in this context that she most severely advocates her separatist views by promoting a traditionalist perspective and a return, often nostalgic, to pre-contact tribal social structures.

On the other hand, Allen does self-identify as a feminist (e.g. 187, 224) and sees the benefits of finding common ground with some feminist agendas, especially through her involvement with lesbian feminism (187). Occasionally she comments on similar goals of the two feminist streams: "Modern American Indian women, like their non-Indian sisters, are deeply engaged in the struggle to redefine themselves. In their struggle they must reconcile traditional tribal definitions of women with industrial and post-industrial non-Indian definitions" (43). Interestingly enough, Allen addresses the mainstream feminists as "sisters," a term which is in Maracle's and Huggins' texts reserved exclusively for Indigenous women or at best for other "women of color." However, Allen, though on a much lesser scale, concurs with Maracle's scathing critique of sexism in Indigenous communities, accusing Native American men of taking advantage of the imposed patriarchal rule and "white male-centeredness" in the context of growing violence against women and children (224).

The feature that perhaps most strongly resonates in the three Indigenous women's writing examined in this section, one that is more often than not present



in other Indigenous women's personal non-fiction, involves inscribing their own lives and personal experiences into their critical writings. Interweaving the theoretical/critical and the personal, Allen draws heavily on her traditional Laguna Pueblo upbringing, particularly in the passages in which she elaborates on the oral aspects of Indigenous cultures, storytelling tradition, creation stories, and the representations of Native womanhood. In such passages, she may incorporate, for example, a creation story told by her great-grandmother, or a memory of her mother telling stories with seemingly simple but deeply educational content about cooking, childbearing, or medicine, demonstrating how these stories have informed her identity as an Indigenous woman. At the same time, Allen draws attention to the stereotypes promoting negative images of Native Americans that she encounters at mainstream educational institutions. In the interview with John Purdy, Allen comments on the impossibility of separating one's immediate social background and everyday experience from general abstractions of the ways in which Indigeneity is constructed:

It's not that we sit around and think 'Well, let's see, the woman's tradition is...'; you just grow up being informed of these things, and nobody says that's 'the Indian way.' It's just part of what you learn from your folks. They seldom identify it in any way, so you just think that's how reality is—at least that is how your reality is. (Allen, "And Then, Twenty Years Later ...")

Thus inscribing their personal experiences with both positive role models of, in particular, female family members and negative projections of modern female Indigeneity serves all of the three authors examined in this section to support and validate their analytical conclusions.

However, some critics may perceive the subjectivity shaping the narrating voice in Indigenous women's personal non-fiction as harmful to the validity of their research and writing. Speaking of Paula Gunn Allen's *The Sacred Hoop*, Pulitano feels "uneasy with Allen's declarations" (37), criticizing her for "assum[ing] the pose of Native informant" (36), for "tokenization of the Native" (36), and for making "puzzling" claims (37). She seems particularly irritated by Allen's statements such as: "Whatever I read about Indians I check with my inner self. ... But my inner self, the self who knows what is true about American Indians because it *is* one, always warns me when something deceptive is going on" (6–7, original emphasis). Pulitano makes ironic comments, asking "How does this inner self know 'what is true about American Indians,' and, more important, how does this inner self define *Indianness*?" (34, original emphasis). What Pulitano finds lacking in Allen's analysis, it seems, is evidence and objectivity, although this is not explicitly noted. It is true that *The Sacred Hoop* generalizes, at times, too much, and Allen has been rightly accused of essentialism. Pulitano, however, seems to reiterate the



implicit critiques of Indigenous authors who write personal non-fiction and include general comments about Indigenous people and communities which, in the critics' view, are not supported by anything other than the "inner selves," which apparently makes the critics "uneasy". However, Allen, on careful reading of the introductory remarks about her methodology and position as a subjective voice in *The Sacred Hoop*, complements, and even contradicts, her own declarations, for example when claiming that her reflections are "unfiltered through the minds of western patriarchal colonizers" (*The Sacred Hoop* 6) and a few paragraphs later that "[her] method is somewhat western and somewhat Indian" (*The Sacred Hoop* 7). In such moments, the text may come across as inconsistent. But at the same time, Allen acknowledges her subjectivity, her personal bias, including the inevitable contradictions and ambivalence of her personal exploration of Indigenous worldviews when she claims: "my method of choice is my own understanding of American Indian life and thought. ... I write out of a Laguna Indian woman's perspective ... my essays are subject to the same vicissitudes of interpretation as are her [Kochinnenako's] stories when they appear in a western context" (*The Sacred Hoop* 6). In this, Allen precedes Lee Maracle, whose narrative is also driven by her subjective voice and her own personal experience.

It may be difficult to decide whether Allen's intention in *The Sacred Hoop* can be interpreted as a call for a kind of reconciliation between Indigenous and mainstream feminism under certain conditions—something that Jackie Huggins voices in *Sister Girl*—or whether her insistence on taking a separatist stance prevails. It is clear, however, that Allen's most significant contribution to verbalizing Indigenous feminist thought consists of making a direct relation between European colonialism in North America and the disempowerment of Indigenous women. In this light, the many critiques of her approach in *The Sacred Hoop* should not overlook the fact that Allen has opened up an important space for re-thinking the ways in which patriarchal and colonialist discourses have silenced Indigenous women.

## Lee Maracle | Re-feminization

There is nothing worse than being a woman who is dark, brilliant and déclassée.

Lee Maracle, *I Am Woman* (102)

The First Nations writer Lee Maracle (Métis/Salish),<sup>9</sup> a member of the Stó:lō Nation, has been recognized for a number of critically acclaimed works that have shaped the Canadian textual landscape. Crossing various genres, her writings in-

9 Maracle's identities are multiple: sometimes she identifies herself, or is identified, as a Métis writer according to her mother's ancestry. Increasingly she stresses her father's ancestry, which is Stó:lō or Coast Salish (Hoy 223).





clude her fictionalized autobiography, *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* (1990); the collection of poetry *Bent Box* (2000); the novels *Ravensong* (1993), *Daughters Are Forever* (2002), and *Celia's Song* (2014); a collection of short stories *First Wives Club: Coast Salish Style* (2010); and a collection of essays combining academic writing, personal essays, autobiographical sketches, and poetry, *I Am Woman* (1996).<sup>10</sup> Maracle has also edited several anthologies, written numerous articles, and given many speeches. Unlike Paula Gunn Allen, she grew up in the urban environment of North Vancouver, separated from her Indigenous culture (Bonikowsky n. pag.). But like Allen and Huggins, Maracle is politically active and an activist in promoting Indigenous voices, often speaking on issues related to the history of colonization as well as institutionalized racism and sexism, both outside and within First Nations communities in Canada. She has been directly involved in political groups such as the Red Power Movement and the Liberation Support Movement, and in important protests like the Oka Crisis in 1990. She gained university education at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, later becoming a teacher and mentor at the University of Toronto; in 2001, she was appointed the Distinguished Visiting Professor of Canadian Culture at Western Washington University. She currently teaches at the University of Toronto First Nations House (Bonikowsky n. pag.).

From Lee Maracle's non-fiction, this chapter focuses on *I Am Woman* (1996). As its subtitle suggests, it provides a "native perspective on sociology and feminism," interweaving personal voice and autobiographical elements with more analytical observations on the issues that Indigenous communities in Canada face at present as well as with poetry and fictionalized stories. In the preface to the text, Maracle reveals her personal and political motives that inform the contents of her book: "*I Am Woman* represents my personal struggle with womanhood, culture, traditional spiritual beliefs and political sovereignty, written during a time when this struggle was not over" (vii). By combining various genres, Maracle creates a generically multilayered text that presents a specific voice within Indigenous women's writing. In the self-referential passages, Maracle offers an insight into the construction of her book's particular textuality: for example, she admits that the text is informed by events in her own life and at the same time by life stories collected from people she knows. Instead of promoting the realistic mode of her writing, Maracle is inclined to incorporate imaginative elements: "I, too, have taken the stories of my life and others' lives and added some pure fabrications of my imagination, rewriting them as my own. Rather than distorting the facts,

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10 Some of Maracle's works were re-written and re-published. This is the case of *Bobbi Lee*, which was written as early as the 1970s in collaboration with Donald Barnett, originally as an as-told-to autobiography. It is not clearly stated in the prologue to the book how the writing process happened or whether Maracle rewrote some of it for the 1990 publication. Similarly, *I Am Woman* was written and published in a typewriter copy in 1988 by the Write-On Press owned by Maracle's husband, and then republished with a different publisher in 1996.



I have altered their presentation” (*I Am Woman* 5). What remains the essential motivation for the text, however, is Maracle’s personal and political struggle against racism and sexism in Canadian society.

*I Am Woman* can be compared to Huggins’ *Sister Girl* in the call for a strong alliance among Native women<sup>11</sup> in what Maracle calls CanAmerica in order to fight sexism and racism. To a certain extent, Maracle insists on the separation of Native women’s struggles from those of mainstream feminism. Her motivation stems, however, from different anxieties than Huggins’ critique. Maracle is more ambivalent in her priorities than Huggins, but generally in *I Am Woman* she puts racism and sexism on the same level, seeing both as the greatest obstacles to liberation. In contrast to both Allen and Huggins, Maracle is strongly political in the Western sense of a commitment to a political ideology: she became acquainted with Marxism when young and since then she has been involved in promoting Marxist ideas of revolutionary struggle against oppression and poverty under capitalism.<sup>12</sup> In *I Am Woman*, however, Maracle’s major trigger for critical discussion is the mainstream women’s movement: as the title appropriately suggests, issues of gender and feminism are central to her analysis of racism.

In the chapter “The Woman’s Movement,” Maracle maintains that “women of color” generally position themselves outside white feminism and that it should not be surprising to find white women of North America racist, defining the feminist movement through their own narrow-minded perspectives (*I Am Woman* 137). She is not, however, specific about which “women of color” she means, and thus cannot avoid the suspicion of homogenizing their view of mainstream feminism. Rather than challenging mainstream feminism from the marginal position of the Other, which is what Paula Gunn Allen does in *The Sacred Hoop*, Maracle points out that women, who throughout the world are predominantly “non-white,” should take on the task of defining and directing the feminist movement and its struggle for emancipation, instead of preoccupying themselves too much with the white women’s movement. Maracle comments on this in what may seem a rather hostile tone: “The women of the world are re-writing history with their bodies. White women of CanAmerica are a footnote to it all. I am not in the habit of concerning myself with footnotes. ... White women figure too largely in our minds. Let us stop chasing them and challenging their humanity at every turn. Let us begin by talking to each other about ourselves” (*I Am Woman* 139). It is precisely

11 I respect Maracle’s preference to use the term “Native women,” “Native feminism” etc. in the writings selected for this section, rather than Indigenous. As for the geographical limitations, Maracle, as most Indigenous people in North America, refuses to acknowledge the Canadian-U.S. border as it was superficially imposed on Indigenous communities of that area, dividing many in an absurd way. Her term “Native,” therefore, includes Indigenous people of both Canada and the U.S.

12 Maracle’s commitment to Marxism is elaborated in some of her writings, most prominently in her autobiographical text *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel*.



this emphasis on “talking in,” in the words of Patricia Monture-Angus, rather than on “talking out” (Monture-Angus 41) that permeates Maracle’s writing in *I Am Woman* and draws her near Jackie Huggins. Like her Australian counterpart, Maracle is not opposed to establishing alliances with mainstream feminists but she sets certain preconditions to the collaboration, suggesting that the white feminists should initiate the process: “Until white women can come to us on our own terms, we ought to leave the door closed. Do we really want to be a part of a movement that sees the majority as the periphery and the minority as the center?” (*I Am Woman* 137–138). In this statement, Maracle actually comes close to Huggins’ call for keeping a distance from white feminism until respect for difference and an effort to engage in anti-racism are visible on the part of the mainstream feminists. In her interview with Janice Williamson, Maracle also comments on the extremely difficult position of a “woman of color” within the wider feminist movement and at events such as feminist conferences, where the critical discussions between white and non-white feminists are falsely perceived as necessarily antagonistic and confrontational, in other words as “pain and rage” (“An Infinite Number” 169). This perception is, in Maracle’s view, rather simplistic, and she keeps promoting the need to engage critically with mainstream feminism as a way to reach closer cooperation and understanding, rather than adopt a separatist stance.

While Jackie Huggins reiterates that the priority of Aboriginal women in Australia is to fight against racism alongside Aboriginal men, Maracle stresses the need to eliminate both racism and sexism, regardless of skin color. Indeed, a description of the plight of sexism takes up most of her book and is highlighted as the main evil of contemporary society in North America in general. Sexism, in Maracle’s terms, does not refer only to power relations between women and men, but primarily it denotes committing physical violence against women and children, such as rape between partners and beatings. Maracle is very open and straightforward about the issue of domestic violence in both Native communities and North American society as a whole. Incorporated into her essayistic writing, there are short stories and poems depicting domestic violence, for example the story “Rusty” (43–61), and short sketches from her women friends’ lives (24). In arguing that rape between partners and domestic violence are common practice in North America, Maracle does not exclude white women, even though she notes, without further explanation, that it might be a more common experience for “women of color” (25). Importantly, Maracle sees patriarchy as something “imported” to Native communities (139), and her assertion that “racism is recent; patriarchy is old” (20) situates her views rather on the mainstream feminist side. But this statement also invokes Paula Gunn Allen’s call for the restoration of the gynocratic arrangement in Indigenous communities. Indeed, Maracle’s response to the publication of *The Sacred Hoop* ten years later may be her concept of “re-feminization” of the original Native social existence as a possible solution



to sexism and racism. At the same time, she warns that this process is not simply a matter of gaining equality with men, as has been often voiced in the demands of second-wave mainstream feminism, within the spheres of house-work, child-care, jobs, and education (*I Am Woman* xi). Unlike Allen, however, Maracle does not understand re-feminization as the return to “spiritual foremothers,” since she perceives this kind of spirituality, embedded in “traditionalism” as false and fetishized by the mainstream culture (39). Instead, Maracle calls for Indigenous women to re-gain the lost power, to speak on their own behalf, and maintain that power. Although Maracle does acknowledge the importance of Native women elders in helping decolonize Native society and develop self-respect in the next generation, this is by no means to be achieved through insistence on traditionalism and mysticism—values that Maracle ascribes to the dominant society’s “parasitic” taste (Godard 208; Maracle, “An Infinite Number” 169). Maracle then suggests that in order to gain liberation, Native women in North America must critically examine the conditions of their lives and the internalization of racism and sexism. One of the ways to initiate this process is, in Maracle’s view, to approach it from a deeply personal point of view and lived experience, retreating to “memories of childhood that are fogged in time” (*I Am Woman* xi). Thus the empowerment can be accomplished through a connection with one’s own (fore)mothers who are anchored in reality, not a mystical spirituality.

Despite her reservations about some aspects of mainstream feminism, Maracle generally supports and finds common ground with the mainstream feminist movement in North America. She even evokes some of its main agenda, especially when it comes to the “traditional” women’s roles and their invisibility. One example of this is her general critique of the objectification of the female body and sexuality created by patriarchal norms, to which she points out:

Sexuality is promoted as the end-all and be-all of womanhood, yet perversely it is often a form of voluntary rape: self-deprecation and the transformation of women into vessels of biological release for men. Our bodies become vessels for male gratification, not the means by which we experience our own sexual wonderment. (*I Am Woman* 24)

Here Maracle clearly concurs with other feminists, regardless of their social status or skin color, in their struggle to de-mystify and de-sexualize the female body. Like Huggins in *Sister Girl*, she also draws attention to the binary opposition between the negative images of Indigenous women’s sexuality which is framed as insufficient or lacking (in comparison to white women) and the overly charged “imaginary” sexuality ascribed to Indigenous women, an image that is “driving us [Indigenous women] to celibacy” (*I Am Woman* 20–21).

Other alliances with the women’s movement that Maracle acknowledges include her appreciation of its role in offering an alternative to the patriarchal



discourse which demands and rewards absolute knowledge based on objective, scientific, and verifiable facts (“An Infinite Number” 173). On this point Maracle concurs with Trinh T. Minh-ha who locates the reason for considering “third-world” women’s writing as “inferior” in its incompatibility with the system of (mostly) male-controlled Western discourse and its stress on veracity achieved through scientism, professionalism, and scholarship (Trinh 49). This complaint of excluding women’s voices from serious critical consideration resonates strongly with second-wave mainstream feminism as it was formulated in the 1970s. Ultimately, Maracle’s engagement affiliates with the women’s movement most strongly when pointing to the plight of women under patriarchal rule from a global point of view: “The systemic breakdown Indigenous women suffer from was predicated on the same fundamental lies which plague all women in the world today. Women are not deserving power because we are emotional beings, beings who are incapable of ‘objective, rational’ thinking” (*I Am Woman* xi). Even though Maracle is clearly being ironic and too generalizing, speaking with a sense of overstatement, it is nevertheless important to see these claims in the context of her own life story: in this light, the title of Maracle’s book is most telling, as *I Am Woman* stands for her personal journey from a denial of her femininity (and feminism) to the recognition of it as a source of strength and empowerment.

Of the three texts which I compare in this section, Maracle’s style is perhaps the most stern, disturbing, and haunting, particularly for non-Indigenous readers, in its condemnation of North American dominant culture. Interestingly, one of the reasons the first version of *I Am Woman* was self-published in 1988 was that Maracle, after receiving negative responses from mainstream publishers, decided to avoid them out of fear of having to compromise the text (Maracle, “An Infinite Number” 170). On the other hand, Maracle, unlike Allen and Huggins, does not hesitate to take a long hard look at Native communities themselves in her uncompromising analysis of sexism and violence against women, which is perhaps one of the most honest and raw aspects of her text. It is particularly Native men who are accused of “anti-woman” attitudes that are, however, only “reserved for Native women” (*I Am Woman* 22). Native men are seen as complicit in denying Native womanhood and perpetuating the system of patriarchy, doing nothing to make their contributions to the community’s well-being visible. This is an argument that is never voiced by Jackie Huggins, who in *Sister Girl* mostly excludes Aboriginal men from her discussions of Aboriginal women’s positions in mainstream society, highlighting instead the complicity of the white Australian women in the racial oppression, but almost never bringing the gender oppression within Indigenous communities to the forefront. Maracle also complains that women form the majority in the Native grassroots organizations, but are the least heard and never the leaders (*I Am Woman* 21). Drawing attention to the invisible yet foundational importance of Indigenous women’s political work within their own communi-



ties may be juxtaposed against the feminist writings of other “women of color,” particularly of Black feminist thought in the USA, which, as Patricia Hill Collins argues, has been a product of the intersection of Black women’s oppression and their political activism (Collins 5–6).

Apart from putting forward Maracle’s views on feminism, sexism, and racism in contemporary North American society, *I Am Woman* resonates with Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop* in its very subjective speaking voice. Recollections, autobiographical sketches, and everyday experiences are intrinsically interwoven in the text and complement the analytical passages. In fact, critics may find the self-admittedly subjective undertone somewhat disturbing. Just as Pulitano feels uneasy about Allen’s statements about her “inner self” (37), critics may view Maracle’s style as lacking evidence and support, especially in her more sociological sections. But *I Am Woman* reads more as a hybrid auto/biographical and documentary text, one that relies on the “values and oratory of Maracle’s Grannies” as much as on her interpretation of other thinkers and theorists that influenced her worldview, most prominently Malcolm X and Franz Fanon (S. Armstrong 86). Allen writes that “[her] method of choice is [her] own understanding of American Indian life and thought” (*The Sacred Hoop* 6), explicitly acknowledging her bias which sometimes leads to ambivalence and contradiction, and Maracle is also ready to claim her allegiance to subjectivity and personal interpretations. In fact, she adopts a very similar position to Allen’s when defining her speaking voice in *I Am Woman*. This voice is anchored in her own “personal struggle with womanhood, culture, traditional spiritual beliefs and political sovereignty, written during a time when this struggle was not over” and is “presented in poetry and stories” (*I Am Woman* vii), rather than through objective analysis supported with data and research. Maracle also admits that her text is “an emotional one” (viii), coming from a “deeply personal place” (xi). Her declaration that she “root[s] [her] heart in the sense of justice [her] mother struggled to impart” (xi) mirrors Allen’s proclamation of turning to her “inner self” and may cause the same unease as Allen’s methodology. Allen’s and Maracle’s authority in their writings stems from and is directly related to their backgrounds and upbringing—this is their “evidence.” That this may be a paradigmatic feature of Indigenous women’s personal non-fiction and life writing will be examined in the last chapter of this section.

In addition, both Allen and Maracle embody what Trinh T. Minh-ha calls the “triple bind”—a position that results from the intersection of being a woman, being “of color,” and being a writer (Trinh 6), seeing writing as a tool of political empowerment and acquiring an authority to speak. Although Maracle’s writing style is highly individual and subjective in its passion, anger, and force, she does speak for Native women in North America to a certain extent, especially when strategically representing “voices of the unheard” and linking the everyday and private with the political and public: “For us racism is not an ideology in the abstract, but



a very real and practical part of our lives” (*I Am Woman* 4). The autobiographical “I” thus allows Maracle to position her authority as a political representative both for women and for Indigenous people. The biggest contribution of *I Am Woman* to the debates on Indigenous feminism is, in my opinion, its strategy of deconstructing previously held claims that sexism in Native communities is secondary because it was alien to pre-contact social structures and that it will be erased once the Indigenous society is successfully decolonized (Churchill qtd. in A. Smith, “Native American Feminism” 121). But Maracle explains that in fact it can be the other way round: because the European settlers colonized Indigenous peoples through the imposition of European gender relations, it follows that unless the patriarchal system is brought down and replaced, a successful decolonization and full self-determination for Indigenous people, women in particular, will not be possible.

## Jackie Huggins | Sisterhoods

Welcome to my journey. For some time I have wanted to put my thoughts down on what it is that spurs me on as a Murri, woman, activist, historian, mother and, of course, “Sister Girl.”

Jackie Huggins, *Sister Girl* (ix)

An Aboriginal woman from Queensland, Jackie Huggins (Bidjara/Birri-Gubba Juru) speaks with pride of her multiple identities. The identities she notes in the quote above must be complemented by being an author whose writing career includes a critically acclaimed collaboration on her mother’s life story, *Auntie Rita* (1994); a multi-generic collection of essays, personal narratives, interviews and articles, *Sister Girl* (1998); and a number of academic articles on topics that parallel those discussed in the Native North American context: the history of Aboriginal women in Australia; the Reconciliation process; the representation of Aboriginal women in literature; Aboriginal education and healthcare; and the critique of Australian mainstream feminism. Huggins is also a frequent public speaker on Aboriginal issues and has held several significant posts, such as Co-Commissioner for Queensland for the Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, the result of which was the influential *Bringing Them Home* report released in 1997, and co-chair of Reconciliation Australia. Huggins earned her degree in history, women’s studies, and education at the University of Queensland where she is now the Deputy Director of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit (“Jackie Huggins—Biography”). In one of the personal essays in *Sister Girl*, Huggins recounts how, in reaction to offensive remarks on her intelligence and learning abilities from her non-Aboriginal teachers, she



set out on a journey to prove the opposite, listing her achievements and contributions to making Aboriginal communities in Australia visible:

I see myself as a multi-faceted and multi-talented person and an advocate for Aboriginal people. ... They see that I have done much along the way: establishing community-based organizations, organizing the first International Indigenous Women's Conference, completing tertiary studies, achieving a high position in the public service, writing articles in journals and chapters in history books, and being a member of national and state Aboriginal advisory boards. (*Sister Girl* 56)

Like Allen and Maracle, Jackie Huggins' identity as an Aboriginal woman has been rooted deeply in her in her people's land, history, and culture, which is a position that informs most of her research and writing.

*Sister Girl* is a useful source for theorizing Indigenous women's personal non-fiction and life writing since it offers an analysis of some contemporary life stories, particularly in relation to Huggins' research on Aboriginal women's exploitation as domestic workers during the 1920s and 1930s. It is also illuminating in terms of its critique of mainstream Australian feminism and historiography. As already suggested, *Sister Girl*, like Allen's *The Sacred Hoop* and Maracle's *I Am Woman*, transgresses genre boundaries in that it includes various subgenres: an academic article on the history of Aboriginal domestic labor; a reflection on the writing of Huggins' mother's biography; a newspaper article; autobiographical and biographical essays; a transcription of a radio interview with the African American feminist bell hooks; a piece of personal non-fiction about presenting a paper at a conference; a confessional account of her relationship with her mother; and a political pamphlet. Throughout the book, even in the most academic and scholarly pieces, Huggins never abandons her subjective voice, always relying on her own lived experience and personal memories, which is a feature that links her writing in *Sister Girl* to Allen's and Maracle's personal non-fiction.

Of the three main texts examined in this section, *Sister Girl* is perhaps most explicitly critical of white feminism.<sup>13</sup> Huggins dedicates an entire essay to exposing the core of her critique. In a generically rich piece which encompasses a confessional mini-preface, historical analysis, polemic essay, and political writing, Huggins voices a powerful critique of white women's complicity in Australia's colonization and racism. The title of this particular essay, "Wedmedi [white woman] – If Only You Knew," already sets the tone of her writing: Huggins directly addresses white women, which may suggest a lack of, as well as a desire for, a dialogue between

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13 In Australia, the term "white feminism" is commonly used among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous feminists, and the two major texts I rely on in this analysis, Huggins' and Moreton-Robinson's, work with the term explicitly. In Canada and the U.S., I am not aware of a parallel use of the term, even though Maracle and Allen do refer to the white women's movement.





Indigenous and settler women. The title also alludes to the discrepancy between the two systems of knowledge and the power, or the lack of it, assigned to each of them. While the dominant white feminist discourse is capable of creating white women's subjectivities, from the point of view of Indigenous women it lacks legitimacy as long as it denies Indigenous and other "women of color" equal access to constructing their own agency based on experience different from that of white women (Felton and Flanagan 54–55; Little n. pag.). Huggins understands white feminism and women's studies as Western cultural products that are complicit in silencing and controlling Indigenous women, and this will be so until the white women's movement understands and recognizes the political and cultural differences of Aboriginal women, one of which is the fact that, in Huggins' view, racial discrimination remains a reality far more severe for Indigenous women in Australia than gender oppression (*Sister Girl* 25–26). In her analysis of the relationships between Indigenous women and white women in the 1950s and 1960s, Huggins comes to the conclusion that the two groups have rather distinct, sometimes even opposing, political agendas. As an example, she contrasts white women's demands for equal opportunities in education and jobs with Aboriginal women having generally better education and, if employed, performing in higher status jobs than Aboriginal men. A similar contrast permeates the issue of women's ability to control their sexuality: while white women demanded at that time to be sexually free and to control their fertility via contraception and abortion, Aboriginal women, quite to the contrary, fought against overly sexually charged stereotypes, demanding the right to say "no" to the sexualization of their bodies, to be sexually restrained, but also to put an end to forced sterilization and to have as many children as they wanted (27). This is an important step in outlining the radical differences in Aboriginal and white women's perceptions of their bodies and sexuality, and Huggins goes on to provide a very detailed and perceptive examination of these differences.

Her analysis of the history of Aboriginal women's domestic work in Australia in the 1920s and 1930s identifies factors that have significantly shaped relations between Aboriginal and white women. The first factor concerns the women's positions in the family and their ability to raise children. While white women called for freedom from the confinement of the households and families in order to participate in the public sphere, Aboriginal women had to struggle to keep their children and families together, demanding the right to run their own households without the constant threat of state intervention. The traumatic experience of Aboriginal women in Australia of having been denied their motherhood due to the state-sanctioned policy of forced removal of the "half-caste" children and the complicity of white Australian women in the Stolen Generations remains a painful memento in the contemporary relations between Aboriginal and white women in Australia (*Sister Girl* 28; Moreton-Robinson 10). Young Aboriginal women who gave birth to children fathered by white men were frequently forced to give up their first-



born children so that they could continue their work as domestics in order to keep “mothering” the children of their white mistresses (*Sister Girl* 7). With the question “What happened to the first-born children of these women who were recruited to domestic service?” (11), Jackie Huggins challenges the silence surrounding this issue, demanding an answer not only on behalf of her own mother who went through a similar experience, but on behalf of many Aboriginal women of the time.

Another factor that has negatively impacted the relationship between Aboriginal and white women, especially during the first half of the twentieth century, is the sexual liaisons between Aboriginal women and their white employers, which more often than not involved the sexual exploitation or rape of Aboriginal women. The consequences of this miscegenation were severe: it disrupted the fabric of Aboriginal social structures as it brought shame on Indigenous men whose dignity suffered and it violated Indigenous women’s rights to motherhood. White women are clearly seen as complicit in this process as evidenced by a number of Indigenous life writing narratives, scholarly analyses, and activist reports. Moreton-Robinson claims that “white middle-class feminists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries perceived miscegenation as being the result of Indigenous women’s sexual promiscuity, lack of dignity and lack of self-respect” (*Talkin’ Up* 166). Huggins demonstrates how instead of attempting to establish cross-racial women’s alliances in order to defy sexual exploitation and rape, white wives frequently refused to believe their Aboriginal “servants” or intervene in any way, sometimes even blaming Aboriginal women for initiating such relations (Huggins, *Sister Girl* 15). Although certainly not all Aboriginal women working as domestic servants were sexually abused and some of them might have consented to sexual relationships with white men, the life writings of Aboriginal women in Australia tend to confirm that the sexual advances and abuse on the part of the white “masters” were quite common, often leading to the Aboriginal mothers having to separate from their children. One of the most well-known Aboriginal autobiographies, *My Place* by Sally Morgan (1987), attests to sexual relationships, including incest, between a white station owner, famous and wealthy pastoralist Drake-Brockman, and Aboriginal women, members of Morgan’s family, who worked on his stations. Marnie Kennedy’s memoir *Born a Half-Caste* (1985) mentions the story of her mother who gave birth to three children fathered by a white man and implies the sexual relationship was without her mother’s consent (2–3). Thus Aboriginal women’s life writing in Australia may be taken as an important source and evidence of the complicated history of sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women, including the fact that “Indigenous woman’s body has been positioned within white society as being accessible, available, deviant and expendable” (Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ Up* 168).

Huggins admits that the issue of the relationships between white mistresses and their Aboriginal “servants” has been a taboo subject in Australian feminist discourse. She reiterates the need to engage in a critical examination of white



women's complicity in colonization: "The focus has been on 'women' as an entity as constituting the oppressed. Yet this [mainstream feminist] literature has never raised the question of whether women themselves are oppressors" (*Sister Girl* 28).<sup>14</sup> Again, a number of life writings by Aboriginal women in Australia expose the inequalities in female relationships by depicting the harsh treatment of these domestic workers by white women (e.g. memoirs by Glenyse Ward, Margaret Tucker, Ella Simon, Marnie Kennedy, and Alice Nannup). According to Moreton-Robinson, while white women and men assumed the roles of the "knowing subject," Aboriginal women were relegated into the "subject position servant" (*Talkin' Up* 22). This is, however, not to suggest that there were no positive or close bonds between Aboriginal and white women in the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, some life writings reveal more or less temporary alliances or even friendships with white women, but most of these encounters are reduced to occasional acts of kindness and generosity (e.g. memoirs by Ella Simon, Alice Nannup, Glenyse Ward, and Della Walker). It seems, nevertheless, that even these relationships were defined predominantly by white women and men; on the other hand, such interpretations do not pretend that Indigenous women were only victims in these relationships. On the contrary, they developed a number of subversive strategies, as will be demonstrated in the analysis of Indigenous women's resistance to assimilation in the second section of this book.

At present, some changes have certainly occurred in the sphere of the relationships between Aboriginal and white feminists in Australia, but many tensions remain. For example, Jackie Huggins, writing in the 1990s, points to the still prevailing superior positioning of white women in educational institutions and welfare programs: "White women were and are still a major force in the implementation of government policies of assimilation and cultural genocide. As welfare workers, institution staff, school teachers and adoptive/foster mothers, white women continue to play major oppressive roles in the lives of Aboriginal women and children" (*Sister Girl* 30). And so white feminists' maternalism, evident in their desire to "educate" Aboriginal women and "raise" their feminist consciousness, sustains the colonial conditions of disempowering Indigenous women. Huggins' critique of this kind of maternalism resonates with Mohanty's theoretical analysis of Western feminism's tendency, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, to view "women of color" as disempowered victims in need of feminist liberation.

Despite her fierce critique of contemporary white feminism in Australia, Jackie Huggins does remain vocal in a cross-racial and cross-cultural dialogue with the mainstream feminist discourse, albeit under the condition that the politics of differ-

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14 Since the publication of *Sister Girl* in 1998, a number of articles discussing this topic have appeared, among them Victoria Haskins' "Beyond Complicity: Questions and Issues for White Women in Aboriginal History" (2006), and a book-length study *Uncommon Ground: White Women in Aboriginal History*, edited by Anna Cole et al. (2005).



ence and Indigenous women's demands are acknowledged and respected. The suggestions made by Huggins for transcending the cultural and racial barriers include white feminists' move towards racial equality within the movement, the construction of a comprehensible and sustainable anti-racial and anti-colonial discourse that is not torn away from reality, and meaningful representation of Aboriginal women when collaborations between them and white women take place (*Sister Girl* 35–36). Until these measures are visibly in operation, Huggins maintains resolutely, many Aboriginal women will not be willing to initiate discussions with white women. Although she admits at times that certain alliances *are* possible between Aboriginal, immigrant, and Anglo-Australian women, Huggins nevertheless reiterates that Indigenous women in Australia prefer “to be separate in [their] struggles” (116).

On the other hand, Huggins herself sets an example and proves that collaboration between Aboriginal and white women in Australia is possible and can function as a positive example. In a collaborative and dialogic article presented together with Kay Saunders, a white female historian, at a conference in 1993, Huggins expresses in the epilogue her belief in the possibilities of forming alliances between white and Aboriginal feminist historians, “particularly if the historians happen to have some grounding in race relations” (Huggins and Saunders 68). This common “grounding,” frequently emphasized by Huggins throughout her writing, means that before making any attempts to establish a meaningful dialogue, white people must educate themselves in the history of racism in their respective countries. In the end, Huggins does point out the importance of cross-cultural learning and reconciliation when she claims: “It is imperative that we learn from each other; incorporating our different skills and expertise in redressing the imbalance of what remains the long-awaited beginning of Aboriginal documented history” (Huggins and Saunders 68–69). Interestingly, this piece of collaborative writing demonstrates the possibilities of cross-racial collaboration in research and writing without jeopardizing one's own grounding in specific locations and histories. Jackie Huggins notes that “it is clear that Kay's [Saunders'] style and mine are quite distinct. ... [W]e represent the two faces and products of colonization. ... The difference is that we have joined forces as a white woman and a Black woman to refute claims by feminists that all women are the same” (Huggins and Saunders 69). In other words, Saunders and Huggins, each approaching the topic from her own perspective based on her particular background, show on a practical level that maintaining a distinctive voice anchored in culturally incommensurate identities can actually successfully defy the universalist notions of womanhood within mainstream feminist discourse in Australia.<sup>15</sup> The result of this approach invites not only better collaboration and

15 The collaborative article mentioned here is not the only case of Huggins' interest in this type of writing; other collaborations include, for example, a chapter titled “Reconciling Our Mothers' Lives: Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Women Coming Together” (2001) written together with Kay Saunders and Isabel Tarrago; and collaborative editorial work on *Placebound: Australian Feminist Geographies*



consultation when researching Aboriginal women's issues but also the formulation of new feminist discourse, as the following quote from *Sister Girl* suggests: "A new feminism must be constructed which is global and international—to embrace all issues of oppression and not just one of its manifestations. It must have open and egalitarian lines of communication and respect for the cultural diversity of oral and written forms of expression" (119). So Jackie Huggins has demonstrated that collaboration with white feminists in Australia does not have to occur at the expense of losing the critical edge of Indigenous women's relations to mainstream feminism. In fact, such collaboration can actually become part of the mainstream feminist discourse given its respect and recognition for the social, historical and cultural differences among Australian women.

To conclude this chapter, the comparative analysis of Paula Gunn Allen's, Lee Maracle's, and Jackie Huggins' explorations of Indigenous feminist discourse demonstrates how reading these texts together may prove useful for establishing and maintaining conversations across Indigenous women's personal non-fiction and life writing from various locations and histories. It reveals that despite differences in socio-historical and cultural backgrounds as well as in personal idiosyncrasies, the texts express similar kinds of preoccupations and concerns relevant to Indigenous women's lives and writings in the second half of the twentieth century. Reading these texts as voicing an alternative to mainstream feminism may also be vital for future feminist discourse based on respecting cultural, historical, social, and personal differences while negotiating these differences in critical scholarship. Inscribing difference is one of the recurring themes in contemporary feminist theory, and certainly mainstream feminists must take into account the diversity of women's experiences around the world. In particular, the themes stemming from the Indigenous feminist discourse that may enrich the future mainstream feminist agenda are the following: opening up space for a meaningful dialogue *with* Indigenous women, a dialogue based on the recognition of Indigenous women's cultural differences and their "double disempowerment" and on a sensitive approach to studying and writing about individuals outside one's racial and cultural group; critical examinations of local histories of relationships between Indigenous and settler women, especially the latter's complicity in the colonial disempowerment of Indigenous women; incorporating Indigenous feminist goals, in particular the anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles, *within* the mainstream feminist agenda. Only this kind of collaboration, together with recognition of the heterogeneity and diversity of minority women's voices, can lead to mutual understanding and alleviation of the tensions between the two groups.

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(Johnson, Huggins, and Jacobs, 2000). These examples show that Jackie Huggins is a writer interested in sharing knowledge and creating spaces open to dialogues, which is also confirmed by her position in the Reconciliation Committee.



## CHAPTER 2

# RECREATING THE CIRCLE: RECONSTRUCTING INDIGENOUS WOMANHOOD

We can talk about self-government, sovereignty, cultural recovery and the healing path, but we will never achieve any of these things until we take a serious look at the disrespect that characterizes the lives of so many Native women.

Kim Anderson, *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* (14)

Closely connected to the ways in which Indigenous feminism is presented in Paula Gunn Allen's *The Sacred Hoop*, Lee Maracle's *I Am Woman*, and Jackie Huggins' *Sister Girl* is the recurring theme of how Indigenous women themselves are depicted in these texts. This theme unfolds on two levels. There is the personal level, where Allen, Maracle and Huggins present their individual experiences of what it means to be an Indigenous woman in North America and Australia in the second half of the twentieth century. Then, on a larger scale, all three writers also examine the mechanisms of representing Indigenous womanhood, motherhood, and sisterhood that were developed and maintained by the mainstream American, Canadian and Australian settler cultures. In addition, they draw attention to the roles that mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts and female ancestors in general play in extended families, tribal communities and kinship structures as well as in reconstructing a positive and functioning sense of femininity. As was suggested in the previous chapter, womanhood and motherhood become an important site of difference for Indigenous women. The governing principles of Indigenous women's personal non-fiction and life writing in general include, on the one hand, grief over the loss of tribal powers, forcibly separated children, and the denial of motherhood, all resulting in the break-up of traditional family and tribal structures, and on the other hand, the affirmation of female nurturing, maternity and sexuality, including the celebration of female ancestors. It may even be argued that the genre of Indigenous women's personal non-fiction and life writing itself



activates this dialectic of female grief, loss and sorrow, and simultaneously the survival, recovery and continuance of strong, functioning womanhood.

This chapter examines the ways in which Indigenous womanhood, motherhood and sisterhood are re-defined and re-constructed in the writings of Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle and Jackie Huggins and how these three writers apply key strategies that help them identify the maladies of contemporary Indigenous womanhood, analyze their causes, and then restore the power and strong status of Indigenous women by re-writing the stereotypical images of female Indigeneity constructed by the dominant society and by bringing back the importance of female genealogies in the form of re-connecting with female ancestors. Kim Anderson outlines similar strategies in her introduction to *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood*, in which she emphasizes the need to address “social ills like family violence, incest, sexual abuse and child neglect” that are responsible for the “loss of balance” that Indigenous women have encountered amidst their families and communities (13–14). Only after this “sickness that is the legacy of colonization” (14) is properly examined, Anderson explains, can Indigenous women “recreat[e] the circle in a way that suits [their] modern lives” (13). To initiate and successfully complete this process, Anderson proposes a theory consisting of four steps—resist, reclaim, construct and act—that will lead to the “decolonization of our [Indigenous] womanhood” (17). These steps consist of “resisting negative definitions of being; reclaiming Aboriginal tradition; constructing a positive identity by translating tradition into the contemporary context; and acting on that identity in a way that nourishes the overall well-being of our communities” (15). Anderson’s proposition is an apt introduction to my own analysis of how the texts by Allen, Maracle, and Huggins each work to implement some of these strategies.

*The Sacred Hoop*, *I Am Woman* and *Sister Girl* all engage, in one way or another, in the historical development of Indigenous women’s social status in the pre- and post-contact periods, pointing out what Anne Brewster, drawing on Jane M. Jacobs, calls “historicity of gender,” described as the “way gender relations have been transformed through colonization” (Brewster, *Literary Formations* 42). This transformation, particularly in connection to changing power relations, has been the subject of numerous discussions, for example by Rayna Green, Devon A. Mihesuah, Lee Maracle, Beverly Hungry Wolf, Marie Annette Jaimes, Janice Acoose, Kim Anderson, and Patricia Monture-Angus on the North American side and by Annette Hamilton, Jackie Huggins, Marcia Langton and Aileen Moreton-Robinson on the Australian side. Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop* itself provides a detailed overview of the ways the centrality of Indigenous women’s powers in pre-contact North America, based on the strong presence and high status of female deities, women healers, and extended family matriarchs, shifted to marginalization under the influence of the imposed patriarchal system (30–40). Some of these debates, however, might also contribute to maintaining the dichotomy in which the Euro-



pean settlement is the borderline in the transition from favorable power relations for women and their stronger position in pre-contact Indigenous cultures to the gradual loss of their influence in the public sphere after the arrival of European settlers. This dichotomy may lead to overstating or even idealizing the pre-contact social positions of Indigenous women (a position which Paula Gunn Allen has been seen, by some critics, as complicit in), while blaming the colonization of North America and Australia for relegating Indigenous women to hidden, invisible and powerless positions. The risk of reducing this complex argument to the suggested dichotomy is that it tends to depict contemporary Indigenous women as inevitably dependent, weak, alienated, disempowered by both Indigenous men and dominant culture, and in need of being educated on how to liberate themselves from the double burden of racial and gender discrimination (Grant 50). The role of personal non-fiction and life writing by contemporary Indigenous women writers—Allen, Maracle and Huggins among them—is precisely in helping problematize this dichotomy by showing the spaces “in between” these two extreme positions—i.e. strong, independent and powerful womanhood in pre-colonial period on the one hand, and weak, dependent and powerless womanhood in the post-contact period on the other. Their portraits of Indigenous womanhood reveal both strength and vulnerability in the face of racial oppression in North America and Australia. In addition, these texts displace conventional representations of Indigenous women and expose the long history of stereotyping them. For example, Janice Acoose describes the impact of the stereotypical binary of “either a Pocahontas or a squaw” on Indigenous women in North America, explaining that “such representations create very powerful images that perpetuate stereotypes and perhaps more importantly, foster dangerous cultural attitudes that affect human relationships and inform institutional ideology” (Acoose, *Iskwewak. Kah’ Ki Yaw Ni Wahkomakanak* 39). In the Australian context, Jackie Huggins similarly comments on the construction of consistent and pervasive imagery related to Aboriginal women, especially their sexuality which was perceived by settlers as both desirable and repulsive, which is visible in the history of using very derogatory names for Aboriginal women, such as “lubra,” “gin,” or “black velvet” (*Sister Girl* 15).

Although it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to generalize about Indigenous women’s status and gender roles in the period before and after European settlement in North America and Australia, it is clear that the profound transformation that colonization brought to both continents is responsible for the political, economic and cultural disempowerment of Indigenous women within mainstream discourse and, gradually, within their own communities as well. The repression of Indigenous women’s power and the construction of deep-rooted stereotypical images of Indigenous women in both colonial and postcolonial cultural production is paralleled in North America and Australia. Devon A. Mihesuah





notices that most historical works have omitted the social roles and positions of Indigenous women in North America as well as “the feelings and emotions of Indian women, the relationships between them, and their observations about non-Indians” (“Commonality of Difference” 21). Meanwhile, Moreton-Robinson has documented how Aboriginal women in Australia were denied all kinds of agency and subjectivity as they only became “known” through the gaze of others, usually of white men (explorers, philanthropists, state officials, drovers, adventurers, and anthropologists) but also of white women who exploited Aboriginal girls and women as domestic servants (*Talkin’ Up* 1).

Thus through self-representation, critical interrogation and de-masking of common stereotypes, Indigenous women writers use the genre of personal non-fiction and life writing to problematize and chart the complexities of their existence and subjectivity, as well as to show how they themselves see mainstream settler culture. The narratives often depict Indigenous women as strong personalities, as battlers through poverty and social injustices, as mother figures and caretakers located in the center of their extended families and communities, always there for their own children, taking in abandoned children and relatives, and struggling for control over their lives and sovereignty in the face of assimilation and paternalistic state policies. Sometimes they are successful in these endeavors; other times they fail. Whatever the case, by recording and publishing their own memoirs and biographies of their female relatives and ancestors, Indigenous women manage to create their own space, construct their self-identities and “establish their history and their subjectivity through an exploration of their unique and often overlooked cultural legacy” (Turner 109). Moreover, these narratives use life stories to draw attention to a larger historical context in which dominant settler culture intervened in Indigenous peoples’ social and family structures in unacceptable ways.

Although not restricted to presenting gender-based issues, most Indigenous women’s personal non-fiction and life stories present experiences unique to their lives. In the words of Moreton-Robinson, “Indigenous women’s life writings are based on the collective memories of inter-generational relationships between predominantly Indigenous women, extended families and communities” (*Talkin’ Up* 1). The range of themes covered by the genre is wide: in addition to issues concerning the positions of Indigenous women within their families and communities, the texts portray Indigenous women’s interactions with dominant society. Anne Brewster specifies that many Aboriginal women’s narratives have been shaped by “corporeal histories of the gendered and racialised body that has been placed under surveillance, disciplined, silenced and condemned to poverty,” the histories of “rape and abuse, childbearing and motherhood, extended family networks, the absence of male partners, arduous physical labour and political activism” (*Literary Formations* 5). These histories then function as an alternative version of the history of making the modern Australian nation-state and as a testimony to the survival



of Indigenous culture in the twenty-first century. Beverly Rasporich similarly summarizes the key strategies of Indigenous women's narratives in North America in the following way:

In feminist fashion, Native female authors are writing woman-centered texts; they write to and for other women in their acknowledgements, often aligning themselves with other writers "of color". They seek to re-establish matrilineal genealogy and maternal order and have the power of creation and regeneration, both mythically and poetically. (Rasporich 42)

In spite of the thematic diversity, it is possible to draw a more general conclusion that most contemporary Indigenous women's personal non-fiction and life writing in North America and Australia promotes a return to the centrality of womanhood and women's roles in Indigenous cultures. This has also become a key issue in the process of Indigenous women's empowerment and decolonization.

## Images of Indigenous Womanhood

... for Indigenous women, liberation is in the context of viable decolonized societies with their own cultural particularities, on their own lands and sustained by their own formulas for economies and for healthy societies.

Joyce Green, "Taking Account of Aboriginal Feminism" (30)

Indigenous womanhood has been, as was already pointed out, significantly shaped by colonization and the ensuing denial of functional mothering. In Australia, young girls of mixed parentage were taken away from their Aboriginal families, often under the guise of their "education," and trained for domestic service in which they were frequently tasked with taking care of white children. From her conversations with elder Aboriginal women in the "yarning circle," Boni Robertson draws this conclusion: "Whereas Aboriginal women were seen as fit to care for and rear the children of white women, ironically they were not seen as fit to mother their own. Whereas all white women had the inherent capacity and right to be(come) mothers, this privilege was denied to Aboriginal women" (Robertson et al. 41). Catriona Elder observes that the policy of forced separations had a traumatizing impact not only on those involved directly but also on the next generations of young women who, having been brought up in institutions or foster care, had almost no experience of functional mothering, the result of which "reproduced the cycle of removal as state governments could argue they [young Indigenous women] were poor mothers and take their children away" (85). The effects of the denial of Indigenous mothering, both individual and transgenerational,



are repeatedly pointed to in Indigenous women's personal non-fiction and life writing, including in Jackie Huggins' *Sister Girl*, in which Huggins, in her pioneering analysis of Indigenous women's domestic service, shows how this issue caused division among Indigenous women and Anglo-Australian feminists (14–15; 26–29). Elder relates the site of motherhood to the story of the nation in Australia, arguing that “in national policies about motherhood, the mother was represented as a non-Indigenous woman” (85) and the pressure was rather on “respectable” Anglo-Australian women to have as many children as possible in order to enhance the process of nation-building and “national self-definition” (82). The sense of loss in terms of Indigenous motherhood and familial bonds is also intensified by the imposition of the Western patriarchal model of a nuclear family on Indigenous communities, which led to the destruction of traditional extended family structures (K. Anderson 83–84). The functionality of Indigenous families was disrupted mainly by government institutions such as residential and boarding schools and missions, which had the power to intervene in the private sphere of Indigenous relationships and parenting; and also by white men, who destroyed virtually any possibility of Indigenous familial ties by engaging in sexual relationships with Indigenous women, exploiting their bodies, and leaving behind a high number of mostly fatherless, part-Indigenous children who did not belong in either society.

The importance of functional womanhood and motherhood for the extended Indigenous family is visible in the fact that in Indigenous narratives the term “mother” may have different meanings from those in the mainstream Western discourse. Generally, it may be argued that rather than the notion of the “mother” in the limiting sense of her biological reproduction, Indigenous discourse privileges the concept of a “mother figure,” emphasizing the multiple roles and functions of such women. In North American Indigenous cultures, as Kim Anderson observes, power and high status was ascribed not only to mothers but to all women as “both biological and non-biological mothers were honored for their work” (83). Aboriginal women in Australia describe the mother figure in a similar way: “The mother is not necessarily the biological mother, but grandmothers, aunts, sisters, cousins, nieces, all women assume the role and responsibilities of mothering a child of their community. All mothers are the carers of children, regardless of whether or not they have been the bearers of children” (Robertson et al. 37). Jackie Huggins also stresses the complexity of Aboriginal women in their communities:

Grandmothers, sisters and aunts are the most frequently used persons in Aboriginal communities—the extended family plays a very important role in child care arrangements. It is very common for a member of a child's extended family, particularly the grandmother, to look after a child or children for short periods of time because the parents are unable to do so for one reason or another ... Sometimes these arrangements will extend for longer periods of time, to the point where the child might be identified



as belonging to the person looking after him or her and be regarded as having been “fostered,” in a way. (*Sister Girl* 11)

Indigenous mothers have mostly occupied a significant position in the family unit as holders of certain privileges, power, and knowledge that should be passed on to the next generation. The “women’s business” encompassed a “cultural, social and spiritual haven for women, one that embraces and valorizes women as mothers” (Robertson et al. 37). In Australia, the traditional knowledge that Indigenous mothers used to pass down included teaching the younger generation to read the landscape, survive in the bush, identify one’s kinship, and integrate spiritual and belief systems. Importantly, Indigenous women have often articulated such knowledges and skills from a position of strength: in terms of extended family and the site of (grand)motherhood, many Indigenous women’s personal non-fiction and life writing narratives reveal, for example, the prestige and high status of women stemming from having many children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, ensuring the family’s survival and continuation. Kim Anderson confirms that among Native North American communities “motherhood was an affirmation of a woman’s power and defined her central role in traditional Aboriginal societies” (83). Not only motherhood itself, but also the roles of women in the sphere of domestic and family life were a source of empowerment. This provides an interesting contrast to the second-wave mainstream feminist agenda which, for a time, perceived domesticity and family care as an oppressive and limiting space for women in general, until scholarly interest in women’s autobiographies, memoirs, journals and diaries rendered the domestic and private space—traditionally associated with femininity—visible, complex, and worth examining. But Indigenous women’s commitment to domesticity and family life was seen, due to long-term external intervention and pressure to assimilate, as unattainable and, in fact, unavailable. This led to a situation in which Indigenous women were denied, besides their motherhood, satisfactory and self-affirming participation in the domains of their own households and private family life.

It has been suggested that the focus of Indigenous women writers on extended family life, wider community relations and commitment to social justice has become a distinctive feature in their personal non-fiction and life writing. This focus indicates an important strategy of resistance to forced separations and pressure to adopt the forms of social structures imposed on Indigenous people by the dominant settler society. Anne Brewster argues that the extended family, a basic unit and a woman-centered arena in traditional Aboriginal cultures in Australia, is a place of women’s knowledges and practices, and therefore women writers use it as a means of resistance against the dominant society’s assimilationist practices (*Reading Aboriginal Women’s Autobiography* 40–47). While this argument is certainly valid for many Indigenous women’s texts, recently there have also been



voices problematizing the position of Indigenous women within their families and underlining its complex and shifting character. In her article “Out of the Salon,” Michele Grossman claims that some recent Indigenous women’s narratives in Australia show that the Aboriginal family, apart from being a “site of resistance” in Brewster’s words, can also be a “site of ambivalence, conflict, confusion and at times oppression for *some* Australian Indigenous women” (Grossman, “Out of the Salon” 179, original emphasis). This ambivalence is at least partially exposed in Allen’s, Maracle’s and Huggins’ texts. Although only Lee Maracle explicitly addresses the problematic positions of Native North American women within their families, a space that can sometimes be perceived as threatening, the issues of conventional women’s arenas such as household, childbirth, or motherhood are, in fact, overshadowed in all three texts in favor of other Indigenous women’s activities—creative writing, storytelling, education, political activism, and leading.

Following what was said above, the image of strong motherhood by no means predestines Indigenous women to be confined to the domestic sphere and family well-being. The mother figures in Indigenous communities seem to have performed multiple roles within their communities, some of which were public, performed outside the domestic domain. The genre of Indigenous women’s personal non-fiction and life writing both shows the emphasis on motherhood and mother figures as bearers of certain values, and depicts the social, political and cultural roles of Indigenous women. So while Anne Brewster argues that “because many of the narrators of Aboriginal women’s autobiographical narratives construct themselves primarily as mothers, ... their narratives are gendered” (*Literary Formations* 35), it is also necessary to point out that other narratives, such as *Wandering Girl* by Glenyse Ward or *Mum Shirl* by Shirley Coleen Smith (Mum Shirl, with assistance by Bobbi Sykes) in Australia, and *Enough Is Enough: Aboriginal Women Speak Out*, edited by Janet Silman in Canada, in turn marginalize events such as giving birth, raising children, or getting married in favor of other themes, such as working life and political activism. This is also manifested in the personal non-fiction of Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle, and Jackie Huggins, who in their autobiographical passages foreground experiences related to their careers as scholars, community leaders, activists, and writers.

While the site of motherhood had to be “re-discovered” as an important part of white women’s auto/biographical accounts, Indigenous women writers have had a rather long tradition to follow of portraying familial and kinship relationships. This tradition stems, among other things, from the widespread practice of speakers/writers introducing themselves at the outset of telling/writing a story/text, of positioning themselves within the extended family, and of placing themselves in the kinship structures, which is a method of “contextualizing knowledge” and better understanding the specific knowledge or general observation the speaker/writer is about to share (K. Anderson 22). As for bringing back the mother, al-



ready in 1980, Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner claimed in *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature* that it is precisely Indigenous women, together with other “women of color,” who “have shown us the way back to our mothers” (254). Commenting on the essays in their collection, which analyze primary texts by African American women writers such as Alice Walker, Lucille Clifton and Gayle Jones, as well as by Native American writers from the American Southwest, Davidson and Broner point to the reconnection of mother and daughter within the framework that they call “new matrilineage:” “One important theme running throughout all these writings is the sense that the daughter is no longer alone. The lost mother is found. One consequence of the women’s movement is a new emphasis on sisterhood and daughterhood” (254). This view is supported by Marianne Hirsch who also asserts that it is precisely in the fiction of “women of color” that she finds a discourse of “identity and subject-formation which goes beyond oedipal patterns and the terms of psychoanalytic discourse” (*The Mother/Daughter Plot* 16). In the new matrilineage, both mother and daughter speak for themselves, as well as to one another, rather than allowing the daughter to take authorial control over the mother’s voice (Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot* 16). In Indigenous women’s personal non-fiction and life writing the various forms of dialogues between mothers and daughters are embedded in the maternal tradition of the past—a tradition where female bonds dominate. The complex dynamic of a mother-daughter relationship, especially regarding the control over the narrative voice, is handled superbly in *Auntie Rita*, where the dialogic form which combines the voices of the mother and daughter goes so far as to inscribe a kind of “dual voice” as will be shown in the third chapter of this section.

“The literature of matrilineage,” as Nan Bauer-Maglin called the new and growing subgenre in the 1970s and 1980s, presents texts written by women about their relationships with other women and about various kinds of female heritage. Although Bauer-Maglin reminds readers that this is not a new discovery but rather a “new passion” for contemporary women writers growing out of the feminist movement (257), she nevertheless makes it clear that the mother-daughter relationship and the notion of motherhood itself was somehow suppressed in mainstream feminist writings, resulting in “the sudden new sense the daughter has of the mother; the realization that she, her mother, is a strong woman; and that her voice reverberates with her mother’s” (265). While this is true for mainstream feminist writing of a particular era, it is clear that Indigenous women’s personal non-fiction and life writing, rather than imitating this development, re-establish the broken ties between (grand)mothers and (grand)daughters that were destroyed by colonization and the subsequent imposition of the patriarchal concept of nuclear family. As Kim Anderson argues, this new family structure “isolated women from one another and broke down family and community systems that once empowered women” (84). In their personal narratives, Indigenous women both in North



America and Australia re-connect with and continue to cultivate principles of strong, multifunctional womanhood of pre-colonial societies. The mother figure, in particular, is then re-constructed not only in the published narratives but also in oral and unpublished records, in stories, myths, songs, and legends, often having a spiritual character. With respect to these potential overlaps between Indigenous and mainstream feminist discourses of re-discovering the lost mother figure and exploring female ancestry, it is unfortunate that Indigenous women writers and scholars are still marginalized in the mainstream feminist movement, as they could enrich the debates from a different historical perspective.

In *The Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen sets on a journey to rewrite the constructed images of Indigenous women as those of “slaves, drudges, drones who are required to live only for others rather than for themselves” (27) by naming various social functions and diverse powers that Native American women had held before European colonizers imposed patriarchy on them. Since a Native American woman is, in Allen’s view, defined first and foremost by her tribal identity, her sense of the self is also “primarily prescribed by her tribe” (*The Sacred Hoop* 43). Being a tribal woman—a phrase repeated later by Anna Lee Walters in *Talking Indian*—is a concept that Allen considers the only acceptable means of reconnecting with Indigenous foremothers. It is arguable, however, to what extent this rather radical view excludes the participation of “non-traditionalist” Indigenous women in this process of reconnection. Understandably, Allen’s conviction stems from her own life experience of growing up among strong and powerful Laguna Pueblo women whose “practicality, strength, reasonableness, intelligence, wit, and competence” (*The Sacred Hoop* 44) were passed on to Allen. This certainly represents a very different life experience from Lee Maracle, who confesses to being “guilty of acceding to the erasure of our womanhood” (*I Am Woman* 18). Allen is convinced that perhaps the most important tool for empowering Indigenous womanhood is re-connection with mythological and spiritual female powers: through retelling the creation myths of Spider Woman and Thought Woman, Allen restores the female principle of creativity, resistance and survival, a principle corroborating the idea that “while we change as Indian women, as Indian women we endure” (*The Sacred Hoop* 12).

Allen further underscores the importance of the mother figure for the re-connection of Indigenous womanhood by arguing that in the ancient Keres societies, from which Laguna Pueblo culture derives, a person’s identity was to a large extent determined by their mother’s identity, which enabled “people to place you precisely within the universal web of your life” and failure to know one’s mother is “failure to remember [one’s] significance, [one’s] reality, [one’s] right relationship to earth and society” (*The Sacred Hoop* 209). Allen goes on to invoke historically important tribal women, such as the Iroquois political women leaders—the Clan Matrons (219), as predecessors of Sacagewea, the young Shoshone



guide to the Lewis and Clarke expedition, who Allen honors as a truly American feminist heroine (215). Allen's goal to reclaim the history of tribal women and mother figures may be juxtaposed to second-wave mainstream feminists' efforts to recover the "lost" mother figure and redefine the mother-daughter relationship. Such revisions took place in the disciplines of psychology and psychoanalysis, where a number of feminist theoretical studies responded to the male-centered Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical theories and explored the early mother-child relationship from a feminist point of view, as can be evidenced in influential publications such as Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) or Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982). Most notably, however, this "re-vision," an illustrious concept elaborated by Adrienne Rich in her famous essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision" (1972), found its expression in literary studies, where feminist maternal scholars, such as Marianne Hirsch in her early writing, began to promote the "literature of matrilineage" in the "ongoing feminist pursuit of retrieving maternal subjectivity" (Yu).<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the boom in matrilineal narratives invoked by the mainstream feminist agenda of the 1970s and 1980s, especially by the stream represented by Gilligan's work which saw women primarily as empathetic nurturers and brought the issue of motherhood to the forefront (Birns 149–150), conspicuously chimes with Allen's contention that pre-contact Native American women's power and knowledge to create life was highly valued and was at the heart of their social standing "because they understood that bearing, like bleeding, was a transformative ritual act. Through their own bodies they could bring vital beings into the world... They were mothers, and that word implied the highest degree of status in ritual culture" (*The Sacred Hoop* 28).

While Allen's main strategy is to re-connect with tribal femininity and the power of gynocracy, Lee Maracle in *I Am Woman* calls for strengthening the status of urban Métis women in contemporary "CanAmerica." Historically, the Métis<sup>17</sup> have been excluded from both mainstream Canadian and Native societies and, having to come to terms with an ambivalence about their identity, perceived themselves

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16 Works dealing with recovering the mother figure in literary studies include *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature* (1980) edited by Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner; *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1989) by Marianne Hirsch; and *Mother Puzzles: Daughters and Mothers in Contemporary American Literature* (1989) edited by Mickey Perlman. This boom continued well into the 1990s, including, for example, works such as "Feminism, Matrilinealism, and the 'House of Women' in Contemporary Women's Fiction" (1996) by Tess Cosslett; *Women of Color: Mother-Daughter Relationships in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Literature* (1996) edited by Elizabeth Brown-Guillory; *The Voice of the Mother: Embedded Maternal Narratives in Twentieth-Century Women's Autobiographies* (2000) by Jo Malin; and *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women* (2002) edited by Adalgisa Giorgio.

17 The origins of the Métis in Canada can be summarized in the following way: "Originally consisting of those people with French and Indian (usually Cree) blood, but now consisting of anyone with some Indian blood, the Métis were a legally recognized group until 1940. After 1940 and until the passage of the Canada Act, the Métis were not a legal entity" (Donovan 20).





as “the people in-between, a part of Euro-Canadian and Native culture, yet belonging to neither” (Donovan 20). Contemporary urban Métis women writers such as Maracle herself have significantly contributed to restoring a sense of pride in their Indigenous identity and Métis cultural legacy. Maracle’s tone in *I Am Woman*, similarly to some of the earlier urban Métis women writers, such as Beatrice Culleton Mosionier and Maria Campbell, is often angry and radical, pointing to frequent abuse and enslavement of urban Indigenous women. As Kathleen M. Donovan demonstrates, Métis women encounter some distinctively female-gendered problems, among them the loss of power in formerly matrilineal cultures, sexual abuse by both Native and non-Native men, prostitution, and loss of their children to social-welfare institutions (18). All these physical and psychological wounds must be healed and healing Indigenous womanhood means, in Maracle’s view in *I Am Woman*, to accept and cultivate Indigenous identity. Maracle asserts that Native women hold the key to change in the ongoing conflicts both in Indigenous-settler relationships and within Indigenous communities.

Although Maracle is always firm about her Indigeneity and never questions it, her thinking about (Indigenous) womanhood has developed over time. She admits that in her youth she thought that “feminism, indeed womanhood itself, was meaningless to [her]”, that “it was irrelevant that [she] was a woman”, and she was in “denial of [her] womanhood” (*I Am Woman* 15). Native women, in her view, did nothing to liberate themselves as Indigenous women, as “we trade our treasured women friends for the men in our lives” (19), letting others to turn them to “slaves with our own consent” (18). Maracle is relentless in her criticism of Native women’s blindness in this matter but importantly, by consistently employing the first person plural, she insists on including herself in Native women’s complicity in “help[ing] Europeans wipe us off the face of the earth” (19). Since then, Maracle recounts, she set out on an intellectual journey leading her to later awareness that gender does matter. She becomes as fierce in her advocacy of Indigenous women’s solidary, friendship and support, as she has been in her earlier critique. In this light, *I Am Woman* can also be read as Maracle’s gradual awakening to the feminism of the 1980s when the words “I am woman” acquired a liberating touch for her. Throughout her text, there is a sense of pride in being an Indigenous woman, but significantly, Maracle also at times describes herself primarily as a *woman*, not a *Native* woman. This is also true of some characters in Maracle’s fiction, as is shown by Helen Hoy in her analysis of Maracle’s novel *Ravensong*, in which Maracle typically uses female characters whose feminist analysis “refuses to subsume ‘woman’ under ‘Native’ in the constituting of identity” (Hoy 143). For Maracle, reconstructing Indigenous womanhood means that Native women must turn away from negative images and stereotypes constructed in the past: if “colonization for Native women signifies the absence of beauty, the negation of our sexuality” (*I Am Woman* 20), the key to decolonization is to “see ourselves



as women: powerful, sensuous beings in need of compassion and tenderness” (22). Like Allen and Huggins, Maracle is convinced that this can be achieved by cultivating Indigenous women’s solidarity, support and friendship as well as by understanding the complex causes of Indigenous women’s oppression.

In *Sister Girl*, Jackie Huggins’ re-definition of Aboriginal womanhood also consists, first and foremost, in pointing out various mechanisms that dominant settler society has used to disempower Aboriginal women, especially during the period of their forced domestic work. Huggins’ input involves bringing forward several issues that might have been considered taboos until recently in Australian history: apart from outlining the complexities of the relationships between Aboriginal and white women, Huggins also openly refers to the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women by white men, stressing the large-scale occurrence of such relationships in the north Australian frontier where European adventurers arrived without their wives: “Indulging in sex with Aboriginal women was a major pastime of Territory men from all ranks, including the policemen who were appointed as ‘Protectors of Aborigines’” (*Sister Girl* 15). Huggins repeatedly relates the exploitation of Aboriginal women by white settlers to the colonizers’ conquest of the land, referring to it as their “colonial adventure” (16). As a result, Aboriginal women were completely disempowered, having nowhere to turn to for protection. On the other hand, Huggins also recognizes the ambivalent position of Aboriginal women in these relationships and complains about the little critical attention that the notion of Aboriginal women’s power in regard to sexual exploitation has received (16). This analysis of the relationships between Aboriginal women and white men, leading to a collective historical experience of sexual abuse, is one of the examples in which Huggins demonstrates the necessity of paying careful attention to differences in the construction of Aboriginal womanhood.

Another issue highlighted throughout *Sister Girl*, one that counters the pervasive disempowerment of Aboriginal women through forced separation, forced domestic labor, and sexual exploitation, is the sense of sisterhood as a concept essential to understanding Aboriginal women’s realities: “Women’s position in Aboriginal culture, both traditional and contemporary, situates them within a powerful network of female support,” explains Huggins (32). In the introduction, Huggins explains the title of her book, comparing “sister girl” to the term “auntie” in its connotation of “endearment used widely and lovingly in our Indigenous community to consolidate our reciprocal family feelings of warmth and sisterhood” (ix). Just as with Aboriginal womanhood, Huggins constructs Aboriginal sisterhood as a site of difference, mostly excluding the possibility of white women’s participation in this relational structure, even though she admits that the term “sister” might be also extended to close non-Indigenous women (ix). In this matter, Huggins confirms Mohanty’s more general claim that “sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete historical and politi-



cal practice and analysis” (“Under Western Eyes” 58). Huggins makes it clear that she draws a strict line between Aboriginal and white women in Australia, which stems from the historical experience of white women’s complicity in dispossession and disempowerment of Aboriginal women. But rather than separatism, Huggins, resonating with Maracle, calls for and cherishes alliances with other disempowered women across the world.

## Writing Back to Foremothers

Grandmothers, mythological and real, are being remembered as the first figures or metaphorical figures of female and tribal community.

Beverly Rasporich, “Native Women Writing: Tracing the Patterns” (46)

Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop*, Maracle’s *I Am Woman*, and Huggins’ *Sister Girl* manifest a significant strategy which could be described as re-connecting with female ancestors. In this, the texts follow a general tendency in Indigenous women’s personal non-fiction and life writing which is dominated by the images and voices of foremothers of all kinds: mythological figures, real historical women, still-living family members, and significant role models. Since this reconnection with female ancestors takes place on a textual level, I call this strategy “writing back to foremothers,” even though it may be referred to in a number of other ways by diverse critics and scholars. Beverly Rasporich, for example, talks about “putting the Mother back into the language” (46), a process of compensating for the loss of the mother figure, which, curiously enough, parallels a very similar tendency of the second-wave mainstream feminist agenda to restore the historical, social, and cultural significance of women and thus counter their invisibility within the male-dominated discourse. In Indigenous women’s writing, this symbolic return to and acknowledgement of foremothers takes various forms: on the personal level, it is the effort to honor strong family role models such as mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers, or female community elders who made a visible presence in the public sphere. Similarly, some narratives draw attention to previously unacknowledged Indigenous women activists, public speakers, educators, and political leaders. This is the case of Jackie Huggins, who in the collaborative auto/biography *Auntie Rita* pays tribute to the personal life story of her mother Rita Huggins and the circle of her female friends and supporters, while simultaneously acknowledging her role in political activism of Aboriginal urban movements. On a spiritual level, a reconnection to female deities—goddesses and creatrixes—and mythological figures is also common, as is evidenced in Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop* which provides a wide range of important female deities and mythological figures. Finally, Indigenous women writers re-discover their literary



foremothers: for example, First Nations writers Joan Crate, in *Pale as Real Ladies: Poems for Pauline Johnson* (1989), and Beth Brant, in *Writing As Witness: Essay and Talk* (1994), reclaim, either creatively or critically, the influential Indigenous poet Pauline Johnson (1861–1913).

Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle, and Jackie Huggins all engage in writing back to their foremothers, albeit in different ways. In *The Sacred Hoop*, Allen calls for the return to the spiritual female ancestors as a way of restoring empowered Indigenous womanhood. In fact, her concept of the “feminine principle” derives the power and status of Indigenous women from the strong presence of female deities in many Native American cultures. She explains that “there are many female gods recognized and honored by the tribes and Nations. Femaleness was highly valued, both respected and feared, and all social institutions reflected this attitude” (*The Sacred Hoop* 212). Kim Anderson confirms in her study of Native womanhood that “many Native creation stories are female centered, and there are many stories that speak about the role of women in bringing spirituality to the people” (71). In light of her other reflections on the nature of female Indigeneity, Allen seems to strictly reject the reduction of female power to mere biological reproduction: instead, she asserts that “the power of woman is ... both heart (womb) and thought (creativity)” (22).

The very first essay in *The Sacred Hoop*, “Grandmothers of the Sun”, is dedicated to a discussion of Native female deities and presents Native goddesses as spiritual and creative beings, arguing that the Keres theological foundations rest on the presence of the female spirit—Creatrix—who is “She Who Thinks rather than She Who Bears,” a woman thinker who creates all material and nonmaterial reality (15). Allen provides a detailed overview of stories and myths from various sources, including the Keres Pueblo, the Hopi, the Navajo, the Lakota, and the Abenaki, all featuring a female spirit or goddess—be it the primary Thought Woman who created everything, or Spider Woman, Serpent Woman, Corn Woman, or Earth Woman (13), to name but a few—in order to show that “the perception of female power as confined to maternity is a limit on the power inherent in femininity” (15). Interestingly, these spiritual figures are all “grandmothers” for Allen, a term that often appears in the titles of her writings, demonstrating how the power of the spiritual world is interconnected with the female family lineage. Introducing a section in *The Sacred Hoop* titled “The Ways of Our Grandmothers,” Allen emphasizes the influence of the grandmother figure: “The Mother, the Grandmother, recognized from earliest times into the present among those peoples of the Americas who kept to the eldest traditions, is celebrated in social structures, architecture, law, custom, and the oral tradition” (11).

Throughout her exploration of spiritual female figures, however, Allen never overlooks her own female ancestors: she contends, for example, that teaching Native American studies “returned [her] to [her] mother’s side, to the sacred hoop of [her]



grandmothers' ways" (*The Sacred Hoop* 1), and she acknowledges her mother's art of storytelling when she enumerates in a long paragraph all of the kinds of stories told by her mother, which, put together like that, began to make sense to her as a system of education, although she "often did not recognize them [the stories] as that" (46). In the autobiographical passages—her "personal chronicle" as she call them—Allen offers insight into the contemporary Indigenous woman's life which emphasizes both change and endurance, symbols of modernity and traditionalism (*The Sacred Hoop* 12). Allen's immediate family, both maternal and paternal, are then often mentioned, alongside the many female spiritual figures, in various autobiographical fragments dispersed throughout her experimental collection of essays, *Off the Reservation*, including frequent references to her "mixed-blood" Laguna mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, on whose land (Laguna Pueblo and Cubero Land Grant in New Mexico) Allen grew up (*Off the Reservation* 4).

Lee Maracle's role in the process of restoring Indigenous foremothers by writing back to them is perhaps less direct than Allen's, as she puts emphasis on female ancestors but rejects what in her view is a false idealization of traditional Native spirituality and adoration of female goddesses, appropriated by shallow New Age movements or even, at times, by "self-proclaimed 'spiritual leaders'" within Native communities who Maracle used to think were "charlatans—caricatures of our past" (*I Am Woman* 36). Thus when Maracle needed to heal her "sickened spirit", she sought "the teachings of [her] grandmothers" (36). Maracle stresses the importance of real-life grandmothers "in giving love and discipline to help develop self-respect in Native children and interrupt the cycle of self-hatred and self-destruction that is the legacy of colonialism and magic of the Grandmother in the semiotic field of the indigene" (Godard 208). In this sense, the grandmother represents for Maracle security, comfort, and protection. She has the power to "take care of you" or "forsake you" (*I Am Woman* 6). Maracle remembers her own great-grandmother "whose eyes spoke love, discipline and wisdom when words failed" (ix) and celebrates her mother's wisdom and strength as she struggled "to feed, clothe and house eight children, instill in them some fundamental principles of culture, educate them in our original sense of logic and story and ensure they would still be able to function in the larger world" (viii). The reclaiming of female ancestors' tenacity and determination, of women who fought hard to survive, is a thread linking Maracle's text not only with Huggins' writing in which she repeatedly expresses her admiration of her mother's strong will, but also with other "women of color." For example, in the essay "Talking Back," bell hooks explains how she began to use the pseudonym bell hooks—her great-grandmother's name:

I had just 'talked back' to a grown person. Even now I can recall the surprised look, the mocking tones that informed I must be kin to bell hooks—a sharp-tongued woman, a woman who spoke her mind, a woman who was not afraid to talk back. I claimed this



legacy of defiance, of will, of courage, affirming my will to female ancestors who were bold and daring in their speech. (hooks 9)

In contrast, *I Am Woman* presents a grandmother figure who is a fictional combination of Maracle's friends' grandmothers, a strategy Maracle openly admits to: "The grandmother in this book ... is a composite of a number of old Native women I have known" (6). So this fictional, yet real grandmother figure becomes an archetypal representation of a certain type.

Maracle is also unique among the three Indigenous writers in that she constructs *herself* as a mother, reflecting on what she has learned from her children, and occasionally "writes forward" to her daughters (7-8). This becomes even more pronounced in her novel *Daughters Are Forever* (2002), in which she writes from the position of a mother paying homage to her daughters. The extension of the "long chain of people" to the foremothers on one hand and female descendants on the other is best expressed in the short poem titled "Creation" included in *I Am Woman*:

I know nothing  
of great mysteries  
know less of creation  
I do know  
that the farther backward  
in time that I travel  
the more grandmothers  
and the farther forward  
the more grandchildren  
I am obligated to both. (Maracle, *I Am Woman* 8)

Again, the connection between the generation of contemporary Indigenous women and their "aunties and grannies" to whom they often turn for advice and hope is quite common in these narratives, just as Indigenous scholar Kim Anderson, after having interviewed forty Indigenous women in Canada, some of who related disturbing life experiences connected with domestic violence and sexual abuse, confesses: "After listening to the stories of distress, I felt a pressing need to seek out those aunties and grannies who could nurture my sense of hope for Native women" (14). Generally speaking, while Maracle does engage in re-connecting with her foremothers in *I Am Woman*, this process, in comparison to Allen and Huggins, is much more subtle: rather than invoking female deities or her own female relatives, she writes back to ordinary contemporary Native women, addressing the tragedies and pain of their lives and calling for action to alter their existence.



More than reconnecting with spiritual foremothers or addressing contemporary Indigenous women in general, Jackie Huggins writes back to individual Aboriginal women of her own family and circle of friends, women who were often struggling for survival and dignity in difficult life conditions. Most of all, Huggins writes back to her own mother; the mother-daughter relationship permeates most of her writing. Apart from the collaborative auto/biography *Auntie Rita*, in which she pays tribute to Rita Huggins, Jackie Huggins uses her mother's life story as an inspiration in the collaborative article "Reconciling Our Mothers' Lives: Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Women Coming Together" which was conceived as a performative act to express commitment to the Australian project of Reconciliation. In this article, three women historians of different cultural and racial backgrounds, Jackie Huggins, Kay Saunders, and Isabel Tarrago, try to find common ground by tracing the lives of their own mothers and writing back to them. In the introduction to *Sister Girl*, also dedicated to her mother—the "inspiration of [her] life" (n. pag.), Huggins talks about the process of passing on the legacy of carrying on the struggle to her children. By this legacy she means not only the memory of a strong female role model within her own family, but also the political struggle for recognition of Aboriginal peoples' rights (xi). The intimacy of the mother-daughter relationship is best shown in Jackie's very personal, almost confessional passages: "I remember all of my mother's stories, probably much better than she realizes. Not only have I heard them a hundred times over, but she is a fine storyteller, recalling every event of her life with the vividness of the present. ... Yes, I too lived through every one of those feelings as she related them to me" (*Sister Girl* 45–46). Similar reflections reveal Huggins' strong admiration of her mother: she clearly intends to follow in her mother's footsteps and be like her, although she admits the relationship is not of blind adoration only but also an expression of two independent minds with differing views on Aboriginal issues.

*Auntie Rita* is probably the most evident and strongest example of a life writing narrative that demonstrates how much the representations of Indigenous womanhood have changed and what innovative forms the concept of writing back to foremothers has taken. The collaborative text, in recounting the life story of the mother while also inscribing the daughter's autobiography, marked the emergence of a new form in Indigenous life writing, which involves a dialogic approach and negotiating two, sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting perspectives.<sup>18</sup> In addition, *Auntie Rita* foregrounds issues related to Indigenous feminism and re-presenting Indigenous womanhood as it offers not only an intimate portrait of a mother-daughter relationship but also insight into the changing gender

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18 The notion of the dialogic is not, of course, new. Both Arnold Krupat, who uses the concept for his idea of the "collective self" and the dialogic nature in some Native American autobiographies, and Rocío G. Davis, who develops the concept of "dialogic selves" in her analysis of *Auntie Rita*, acknowledge their inspiration in Mikhail Bakhtin's work.



roles of Aboriginal women across two generations. Thus the text rewrites earlier representations of Indigenous women and promotes heterogeneity in depicting female Indigeneity. As far as narrative strategies are concerned, *Auntie Rita* employs multiple voices, a dialogic structure, and a sense of the collective existence of Indigenous people in Australia. It is a truly hybrid text combining an oral history project with the writing of both biography and autobiography, challenging the boundaries between the public/political and the personal/everyday, between writing history and writing one's personal memories.

The site of motherhood is depicted in *Auntie Rita* as ambivalent and shifting. It acquires new meanings as the traditional Aboriginal concept of motherhood is combined with the modern urban experience. The result is a hybridized image of a traditionally strong mother figure in the center of the family clan on the one hand, and an urban single mother who plays a visible role in political activism, on the other hand. This image blurs the boundaries between the categories of mother/private and non-mother/public by combining the two in both Rita's and Jackie's lives. In a way, Rita's life story problematizes the conventional 1950s Western model of a woman as a dedicated mother and full-time housewife: she mothered five children; the first two daughters, Mutoo and Gloria, were illegitimate and Rita does not mention their father(s). In fact, she says very little about her pregnancies, both outside and in the marriage to Jack Huggins. Rita relates that because she was young, working as a domestic under the Aborigines Protection Act which gave her no choices in arranging her own life, she left her first daughter to be raised by her parents, who took her in as their own daughter, in accordance with Aboriginal values of extended families and care for children (Huggins and Huggins 42). After five years, having obtained "exemption papers" from the Director of Native Affairs that allowed Rita to leave her work and travel wherever she wanted, she was pregnant again with her daughter Gloria, running away because "in those days it was a scandal to be an unmarried mother, especially now that I was considered a respectable and 'free' Aboriginal woman" (44–45). This last comment invites speculation about whether Rita's desire to become a "respectable" woman was genuine or whether it is meant to be ironic. In any case, the stress on the disgrace that the dominant settler culture attached to single mothers at that time, and Rita's status as a "respectable woman" in the white middle-class terms, resonates with the prevailing dominant culture's values and assimilationist policies applied to "half-caste" Aboriginal women. After marrying Jack Huggins, Rita comes close to fulfilling this "ideal" of a mother and housewife, only to be left a single mother again after her husband's sudden death. Juxtaposed with the image of a single mother struggling with poverty in a hostile city is the sense of the larger Aboriginal community and extended family Rita is a part of: significantly, after the tragic death of her daughter Gloria, Rita takes in her four young grandchildren and, with her own children still living with her, she becomes a mother





again in her early 50s. It is also mentioned several times in the narrative that Rita takes in some of her women relatives and friends, although she herself does not have a proper place to stay. This image of Rita, embodied in the word *auntie* used in the title, depicts her as a matriarch taking care of people around her and strengthens the notion of the traditional Aboriginal kinship system that Rita, in spite of her mostly urban life experience, represents.

The depiction of the mother-daughter relationship in *Auntie Rita* is as complex as the representation of Aboriginal motherhood. This complexity is visible mainly due to the character of the dual voice in which Rita Huggins' life story, although being the primary concern of the narrative, is complemented by her daughter's personal account. Through Jackie's commentary and recollections of her childhood memories, fragments of her own life come to light. In the second half of the book, when Rita's children, including Jackie, have a more visible presence in the narrative, Jackie relies on her own memories in order to create a fuller picture of her mother's life. For example, she comments on her early experience of Rita's involvement in political activism and offers a different perspective on what it was like to be dragged as a small child by her mother to political meetings in the evenings, or being neglected with her siblings due to Rita's life-style amidst the urban whirl of meetings, dances and parties, or facing extreme poverty and racism (Huggins and Huggins 69–71). These moments in which Jackie very personally addresses her mother and decides to relate her painful memories are among the most powerful aspects of this narrative. Bernadette Brennan, who frames her analysis of *Auntie Rita* in terms of private and public healing, argues that because the narrative works both as a public document, in which Aboriginal people address settlers, and a private conversation between a mother and daughter, it "seeks to facilitate healing on a personal and a national scale" (Brennan 159). However, in spite of these occasional tensions, Jackie Huggins mostly recounts her memories of a happy childhood, being surrounded by her sisters and a brother in a family with a strong, supportive mother, and exposed to the values of extended family ties, sharing and belonging to a large urban Aboriginal community in Brisbane (Huggins and Huggins 70–77). What is enriching about the depiction of the mother-daughter relationship in *Auntie Rita* are the intimate and introspective passages which illuminate the strengths as well as weaknesses, dialogues as well as silences, between the two women—such "interdependence of trust and vulnerability," Brennan confirms, is "integral to the narrative's power" (155). In this light, *Auntie Rita* constitutes an interesting example of "writing back to the foremothers:" Jackie, as a daughter-biographer, reconstructs her mother's life and hence succeeds in providing a complex and realistic representation of Indigenous womanhood and motherhood.

Re-connection with the figure of the (grand)mother, elder storyteller, or female spirit is, together with the reconstruction of Indigenous womanhood and



motherhood, one of the most powerful instruments of Indigenous women writers in asserting control over the representations of their own and their family relatives' subjectivities. The process of writing back to foremothers, besides helping Indigenous women integrate back into what was often a broken chain of Indigenous female bonding, also invokes a sense of recovering orality since it requires going back to the teaching and wisdom of the elders, to the tradition of storytelling. From the textual comparison of *The Sacred Hoop*, *I Am Woman*, *Sister Girl*, and *Auntie Rita*, it follows that although Allen, Maracle, and Huggins examine the mechanism through which the dominant society has oppressed Indigenous women, each of them opts for a different strategy: Allen's main goal is to promote a return to and restoration of traditional, tribal, strong, functioning motherhood and the "feminine principle," while Maracle seems to negotiate between her anger at the injustices stemming from the loss of Native women's power in contemporary "CanAmerica" and a slightly more optimistic prospect of the future if Native women manage to re-define their positions within their communities. Huggins, who examines the disempowerment of Aboriginal women in Australia, highlights the maternal grief, loss, and sorrow originating in the denial of Indigenous motherhood and in preventing Indigenous women from functioning within their own domains of domesticity and family life. Apart from that, Huggins enriches the discussion of representing female Indigeneity in her collaborative account of her mother's biography in *Auntie Rita*. While *The Sacred Hoop*, *I Am Woman*, and *Sister Girl* are more scholarly and documentary in style, reflecting more often than not generally on the position of Indigenous women in contemporary settler societies, *Auntie Rita* centers on one woman's life—a strong mother figure firmly grounded in her extended family and wider Aboriginal community. The presentation of the mother-daughter relationship, then, consists mainly of Jackie's strategy of "writing back" to her own mother in precisely the way that was more theoretically and generally proposed by Allen in *The Sacred Hoop* and Maracle in *I Am Woman*, as well as in Huggins' *Sister Girl*. Thus all of these texts demonstrate various approaches to voicing the dialectic of acknowledging female and maternal grief and celebrating the reconstruction of strong, functioning womanhood, motherhood, and sisterhood.





## 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 phallogocentric 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.

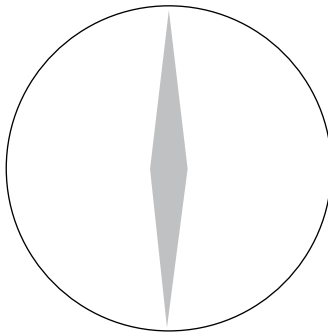
To conclude, although a major portion of the book is dedicated to Rita's first-person narrative, Jackie's account is by no means secondary. By presenting two narrative voices in this auto/biographical experiment—the "I" of Rita's autobiographical account alongside the "I" of Jackie's introspective passages 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.







Inscribing **Resistance**





## SECTION II

### **Separation, Assimilation and Trauma in Life Writing by Doris Pilkington, Shirley Sterling and Anna Lee Walters**

The act of life-writing serves as its own testimony and, in so doing, carries through the work of reinventing the shattered self as a coherent subject capable of meaningful resistance to received ideologies and of effective agency in the world.

Suzette Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (xix)

The second section of this book explores a subgroup of Indigenous women's life writing that differs in content and form from the texts of public intellectual writers such as Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle, and Jackie Huggins. The life writing narratives by Doris Pilkington, Shirley Sterling and Anna Lee Walters turn more to history and the impact of the colonization trauma on Indigenous peoples, and although they do transgress boundaries of genre, they seem less experimental and self-reflective. The title of the section reflects the thematic parallels these stories share: they present accounts of events that were most traumatic to Indigenous families and communities—separating Indigenous children from their families and sending them to boarding, residential and mission schools, as they were called in different parts of the world, with the single purpose of assimilating these children into the dominant settler society and infringing on Indigenous systems of kinship and family ties. Stemming from 19<sup>th</sup>-century scientific racism and the colonial belief that Native cultures were “dying out” as a result of their “inferiority,” “primitiveness,” and general “inability to adapt” and transform to “modern” civilization, assimilationist policies in North America and Australia in relation to



Indigenous populations went hand in hand with phrases such as “breeding out”—a term officially used in Australia during the politics of eugenics in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as is evidenced, for example, in the meticulous documentation by the Chief Protector of Aborigines A. O. Neville in Western Australia (qtd. in Scott and Brown 26, 157). The separation of Indigenous children was executed in especially brutal ways and their treatment in these institutions was equally brutal, resulting in collective and transgenerational trauma impacting most of Indigenous families.

The terminology may differ in Australia, Canada, and the United States, but the core of this system is the same: be it the boarding schools to which Native American children were forcefully sent in the United States, or the residential schools, as they are called in Canada, or the missions, sometimes also called Native settlements, to which Aboriginal people in Australia were removed, all of these places were disguised as educational institutions but mostly served as training places for future cheap Indigenous labor—domestic servants, farm hands, manual laborers—and produced second-class citizens. In Australia, the Aboriginal people who were systematically removed as children between 1910 and 1970 are referred to as the *Stolen Generations*; more than one generation, up to 100,000 children, was affected by this government policy. In 1997, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission released the *Bringing Them Home* report, which amassed over 500 oral accounts of Aboriginal people affected by forced removals (Schaffer and Smith 95). A similar report was published in Canada in 1996 by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, under the name of *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, which provides an overview of the development of the residential school system in Canada and reveals its devastating impact on the First Nations. The residential school system in Canada started officially in 1879 and was usually administered jointly by the state and various churches. Most residential schools ceased to operate by the mid-1970s; the last one closed in 1985 (Kuokkanen 702). It is estimated that about 150,000 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people attended residential schools in Canada (Miller n. pag.). As in Australia, various projects attempted to collect and record oral accounts of residential school attendees. One such example, preceding the official *Report*, is a representative collection of 21 oral accounts of First Nation peoples in Canada who were affected by the residential school system, titled *Residential Schools: The Stolen Years* (1993) and edited by Linda Jaine. Both the Australian and Canadian governments have issued a formal apology to the Stolen Generations and First Nations residential school survivors, respectively; interestingly enough, both apologies were made in 2008, by the Labor Party Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in Australia and by the Conservative Party Prime Minister Stephen Harper in Canada. In the USA, Native American tribes, their land as well as their “education,” have been administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) since 1824. The system of boarding schools



in the USA, which started in 1869 and continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, affected more than 100,000 Native Americans who were forced by the U.S. government to attend Christian schools (A. Smith, “Soul Wound” n. pag.). Although there are projects to record and acknowledge the experiences of Native American boarding schools survivors (e.g. the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition), the U.S. government has not, to my knowledge, issued a formal apology similar in the scope of public interest and media coverage to those offered in Australia and Canada.

The stories published by Indigenous people as a response to the public attention to the histories of colonial assimilationist policies in settler colonies have functioned as an important milestone in the recognition of the scale and impact of these policies on Indigenous peoples. It can be argued that this type of life stories, the Stolen Generations narratives in Australia and residential/boarding school narratives in North America, aims to come to terms with the suppressed histories of separation and assimilation and to bear witness to the subsequent collective trauma. This is accomplished not only through actual documentation of historical events and individual life stories from the Indigenous point of view, but also through employing resistance strategies in the narratives. The life writing narratives that will be analyzed in the following chapters, Doris Pilkington’s *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996), Shirley Sterling’s *My Name Is Seepeetza* (1992) and Anna Lee Walters’ *Talking Indian: Reflections on Survival and Writing* (1992), inscribe resistance to the forced separation and the absolute government control over the lives of Indigenous children and their relationships to their families by rigorously recording the impact of these colonial policies and by textualizing the memories of times spent with the family in the community, recording daily activities, explaining the kinship relationships, and generally bringing happy moments back to life. This process becomes an effective, though double-edged way of coming to terms with the trauma from the separation and assimilation and signaling towards healing and reconciliation.

Doris Pilkington Garimara (1937–2014) was an Australian Aboriginal woman, community leader, researcher, and non-fiction writer associated mostly with Western Australia and the region of Pilbara. Pilkington was a member of the Stolen Generations, having experienced forced separation when she was taken away to the notorious Moore River Native Settlement, and was able to reunite with her family only later in her adult life. Her most well-known non-fiction work, which has become a classic in the genre of Stolen Generations narratives, is *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996), part of a kind of a family trilogy, preceded by *Caprice: A Stockman’s Daughter* (1991) and followed by Pilkington’s autobiography *Under the Wintamarra Tree* (2002). In 2002 Pilkington also saw her most well-known story adapted to the screen in the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* directed by Phillip Noyce. In 2006, Pilkington adapted *Rabbit-Proof Fence* for children under the title *Home to*



*Mother*. Pilkington also contributed to *Many Voices: Reflections on Experiences of Indigenous Child Separation* (2002), edited by Doreen Mellor. Her publications received a number of awards and her achievements were recognized by the Order of Australia in 2006.

Compared to Doris Pilkington, the work of Shirley Sterling (1948–2005) is much less known. She was a member of the Nlaka’pamux First Nation of the Interior Salish of British Columbia, and like Pilkington and Walters, she had direct experience with forced assimilation when she was sent to the Kamloops Indian Residential School, in accordance with Canada’s Indian Act of 1876, where she remained for seven years (“Authors and Literary Work—Biography: Shirley Sterling”). Sterling then narrativized this experience in her autobiographical account *My Name Is Seepheetza* (1992) as part of her creative writing graduate class. Because Sterling adopted the narrative voice of a young adult, her book was initially categorized as young adult fiction, finding its way to official educational curricula in primary and secondary schools in several Canadian provinces (Episkenew 126). In 1997, she received a Ph.D. in Education from the University of British Columbia and was active mainly as a teacher and educational advisor. Sterling died prematurely from cancer in 2005 (Episkenew 132).

Anna Lee Walters (1946– ) is yet another kind of Indigenous writer. A member of Pawnee/Otoe-Missouria, she attended Pawnee boarding school and narrativized this experience in her adult life, particularly in *Talking Indian* in which she acutely describes her own identity crisis as a direct result of the residential school system. She married into the Navajo tribe and worked for the Navajo Community College and Navajo Community College Press. She holds a degree in creative writing and has served as a teacher, lecturer, and public speaker on issues of Native American literature and education. Walters is a prolific writer who was active in the 1980s and 1990s, publishing mostly non-fiction but occasionally also novels and short stories. Apart from *Talking Indian: Reflections on Survival and Writing* (1992), which is analyzed here, her most well-known publications include the short story collection *The Sun is Not Merciful* (1985); the novel *Ghost Singer* (1988); and a number of non-fiction and ethnographic narratives, such as *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life* (1977), a combination of photography, oral stories told by elders, and history writing; *The Spirit of Native America: Beauty and Mysticism in American Indian Art* (1989), which relates art and Indigenous religion/spirituality while at the same time problematizing the collection and display of Native American art and religion as objects in American museums and private collections. Walters has also published two children’s stories, *The Two-Legged Creature: An Otoe Story Retold* (1993) and *The Pawnee Nation* (2000) which, as the titles suggest, educate children in both Otoe and Pawnee history. Her short prose and poetry have been widely anthologized. Rebecca Tillett characterizes Walters’ writing in the following way:



For Walters, a clear problem is the basis of both history and anthropology in the entrenched racism of nineteenth-century Euro-America: for example, the histories of American “conquest” that celebrated acts of genocide as legitimate “battles”; the federal policies that were informed by former military “educationalists” such as Captain Pratt of Carlisle; and the racial theories of early anthropologists such as Samuel Morton, whose “polygenesis” theory justified slavery through its promotion of ideas of biological inferiority (Tillett 85).

Walters, it seems, decided to counter the gradual disappearance of her people by actively reviving and promoting Native cultures, by producing literature in her tribal languages (Tillett 79), by explaining and passing on the oral storytelling tradition, and by detailing Native American political and religious systems.

The following chapters of this section examine the most distinguishing thematic and formal characteristics of each of the three narratives. The fourth chapter explores various ways of re-writing history, pointing out the techniques of working with and re-working the official, nationally accepted histories of settlement in Australia and North America, and of challenging the policies of separation and assimilation of Indigenous children. In addition, it analyzes the strategies that make it possible to define these narratives as sites of resistance, relating them to the concept of subjugated knowledges. The fifth chapter engages with the testimonial nature of the analyzed texts and looks at the ways in which the traumatic experience of separation and assimilation is inscribed in what I call *scriptotherapy*. The last chapter focuses on the collective subjectivities of the texts and the relevance of the often-discussed dichotomy between conventional Western auto/biographies with supposedly individual subjects and Indigenous life writing that is often characterized as typically promoting collective and relational, rather than individual, selves.





## CHAPTER 4

# ALTERNATIVE (HI)STORIES, INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE AND SUBJUGATED KNOWLEDGES

As an interpretation of the past, trauma is a kind of history. Like other histories, it attempts to square the present with its origins. The past can be personal or collective, recent or remote: an artefact of psychoanalysis or an act of witness; a primordial myth or a use of ancestral spirits to account for misfortune or violation.

Kirby Farrell, *Post-Traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties* (14)

History and its representation play a fundamental role in fictional and non-fictional Indigenous writing worldwide. Although “telling history” was a common practice in pre-contact Indigenous storytelling, the various forms of the impact of the history of colonization and oppression permeate, implicitly or explicitly, most Indigenous life writing narratives today. From the very beginning of the colonization of Australia and North America, Indigenous peoples of both continents have attempted to tell their experiences of history. As Bain Attwood and Fiona Magowan note in their introduction to *Telling Stories: Indigenous History and Memory in Australia and New Zealand*, “Indigenous people have often worked up histories—historical interpretations—in order to explain their plight to themselves, and so helped themselves to survive” (Attwood and Magowan xii). Indeed, the notions of history, memory, and survival are key issues that have shaped Indigenous writing in general. Until recently, however, the mainstream population in the settler colonies refused to recognize Indigenous versions of history and only relatively recently has there been a progress in providing the other, sometimes very different and rather unfavorable, side of the history of settlement in Australia and North America. In reaction to the invisibility and silenced voices of Indigenous peoples, contemporary Indigenous life writing is driven by the desire to have the hidden histories written down on paper—histories that in spite of being part of colonial history have never been acknowledged



(Attwood and Magowan xii). As a result, these narratives frequently communicate perspectives that displace official histories of white settlement and re-write history in the sense that they fill the gaps with previously repressed (hi)stories and/or they provide alternative versions of the settlement. Some well-known examples include alternative histories of the “discovery” of the two continents which portray Christopher Columbus and Captain James Cook as anti-heroes, challenging the myth of *terra nullius*—a concept largely applied in Australia where it became part of historical and legal discourse but which could also apply in this sense to the settlement practices in North America. *Terra nullius* refers to empty, unoccupied land, open to claims of European imperial powers, “without negotiation or compensation to its indigenous occupants” (Schaffer and Smith 86). Aboriginal writer and poet Alf Taylor, a member of the Stolen Generations himself, provides one of the many “Captain Cook yarns” in his short story “The Last Drop” in which Cook’s celebrated landing in Botany Bay is depicted as the accidental result of a drunken stupor and being lost at sea:

... Captain Cook got lost in his ship and landed in this country. He was that pissed from all the rum he’d been drinking, that on seeing land, he told his convicts to put a dingy down. He staggered into the boat with some flag and when he touched land he put this flag down to steady himself and the fuckin’ thing stuck in the ground, thereby claiming this country while asleep under the flag. (Taylor 125–126)

Anne Brewster argues that this reversal “problematizes the triumphalist, teleological narratives of settlement, discovery and nationhood” (“Humour and the Defamiliarization of Whiteness” 434). Similarly, in “A Coyote Columbus Story,” Cherokee writer Thomas King reconfigures Columbus’ discovery and his hero status by having Old Coyote conjure the European colonizers, depicted as “some people on the beach with flags and funny-looking clothes and stuff” (King 123), in order to have someone to play ball with. Significantly, Columbus, described as a greedy fool “sailing the ocean blue looking for China” (123), is also depicted as someone who is lost (both literally and metaphorically speaking) and thus the randomness and accidental character of European overseas adventures is foregrounded. In addition, the narrator, whose argument with trickster Coyote about the genesis of the New World frames this as a story-within-a story, voices the preoccupation of many Indigenous writers today: “We’re going to have to do this story right” (122), he explains to Coyote and begins to tell “what really happened” (122). In this way, such narratives formulate historical counter-narratives that significantly problematize the nationally accepted stories of European settlement and unmask them as myths of nation-building.

For many Indigenous writers/storytellers, telling history and telling peoples’ lives, including their own, seem to be intrinsically related. Both these activities



originate in the tradition of storytelling which has been a primary mode of “passing knowledge, maintaining community, resisting government control, and sharing the burden of hardship” (Schaffer and Smith 101) for Indigenous people in both Australia and North America. The interconnection between historiography and life writing has therefore become an important vehicle for remembering the past and was crucial in the storytelling tradition, the main function of which was to educate the next generation. However, Sam McKegney, writing about residential school narratives in Canada, warns against an overly strict focus on historicization, which “(alone) dangerously orients our thinking away from the present and future, binding us in a reactive manner to the power dynamics of the past” (6). McKegney argues that it is precisely the imaginative renderings of the past that are essential to ensure plausible futures for Indigenous peoples by “affording the Indigenous author interpretive autonomy and discursive agency while transcending the structural imperatives of proof and evidence embedded in historical paradigms” (7). In other words, Indigenous life writing, in particular the Stolen Generations narratives and residential and boarding school narratives, invoke a significant part of colonial history, but they do so in a creative manner, offering visions of hope, healing, and change (McKegney 7).

Indigenous women’s life writing under inspection in this section contributes to re-writing the history of coexistence between Indigenous and settler populations in Australia and North America by challenging the official policies of cultural genocide, assimilation, and total governmental control over Indigenous lives. Narratives such as *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *My Name Is Seepetza*, and *Talking Indian* reframe these policies designed to break up Indigenous kinship and communal bonds by piecing together individual stories of Indigenous children of mixed parentage who have been taken away and mapping their traumatic experiences, their resistance and survival strategies, and their successful or unsuccessful reunions with their relatives. These stories are often based on oral accounts, therefore struggling to be recognized by the dominant historiography preserved in written documents. Yet, as Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra observe, “their cumulative weight has carried a particular grand narrative into general circulation, as a theme that the dominant history for many years ignored but now acknowledges as valid” (Hodge and Mishra 102). So these accounts, even though telling individual life stories, actually reveal a collective portrait of the Stolen Generations in Australia and residential and boarding school victims in North America. Most importantly, these stories are empowering because they tell of Indigenous people who, despite having been separated from their families, having gone through the institutions, and having been forced to accept the dominant society’s values, managed to resist the pressure; instead of assimilating, they held even more tightly to their Indigenous origins. As a result, these narratives often show cases in which the surveillance system and assimilation policies failed in the end. Therefore, it may



be argued that these life stories, no matter how different in their representations of the Stolen Generations or residential and boarding school experiences, voice a collective resistance to the forced separation and assimilation policies towards Indigenous peoples in Australia and North America. The ways of expressing this resistance are the focus of the following paragraphs.

The notion of resistance is a complex term and as such can be employed in a number of ways, in various discourses not always in agreement with each other, and with increasingly ambivalent definitions. Essentially, resistance is linked to domains of power and operates on several levels. For the purposes of dealing with textual, literary resistance, Bill Ashcroft's general characteristic proves useful: he describes resistance as a discursive practice which "appropriat[es] forms of representation, and forc[es] entry into the discursive networks of cultural dominance" (Ashcroft 19). However, this raises a number of questions: How does a piece of writing appropriate forms of representation and whose representation is it? How does one resist effectively in literature? What are the strategies of writing resistance? Does resistance happen only on the level of content or also on the level of form? When considering Ashcroft's observation that "the concept of resistance literature arises from the central role of cultural expression of political struggle" (28), it is clear that Indigenous literary production, including life writing, exemplifies this characteristic. A number of Indigenous writers, scholars, and intellectuals, as well as non-Indigenous critics, have commented on the resistant and political nature of Indigenous writing (Monture-Angus 31; Tuhiwai Smith 4; Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up* xxiii). Indigenous life writing therefore plays the role of what Penny van Toorn calls "tactical histories;" she comments on the resistant nature of Aboriginal life stories being produced and disseminated through non-Indigenous institutions, invoking de Certeau's terms of tactical and strategic writing:

Whether called forth in colonial institutions such as missions, reserves, courtrooms and prisons, or edited, mass produced and packaged by today's commercial publishers, indigenous testimonies remain for the most part 'tactical' in Michel de Certeau's sense of being made and deployed in cultural territories predominantly or officially under someone else's control. (van Toorn 2-3)

The Indigenous women's life writing that is discussed here, i.e. published texts aimed at both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readership,<sup>22</sup> must necessarily take part in the institutional production of texts, conforming to its laws of power. At

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22 There are many life narratives by Indigenous writers and storytellers that are aimed entirely at family, relatives, and friends in the larger Indigenous community, often produced locally, outside the domain of non-Indigenous publishing institutions. As products of Aboriginal agency, these narratives do not need to conform to criteria imposed by a "foreign power," for example in language, content, and form choices (van Toorn 3).



the same time, however, they perform resistance to this power in the form of subversion, “blindspots, interstices and fleeting, opportune moments,” exploiting the “play within and between the institutions through which the dominant group routinely asserts and perpetuates its power” (van Toorn 3). As for the nature of resistance strategies in Indigenous women’s life writing, it is imperative to take into account their multifaceted nature. In terms of the diversity of such strategies and their characteristics, Moreton-Robinson notes: “Our resistances can be visible and invisible, conscious and unconscious, explicit and covert, partial and incomplete and intentional and unintentional. They are profoundly political acts that are neither one dimensional or fixed and they do not always lead to conflict or self-destruction” (*Talkin’ Up* xxiii). This suggests that the various kinds of resistances inscribed into life stories are not, due to their tactical, strategic, and shifting character, easily detectable.

In the originally oral Indigenous cultures, writing itself becomes an act of resistance in the sense that in order to gain a voice and be heard it appropriates the colonizer’s means of expression in order to “write back to the center,” as the famous phrase goes. By writing and publishing their stories, Indigenous authors resist the official state policies of silencing or distorting Indigenous voices, histories, subjectivities, and representations. Also, by writing in English—a language imposed on them by the settlers—Indigenous writers and storytellers try to seize some of the power from the dominant society and challenge and shape its discourse. On another level, Indigenous writers have often appropriated conventional European literary genres and at the same time resisted them by employing non-European techniques that are characteristic of the Indigenous practice of storytelling. In Indigenous life writing, the genre of autobiography, conventional in European tradition but considered foreign in Indigenous cultures (Krupat, *The Voice in the Margin* 55; Wong, *Sending My Heart Back* 12), is used to tell the story of colonized people as a collective entity, rather than the story of an individual, unique self; it is often a collaborative project with multiple authorship, incorporating other voices and genres, therefore resisting and transgressing genre conventions. On the thematic level, by deliberately choosing to depict extended familial relationships and foregrounding domesticity, Indigenous women’s life writing significantly resists the intended goals of the government policies of breaking up Indigenous families. In addition, the depiction of traditional cultural practices and the foregrounding of Indigenous identities resist assimilationist policies. Finally, on a stylistic level, life writing narratives often integrate elements (words, phrases, or entire sentences) from Indigenous languages, sometimes without translation, as well as the narrative techniques of fragmentation and repetition, adopted from storytelling traditions.

In Australia, Aboriginal life writing has been fundamental to the process of resistance to colonialism. Gillian Whitlock emphasizes the importance of resistance



against assimilation organized by Aboriginal intelligentsia between the 1960s and 1980s, the result of which was a new concept of Aboriginality with a “strategic sense of united identity” that became “fundamental to the development of an effective counter-discourse, which could challenge the principles of white nationalism” (Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire* 155). This concept of Aboriginality arises from two bases: first, it is formulated in relation to the dominant white society and second, it is increasingly “tactical and contingent” (Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire* 156). These tactics and contingencies, Whitlock argues, characterize Australian Aboriginal life writing, together with two opposing processes that are crucial to resistance and are also activated in the narratives analyzed in this section: the process of articulation in the form of identity formation and the process of disarticulation, i.e. a critique of it (156). In other words, Indigenous women’s life writing is significant because it gives importance to tribal, regional, familial, and generational affiliations while disrupting the fixed and singular idea of Aboriginality and turning to more mobile, diversified, and plural notions of Aboriginality (Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire* 156). As is shown both in the feminist texts by Allen, Maracle, and Huggins and in the historical narratives by Pilkington, Sterling, and Walters, these texts explicitly resist genre boundaries and language codes, as well as conventional representations of Indigenous women and their histories.

Indigenous life writing in North America certainly shares these elements of resistance with Aboriginal life writing in Australia. Patricia Monture-Angus, for example, identifies resistance as a common denominator in Native American writing: “What is common among many Native American writers is our desire to write our resistance. This desire might sometimes be described as ‘decolonization’” (Monture-Angus 31). While she characterizes the first wave of Native American literature, quoting Greg Young-Ing, as “protest literature, political in content and angry in tone,” Monture-Angus asserts that the more recent writing by both Native American and First Nations women is resistance writing rather than the protest literature of previous years (31). In her influential study of Native women’s writing in Canada from feminist and postcolonial perspectives, Julia Emberley also argues for reading Indigenous women’s writing as resistance literature, drawing on Barbara Harlow’s theoretical work *Resistance Literature* and emphasizing that literary texts produced by “third-world” women are not “supplement[s] to political events but a constitutive element[s] in the political process” (Emberley 21). Resistance in various forms is a crucial element of Indigenous life stories and counteracts their marginalization in the sense that it is shared across diverse Indigenous communities (Tuhiwai Smith 2).

If Indigenous feminist personal non-fiction was related to strategies of inscribing difference and framed in terms of resistance to the totalizing tendencies of the mainstream (feminist) theory, the Stolen Generations and residential and boarding school narratives analyzed in this section textualize resistance to mainstream



historiography. *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *My Name Is Seepetza*, and *Talking Indian* stress their protagonists' resistance to the policy of state intervention imposed on them and by extension the power of colonial history that swept over their communities and families. They manifest the uselessness and absurdity of the mission, residential, and boarding school system in which the children were supposed to gradually forget about their Indigenous background and assimilate into the dominant society. The removed children in the selected life writing narratives are individuals who, although torn from their original environment, develop an even stronger connection to their communities, represented by the family, Native languages, and traditional life-style. This resistance is significant when considered in the context of the other experiences among the majority of separated Indigenous children affected by the system. Most of the children's lives were, in fact, crushed by the system: the outcome was trauma, internal conflicts, loss of identity, and/or sense of alienation, all of this leading to dysfunctional relationships later on and generally unhappy lives. It was certainly hard to resist openly, with few opportunities to escape the predetermined fate and break the cycle. Cases of children's escapes from the institutions were scarce and mostly unsuccessful; many were not able, or not allowed, to connect with their relatives in adulthood, many assimilated into mainstream society and denied their origins in the hopes of protecting themselves and their own children.<sup>23</sup> In this context, the life writings by Doris Pilkington, Shirley Sterling, and Anna Lee Walters gain special importance because they tell stories of resistance, of the survival of the few who managed to escape, both literally and metaphorically, the colonizing power.

Writing resistance in *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *My Name Is Seepetza*, and *Talking Indian* proceeds basically on two levels. First, there is the resistance that the author inscribes into her text. This includes techniques permeating the language, such as subverting Standard English by integrating Indigenous words and phrases; narrative strategies, such as combining and/or reflecting oral traditions and storytelling; and the content, such as challenging official narratives by voicing alternative stories. But resistance also takes place within the life stories: in the form of the protagonists' resistance to the state policies of separation and assimilation, especially in the mission, residential, and boarding schools. Some protagonists run away, as in Pilkington's account, some seemingly succumb to the institutional regime but are determined to return to their communities and affirm their Indigenous identities, as in Sterling's and Walters' cases. All these strategies of resistance are intertwined, sometimes in a more, sometimes less traceable way.

Apart from inscribing resistance, Indigenous women's life writing produces differences also by inscribing subjugated knowledges. Moreton-Robinson claims

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23 More detailed accounts of people removed as children are available in Carmel Bird's *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, the *Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal People*, and Linda Jaune's *Residential Schools: The Stolen Years*.





that in their life stories, Indigenous women “speak of the practical, political and personal effects of being ‘other’” and they express their difference through “accumulating and producing subjugated knowledges which reflect their world view and inform their social practice in Indigenous and white domains” (*Talkin’ Up* 3). In the following paragraphs, I want to argue that the notion of subjugated knowledges, introduced by Michel Foucault, is particularly useful for exploring Indigenous women’s life writing in the critical framework of strategic resistance, and that these subjugated knowledges create a counter-archive of knowledge through which the life stories help the writers resist the pressure of non-Indigenous cultural practices and allow their positioning to differ from that of dominant discourses.

In *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault defines subjugated knowledges as “those blocs of historical knowledge which were present but disguised within the body of functionalist and systematising theory and which criticism ... has been able to reveal” (82). A further elaboration on the definition reveals that subjugated knowledges may be “disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity;” more specifically, Foucault continues, it is “particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity ... which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it” (82). It is this oppositional character, I believe, that may relate Foucault’s concept to Indigenous discourse and its commitment to bringing suppressed histories to the surface while relying on tactical resistances. For Foucault, subjugated knowledges are concerned with a “*historical knowledge of struggles*” (83, original emphasis); in other words, with the conflicts, clashes and hostile encounters, “confined to the margins of knowledge ... by the tyranny of globalizing discourses with their hierarchy and all their privileges” (83). In my understanding, Foucault’s theory of the genealogy of knowledge—a product combining “an erudite knowledge and a popular knowledge” (83)—may be applied to the complex ways in which Eurocentric epistemology, particularly the colonial discourse, has been placed at the center of the foundational national narratives of settler colonies and, in order to do this, marginalized and “disqualified” Indigenous knowledges of history, land, social structures, and cultural practices. It can be argued that Indigenous life writing is one of the means that can, at least partially, disrupt the linearity and homogeneity of mainstream historiography by unfolding the previously subjugated Indigenous knowledges, by, in Foucault’s words, “entertain[ing] claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects” (Foucault 83). In this way, subjugated knowledges can foster the group’s self-definition and self-determination (Collins 299).



Brewster applies Foucault's notion of genealogy of knowledge, which may arise out of the decolonization process as a "historical knowledge of struggles that might be used tactically," to Aboriginal discourse in Australia (*Literary Formations* 47). Brewster asserts that this genealogy of subjugated knowledges is embedded in Aboriginal women's autobiographical narratives,<sup>24</sup> and that these narratives articulate "knowledges that have been repressed and denied by the dominant group" (*Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography* 34). Among the various thematic levels of subjugated knowledges, she identifies the notions of family, spirituality, survival skills (allowing for survival both in the remote bush and within the urban poverty trap), Aboriginal languages, and the practice of storytelling which together create an oppositional discourse (*Literary Formations* 48–52; *Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography* 34–36). Therefore, as an example of subjugated knowledge within the site of Aboriginal family, Brewster mentions the representations of extended family, kinship ties, and domesticity shown in the practices of home-making, cooking traditional meals and health remedies. In the realm of spirituality, the communication with dead people's spirits, spiritual practices, and frequent readings of "signs" such as bird calls as an indication of a misfortune or tragedy, is considered incommensurate with the Western rational belief system (Brewster, *Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography* 35). Aboriginal subjugated knowledges are also embodied in the traditional knowledge of the bush and of living off the land. Together with the use of Aboriginal language, these knowledges were perhaps most severely suppressed by government policies.

In accord with Brewster, Moreton-Robinson foregrounds relationality and spirituality as the primary sites of subjugated knowledges in Aboriginal life writing in Australia, which she defines as "disguised and hidden but ... present in inter-subjective relations" (*Talkin' Up* 20). In this perspective, Indigenous women are identified as the bearers of these knowledges (20). It is interesting to note that Moreton-Robinson shifts Foucault's original concept, which emphasized that subjugated knowledges were revealed mainly through the work of criticism and academic scholarship. Moreton-Robinson argues differently: subjugated knowledges are revealed in the "inter-subjective relations," suggesting that it is rather up to the "bearers" of the "hidden" and "disguised" knowledge to reveal the oppositional knowledges (20). At the same time, Moreton-Robinson is aware that the concept of subjugated knowledges is not meant to simply complement the Indigenous/Western binary in terms of epistemology and subsequently problematizes the argument in a series of questions which are, in her opinion, raised precisely in

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24 Brewster designed the term "autobiographical narratives" in her 1996 study *Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography* to distinguish Aboriginal women's life writing, with its oral and collaborative nature, from the written and individualistic "autobiography" of the Western literary tradition (9). In the recent re-edition of Brewster's book, the title reflects the more accepted term today—*Reading Aboriginal Women's Life Stories*.



Indigenous women's life narratives: "How does one know when subjugated knowledges are operating in a particular cultural context where two subjects may speak the same language but position the world in distinctively different ways? How can one be reflexive about knowledge that one does not know? And what is the extent of the indeterminacy?" (20) Although Moreton-Robinson suggests in her answer to these questions that there will always be communicative incommensurabilities and only partial dialogues, she adds that while Indigenous women have no other choice than to be conscious of the colonizing systems of knowledge and to carefully negotiate their subjectivities in the process of cross-racial dialogues, there has never been such an imperative for reflexivity for the dominant white society (21). The solution called for by many Indigenous scholars is to develop gradually an Indigenous system of knowledge which would allow for an alternative critical framework and research methodologies (Tuhiwai Smith 4).

Although the theoretical concept of subjugated knowledges has been mostly applied in the Australian context, particularly by Brewster in *Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography*, in which she applies the notion of subjugated knowledges to Ruby Langford Ginibi's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988), and Aileen Moreton-Robinson in *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*, it can be extended to the Native North American context. The suggested examples of subjugated knowledges in Australian Aboriginal women's life writing find many counterparts in the life writings of Indigenous women in North America. The extended family, household management, negotiation between traditional religious systems and Christianity, and the use of Native languages in spite of their prohibition at residential and boarding schools have certainly been important sites of resistance for Indigenous people in the US and Canada. Traditional knowledge of the land, medicines, hunting, gathering food, and cooking are depicted predominantly in the cultural maintenance narratives as well as in the residential and boarding school narratives, in which they reveal subjugated knowledges in opposition to the Western system of knowledge enforced by the official assimilationist policies of the government institutions and church missions. Often the traditional tribal knowledge in these narratives is presented with a kind of pre-colonial nostalgia and awareness that it is gradually disappearing due to the encroachment of the white settler society. This is seen, for example, in *Honour the Sun* (1987), an autobiographical novel by the First Nations writer Ruby Slipperjack, which recounts a diary-like life story of the main protagonist's childhood and teenage years in a small Native community. The more urban life stories of North American Indigenous women, such as Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* (1973) or Lee Maracle's *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* (1990), reveal, in turn, a modified version of the archive of subjugated knowledges that takes the form of urban survival skills in an alienated city environment, showing ways of battling racism, poverty, unemployment, high incarceration rates, alcoholism, and drug addiction.



## Doris Pilkington | Counter-(hi)story

In their grief the women asked why their children should be taken from them. Their anguished cries echoed across the flats, carried by the wind. But no one listened to them, no one heard them.

Doris Pilkington, *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* (48)

Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* helped bring about a second wave of public interest in Aboriginal women's life writing in the 1990s and proved that the popularity of this specific genre has not yet reached its end.<sup>25</sup> Together with Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987), *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* is perhaps the most internationally recognized Aboriginal life story, thanks in part to a widely discussed adaptation of the written narrative to the screen, entitled *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2001).<sup>26</sup> Pilkington's narrative is a boundary-crosser in the sense that it draws on several genres. First and foremost, the author documents the history of her people since pre-colonial times and re-writes the history of Aboriginal-settler relationships from the earliest period until the 1930s in Western Australia. In these terms it is a resistance story—resistance to white control, to physical and psychological limitations—and a story of survival. It is also a biography of her mother and two aunts, as well as of her ancestors. Further, the story can be read as an adventure story, a story of an escape or a quest. Lastly, it draws heavily on oral traditions and storytelling techniques as Pilkington collaborated on eliciting and recording the oral accounts of her mother and aunt Daisy. This made Pilkington negotiate Aboriginal oral traditions and European literary conventions. In addition, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* can be read as a prequel to Pilkington's next book, the memoir *Under the Wintamarra Tree* (2002), which provides a third-person autobiographical account of Pilkington's own separation from her family and of how she was taken to the very same Moore River Native Settlement that her female family members

25 An exhaustive overview of Aboriginal women's life writing published in Australia since the 1970s and the suggested reasons for the popularity of the genre is provided in Anne Brewster's *Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography* (1996) and Oliver Haag's article "From the Margins to the Mainstream: Towards a History of Published Indigenous Australian Autobiographies and Biographies" included in *Indigenous Biography and Autobiography*.

26 Directed by Philip Noyce, an Australian filmmaker who worked his way to filming in Hollywood, and backed by Doris Pilkington herself as a consultant on the film script, the film was positively accepted and reviewed worldwide. However, in Australia it triggered a debate among scholars about the film's commodification of the Stolen Generations narrative which was universalized and marketed for an international audience. Detailed discussions are offered in three crucial articles published in *Australian Humanities Review*: Tony Hughes D'aeth's "Which Rabbit-Proof Fence: Empathy, Assimilation, Hollywood" (2002), Anne Brewster's "Aboriginal Life Writing and Globalisation: Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*" (2002), and Emily Potter and Kay Schaffer's "*Rabbit-Proof Fence*: Relational Ecologies and the Commodification of Indigenous Experience" (2004).



had managed to escape from decades earlier. In this way, Pilkington's own story is already inscribed in *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

*Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* is primarily a historical account of Aboriginal lives, both collective and individual. As such, it redresses the long-term invisibility of local Indigenous groups and supplies a previously missing perspective. Pilkington contributes to the re-creation of Aboriginal history in Western Australia as she starts her narrative with a mytho-fictional account of the pre-contact and early-contact history of the Nyungar people, portrayed as idyllic, imagined, and decolonized space. Interestingly enough, this part is not re-told as an "objective" historical account in the Western tradition but rather offers a dramatized history including fictional dialogues, referring to stories told by Aboriginal people across the generations. The result is a picture of Aboriginal history "as it might have been." The larger portion of the narrative, however, follows the lives of Pilkington's mother, Molly, and her two cousins/sisters, Daisy and Gracie, who were together removed from their home in Jigalong in north-eastern Western Australia to the infamous Moore River Native Settlement at the other end of the state. This part shows the full impact of the Department of Native Affairs' policies of removing "half-caste" children in the 1930s, policies championed by the notorious A. O. Neville, then the Western Australian Chief Protector of Aborigines. The last third of Pilkington's book recounts the three girls' escape from the Native settlement, setting out on the journey home and walking 1,600 km along the rabbit-proof fence that runs north-south across the state. This part celebrates the traditional knowledge that helps the girls survive in the bush and at the same time condemns the monstrous state apparatus that is mobilized by the authorities during the girls' persecution.

The technique that Pilkington employs when re-writing the history of colonization in Western Australia is mainly the principle of synthesis, which allows her to combine effectively both Aboriginal and European historical sources and to echo what Hodge and Mishra, in their analysis of a play by the Aboriginal playwright Jack Davis, call a dual principle: "By using this dual principle of organization, Davis was able to fuse what have been seen as the two opposing kinds of history—linear European and circular Aboriginal—to represent both the continuities across time and the different possibilities offered by different circumstances" (103). In my view, Pilkington's text gets close to this principle in the sense that it "fuses" two historical perspectives and two means of recording history: one is based on archival, written materials, such as documents describing the first landings on the Western Australian coast, the early expeditions, and the founding of military bases and government depots, and later also the correspondence, official records, and newspaper reports related to the girls' escape. The other perspective is based on Aboriginal (hi)stories of the first contact, partly recorded from oral accounts, partly fictionalized by Pilkington herself. One example of this historical synthesis appears early in the book, when Pilkington juxtaposes two means of recording



one event—the establishment of the first military base on the Western coast in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first description obviously relies on European historiography, reminding readers of conventional early colonial narratives, such as navy officers' journals:

Major Edmund Lockyer with a detachment of eighteen soldiers from the 93<sup>rd</sup> Regiment and fifty convicts were sent to King George Sound (where Albany is now situated) by Governor Darling in New South Wales, to establish a military base. Their aim was to deter renegade convicts, whalers and sealers. They sailed in the brig *Amity* and had been anchored offshore in King George Sound for over a month. On a hot summer day in 1826, Major Lockyer and two of his officers went ashore and climbed the cliffs and explored the harbour. They were delighted with the beauty of the coastal region but were not impressed with the soil. (*Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* 5)

Several paragraphs later, readers are confronted with the Aboriginal perspective of the same event, voiced through a group of Aborigines living in the area:

Suddenly they heard voices of men shouting loudly and yelling back and forth. Kundilla and his sons became alarmed. They clambered up the cliffs and hid behind the thick bushes on the rocky ledge. Lying on their stomachs they peered over the edge. They were not prepared for the sight that greeted them. They were confronted not with shouting, cruel men, but different men wearing strange scarlet jackets and others in white, coarse cotton suits. All these men were very pale. 'Surely they must be gengas,' whispered Kundilla, as he moved closer to the edge of the cliff. (*Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* 5–6)

These “doubled” passages abound in Pilkington's narrative, suggesting that such a device may offer a true synthesis of the two histories. By placing these two segments side by side, the author draws attention to two different modes of recording history—the Western archival source supplying exact names and dates, depicting events in a seemingly objective, linear way, while the Aboriginal perspective is fictionalized and told as a story. Pilkington alludes here to the Western practice of privileging the former as a more credible account that is taken for granted as normative, and of suppressing the latter as lacking historical evidence and thus credibility.

Another example of the many ways in which the explorers' and Aboriginal histories are interwoven is the main theme of the entire narrative—the journey across the desert, across a difficult terrain that was often described by the first explorers as inhospitable, barren, and unwelcoming. The trek the three little girls undertake is presented as a heroic deed and presents a juxtaposition to the journeys of the first Anglo-Australian explorers, such as the famous 1860 Burke and Wills expedi-



tion across the continent from the south to the north, in which the two explorers died from starvation and exhaustion in a territory where Aboriginal people had lived for centuries. The fact that in Pilkington's story the Aboriginal girls, aged 8, 11, and 14, make a successful journey of about 1,600 km towards their home, escaping a government institution, therefore subverts the celebrated expeditions of Anglo-Australian heroes and the subsequent colonization and settlement of the region. The girls' journey home, in spite of the distance, also challenges the Department's effort to deterritorialize Aboriginal people with the aim of diminishing or destroying their bonds to land and kinship.

A specific strategy that Pilkington employs when presenting the two historical perspectives is her use and appropriation of the official archival materials. I use the term "appropriation" here to mean rejecting the privilege of the official, nationally established archive, seizing its power and using the material for new purposes. In *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Pilkington appropriates archival materials and uses their credibility in order to make the victims of the system of surveillance visible. In her article on *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* and the effects of globalization, Brewster characterizes the notion of the archive and Pilkington's use of it in the following way:

The inclusion of these excerpts [from archival materials] points to an awareness of the apparatus of the archive, not so much as a specific institution as an entire epistemological complex for producing a comprehensive knowledge within the domain of the British empire, and its subsequent legacy in the governance of the recently federated states of Australia. The archive was a prototype for global and national systems of dominance, an operational field for controlling territory by the production and distribution of information about it in the forms of files, dossiers, censuses, statistics, maps, reports, letters, telegrams and memoranda. These technologies of surveillance were derived from the demographic and ethnographical practices devised by various disciplines of learning (geography, medicine, sociology, linguistics, etc.). (Brewster, "Aboriginal Life Writing and Globalization" n. pag.)

In Pilkington's narrative, the archive is depicted as an important means through which the colonizers exercised power in the form of controlling Aboriginal people's lives by monitoring their movement, employment, family connections, relationships, marriages, and reproduction. This information was recorded in the files of the Department of Native Affairs in Perth and in the correspondence of authorities. Throughout *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Pilkington uses these documents from her archival research and interweaves them either directly or indirectly into her narrative.<sup>27</sup> These documents include newspaper reports (17, 102), early

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27 Many Aboriginal writers writing life stories present information researched in the archives, which were inaccessible to them for a long time. Archival documents and records are sometimes the only means for Aboriginal people in Australia to trace their ancestors and find information about their rela-



settlers' diaries (16), station reports addressed to the Department of Native Affairs (39, 41), police records (46, 105, 112, 124), original photocopies of telegrams sent back and forth by the authorities (51, 53), transcripts of correspondence between A. O. Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines, and his informants (124–26, 128, 129), and the map of the girls' journey from Jigalong to the Moore River Native Settlement and the trek back home (x). The motivation for such incorporation of the archival materials is at least two-fold. First, Pilkington uses the archive to do what Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls “researching back” (7), which in her case means employing the archival knowledge to expose the monstrosity of the system of state intervention encoded in the policy of eugenics and for revealing the inhuman treatment of the “half-caste” people by the state authorities. Second, by showing histories and life experiences which inhabit the space *outside* of this archival material, for example the life at the Moore River Native Settlement from an Aboriginal point of view or the traditional Aboriginal knowledge that helps the three girls to “read” the landscape around them and thus survive in the outback, Pilkington points to the blind spots that the system of surveillance could not have encompassed.

Pilkington's usage of the official archive leads to establishing what Brewster calls a “counter-archive” which consists of “(formerly largely oral) Aboriginal knowledges and practices, such as hunting, birthing and mourning practices, food, drinks and medicines, marriage and skin customs and spiritual beliefs” (“Aboriginal Life Writing and Globalization” n. pag.). Brewster explains that “it is not, however, an archive that confines a total knowledge under the purview of the state, but one that enables that knowledge to be mobilised in everyday life in the service of a resistant identity formation” (“Aboriginal Life Writing and Globalization” n. pag.). Thus the appropriation of the archival material and formation of the counter-archive in Pilkington's, as well as Sterling's and Walters' narratives, emphasizes the fact that this type of Indigenous women's life writing combats the assumption that the official archive can completely define Indigenous people. After all, in *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* the Aboriginal girls manage to escape against all odds, in spite of the entire official apparatus that is activated in their search. From an Aboriginal point of view, the story of the three girls' escape can be read as a story of outwitting the dominant power and as a celebration of Aboriginal abilities to survive in the face of policies of extermination.

Pilkington's strategies of resistance and of revealing subjugated knowledges in *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* are highlighted most prominently in three areas: first, in Pilkington's use of Mardudjara words within her narrative in English; second, in her appropriation of the official archive through re-naming and subverting the

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tives, since sometimes their removal to the farthest possible area from their own land meant the severe rupture of family ties. Jackie Huggins comments on the difficulties of gaining access to the archival documents in *Sister Girl*, particularly in the chapter “Auntie Rita's File” (131–134).





vocabulary of the period documents; and third, in the ability of both the author and the main protagonist, Molly, to combine their traditional Aboriginal knowledge with the practices of the colonizers, forming a kind of hybrid knowledge. These three areas are explored in more detail in the following paragraphs.

The role of language as one of the main tools of colonial domination has been postulated for some time by postcolonial scholars. In settler colonies such as Australia, Canada, and the U.S., the focus has been on the process of using English as a source of creative subversion of the dominant power by marginalized groups, including Indigenous people (Ashcroft et al. 37). It is also Indigenous people, it has been argued, who exemplify one of the richest developments of what Hodge and Mishra call “antilanguage strategies” (206) which stem from the people’s strong attachment to their traditional languages and their enormous efforts to keep the languages alive. Therefore Indigenous life writing sometimes incorporates Indigenous languages into the English text, ranging from individual words and phrases to entire passages such as poems or stories. In addition to bonding the community and reviving the lost language fragments, this strategy also encodes the text and to a certain extent excludes outsiders, which is the fundamental characteristic of antilanguages (Hodge and Mishra 206). The exclusion of the non-Indigenous readership does not have to be, however, complete: Indigenous writers frequently provide a translation either within the text or in a glossary at the end, which is the case of Pilkington’s narrative. Therefore it is possible to say that while partially encoding parts of the texts, the writers also provide decoding clues. If the reader is a cultural outsider, however, the translations are often not enough: rarely do they offer explanations of social concepts linked to kinship, religion, economies or various communal policies. The linguistic translation thus creates the illusion for cultural outsiders that they can fully understand what they can in reality understand only partially.

As an example, Pilkington’s text relatively often uses the Mardudjara word *dgudu*, by which Daisy and Gracie, the younger girls, address the oldest Molly. *Dgudu* is translated in the glossary as an “older sister” and throughout the text there are ambivalent references to the kinship relationships among the three girls. Strictly speaking, according to the Western social structures, Molly, Daisy, and Gracie are cousins, not sisters. However, in the kinship structures of the Mardudjara people, the three girls would be considered sisters due to their close relationships and their growing up together. Similarly, words linked to a different system of beliefs, such as *gengas* (translated as “spirit of the ancestors”) or *marbarn* (“object of magical powers for healing or finding lost items”) may be intelligible but conceptually challenging or even misleading for non-Indigenous readers. It is interesting to note the areas in which Pilkington actually uses Mardudjara words in her narrative. From a simple analysis of the glossary, it is clear that the words and phrases in the traditional language relate to several groups: the first one includes kinship-related words and words describing relationships between people,



both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal; the second area covers concepts related to the belief system; and the third area depicts practical, everyday objects, such as the names of clothes, body parts, food, and animals, but also things important for survival in the desert, for example cardinal points and seasons of the year. This overview shows that Pilkington's strategy is to encode concepts important for the traditional Aboriginal cultural practices and to record the counter-archive consisting of Aboriginal subjugated knowledges.

Pilkington incorporates the official archive into her text and subsequently appropriates this archive while at the same time creating a counter-archive of knowledge. The resistance to the official archive is also demonstrated through the vocabulary Pilkington employs, exposing the discrepancy between Aboriginal and settlers' political systems. For example, a paradoxical ambiguity appears in the use of the word "protection." On the one hand, it is used by the authorities in the correspondence and newspaper reports to justify the mobilization of the police apparatus in the search for the three runaways through rhetoric such as "we are very anxious that no harm may come to them in the bush" (102) or "I fear for their safety" (*Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* 113). On the other hand, there is the reality in which the girls, quite capable of not only surviving in the outback but also of turning their knowledge of the environment to their advantage, know they must escape this "protection" that in their own vocabulary equals dangerous persecution. In other instances, Pilkington contrasts the official euphemisms for the oppressive treatment of Indigenous children, such as "native settlement," "school," and "students," with her own vocabulary, where the Native settlement is a "concentration camp" and the children are "inmates" (72). The image of jail is further invoked by Pilkington's description of the girls' dormitory in the settlement, stressing the bars on the windows and padlocks on the doors (63). Finally, Pilkington does not hesitate to call the removal of the three girls from their families an "abduction" (45). Significantly, neither does Pilkington shy away from referring to the sexual relationships between white men and Aboriginal women. At the beginning of her account, she describes the practices of the whalers and sealers: "Those cruel and murderous men came ashore and stole Aboriginal women and kept them on board their ships as sexual slaves, then murdered them and tossed their bodies into the ocean" (4). Later, when describing the early settlements and pastoralists' stations, Pilkington exposes the names of Molly and Gracie's white fathers (48). This has become an important strategy in Indigenous women's life writing through which authors confront the often prominent descendants of the Australian "founding fathers," as is most strikingly done in Sally Morgan's *My Place*.

The concept of subjugated knowledges in *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* is related mainly to the counter-archive of traditional Aboriginal knowledge which surfaces particularly at the beginning of the story in the pre-contact and early-contact history of the Nyungar and Mardu people, as well as during the girls' journey during



which the traditional knowledge helps them survive. Revealing this knowledge has a didactic function as the narrative provides information on various aspects of Aboriginal life, from everyday practices, such as hunting and cooking, to beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, kinship systems, and so on. Pilkington, for example, gives a complex account of Aboriginal codes related to covering their naked bodies. In a passage describing Aboriginal people's adoption, both voluntary and involuntary, of certain products and everyday practices of the settlers, she mentions how Aboriginal people who came to live near white settlements were made to cover their naked bodies. She depicts the initial puzzlement of the Aboriginal families coming from the desert at the incomprehensible embarrassment of white people because of their nakedness. She then goes on to explicate a set of Aboriginal practices connected to the body and skin, such as covering their bodies with a mixture of red ochre and animal fat to protect them from evil spirits during ceremonies or to disguise human odors when hunting (25). In this way, the subjugated knowledge, i.e. both ceremonial and everyday practice, is revealed in the wake of describing a custom imposed on the Aboriginal population by the settlers.

It was noted earlier that Pilkington combines Western historical sources, going as far as quoting directly from major Australian historians such as Robert Hughes and his *The Fatal Shore (Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence 12)*, with transcribed oral accounts collected from her relatives. Pilkington juxtaposes not only the public and the political with the private and the personal, but also the two systems of knowledge: "I have though worked to synthesize these different forms of knowledge to give readers the fullest insight into this historic journey," explains Pilkington in the introduction to her text (xiv). Indeed, she manages to interweave the two frameworks in a kind of hybrid knowledge which draws on both Indigenous and Western epistemologies. This hybrid knowledge proves vital even for the protagonists themselves. Molly, for example, can successfully find her way home only through using the traditional Aboriginal knowledge of the bush *and* her knowledge of the geography of the rabbit-proof fence—a Western technology. In this sense, the rabbit-proof fence, paradoxically, becomes a symbol of homecoming. Another example of cultural hybridity is echoed in the passage in which the three girls are taken south on a boat and, approaching Fremantle, the sight of the wheat flour producer's logo—a dingo—immediately brings back memories of home and family gatherings:

As the red dingo became more visible, Molly, Daisy and Gracie felt an acute pang of homesickness. How many ration bags had their mothers, grandmothers and aunts used with that red dingo—midgi-midgi dgundu—on them? Scores and scores when you think of all the dampers they cooked. When the bags were empty the women made them into bags for carrying food and other items or filled them with old rags and used them as pillows. Bloomers and shifts were also cut out of the flour bags. Yes, they had grown



up with the red dingo. Tears welled in their eyes as they remembered their families. (Pilkington, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* 56)

This scene is worth quoting at length because it reveals inscribed resistance and subjugated knowledges in a complex way. First, it shows hybrid knowledge in the combination of a Western concept (producing flour) that is symbolized, interestingly, by a native Australian animal (dingo), an important element of Aboriginal life. But paradoxically it is not the dingo itself that signifies home for the girls; rather, home is symbolized by what the dingo represents in the white world—dozens and dozens of flour bags that Aboriginal families used, which prompts the girls to remember their Aboriginal identity. Secondly, the passage uncovers an important set of strategies which appropriate a Western product for other purposes. Thus the used flour bags cover the basic needs of an Aboriginal family who were made dependent on the rations provided by the government and forced to gradually succumb to the settler way of life. Finally, the passage also reveals resistance to assimilation as the girls spontaneously recall their memories of the community of women cooking meals at home. This is something that provides a link between and a transition from Pilkington’s narrative to Shirley Sterling’s life writing.

## Shirley Sterling | AlterNative (Hi)story

Sometimes at dusk  
When Shadowtime steals souls,  
I listen at the nighthawk  
Screams and falls.  
I search the clouds for moonlight. ...

Then somewhere in the pines  
Coyote laughs—  
Transforming night,  
And welcoming the little star  
That follows Moon.

Shirley Sterling, *My Name Is Seepetza* (n. pag.)

Shirley Sterling’s *My Name Is Seepetza* can be compared to *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* in its effort to confront settler history with Indigenous history and provide what Kateri Damm, in her analysis of Maria Campbell’s and Beatrice Culleton’s autobiographies, calls “an alterNative perspective of the history of Canada,” which is intended to “affirm and preserve Native views, Native realities, and Native forms of telling, while actively challenging and redefining dominant concepts



of history, truth and fact” (95). In her portrayal of the residential school system in Canada, Sterling follows a tradition of similar narratives, most prominently Basil Johnston’s *Indian School Days* (1988). With a technique that is atypical in Indigenous life writing—a diary form—and a child narrator, Sterling’s story represents one of the many accounts of the residential school system in Canada in the late 1950s. Although the narrative is strongly autobiographical, based on the author’s own experience in the Kamloops Residential School in interior British Columbia, Sterling also incorporates and fictionalizes her sisters’ and friends’ experiences from the same institution. The persona of a twelve-year old N’laka’pamux girl, named Seepetza by her family but later renamed Martha Stone by the school staff, provides Sterling with tools for presenting the story through a child’s innocent and naïve eyes. Using a child narrator allows Sterling to unmask and criticize abusive practices perpetrated by the residential school system. The heroine is separated from her family at the age of six to spend each year, with the exception of the two summer months, at the fictional Kalamak Indian Residential School. In her diary entries, Seepetza records the events and details of residential school life, including the memory of her first day of grade one, marked by the trauma of unwanted parting from her family and having to succumb to the strict regime of the school.

From the very beginning, Sterling’s narrative is told in a series of contrasts that can be summarized under the heading “school versus home.” The diary structure reveals a pattern in the organization of the individual entries which frequently begin by recording an event or a detail from the school’s life that is immediately followed by a memory of a similar event or activity that is done in the family circle, and vice versa. These contrasts are not only implicitly encoded in the text; they are consciously placed side by side by the narrator herself, as in the following quote: “When we’re at home we can ride horses, go swimming at the river, run in the hills, climb trees and laugh out loud and holler yahoo anytime we like and we won’t get in trouble. At school we get punished for talking, looking at boys in church, even stepping out of line. I wish I could live at home instead of here” (Sterling 13–14). Similar passages show the depth of the narrator’s trauma from the separation and the impossibility of justifying in any way the officially established assimilationist system, especially since the story foregrounds a picture of a functional Native family which is loving, caring, and self-sufficient, devoid of stereotypical images of domestic violence, alcoholism, or neglected children. Seepetza’s family is provided for by the father who, apart from having a job as a court interpreter due to his knowledge of six Indian languages, is also a hunter and rancher working on his own farm (67, 65), and it is implied that he is also involved in activism promoting social justice for Indigenous people (67). Seepetza’s life at the Joyaska ranch is characterized by a circle of extended family members; by joy, freedom, and various little incidents and humorous episodes.



This portrayal of an Indigenous family is very important as it resists the common representations of dysfunctional Indigenous families that have become a target of state welfare policies as well as the subject of many literary accounts. In *My Name Is Seepeetza*, however, the passages depicting the harmonious family environment make it all the more difficult for the reader to comprehend the rationale behind the forced separations.

As the narrator moves back and forth in time and space, images of home are positioned against the strict, military-like regime at the residential school. The contrasts between the two environments can be found on various levels, from differences in food to exercising physical violence. The descriptions of home-made food, which is abundant, healthy, tasteful, and always shared (Sterling 66) are juxtaposed with the lack of food at the residential school; it is repeatedly suggested that the school provides insufficient, miserable, and unhealthy meals, and the children frequently suffer from hunger (87). While the work at home is meaningful, done for the benefit of the whole family and in accordance with seasonal cycles, the work assigned to children at the school is hard and sometimes pointless, consisting mainly of endless cleaning, polishing, scrubbing, waxing, and washing. A contrast is also made between the mostly outdoor activities and labour tasks at the ranch, when Seepeetza helps her father with haying, rides horses, takes care of domestic animals, and generally spends most of her free time outdoors, and the strictly indoor, domestic labor at the school. In this respect it is necessary to take into account that one of the aims of residential schools in Canada, similarly to the mission schools in Australia and the boarding schools in the U.S., was to train Indigenous girls in domestic service so that they could be later employed in white families or various institutions.

Another stark contrast concerns the emotional development of the children and the methods of “educating” them. While Seepeetza’s family encourages emotional expression and provides a safe environment for the children to run around and play together, the school’s environment explicitly demonstrates its lack of affection and care, any sign of which is suppressed or punished. Physical violence and corporal punishment become tools for maintaining control and the status quo in the power relations at the school. Against Seepeetza’s firm statement—“My mum and dad never hit us” (Sterling 83)—stand repeated incidents of being pushed, beaten, and “getting the strap” which are reported as so common that children even “get used to it” (18). It is precisely this record of physical and psychological abuse that contributes to creating a powerful counter-narrative that challenges the national account of the treatment of Indigenous people in Canada in the form of, for example, official reports from residential school principals, and also undermines the image of the “beneficiary” impact of the churches and missions that frequently ran the residential schools. In Seepeetza’s narrative, four hundred Indian students are under the supervision of the school’s principal Fa-



ther Sloane, six other priests, and the nuns who are responsible for teaching and managing the children's free time. Seepeetza repeatedly illustrates the power relations in the school, where the nuns and priests use shame and force to destroy children's ties to their culture. The children are forbidden to speak their own languages, denied the right to be called by their traditional names, and prevented from maintaining emotional ties with their siblings.

Sterling's critique of the brutal reality in the Kamloops Residential School and of the complicity of the missionaries is veiled by her use of a child narrator. One of the reasons for using this device may be the young readership to which the book is addressed. It was originally published for the juvenile market: it won the 1993 Sheila A. Egoff Children's Book Prize and was short-listed for the Governor General's Award for Children's Literature. Since then, however, the book has found an adult readership as well. Jo-Ann Episkenew explains that Sterling chose the genre strategically, since as an educator and teacher she was well aware of the invisibility of the history of residential schools in school history books and therefore "motivated by socio-pedagogical objectives" (125). Another reason for using a child narrator might be Sterling's desire to avoid a strictly historicizing mode of writing and present a more literary and less historical account. While the narrative does reveal the trauma of separation and the sense of alienation and loneliness at the residential school, it never actually describes openly the physical and sexual abuse the children suffered. Instead, the descriptions of the systematic oppression and abuse through the child narrator who has a limited knowledge of what is happening around her take the form of dramatic irony and subtle hints. In fact, this subtlety of the descriptions even intensifies their impact. Nobody from the school staff is spared the author's critique and latent accusations. Examples include Father Sloane, who is said to be "interested" in girls, which is demonstrated by the frequency of his visits to the girls' gym and by his teasing them (Sterling 93), and other priests who are accused of "doing something bad" to several boys who subsequently decide to run away (12-13). The viciousness and hypocrisy of the nuns is also evident: for example, Sister Superior is known for carrying a strap in her sleeve all the time and hitting the children's hands whenever "someone is bad" (18); or, when Seepeetza wets her bed, she is publicly humiliated by one of the sisters (19). One of the supervising nuns, Sister Theo, is described in Seepeetza's diary as a "wicked witch in the Wizard of Oz," which is underscored by the detailed description of her black robe and veil, big nose, and small shiny eyes, and by the sinister clicking of the rosary beads hanging at her waist which makes all the children run away at her approach (51). This fearful image of the nun, however, suddenly dissolves in the next memory-image of Seepeetza's mother, who is depicted in both her physical appearance (her beauty, long black hair, and big brown eyes) and her kindness (she speaks softly, smiles a lot, and shows affection) (51-52). This contrast yet again places side by



side the atrocious reality and the happy memories, asserting Seepeetza's ability to "see through" what had been imposed on her.

The use of the child narrator also allows Sterling to occasionally undermine the grave tone of the whole narrative. Sometimes Seepeetza records in her diary various humorous episodes and family jokes that she recalls mostly from the periods spent at home playing with her siblings and cousins. At other times, Seepeetza, in her childhood naivety, unconsciously subverts the imposition of Christianity on Native people by fusing the sublime of the Church and the everyday, such as when she comments on the obligatory attendance at Sunday Masses: "On Sunday morning we go to High Mass. The girls have to wear navy blue tams. At home the women wear kerchiefs. Father Sloane wears gold and white vestments. I like Sunday mornings because we get cornflakes for breakfast" (26). As in many Indigenous narratives, Christianity and missionary activities are treated with suspicion, but also with a sense of humor. But in spite of the narrator's honest and naive tone, the themes of the text are earnest. Even though the narrative ends with a nostalgic and quite idyllic picture of Seepeetza's family's happy times together during summer, it is acknowledged that the narrator will be returning to school to face yet another year. This makes it difficult for the reader to form an optimistic conclusion—a feature that links Sterling's narrative to that of Pilkington's: *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* also subverts the seemingly "happy ending" of the separated family's reunion by foreshadowing Molly's and even her daughter's forced return to the Moore River Native Settlement.

Sterling's narrative is most instrumental in combining the strategies of resistance and adaptation to the residential school system in what Rauna Kuokkanen, drawing on the Native American writer and critic Gerald Vizenor, calls "survivance" which, as a theoretical concept, weaves together the notions of resistance and survival in an effort to challenge the "dualistic notions of dominance and victimhood" (Kuokkanen 700). Compared to Pilkington's account of open and active resistance in the form of the girls' escape, Seepeetza's resistances to assimilation are more strategic, subtle, and hidden. On one level, they relate to language and naming. It is a well-known fact that children in mission and residential schools were strictly forbidden to use Indigenous languages. Both Pilkington and Sterling depict this policy as a traumatic experience for the children and a severe cultural loss. However, both narratives also provide many instances of strategic uses of Indigenous languages, in situations when the children do not want to be understood by others or when they want to deliberately reminisce about their homes and families. The symbolic title of *My Name Is Seepeetza* alludes to one of the first internal conflicts Seepeetza encounters at school:

After that Sister Maura asked me what my name was. I said, 'my name is Seepeetza.' Then she got really mad like I did something terrible. She said never to say that word





again. She told me if I had a sister go and ask what my name was. I went to the intermediate rec and found Dorothy lying on a bench reading comics. I asked her what my name was. She said it was Martha Stone. I said it over and over. (Sterling 18)

Seepeetza is therefore deprived of her traditional name given to her by her father after a community elder, a name which reflects her Indigenous identity and anchors her existence in the midst of her family. At the same time, the fact that Sterling titled her narrative with this assertive statement by a little girl confirms Seepeetza's connection to the culture that the residential school system tried to deny her. In addition, Seepeetza remembers not only her own traditional name, but also the names of her siblings, and she occasionally uses Indigenous words to name important concepts, such as *shamah* for a "white person" (100), rituals such as *potlatch* for a big gathering (121), or favorite pastime activities such as *lahal* for a stick game (123). Similarly, writing the journal is itself an act of resistance for Seepeetza, as she can put down her memories of the happier times, and at the same time spell out the names and willful acts of the school staff. In this way she actually manages to provide a written "report" of the ideology within which the residential school operates.

Seepeetza's resistances to the residential school regime and its pervasive control over her every movement are, as it has been pointed out, subtle and hidden, mostly kept secret from the nuns. The variety of these resistances ranges from individual acts, such as holding hands with her sisters when walking outside (12) or writing one diary for the class and another one in secret (12), to the collective resistance of all the school children who were ordered to laugh at the run-away boys after they were caught and brought back in order to publicly humiliate them, but nobody, as if in support of the boys, makes fun of them (13). Occasionally, Seepeetza resists openly when one of the Sisters crosses an imaginary line and Seepeetza is driven to threaten suicide should the Sister insist (83). But examples like these are rare; resistance more often happens in the sphere of Seepeetza's fantasies of home while she accommodates herself to the regime.

One of the many examples of revealing subjugated knowledges in the form of traditional tribal cultural practices concerns bringing aspects of Indigenous culture to school, which helps the children to maintain their Indigenous identity. When the girls have to peel corn after classes, this simple domestic task immediately evokes the memory of Native women doing similar work at home and the joking, laughing, and storytelling it is related to, while it also strengthens the solidarity among the residential school attendees: "Then we all started to get happy, even the big girls. We started joking and laughing like Mum and Aunt Mamie and Yah-yah do when they're cleaning berries or fish together at home. They tell stories and laugh all day while they're working" (14). In this case, instead of complying with the school rules, the girls spontaneously imitate what they were exposed



to at home and saw as natural, and in this way they manage to slip away, if only for a moment, from the school's pervasive controlling regime.

Through Seepeetza's memories of home, Sterling's account also makes more visible the traditional Indigenous knowledge that has been suppressed in the children attending residential schools. This is most evident in passages where Seepeetza unconsciously compares the two educational systems, describing the Indigenous ways of transmitting knowledge, such as storytelling and generational learning from family elders. For example, Seepeetza reminisces about her mother making a fish trap in the way that her grandmother had taught her, just as she had taught her about "Indian medicine" (89). Indeed, skills like weaving, making clothes, gathering food, and collecting herbal medicines are presented as typically women's set of knowledges "inherited" from the elder family members. In this light it is a great paradox that this traditional knowledge, including speaking the Native language, is kept hidden from Seepeetza and her siblings by their parents, who themselves have suffered a similar trauma as a result of their experiences in a residential school or in the clash with the settler culture. In spite of this, the children cannot be totally kept away from traditional knowledge as it is a part of everyday life and naturally they come into contact with it. This includes communal activities, such as seasonal camping trips filled with berry picking and hunting, through which Seepeetza, in spite of the seeming innocence and simplicity of the activities, learns important principles, such as sharing food, labor division, and the naming of things in Indian language. The following quote summarizes everything that the Indigenous system of teaching and learning provides:

The old people like Yah-Yah smile at you and tell you something about the trail you're following or show you how to cover your berries with leaves so they stay fresh. They know where to find the biggest berries and how to cook delicious food over the campfire. They notice how many berries you pick, who sneaks off to go fishing, and what everybody likes to eat. They tease you around the campfire if you don't pick many berries. Next day you pick lots. (Sterling 91)

This passage also shows, in addition to the methods of educating the young, the system of social control exercised by the elders who watch over the younger members and punish those who do not comply with the rules by teasing. The scene also invites a comparison with the residential school's educational methods based on physical punishment, humiliation, and control of every single movement. Through the activities described above, Seepeetza develops a strong sense of belonging to land and her people, including her awareness of the positive exceptionality of her Indigenous identity. Seepeetza says: "There is something really special about mountain people. It's a feeling like you know who you are, and you know each other. You belong to the mountains" (91). This assertion of her identi-



ty is certainly very different from the internal racism and negative perception of Indigenous identity among most of the residential schools' victims, as well as from some urban characters in the works of Maria Campbell and Lee Maracle.

On the whole, the major contribution of Sterling's narrative to writing Indigenous women's resistance to assimilation is the non-stereotypical portrait of a functional Native family and its everyday activities depicted in fragments and details that together comprise a mosaic depicting a small part of a Native community in 1950s Canada. This image is particularly strong towards the end of the book, where Seepeetza is back home at the Joyaska ranch during her two-month summer holiday and records the everyday events that make up the precious time spent with extended family. This section is important as it communicates the complexities of hybrid knowledge consisting of two elements: on the one hand, there is the traditional Indigenous knowledge represented especially by the grandparents and partly by the parents who, however, wish to keep it hidden from their children in order to protect them; on the other hand, there are the children who must develop certain survival skills in order to "make it" in a modern world where the dominant settler society threatens Indigenous cultural values. The result is to make various compromises, such as sending children to the residential school and not teaching them Native languages. The next generation then become the bearers of this hybrid knowledge, combing the two epistemologies and worldviews and trying to make the best of it. The ending of Sterling's narrative is imbued with sad nostalgia and a sense of loss: Seepeetza's brother Jimmy leaves to study at a university, while Seepeetza's father predicts the destruction of the valley and the ranch in the face of commercial development. His advice to his children is clearly a resigned one: "You kids want to get yourself an education. Get a job. That way you'll be okay" (125). This kind of ending is disturbing and ambivalent when compared to Seepeetza's assertion of her Indigenous identity, since it suggests that Seepeetza's future lies, after all, somewhere other than in the center of her Indigenous community. In her last entry, Seepeetza is clearly aware of the pressure to leave the past behind: "I think I'll leave the journal at home in the attic inside my dad's old violin case. If Yah-yah is in the mountains where we go to pick berries, I'll ask her to make a buckskin cover for it. I'll ask her to bead fireweed flowers on it" (126). These last words refer to the borderline between the past, symbolized by the grandmother as the keeper of Seepeetza's diary, and the future which, through spending more years in the residential school, may also bring further alienation from the traditional Indigenous culture.



## Anna Lee Walters | Tribal (Hi)stories

So we sing, have reason to sing of our peoples' lives and experiences. By our very existence, our birth—individual and collective, we cannot help but sing.

Anna Lee Walters, *Talking Indian* (220)

Although Anna Lee Walters' *Talking Indian: Reflections on Survival and Writing* can be categorized as a life writing narrative, it is also a piece of non-fiction with fictional elements in the form of short stories that are incorporated into the narrative. It can also serve as a link between the personal non-fiction analyzed in the first section and the life writing explored in the second section: its essayistic, self-reflective nature and personal observations on various aspects of Native American life relate Walters' text to the narratives of Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle and Jackie Huggins, while the themes of re-writing history, inscribing resistance to assimilation and depicting the traumatic experience of separation can be compared to those in Doris Pilkington's and Shirley Sterling's narratives. Walters' account, however, is concerned less with the boarding school experience and more with the history of the author's two inherited cultures, Otoe and Pawnee. In addition, while Pilkington's and Sterling's texts reveal the strategies of re-writing history and resisting mainstream historiography through actual, partly fictionalized life stories, Walters frequently provides interpretations of her own writing about the meanings of history, survival, and memory, and of her short stories that are either included in *Talking Indian* or have been published elsewhere.

Like Pilkington and Sterling, Walters is interested in exploring the contrasts and discrepancies between Western historiography and what she calls "tribal" history (*Talking Indian* 75). Above all, she is disturbed by the misleading representations of Native Americans in U.S. literature and history, which she perceives as negative and often uninformed. At the beginning of the third part of her book, called "History," Walters asserts:

Eventually I saw the literary treatment of tribal peoples by non-tribal writers as a way of maintaining the status quo of mainstream society. And the absence of individual Native voices interpreting their own identities and histories appeared as a form of censure, as a form of suppression that was deeply rooted in American society. I began to evaluate tribal histories versus American history, and to study what history means to tribal societies, as compared to what history is to American (mainstream) society. How do tribal histories vary from American history in their perspectives, structure, and content? And how do tribal people relate to their own respective histories? (*Talking Indian* 75)

This quote suggests Walters' main strategies in *Talking Indian*: she fills in the gap of the missing Native American voices by adding them to the American histori-



cal discourse; she interprets her tribes' histories and her tribal identity; and she evaluates the meanings of history in Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. In fact, her overview of the conceptual differences between Indigenous and American historiography, such as the emphasis of tribal histories on family lineage, "pre-human" existence, shared responsibility for recording history, and the preservation of history in other than written documents (ceremonies, storytelling, prayers, songs), points to an alternative approach to history which is comparable to Pilkington's and Sterling's strategies and provides a methodology for interpreting Indigenous tribal histories distorted by Western interpretations.

While Pilkington's tactic of re-writing settler history is a synthesis of the two sources of history and an appropriation of the official archive, and Sterling's approach stresses more the contrasts between the two social environments, Walters foregrounds Indigenous oral tradition and techniques of storytelling. Following a specific pattern, in the first half of the book Walters offers non-fictional, explanatory, and educational passages about various aspects of tribal life (the first four parts include "Oral Tradition," "World View," "History," and "Identity") and then complements each of them with a fictional short story. This structure makes it possible for her to make implicit as well as explicit references to traditional storytelling. The purpose of the fictional stories accommodates both the author's respect for tribal traditions, especially storytelling, and her creative potential. The short stories themselves are partly fictional works, but at the same time they are modelled on the collective sources of oral stories handed down by the community members. This is the case, for example, of the John Stink story from Walters' earlier collection of short stories *The Sun Is Not Merciful* (1985), which Walters admits was inspired by many informal versions of the same tale but is entirely fictional in its written form: "I thought of my tale as simply another in the tradition of John Stink storytellers—except that mine was *written* as fiction. In other words, I made most of it up!" (*Talking Indian* 22, original emphasis). This self-interpretation suggests that Walters, and the tribal society for that matter, perceives authorship and credibility very differently from Western conventions. Walters takes on the role of a modern storyteller, scribe, and chronicler, using contemporary methodology (i.e. writing fiction in various genres) but relying on the old, tribal sources.

In contrast to Pilkington, who in her narrative integrates archival materials from mainstream historiography, including citations and references, Walters' strategy is to present a genuine counter-history, relying only on the Indigenous worldview, in particular the tribal histories of the Otoe and the Pawnee (her parental tribal cultures) as well as the Navajo (her husband's tribal culture). Although she is obviously well-read in the mainstream historiography, she mostly refers to its misinterpretations and distortions of Indigenous history. Settler history is completely marginalized in her account, present only through vague and undefined



allusions and phrases such as “We [Indigenous people] have read that ...,” “Indian people today ... have often been told that ...,” “They said that ...,” “This is what we were taught repeatedly” (*Talking Indian* 134), or “We have all heard it said that ...” (135). This is a subtle, yet powerful critique of the dominant historical and educational discourse which has turned Indigenous people into mere spectators of their own history, playing no active part in its constitution on the national level. Then, as if to prove the suggested statements wrong, especially those pointing to the disappearance and extermination of the “real Indians,” the “inevitable” destruction of tribal life styles, and the invisibility of Indigenous cultures in formal educational curricula (134–35), Walters sets out on a journey to uncover what has been hidden, i.e. the physical and cultural survival of her people, as reflected in the counter-histories of her tribe and family.

Writing and history are inseparable for Walters, as for many other Indigenous writers, including Pilkington and Sterling. Walters admits that because the histories of her tribes inform her entire worldview, naturally they must also find their way into her writing. The following quote expresses what writing history means for her and at the same time foregrounds the interconnectedness between the history of a tribe and the history of a family:

Today, my occupation as a writer is related to what my grandfather and grandmother did when they repeated family history in the manner of their elders, leading the family all over this sacred land, this continent most recently called America in the last five hundred years. ... In the same way, I repeat their words to my children and grandchildren. In tribal society, this is who history is for, after all, in a very personalized version of time. (*Talking Indian* 86)

Again, the stress on repetition, on passing on the (hi)stories onto the next generation, refers to Walters’ strong awareness of storytelling techniques. This knowledge serves her well when in the second part of the book she reconstructs the tribal histories of the three Indigenous cultural groups, which becomes her most significant strategy for re-writing history.

In the chapter dedicated to the Pawnee, Walters’ maternal tribe, for example, the author starts off with a brief overview of the pre-contact history of the Pawnee and goes on to present a Pawnee perspective on the subsequent historical events. These include the making of formal treaties with the U.S. government, the recognition of the tribe as a whole and its placement under the guidance of the U.S. in 1825, the constant relocations and compensations paid for the land taken, but also the wars with other neighboring tribes and the smallpox epidemics (*Talking Indian* 137–40). In this section, Walters is obviously relying on archival documents to provide historical data in the Western sense. Her narrative voice, in contrast to the first part of the book in which she includes autobiographical and fictional



elements, becomes very detached and objective, recalling mainstream history writing: her sentences are short and matter-of-fact; the account is strictly linear. This detachment, as if to evoke an “objective” critical distance, resembles the way in which Jackie Huggins employs “the historian’s” voice, as opposed to the voice with which she addresses her mother and her people. Similarly, when Walters later gets to the more recent history, her voice becomes more engaged: she starts incorporating tribal sources and introductory phrases such as “it is told,” or “in the words of an old man,” now referring to Indigenous voices, not mainstream historiography (143). There are also informal stories, including humorous ones, relating, for example, animosities between the neighboring tribes; such stories seem to circulate through the oral tradition. Similarly, in another example from the history of the Otoe, against a sober statement that the Otoe were relocated from Nebraska to the Indian Territory in 1881, Walters carefully places the transcribed story of the removal as told by her grandfather, who was born in 1873. The passage, written in italics and as direct speech, evokes not history textbooks or documents but a very personal, emotional, and deeply human account of the difficult journey (25–26), not dissimilar from Pilkington’s narrative of her people’s journey from the desert region. Another aspect that connects Walters with Pilkington’s account of the Nyungar and Mardudjara histories is the gradual progress in telling the tribal histories, moving from the general, more distant, and collective accounts to the histories of a specific clan and kinship, to the life stories or biographies of family ancestors, ending with an autobiographical and highly personal touch.

The introduction to this chapter suggested that the strategies of re-writing history are frequently intertwined with the educational purpose of the life writing narratives, and the three narratives analyzed in this section are no exception. In the same way that writing is inseparable from telling history, telling history is inseparable from passing on knowledge of tribal history. Doris Pilkington’s account seems to be directed mainly at the non-Indigenous readership as it attempts to translate the experience of the Stolen Generations as well as the early history of her people in Western Australia. Shirley Sterling’s autobiographical portrait is also educational as it is addressed to a juvenile market. Because of its accessible form, young people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, can empathize with Seepeetza’s sadness, alienation, confusion, and internal conflicts, and through her desire to go back home to her family they can see the injustice and cruelty of the residential school system. Walters accomplishes the same effect by foregrounding the tribal histories of specific Indigenous groups largely based on oral forms of recording historical events in order to counterbalance the common misrepresentations of Native Americans in the popular media. All three narratives essentially draw upon traditional Indigenous strategies of recording history; at the same time, they use Western genres in order to gain the power to tell their own versions of history in contemporary political arenas.



Although *Talking Indian* differs from Pilkington's and Sterling's texts in many ways, one of thematic and formal elements that they all share is inscribing resistance strategies and revealing subjugated knowledge in the context of the boarding school experience. The very last chapter of Walters' book, titled "The Fourth World," focuses more on Walters' personal life, the memories of her childhood and growing up among Indigenous families before being separated and placed in the formal educational institution provided by the government. Like Sterling, Walters draws on the technique of foregrounding the idyllic, harmonious childhood spent with her grandparents in the traditional Indigenous community and then contrasting this image to the sense of alienation, oppression, and abuse experienced in the boarding school.

In her youth, Walters was very much influenced by the Otoe world of her paternal grandparents, who taught her tribal culture such as songs and the meaning of ceremonies. Walters describes this period of her life in a romanticized, nostalgic way, putting stress on the educational aspect and tribal knowledge:

I thought the whole world was Indian, was Otoe. They opened my eyes and formed my first words with me. No, they did not put words into my mouth, and even if they did, I did not taste them. They filled my mouth and belly with wild berries me and Grandpa picked from a slow moving wagon. They filled me with old dreams they or their ancestors had dreamed collectively hundreds of years before. They made me see things only I could see, and hear the old stories and songs they told with exaggerated animation and sang with such haunting emotion. Maybe that is the same thing as putting words into my mouth. (*Talking Indian* 189)

This and the subsequent passages in Walters' account portray the grandparents as sources of tribal power, traditional Indigenous knowledge, and affirmative Indigenous identity. On a formal level, these passages also present a very poetic language underscored by storytelling techniques such as repetition. The early separation from her parents shortly after Walters' birth does not seem to have disturbed Walters' harmonious childhood in any way; rather, it is taken for granted that growing up with one's grandparents is common in Native communities. Walters dedicates a lot of space to the detailed depiction of both her paternal and maternal grandparents, especially the grandmothers, joining the two histories—the life stories of the two tribal families—together in a family saga-like narrative.

This peaceful period in Walters' life is suddenly disrupted by the traumatic experience at the boarding school. Here Walters' account resonates most with Sterling's and Pilkington's: humiliation and shaming are depicted as common, through practices such as delousing, cutting the long hair, issuing uniform clothing and shoes, assigning useless work and hard domestic tasks, forbidding Native languages, imposing a military regime on the children, and denying their Indigenous





identity. Like the other two narratives, this particular chapter in *Talking Indian* resists the ideology behind the state policies of separation and assimilation of Indigenous people in the United States. This is confirmed by Tillett who points to Walters' "direct resistance to ongoing and pervasive forces of assimilation which, through an imposed Indian education system, taught her and other Native American children that 'all the real Indians are gone: conquered, subdued, extinct, assimilated'" (Walters qtd. in Tillett 80). Walters' boarding school experience, although it results in alienation from her grandparents after her return home, is a far cry from ensuring her assimilation into the mainstream society. Walters' resistances against the boarding school system and the school staff are similar in character to those shared by Sterling's and Pilkington's protagonists. As a child, Walters keeps her cut braids in a shoe box in protest (*Talking Indian* 206) and talks back to the matron when the reasoning for some activity runs against her Indigenous beliefs (206); she also participates in collective resistance when the children manage to escape the staff's control and immediately slip back into their suppressed selves: "We listened to the stories of each other's family and people that all of us told. We heard how so-and-so's grandmother could turn herself into a snake, how someone else's people were buried in trees, the stories of Deer Woman, and countless other tales" (207). It is clear that Walters reminisces about the subjugated cultural practices in the same way that Seepeetza does when the children slip away from the school's surveillance. Rather than making them forget their Indigenous identity, these moments of resistance are used by the children to affirm it.

One of the more complex strategies for resisting the boarding school system in Walters' account points to the failure of the state to recognize traditional animosities between certain tribes—something that, according to Walters, "each child was thoroughly aware of" (*Talking Indian* 206). As the children were "well-versed" in their tribal histories and naturally knew who their traditional enemies were, they transplanted this knowledge to the boarding school environment too: "[T]he children knew that the tribes had different philosophical concepts, social relationships, and organization, and that certain tribes fought each other since the beginning of time" (207). As a result, the children know perfectly well where they stand when being insulted and they know equally well how to defend themselves effectively, in contrast to their helplessness in the face of the school staff's physical and emotional abuse:

[T]here were children who called all the Pawnees "horse thieves" in their own language. ... We Pawnee children knew we were being called a derogatory name, and of course would have to make some reply which was appropriate to the history of another child's tribe. We knew that some tribes practice sorcery, that others in the past had practiced cannibalism, that one of our ancestors had fought face-to-face with another child's great-great-grandparent. (207)



This quite complex awareness of not only one's own tribal history but also the entire network of relationships and histories can be classified as subjugated knowledge since it is "disqualified" by official discourse but nevertheless still present and kept alive by the young generation; it is a knowledge of tribal history, land, and social structures, knowledge that has been, like a layer of a palimpsest, covered and concealed by the dominant society's policies. Walters, in this case, serves as a mediator between this suppressed knowledge and the mainstream reader as she helps to decode the discourse. Therefore, while Walters' narrative exposes her own resistances to the boarding school system, the process of "decoding" and re-writing history becomes a resistance strategy for Walters the writer.

Just as Pilkington undermines vocabulary employed by the official discourse, Walters also subverts the rhetoric of the state assimilation policies when she compares the government promises and the reality. With dramatic irony, she ridicules the state's attempt to turn vices into virtues when she talks of the school's message delivered over and over to the children, the message that "we ought to be grateful to be at the school which the government so graciously provided for us. We should be glad that there was this fine old institution which would take us in and delouse us, and cut our hair, and give us shoes, and feed us, and let us sleep in its army beds" (206). In this angry tone, which directly denounces American federal policies of extermination and assimilation, Walters echoes, through mockery and irony, what so many Indigenous writers have expressed before and after her: the boarding and residential school system was successful in severing ties among Indigenous parents and their children who, as a result, suffered a significant identity crisis. McKegney even argues that the residential school system in Canada was designed for Indigenous people to slowly disappear from the site/sight of Canadian nation-state while at the same time making it possible for settlers to shed the burden of culpability: "It allowed the non-Native majority to witness the death of Indigenous impediments to 'progress' without seeing themselves holding the trigger" (McKegney 4). In this sense, all three narratives analyzed in this chapter function as testimonies to this cultural genocide, as will be examined later in detail. On the other hand, the system also provoked various more or less visible resistance strategies which ensured cultural survival, resistance strategies that are also reflected in the narrative forms of Indigenous writers. Thus these narratives also demonstrate a *failure* of residential schools to "kill the Indian, save the man," to echo the expression with which Richard H. Pratt founded the infamous Carlisle Indian School. They remain important survival narratives which, as McKegney argues, "document the perseverance of certain raw materials of cultures against the relentless undertow of genocide; they reinvigorate what survived, recreate what didn't, and re-imagine the place of the creative Indigenous individual in relation to her or his community ..." (McKegney 8). In this sense they provide the necessary counter-narrative: hope in the face of oppression, cultural memory in the face of assimilation, and survival in the face of annihilation.





## CHAPTER 5

# BEARING WITNESS: TRAUMA, TESTIMONY, SCRIPTOTHERAPY

Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival.

Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* (58)

An analysis of Indigenous women's life writing and its testimonial nature from the point of view of trauma studies is inevitably informed by the extensive theoretical field which encompasses both the recent surge in trauma studies in the aftermath of the Holocaust and a much older intellectual history that includes the beginnings of psychoanalysis in modern Europe (Whitlock and Douglas 1). This chapter relates the selected narratives to the contemporary emphasis on the issues of human rights violations and the way these issues are inscribed into literary texts such as life stories. The chapter also incorporates the notions of collective trauma, memory, remembering, forgetting, and healing, which have become crucial in exploring the narratives of marginalized voices. In *Human Rights and Narrated Lives* (2004), Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith explain the recent surge of interest in the autobiographies and life writing of marginalized groups as a need to bear witness to the violent and painful histories that have shaped many modern nations. Primarily, they perceive bearing witness as an act of remembering that logically challenges the reluctance of many nation-states to recognize the rights (be it human rights, land rights or the rights to cultural self-determination) of marginalized groups. Schaffer and Smith claim that:

These acts of remembering test the values that nations profess to live by against the actual experiences and perceptions of the storyteller as witness. They issue an ethical call to listeners both within and beyond national borders to recognize the disjunction



between the values espoused by the community and the actual practices that occur. (Schaffer and Smith 3)

The stories of forced separations and assimilation that permeate many Indigenous women's life stories appeal to a mainstream readership precisely because they reveal the suppressed and hidden practices and policies that problematize the values promoted by the liberal humanism of modern settler colonies. Schaffer and Smith further discuss the capacity of these "narrated lives" to draw attention to the previously unspoken truths and their effects on both writers and readers:

Some stories, formerly locked in silence, open wounds and re-trigger traumatic feelings once they are told. Some stories, recounted in the face of oppression and repression, of shame and denial, reinvest the past with a new intensity, often with pathos, as they test normative conceptions of social reality. All stories invite an ethical response from listeners and readers. (Schaffer and Smith 4)

In other words, the narratives that Schaffer and Smith have in mind bear witness to the problematic colonial histories in Australia, Canada, and the United States. The act of bearing witness also provides a link between the notion of re-writing history and inscribing traumatic experience, as well as between revealing subjugated knowledge and unlocking memory: indeed, the issues of speaking the individual, collective and generational trauma stemming from displacement, relocation, separation, and assimilation is what links Pilkington's, Sterling's, and Walters' narratives. To Indigenous women writers, bearing witness also provides a sense of empowerment and is sometimes framed in terms of a "healing process," a part of what Suzette Henke theorizes as "scriptotherapy," i.e. empowering oneself through writing, through engaging with the traumatic past and through investing one's own self and personal experience into dealing with the issues of colonial violence, broken family ties, and generational and internal conflicts.

In *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996), Kalí Tal reminds us that bearing witness is an "aggressive act" (7) because it ultimately challenges the power of political, economic and social pressures upon affected groups, the status quo that silences the voices of witnesses. Tal claims that:

[Bearing witness] is born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or to repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity, to endure a lifetime of anger and pain rather than to submit to the seductive pull of revision and repression. Its goal is change. The battle over the meaning of a traumatic experience is fought in the arena of political discourse, popular culture, and scholarly debate. (Tal 7)



Bearing witness is highly politicized and can become empowering; the narratives that bear witness to the trauma of colonization, for example, function as a tool in political activism. Bearing witness can also lead to seizing control over the representations and interpretations of a particular traumatic event, which in turn can lead to changing political and social structures. A problem, however, arises with the consumption, appropriation, and/or commodification of the representations of trauma by the dominant discourses, in which case the structures remain largely unchanged. In their introduction to *Trauma Texts*, Whitlock and Douglas comment on the recent proliferation of trauma narratives which are elicited by “the culture of confession” (2). Certainly there has been a notable surge in the production, readership, and criticism of these narratives, with a focus on the ways in which reader empathy is activated and engaged and stories of traumatic events marketed and consumed. Thus critics have become increasingly interested in the ethics of life writing, particularly in testimony and witnessing, voicing their concerns about the “commodification of traumatic story, and politics of recognition that shape this field of research and writing” (Whitlock and Douglas 3). Thus examining Indigenous life writing also means exploring the ways in which the genre intervenes in public domains and confronts the settler culture. In Australia, for example, Indigenous testimonies, particularly the Stolen Generations narratives, have come to occupy a double position; on the one hand, they became “a vehicle for the construction of Indigenous identity,” and on the other hand “a transformative force in the dominant culture ... mobilised for the cause of national reconciliation” (Whitlock, “Becoming Migloo” 240, 242). Indeed, the Stolen Generations narratives became so central in the public discourse that, as Bain Attwood explains, the stories of Aboriginal children’s separations were gradually assessed under an increasingly homogenous category of “Stolen Generations narrative” that “was produced and circulated in regional and national forums” (Attwood 195). Attwood argues that this homogenization of the “Stolen Generations *narrative*” (as opposed to earlier Aboriginal life *stories*) is due largely to the cultural and political milieu of the late 1980s and early 1990s, as well as to the pioneering work of Australian historians, namely Peter Read, Heather Goodall, and Henry Reynolds, who played a crucial role in disseminating, but also in homogenizing, the meta-story of the child removal in Australia. Attwood uses the term “narrative accrual” for the process in which the stories of removal were “reproduced again and again, and/or were being interpreted in terms of the ‘stolen generations’” (196). Similarly, in Canada and the United States, the residential and boarding school narratives, together with numerous historical studies published during the 1990s, brought to light a repressed history of systematic cultural genocide and destruction of Indigenous social fabric. As a result, McKegney argues, “the reality of residential school oppression and abuse is now firmly established in historical and political spheres, no longer an alternative counter-narrative to official history but,



rather, the contemporary orthodoxy” (6). McKegney perhaps overestimates the impact of this “counter-narrative,” but it becomes increasingly visible that in the 1990s, in particular, it was possible to witness a momentum in which Indigenous testimonies *were* able to elicit empathy and compassion from non-Indigenous settler population to such an extent that political action as well as various forms of symbolic gestures of reconciliation followed. In her latest study *Postcolonial Life Narratives: Testimonial Transactions* (2015), Gillian Whitlock repeatedly points to the significance of the routes, sometimes unexpected, that testimonial narratives take across the globe: “Testimony can thrive and trigger powerful and transformative cycles—such as Truth and Reconciliation narratives in South Africa, and Stolen Generations and Residential School narratives in Australia and Canada” (69). In Canada and Australia, Whitlock continues, it is the child removal story that is “a powerful site of memory for indigenous peoples in the recent past that has impacted profoundly on non-indigenous individual and cultural memory” (138). Indeed, because of its testimonial *and* political nature, Indigenous life writing can be argued to have troubled significantly the sense of legitimate belonging and citizenship in settler colonies.

## History as Trauma

Everyone laughed at the impossibility of it,  
but also the truth. Because who would believe  
the fantastic and terrible story of all of our survival  
those who were never meant  
to survive?  
Joy Harjo, from the poem “Anchorage”

The definition of trauma has undergone many changes and modifications, from strictly medical descriptions to more inclusive sociological and historical applications. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth goes back to the original Greek meaning of trauma—a wound upon a body—and follows its further extension in medical and psychiatric use to include a wound upon a mind, as was later thoroughly explored in Sigmund Freud’s work (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 3). Since then, the characterization of trauma has become more inclusive and has seen the development of the discipline of trauma studies, analyzing the impact of trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, memory, and the implications of trauma for both storytellers and writers as well as listeners and readers. In her study *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (2002), Laurie Vickroy has re-defined trauma as “a response to events so overwhelmingly intense that they impair normal emotional or cognitive responses and bring lasting psychological disruption” (ix).



However, recent definitions of trauma as an event so extreme and intense that it reaches beyond normal human experience have been contested particularly on the grounds of what constitutes the “normal” human experience. For example, Laura S. Brown, who offers a feminist perspective on trauma, contends that such definitions are insufficient, as they would imply that, for instance, because so many women around the world are subjected to sexual abuse, incest, and rape, by this logic it would not be an uncommon experience, and therefore not a trauma (Brown 101). Based on this, Brown insists that “human” experience often refers to “male” experience, thus trauma refers to an event that disrupts what is normal and usual in the lives of men, i.e. wars, genocides, natural disasters, vehicle crashes, boats sinking, etc. (101). Another important step in extending thinking about traumatic events was transcending the exclusive focus of trauma theory on Holocaust survivors and their oral accounts as well as on strictly psychoanalytical interpretations. Vickroy is one of the scholars who have incorporated racial trauma, such as slavery and colonization, in what she calls “socially induced trauma” (xiii), employing the methodology of combining literary, cultural, and psychological approaches to literary narratives.

In addition to extending the definitions of trauma, more attention has also been paid to theorizing about collective trauma, in which the social structures of particular communities were damaged or destroyed. The sociologist Kai Erikson made a significant contribution in his article “Notes on Trauma and Community” elaborating on the character of traumatized communities as distinct from traumatized persons and, similarly to Vickroy, working with trauma as a social concept. Erikson argues that:

‘trauma’ becomes a concept social scientists as well as clinicians can work with. ... Sometimes the tissues of community can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of mind and body ... but even when that does not happen, traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can combine to create a mood, an ethos—a group culture, almost—that is different from (and more than) the sum of the private wounds that make it up. Trauma, that is, has a social dimension. (Erikson 185)

In his idea of communal trauma, Erikson stresses its collective nature and the damage it causes to the relationships in the community. Primarily, he describes communal trauma as an injury “to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality ... [it is] a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared” (Erikson 187). This definition certainly applies to Indigenous communities worldwide; much Indigenous literature, especially those narratives focused on the alienation from tribal cultures and histories, reflects the process of disintegration in Indig-





enous communities. On the other hand, Erikson also claims that “trauma can create community” in the sense that it gives the victims the feeling of having been “set apart and made special” (185–186), an idea that immediately evokes the community of Holocaust survivors and the exceptionality of their shared traumatic experience. This argument allows Erikson to maintain that “trauma shared can serve as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common backgrounds can. There is a *spiritual kinship* there, a *sense of identity*, even when feelings of affection are deadened and the ability to care numbed” (Erikson 186, emphasis mine). The idea that communal trauma, such as that stemming from colonization, creates spiritual kinship and a sense of collective identity contributes, in the case of Aboriginal, Native American, and First Nations peoples, to the notion of pan-Indigeneity, which underscores the historical parallels of colonization and settlement practices. Collective identities and communal ties are of course crucial to my analysis of Indigenous women’s life stories which very often foreground the kinship structures, extended family ties, and relational selves as a reaction to the forced break-up of the communal tissues. In particular, the accounts that attempt to re-imagine and re-construct a functional tribal society, the “cultural maintenance” life writings, stress the need of Indigenous people within communities to stick together in the face of cultural assimilation pressures. Communal trauma is transgenerational: the younger generations of Indigenous people, although they have no direct experience with colonial violence, such as the massacres, deaths due to illnesses, hunger, and relocations, and they have not gone through the boarding, residential, and mission school systems, are still heavily burdened with the historical experience of their ancestors. The colonization trauma is transmitted from one generation to the next, and so it is always present in the collective memory. The past is perpetuated in the communal trauma, haunting the present and the future, as Erikson concludes: “Our memory repeats to us what we haven’t yet come to terms with, what still haunts us” (184).

An important issue in trauma theory is the process of narrativization of trauma. Scholars working in trauma studies agree on the “imperative to tell” that is inherently present in survivors. In “An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival,” the psychoanalyst Dori Laub, who worked with victims of massive psychic trauma and their descendants, explores the relation between survival and the urge of the survivors to tell their story: “The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one’s story” (78, original emphasis). This urge to speak out may become a consuming life task, almost an inner compulsion. However, there is also an opposing tendency, something that Laub calls “the impossibility of telling,” which refers to the impossibility to articulate something that cannot be fully captured in thought, memory, or speech (“An Event Without a Witness” 78–79). Even



though Laub's theory relies mainly on the oral accounts of Holocaust survivors, in my view his approach may illuminate some aspects of Indigenous women's life writing, such as its testimonial nature. It is noteworthy, for example, how Laub equals "telling" and "knowing" one's story, which also applies to all the narratives discussed in this section. The stories that Indigenous women tell reflect their struggles to come to terms with the history of their people's physical and cultural destruction, and telling their own and their people's traumatic experiences means consciously striving to learn and memorize what actually happened. Learning this knowledge through writing in turn empowers them.

The process of narrativization of trauma is essential in the psychoanalytical treatment of trauma survivors. Drawing on her clinical practice, Cathy Caruth suggests that "the treatment of trauma requires the incorporation of trauma into a meaningful (and thus sensible) story" (*Unclaimed Experience* 117). Similarly, in "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," Dori Laub maintains that in order to break the circle of a fate which cannot be told or known, only repeated, but in which the victims are still subject to the previously mentioned imperative to tell *and* know, a therapeutic process must encourage the construction of a narrative, the reconstruction of a history, and, above all, what he calls the "re-externalization of the event" (69). This re-externalization, Laub continues, "can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and *transmit* the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside" ("Bearing Witness" 69, original emphasis). This is an important point for examining Indigenous life writing through the lens of its testimonial nature, as the accounts try to make sense of all those historical injustices. The history of colonization in settler colonies and its consequences for Indigenous populations are re-externalized in this way.

Creating a meaningful story out of a trauma experience results in establishing the genre of "trauma narratives." Trauma narratives are described as

personalized responses to this century's emerging awareness of the catastrophic effects of wars, poverty, colonization, and domestic abuse on the individual psyche. They highlight postcolonial concerns with rearticulating the lives and voices of marginal people, rejecting Western conceptions of the autonomous subject and describing the complex negotiations of multicultural social relations. (Vickroy x)

This broad definition of a trauma narrative importantly stresses the global context of contemporary violent conflicts of the world and reiterates the social dimension of representing the trauma, leaving the door open for the inclusion of literary texts which themselves do not focus on the original traumatic events but rather re-tell and depict their consequences. The definition also suggests that trauma narratives do not have to be recounted by the actual survivors but can be creatively re-worked and interpreted by their descendants, both individually and collectively.



This would imply that a large portion of Indigenous life writing can be treated as trauma literature. However, as is the case of the narratives analyzed in this section, the aspects of trauma narratives are only one of the layers, and it would be reductive to read them only in this way since no matter how auto/biographical, these narratives are also fictionalized, multi-generic literary texts.

Following the psychoanalytical stream in Caruth's and Laub's treatment of individual trauma and the ways in which that trauma is transformed into a "meaningful story," it is necessary to enquire what happens when the collective and communal trauma is narrativized. Scholars suggest that traumatic events are "written and rewritten until they become codified and narrative form gradually replaces content as the focus of attention" (Tal 6). Tal demonstrates how this occurred with the Holocaust trauma, which was converted into a metonym, "a set of symbols that reflect the formal codification of that experience" (6). A similar process might be traceable in the narratives representing aspects of colonization trauma, particularly the Stolen Generations and the boarding and residential schools experience. Pilkington's, Sterling's, and Walters' accounts confront the readers with a specific set of images, symbols, and vocabulary to convey the experience of having been forced to submit to government institutions. Thus they abound with images of shabby buildings with barred windows that evoke prisons; bad food; military-like regime; gender and sibling separation; harsh punishment from the staff; the total confusion of the children at the beginning; descriptions of their trauma from having been separated; homesickness; occasional resistances; and so on. Although these images are based on the actual experience of the authors (Sterling and Walters) or their immediate family (Pilkington), the narratives give the impression that they also depict something larger, something reaching beyond the individual experience. This process of extending traumatic impact is what Kalí Tal identifies as "mythologization," defined as reducing a traumatic event to a "set of standardized narratives (twice- and thrice-told tales that come to represent 'the story' of the trauma) turning it from a frightening and uncontrollable event into a contained and predictable narrative" (6). Tal claims that mythologization is one of the three strategies of coping with a traumatic event, the other two being medicalization, which "focuses our gaze upon the victims of trauma, positing that they suffer from an 'illness' that can be 'cured' within ... institutionalized medicine and psychiatry," and disappearance, which is a "refusal to admit to the existence of a particular kind of trauma ... usually accomplished by undermining the credibility of the victim" (6). While Tal examines the traumatic effects of the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and sexual violence against women and children in her analysis of trauma narratives, some of her conclusions are applicable to the Indigenous women's life writing explored in this section.

The process of reducing the traumatic event to a recognizable set of images does not mean that this mythologized trauma becomes an empty and meaning-



less story repeating the same forms, strategies, and symbols. Rather, it puts the emphasis on extending the personal testimonies into a larger narrative of the colonization trauma where the narrators and storytellers serve as mediators and cultural translators of the past from an Indigenous point of view. Their singular personal experience to some extent represents the experience of the whole community, one story standing for all comparable stories of the other community members, the unique accounts being drawn together to form a single “meta-experience” (Hughes D’aeth, n. pag.). This collective aspect of the Stolen Generations narratives and boarding and residential school narratives is also noted by Laurie Vickroy, who underscores that “testimony narratives do not just concern individuals but also the individual as representative of a social class or group” (5). This emphasis on the collective meta-narrative has been reiterated by various scholars in different context, most recently by Gillian Whitlock in *Postcolonial Life Narratives: Testimonial Transactions*. Whitlock again draws attention to the power of testimonial narrative to intervene in the public discourse, to give voice to the subaltern, albeit in a limited degree: “In testimonial narrative a narrator speaks publicly on behalf of the many who have suffered, and lays claim to truth and authenticity in accounts of social suffering. ... Testimonial narrative can enable subaltern access to a powerful voice to speak as a political subject” (67), although, Whitlock admits, this access is limited.

When examining the testimonial nature of Indigenous narratives of the Stolen Generations and boarding and residential school experiences, it is useful to revise the main characteristics of a specific subgenre of *testimonio* which is closely related to trauma narratives and which heavily influenced the theory of testimonial narratives. It was theoretically developed in the work of John Beverly, who defines *testimonio* as “a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a ‘life’ or a significant life experience” (Beverly 30–31). It has also a specific geographical aspect as it is mostly associated with Latin American narratives. Beverly’s discussion of *testimonio* is useful because of its emphasis on the act of truth telling, which supposedly lends *testimonio* an “ethical and epistemological authority” which “derives from the fact that we are meant to presume that its narrator is someone who has lived in his or her person, or indirectly through the experiences of friends, family, neighbours, or significant others, the events and experiences that he or she narrates” (Beverly 3). The issue of the truth-telling effect has been subject to a number of scholarly debates, not only in the subgenre of literary testimony and *testimonio* in particular, but also in the theory of auto/biography as such. All these debates underscore its ambiguity: in his own discussion of the famous Latin American *testimonio* of a Guatemalan activist and guerrilla fighter *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983), John Beverly, for example, reacts to



the anthropologist David Stoll's argument which questions and accuses Rigoberta Menchú of adjusting, if not fabricating, certain facts from her life in order to meet the public and political demands of the day. Beverly claims in his response to this controversy that the crucial question is not whether the author "lies" or not, but rather who has the "authority to tell the story" (5). In a similar way, Dori Laub also discusses challenges to factual accuracy in testimonies, for example in the case of an oral account by a Holocaust survivor whose remembered "facts" about Nazi concentration camps were "corrected" by historians. Laub explains: "Knowledge in the testimony is, in other words, not simply a factual given that is reproduced and replicated by the testifier, but a genuine advent, an event in its own right ... The woman was testifying not simply to empirical historical facts, but to the very secret of survival and of resistance to extermination" ("Bearing Witness" 62). The same is confirmed in Henke's discussion of the twentieth-century women's trauma narratives:

Testimonial life-writing allows the author to share an unutterable tale of pain and suffering, of transgression and victimization, in a discursive medium that can be addressed to everyone and no-one—to a world that will judge personal testimony as accurate historical witnessing or as thinly disguised fiction. No matter. It is through the very process of rehearsing and reenacting a drama of mental survival that the trauma narrative effects psychological catharsis (Henke xix).

Vickroy points to a problematic distinction between *testimonio* and trauma narratives, seeing Beverly's definition as rather general and applicable to trauma narratives which, in Vickroy's view, are also "a literary simulacrum of oral narrative' that seeks to create a truth effect, a feeling of lived experience, and expresses a 'problematic collective social situation' through a representative individual" (xii). Even though the distinction between *testimonio* and trauma narratives may seem blurred, *testimonio* seems to refer to a more realistic account, while trauma narratives may also be fictionalized to various extents. While *testimonio* is used to discuss a very specific subgenre tied to a particular location and history, a trauma narrative must be understood as a broader and more inclusive term representing any kind of trauma, be it collective trauma, such as colonization or slavery, or individual trauma, such as psychic and domestic violence. It is conventionally presented in a semi-fictional form but with accurate historical, sociological, or psychological foundations. In the end, Vickroy makes a subtle distinction between testimony and fictionalized trauma narratives in their symbolic representation: while *testimonio* attempts to tell the story as it is, trauma narratives represent trauma on a symbolic level; the choice of third-person narration, for example, certainly engages readers in a different way than an autobiographical voice. This, however, does not mean that these symbolic representations are not accurate or



truth-telling. Vickroy therefore concludes that while testimony may be more confrontational in its realistic approach and the symbolic representations of trauma may be challenged as distorting the nature of traumatic experience, it is important to take into account that “an audience needs assistance in translating unfamiliar experience in order to empathize with it” (Vickroy 11).

As was already suggested in Beverly’s definition of *testimonio*, the genre typically presents a direct involvement of the author-narrator in a traumatic event; if they are not direct witnesses to the traumatic experience, they are somehow affected by it. The author-narrator may therefore bear witness to historical traumatic events that were passed on to them by their ancestors. This phenomenon has been famously theorized by Marianne Hirsch as *postmemory*, a term originally related to the second-generation of Holocaust survivors but since then adapted to other contexts and histories to connote the sense of transgenerational trauma and suffering. Hirsch writes that *postmemory* “characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated” (*Family Frames* 22). Anne Brewster makes a direct link between Hirsch’s concept and Indigenous life writing; in her latest book, which features in-depth interviews with Aboriginal writers, she refers to *postmemory* to comment on Doris Pilkington’s strategies in her third-person narration in her autobiography *Under the Wintamarra Tree* (2002), arguing that Pilkington’s “gaps” in memory (e.g. her “forgetting” about her grandmother)—a result of traumatic experience of her removal as a child—allows her to fictionalize events from the past (Brewster, *Giving This Country a Memory* 249). In this way, the process of “transference of traumatic responses” can continue for generations, especially between parents and children where children often “inherit patterns of traumatic response” (Vickroy 19). This is rather symptomatic of Indigenous life writing, in which the younger generation of writers often succumbs to the imperative to represent the traumatic past as well as the post-traumatic present in their narratives.

The last aspect of trauma narratives this overview seeks to foreground is the notion of *scriptotherapy* and its function in healing and recovering from both individual and collective trauma. In her introduction to *Shattered Subjects*, Suzette Henke defines scriptotherapy as “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment” (Henke xii). It is an outcome of her research into women’s life writing in the twentieth century in which she argued that autobiography and life writing can be effective substitutes for psychoanalysis by providing a therapeutic alternative for victims of traumatic experience. This “writing out and writing through” that characterizes scriptotherapy may, if successful, lead to both individual and collective closure and contribute to subsequent healing, which is explicitly called for in most Indigenous women’s



personal non-fiction and life writing, as it empowers the individual authors as well as the whole community through sharing and writing about various aspects of the colonization trauma. Ideally, the result of this process is what Henke calls “narrative recovery” in referring to a community’s recuperation from the “past experience through narrative articulation and the psychological reintegration of a traumatically shattered subject” (xxii).

The life writing narratives analyzed in this section tell, in one way or another, stories of collective, communal, and transgenerational trauma, and call for healing of the community. Thus they perform what Sidner Larson, discussing Native American literature, calls a “curing phenomenon” (60). In the first section, it was suggested that the urban, politicized, and activist texts by Jackie Huggins and Lee Maracle empower their authors by engaging them in a public intellectual and academic environment, and give voice to their long-term struggles for Indigenous human rights and sovereignty. In these texts, healing is possible when Indigenous communities gain equal access to the resources and privileges that the dominant society offers and their political sovereignty, cultural plurality and self-determination is recognized. Even before that, Paula Gunn Allen argued that the current abyss between the modern patriarchal society of settler colonies and traditional Indigenous heritage can be bridged by the spiritual restoration of tribal gynocracies and the feminine principle that guided them. How the scriptotherapeutic elements make their way into the stories of both separation and homecoming written by Pilkington, Sterling, and Walters, where the healing process depends on the possibility (or impossibility) of a physical and/or spiritual return home while ensuring survival and continuance, is examined in the following subchapter.

## Trauma as a Story

And today, we are talking about the imagination of tribal stories, and the power of tribal stories to heal. Stories that enlighten and relieve and relive. Stories that create as they’re being told. And stories that overturn the burdens of our human existence.

Gerald Vizenor, “Trickster Discourse: Comic and Tragic Themes in Native American Literature” (68)

It was suggested above that Indigenous women’s life writing can be also read as trauma narratives, as it represents traumatic experiences stemming from violent colonization, racial oppression, and cultural genocide. The genre also manifests elements of personal testimony and scriptotherapy. The texts discussed in this section, Doris Pilkington’s *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Shirley Sterling’s *My Name Is Seepetza*, and Anna Lee Walters’ *Talking Indian*, are auto/biographical but partly



fictionalized accounts that inscribe both individual and collective trauma from forced separation and assimilation and provide testimony to the destructive system of mission, residential, and boarding schools in Australia, Canada, and the USA. The authors narrativize their own encounters with the system of regimented surveillance, unmasking a severe invasion of the private by the public sphere and documenting the difficulties, if not the impossibility, for Indigenous people to keep their families intact in the face of state intervention.

The separation of children from their families has different motives and takes place under different circumstances in the life writing narratives. In *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Molly, Daisy, and Gracie are literally “stolen,” or, as Pilkington deliberately calls it, “abducted” from the midst of their family and community (45). The Aboriginal family are somehow immediately aware of what is happening when Constable Riggs appears, all of a sudden, amongst them:

Fear and anxiety swept over them when they realised that the fateful day they had been dreading had come at last. They always knew that it would only be a matter of time before the government would track them [the girls] down. When Constable Riggs, Protector of Aborigines, finally spoke his voice was full of authority and purpose. They knew without a doubt that he was the one who took their children in broad daylight—not like the evil spirits who came into their camps in the night. (Pilkington, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* 44)

This scene shows that there was some awareness among Aboriginal people of the dangers that their children faced. In Pilkington’s narrative, the fear of separation affects both children and the community who feel they are powerless to prevent the removals. The only action the family can take to protect their part-Aboriginal offspring is to hide them in the bush or let the Aboriginal women give birth in the bush rather than in a hospital where the child would be registered and might be taken away soon after the birth (Pilkington 40). The little strategies of trying to prevent the children from being removed are further described by historian Anna Haebich: “They had look-outs and warning systems and kids might rush off into the bush. Some families put them in suitcases, sat on the suitcase, they might have, if they knew about it, might have the children blackened up with charcoal” (qtd. in “About Stolen Generations” n. pag.). *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* demonstrates, among other things, how the traumatic experience of the removals and the long-term, if not permanent, separation is destructive for the community. The children could be taken away any time and very unexpectedly, with no time to prepare the family or the children, so the mothers had to be alert at all times. In addition, the probability of the children returning to their families was very low, as the children were deliberately removed to very distant settlements or cities as far from their original homes as possible, as is visually recorded on the first pages





of *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* by the map of the girls' journey from Jigalong and back home. This is in contrast to the depiction of residential and boarding school experience in Sterling's and Walters' narratives, in which the children are not so far away from home and they usually go home for Easter, Christmas, and summer holidays. This does not diminish the traumatic impact of the residential and boarding school environments on Indigenous children in Canada and the USA; it is, however, a different life experience than that of the Stolen Generations in Australia where the links were often cut off abruptly by a single removal with very slim chances of return, while North American residential and boarding schools were responsible for a rather gradual process of alienation from the Indigenous background.

In Sterling's *My Name Is Seepeetza* and Walters' *Talking Indian*, the separation seems to be guided by different motives. Rather than "stolen," the children are "sent away" by their parents who often see this as the only option they have. By no means does this indicate that the parents would voluntarily send their children to boarding and residential schools; rather, they are pressured to do so by various circumstances, such as poverty and the struggle to keep all of their children fed and clothed, the pressure from the churches running the schools, or legal orders. Often the parents themselves are traumatized by their own childhood separation from family and the institutional experience and try to prevent their children from getting into "trouble." Some parents even refuse to teach their children Native languages, as they know the children would be severely punished for using them at residential and boarding schools. This is repeatedly expressed in *My Name Is Seepeetza*, where the parents, despite speaking their language fluently, consciously prevent their children from learning Indigenous languages in order to "prepare" them for the residential school experience (78, 89). This strategy, however, confuses Seepeetza who perceives speaking Native languages as something natural and desired: "Dad says I have to be a nurse or a teacher but I would like to be an interpreter like him. He speaks lots of Indian languages, but he won't teach us. Mum won't either. She says the nuns and priests will strap us. I wonder why it's bad" (36). Of course, Seepeetza is soon to discover the residential school rules about speaking languages other than English. Another important motivation for the parents to send their children to residential and boarding schools is their belief that education will secure their children a job and help them survive in the mainstream society, as is suggested in the quote from Sterling's text above. But again, this is proved wrong as the main "education" Indigenous children were receiving in residential and boarding schools was not in academic subjects but in various household and farming skills, mostly to be practiced in the service of white people (Kuokkanen 703). In this the system was very similar to mission schools and Native settlements in Australia. Interestingly, in *My Name Is Seepeetza*, it is Seepeetza's great-grandmother who protests sending the children to the resi-



dential school as it “would turn them into white people” and they “wouldn’t be able to hunt or fish or make baskets or anything useful anymore” (Sterling 30). The clarity of her vision is, however, obscured by the next generation’s struggle to survive in the environment of encroaching Anglo-Canadian society. In spite of some Native parents’ false but understandable belief that they were doing the best for their children by sending them to residential and boarding schools, their awareness of the fact that they are denying their children their Indigenous identity and sending them into the arms of assimilation is depicted nonetheless as debilitating and paralyzing for the family and community life. Having no means to change this course of events is as traumatizing as the experience of the Stolen Generations and their families in Australia.

Similarly to the history of the Stolen Generations in Australia, the residential and boarding school history in North America remains a deeply embedded trauma among Indigenous peoples today, with many survivors and eyewitnesses speaking out about the abuse and maltreatment they received in various kinds of institutions. What the following quote suggests about the impact of the residential school system in Canada is also applicable to the USA and Australia: “Residential schools were instrumental in the breakdown of the family, causing strain and mistrust as language barriers arose and children were taught to devalue their cultural traditions” (Grant 46). The separation of Indigenous children from the familiar environment and the need to come to terms with the new, hostile surrounding is accompanied by feelings of loss, confusion, fear, internalization of one’s difference and sometimes by psychosomatic symptoms such as bedwetting. Hence Seepetza comments: “We get stomach aches when we have to come back to school after summer. It starts when we see the first leaves turning yellow at the end of August” (Sterling 36). The fear of having to return to the school, of being taken away from the family not once but every year after the summer of course has a severe impact on the children’s physical and mental health, resulting in alienation and internalized shame.

Similarly, even though Anna Lee Walters’ narrator in *Talking Indian* goes through a boarding school experience for a shorter period than Seepetza in Sterling’s narrative, she also admits it was the most traumatic experience in her life as she was taken away from the very traditional, tribal environment of her grandmother’s household when five years old. However, Walters provides an insight into yet a different experience with a government boarding school. Until her school age, she lived with her Otoe-Missouria grandparents with whom she was very close. When the grandfather dies, she is “returned to [her] parents,” which is described by Walters as “an extremely traumatic experience” because “this act, in itself, loosened [her] grip on the picture of a completely tribal world” (*Talking Indian* 50). In the following paragraph Walters confesses her feelings of anxiety and alienation stemming from having been taken away from her grandparents:



A chain reaction began when I was in the second grade that, once started, reverberated through my world. For the first time, the picture I was always able to envision began to dim. I seemed to float alone in space with nothing to pin me down, cut away from the safe and nurturing world that my grandparents had given to me. (*Talking Indian* 50)

“Floating alone in space” is an apt metaphor for the trauma Walters suffered when very young and it intensifies when first her sister and then mother are also “taken away” from her as they both develop tuberculosis and must be hospitalized. She remains alone with her father and little sister and in this difficult moment for the family, she and her sister are sent to the government boarding school (51).

Walters’ text is rather conventional in terms of genre conventions, giving a fairly straightforward autobiographical account of her experience in the boarding school, and thus the representation of trauma is unmediated by an unreliable child narrator, as in *My Name Is Seepeetza*, or by a third-person biographical mode, as in *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*. Instead, the boarding school experience in *Talking Indian* is depicted in a raw, factual, documentary style of writing. What Walters’ text adds, however, is the introspective mode describing her inner feelings and reflecting on how this experience shapes her identity in a negative sense: “This was the first time my sister and I were completely separated from our family. ... The picture of the Otoe world was not yet entirely gone, but it was now *away* from me. I could *almost* see it, but I was definitely outside it” (51, original emphasis). Even though Walters admits that the boarding school did “take care of them” in terms of clothing, food and a place to sleep (51), she does not see anything positive about the experience and the strongest memory Walters has of this time is the “feeling [she] had no control of what was happening to [her]” (51). In addition to her own traumatic story, Walters also gives a similar account of the boarding school experience of her Navajo husband who could not speak much English when arriving at the boarding school, and who therefore experienced many communication problems. “Those years were painful and lonely, and my husband still has difficulty talking about his experience there” (216), says Walters. In contrast to Walters, who decides to alleviate the painful memory through narrativizing it in a scriptotherapeutic mode, her husband seems to be unable to work through his traumatic experience, preferring, like so many trauma survivors, to suppress it and remain in silence.

The issue of silence and the impossibility of representing the unspeakable is of course one of the major themes in trauma theory. Remaining silent as a response to trauma is, according to Dori Laub, common in trauma survivors:

[T]he speakers about trauma on some level prefer silence so as to protect themselves from the fear of being listened to—and of listening to themselves. That while silence is defeat, it serves them both as a sanctuary and as a place of bondage. Silence is for them



a fated exile, yet also a home, a destination, and a binding oath. To *not* return from this silence is rule rather than exception. (“Bearing Witness” 58, original emphasis)

Even though trauma theory has explored the issue of silence mainly in relation to testimonies by Holocaust survivors, *Stolen Generations* and boarding and residential school narratives also address similar issues. The protagonists of personal testimonies often have to make decisions about speaking out or remaining silent, or even strategically withholding some information about their traumatic experiences. All writers under analysis here have managed to break the silence by sharing the life stories of themselves, their families, and their communities, yet they must also negotiate the ways in which they present the painful memories. In some cases, the younger generation writers/biographers who record oral accounts of their family members, and whose traumatic experience is not direct but transgenerational, must sometimes confront the silence and reluctance to fully disclose the impact of their parents’ or community elders’ traumatic experience. But it is also common that the elder relatives finally decide to tell their stories with the prospect of their stories being documented for their own children as well as for the non-Indigenous reading public. This is the case of Australian Indigenous life writing and auto/biographical narratives such as *My Place* by Sally Morgan, *Auntie Rita* by Rita and Jackie Huggins, *When the Pelican Laughed* by Alice Nannup, and *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, in which Doris Pilkington says at the beginning of her narrative that her mother and aunt are “anxious for their story to be published before they die” (xi). Although Molly and Daisy, Pilkington’s main informants, are willing to share their memories in the end, there is no doubt that they are selective about which facts and details are revealed and which are not. In addition, the whole story is mediated by Pilkington who also inscribes her own imaginative and creative skills as a writer. In Sterling’s and Walters’ narratives, the traumatized parents (and a husband in Walters’ narrative) refuse to share their experience with their children. As a result, mostly the recent generation of Indigenous writers narrativize the suppressed traumatic experiences of their parents and grandparents as well as their own, negotiating the silences and becoming mediators between the traumatic past and post-traumatic present.

*Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *My Name Is Seepetza*, and *Talking Indian* can thus be identified as participating in both individual and communal scriptotherapy. The idea that testimonial and trauma writing can perform a healing effect on the author and her immediate environment actually permeates all the life narratives discussed in this book. The scriptotherapeutic elements are perhaps most visible in Anna Lee Walters’ *Talking Indian* where there is also the strongest sense of the autobiographical “I.” Walters describes how after the traumatic boarding school experience in which she totally separated from tribal culture, writing helped her find her own identity through reconnection with the tribal and oral traditions of



her people: “Writing released years of oppression. It made me whole and free. [It] seemed to express my renewed self, the sense of identity that was given back to me when I stopped trying to follow the mainstream, stopped denying the tribal essence of me, as I started listening for the familiar voice of tribal oral tradition again” (53). For Walters, the process of writing down her people’s version of history, of re-writing the history, is a means of empowerment, particularly in the moments of emphasizing the survival of her community, rather than the defeat which has been presented in so many white historians’ and anthropologists’ publications. This aspect of her narrative runs through *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, too. Reconstructing the trek of the three girls in a textual form is a process of healing and reconciliation, both for Molly and Daisy, and for Pilkington herself as she becomes directly involved in the continuation of the story. *My Name Is Seepetza* explicitly plays upon the concept of writing as a means of dealing with traumatic experience: Seepetza, the protagonist, writes a diary to release her childhood frustrations and confusions in the fictional residential school, while Sterling, the author, writes the diary-like fictionalized autobiography to obtain closure for her own trauma from a real residential school. While Walters tells her story in an autobiographical mode, the other two narratives by Pilkington and Sterling are much more fictionalized, which has led some critics to read them as novels. Rauna Kuokkanen calls *My Name Is Seepetza* a “fictionalized lifewriting” to argue that this form allows the writers “to confront and deal with their own, often painful experiences in an indirect way that is less personal than writing in first person” (700).

Testimonial elements are inscribed in Pilkington’s, Sterling’s, and Walters’ texts on two different levels. First, there is the sense of the testimony and bearing witness to the forced separations and assimilation pressures, to the system of the state intervention and “educational” institutions—in other words the testimony to the cultural, economic and political destruction. On this level, the three narratives have a disturbing effect on readers who are confronted with previously silenced deeds. On the other hand, there is a strong sense of testimony to survival and continuance. The epilogue to *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* titled “What Happened to Them? Where Are They Now?” gives a brief overview of the further fates of the three protagonists. Although they are still filled with many sad episodes of repeated removals and state interventions, it is also interesting to note that the stress is put on the continuance—namely the three women’s descendants. So it is carefully recorded that according to Aboriginal kinship, Molly has eighteen grandchildren, twenty-nine great-grandchildren and two great-great grandchildren; similarly, Daisy and Gracie also have great numbers of offspring (132), contributing to the community’s growth. As the whole narrative concludes with this statement, it somehow counteracts the traumatic content and, as was already suggested, demonstrates the failure of the central assimilationist ideology which motivated the practical policies of removals. The same strategies are employed by Sterling



and Walters who, apart from bearing witness to residential and boarding school trauma, emphasize the strong connections with their Indigenous background that they were able to restore. In spite of her traumatic experience and partial alienation from her family, Seepeetza manages to remain grounded in her Indigenous identity because, as someone who has been brought up in a traditional environment in the midst of functional extended family, she is able to remember and bring back, albeit in secret and only in the company of other selected Native children, the cultural practices and customs learned at home when times are bad at the residential school. Similarly, although Walters' Indigenous identity has been severely disrupted by her years in the boarding school, away from the family, in the end she stresses the survival of her people and their resilience; for example, she describes how in spite of everything she kept Otoe and Pawnee cultural traditions close to her heart, and even added her husband's Navajo culture, passing all of these cultures on her own children. Therefore, the life writing narratives analyzed in this section, with a particular focus on Stolen Generations narratives and residential and boarding school experiences, record in detail the severe impact of what has sometimes been called "historical trauma" and they also inscribe ways of healing this trauma. Healing is almost always constructed through the trope of returning home, both in the physical sense of a journey home and the metaphorical sense of returning to traditional cultures, languages, places, landscapes, and kinships. This notion of homecoming-as-healing also refers to writing, as Doris Pilkington, Shirley Sterling, and Anna Lee Walters all write with home in their minds: Pilkington records the heroic journey of her relatives to their Aboriginal home; Sterling returns home in her journal entries; and Walters writes a love letter to her grandparents' tribal cultures and histories.





## CHAPTER 6

# COLLECTIVE SUBJECTS, DIALOGIC SELVES

... self-construction depends upon creating new spaces between languages, cultures, and places that are impossible to regain or achieve, and the present accommodation, which transforms the place of transplantation.

Susanna Egan, *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography* (27)

The genre of life writing has been critically shaped by the theory of autobiography, which in the Western discourse traditionally revolves around the issue of the construction and centrality of the self. Since the 1970s when Philippe Lejeune formulated his definition of autobiography as a “retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence when he puts the principal accent upon his life, especially upon the story of his own personality” (qtd. in Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 1), a number of book-length publications have intervened in the definition and shifted it in various directions. Some ground-breaking texts on the subject include Paul John Eakin’s *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (1985); Domna Stanton’s *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century* (1987); James Olney’s *Studies in Autobiography* (1988); Leigh Gilmore’s *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-representation* (1994); Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters’ *Autobiography & Postmodernism* (1994); and Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (1998) and *Reading Autobiography* (2001). Even though Lejeune’s definition has been modified, adjusted, and even challenged many times, particularly by poststructuralist and feminist scholars, it nevertheless illustrates the foundations of the familiar model of recording and representing one’s life in Western autobiography. This model works within an established genre that emerged in the Enlightenment and celebrates the “autonomous individual and the universalizing life story” (Smith and Watson, *Reading*





*Autobiography* 3). It has come to denote “a first-person narrative that purports to describe the narrator’s life or episodes in that life, customarily with some chronological reflections about individual growth and development” (Reid xvii). In spite of various interpretations and modifications, this understanding of autobiographical narratives remains standard in Euro-American scholarship.

Indigenous life writing, however, is often perceived as presenting a different construction of the self—an alternative to the centrality of the individual subject in Western autobiography (Krupat, *Ethnocriticism* 201). This is not to say that Indigenous life writing lacks subjectivity but rather that it privileges the collective subject and multiple voices over a single unified voice, even if these multiple voices are sometimes only implied. The idea of a collective subject is echoed in the work of Arnold Krupat, a scholar of Native American literature, particularly Native American autobiography. In the chapter titled “Monologue and Dialogue in Native American Autobiography” in his *The Voice in the Margin* (1989), Krupat explores the development of what he calls “dialogic models of the self” in both early and modern Native American autobiographies<sup>28</sup> which are either individually written or produced collaboratively with a white editor. He argues that “[i]n Native American autobiography the self is most typically not constituted by the achievement of a distinctive, special voice that separates it from others, but, rather, by the achievement of a particular placement in relation to the many voices without which it could not exist” (Krupat, *The Voice in the Margin* 133). This premise, contrasting Native American life writing and Western autobiography, is generally accepted among scholars of Native American life writing. This is confirmed by Kathleen M. Sands who, exploring Native American women’s collaborative life writing, makes the following comment: “Dialogue emphasizes kinship and relationality in terms of placement within the community social structure. This, of course, is directly antithetical to the privileging of individuality, of uniqueness, at the core of Euro-American autobiography” (144). In turn, Hertha D. Wong is committed to the notion of what she calls the “communal” self in Native American societies, arguing that Native people generally construct their identity primarily in relation to their families, clans, and tribes, and only secondarily as individuals (Wong, *Sending My Heart Back* 13). Close readings of both pre-contact and contemporary Native American life writing lead Wong to claim that “[i]nstead of emphasis on an individual self who *stands apart* from the community, the focus is on a communal self who *participates within* the tribe” (14, original emphasis). Even though such statements may invite a potential backlash in the sense of creating an artificial binary between the notions of Indigenous/collective/dialogic on the one hand and Western/individual/monologic on the other, it will be shown that the life writing

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28 Krupat consistently uses the term “Native American autobiography,” but many of the narratives he analyzes, particularly the contemporary ones which blur the boundaries between the autobiographical self and other voices, could be described as life writing.



narratives discussed in this study tend to confirm this argument, no matter how distant their authors might be from their traditional tribal environment.

Krupat's notion of the dialogic self<sup>29</sup> refers not only to the texts which *literally* present at least two voices (e.g. a non-Indigenous writer/editor and an Indigenous informant, often complemented by a translator), but also to the narratives which encompass two cultural backgrounds of an Indigenous writer—something that Krupat distinguishes as “autobiographies by Indians” as opposed to “Indian autobiographies.” These narratives present a “cultural cross-talk,” such as being Indigenous *and* a writer/academic/activist (Krupat, *The Voice in the Margin* 133). This point draws attention to the issues of biculturalism and cultural hybridity, which play important roles in contemporary Indigenous life writing in general, trying to answer the questions of cultural survival in the modern globalized world. Browdy de Hernandez speaks about the “hybridization of [Indigenous] ancient cultures with the Euroamerican dominant culture” (40). Thus Krupat develops his notion of a textual self which is collective, based on the dialogic nature of the Indigenous tribal existence:

Native American autobiographies, then, are the textual results of specific dialogues (between persons, between cultures, between persons and cultures) which claim to represent an Indian subject who, him- or herself, is the human result of specific dialogical or collective sociocultural practices. They are particularly interesting ... as providing images of a collective self and a collective society. (*The Voice in the Margin* 134)

Although Krupat, somewhat problematically, makes this statement applicable to those subjects who “have been formed in relation to tribal-traditional cultures” (134), potentially excluding urban-based writers who have lost touch with their tribal-oriented communities, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge the role of the community and the collective identity that informs much of the Indigenous worldview. Krupat examines closely some of the early, seemingly “monologic” Native American life writings, demonstrating their writers’ conscious suppression of the dialogic or collective constitution, while arriving at the conclusion that multiple voices and the collective subject simply cannot be erased from the Indigenous text:

What is worth remarking, however, is how extremely difficult it seems to be to write as an Indian ... without some measure of polyphony entering one’s text. For all that the Indian author of an autobiography may wish to privilege a single perspective and a single stylistic practice, it usually turns out that there are, nonetheless, traces of other

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29 The same concept, though approached from a slightly different perspective, is also addressed by Rocío G. Davis in her analysis of collaborative life writing, as was shown in the chapter discussing Rita and Jackie Huggins’ *Auntie Rita*.



voices, even, it may be, other voices of the author herself, if not actually in the text then in the margins. (*The Voice in the Margin* 170)

The “polyphony” that Krupat mentions as inherent in Indigenous life writing also informs, to various extents, all of the texts examined in this book: Paula Gunn Allen’s inclusion of tribal myths and the voices of her own family; Lee Maracle’s integration of stories told to her by other Indigenous women; Jackie Huggins’ sharing of narrative space with her mother; Doris Pilkington’s re-writing of her mother’s and aunt’s oral stories; Shirley Sterling’s interweaving of the voices of her family, schoolmates, and staff; and Anna Lee Walters’ mélange of her short stories and non-fiction. In a later study, Krupat reiterates the same argument that “Native American self ... seem[s] to be less attracted to introspection, expansion, or fulfilment than the Western self appears to be” and that it seems “relatively uninterested in such things as the ‘I-am-me’ experience, and a sense of uniqueness or individuality” (*Ethnocriticism* 209). Certainly, such characteristics may seem problematic in the sense that they rely on essentialism and contribute to creating unnecessary binaries (i.e. all Indigenous life writing is dialogic and communal, while the Western autobiography is monologic and individual) and there are many examples of either Indigenous or Anglo-American autobiographical accounts that do not fit these characteristics; on the other hand, Krupat’s observations are useful for our thinking about the distinctive features of Indigenous life writing.

In the chapter titled “Native American Autobiography and the Synecdochic Self,” Krupat further elaborates on his concept of the collective self and develops an original theory of the conception of the self in the genre of autobiography based on the theory of linguistic tropes, specifically metonymy and synecdoche. Krupat argues that if we understand metonymy as a relation of part-to-part and synecdoche as a relation of part-to-whole, then personal accounts with the individual’s strong sense of the self as an entity different and separate from other individuals engage a metonymic sense of self, while life stories in which the individual’s sense of the self is expressed “in relation to collective social units or groupings” construct a synecdochic sense of self (Krupat, *Ethnocriticism* 212). In other words, the synecdochic sense of the self means the personal representation of a collective entity. Because early Indigenous life stories were communicated orally and often performed tribally in public, Krupat maintains that they were experienced through a collective effect (216–17). Krupat then goes on to argue that this process of communicating the personal life story in an oral, dramatic, performative, and public way is more likely to “privilege the synecdochic relation of part-to-whole than the metonymic of part-to-part” (217). The analyses of the Indigenous women’s life writing narratives in this study confirm that the individual lives presented in them become comprehensible principally in relation to



the collective experience of each of the author's tribes or communities, be it in a traditional or urban setting.

Krupat's discussion of the construction of the dialogic self in Native American autobiography does not refer explicitly to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogism. It is important to mention, however, that the idea of extending the theory of dialogism from the genre of the novel (as it was developed by Bakhtin) to life writing has taken hold in the increasing field of modern auto/biography studies. For example, for Susanna Egan, "dialogism is a recurring feature of contemporary autobiographies" and dialogic aspects include

dynamic and reciprocal relations between text and context; their revelation of the difference between self and other; the contestatory nature of many of these relationships; the frequent recognition and destabilizing of power relations; the common move toward decentered heterogeneity; the omnivorous use of genres to destabilize each other; and perhaps most important, the recognition that human beings exist within a hierarchy of languages or ideological discourses. (Egan 23)

One of the few sources that does discuss the potential applicability of Bakhtin's theory to Indigenous life writing stems from the context of Métis literature in Canada. In *Ethnopoetics of the Minority Voice: Introduction to the Politics of Dialogism and Difference in Métis Literature*, Armando Jannetta begins by drawing on Krupat's dialogic models of the self in Native American autobiography, distinguishing three strategies employed by Métis literature to enact the process of decolonization. The first strategy corresponds to the representation of Indigeneity as Europe's monolithic Other, emphasizing radical difference (Jannetta 53). This may, however, result in "misrepresented romanticism, nostalgia and reversed stereotypes," all of which enslave cultural production in a "'heroic' past" (59). The second strategy is that of "rehabilitation," which highlights "contra/dictions, fragmentations and asymmetry," as opposed to the "rigid patterns and univocal truths" of the first approach (59). This strategy comes to constitute a "minor literature" in Deleuze and Guattari's sense, which "situates itself in its dialogic and mediating role at the margins" and applies, in Jannetta's view, a deconstructionist approach to both Western and Indigenous traditions (59). Finally, Jannetta argues that Métis literature, in its "position between Indian and white," adopts a "third strategy of locatedness which resembles Bakhtinian dialogism and relates to the lived experience of the local community" (53). In my understanding, it is Bakhtin's notion of "double-voiced" discourse that can, in this sense, be applied to Indigenous life writing which, as it has been shown in the analysis of the selected narratives, often manoeuvres between Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemology, between resistance to and complying with the dominant discourse (visible, for example, in the use of English as a tool of expression and in the use of the medium of a writ-



ten text intended for publication). In any case, elaboration of the above strategies in Métis writing leads Jannetta to conclude that “Bakhtin’s dialogism is typical of the hybrid third space of Métis writing ... defined by communal interaction, local situation and valorization of difference” (65). These three strategies, i.e. emphasizing radical difference, highlighting contradiction and fragmentation, and localization between two cultures, foreground both the dialogic and the hybrid character of Indigenous life writing.

The issues of collective identity and relationality in Indigenous women’s life writing may be perceived as overlapping with feminist criticism in terms of constructing the female self in autobiographical writing. When Krupat and other scholars of Native American life writing such as Hertha Wong speak of the collective, “synecdochic” self based on a different construction of the self in tribal societies, these ideas also resonate with feminist scholarship, which has demonstrated that women autobiographers construct their textual selves in a different way from male authors, privileging collective subjects and relationality.<sup>30</sup> For example, Susan Stanford Friedman pertinently observes in her article “Women’s Autobiographical Selves, Theory and Practice” that there are parallels between women’s life writing and minority literatures in terms of their tendency to subdue what she calls “individualistic models” of constructing the self in Western autobiography:

The fundamental inapplicability of individualistic models of the self to women and minorities is twofold. First, the emphasis on individuality does not take into account the importance of a culturally imposed group identity for women and minorities. Second, the emphasis on separateness ignores the differences in socialization in the construction of male and female gender identity. From both an ideological and psychological perspective, in other words, individualistic paradigms of the self ignore the role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process of women and minorities. (Friedman 35)

Similarly, Egan argues in *Mirror Talk* that it has been mainly feminism and minority discourse that have embraced dialogism in the critical analysis of women’s and ethnic auto/biographies (24). Egan reviews the scholarship on this topic, referring not only to Sidonie Smith, Shirley Neuman, and Helen M. Buss, who in the 1980s repeatedly emphasized the double-voiced nature of feminist life writing

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30 A collection of essays edited by Shari Benstock, *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiography*, provides a good overview of the development of the debates about women’s sense of collective identity and relationality. For example, Susan Friedman’s contribution on women’s autobiographical selves uses Nancy Chodorow’s well-known argument suggesting that girls define themselves in relation to others and the world while the masculine self is separate (41). Recently, however, a number of texts have problematized this argument which privileges the relational self in women’s life writing narratives, challenging its essentialist nature (Wong, “First-Person Plural” 168; Stanton, “Autogynography” 11; Hooton 79–102).



(when articulating difference from the dominant discourse while writing within the domain of this discourse), but also to Henry Louis Gates and Francoise Lionnet, who insisted on the double-voiced and polyphonic principles of the trope of the “Talking Book” and the practice of *métissage*, respectively (Egan 24–25). Egan’s own metaphor for describing the same process—“mirror talk”—connotes “double voicing, double vision, or that fluid and encompassing activity both personal and generic” (25) which valorizes plural perspectives and emphasizes interactions between genres as well as between writers and readers of life writing (12).

Therefore, many debates about Indigenous construction of the self in life writing can be compared to feminist analyses of women’s autobiographical selves, the common ground being the focus of both Indigenous and women’s life writing on the communal and relational identity (Wong, *Sending My Heart* 7). Krupat makes a similar argument when he applies his concept of the synecdochic self, together with the notion of orality, to women’s narratives. In his view, recent feminist criticism has solidly established that “orality ... and textuality ... are, indeed, perceived as gender-related in the West, where men tend toward metonymic presentations of self, and women—in this like Indians and tribal peoples generally—tend toward synecdochic presentations of self” (*Ethnocriticism* 217). Indigenous women’s life writing thus provides an ideal space for examining the intersections of the feminist and Indigenous perceptions of the collective self.

It has been established that the identities of women who also identify as members of racial or ethnic minorities must be critically studied as intersections of gender and race/ethnicity (apart from other identity markers, such as class, sexuality, religion, etc.), since these intersections often put them, in the space of settler colonies, in a position of “double jeopardy” and double marginalization (Friedman 47; Longley 371). This process of double othering may strengthen the minority women’s sense of group consciousness and collective identity, which is then reflected in the ways in which they construct their selves in life writing. Indigenous and feminist concepts of relationality are based, however, on a slightly different relation of the self to community: while Indigenous relationality is associated with cultural grounding, particularly with extensive kinship networks and a specific relationship to the land, feminist theorists perceive female relationality as linked mainly to gender and social structures that place women in the midst of the nuclear family and domestic sphere (Wong, “First-Person Plural” 168). But even though the two notions of relationality, Indigenous and feminist, may have a different basis, as Wong observes, in my view it is possible to argue that the self in Indigenous women’s life writing is always, to a certain extent, constructed in relation to the community, simply because there is a common history. Community can of course imply various meanings: extended family, kinship network, tribe or clan, urban activists, or a circle of public intellectuals. Whatever the meaning, the importance of community based on shared history is undeniable for Indigenous



people. Armand Garnet Ruffo confirms this view when he claims that community is a prominent theme in Native American literature in general: “What we notice is a return to the community rather than a going away. ... Community is necessarily linked to identity, the return to community signifying the protagonist’s recognition of himself as a Native person who has survived the colonizing and assimilating forces of the dominant society” (116). Again, Ruffo brings up a significant trope that recurs in Indigenous women’s life writing, that of homecoming, returning to one’s original community and culture, as was mentioned in the previous chapter in relation to the power of life writing narratives to heal authors, protagonists, and Indigenous readers.

Finally, the issue of the collective identity in Indigenous life writing is inevitably linked to the collective trauma, historic memory, and subsequent healing. Trauma narratives inscribe historically determined group consciousness based on the shared experience of a traumatic event: for Indigenous people, these events include colonization, subsequent displacement, and cultural genocide. In their introduction to a collection of essays in *Tracing the Autobiographical*, Jeanne Perreault and Marlene Kadar observe that minority life writing, survivor narratives in particular, inhabit the space between “I,” “we,” and “they:” “When the speaking presence is narrating the story of a community, ... the ‘I’ blurs with the ‘we,’ and the axes of differentiation move less among differences or similarities within a collective and more in the commonality of the ‘we’ in struggle against the ‘them’” (Perreault and Kadar 5). Thus highlighting aspects of trauma narratives and testimonies in Indigenous women’s life writing also underlines the dialogic features of the texts, not in the sense of polyphony, by integrating a number of different voices in the text, but rather in the sense of establishing a dialogue between teller and listener, writer and reader. This relationship is always somehow present, of course, but the role of the listener or reader in trauma narratives and survivor testimonies actually shapes the narrative: these accounts can never be monologic as they require, if not insist on implicating the listener or reader. As such they cannot take place in solitude and they always interpellate the listener or reader. In Laub’s words, “the witnesses are talking *to somebody*; to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time” (“Bearing Witness” 70–71, original emphasis). Thus it follows that the notions of collective subjects and dialogic selves are to a certain extent embedded in the genre of Indigenous women’s life writing, certainly in the narratives analyzed in this section, even though they often negotiate the boundaries between the individual and the collective selves.



## Polyvocality and Dialogism in Pilkington, Sterling, and Walters

It is by listening to a plurality of voices from various corners of the planet and across centuries that we will strengthen our ability to resist demeaning power structures without risk of being recuperated by current or trendy professionalism within our academic disciplines.

Françoise Lionnet, Preface to *Autobiographical Voices* (xi)

Doris Pilkington, Shirley Sterling, and Anna Lee Walters are all writers who employ a synthesis of traditional Indigenous and mainstream narrative strategies, in particular by incorporating aspects of orality into their texts. They are also writers who voice their individual perspectives and experiences, at least partly using introspection in their writing (even though not to the same extent that Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle, and Jackie Huggins do), which can be compared to ways of constructing the self in Western autobiographical writing. On the other hand, their narrative individuality is decentered by making the collective and communal experience an integral part of their narratives. In these accounts, there are other voices gleaming through, voices that are more perceptible in some cases and less in others, but always there “in the margins,” to use Krupat’s phrase. These other voices stem from the shared sense of collective identity and communal environment of the writers, whether they come from a more traditional community or an urban area. They are also revealed through collective memory of Indigenous populations across Australia and North America. In specific examples, these voices belong to people who the writers may have interacted or worked with; to friends and family; to community elders and leaders. In these cases, the writers and/or narrators function as mediators, weaving their story from a number of stories from various voices and passing it on. It is perhaps this function that recalls the role traditional storytellers played. The voices that inform the narrative are sometimes even acknowledged in the collective authorship or in various paratexts, such as introductions and prefaces. The Indigenous women writers analyzed in this book acknowledge that the text is not theirs alone; it incorporates other voices and other people’s stories. Thus Lee Maracle admits in *I Am Woman* that she uses stories told to her by her female friends, while Jackie Huggins in *Sister Girl* relies on the experience of the many Aboriginal women who have struggled with institutionalized racism. In *Auntie Rita*, the voices of the mother and daughter are arranged in an explicit dialogue in which the two voices take turns narrating. In *Off the Reservation*, Paula Gunn Allen brings in the stories narrated by her grandparents and other family members. Some of these stories are even told in the first person by the subject of the story, rather than by the autobiographical narrator.

Many of the Indigenous women’s narratives examined here, certainly those of Lee Maracle, Jackie Huggins, and Doris Pilkington, are primarily concerned with





the history of racism in Australia and North America. It is possible to say that recording this history as an alternative to the official history of settler colonies is a central issue in their writing. This is so because their ancestors and family members have a long-term experience with racial discrimination in their respective countries and thus the anti-racist and anti-colonial rhetoric embedded in their writing largely depends on their self-definition as members of an Indigenous community. Again, Krupat's theory of synecdochic self is relevant here, as "the self as such is validated only in its social-collective ... personhood" (Krupat, *Ethnocriticism* 227). In this respect, the notion of the dialogic may also be extended to include the dialogue between the past and the present, as is suggested by Kathleen M. Sands who claims that "contemporary [Indigenous] narrative speaks to and is resonant with oral tradition and historical narrative. Further, it is dialogic; voices of the past, dialogue from both past and present, and self-reflective interpretation all share narrative space" (144).

The dialogic character permeates the narratives explored in both sections on several levels. First, there is an explicit or implicit dialogue between narrative voices, and other independent voices are integrated either in paratextual materials or within the main narrative, where some texts include fictionalized dialogues (Pilkington, Maracle, Allen), first-person accounts (Walters, Allen, Huggins), or implicit voices of other protagonists (Sterling)—this results in the polyphonic form, evoking a community of voices. Second, the dialogue occurs between the past and present, with both historiography and storytelling being inseparable from recording, writing, and publishing Indigenous life stories, as is illustrated in all of the narratives under inspection in this book. Third, all of these narratives are cross-cultural, establishing a dialogue between Indigenous storytellers and non-Indigenous readership. By writing testimonies to various forms of racism and racial violence, by presenting counter-histories to challenge the national foundations of settler colonies, by inscribing alternative forms of knowledge, Indigenous life writing interpellates the settler audience and creates "new ethics of cross-cultural engagement" which is predicated upon the "transformations of subjectivity" (Slater 153). Finally, all of the texts interpret, in one way or another, the dialogic relationship between orality and literacy since Pilkington, Sterling, and Walters have all taken up the difficult task of translating and transforming the oral word to the written text.

Doris Pilkington has written a tale of a heroic quest that symbolizes the struggle and resistance of the Stolen Generations experience in Australia. *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* is formally a third-person biographical account, but Pilkington's voice is present in the text, even though not explicitly in the form of a first-person account. In the introduction, Pilkington talks about the process of writing the book, including the recording and transcribing the oral accounts of her mother and aunt, retracing the journey of escape, going back to the settlement, etc. This



suggests that she, as an Indigenous person and writer, *relives*, both physically and in her imagination, both the experience of her mother and aunts and the collective experience of the Stolen Generations. This effort is obviously made mainly for Pilkington's mother and aunt who wish to have their story put on paper and made public but the narrative is Pilkington's as much as theirs. Her story and her voice are embedded in the text as well, especially in the context of her own later experience with the Moore River Native Settlement to which she was removed as a child and which is the basis of her later autobiography *Under the Wintamarra Tree* (2002). In addition, it is a story of her people and her community, as the narrative implies the voices of all Indigenous people going through the Moore River Native Settlement and thus represents, as a powerful meta-story, one of the many versions of the Stolen Generations narrative. In allowing other voices from the past to be heard, Pilkington provides space for recreating the storytelling tradition. This method permeates especially the first half of the book, where fictional dialogues of Pilkington's ancestors are written in-between the historical facts: the readers are acquainted with the voices of Kundilla and his band from the period of the first contact between the Nyungars and the British navy; the voices of Yelagonga and his group from the beginning of the English settlement in the Swan River colony in the 1830s; the voices of the Mardudjara people coming from the deserts to live closer to the government depots and farms in the 1900s; and finally, the voices of Pilkington's family ancestors from the Jigalong area who were subject to state surveillance and assimilation policies. In addition to the polyphony of Aboriginal voices, Pilkington brings in the voices of the authorities, such as policemen, Protectors, or farmers living in the area who take part in the girls' removal and then persecution after they manage to escape. These voices are present through the archival materials—letters, reports, and newspaper notices—and form an integral part of the narrative.

The dialogic character of *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* does not consist only of the inclusion of the voices of other protagonists of the story. Pilkington's text is also informed by two cultural environments: her Indigenous cultural background and Australian mainstream culture interact in a dialogic style. This is most noticeable in Pilkington's technique of combining archival materials, including notes, quotations, and explanations, which clearly represents the Western way of telling history, and counter-archival knowledge encompassed in the fictionalized oral (hi) stories. This strategy—inscribing multiple voices originating in the past, while synthesizing two histories and cultures into a form of hybrid narrative—creates a polyphony of voices and dialogic character which correspond to Krupat's premises about Native American autobiography.

The narratives of Shirley Sterling and Anna Lee Walters also demonstrate features of the collective identity and polyphony, though these are first-person narratives in which the narrator's "I" guides the reader. In *My Name Is Seepetza*,



the voice of Seepeetza is complemented by the voices of the other children in the residential school, as well as by the voices of her family, underlining a strong communal cosmology that shapes Seepeetza's personality. This is visible, for example, in the way Seepeetza's mother's traumatic experience from the Kalamak residential school is depicted as part of Seepeetza's experience: "My mum only went to grade three. She went to Kalamak, too. The nuns strapped her all the time for speaking Indian, because she couldn't speak English. She said just when the welts on her hands and arms healed, she got it again" (Sterling 89). This shows the destructive effect of recurrent violence, both physical and mental, on the Indigenous family's well-being. Similarly, the collective and communal aspect is highlighted when Seepeetza records various activities, such as summer camping, in order to collect enough berries, fish or hunt in the mountains, done by family members for the benefit of the entire community of several extended families (Sterling 91). Kuokkanen confirms that Sterling's novel is "highly polyvocal, interweaving voices of her family at home, on the one hand, and the voices of her peers as well as nuns and priests in the school on the other" (700). The "textual self" in *My Name Is Seepeetza*, Kuokkanen argues, is "collectively constituted, primarily through her culture but also through her interaction with other people and cultures in school" (700). Even though other characters in the narrative are perceived only through Seepeetza's individual perspective and occasional dialogues entered in her fictional diary, the readers are nevertheless aware of the collective self which arises from Seepeetza's firm belonging to her Indigenous community. Her ethnicity and cultural background put her in opposition to the school's regime, but also in the same situation as other Indigenous children, so the resulting impression is that Seepeetza's story is one of many. Seepeetza constructs her subjectivity in a synecdochic, i.e. "part-to-whole" relation to her people, to reiterate Krupat's argument. In addition, Sterling has based her residential school narrative not only on her own experience in the residential school, but also on the experiences of her friends and relatives, interweaving their stories with hers; thus, similarly to Pilkington, she creates a meta-narrative. Even though at first *My Name Is Seepeetza* may give the impression of a fairly individual, first-person narration, it nevertheless embodies a polyvocal narrative representing the residential school victims as a group. This is made clear in Sterling's dedication of her book "to all those who went to the residential schools."

The text most responsive to Krupat's concept of the dialogic and collective self is Walters' *Talking Indian*. Walters' origins lie in a tribal culture and her worldview is strongly shaped by the tribal histories of the Otoes, Pawnees, and Navajos. As in Sterling's *My Name Is Seepeetza*, Walter's narrative is guided by a first-person account, seemingly privileging the individual self. At the same time, however, the text gives voice to Walters' ancestors, both immediate family and distant relatives and elders, who all push their way into the narrative. Again, these are Krupat's "voices in the margins" and Walters' autobiographical "I" is the textual result of



specific dialogues between the writer and her family, the writer and her tribal history, and the writer and the mainstream culture. When Krupat analyzes what he considers a prime example of a Native American dialogic novel and life writing, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* (1981), he characterizes Silko as an author who "conceives of individual identity only in functional relation to the tribe" (*Ethnocriticism* 230). This argument is applicable to Walters' position as a chronicler of her tribe's culture and history and a tribal person herself. The fact that Walters constructs her own self in the text only in relation to her tribal background is demonstrated in the way she switches between the collective "we" whenever she presents a tribal worldview, and the individualistic "I" whenever she describes her own life in an autobiographical manner. In the first chapter of *Talking Indian*, Walters elaborates on the role that oral tradition plays in Native American tribal societies and in the opening paragraphs she quite seamlessly shifts from the autobiographical "I" to the collective "we:"

My first memories are not so much of things as they are of *words* that gave shape and substance to my being and form to the worlds around me. Born into two tribal cultures which have existed for millennia without written languages, the spoken word held me in the mystical and intimate way it has touched others who come from similar societies whose literature is oral. ... We are also shown that it is through the power of speech, and the larger unified voice of oral tradition, that we exist as we do. (Walters, *Talking Indian* 11, original emphasis)

This quote also shows how Walters puts forward the idea that oral, i.e. non-literate cultures are somehow bound to express themselves in a collective voice—"the larger unified voice of oral tradition." She practically equals orality, tribal cultures, and her own identity, as if her own self was subsumed, or dissolved, in the larger, collective entity of the tribe. With a fair amount of self-reflectivity, Walters further comments on growing up in a multi-voiced, multi-tribal, and multi-cultural environment, crossing the boundaries of individual Indigenous groups, Indigenous and mainstream cultures, and individual voices, allowing her to become part of the collective voice:

There were many individual voices, male and female, old and young, scattered about me, and these voices expressed themselves in two languages, Otoe and English. ... But more often than not, as if by some magnetic pull of oral tradition, the individual tribal voices unconsciously blended together, like braided strands of thread, into *one* voice, story, song, or prayer. (Walters, *Talking Indian* 12, original emphasis)

As a result, Walters transforms this "one voice" into a concept that she calls the "tribal voice," which is responsible for the successful development of her identity



as an Indigenous person and which also becomes a source of power, knowledge, and healing in the times when Walters felt she was drifting away from her tribal background: “The echo of that tribal voice, in Otoe and English, never disappears or fades from my ear, not even in the longest silences of the people, or in my absences from them” (*Talking Indian* 12).

Walters’ multi-genre narrative creates an ideal space for incorporating multiple voices and dialogic expressions. The tribal histories of her ancestors, as well as those of her husband’s family, take up most of the narrative space in *Talking Indian*. These passages turn the narrative into multiple biographies. There are, for example, the extensive life stories of her maternal and paternal grandparents who played an important role in Walters’ life; their portraits are narrated in a fragmented way, mainly through oral tradition and storytelling techniques, as if telling stories about them and calling for responses, which again draws attention to the dialogic character of her text. Some of the examples include describing her paternal grandfather, where at one point Walters uses her own piece of prose-poetry in which she directly addresses the old man and produces the sense of having a conversation with him. The poem begins: “*Grandpa, I saw you die in the Indian hospital at Pawnee, / Twenty years ago, but look who is talking. You know of it all / Too well*” (23, original emphasis). The poem continues in a very intimate mode, recalling memories from Walters’ happy childhood spent with her grandparents. Then, after a few paragraphs, a passage in italics follows in which the grandfather’s voice, in direct speech, recounts a story from the time of the relocation of the Otoes from Nebraska to Indian Territory in 1881 (25–26). So the grandfather’s memory is present in Walters’ narrative, and even though the story is obviously retold by Walters (as is acknowledged in the brackets after the italicized passage ends), Walters decides to include it as if told directly by the grandfather, perhaps as a strategy to keep his voice alive and present.

For Walters, her self is clearly inseparable from the collective identity of the two tribes that encompass her cultural background. This is confirmed by the metaphorical depiction of the way in which her identity is anchored in her Indigenous tribal background. The following passage suggests a sense of relational hierarchy, but this hierarchy is mobile and fluid. She describes the relationships as if they were arranged in a photograph or presented in a short film:

In this picture, I always saw the entire tribe moving in the background as in a motion picture, with other relatives and ancestors in the foreground—poised just so in contrast to the background activity. At the centre stood my grandparents. Sometimes my image was in the picture, standing in the shadow of my grandparents, or sometimes at its border, like the shadow of a photographer stretched out across the ground. (Walters, *Talking Indian* 44)



In this visual image, Walters does not position herself in the center of the imaginary picture but somewhere else, in a space that is unfocused, “at its border,” in the “shadow.” From the perspective of the genre conventions of Western autobiographical writing, where the “I” is supposed to stand at the center of the narrative, this is very unconventional; it again confirms Krupat’s theory of the synecdochic self employed in Indigenous life writing. The location of Walters’ self outside the center is also reflected in her narrative which imitates the relationships outlined in the picture: Walters’ own life is not in the center of the text, even though the text does focus on her autobiography, especially her growing up. These parts are, however, told in fragments rather than in a coherent narrative. Sometimes they are completely overshadowed and seem concealed behind the life stories of Walters’ relatives and ancestors. However, this does not mean that Walters’ “I” is subdued in her text; rather, the borders between her own individual identity and the collective identity of her people are blurred. In this light, it is not a coincidence that in the chapter titled “World View” which tells the story of Walters’ childhood, including her separation from her grandparents and her residential school experience, Walters reflects on her position and role in her grandparents’ tribe, asking fundamental questions: “Where did tribal genealogy end and *I* begin? ... when did I begin to separate myself from this picture and the people in it, who up until then made up my reality and universe? In short, apart from the tribal world, where did my individuality and space begin?” (*Talking Indian* 44, original emphasis). Walters is very self-reflective about the process of her identity formation and carefully records her thoughts and memories in an introspective way, which differentiates her text from those by Pilkington and Sterling. Even though this aspect may seem to shift *Talking Indian* more towards Western autobiographical writing, its emphasis on relationality and polyphonic character firmly place it within the conventions of Indigenous life writing.

The analysis of Doris Pilkington’s *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Shirley Sterling’s *My Name Is Seepetza*, and Anna Lee Walters’ *Talking Indian* from the perspective of constructing the textual self has disclosed the ways in which Indigenous women writers demonstrate the collective and dialogic nature of their shared experiences. This strategy links Indigenous women writers such as Pilkington, Sterling, and Walters to other minority writers who “manoeuvre between autobiographical and political-cultural texts,” between their individual “I” and various forms of “we” in the presentation of their life stories (Goldman 290). Indeed, recording Indigenous culture and history and writing the self simultaneously seems to offer Indigenous women writers another opportunity to cross boundaries of various narrative strategies. The analysis also shows why the established term of autobiography is inadequate for exploring Indigenous life writing: the narratives under inspection here are polyphonic texts produced most often in collaboration with family and/or community members, revealing how the individual is placed



in the kinship network. In addition, there is the collaborative authorship, either explicit, as is the case of *Auntie Rita* by Rita and Jackie Huggins, or implicit, such as Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*. This collaborative endeavor behind much of Indigenous women's life writing complicates the notion of individual authorship embedded in the genre of Western autobiography. Finally, as Brewster argues, "the term's [autobiography's] emphasis on writing is in danger of obscuring the oral dimension of some stories, especially those by members of earlier generations, who narrated them to amanuenses, editors and transcribers" (Brewster, *Reading Aboriginal Women's Life Stories* xxiii). Highlighting the dialogic and polyphonic character of Indigenous women's life writing can help us appreciate the aesthetics of the narratives and better understand the differences and deviations from the conventions of Western autobiography. In addition, this narrative device supports the notions of collective identity and shared history that permeates Indigenous women's life writing thematically. In other words, it complements the reading of Indigenous women's life writing as a meta-narrative of a particular life experience. For example, reading Indigenous women's stories in the light of the traumatic experience of the separation from Indigenous families and of their personal struggles and resistances within the assimilationist systems of mission, residential, and boarding schools can be particularly illuminating for our understanding of the ways in which the treatment of Indigenous populations in settler colonies crosses the borders of nation-states and can be viewed as a global phenomenon.

# ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

## **Geschichten des Anderen und des Widerstands: Sachliteratur und autobiografische Literatur der einheimischen Autorinnen in Australien und Nordamerika**

Die vorliegende Studie befasst sich mit repräsentativen Beispielen der persönlichen Sachbücher und *life writing* der indigenen Frauen in Siedlerkolonien, die Ende der 80er und 90er Jahre des zwanzigsten Jahrhundert veröffentlicht wurden. Im ersten Abschnitt werden persönliche Sachbücher von Paula Gunn Allen (1939–2008) aus den USA, Lee Maracle (1950–) aus Kanada und Jackie Huggins (1956–) aus Australien verglichen, um zu zeigen, wie diese Autorinnen Unterschiede in Bezug auf ihre Indigenität und Abstammung auf der einen Seite und ihre Artikulationen des indigenen Feminismus auf der anderen einschreiben. Ich argumentiere, dass alle drei Schriftstellerinnen einen sehr hybridisierten Schreibstil verwenden, der auf traditionelle mündlich-orientierte indigene Kulturen und Techniken des Erzählens zurückgreift, jedoch gleichzeitig westliche Konventionen des Schreibens von Sachliteratur integriert. Die analysierten Texte überschreiten daher Genrekonventionen, indem sie kritische Analysen und akademische Forschung (einschließlich Soziologie, Geschichte und Literaturtheorie) mit sehr persönlichen autobiographischen und biographischen Fragmenten verbinden, in denen sie ihr eigenes Leben und das Leben ihrer Familienangehörigen, der Ältesten, der Gemeindeführer und Vorfahren eintragen. Diese Methode bezeichne ich als theoretisches Schreiben durch eine Lebensgeschichte und persönliche Erfahrung. Darüber hinaus wechselt die nicht-fiktionale Schrift zuweilen mit fiktiven und/oder mythologischen Fragmenten: halbfiktionale Geschichten ihrer Freundinnen, das Wiedererzählen alter indigener Mythen und Legenden und stilisierte Familiengeschichten.

Das erste Kapitel des ersten Abschnitts, „Talking Back, Talkin‘ Up: Voicing Indigenous Feminism“ (Talking Back, Talkin‘ Up: Äußerung des indigenen Feminismus), beschreibt, wie indigene Frauen, neben anderen marginalisierten Frau-



## Zusammenfassung

en, in die feministische Bewegung eingreifen, die bis vor kurzem ausschließlich von den politischen und persönlichen Interessen von weißen Mittelklasse-Frauen dominiert wurde. Ich benutze Theorien von Patricia Hill Collins, Chandra Talpade Mohanty und Aileen Moreton-Robinson, um zu zeigen, wie die sogenannten „Frauen der Farbe“ durch ihre Eingriffe in die Mainstream-Feministinnen-Agenda die universelle Kategorie der „Frau“ dekonstruieren, die die Unterschiede von Rasse, ethnischer Zugehörigkeit, Klasse, Religion, Sexualität usw. ignoriert. Die persönliche Sachliteratur der indigenen Frauen stellt einen sehr unterschiedlichen Standpunkt dar, der von der Geschichte der Kolonialisierung und des kulturellen Völkermordes geprägt ist sowie von sozialen Strukturen und Wissenssystemen, die sich von denen der weißen Siedlerinnen wesentlich unterscheiden. Darüber hinaus haben indigene Frauen auch auf die Komplizenschaft der Siedlerinnen in der Kolonisation und der rassistischen Unterdrückung hingewiesen. Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle und Jackie Huggins sprechen sich deutlich für alternative feministische Diskurse aus: Allens Absicht in *The Sacred Hoop* (1986) ist es, die gynäkokratische Natur einiger indigener Gemeinschaften in Nordamerika vor dem Kontakt mit europäischen Siedlern zu zeigen, die zwangsweise von dem auferlegten westlichen patriarchalischen System gelöscht wurde. Maracles *I Am Woman* (1996) konzentriert sich darauf, jede Form von Sexismus und Gewalt gegenüber Frauen in den indigenen Gemeinschaften zu verurteilen, und fordert eine „Re-Feminisierung“, während sie eine ziemlich radikale feministische marxistische Perspektive anwendet. In *Sister Girl* (1998) basiert Jackie Huggins Kritik am weißen Feminismus in Australien vor allem auf ihrer Analyse der historischen Entwicklung von Rassenspannungen zwischen weißen und Aborigine-Frauen.

Das zweite Kapitel in diesem Abschnitt mit dem Titel „Recreating the Circle: Reconstructing Indigenous Womanhood“ (Das Wiederschaffen des Kreises: Rekonstruktion der indigenen Weiblichkeit) zeigt, wie die drei indigenen Autorinnen die Mechanismen der (Mis-)Repräsentation der weiblichen Indigenität von den herrschenden amerikanischen, kanadischen und australischen Siedlerkulturen aufdecken. Ich argumentiere in diesem Kapitel, dass die Texte von Allen, Maracle und Huggins zur Problematisierung der Dichotomie beitragen, indem sie die Räume zwischen den beiden extremen Stellungen – der starken, unabhängigen und machtvollen Weiblichkeit in der vorkolonialen Periode einerseits und der schwachen, abhängigen und entmündigten Weiblichkeit in der kolonialen Periode andererseits, aufzeigen. Ihre realistischen Porträts der indigenen Weiblichkeit offenbaren sowohl Stärke und Verletzlichkeit angesichts der Rassenunterdrückung in Nordamerika und Australien durch Selbstdarstellung, kritische Untersuchungen, Enthüllung von gängigen Stereotypen, Wiederherstellung von Genealogien von weiblichen Vorfahren und von Verbindungen mit diesen – es geht dabei um reale Frauen aus ihren Leben (Mütter, Großmütter und entferntere weibliche Vorfahren) sowie um mythologische Figuren und weibliche Gottheiten.

Im dritten Kapitel „Threshold Writing: Interweaving Indigenous Theory and Life“ (Schwellenschreiben: Durchweben der indigenen Theorie mit Leben), untersuche ich wie andere Texte von Allen, Maracle, und Huggins – *Off the Reservation* (1998), „Oratory: Coming to Theory“ (1990) und *Auntie Rita* (1994) – auch dazu beitragen, die Unterschiede der Autorinnen einzuschreiben, indem sie einen schwellen- und generationenübergreifenden Stil präsentieren, ein „Schwellenschreiben“, welches das Konzept der Schwellenidentitäten von Minderheitenfrauen von Anna Louise Keating widerspiegelt. Es ist ein Stil, der das traditionelle Wissen der Vorfahren mit der akademischen Forschung und den theoretischen Diskurs mit Identitätspolitik verbindet. Auch wenn Allen, Maracle und Huggins unterschiedliche Konzepte entwickeln, die den bestimmten Zwecken jeder Autorin entsprechen, und zwar *mestizaje écriture* (Allen), *oratory* (Maracle) und *dual voice* (Huggins), wurden sie alle durch diese hybriden Schreibstile zu Vermittlerinnen zwischen Wissenschaft und indigenen Gemeinschaften – sie schreiben Theorie indem sie eine Geschichte schreiben, persönliche Erfahrungen aufschreiben und das Leben aufschreiben.

Der zweite Abschnitt konzentriert sich auf das konventionellere Genre von *life writing*, das im indigenen Schreiben eine lange Geschichte hat. Doris Pilkington Garimara (1937–2014) aus Australien, Shirley Sterling (1948–2005) aus Kanada, und Anna Lee Walters (1946–) aus den USA beschreiben den Widerstand gegen die gewaltsame Entfernung der indigenen Kinder, staatlich sanktionierte Politik der Assimilation in den einheimischen Siedlungen, Missionsschulen, Internatsschulen und dem Trauma, das aus der Erfahrung der Trennung von deren Familien entstand. Pilkingtons *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996), Sterlings *My Name Is Seepeetza* (1992) und Walters *Talking Indian: Reflections on Survival and Writing* (1992) tun dies indem sie über die Auswirkungen dieser Kolonialpolitik schreiben und indem sie ihre Erinnerungen an Zeiten, die sie mit ihren Familien in der Gemeinde verbracht haben, aufschreiben. Allgemein tun sie dies durch das Aufzeichnen alternativer oder Kontrageschichten. Dieser Prozess wird zu einer effektiven, wenn auch zweischneidigen Art, sich mit dem Trauma von der Trennung und der erzwungenen Assimilation auseinanderzusetzen, und gleichzeitig signalisiert dies einen Weg zur Heilung und Versöhnung.

Die drei Kapitel in diesem Abschnitt beschäftigen sich mit den thematischen und formalen Merkmalen der drei Erzählungen. Das vierte Kapitel „Alternative (Hi)stories: Indigenous Resistance and Subjugated Knowledges“ (Alternative Geschichten: Indigene Resistenz und unterworfenen Wissen) erforscht, wie die ausgewählten Texte verschiedene Arten des Wiederschreibens der Geschichte aus einer indigenen Perspektive verwenden, weist auf Techniken der Arbeit mit sowie der Wiederverarbeitung der offiziellen, national akzeptierten Geschichten der Besiedlung von Australien und Nordamerika und der Herausforderung der Politik der Trennung und Assimilation indigener Kinder hin. So zeichnet Pilkington in

## Zusammenfassung

ihrer Geschichte in Form eines Tagebuches aus den Zeiten in der sie zur sogenannten *residential school* (Internatsschule) ging, auf, was ich die Kontrageschichte des Stammhauses und der Erzählung der „Stolen Generation“ (Gestohlene Generation) nenne. Sterling juxtapositioniert die glücklichen Erinnerungen ihrer nativen Familie mit dem schlechten Regime der Schule, welches ich *alterNative (hi)story* nenne. Schließlich schreibt Walters eine *tribal (hi)story* über ihre beiden Ahnenkulturen als eine Art, die amerikanische Mainstream-Historiographie zu hinterfragen.

Das fünfte Kapitel, mit dem Titel „Bearing Witness: Trauma, Testimony, Scriptotherapy“ (Zeugnis erstatten: Trauma, Zeugenaussage, Skriptotherapie), bezieht die ausgewählten Erzählungen auf die zeitgenössische Betonung der Menschenrechtsverletzungen und auf die Art und Weise, wie diese Themen in literarische Texten wie Lebensgeschichten eingeschrieben sind. In den Texten werden Konzepte wie kollektives Trauma, Gedächtnis, Erinnerung, Vergessen und Heilung benutzt, die bei der Erforschung der Zeugnisse marginalisierter Stimmen grundlegend geworden sind, um die Zeugnisse von Pilkingtons, Sterlings und Walters Texten genauer zu untersuchen. Schließlich zeige ich, wie das traumatische Erlebnis der Trennung und Assimilation in den Erzählungen der gestohlenen Generation und der Internatsschulen durch Schreiben geheilt werden kann, mithilfe *Skriptotherapie*, wie ich diesen Prozess nenne.

Das letzte, sechste Kapitel mit dem Titel „Collective Subjects, Dialogic Selves“ (Kollektive Subjekte, dialogisches Selbst) konzentriert sich auf die kollektive Subjektivitäten, die in den Texten vorhanden sind, und die Relevanz der oft diskutierten Dichotomie zwischen konventionellen westlichen Auto/Biographien und indigenen Lebensgeschichten, von denen oft angenommen wird, dass sie eher das kollektive und relationale als das individuell zentrierte Selbst betonen. Ich verwende die Theorien von Arnold Krupat, vor allem sein Konzept von *synecdochic self*, um zu argumentieren, dass die drei Erzählungen von indigenen Schriftstellerinnen dialogische Modelle des Selbst verwenden, welches kollektiv ist und welches auf mündlich-orientierten Stammeskulturen basiert. Das Ergebnis ist eine Polyphonie von Stimmen, die nicht nur bei den wechselnden Erzählerinnen und deren Vorfahren, Verwandten, Freunden zu sehen ist, sondern auch in der oft kollaborativer Natur der Autorenschaft durch eine mehr oder weniger engen Zusammenarbeit mit Familienmitgliedern und/oder mit Gemeindeältesten. Der dialogische Charakter manifestiert sich in der Art und Weise, wie die Erzählungen zwischen autobiographischen und politisch-kulturellen Texten manövrieren, sowie auch zwischen ihren individuellen „Ichs“ und verschiedenen Formen von „Wir“ in der Darstellung ihrer Lebensgeschichten. Schließlich zeigt die Zeugnisnatur von Pilkingtons, Sterlings und Walters Texten eine andere Form des Dialogismus – die der eingebetteten Beziehung zwischen einem Erzähler und einem Zuhörer-Leser.

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and Life Writing in Australia and North America

Martina Horáková

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