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Talking back, talkin' up: voicing indigenous feminism

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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”² 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

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).³ 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” women⁴ 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

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).⁵ "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).⁶ 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,⁷ 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.⁸

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),⁹ 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).¹⁰ 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,

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 women¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³ 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

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 19th and early 20th 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).¹⁴ 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-

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.¹⁵ 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.

(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.