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“I will not cease to be”: Voicing the Alternative in Beth Brant’s “A Long Story”¹

Abstract

In “A Long Story”, Beth Brant, a contemporary Canadian Mohawk writer, juxtaposes the legal kidnapping of Indian children by government officials at the end of the nineteenth century with the experience of a modern lesbian mother who loses her daughter in a custody battle. Unlike the pain-numbed, submissive Indian mothers in the past, Brant’s modern legally unfit mothers voice an alternative to a kind of legality that serves as a cover for a hideous crime – the Two-Spirit Identity, which reinforces the dualism of the author’s lesbian sexual preference as well as her Indigenous origins. Though the authors of the article question the validity of Brant’s alternative to the dominant patriarchal order, the paper represents a contribution to the never-ending quest for the definition of Canadian female identity along the lines of feminist theory and practice (with a special reference to the work of Adrienne Rich) and Wilson’s Two-Spirit Identity Theory.

Résumé

Dans « Une longue histoire » Beth Brant, l’auteure contemporaine Mohawk du Canada, compare l’enlèvement légal des enfants indiens fait par les responsables gouvernementaux à la fin du XIX siècle et l’expérience d’une mère lesbienne contemporaine qui perd la tutelle de sa fille au Tribunal. À la différence de la mère indienne soumise d’autrefois, la mère de Brant, « légalement indigne », exprime l’alternative à la légalité couvrant les crimes affreux – l’identité double fondée sur le maintien des origines indiennes et de l’orientation lesbienne contemporaine. Tout en mettant en question l’alternative offerte par Brant au système patriarcal dominant, le présent ouvrage représente encore une définition de l’identité féminine canadienne, fondée comme les autres sur la théorie et la pratique du féminisme (renvoyant surtout au travail d’ Adrienne Rich) et la théorie de l’identité double de Wilson.

In her influential study, *A Human Eye: Essays on Art in Society, 1997-2008*, Adrienne Rich distinguishes between “protest poetry” and “dissident poetry”:

Protest poetry is ‘conceptually shallow’, ‘reactive’, predictable in its means, too often a hand-wringing from the sidelines. Dissident poetry, however, does not respect boundaries between private and

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public, self and other. In breaking boundaries, it breaks silences, speaking for, or at best, with the silenced; opening poetry up, putting it into the middle of life...It is a poetry that talks back, that would act as part of the world, not simply as a mirror of it. (Rich 2009, 130)

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Hence, in Rich's opinion, the act of writing corresponds to a form of political activism, and the proper artist, a dissident, represents the voice of the silenced and deprived. That is the reason why she presents her sexual preference – lesbianism – both as a personal and political imperative. Rich's refusal to respect boundaries between private and public, self and other, has also included a refusal of "compulsory heterosexuality". Her rebellion against the traditional female roles made her one of the leading feminist artists in the USA. In her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", Rich openly states:

In none of the books which concern themselves with mothering, sex roles, relationships, societal prescriptions for women is compulsory heterosexuality ever examined as an institution powerfully affecting all these, or the idea of 'preference' or 'innate' orientation even indirectly questioned. (Rich 1998, 26)

Rich strongly believes that it is not enough for feminist thought that lesbian works exist. Feminists should fight against any theory or culture that treats lesbian existence as marginal or less "natural".

Whereas Adrienne Rich represents one of the main feminist voices in the USA, Beth Brant, a contemporary Mohawk lesbian writer, can be perceived as her Canadian feminist counterpart. Apart from sharing similar life stories (both women started writing at the age of forty, after being married and realizing themselves as mothers, thus initially accepting the traditionally prescribed social female roles and afterwards discarding them and asserting their lesbian identity), Rich and Brant also share the notion of being actively engaged in the process of acknowledging the existence and equality of different social groups.

A typical trait of Brant's work is the link between her Mohawk nationality and her sexuality, which actually boils down to current issues of racism and sexism. Brant exposes the negative impact of the binary oppositions between vulnerable, White women, supportive of the males, and dirty, immoral squaws, who instigate moral panic on the part of the refined Europeans and should be therefore kept on a reservation. This stereotype regarding First Nations women is presented in detail in Janice Forsyth's study "After the Fur Trade: First Nations Women in Canadian History 1850-1950", as well as its other aspect, the stereotype of the dignified and noble "Indian Princess", who ultimately corresponds to Rousseau's idea of the sophisticated "noble savage" (see Cranston, *passim*).

In Brant's narratives, the stereotypes of the "Indian Princess" and the "Easy Squaw" are shown to be exalting and degrading respectively. Although these images are imaginary constructs, they have a powerful effect on the lives of First Nations women. First Nations women writers, Beth Brant among them, battle these stereotypes in different ways.

In *Writing as Witness*, Brant speaks of homophobia as a sickness that was introduced by colonialism, just as smallpox and alcohol were introduced by the Europeans to weaken and destroy the first peoples of the land. The major themes of her writing are recovery and trans-



formation – recovery based on questioning and undermining the homophobic internalized hatred towards the Other and the healing journey of the transformative power of sexuality. Although she has not found the word for “lesbian” in Mohawk, in her research she has found the terms in the languages of many other First Nations. For instance: Nadle, shopan, a-gokwa, ayekewe, bade, winkte, geenumu gesallagee, ma ai, pote are the words in Navajo, Aleut, Chippewa, Cree, Crow, Lakota, Micmac and Shoshone respectively, all of which are nowadays in use (Brant 1994, 48).

Brant perceives herself as a Two-Spirit individual. The expression Two-Spirit “reflects a traditional Indigenous peoples’ worldview that asserts that all aspects of identity (including sexuality, race, gender, and spirituality) are interconnected and that a person’s experience of sexuality is inseparable from experiences of culture and community” (Wilson 2009). Two-Spirit Identity Theory refers to a developmental model that explores identity development from the Indigenous American perspective and is grounded in the understanding that various aspects of identity are interrelated (Wilson 1996). In Brant’s case, these aspects are based on the dualism of her being a Mohawk lesbian writer in the predominantly white patriarchal Canadian society.

Like many of her Two-Spirit counterparts, Brant made an effort to escape the racism of her small community as well as to explore her sexual identity; however, the coming out process was difficult as she was unable to find a positive support system among the “predominantly White gay scene” (Wilson 1996, 339). Her struggle is typical of the coming out experiences of Indigenous people who seek recognition from mainstream communities only to find that they are the most empowered within their Indigenous communities (Wilson, 1996). According to Wilson, this means that “the positive bicultural adaptation that sexual and racial identity models prize is not appropriate for Two-Spirit people” (Wilson 1996, 340).

However, this is not a reason to give up on someone’s genuine self. The gratification of Two-Spirit individuals’ choices can be found in their guiding principles relating to certain ethical issues. Specifically, these principles involve non-interference with others; the hiding of anger; the promotion of gratitude; withdrawing to keep peace; and the principle of timing things right. These principles are naturally understood by Two-Spirit individuals if they grow up in proximity to their culture. Balancing for Two-Spirit people involves understanding dualism and their own ethics (Wilson 1996).

As already stated, having begun to write at the age of forty in 1981, Beth Brant claims that, after coming to terms with her Two-Spirit identity, she had to fumble and write in aloneness, because there was no model for being an active Indian lesbian writer (Brant 1994, 945). However, Brant continues that even though literature at the time lacked inclusion, she “knew there was a community out there and that we were looking for each other. I think the courage of naming ourselves as lesbian is a significant act of love and community” (Brant 1994, 945). Today, Brant openly questions the lack of Native Lesbian literature: “If you ask why you have not read or heard of these women, ask it to yourself. The answer lies in the twin realms of racism and homophobia. Some of us cannot get published. And this has nothing to do with the excellence of our work. It has to do with who will be courageous enough to see us in all our facets of being. And of course, this has to do with power and who has it and who exercises it over us. We are rarely reviewed in so-called feminist newspapers or journals. So-called progressive papers do not know our names” (Brant 1994, 946).

The silent treatment that Brant has been exposed to since she began writing provokes an outburst of determination – not to be silenced again and to challenge the dominant power structures through the creative act of writing. For Brant, as for Adrienne Rich, writing is survival, for her writing is always dissident and politically engaged. Although her writing uses the language of the dominant culture, Brant explains that she employs this language to suit her purpose of rebellion against the dominant order: “[W]hen I use the enemy’s language to hold onto my strength as a Mohawk lesbian writer, I use it as my own instrument of power in this long, long battle against racism” (Brant 1994, 946). She refers to the writing of Native women as “grief filled art”, since the common themes within this corpus are the loss of land, language, religion, people and children (Brant 1994, 946). Brant explains that though these subjects are predominant, “the work is not bitter or mournful. It is testimony. I suggest that Native lesbian writing brings an added dimension to grief and celebration” (Brant 1994, 946).

The theme of loss is dominant in Brant’s “grief-filled” short story “A Long Story.” Brant juxtaposes a parallel grief between two different families in separate time frames. Beginning with 1890, the reader sees the pain of a Native, heterosexual woman whose children have been taken away from their community to an Indian residential school. Founded in the 19th century, the residential school systems in both Canada and the United States aimed to force the assimilation of Indigenous people to the dominant White society by separating children from their families and thus literally killing the Indian in the child, which is the way governments perceived this “noble” mission. The mission was indeed a noble one, since the state provided facilities and education which assumed the inherent superiority of Euro-American ways and the need for Indians to become English speakers, Christians and farmers. Brant writes, “It has been two days since they came and took the children away... It is good for them, the agent said. It will make them civilized, the agent said. I do not know civilized” (Brant 1999, 318).

The “civilized” attempt to force assimilation involved punishing children for speaking their own languages or practicing their own faiths, which eventually led to allegations of cultural genocide and ethnocide in the 20th century. As a result of the exposure of mistreatment details towards the Indian children, the residential schools began to be closed during the 1960s, and afterwards official government apologies followed.

However, it is not with the apologies that Brant opens her story. At the beginning of her narrative, Brant provides a quotation from *The Northern Observer*, Massena, New York 1892, in which the Indian children taken away from their families are described as a bright looking lot. This quotation is immediately followed by another one coming from a book entitled *Legal Kidnapping*, Beacon Press, Boston, in 1977, where the pain of a mother losing her children is described. The parallel between these two texts serves Brant’s purpose to expose the horrible truth – although the residential schools are banned, the pattern of separating mothers from their children is not only being repeated, but seems to be everlasting. Unfortunately, it seems that the institutions change, but the practice of “legal kidnapping” remains.

The readers are then introduced to a story about a lesbian family’s child, Patricia, taken from them in 1978; Brant writes, “He took her hand and pulled her to the car. The look in his eyes of triumph. It was a contest to him, Patricia the prize. He will teach her to hate us. He will!” (Brant 1999, 319). The juxtaposition of these historically separated events – the stealing



of First Nations children by the state in the past and the present-day stealing of children of First Nation lesbian mothers by the state – demonstrates the oppression and cruelty towards Indigenous families by the dominant culture through time.

The binary oppositions that Brant deals with here are the concepts of savage and civilized, as well as the concepts of law and justice, which enables her to express her inner disbelief, identical to the one that Joseph Conrad described in his novel *Heart of Darkness*, in the grand venture of "civilizing" "the brutes". Brant exposes the hypocrisy of this venture through the issue of "unfit mothers". During the 19th century, the mere fact of being an Indian was enough to characterize a mother as being unfit to raise her children in a civilized manner. Although utterly "uncivilized" according to European conventions, the Indian mother is overwhelmed with pain, after being violently separated from her children. In her story, Brant exposes the barbarity of those who set up the standards of being civilized:

I hold myself tight in fear of flying apart in the air. The others try to feed me. Can they feed a dead woman? I have stopped talking. When my mouth opens, only air escapes. I have used up my sound screaming their names – She Sees Deer! He Catches The Leaves! My eyes stare at the room ... but I cannot see them...My brother is changed. He says that *I* have changed and bring shame to our clan. He says I should accept the fate. But I do not believe in the fate of child-stealing. There is evil here. There is much wrong in our village. My brother says I am a crazy woman because I howl at the sky every evening. He is a fool. I am calling the children. He says the people are becoming afraid of me because I talk to the air and laugh like the raven overhead. But I am talking to the children. They need to hear the sound of me. I laugh to cheer them. They cry for us. (Brant 1999, 320)

Unable to cope with her life after being violently separated from her children, this Indian mother engages in a sort of personal sacrifice: she removes her clothes, sets them on fire and starts mutilating herself – she brings the sharp blade to her arms, legs and breasts. Although the blood "trickles like small red rivers" (Brant 1999, 322) down her body, she is numbed with the mental anguish for the loss of her children and does not respond to physical pain. The final act of her sacrifice – throwing the tangled braids of her hair into the flames and thus losing her Indian identity – shows the ultimate victory of the white man and his laws, as well as the inability of her tribe to offer any meaningful resistance to it. Hence, in a dream of the crazy woman, as everyone now perceives her, the readers are given a glimpse into the Indian side of taming the wilderness and civilizing the brutes of Canada:

I fear the dreams. It is too terrible, the things that happen here. In my dream there is wind and blood moving as a stream. Red, dark blood in my dream. Rushing for our village. The blood moves faster. There are screams of wounded people. Animals are dead, thrown in the blood stream. There is nothing left. Only the air echoing nothing. Only the earth soaking up blood, spreading it in the four directions, becoming a thing there is no name for. I stand in the field watching the fire. The People watching me. We are waiting, but the answer is not clear yet. A crazy woman. That is what they call me. (Brant 1999, 323)

The ideas of political power and colonial expansion are of utmost importance for the understanding of the relationship between the First Nations and the white European settlers in Canada. A key element of this relationship is the connection between race and culture. The cultural labels are never neutral, but carry racially inscribed connotations of inferiority, completely opposed to the construction of Western society, which presents itself as progressive and democratic. Edward Said, in his study *Orientalism* (1994), claims that Orientalism presents a Western style of dominating, restructuring and having authority and power over the Orient or Other (Said, 3). As a result of this unfair power balance, the Orient is not a free subject of thought or action. In effect, the unequal relationship between the Occident (the West) and the Orient (the Other), causes the white-European culture to gain in strength and identity by setting itself up against the Oriental culture (Said, 3). The Oriental is seen as being irrational, depraved, childlike and "different"; hence, the need for Machiavellian methods in civilizing the Oriental is perceived as necessary and justified.

On the other hand, in the 20th century, a mother is unfit for her role due to her sexual preference: if she is a lesbian, like Mary in Brant's story, she will be literally punished for her preference with the loss of her child. Her dream, just like the dream of her fellow sufferer from the 19th century, exposes the unjust treatment of the dominant patriarchal order towards the Other:

I am wakened by the dream. In the dream my daughter is dead. Her father is returning her body to me in pieces. He keeps her heart. I thought I screamed...*Patricia!* I sit up in bed, swallowing the air as if for nourishment. The dream remains in the air. I rise to go to her room... I open her door. She is gone. The room empty, lonely. They say it was in her best interests. How can that be? She is only six, a baby who needs her mothers. She loves us. This has not happened. I will not believe this. Oh, god, I think I have died... How is it possible to feel such pain and live? (Brant 1999, 319)

However, unlike the deprived Indian mother from the 19th century who instinctively realized that nothing could be done to change this cruel practice and consequently ended her struggle in a sort of personal sacrifice, the contemporary Indian lesbian mother has a different alternative. In Brant's opinion, this alternative is liberating and represents a way of coping with life in the dominant patriarchal society. Namely, Brant's personal conviction is that the Freudian pre-Oedipal bond with the mother, the feeling of complete unity and oneness, can be remembered and recreated in an adult, lesbian love relationship. Through a description of the lesbian sexual act, Brant exposes her dissident life style, as well as her place of power, which is totally contrasted to "superior" male power:

She comes to me full in flesh. My hands are taken with the curves and soft roundness of her. She covers me with the beating of her heart. The rhythm steadies me. Heat is centring me. I am grounded by the peace between us. I smile at her face above me, round like a moon, her long hair loose and touching my breasts. I take her breast in my hand, bring it to my mouth, suck her as a woman – in desire, in faith. Our bodies join. Our hair braids together on the pillow. Brown, black, silver, catching the last light of the sun. We kiss, touch, move to our place of power. Her mouth, moving over my body, stopping at curves and swells of skin, kissing, removing pain. Closer, close, together, woven,



my legs are heat, the centre of my soul is speaking to her, I am sliding into her, her mouth is medicine, her heart is the earth, we are dancing with flying arms, I shout, I sing, I weep salty liquid, sweet and warm it coats her throat. This is my life. I love you Ellen, I love you Mary, I love, we love. (Brant 1999, 322)

Unlike her pain-numbed Indian ancestor, Mary's voice manages to find the way out. She begins to scream and points her "brown" fists at "all the judges in their flapping robes and the fathers who look for revenge" (Brant 1999, 323). Her centre of power is concentrated in a single word: "The word *lesbian*. Lesbian. The word that makes them panic, makes them afraid, makes them destroy children. The word that dares them. Lesbian. *I am one*. Even for Patricia, even for her, *I will not cease to be...* I close the door" (Brant 1999, 324). This is Mary's final act of coming to terms with herself and the society – she will not discard one aspect of herself in order to be socially recognized as a fit parent. It is enough that she intuitively feels and sees herself as a fit mother, she does not look for the society's approval of her role as mother. Simultaneously, this act shows Brant's resistance to the society's uniform models of living by reinforcing the concept of lesbian uniqueness and embracing her Two-Spirit identity.

This idea brings us back to Rich's feminist writing. As already stated, Rich strongly believes that feminists should fight against any theory or culture that treats lesbian existence as marginal or less "natural". Therefore, Rich defines the term "lesbian existence" as a mode of life different from genital lesbianism, which coincides with Brant's recognition of a broad concept of Two-Spirit identity:

Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women. But it is more than these, although we may first begin to perceive it as a form of nay-saying to patriarchy, an act of resistance. It has, of course, included isolation, self-hatred, breakdown, alcoholism, suicide and intra-woman violence; we romanticize at our peril what it means to love and act against the grain, and under heavy penalties; and lesbian existence has been lived ... without access to any knowledge of a tradition, a continuity, a social underpinning. (Rich 1998, 26)

Adrienne Rich defines the term "lesbian continuum" in order to make a difference between the popular definition of lesbianism and what it really is:

If we consider that all women – from the infant suckling her mother's breast, to the grown woman experiencing orgasmic sensations while suckling her own child, perhaps recalling her mother's milk-smell in her own ...to the woman dying at ninety, touched and handled by women – exist on a lesbian continuum, we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not. (Rich 1998, 27)

Therefore, Rich suggests a reconstruction of the concept "lesbian" in terms of a cross-cultural lesbian continuum which can capture women's ongoing resistance to the patriarchal domination. From Brant's point of view, Rich's lesbian continuum as a form of resistance to the pa-

triarchal society can be enriched with another dimension – reinforcing Native cultural values. This continuum for Native Two-Spirit individuals arises from an acceptance of their Native cultural values and the rejection of violently imposed Western conventions regarding race and sexual identity as the Two-Spirit person's identity is maintained by their sexual orientation and their commitment to their culture of ethnicity (Wilson, 1996).

However, although both Brant and Rich see lesbianism as a form of nay-saying to patriarchy and an act of resistance, the regrouping of women without men will not solve the problem of sexual difference, but rather perpetuate it; the burning issue is not sexual difference, but gender inequality. It seems that this point of view threatens to introduce a gender polarity that is hard to distinguish from the male chauvinist version. Perhaps it was Brant's and Rich's reaction to modern man's unwillingness to acknowledge the denied feminine in himself or, as Cixous would say, to admit that there is an Other and to abandon rational control and power and let the Other come through him (Cixous, 320). Beth Brant and Adrienne Rich have had the courage to undertake the quest of self-transformation and that gives us hope that modern men will experience the same ordeal and meet them half way. Only then will the quest for the unified self be completely fulfilled. Although this is not necessarily a sign of the end of patriarchy, yet it is an indication of feminism's pervasive and sustained impact.

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