



Inscribing Difference and Resistance

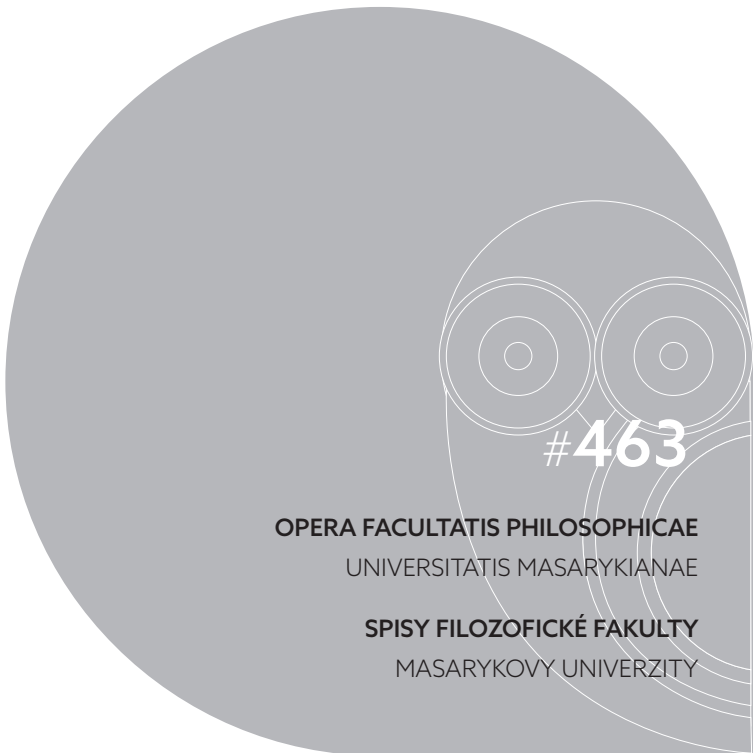
Indigenous Women's Personal Non-fiction
and Life Writing in Australia and North America

Martina Horáková



FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA
MASARYKOVA UNIVERZITA

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Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	9
INTRODUCTION	
Narrating Precarious Lives	11
SECTION I <i>Inscribing Difference: Indigenous Feminism in Personal</i>	
Non-fiction by Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle, and Jackie Huggins	25
CHAPTER 1	
TALKING BACK, TALKIN’ UP: VOICING INDIGENOUS FEMINISM	31
Paula Gunn Allen Gynocracies	41
Lee Maracle Re-feminization	47
Jackie Huggins Sisterhoods	54
CHAPTER 2	
RECREATING THE CIRCLE: RECONSTRUCTING	
INDIGENOUS WOMANHOOD	61
Images of Indigenous Womanhood	65
Writing Back to Foremothers	74
CHAPTER 3	
THRESHOLD WRITING: INTERWEAVING INDIGENOUS THEORY	
AND LIFE	83
Paula Gunn Allen Mestizaje <i>Écriture Féminine</i>	91
Lee Maracle Oratory	98
Jackie Huggins Dual Voice	104
SECTION II <i>Inscribing Resistance: Separation, Assimilation and Trauma in Life Writing</i>	
by Doris Pilkington, Shirley Sterling, and Anna Lee Walters	115
CHAPTER 4	
ALTERNATIVE (HI)STORIES, INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE	
AND SUBJUGATED KNOWLEDGES	121
Doris Pilkington Counter-(hi)story	131
Shirley Sterling AlterNative (Hi)story	139
Anna Lee Walters Tribal (Hi)stories	147
CHAPTER 5	
BEARING WITNESS: TRAUMA, TESTIMONY, SCRIPTOTHERAPY	155
History as Trauma	158
Trauma as a Story	166

CHAPTER 6
COLLECTIVE SUBJECTS, DIALOGIC SELVES 175
 Polyvocality and Dialogism in Pilkington, Sterling, and Walters 183
ZUSAMMENFASSUNG 191
BIBLIOGRAPHY 195

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INTRODUCTION

Narrating Precarious Lives

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

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

* * *

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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