

Horáková, Martina

Collective subjects, dialogic selves

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CHAPTER 6

COLLECTIVE SUBJECTS, DIALOGIC SELVES

... self-construction depends upon creating new spaces between languages, cultures, and places that are impossible to regain or achieve, and the present accommodation, which transforms the place of transplantation.

Susanna Egan, *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography* (27)

The genre of life writing has been critically shaped by the theory of autobiography, which in the Western discourse traditionally revolves around the issue of the construction and centrality of the self. Since the 1970s when Philippe Lejeune formulated his definition of autobiography as a “retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence when he puts the principal accent upon his life, especially upon the story of his own personality” (qtd. in Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 1), a number of book-length publications have intervened in the definition and shifted it in various directions. Some ground-breaking texts on the subject include Paul John Eakin’s *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (1985); Domna Stanton’s *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century* (1987); James Olney’s *Studies in Autobiography* (1988); Leigh Gilmore’s *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-representation* (1994); Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters’ *Autobiography & Postmodernism* (1994); and Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (1998) and *Reading Autobiography* (2001). Even though Lejeune’s definition has been modified, adjusted, and even challenged many times, particularly by poststructuralist and feminist scholars, it nevertheless illustrates the foundations of the familiar model of recording and representing one’s life in Western autobiography. This model works within an established genre that emerged in the Enlightenment and celebrates the “autonomous individual and the universalizing life story” (Smith and Watson, *Reading*



Autobiography 3). It has come to denote “a first-person narrative that purports to describe the narrator’s life or episodes in that life, customarily with some chronological reflections about individual growth and development” (Reid xvii). In spite of various interpretations and modifications, this understanding of autobiographical narratives remains standard in Euro-American scholarship.

Indigenous life writing, however, is often perceived as presenting a different construction of the self—an alternative to the centrality of the individual subject in Western autobiography (Krupat, *Ethnocriticism* 201). This is not to say that Indigenous life writing lacks subjectivity but rather that it privileges the collective subject and multiple voices over a single unified voice, even if these multiple voices are sometimes only implied. The idea of a collective subject is echoed in the work of Arnold Krupat, a scholar of Native American literature, particularly Native American autobiography. In the chapter titled “Monologue and Dialogue in Native American Autobiography” in his *The Voice in the Margin* (1989), Krupat explores the development of what he calls “dialogic models of the self” in both early and modern Native American autobiographies²⁸ which are either individually written or produced collaboratively with a white editor. He argues that “[i]n Native American autobiography the self is most typically not constituted by the achievement of a distinctive, special voice that separates it from others, but, rather, by the achievement of a particular placement in relation to the many voices without which it could not exist” (Krupat, *The Voice in the Margin* 133). This premise, contrasting Native American life writing and Western autobiography, is generally accepted among scholars of Native American life writing. This is confirmed by Kathleen M. Sands who, exploring Native American women’s collaborative life writing, makes the following comment: “Dialogue emphasizes kinship and relationality in terms of placement within the community social structure. This, of course, is directly antithetical to the privileging of individuality, of uniqueness, at the core of Euro-American autobiography” (144). In turn, Hertha D. Wong is committed to the notion of what she calls the “communal” self in Native American societies, arguing that Native people generally construct their identity primarily in relation to their families, clans, and tribes, and only secondarily as individuals (Wong, *Sending My Heart Back* 13). Close readings of both pre-contact and contemporary Native American life writing lead Wong to claim that “[i]nstead of emphasis on an individual self who *stands apart* from the community, the focus is on a communal self who *participates within* the tribe” (14, original emphasis). Even though such statements may invite a potential backlash in the sense of creating an artificial binary between the notions of Indigenous/collective/dialogic on the one hand and Western/individual/monologic on the other, it will be shown that the life writing

28 Krupat consistently uses the term “Native American autobiography,” but many of the narratives he analyzes, particularly the contemporary ones which blur the boundaries between the autobiographical self and other voices, could be described as life writing.



narratives discussed in this study tend to confirm this argument, no matter how distant their authors might be from their traditional tribal environment.

Krupat's notion of the dialogic self²⁹ refers not only to the texts which *literally* present at least two voices (e.g. a non-Indigenous writer/editor and an Indigenous informant, often complemented by a translator), but also to the narratives which encompass two cultural backgrounds of an Indigenous writer—something that Krupat distinguishes as “autobiographies by Indians” as opposed to “Indian autobiographies.” These narratives present a “cultural cross-talk,” such as being Indigenous *and* a writer/academic/activist (Krupat, *The Voice in the Margin* 133). This point draws attention to the issues of biculturalism and cultural hybridity, which play important roles in contemporary Indigenous life writing in general, trying to answer the questions of cultural survival in the modern globalized world. Browdy de Hernandez speaks about the “hybridization of [Indigenous] ancient cultures with the Euroamerican dominant culture” (40). Thus Krupat develops his notion of a textual self which is collective, based on the dialogic nature of the Indigenous tribal existence:

Native American autobiographies, then, are the textual results of specific dialogues (between persons, between cultures, between persons and cultures) which claim to represent an Indian subject who, him- or herself, is the human result of specific dialogical or collective sociocultural practices. They are particularly interesting ... as providing images of a collective self and a collective society. (*The Voice in the Margin* 134)

Although Krupat, somewhat problematically, makes this statement applicable to those subjects who “have been formed in relation to tribal-traditional cultures” (134), potentially excluding urban-based writers who have lost touch with their tribal-oriented communities, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge the role of the community and the collective identity that informs much of the Indigenous worldview. Krupat examines closely some of the early, seemingly “monologic” Native American life writings, demonstrating their writers’ conscious suppression of the dialogic or collective constitution, while arriving at the conclusion that multiple voices and the collective subject simply cannot be erased from the Indigenous text:

What is worth remarking, however, is how extremely difficult it seems to be to write as an Indian ... without some measure of polyphony entering one’s text. For all that the Indian author of an autobiography may wish to privilege a single perspective and a single stylistic practice, it usually turns out that there are, nonetheless, traces of other

29 The same concept, though approached from a slightly different perspective, is also addressed by Rocío G. Davis in her analysis of collaborative life writing, as was shown in the chapter discussing Rita and Jackie Huggins’ *Auntie Rita*.



voices, even, it may be, other voices of the author herself, if not actually in the text then in the margins. (*The Voice in the Margin* 170)

The “polyphony” that Krupat mentions as inherent in Indigenous life writing also informs, to various extents, all of the texts examined in this book: Paula Gunn Allen’s inclusion of tribal myths and the voices of her own family; Lee Maracle’s integration of stories told to her by other Indigenous women; Jackie Huggins’ sharing of narrative space with her mother; Doris Pilkington’s re-writing of her mother’s and aunt’s oral stories; Shirley Sterling’s interweaving of the voices of her family, schoolmates, and staff; and Anna Lee Walters’ mélange of her short stories and non-fiction. In a later study, Krupat reiterates the same argument that “Native American self ... seem[s] to be less attracted to introspection, expansion, or fulfilment than the Western self appears to be” and that it seems “relatively uninterested in such things as the ‘I-am-me’ experience, and a sense of uniqueness or individuality” (*Ethnocriticism* 209). Certainly, such characteristics may seem problematic in the sense that they rely on essentialism and contribute to creating unnecessary binaries (i.e. all Indigenous life writing is dialogic and communal, while the Western autobiography is monologic and individual) and there are many examples of either Indigenous or Anglo-American autobiographical accounts that do not fit these characteristics; on the other hand, Krupat’s observations are useful for our thinking about the distinctive features of Indigenous life writing.

In the chapter titled “Native American Autobiography and the Synecdochic Self,” Krupat further elaborates on his concept of the collective self and develops an original theory of the conception of the self in the genre of autobiography based on the theory of linguistic tropes, specifically metonymy and synecdoche. Krupat argues that if we understand metonymy as a relation of part-to-part and synecdoche as a relation of part-to-whole, then personal accounts with the individual’s strong sense of the self as an entity different and separate from other individuals engage a metonymic sense of self, while life stories in which the individual’s sense of the self is expressed “in relation to collective social units or groupings” construct a synecdochic sense of self (Krupat, *Ethnocriticism* 212). In other words, the synecdochic sense of the self means the personal representation of a collective entity. Because early Indigenous life stories were communicated orally and often performed tribally in public, Krupat maintains that they were experienced through a collective effect (216–17). Krupat then goes on to argue that this process of communicating the personal life story in an oral, dramatic, performative, and public way is more likely to “privilege the synecdochic relation of part-to-whole than the metonymic of part-to-part” (217). The analyses of the Indigenous women’s life writing narratives in this study confirm that the individual lives presented in them become comprehensible principally in relation to



the collective experience of each of the author's tribes or communities, be it in a traditional or urban setting.

Krupat's discussion of the construction of the dialogic self in Native American autobiography does not refer explicitly to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogism. It is important to mention, however, that the idea of extending the theory of dialogism from the genre of the novel (as it was developed by Bakhtin) to life writing has taken hold in the increasing field of modern auto/biography studies. For example, for Susanna Egan, "dialogism is a recurring feature of contemporary autobiographies" and dialogic aspects include

dynamic and reciprocal relations between text and context; their revelation of the difference between self and other; the contestatory nature of many of these relationships; the frequent recognition and destabilizing of power relations; the common move toward decentered heterogeneity; the omnivorous use of genres to destabilize each other; and perhaps most important, the recognition that human beings exist within a hierarchy of languages or ideological discourses. (Egan 23)

One of the few sources that does discuss the potential applicability of Bakhtin's theory to Indigenous life writing stems from the context of Métis literature in Canada. In *Ethnopoetics of the Minority Voice: Introduction to the Politics of Dialogism and Difference in Métis Literature*, Armando Jannetta begins by drawing on Krupat's dialogic models of the self in Native American autobiography, distinguishing three strategies employed by Métis literature to enact the process of decolonization. The first strategy corresponds to the representation of Indigeneity as Europe's monolithic Other, emphasizing radical difference (Jannetta 53). This may, however, result in "misrepresented romanticism, nostalgia and reversed stereotypes," all of which enslave cultural production in a "'heroic' past" (59). The second strategy is that of "rehabilitation," which highlights "contra/dictions, fragmentations and asymmetry," as opposed to the "rigid patterns and univocal truths" of the first approach (59). This strategy comes to constitute a "minor literature" in Deleuze and Guattari's sense, which "situates itself in its dialogic and mediating role at the margins" and applies, in Jannetta's view, a deconstructionist approach to both Western and Indigenous traditions (59). Finally, Jannetta argues that Métis literature, in its "position between Indian and white," adopts a "third strategy of locatedness which resembles Bakhtinian dialogism and relates to the lived experience of the local community" (53). In my understanding, it is Bakhtin's notion of "double-voiced" discourse that can, in this sense, be applied to Indigenous life writing which, as it has been shown in the analysis of the selected narratives, often manoeuvres between Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemology, between resistance to and complying with the dominant discourse (visible, for example, in the use of English as a tool of expression and in the use of the medium of a writ-



ten text intended for publication). In any case, elaboration of the above strategies in Métis writing leads Jannetta to conclude that “Bakhtin’s dialogism is typical of the hybrid third space of Métis writing ... defined by communal interaction, local situation and valorization of difference” (65). These three strategies, i.e. emphasizing radical difference, highlighting contradiction and fragmentation, and localization between two cultures, foreground both the dialogic and the hybrid character of Indigenous life writing.

The issues of collective identity and relationality in Indigenous women’s life writing may be perceived as overlapping with feminist criticism in terms of constructing the female self in autobiographical writing. When Krupat and other scholars of Native American life writing such as Hertha Wong speak of the collective, “synecdochic” self based on a different construction of the self in tribal societies, these ideas also resonate with feminist scholarship, which has demonstrated that women autobiographers construct their textual selves in a different way from male authors, privileging collective subjects and relationality.³⁰ For example, Susan Stanford Friedman pertinently observes in her article “Women’s Autobiographical Selves, Theory and Practice” that there are parallels between women’s life writing and minority literatures in terms of their tendency to subdue what she calls “individualistic models” of constructing the self in Western autobiography:

The fundamental inapplicability of individualistic models of the self to women and minorities is twofold. First, the emphasis on individuality does not take into account the importance of a culturally imposed group identity for women and minorities. Second, the emphasis on separateness ignores the differences in socialization in the construction of male and female gender identity. From both an ideological and psychological perspective, in other words, individualistic paradigms of the self ignore the role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process of women and minorities. (Friedman 35)

Similarly, Egan argues in *Mirror Talk* that it has been mainly feminism and minority discourse that have embraced dialogism in the critical analysis of women’s and ethnic auto/biographies (24). Egan reviews the scholarship on this topic, referring not only to Sidonie Smith, Shirley Neuman, and Helen M. Buss, who in the 1980s repeatedly emphasized the double-voiced nature of feminist life writing

30 A collection of essays edited by Shari Benstock, *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiography*, provides a good overview of the development of the debates about women’s sense of collective identity and relationality. For example, Susan Friedman’s contribution on women’s autobiographical selves uses Nancy Chodorow’s well-known argument suggesting that girls define themselves in relation to others and the world while the masculine self is separate (41). Recently, however, a number of texts have problematized this argument which privileges the relational self in women’s life writing narratives, challenging its essentialist nature (Wong, “First-Person Plural” 168; Stanton, “Autogynography” 11; Hooton 79–102).



(when articulating difference from the dominant discourse while writing within the domain of this discourse), but also to Henry Louis Gates and Francoise Lionnet, who insisted on the double-voiced and polyphonic principles of the trope of the “Talking Book” and the practice of *métissage*, respectively (Egan 24–25). Egan’s own metaphor for describing the same process—“mirror talk”—connotes “double voicing, double vision, or that fluid and encompassing activity both personal and generic” (25) which valorizes plural perspectives and emphasizes interactions between genres as well as between writers and readers of life writing (12).

Therefore, many debates about Indigenous construction of the self in life writing can be compared to feminist analyses of women’s autobiographical selves, the common ground being the focus of both Indigenous and women’s life writing on the communal and relational identity (Wong, *Sending My Heart* 7). Krupat makes a similar argument when he applies his concept of the synecdochic self, together with the notion of orality, to women’s narratives. In his view, recent feminist criticism has solidly established that “orality ... and textuality ... are, indeed, perceived as gender-related in the West, where men tend toward metonymic presentations of self, and women—in this like Indians and tribal peoples generally—tend toward synecdochic presentations of self” (*Ethnocriticism* 217). Indigenous women’s life writing thus provides an ideal space for examining the intersections of the feminist and Indigenous perceptions of the collective self.

It has been established that the identities of women who also identify as members of racial or ethnic minorities must be critically studied as intersections of gender and race/ethnicity (apart from other identity markers, such as class, sexuality, religion, etc.), since these intersections often put them, in the space of settler colonies, in a position of “double jeopardy” and double marginalization (Friedman 47; Longley 371). This process of double othering may strengthen the minority women’s sense of group consciousness and collective identity, which is then reflected in the ways in which they construct their selves in life writing. Indigenous and feminist concepts of relationality are based, however, on a slightly different relation of the self to community: while Indigenous relationality is associated with cultural grounding, particularly with extensive kinship networks and a specific relationship to the land, feminist theorists perceive female relationality as linked mainly to gender and social structures that place women in the midst of the nuclear family and domestic sphere (Wong, “First-Person Plural” 168). But even though the two notions of relationality, Indigenous and feminist, may have a different basis, as Wong observes, in my view it is possible to argue that the self in Indigenous women’s life writing is always, to a certain extent, constructed in relation to the community, simply because there is a common history. Community can of course imply various meanings: extended family, kinship network, tribe or clan, urban activists, or a circle of public intellectuals. Whatever the meaning, the importance of community based on shared history is undeniable for Indigenous



people. Armand Garnet Ruffo confirms this view when he claims that community is a prominent theme in Native American literature in general: “What we notice is a return to the community rather than a going away. ... Community is necessarily linked to identity, the return to community signifying the protagonist’s recognition of himself as a Native person who has survived the colonizing and assimilating forces of the dominant society” (116). Again, Ruffo brings up a significant trope that recurs in Indigenous women’s life writing, that of homecoming, returning to one’s original community and culture, as was mentioned in the previous chapter in relation to the power of life writing narratives to heal authors, protagonists, and Indigenous readers.

Finally, the issue of the collective identity in Indigenous life writing is inevitably linked to the collective trauma, historic memory, and subsequent healing. Trauma narratives inscribe historically determined group consciousness based on the shared experience of a traumatic event: for Indigenous people, these events include colonization, subsequent displacement, and cultural genocide. In their introduction to a collection of essays in *Tracing the Autobiographical*, Jeanne Perreault and Marlene Kadar observe that minority life writing, survivor narratives in particular, inhabit the space between “I,” “we,” and “they:” “When the speaking presence is narrating the story of a community, ... the ‘I’ blurs with the ‘we,’ and the axes of differentiation move less among differences or similarities within a collective and more in the commonality of the ‘we’ in struggle against the ‘them’” (Perreault and Kadar 5). Thus highlighting aspects of trauma narratives and testimonies in Indigenous women’s life writing also underlines the dialogic features of the texts, not in the sense of polyphony, by integrating a number of different voices in the text, but rather in the sense of establishing a dialogue between teller and listener, writer and reader. This relationship is always somehow present, of course, but the role of the listener or reader in trauma narratives and survivor testimonies actually shapes the narrative: these accounts can never be monologic as they require, if not insist on implicating the listener or reader. As such they cannot take place in solitude and they always interpellate the listener or reader. In Laub’s words, “the witnesses are talking *to somebody*; to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time” (“Bearing Witness” 70–71, original emphasis). Thus it follows that the notions of collective subjects and dialogic selves are to a certain extent embedded in the genre of Indigenous women’s life writing, certainly in the narratives analyzed in this section, even though they often negotiate the boundaries between the individual and the collective selves.



Polyvocality and Dialogism in Pilkington, Sterling, and Walters

It is by listening to a plurality of voices from various corners of the planet and across centuries that we will strengthen our ability to resist demeaning power structures without risk of being recuperated by current or trendy professionalism within our academic disciplines.

Françoise Lionnet, Preface to *Autobiographical Voices* (xi)

Doris Pilkington, Shirley Sterling, and Anna Lee Walters are all writers who employ a synthesis of traditional Indigenous and mainstream narrative strategies, in particular by incorporating aspects of orality into their texts. They are also writers who voice their individual perspectives and experiences, at least partly using introspection in their writing (even though not to the same extent that Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle, and Jackie Huggins do), which can be compared to ways of constructing the self in Western autobiographical writing. On the other hand, their narrative individuality is decentered by making the collective and communal experience an integral part of their narratives. In these accounts, there are other voices gleaming through, voices that are more perceptible in some cases and less in others, but always there “in the margins,” to use Krupat’s phrase. These other voices stem from the shared sense of collective identity and communal environment of the writers, whether they come from a more traditional community or an urban area. They are also revealed through collective memory of Indigenous populations across Australia and North America. In specific examples, these voices belong to people who the writers may have interacted or worked with; to friends and family; to community elders and leaders. In these cases, the writers and/or narrators function as mediators, weaving their story from a number of stories from various voices and passing it on. It is perhaps this function that recalls the role traditional storytellers played. The voices that inform the narrative are sometimes even acknowledged in the collective authorship or in various paratexts, such as introductions and prefaces. The Indigenous women writers analyzed in this book acknowledge that the text is not theirs alone; it incorporates other voices and other people’s stories. Thus Lee Maracle admits in *I Am Woman* that she uses stories told to her by her female friends, while Jackie Huggins in *Sister Girl* relies on the experience of the many Aboriginal women who have struggled with institutionalized racism. In *Auntie Rita*, the voices of the mother and daughter are arranged in an explicit dialogue in which the two voices take turns narrating. In *Off the Reservation*, Paula Gunn Allen brings in the stories narrated by her grandparents and other family members. Some of these stories are even told in the first person by the subject of the story, rather than by the autobiographical narrator.

Many of the Indigenous women’s narratives examined here, certainly those of Lee Maracle, Jackie Huggins, and Doris Pilkington, are primarily concerned with



the history of racism in Australia and North America. It is possible to say that recording this history as an alternative to the official history of settler colonies is a central issue in their writing. This is so because their ancestors and family members have a long-term experience with racial discrimination in their respective countries and thus the anti-racist and anti-colonial rhetoric embedded in their writing largely depends on their self-definition as members of an Indigenous community. Again, Krupat's theory of synecdochic self is relevant here, as "the self as such is validated only in its social-collective ... personhood" (Krupat, *Ethnocriticism* 227). In this respect, the notion of the dialogic may also be extended to include the dialogue between the past and the present, as is suggested by Kathleen M. Sands who claims that "contemporary [Indigenous] narrative speaks to and is resonant with oral tradition and historical narrative. Further, it is dialogic; voices of the past, dialogue from both past and present, and self-reflective interpretation all share narrative space" (144).

The dialogic character permeates the narratives explored in both sections on several levels. First, there is an explicit or implicit dialogue between narrative voices, and other independent voices are integrated either in paratextual materials or within the main narrative, where some texts include fictionalized dialogues (Pilkington, Maracle, Allen), first-person accounts (Walters, Allen, Huggins), or implicit voices of other protagonists (Sterling)—this results in the polyphonic form, evoking a community of voices. Second, the dialogue occurs between the past and present, with both historiography and storytelling being inseparable from recording, writing, and publishing Indigenous life stories, as is illustrated in all of the narratives under inspection in this book. Third, all of these narratives are cross-cultural, establishing a dialogue between Indigenous storytellers and non-Indigenous readership. By writing testimonies to various forms of racism and racial violence, by presenting counter-histories to challenge the national foundations of settler colonies, by inscribing alternative forms of knowledge, Indigenous life writing interpellates the settler audience and creates "new ethics of cross-cultural engagement" which is predicated upon the "transformations of subjectivity" (Slater 153). Finally, all of the texts interpret, in one way or another, the dialogic relationship between orality and literacy since Pilkington, Sterling, and Walters have all taken up the difficult task of translating and transforming the oral word to the written text.

Doris Pilkington has written a tale of a heroic quest that symbolizes the struggle and resistance of the Stolen Generations experience in Australia. *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* is formally a third-person biographical account, but Pilkington's voice is present in the text, even though not explicitly in the form of a first-person account. In the introduction, Pilkington talks about the process of writing the book, including the recording and transcribing the oral accounts of her mother and aunt, retracing the journey of escape, going back to the settlement, etc. This



suggests that she, as an Indigenous person and writer, *relives*, both physically and in her imagination, both the experience of her mother and aunts and the collective experience of the Stolen Generations. This effort is obviously made mainly for Pilkington's mother and aunt who wish to have their story put on paper and made public but the narrative is Pilkington's as much as theirs. Her story and her voice are embedded in the text as well, especially in the context of her own later experience with the Moore River Native Settlement to which she was removed as a child and which is the basis of her later autobiography *Under the Wintamarra Tree* (2002). In addition, it is a story of her people and her community, as the narrative implies the voices of all Indigenous people going through the Moore River Native Settlement and thus represents, as a powerful meta-story, one of the many versions of the Stolen Generations narrative. In allowing other voices from the past to be heard, Pilkington provides space for recreating the storytelling tradition. This method permeates especially the first half of the book, where fictional dialogues of Pilkington's ancestors are written in-between the historical facts: the readers are acquainted with the voices of Kundilla and his band from the period of the first contact between the Nyungars and the British navy; the voices of Yelagonga and his group from the beginning of the English settlement in the Swan River colony in the 1830s; the voices of the Mardudjara people coming from the deserts to live closer to the government depots and farms in the 1900s; and finally, the voices of Pilkington's family ancestors from the Jigalong area who were subject to state surveillance and assimilation policies. In addition to the polyphony of Aboriginal voices, Pilkington brings in the voices of the authorities, such as policemen, Protectors, or farmers living in the area who take part in the girls' removal and then persecution after they manage to escape. These voices are present through the archival materials—letters, reports, and newspaper notices—and form an integral part of the narrative.

The dialogic character of *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* does not consist only of the inclusion of the voices of other protagonists of the story. Pilkington's text is also informed by two cultural environments: her Indigenous cultural background and Australian mainstream culture interact in a dialogic style. This is most noticeable in Pilkington's technique of combining archival materials, including notes, quotations, and explanations, which clearly represents the Western way of telling history, and counter-archival knowledge encompassed in the fictionalized oral (hi) stories. This strategy—inscribing multiple voices originating in the past, while synthesizing two histories and cultures into a form of hybrid narrative—creates a polyphony of voices and dialogic character which correspond to Krupat's premises about Native American autobiography.

The narratives of Shirley Sterling and Anna Lee Walters also demonstrate features of the collective identity and polyphony, though these are first-person narratives in which the narrator's "I" guides the reader. In *My Name Is Seepetza*,



the voice of Seepetza is complemented by the voices of the other children in the residential school, as well as by the voices of her family, underlining a strong communal cosmology that shapes Seepetza's personality. This is visible, for example, in the way Seepetza's mother's traumatic experience from the Kalamak residential school is depicted as part of Seepetza's experience: "My mum only went to grade three. She went to Kalamak, too. The nuns strapped her all the time for speaking Indian, because she couldn't speak English. She said just when the welts on her hands and arms healed, she got it again" (Sterling 89). This shows the destructive effect of recurrent violence, both physical and mental, on the Indigenous family's well-being. Similarly, the collective and communal aspect is highlighted when Seepetza records various activities, such as summer camping, in order to collect enough berries, fish or hunt in the mountains, done by family members for the benefit of the entire community of several extended families (Sterling 91). Kuokkanen confirms that Sterling's novel is "highly polyvocal, interweaving voices of her family at home, on the one hand, and the voices of her peers as well as nuns and priests in the school on the other" (700). The "textual self" in *My Name Is Seepetza*, Kuokkanen argues, is "collectively constituted, primarily through her culture but also through her interaction with other people and cultures in school" (700). Even though other characters in the narrative are perceived only through Seepetza's individual perspective and occasional dialogues entered in her fictional diary, the readers are nevertheless aware of the collective self which arises from Seepetza's firm belonging to her Indigenous community. Her ethnicity and cultural background put her in opposition to the school's regime, but also in the same situation as other Indigenous children, so the resulting impression is that Seepetza's story is one of many. Seepetza constructs her subjectivity in a synecdochic, i.e. "part-to-whole" relation to her people, to reiterate Krupat's argument. In addition, Sterling has based her residential school narrative not only on her own experience in the residential school, but also on the experiences of her friends and relatives, interweaving their stories with hers; thus, similarly to Pilkington, she creates a meta-narrative. Even though at first *My Name Is Seepetza* may give the impression of a fairly individual, first-person narration, it nevertheless embodies a polyvocal narrative representing the residential school victims as a group. This is made clear in Sterling's dedication of her book "to all those who went to the residential schools."

The text most responsive to Krupat's concept of the dialogic and collective self is Walters' *Talking Indian*. Walters' origins lie in a tribal culture and her worldview is strongly shaped by the tribal histories of the Otoes, Pawnees, and Navajos. As in Sterling's *My Name Is Seepetza*, Walter's narrative is guided by a first-person account, seemingly privileging the individual self. At the same time, however, the text gives voice to Walters' ancestors, both immediate family and distant relatives and elders, who all push their way into the narrative. Again, these are Krupat's "voices in the margins" and Walters' autobiographical "I" is the textual result of



specific dialogues between the writer and her family, the writer and her tribal history, and the writer and the mainstream culture. When Krupat analyzes what he considers a prime example of a Native American dialogic novel and life writing, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* (1981), he characterizes Silko as an author who "conceives of individual identity only in functional relation to the tribe" (*Ethnocriticism* 230). This argument is applicable to Walters' position as a chronicler of her tribe's culture and history and a tribal person herself. The fact that Walters constructs her own self in the text only in relation to her tribal background is demonstrated in the way she switches between the collective "we" whenever she presents a tribal worldview, and the individualistic "I" whenever she describes her own life in an autobiographical manner. In the first chapter of *Talking Indian*, Walters elaborates on the role that oral tradition plays in Native American tribal societies and in the opening paragraphs she quite seamlessly shifts from the autobiographical "I" to the collective "we:"

My first memories are not so much of things as they are of *words* that gave shape and substance to my being and form to the worlds around me. Born into two tribal cultures which have existed for millennia without written languages, the spoken word held me in the mystical and intimate way it has touched others who come from similar societies whose literature is oral. ... We are also shown that it is through the power of speech, and the larger unified voice of oral tradition, that we exist as we do. (Walters, *Talking Indian* 11, original emphasis)

This quote also shows how Walters puts forward the idea that oral, i.e. non-literate cultures are somehow bound to express themselves in a collective voice—"the larger unified voice of oral tradition." She practically equals orality, tribal cultures, and her own identity, as if her own self was subsumed, or dissolved, in the larger, collective entity of the tribe. With a fair amount of self-reflectivity, Walters further comments on growing up in a multi-voiced, multi-tribal, and multi-cultural environment, crossing the boundaries of individual Indigenous groups, Indigenous and mainstream cultures, and individual voices, allowing her to become part of the collective voice:

There were many individual voices, male and female, old and young, scattered about me, and these voices expressed themselves in two languages, Otoe and English. ... But more often than not, as if by some magnetic pull of oral tradition, the individual tribal voices unconsciously blended together, like braided strands of thread, into *one* voice, story, song, or prayer. (Walters, *Talking Indian* 12, original emphasis)

As a result, Walters transforms this "one voice" into a concept that she calls the "tribal voice," which is responsible for the successful development of her identity



as an Indigenous person and which also becomes a source of power, knowledge, and healing in the times when Walters felt she was drifting away from her tribal background: “The echo of that tribal voice, in Otoe and English, never disappears or fades from my ear, not even in the longest silences of the people, or in my absences from them” (*Talking Indian* 12).

Walters’ multi-genre narrative creates an ideal space for incorporating multiple voices and dialogic expressions. The tribal histories of her ancestors, as well as those of her husband’s family, take up most of the narrative space in *Talking Indian*. These passages turn the narrative into multiple biographies. There are, for example, the extensive life stories of her maternal and paternal grandparents who played an important role in Walters’ life; their portraits are narrated in a fragmented way, mainly through oral tradition and storytelling techniques, as if telling stories about them and calling for responses, which again draws attention to the dialogic character of her text. Some of the examples include describing her paternal grandfather, where at one point Walters uses her own piece of prose-poetry in which she directly addresses the old man and produces the sense of having a conversation with him. The poem begins: “*Grandpa, I saw you die in the Indian hospital at Pawnee, / Twenty years ago, but look who is talking. You know of it all / Too well*” (23, original emphasis). The poem continues in a very intimate mode, recalling memories from Walters’ happy childhood spent with her grandparents. Then, after a few paragraphs, a passage in italics follows in which the grandfather’s voice, in direct speech, recounts a story from the time of the relocation of the Otoes from Nebraska to Indian Territory in 1881 (25–26). So the grandfather’s memory is present in Walters’ narrative, and even though the story is obviously retold by Walters (as is acknowledged in the brackets after the italicized passage ends), Walters decides to include it as if told directly by the grandfather, perhaps as a strategy to keep his voice alive and present.

For Walters, her self is clearly inseparable from the collective identity of the two tribes that encompass her cultural background. This is confirmed by the metaphorical depiction of the way in which her identity is anchored in her Indigenous tribal background. The following passage suggests a sense of relational hierarchy, but this hierarchy is mobile and fluid. She describes the relationships as if they were arranged in a photograph or presented in a short film:

In this picture, I always saw the entire tribe moving in the background as in a motion picture, with other relatives and ancestors in the foreground—poised just so in contrast to the background activity. At the centre stood my grandparents. Sometimes my image was in the picture, standing in the shadow of my grandparents, or sometimes at its border, like the shadow of a photographer stretched out across the ground. (Walters, *Talking Indian* 44)



In this visual image, Walters does not position herself in the center of the imaginary picture but somewhere else, in a space that is unfocused, “at its border,” in the “shadow.” From the perspective of the genre conventions of Western autobiographical writing, where the “I” is supposed to stand at the center of the narrative, this is very unconventional; it again confirms Krupat’s theory of the synecdochic self employed in Indigenous life writing. The location of Walters’ self outside the center is also reflected in her narrative which imitates the relationships outlined in the picture: Walters’ own life is not in the center of the text, even though the text does focus on her autobiography, especially her growing up. These parts are, however, told in fragments rather than in a coherent narrative. Sometimes they are completely overshadowed and seem concealed behind the life stories of Walters’ relatives and ancestors. However, this does not mean that Walters’ “I” is subdued in her text; rather, the borders between her own individual identity and the collective identity of her people are blurred. In this light, it is not a coincidence that in the chapter titled “World View” which tells the story of Walters’ childhood, including her separation from her grandparents and her residential school experience, Walters reflects on her position and role in her grandparents’ tribe, asking fundamental questions: “Where did tribal genealogy end and *I* begin? ... when did I begin to separate myself from this picture and the people in it, who up until then made up my reality and universe? In short, apart from the tribal world, where did my individuality and space begin?” (*Talking Indian* 44, original emphasis). Walters is very self-reflective about the process of her identity formation and carefully records her thoughts and memories in an introspective way, which differentiates her text from those by Pilkington and Sterling. Even though this aspect may seem to shift *Talking Indian* more towards Western autobiographical writing, its emphasis on relationality and polyphonic character firmly place it within the conventions of Indigenous life writing.

The analysis of Doris Pilkington’s *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Shirley Sterling’s *My Name Is Seepetza*, and Anna Lee Walters’ *Talking Indian* from the perspective of constructing the textual self has disclosed the ways in which Indigenous women writers demonstrate the collective and dialogic nature of their shared experiences. This strategy links Indigenous women writers such as Pilkington, Sterling, and Walters to other minority writers who “manoeuvre between autobiographical and political-cultural texts,” between their individual “I” and various forms of “we” in the presentation of their life stories (Goldman 290). Indeed, recording Indigenous culture and history and writing the self simultaneously seems to offer Indigenous women writers another opportunity to cross boundaries of various narrative strategies. The analysis also shows why the established term of autobiography is inadequate for exploring Indigenous life writing: the narratives under inspection here are polyphonic texts produced most often in collaboration with family and/or community members, revealing how the individual is placed



in the kinship network. In addition, there is the collaborative authorship, either explicit, as is the case of *Auntie Rita* by Rita and Jackie Huggins, or implicit, such as Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*. This collaborative endeavor behind much of Indigenous women's life writing complicates the notion of individual authorship embedded in the genre of Western autobiography. Finally, as Brewster argues, "the term's [autobiography's] emphasis on writing is in danger of obscuring the oral dimension of some stories, especially those by members of earlier generations, who narrated them to amanuenses, editors and transcribers" (Brewster, *Reading Aboriginal Women's Life Stories* xxiii). Highlighting the dialogic and polyphonic character of Indigenous women's life writing can help us appreciate the aesthetics of the narratives and better understand the differences and deviations from the conventions of Western autobiography. In addition, this narrative device supports the notions of collective identity and shared history that permeates Indigenous women's life writing thematically. In other words, it complements the reading of Indigenous women's life writing as a meta-narrative of a particular life experience. For example, reading Indigenous women's stories in the light of the traumatic experience of the separation from Indigenous families and of their personal struggles and resistances within the assimilationist systems of mission, residential, and boarding schools can be particularly illuminating for our understanding of the ways in which the treatment of Indigenous populations in settler colonies crosses the borders of nation-states and can be viewed as a global phenomenon.