



Inscribing **Difference**





## SECTION I

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

