

Horáková, Martina

Recreating the circle: reconstructing indigenous womanhood

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CHAPTER 2

RECREATING THE CIRCLE: RECONSTRUCTING INDIGENOUS WOMANHOOD

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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

Images of Indigenous Womanhood

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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



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

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

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



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

While Allen's main strategy is to re-connect with tribal femininity and the power of gynocracy, Lee Maracle in *I Am Woman* calls for strengthening the status of urban Métis women in contemporary "CanAmerica." Historically, the Métis¹⁷ have been excluded from both mainstream Canadian and Native societies and, having to come to terms with an ambivalence about their identity, perceived themselves

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

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



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

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



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

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

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



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

Writing Back to Foremothers

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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



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

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

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



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

