

**“I BECAME A WOMAN THROUGH MY WORDS”:  
THE INDIGENOUS FEMINIST WRITING OF LEE MARACLE AND BETH BRANT**

by

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the short story collections and auto/biographical, self-reflexive works of Lee Maracle (Stó:lō) and Beth Brant (Mohawk), arguing that the multi-generic nature of both writers' work constitutes it as Indigenous feminist theory. Although Indigenous women's writing continues to be marginalized in (white) academic contexts, their writing is not necessarily undertheorized in their own literary communities—indeed, this thesis understands Indigenous women's writing as inherently theoretical because it analyzes the interdependent systems of racist and sexist oppression brought to bear on Indigenous women. Put differently, Indigenous women writing about their lived experiences constitutes theory. Both Maracle and Brant intervene in form and content as a refusal to be fixed by the heteropatriarchal, colonial gaze. On a formal level, Maracle draws on her conceptualization of “oratory,” a Stó:lō methodology for holistically engaging with written texts, to create hybrid, multi-generic written forms. Brant, on the other hand, writes across genres as a gesture of inclusivity to the multiple, marginalized communities she writes to and for; even more, her multi-generic writing mimics her intersectional Indigenous feminist praxis. On the level of content, both writers demonstrate that a firm division between their writing and their political concerns does not exist: Maracle's writing on violence against Indigenous women, other-than-human beings, and the earth coincide with her political advocacy off the page, and the centrality of queer Indigenous and Two Spirit characters and desire in Brant's writing speaks to its political necessity in larger heteronormative contexts. Reading these two authors alongside each other thus enables a fuller conceptualization of the theoretical power of Indigenous feminist writing as a decolonial methodology.

## **Preface**

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, V. Cowan.

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## **Introduction: The Literary Production of Indigenous Feminist Methodologies**

In her essay “A Strong Race Opinion: On the Indian Girl in Modern Fiction,” Mohawk writer E. Pauline Johnson, who is oft-cited as one of the foremothers of Indigenous women’s writing in Canada, concludes the following: “...above all let the Indian girl of fiction develop from the ‘doglike,’ ‘fawnlike,’ ‘deer-footed,’ or ‘fire-eyed,’ ‘crouching,’ ‘submissive’ book heroine into something of the quiet, sweet womanly woman she is” (183). Although published in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Johnson’s exhortation to develop more complex representations of Indigenous women remains relevant. Indeed, Indigenous women writers continue to navigate what Rayna Green (Cherokee) calls white North America’s “Pocahontas Perplex” (701), a symbolic investment in stereotypic representations of Indigenous women as Indian Princesses or Squaws, which Janice Acoose (Saulteaux/Métis) also discusses in her book *Iskwewk—Kah’ Ki Yaw Ni Wahkomakanak: Neither Indian Princesses Nor Easy Squaws*. This preference for narrow portrayals has an insidious effect on dominant understandings of actual Indigenous women and, as Green writes, “when real Indian women...intrud[e] into the needs bound up in symbols and the desires inherent in daily life, the responses to the symbol [become] more complex, and the Pocahontas perplex emerge[s] as a controlling metaphor in the [North] American experience” (703). This perplex is further evinced by the colonial and patriarchal contexts in which Indigenous women live and write. Existing simultaneously as “Indigenous” and “female,” Indigenous women are forced to navigate racism and sexism within and outside of their communities, an imbrication of oppressions that contributes to the ongoing erasure of their voices. Nevertheless, as the editors of *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture* note, “[by] scrutiniz[ing] the effects of colonialism and patriarchy, writers and artists render Indigenous women visible by shifting their voices and cultural authority to the foreground and by reimagining their roles within and outside Indigenous communities” (Huhndorf et al 9). Indigenous feminist writing confronts Indigenous women’s dual marginalization and, in doing so, broadens notions of both the political and the theoretical to include stories of survival and

continuance from the margins; further, the ways that Indigenous feminist theory centers writing as not only a healing act but also a political act of survival thus constitutes the work of both Lee Maracle (Stó:lō) and Beth Brant (Mohawk) as Indigenous feminist methodologies.

In its willingness to examine the literal and symbolic effects of colonialism and patriarchy, Indigenous women's writing is decidedly political. Furthermore, the literary production of Indigenous women has been integral to political movements for sovereignty, social justice, and decolonization, which the Brant describes when she states, "Organizing, gathering, mentoring, demonstrating, picketing. Our writing is, and always has been, an attempt to beat back our colonization and the stereotyping of our Nations" (*Writing* 39-40). And yet, Indigenous women's literary production has gone under-acknowledged in literary and critical theoretical circles alike. Elizabeth Archeluta attributes this under acknowledgement not to Indigenous women's lack of theorizing, but to colonial, patriarchal definitions of what constitutes theory:

Indigenous women reject paradigms that ask us to disassociate ourselves from our lived experiences before we can claim to have the skills and knowledge to theorize. We believe theory comes not from abstract written ideas but from the collective knowledge of Indigenous women whose lives have not informed feminist theories, methods, or policy concerns and whose lived experiences mainstream feminists will continue to ignore unless Indigenous women question and deconstruct existing methodologies. (89)

Indigenous feminist theory thus makes room for Indigenous women to articulate their lived experiences, including their racist, sexist disciplining under both colonialism and patriarchy—articulations which, oftentimes, are the only means of survival readily available to Indigenous women. Archeluta echoes this notion: "Indigenous women who write to promote survival broaden the notion of political activism for those who interpret writing and reading as a passive form of recreation or entertainment. For Indigenous women, the rhetorical practice of writing and embodying a theory in the flesh empowers because it heals" (110). In this way, theory and politics are inextricable in Indigenous women's writing.

The work of Maracle and Brant exemplifies Indigenous feminist modes of theorizing, particularly in their motivations for writing. For instance, Maracle began writing to "save [her]

sanity”: “Poetry and the comfort of my diaries—my books of madness I called them—where truth rolled out of my inner self, began to re-shape me...In my diary, I faced my womanhood, indigenous womanhood. I faced my inner hate, my anger and the desertion of myself from our way of being. I reclaimed that little innocent child...I became a woman through my words” (*Bobbi Lee* 230). For Brant, writing was a “gift” given to her at was forty years old: “I never planned on being a writer. It was not even a fantasy of mine. Born in an urban Mohawk family, story was a given, not something to search for or discover. But the gift of *writing* came long after my birth” (*Writing* 106). Brant also affirms that, “Without writing I would be out of balance. Without the sacred I would be alone” (*Writing* 3). Maracle and Brant share other important similarities: both women were born around the same time to working class families and published explicitly feminist-identified works in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Canada. Furthermore, in writing to transform themselves, both Maracle and Brant write to encourage transformation in their readers, particularly their readers’ potential racist or sexist attitudes and those of the society they live in.

Despite these similarities, Maracle and Brant have experienced immense differences in recognition for their Indigenous feminist writing. For instance, Maracle has experienced relative critical acclaim in academic circles for her writing in Canada, whereas Brant’s name has gone almost unheard of, save for the growing interest in queer Indigenous studies in recent years. Of course, both women’s reception (or lack thereof) must be considered in relation to that of their male colleagues, who continue to dominate the publishing sphere. Nevertheless, it is curious that the work of two similarly prolific Indigenous feminists have received such asymmetrical critical treatment (in undertaking research for this project, for instance, it was much easier to find sources on Maracle than it was to do so for Brant). I argue that this difference can be attributed to the ways that Brant centers queer Indigeneity in her writing, which was often viewed as a “specter of menace” in many Indigenous communities when she was publishing (Tatonetti xiv). Brant’s articulations also speak to the necessity of Indigenous feminism to include gender and sexuality diversity in its anti-colonial critiques, lest it perpetuate divisive colonial practices.



Alongside the Indigenous feminist elements of their writing, the multi-generic aspects of their texts contribute to their formal interventions. For instance, both women frequently write short stories: Brant's major creative works, *Mohawk Trail* (1985) and *Food & Spirits* (1991), are both published as short story collections and Maracle's *Sojourner's Truth & Other Stories* (1990) is her inaugural collection of short stories. Both writers continually intersperse poetry and auto/biography into these texts, calling the original form into question. Further, both authors have published self-reflexive, theoretical books about their writing and activism, such as Brant's *Writing as Witness: Essay and Talk* (1994) and Maracle's *I Am Woman* (1990), both of which are also multi-generic. In writing across multiple generic categories, both writers destabilize colonial categories that continue to attempt to reduce and fix their identities; in turn, their writing creates new spaces of possibility for the representation and being of Indigenous women.

Even more, the political dimensions of Maracle and Brant's writing comes from the content of their work and how content interfaces with form. The ways that Brant centers the lives and erotics of queer Indigenous and Two Spirit people "constitute[d] a radical departure for Indian literature in 1984" (Womack 368); the scarcity of these representations when she was writing attests to the political necessity of her work. I argue that Brant's multi-generic writing is not only a gesture of inclusivity to the communities she writes about and for—working-class, Indigenous, queer, and so on—but also reflects a personal methodology of intersectionality. Indeed, Brant's multi-generic work mimics the quest for spiritual wholeness that motivates much of her writing. Maracle, on the other hand, frequently writes about violence against Indigenous women, other-than-human beings, and the earth, and her work as a writer and an activist continually draws parallels between these forms of violence. By writing across genres, Maracle demonstrates the myriad ways that oppression is prefigured in rhetorical categories and theories of literature; multi-generic writing is thus a preferred format for centering hitherto marginalized beings. Thus, the interplay of form and content in their work further destabilizes the fixity of the colonial gaze and, in turn, further contributes to the Indigenous feminist ethos of their writing.

My interest in this project can be traced back to 2011, when I took my first class in Aboriginal Literature (as it was then called) as an undergraduate student at the University of Saskatchewan. I was drawn to this elective because it appeared to have greater social applications outside of the academy than courses in classic European literatures did; the premise of the course was to combine academic study with community engagement as a means of creating dialogue between textual analysis and community events. Furthermore, I craved an area of study that would further my personal interrogations of identity, only realizing later that I was instrumentalizing the literature for this purpose, a reflection of my privilege as a white woman. This realization—gently prompted by a conversation with an Indigenous mentor—helped me to understand how my own struggles with gender, sexuality, and feminism (patriarchy, in other words) inflected my approaches to the literature in potentially harmful ways. My mentor encouraged me to “let the literature speak for itself” and, in that sense, to listen to what it was saying instead of waiting for it to fulfill what I wanted to hear. Recognizing the investments I initially brought to my readings has humbled me to the necessarily imperfect, incomplete nature of my approach, which is a more honest form of inquiry. I study Indigenous feminisms now because I see it as the most astute and complete methodology for decolonization, a project that affects everyone living under a colonial heteropatriarchal mentality but disproportionately and unfairly falls upon the shoulders of Indigenous women and Two Spirit people.

To mitigate the re-colonizing effects of reading Indigenous texts as a white woman, then, I draw from the insight of Helen Hoy’s *How Should I Read These? Native Women Writers in Canada* and Renate Eigenbrod’s *Travelling Knowledges: Positioning the Im/Migrant Reading of Aboriginal Literatures in Canada*, both of which “make...questions of location...ongoing subjects of investigation” (Hoy 18) and resist “closure and definitiveness” in their interpretations (Eigenbrod xv). Although these approaches do not guarantee an ethical reading, they nonetheless encourage me to continually unpack my own interests and investments in relation to the literature, which are never ideologically neutral.

My first chapter explores Maracle's *I Am Woman* in relation to *Sojourner's Truth & Other Stories*. Maracle's theory of "oratory" plays a significant role in my approach to her texts. Maracle defines oratory as a holistic way of engaging with written texts that draws from Stó:lō oral traditions, which encourage listeners and readers to work out the meaning of the story for themselves: "The listeners are drawn into the dilemma and are expected at some point in their lives to actively work themselves out of it" (*Sojourner's* 12). She goes on to state that, "As listener/reader, you become the trickster, the architect of great social transformation at whatever level you choose" (*Sojourner's* 13). I argue that oratory as a holistic mode of reading mimics the multi-generic nature of Maracle's texts which, in turn, creates the works' destabilizing potential. I also pay attention to her stories that describe Indigenous womanhood, including her story "Sojourner's Truth," which connects violence against women to violence against the earth, her story "Bertha," which describes the deadly effects of capitalism and patriarchy on the main character, and her story "Who's Political Here?" which explores gendered divisions of labour. Through reading these stories in conjunction with related essays from *I Am Woman*, I analyze how Maracle articulates the devastating material effects of colonialism and patriarchy while also attending to the underpinnings of these systems.

My second chapter analyzes Brant's writing vis-à-vis the critical articulations she makes about the intersections between sexism, racism, and homophobia. I argue that, by writing about her lived experiences as "First Nations, lesbian, mixed-blood, urban, [and] not educated in the western 'tradition'" (*Writing* 3), Brant highlights the inherent sexism and homophobia of colonialism long before such discussions became commonplace in the academy or, indeed, in many social justice circles. Her text *Writing as Witness* is significant here, providing theoretical reflections on queer Indigenous identity, feminism, writing, and so on. Further, Brant's importance as a queer Indigenous voice is due in large part to the ways she centers the erotic in her writing, which she engages from both theoretical and fictional perspectives, the latter including her story "This Place" in *Mohawk Trail* and her stories "A Long Story" and "The Fifth Floor, 1967" in *Food & Spirits*. Through analyzing her erotic stories, I demonstrate how Brant's work unifies Scott Richard Lyons' notion of "rhetorical

sovereignty” with Qwo-Li Driskill’s concept of a “sovereign erotic.” In doing so, I argue that the political significance of Brant’s writing comes from how she centers marginalized identities on both a conceptual and a formal level.

Indeed, just as E. Pauline Johnson’s writing paved the way for broader understandings about what constitutes Indigeneity and Indigenous womanhood at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so too does the written work of Lee Maracle and Beth Brant dismantle the sexist, racist confinement of their identities. In turn, their writing gives space to those who would follow in their footsteps, an entire generation of Indigenous feminist writers continuing the fight for freedom.

## Chapter 1: The Forms of Writing: Lee Maracle's Decolonizing Oratories

In a career spanning over four decades, Lee Maracle (Stó:lō) continues to imprint herself on the field of Indigenous literature as one who ushers in transformation. In an interview with Margery Fee and Sneja Gunew, she confesses that “[t]he only reason I write is to bring about a change of heart” (212). Known for the power of her anti-colonial critiques, Maracle has never been one to shy away from personal or political change. In her first auto/biography, *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel*, she describes her involvement with the Native Alliance for Red Power, the Liberation Support Movement, and numerous other activist groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Canada. Although her later reflections on the text would reveal the fraught process of working with a white male interlocutor<sup>1</sup>, *Bobbi Lee* nevertheless signals Maracle's commitment to bridging the personal and the political in her writing. For instance, in the Epilogue to the 1990 edition of *Bobbi Lee*, Maracle describes how her writing during this period also served a therapeutic purpose, helping her “face my womanhood, my indigenous womanhood. I faced my inner hate, my anger and the desertion of myself from our way of being” (230). She continues this process of self-reflection and self-reclamation in her second auto/biographical work *I Am Woman* which, she writes, “represents my personal struggle with womanhood, culture, traditional spiritual beliefs and political sovereignty, written during a time when this struggle was not over” (vii). Speaking directly about the systems of oppression that disproportionately affect Indigenous women, Maracle also states that, “I had settled on very little when I first wrote *I Am Woman*, except this: I and other Native women ought to come by our perceptions of spirituality, culture, womanhood and sovereignty from a place free of sexist and racist influence” (vii). The ways that Maracle identifies and dismantles the sources of her oppression

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<sup>1</sup> Writing about the asymmetrical power relations between her and her editor, Donald Barnett, Maracle notes the following in the Prologue to the 1990 edition of *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel*: “There are two voice in the pages of this book, mine and Donald Barnett's. As-told-tos between whites and Natives rarely work, when they do, it's wonderful, when they don't it's a disaster for the Native... In the end, the voice that reached the paper was Don's, the information alone was mine” (19). Despite these challenges, Maracle never fully repudiated *Bobbi Lee*, though the second edition of the text is heavily insulated by new framing pieces, including a Prologue, Preface, Acknowledgements, and Epilogue. Further, this edition was published by a small feminist press.

in her writing constitute one element of its Indigenous feminist character. The intention to perceive the world “from a place free of sexist and racist influence” also shines through her fiction; for instance, many of short stories in her *Sojourner’s Truth & Other Stories* directly address the destructive effects of colonialism and patriarchy. Even more, the formal elements of both *I Am Woman* and *Sojourner’s Truth & Other Stories* contribute to her larger project of transformation; written from the perspective of Stó:lō “oratory,” Maracle liberates her writing from the generic strictures of European forms in order “to find a way to alter the language to suit my own Salish sensibility” (Maracle with Fee and Gunew 211). Indeed, Maracle’s writing invites transformation at every turn, whether inviting readers to identify and dismantle the insidious effects of colonialism and patriarchy in their own lives through the explicit content of her texts or to encourage readers to uproot their own racist and sexist attitudes through engaging in an oratorical process of transformation. In these ways, her writing functions as an Indigenous feminist methodology for decolonization.

To better understand the transformative impetus behind Maracle’s work, one must turn to Stó:lō oral tradition. Indeed, her commitment to transformation is largely motivated by her culture which, she states, “looks upon life as constant spiritual growth and transformation” (Maracle with Kelly 74). From a Stó:lō perspective, one’s primary *raison d’être* is uncovering “that which is not seen, not known, at what is cherished and hidden” because “[i]n the discovery of the unknown lies growth” (Maracle, “Oratory” 57). Maracle links this preoccupation with growth and discovery to the origins of Stó:lō culture:

Our origin story is that we begin as hidden form, we begin as spirit, mind, and heart, and then Raven calls us into physical being. We learn consequences and we bring stories of those consequences home to our ancestors to augment and bring glory to the spirit world. *Our whole function in life here is to return to our ancestors with some understanding that’s new to the spirit world.* (Maracle with Kelly 75; my emphasis)

As this passage illustrates, a Stó:lō commitment to spiritual discovery is embedded in the process of storytelling, where the function of stories and storytelling is to provide guidance and to bring about personal and collective transformation. In this way, a storyteller is simultaneously a facilitator of

growth and discovery, one who is “present to bear witness, see, and understand the subject under study, and serve[s] as [an] adjunct...to the process, so that they may story up each round of discourse in a way that governs the new conduct required to grow from the new knowledge discovered” (Maracle, “Oratory” 57). This identification with the role of storyteller has been with Maracle since she was a child and, in an interview with Jennifer Kelly, she states, “I think I was a storyteller when I was born—somehow. I don’t have an explanation, but I’ve always been a storyteller” (76). Elsewhere, Maracle describes that “as a Wolf visionary, as a woman of the Wolf clan, as a keeper of Wolf story, and as a mythmaker” she plays “a very specific role in our community. We [members of the Wolf clan] are the backward and forward visionaries for people” (Maracle with Fee and Gunew 209). Storyteller, then, is both a social and a spiritual role that Maracle inhabits within her Stó:lō community, and storytelling is a transformative methodology that she is responsible for facilitating.

The concept of oratory is synonymous with this long-standing tradition of storytelling as a form of guidance. Even more, oratory functions as both a body of Stó:lō knowledge and a methodology for knowledge-creation. In other words, oratory functions theoretically in Stó:lō culture, which also makes it integral for understanding the political character of Maracle’s writing. Significantly, she begins her essay “Oratory: Coming to Theory” by defining oratory against European conceptions of theory, which she views as violently severing language and experience: “Among European scholars there is an alienated notion that maintains that theory is separate from story, and thus a different set of ideas if required to ‘prove’ an idea than to ‘show’ one...However our intellectuals (elders) know that [theory] means nothing outside of human interaction” (162). In this passage, Maracle critiques Western traditions of academic study—including literary analysis—that presuppose a firm divide between the language used to describe a phenomenon and the reality of the phenomenon itself. From a Stó:lō point of view, this mode of inquiry distorts the inherent unity of language and phenomenon, theory and text. As Maracle states, theory is “useless outside of human interaction” (162) and, contrary to what Western academics may think, “there is a story in every line of theory” (163). Significantly, Maracle goes on to state that these attempts to “delete...character,

plot, and story from theoretical arguments” are symptomatic of a larger culture of “heartlessness” (163), which directly contributes to imperial conquest and colonial violence: “[i]n their successful global conquest,” Maracle writes, “the mother countries...granted themselves the right to claim discovery, and then proceeded to define, delineate, and demarcate the cultural, intellectual, economic, spiritual, and physical being for the entire world” (“Oratory” 55). “This has had disastrous results in the world,” she continues, and “[d]isaster is the outcome of invasiveness, to wit, war and environmental destruction” (“Oratory” 56). Indeed, as Maracle makes clear in both *I Am Woman* and *Sojourner’s Truth & Other Stories*, the material realities of death and destruction for Indigenous cultures, Indigenous women, and the environment are the direct results of colonial patriarchal ideologies which posit strict boundaries between subject and object, language and phenomenon, theory and text. By choosing to write in an oratorical form, Maracle is thus positioning herself in opposition to the alienating, severing tendencies of European ideologies, instead using a written form that fosters unity and healing.

Oratory retains numerous features of Stó:lō oral tradition, including its “non-hierarchical and non-coercive character” (Maracle, “Poetry” 305). As already mentioned, storytelling is an important means of providing non-invasive guidance to community members and, as Maracle writes, “[b]ecause Native societies do not have institutions that are alienated from the family and social life of the community, oral language art became a powerful way to maintain governance of social and personal conduct without the use of force” (“Poetry” 306). The inherent unity of social structures and worldviews are expressed in oratory, which serves as a Stó:lō mode of theorizing. In her essay “Oratory: Coming to Theory,” Maracle describes oratory in the following way:

Oratory: place of prayer, to persuade. This is a word we can work with. We regard words as coming from original being - a sacred spiritual being. The orator is coming from a place of prayer and as such attempts to be persuasive. Words are not objects to be wasted. They represent the accumulated knowledge, cultural values, the vision of an entire people or peoples. We believe the proof of a thing is in the doing. Doing requires some form of social interaction, and thus story is the most persuasive and sensible way to present the accumulated thoughts and values of a people. (161)



The theoretical importance of oratory lies precisely in the constitutive power of language it represents, connecting language to social interaction through the sharing of stories. Furthermore, its theoretical character comes from the socio-political-philosophical knowledge that oratory encapsulates and conveys. As a further contrast to the taxonomic fixation of European theory, oratory cannot be reduced to one genre or mode of discourse. As Maracle writes, “our songs are poems and they are stories; our stories are poems and they are songs and include all the oratorical art of Native peoples” (“Poetry” 309). This statement echoes Paula Gunn Allen in *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* when she writes, “It is reasonable, from an Indian point of view, that all literary forms should be interrelated, given the basic idea of unity and relatedness of all the phenomena of life” (62). Unsurprisingly, the interrelated nature of existence also includes the relationship between text and reader, which is co-constitutive and mutually informing.

In the Preface to *Sojourner’s Truth*, Maracle describes the difference between Stó:lō and European stories: “[t]he difference is that the reader is as much a part of the story as the teller. Most of our stories don’t have orthodox ‘conclusions’; that is left to the listeners, who we trust will draw useful lessons from the story” (11-12). Indeed, another significant feature of oratory is that the reader is integral to the functioning of the story and the meaning he or she makes from it. Maracle continues, stating that “[t]he listeners are drawn into the dilemma and are expected at some point to work themselves out of it” (12). The readers are thus presented with open-ended narratives that enable them to envision themselves within the world of the story with the intention of affecting their actions outside of the story. Maracle refers to such stories as “lean narratives,” which “enable the listener to contribute to the narrative and make choices about the direction he or she chooses to take” (“Oratory” 58). She reiterates this notion in the following: “[t]he story conjured is lean, the poetry as pure as the speaker can render it, and the drama short, opened-ended scenes linked to being/phenomenon” (“Oratory” 66). Thus, the narrative must be “lean” enough so that a diversity of readers can envision themselves within the storyline while also specific enough in the phenomenon it describes to be instructive. Even so, the goal of oratory is not to come to a consensus of perspectives,

but to see view the story from as many different standpoints as possible with the goal of achieving a fuller understanding (Maracle, “Oratory” 57). In this way, readers are invited to “become the trickster, the architect of great social transformation at whatever level you choose” (*Sojourner’s* 13). However, “becoming the trickster” does not automatically absolve the reader of his or her participation in a stratified colonial patriarchal society, as the statement might imply; certainly, Maracle’s project of transformation invites the reader to see themselves in her writing, including the ways that he or she may be implicated in systems of oppression that disproportionately affect Indigenous women like herself. *I Am Woman* is one example of this sort of text, whose political power comes from its analysis of the interrelated phenomena of racism and sexism.

*I Am Woman* finds its political resonance through examining the contemporary conditions that (in)form Indigenous womanhood. Through multiple genres and perspectives, Maracle analyzes the “three mountains [on] the path to liberation: the mountain of racism, the mountain of sexism and the mountain of nationalist oppression” (x). However, this examination has not always been taken seriously by (white) literary critics. Whereas when *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* was first published it was viewed as “too political” to be autobiography, *I Am Woman* was criticized for being “too beautiful” (Maracle with Kelly 82). Indeed, the desire to separate the literary from the political in Indigenous women’s writing is almost always a means of silencing. As Laura J. Beard notes about *Bobbi Lee*, “[r]eferences to Maracle’s work as ‘too political,’ ‘strident,’ or ‘Canadian Marxist’ strive to define the politics of her discourse into silence” (123). As Beard notes further, “[t]o make a claim that Native women’s autobiography is not (or should not be) political is another attempt to silence the (political and activist) voices of Native peoples” (122). This bridging of the literary and the political is another way that Maracle transforms language and genre to better suit her Stó:lō sensibility. Writing about Indigenous women’s literary production as necessarily political in light of ongoing threats to their survival, Elizabeth Archeluta writes, “Indigenous women who write to promote survival broaden the notion of political activism for those who interpret writing and reading as a passive form of recreation or entertainment. For Indigenous women, the rhetorical practice of writing and embodying a theory in

the flesh empowers because it heals” (110). Indeed, in its attempt to “present a Native woman’s sociological perspective on the impacts of colonialism on us, as women, and on myself personally” (vii), *I Am Woman* exemplifies Archeluta’s conception of political literature. Further, through bridging the personal with the collective, the literary with the political, and the personal with the political, *I Am Woman* is not only a political text, but also a theoretical text.

Further drawing from Elizabeth Archeluta’s essay “‘I Give You Back’: Indigenous Women Writing to Survive,” I argue that Indigenous women’s writing also must be considered theoretical because of how it articulates the dangers of existing as simultaneously “Indigenous” and “female” within colonial and patriarchal systems of oppression. As Archeluta writes, “Indigenous women demonstrate that theory happens when we speak out and voice opposition to oppression and the many injustices we have experienced” (90). Further, against European intellectual traditions that monopolize and delineate what can and cannot be considered “theory,” Archeluta argues that, “Indigenous women reject paradigms that ask us to disassociate ourselves from our lived experiences before we can claim to have the skills and knowledge to theorize...” (89). Within this definition, *I Am Woman* must be considered theoretical because it is rooted in Maracle’s perceptions and lived experiences as an Indigenous woman. Even more, Maracle’s texts conform to the various characteristics Archeluta identifies for Indigenous feminist writing, including naming the enemy, reinventing the enemy’s language, and sharing stories of survival through dialogue and writing. Archeluta defines “naming the enemy” as “identify[ing] the many sources of our oppression” (92). Referencing *I Am Woman*, Archeluta writes that “Maracle understands that before we can focus on resurgence and recovery, we need to identify outside forces that have created our current conditions” (92). Through identifying these external forces—the three mountains of racist, sexist, and nationalist oppression—Maracle simultaneously “reinvents the enemy’s language,” which Archeluta defines as “Indigenous women’s appropriation, reinvention, and use of English and writing as rhetorical sites of power” (89). Indeed, one could argue that Maracle’s entire written oeuvre is about reinventing the enemy’s language or, as she puts it, altering the language to better suit her Stó:lō sensibility. In *I Am*

*Woman*, this alteration manifests itself within and across genres, which I will discuss below. Finally, by continually putting her texts in dialogue with her community and, especially, with other Indigenous women, Maracle's writing exemplifies an Indigenous feminist theoretical approach, which can be observed in both *I Am Woman* and *Sojourner's Truth & Other Stories*. However, in defining the theoretical character of Maracle's work, it is best to let her speak to this character herself, which warrants quoting at length from her essay "Oratory: Coming to Theory":

Despite all academic criticism to the contrary, my book *I Am Woman* is theoretical text. It was arrived at through my meticulous ploughing of the fields of hundreds of books on the European colonial process – capitalist theory, decolonization, law, and philosophy – from the perspective of Indigenous law, philosophy, and culture. My understanding of the process of colonization and de-colonization of Native women is rooted in my theoretical perception of social reality, and it is tested in the crucible of human social practice. Stories and poetry bring the reality home and allow the victims to devictimize their consciousness and push back on colonization. For Indigenous women, and a good many white women, *I Am Woman* is empowering and transformative. (166)

In these ways, *I Am Woman* must be considered both political and theoretical—indeed, as an Indigenous feminist text—which also extends to its oratorical features.

The theoretical power of *I Am Woman* also comes from its oratorical features, particularly the ways it blurs conventional generic categories. Far-reaching in scope, the text includes vignettes from Maracle's own life, short stories, and poetry; all of the stories in *I Am Woman* challenge an easy distinction between fiction and non-fiction. For instance, Maracle emphasizes the inadequacy of generic categories when she states that, "[u]sually when one writes of oneself it is called nonfiction. I disbelieve that. Hindsight is always fictitious" (5). The text also challenges the boundary between autobiography and biography, including almost as many stories about other people and characters as it does about Maracle. For instance, in the essay "I Want to Write," she describes the painful process of "squeeze[ing] one's loved ones small, onto the pages of a three-dimensional rectangle" to publish their stories (3-4). The ambivalence inherent in this process of amalgamating people and places is palpable in the following: "[t]o the family of the grandmother whose teaching I combined with the teaching of another family's grandmother...I apologize. The grandmother in this book, like Rusty [the

namesake for one of her short stories], is a composite of a number of old Native women I have known” (6). Although writing is a liberating, transformative process for Maracle, this process is simultaneously an uneasy one. As Susie O’Brien states, “[w]riting, for Maracle, is a relinquishment of invisibility. It is, at the same time, a compromise, as she is forced to translate the principles of oratory into a form that is unwieldy in both literary and political terms” (94). As a further testament to this difficulty, Maracle reveals that “it took about twenty years to find a way to transform the language to suit [her] Salish sensibility” (Maracle with Fee and Gunew 211). Nevertheless, it is exactly the uneasiness and ambiguity of *I Am Woman* at a formal level—and, indeed, its larger refusal to be pinned down by the colonial gaze—that makes it expressly political.

*Sojourner’s Truth & Other Stories* also defies easy generic categorization. Although presented as a collection of short stories, the text is frequently interspersed with poetry and includes stories that blur the lines between fiction and non-fiction and biography and autobiography, much like *I Am Woman*. Like the latter, the hybrid quality of *Sojourner’s Truth* was also met with mixed reviews when it was first circulating, which initially led to difficulty getting it published:

“*Sojourner’s Truth* was not published at first because the stories were too controversial,” relays Maracle in a conversation with Jennifer Kelly. She continues, saying that “[the stories] had drinking in them, you know, so ‘we can’t publish that because people might think we’re promoting drinking among Indians’ or some darn thing” (82). Further down, she describes how one of her stories was not considered “culturally mythical enough,” before describing the similarly arbitrary critiques levelled against her auto/biographical works. As she states, there are “[l]ots of reasons that people could come up with for not publishing our work, and, of course, that’s been our history” (Maracle with Kelly 82). Nevertheless, these obstacles to publishing and wider recognition have not deterred Maracle from her personal commitment to writing from a Stó:lō perspective. As Beard notes, “[r]egardless of how her works are classified by publishers, booksellers, and librarians—as fiction, autobiography, biography, bildungsroman, poetry—Maracle strives always to write with a Salishan sensibility, to transform

language and genres to suit this sensibility” (125). As with *I Am Woman*, it is exactly this oratorical blurring that gives *Sojourner’s Truth & Other Stories* its political significance.

One finds the theoretical reverberations of *I Am Woman* in numerous stories in *Sojourner’s Truth*. Indeed, if *I Am Woman* functions as a text of Indigenous feminist theory, then *Sojourner’s Truth* functions as a fruitful site through which to illuminate theory, and vice versa. For instance, the story “Who’s Political Here?” can be read alongside numerous essays in *I Am Woman*. The story describes a day in the life of Lee, an overworked and underrecognized mother, who must navigate taking care of two young children, buying groceries, making dinner, and ensuring the housework is done, all while her husband and his political friends try to maintain moral and intellectual superiority over her. Although the setting of the story is limited to the family home and the walk to and from the grocery store, one is immediately struck by the sheer amount of activity taking place: “I *grabbed* the wash-rag and then both girls, *removing* them from the temptation of playing in the toilet by *pushing* them out of the bathroom, while my toothbrush *vigorously scraped* my dentures. I *strolled* into the kitchen” (27; my emphases). The number of verbs present in this passage is striking—five, including one adverb—and reflects the narrative density of the entire text. However, this narrative density is only accorded to Lee and not to her husband Tom, whose words and actions are slow and monotonous in comparison: ““Do you think you could do laundry?” he said with the tone of voice that implies it has been at least a month since the last time I had done laundry and in between then and now I had been particularly unproductive” (27). Tom’s general recalcitrance is confirmed when he announces his activities for the day, putting up political posters downtown (28). Lee’s internal monologue responds quickly: “Terrific. He posters while I maneuver [*sic*] the logistics of shopping, nurturing and fulfilling my laundress duties. I take the shopping cart and the two girls and go out again” (28). Lee’s disdain is palpable in this quotation, and the gendered inequity between her and Tom’s labour is further emphasized; not only does Tom not offer to help Lee, but he also believes that his postering is a more political and, therefore, more worthy activity compared to the domestic labour he has left for Lee to do. The tension in the text reaches a climax when Tom is arrested for his

political activities and his friends expect Lee to bail him out: “I want to say look a..hole [*sic*], I do all the laundry, cook and clean after that man, type all his leaflets after midnight and mother his two children so that he can risk postering downtown. Who is in prison here?” (32). In this quotation, Maracle is turning the conventional hierarchy positing men’s (political) labour above women’s (apolitical) labour on its head, instead insisting that not only are women’s domestic contributions political, they also undergird and support the so-called political work of men, such as the ability to put up posters downtown unencumbered. Indeed, Lee’s ongoing internal monologue reveals sexist hierarchies and, in turn, the extent to which she is being exploited for her labour.

Lee’s oppression in the story comes from being viewed as unproductive and apolitical, and therefore as intellectually beneath her husband and his friends. Maracle, unfortunately, is not a stranger to sexism in her family life and in leftist circles; indeed, *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* can be read as an intertext for “Who’s Political Here?”, the former describing Maracle’s experiences with leftist politics, including the Native Alliance for Red Power, where she met her first husband Ray Bobb, who is referred to as “Ray Thom” in *Bobbi Lee* (and who is conspicuously connected to the character “Tom” in the story). Reflecting on this period in her life as a young mother and burgeoning intellectual, Maracle writes the following in the Preface to *I Am Woman*: “I am humbled by the absolute heroism required of the young mother that I was, wrestling into the conditions which I was born” (viii). In her essays “The Rebel” and “Party Down!” in *I Am Woman*, she reveals how the social movements that were meant to be liberating for Indigenous people devolved into the same sort of European, patriarchal behaviours observed in dominant society. In describing the American Indian Movement (AIM), Maracle states that “[c]ulturally, the worst, most dominant white male traits were emphasized. Machismo and the boss mentality were the basis for choosing leaders. This idea of leadership was essentially a European one promulgated by power mongers” (*I Am Woman* 99). Maracle also goes on to state that AIM “brought a strange sort of corruption and immorality to our militant youth. The activists became branded with the opportunistic, hustle-media politics that characterized the movement of the 70’s. Sexism, racism’s younger brother, was inherent in the

character of the American Indian Movement” (*I Am Woman* 107). These intertexts further highlight the gendered inequities described in “Who’s Political Here?”, in which moral intellectualizing counts more politically than birthing, raising, and nourishing the next generation of thinkers and activists.

As the title of the story suggests, “Who’s Political Here?” asks readers to broaden their understanding of what constitutes political action, lest they fall into sexist traps that exclude women’s labour. For Maracle, this labour includes motherhood and the literal bearing of children, which she discusses in her essay “Normal vs. Natural”: “[birth] is a bloody revolution carried out with much pain, labour and blood. After nine months of co-habiting the same body, mother and child set to work one day, pushing, pulling and tearing at the body so that the child may escape the dark womb” (*I Am Woman* 131). Indeed, Maracle’s writing re-centers women’s contributions in considerations of “the political,” broadening definitions of labour to include the emotional and physical labour disproportionately required of women when compared to their partners, and to include the labour of childbirth and child-rearing. However, as the story reveals, women are not rewarded for such contributions; instead, women are only rewarded with the semblance of intellectual equality when they engage in self-effacing behaviours, as the character Patti makes clear:

Patti has come over and joined the guys in the “rap.” I can’t figure out why she is so acceptable to them. When she talks they respond. I find her exaggerated, rhetorical clap-trap annoying—they eat it up...She is no ordinary woman. Most of the women who come to visit me, my friends, help with the dishes, the kids, stuff like that, while they’re here. Not this one. She acts like me and the kids are dead except when she wants coffee. She has some sort of secret inside of her that inspires men to respect her brain and not intrude on her person by reducing her to a servant. I envy her position...I’m jealous of Patti, not sexually, but because my husband and his friends accord her her mind. (36-37)

As this passage indicates, the story establishes and critiques a gendered hierarchy that starts with men at the top, women who emulate men below them, and women who engage in stereotypically gendered behaviors on the bottom. Maracle reveals herself as having once emulated a Patti-like mentality, which she discusses at length in “I Am Woman”: “Until March 1982, feminism, indeed womanhood itself, was meaningless to me. Racist ideology had defined woman for the Native woman as nonexistent, therefore neither the woman question nor the European rebel’s response held any meaning



for me” (*I Am Woman* 15). This piece of Maracle’s personal history creates narrative tension between the character “Lee” and between “Maracle” herself—does the story represent a re-visioning of her own personal history as she would have liked to act, both aware and critical of the sexist attitudes surrounding her and infiltrating her psyche? Or, like the women described in *I Am Woman*, is Lee a composite of many political women Maracle has known, thus depicting an overwhelming pattern of mistreatment? Regardless of the answer, Maracle’s personal intertexts reveal the preponderance of sexist ideas of politics and labour, which reward women for emulating patriarchal standards. Nevertheless, in writing “Who’s Political Here?”, Maracle demonstrates her ability to move from a position of ideological interpellation to being the one doing the interpellating.

Maracle’s story “Bertha” is also concerned with motherhood as it relates to nation-building and political continuance. In *I Am Woman*, Maracle describes motherhood as an “ancient art” (66), which finds its resonance in the story: “Motherhood [is] the re-creation of ancient stories that would instruct the young in the laws of her people and encourage good citizenship from even the babies...” (19-20). Unlike “Who’s Political Here?”, this story describes what happens when a whole generation of Indigenous women become cut off from their traditional roles as teachers to their community due to colonization. At the center of the story is Bertha, an Indigenous woman who was positioned to become a respected matriarch before leaving her village to work in a cannery as a teenager. After a grueling night of drinking alone in the rain, memory overtakes her and she reflects upon how she came to this point in her life, bleak and without a sense of future: “You had another upbringing before all this, the memory chided her. The efforts of the village women to nurture her as keeper of her clan, mother of all youth, had gone to naught” (19). In contrast to descriptions of Bertha’s present scene as dark and heavy with rain—in which she is introduced as a “distorted bulk” (15)—descriptions of Bertha’s childhood are idyllic and light-hearted: “Home was a young girl rushing through a meadow, a cedar basket swishing lightly against dew-laden leaves, her nimble fingers plucking ripe fat berries from their branches, the wind playfully teasing and tangling the loose, waist-length black hair that glistened in the autumnal dawn...” (20). A significant portion of her childhood was dedicated to

becoming educated in the stories of her people, thus preparing her for a future as a decision-maker and knowledge-keeper: “She remembered the girl, the endless stories told to her, the meanings behind each story, the careful coaching behind each one, the reasons for their telling, but she could not, after fifty years of speaking crippled English, define where it was all supposed to lead” (20). As this passage demonstrates, the preparation of young women for a future of guiding and teaching the community was undertaken with the utmost care. The impasse that Bertha encounters in the story is a result of being severed from this role and, as a result, her potential as a clan-keeper is never realized—a devastating realization fifty years too late.

In Bertha’s memory, the turning point occurs when her grandfather “took a christian name” (20), thus signifying the beginning of her community’s colonization. After this point, “a ripple of bewildered tension...[went] through the village” as the stories and language began to change, causing confusion, uncertainty, and “a splitting within [Bertha]” (20). The shifts and ruptures that the story describes recall Maracle’s description of colonization in “Oratory on Oratory,” in which the colonizer (re)produces the structure of his society through the dissemination of his worldview: “[t]he structure of Aristotelian story reproduces the structure of Aristotle’s society: hierarchical, patriarchal, and racist” (56). Maracle further explores colonization on the level of ideology in her essay “Black Robes,” which begins as follows: “[t]he children of our people must seek knowledge wherever life presents it. Black Robe was a new thing...[and w]ordlessly, she absorbed its newness” (62). This passage indicates that her people’s worldview—one that continually seeks out opportunities for spiritual growth and transformation—was one factor in their colonization. In taking a Christian name, then, Bertha’s grandfather did not necessarily consent to the colonization of his people, but instead agreed to their education in the new ways of the Black Robes. However, as Maracle states at the beginning of “Education,” “[w]hen our grandmothers sent their children to school it was with self-sufficiency and mastery over the production of things in mind. They did not realize that we would never be taught to create iron cooking pots from the ore of the earth” (*I Am Woman* 88). As this passage indicates, many Indigenous peoples did not realize that participating in the colonizer’s project

of “education” meant converting its society into one that was hierarchical, patriarchal, and racist. Indeed, as Maracle writes in “Bertha,” “No one connected the stripping of woman-power and its transfer to the priest as the basis for the sudden uselessness the people felt” (21). “Bertha,” then, traces the processes of conversion and colonization that took place over an extended period of time in Bertha’s community, thus leading her to the present, incomprehensible moment described in the story.

The central drama in the story is created by Bertha’s encounter with a young woman from her village. The young woman is frequently described in relation to her “mocking giggle” (18) and is named “Old Melly,” an irony given her age: “‘Hey Bertie,’ the giggle hollered out her nickname, unmindful of the woman’s age and her own youth. ‘I got some wine’” (19). Old Melly’s (mis)naming and her mockery of Bertha are indications that something is amiss in this relationship. In a further signification of this strangeness, Old Melly is described as having “a wide grin, exposing prematurely rotten teeth” (22). The description of her as being from Bertha’s village does not come until a couple of paragraphs later; this realization disturbs Bertha, who “struggled with how it came to be that this girl from her village was so foreign to her” (23). Bertha’s internal recollections overtake the narrative as she shares a bottle of wine with the girl, analyzing how she moved from her youth in which “[e]ach girl was born in the comfort of knowing how she would grow, bear children and age with dignity to become a respected matriarch” (19) to the current impasse she felt with this younger clanswoman. Indeed, Bertha’s own happy upbringing stands in contrast to the young woman’s rotten teeth: “[w]hat a cruel twist of fate that this girl, whose frame had not yet acquired the bulk that bearing children and rearing them on a steady diet of winter rice and summer wine creates, should be burdened with a toothless grin before her youth was over” (22-23). This passage again emphasizes the discrepancy in the women’s ages—furthering the impasse between them—while also indicating that the burdens Bertha has experienced in her lifetime have already begun to impact Old Melly, who is old before her time with a prematurely rotten mouth. What disturbs Bertha further is the realization that she was supposed to guide Old Melly towards a better life, the kind of life that Bertha had before moving to

the cannery, which causes her to realize her complicity in the young woman's degradation: "Bertha, once destined to have been this young woman's teacher, had nothing to give but stories—dim, only half-remembered and barely understood—brought her up short. Guilt drove her from her chair before the bottle was empty" (24). What happens to Bertha after this point in the narrative is mysterious, and when her nephew flatly reveals that "[s]he's dead" (26), there is no accompanying explanation or cause of death. Instead, the story seems to suggest that, at some level, Bertha failed Old Melly, the latter representing the supposed future of their people with prematurely rotten teeth. Indeed, the image of the future of her people as rotting from the inside was too much for Bertha to bear, causing her to disappear at the narrative level and in the world of the story.

If "Bertha" describes the centrality of women to Indigenous lifeways through the consequences of their absence, "Sojourner's Truth" describes what happens to a society that fails to realize it has been "stripp[ed] of its woman-power." Whereas "Bertha" was set in the not-so-distant past at the cusp of contact and when canneries were a more central mode of resource production, "Sojourner's Truth" appears to be set in the contemporary moment; although the story was published over twenty years ago, the connections it makes between racism, sexism, and environmental destruction still ring true today. As well, by giving this story the same name as the entire collection, "Sojourner's Truth" points towards the larger collection's major themes and functions as a "last word" on the entire text. The title of both the story and the collection invite further analysis. However, before commenting on the clear allusion to the women's rights advocate and slavery abolitionist Sojourner Truth, I wish to briefly meditate on what it means to *sojourn* or to be a *sojourner*. In its nominal form, the *OED Online* defines *sojourn* as "[a] temporary stay at a place," "a delay, a digression," and "a place of temporary stay" ("sojourn"). In its verbal form, *sojourn* is defined as "[t]o make a temporary stay in a place; to remain or reside for a time" and, although obsolete, "[t]o travel, journey" ("sojourn"). Finally, the *OED online* defines *sojourner* as "[o]ne who sojourns; a temporary resident" and "[a] guest or lodger; a visitor" ("sojourner"). The emphasis on the transitory within these definitions relates to the story's narrator, a recently deceased man making a

spiritual journey across time and space to realize the wrongs he has committed in his lifetime.

Further, speaking about the importance of names in the story, Renate Eigenbrod gestures towards the significance of the title of the larger collection: “Sojourner Truth is the most significant, as this name engendered the title of the story and of the whole collection. The slight modification of the name in the title, the addition of the possessive case, illustrates a slippage reflective of the complexity of the narration” (198). Even more, I argue that the larger collection positions Maracle the writer and her reader(s) as searchers for difficult but necessary truths. Certainly, this positioning resonates with Maracle’s larger project of transformation, as one who invites truth-seeking and seeks the truth herself in her writing. This positioning also recalls the Preface to *Sojourner’s Truth & Other Stories*, which unequivocally states that “[a]s listener/reader, you become the trickster, architect of great social transformation at whatever level you choose” (13). Indeed, both the story and the collection it is embedded in encourage the search for truth.

Although the reader is encouraged to search for truth and to make meaning however he or she chooses, one cannot extricate the name “Sojourner Truth” from the historical specificity of the woman who gave herself this name. Eigenbrod describes Sojourner Truth’s history thus:

The former slave woman, Sojourner Truth, gave herself that name when she became a travelling preacher. According to Margaret Washington, “At that point Isabella Van Wagenen became Sojourner Truth a woman whose proclaimed mission was to ‘sojourn’ the land and speak God’s ‘truth.’” Her ‘ecumenical philosophy’ was supported by women’s rights advocates, abolitionists, and spiritualists. (198-199)

Indeed, Truth’s self-(re) naming was inextricably bound up with her freedom and her desire to liberate others from racism and sexism. As Eigenbrod goes on, “[Truth] was a powerful orator and become widely known for her ‘Ar’n’t I a Woman’ oration, addressing the 1851 Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, which is also alluded to in Maracle’s story” (199). Maracle also references this famous address in *I Am Woman* as a means of identifying racist, Eurocentric attitudes in the mainstream feminist movement: “Sojourner Truth told you already, ‘Ain’t I a woman?’ She asked the white feminist movement on our behalf, a hundred years ago, and the white women of North America have yet to face the answer” (138). Maracle thus looks to Truth as someone who highlighted racism

in the women's movement and articulated an intersectional feminist position that easily parallels Maracle's Indigenous feminist praxis. Further, I would argue that the entire text, including the title, of *I Am Woman* is an answer to Truth's question "ain't I a woman?" that eliminates a white interlocutor, thus emphasizing the validity and integrity of Indigenous articulations of womanhood in their own right, rather than as always subordinate to white women's experiences. Thus, references to Sojourner Truth across Maracle's oeuvre, including in *Sojourner's Truth & Other Stories*, emphasize her importance as a foremother of a feminism that centers women of colour.

The numerous allusions to Sojourner Truth throughout Maracle's works also reveal the solidarity she expresses with Black struggles for liberation. In her essay "Porkchops and Applesauce," Maracle writes about the interlinked struggles against colonialism and imperialism that Indigenous people and Black people face: "[t]he land does not belong to Black people, but the fruit of their labour does. They alone have earned their place in the sun-dome of our future. Black people have paid for this country with blood, sweat and tears" (*I Am Woman* 120). Although a more thorough analysis of Maracle's coalitional politics is outside the scope of this chapter, her critiques of colonialism extend far beyond the plight of Indigenous peoples in North America. "Sojourner's Truth," for instance, references apartheid and the Soweto uprising (124) as well as the Scottsborough boys, nine young Black men who were "hung for a rape they were much too innocent to commit" (120). While acknowledging the different forms that colonialism and imperialism have taken for different groups of people, Maracle evokes different racial categories in order to deconstruct them. For instance, the following passage slips between racialization and homogenization:

The truth of me is a little unnerved by the realization that there are not as many living bodies gathered around my box as I expected... (At least there aren't any Chinamen.)... *Oh God, there are a hundred thousand Chinamen living in this city and I cannot count even one of them as a human being who will miss me...* There aren't any Indians or Blacks. *Oh God, there aren't even many white people here.* I lived for seventy years moving around in a sea of almost a million people and only fifty show up to bury my body and bid my spirit adieu. (122)

Indeed, although racial categories proliferate in this passage, the narrator simultaneously effaces these categories by referring to "human being[s]" and "almost a million people." As Eigenbrod writes,

“[t]he complex introduction of the character in relation to race by constructing and then deconstructing racial identifications, and in the end leaving his racial identity indeterminate, leads well into a story that crosses racial boundaries but exposes racism” (194). Deconstructing rhetorically violent categories while simultaneously exposing oppressive material realities, “Sojourner’s Truth” continually dances back and forth between ideologically constructed oppositions, not just at the level of race.

Maracle introduces numerous oppositions throughout the story, including life/death, spirit/body, truth/lies, and self/other. Instead of upholding these categories, however, she continually uses the narrative to reveal their constructedness. For instance, as Eigenbrod notes, “[t]he vantage point of this story is not anchored in any culture, race, or geography, since it is a spirit traveller’s vision; hence, no group of people is privileged” (196). Furthermore, employing a narrator with an indeterminate racial identity who travels across the boundary between life and death helps Maracle to “emphasize... oneness in [the] crossing [of] ontological boundaries” (Eigenbrod 195), thus recalling her own Stó:lō worldview. “In all these passages,” Eigenbrod writes, “Maracle illustrates the *real* impact of discourses by eliminating the divide between the concrete or physical and the abstract in her own discourse” (194). This statement echoes her essay “I Want to Write” in *I Am Woman*, in which Maracle states that, “Through all the stories [in this collection] runs a common thread: for us racism is not an ideology in the abstract, but a very real and practical part of our lives. The pain, the effect, the shame, are tangible, measurable and murderous” (4). As Susie O’Brien writes in her essay ““Please Eunice Don’t Be Ignorant’: The White Reader as Trickster in Lee Maracle’s Fiction,”: “For Maracle, the choice of whether to adopt a rhetorical position of interstitiality is eclipsed *by her concern mimetically to render the historical conditions by which marginality is not chosen but conferred on the native subject*” (90; my emphasis). Indeed, Maracle’s writing strikes a delicate balance between attempting to present the world from a Stó:lō perspective—thereby emphasizing ontological oneness—while also exposing the material realities of oppressive binaristic discourses. In this sense, the reader can only “become the trickster” to the extent Maracle allows him or her to, thus,

as O'Brien writes, "limiting the freedom of the white Trickster to transcend difference and denying the reader's freedom to assert a multivalent identity" (83). Part of the quest for truth inherent in *Sojourner's Truth & Other Stories* then is realizing the co-constructedness of one's racialized and gendered identity(ies) vis-à-vis other groups of people; it is only once one realizes the material effects of his or her construction that one can begin to chart a different course.

One of the most important connections that "Sojourner's Truth" makes is the one between violence against women and violence against the earth, and the phenomena are linked discursively at numerous points throughout the story. For instance, when the narrator is reflecting on his violent treatment of his wife, Emma, while he was living, he literally evokes a physical representation of this mistreatment: "*Shit*. And mountains of it appear from nowhere. Shitloads tumbling down from above me. A wall of crap" (123). Further down, the narrator realizes that he is swimming in shit not only because he treated Emma that way, but due to other acts of violence he committed in his life, as well: "I remember it now. Three million metric tonnes of untreated sewage dumped into the Fraser River, protested, of course, by a few crazies—college rejects, calling themselves eco-something or others. *Oh God. I wish I had been one of them*" (123). In its catalogue of the narrator's misdeeds, the story offers various insights into the motivations behind his behaviour. On the first page, the narrator describes his justification for beating Emma and their children: "'Spare the rod and spoil the child.' 'Don't let her get away with it.' Whoever heard of such a ridiculous proposition! ...In my newly dead state I try to rationalize one more time: if you don't subject the kid to a certain amount of brain rot, the kid is apt to object to even a minimum of authoritarian discipline. Hell is seeing the lie in all your excuses" (121). In his post-mortem state, the narrator begins to realize the maxims that guided his misconduct during his lifetime; from his new, more detached perspective, the narrator can finally realize the hollowness of his beliefs. Indeed, his participation in destructive ideologies is further explored when he meets Jesus, who clarifies the narrator's misconceptions: "*Oh Lord*. 'That's another thing, that whole business of lords has no roots in heavenly reality' [said Jesus]. At first I think he is kidding. But after I listen to it, I realize the whole notion of lords in heaven is ridiculous. It could not



have been contrived by ethereal souls” (124). In this quotation, the narrator begins to realize that his Christian worldview does not actually reflect “the natural world of the spirit” (127). This natural world of the spirit is hinted at later when the narrator is encouraging Emma to fight for her life against her second domestic abuser: “*Emma, hear the words whispered to thee by thy self, thy perfect self. Abide by thy perfect right to be*” (129; emphasis added). This passage finds its resonance in Maracle’s “Oratory on Oratory,” which describes the “good life” from a Stó:lō perspective as “rooted in recognition of the perfect right to be for all beings” (60). Any ideology that intrudes upon the perfect right to be for all beings—such as positing strict divides between language and phenomenon, self and other—thus distorts the inherent unity of being. Violence, then, occurs at discursive and material levels; ending violence against women means seeing it as inherently linked to violence against the earth, informed by and mutually informing colonialist, patriarchal discourses that subjugate both.

In both *I Am Woman* and *Sojourner’s Truth & Other Stories*, Maracle demonstrates that an Indigenous feminist ethos of writing takes shape when one blurs boundaries not only between genres, but also between what constitutes the personal and the political. Indeed, Maracle’s writing clearly enacts Indigenous feminist principles by centering the lives of Indigenous women and other beings threatened by colonial patriarchy, thus envisioning decolonial futures. Although not often the object of critical attention, her writing also includes descriptions of the erotic, both its pleasure and its difficulty: “It has taken so long to wade through the garbage heaped upon us by a racist colonial society to find love. It has taken us so long to really come together. I have brought pain and terror into our bedroom. My lover has brought pain and anger” (*I Am Woman* 31). Considering Maracle’s relative acclaim as an Indigenous feminist, the inclusion of the erotic in her writing thus begs the following questions: to what extent might Maracle consider the erotic an element of Indigenous feminist methodology? To what extent does she see the erotic as part of Indigenous movements towards sovereignty? How does her conceptualization of Stó:lō oratory as a non-hierarchical mode of discourse make room for queer articulations of gender and sexuality? In posing these questions, I do

not wish to suggest that Maracle has not already answered these questions elsewhere, but rather to create a dialogue about the role of the erotic and, moreover, queerness within Indigenous feminist discourse and, indeed, within larger decolonization efforts. I thus gesture to the work of Beth Brant, whose queer erotic writing poses similar questions of Indigenous feminism.

## Chapter 2: The Gift of Writing: Beth Brant's Decolonizing Erotics

In her life and writing, Beth Brant (Bay of Quinte Mohawk; 1941-2015) theorized a crucial form of intersectionality that challenged both racism within mainstream queer and feminist communities and homophobia and sexism within Indigenous communities. By writing about her lived experiences as “First Nations, lesbian, mixed-blood, urban, [and] not educated in the western ‘tradition’” (*Writing as Witness* 3), Brant highlighted the inherent sexism and homophobia of colonialism long before such discussions became commonplace in the academy or, indeed, in many social justice circles (in the mid-1980s and early 1990s). “Though too often unacknowledged in academic circles,” the editors of *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature* write, “the creative work of Native lesbian, bisexual, queer, and two-spirit feminists such as Brant [has been] instrumental to Native gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and two-spirit (GLBTQ2) identities and movements” (Driskill et al 1). For instance, Brant’s willingness to continually and openly name herself as a Mohawk lesbian is a significant challenge to the silencing effects of colonialism and heteropatriarchy, which Janice Gould (Concow) refers to as “disobedience” to “the patriarchal injunction that demands our silence and invisibility” (32). Further, as Craig Womack (Muscogee Creek-Cherokee) writes, Brant’s self-affirmation as lesbian “constitutes a radical departure for Indian literature in 1984—as it still does today, when Native writers continue to reap the economic benefits and literary awards that come from remaining in the closet” (368). Indeed, Brant uses her writing practice as a means of celebrating not only her identity as a Mohawk lesbian, but also her sexual desire: “Writing was/is Medicine. It is the only thing I know that brings complete wholeness while it is making a visitation. Making love comes close – orgasm, like writing, is a spiritual communication” (*Writing* 119). As this passage suggests, Brant’s importance as a queer Indigenous voice is also due to the ways she centers the erotic in her writing. As she writes further, “I have thought about the transformative power of sexuality. The *magic* of sex that has been trivialized by a dominant and empty society. Our sexuality is despised because sex is despised, unless shrouded in misogynist and/or racist winding sheets” (*Writing* 47). Not only does Brant affirm her existence under colonial

and heteropatriarchal regimes that attempt to erase her, she further challenges these regimes by centering and celebrating same-sex love in her writing, an equally threatening act to white North America's preference for the noble Indian Princess or the ignoble squaw—neither of which are ever lesbians, who are figured as non-existent under these regimes. Whether in her personal essays, poetry, or short stories, Brant continually evokes and celebrates queer Indigenous and Two Spirit identities and queer erotic desire as a challenge to the silencing tactics of larger systems of oppression. In doing so, her writing provides a powerful antidote to the fragmentary effects of colonialism and heteropatriarchy, thereby constituting the queer Indigenous feminist quality of her writing.

Like the work of Lee Maracle (Stó:lō), the political dimensions of Brant's writing derive from its interplay of form and content. Like Maracle's, Brant's writing is often multi-generic and defies conventional categorization. For instance, Brant's 1994 collection of "essay and talk" *Writing as Witness* constitutes a self-reflexive, auto/biographical body of theory akin to Maracle's *I Am Woman*, and Brant's collections of short stories, *Mohawk Trail* (1985) and *Food & Spirits* (1991), also incorporate poetry, memoir, and personal essays, much like Maracle's *Sojourner's Truth & Other Stories*. Nevertheless, the differences between these two writers are as important as their similarities. For instance, whereas Maracle's impetus for writing across genres is grounded in Stó:lō oratory, Brant's multi-generic writing seems informed as much by the multiple audiences and allegiances she navigates as it is by her specifically Mohawk culture. In other words, the political potency of Brant's writing derives more from the marginalized communities she writes for and about rather than from any theorizing of form. Certainly, Mohawk oral tradition provides a primary motivation for Brant's writing, which she frequently gestures towards in *Writing as Witness*:

To come from a people whose foremost way of communicating is through an oral tradition, I must choose each word carefully, aware of its significance, its truth, its beauty. As a writer, I must honour my ancestors, and the people I respect and love through the written way. Without writing I would be out of balance. Without the sacred I would be alone. (3)

I argue that Brant's grounding in Mohawk orality contributes to her multi-generic writing with the goal of reaching hitherto unreachable or, even, undesirable audiences. For instance, Brant continually

evokes her multiply constituted identity—as a Mohawk woman, a lesbian, a mother, a grandmother, working-class, and so on—as a gesture of inclusivity to the numerous communities she writes to and for, and she often creates fictional characters with similarly constituted identities and experiences. I argue that she does this as a means of resisting patriarchal and colonial regimes that dictate who is and is not worthy of being written about, what is and is not worthy of being considered “literary.” Reading the work of Acoma Pueblo writer Simon Ortiz, for instance, allowed Brant to “know for the first time, that it was possible to write about the things that were so familiar to me – working-class Indian people interacting with their white neighbours, making small changes in the imperialist’s doctrine of the history between Red and white. This is the way my family had talked, had worked, had lived” (40). Indeed, Brant writes what she knows and, in doing so, eschews Eurocentric hierarchies about what is literary and who has access to literature. In this way, the political dimensions of Brant’s writing derive not simply from how she writes, but also *who* and to *whom* she writes.

I also argue that Brant’s multi-generic writing is informed by the intersectionality she theorizes. In describing her identity as multiply constituted and complex, Brant demonstrates how the labels used to describe her are inflected by their proximity to other labels; indeed, her identity must be seen as not only Mohawk or lesbian or working-class, but as all of these things at once, thus changing the nature of the individual labels in relation to the complex whole. Genre functions similarly in Brant’s writing, particularly in *Writing as Witness* and her short story collections, *Mohawk Trail* and *Food & Spirits*; in these texts, she does not employ only the short story form or poetry or memoir, but she does all of these things at once, thus creating a hybrid, intersectional form of writing. Implicit in this rhetorical mode is the critique of conventional generic categories as insufficient means of articulating complex identities and diverse worldviews—which Maracle described as her Stó:lō sensibility—and in order to treat such complexity and diversity ethically, one must incorporate elements from multiple generic categories. Brant’s writing thus enacts a more ethical, intersectional

form of writing that better accounts for the complexity of not only her identity and lived experience, but also the identities and lived experiences of those she writes about.

In my analysis of Maracle's work, I also argued that the political dimensions of her work derive from its Indigenous feminist elements. Drawing from Elizabeth Archeluta's essay, "'I Give You Back': Indigenous Women Writing to Survive," I argued that the political potency of Maracle's writing comes from how it names her oppressions, reinvents the enemy's language, and dialogues with other Indigenous women, which Archeluta characterizes as important elements of Indigenous feminist theory: "Indigenous women demonstrate that theory happens when we speak out and voice opposition to oppression and the many injustices we have experienced. An Indigenous feminist ethos of responsibility compels Indigenous women to write and speak to ensure survival, to empower, and, most of all, to heal..." (90). Using these same criteria, Brant's writing similarly exemplifies an Indigenous feminist ethos. Archeluta references Brant specifically, saying that Brant's anthology *A Gathering of Spirit: A Collection by North American Women* (1984) "became a way for her to find women like herself whom the forces of colonialism have silenced" (97), noting further that "Brant's words express a tremendous need to write or create, a common refrain voiced by Indigenous women" (97). However, Archeluta's article does not mention Brant's queerness and can thus only partially account for the theoretical impact of her writing, which Brant suggests in her essay "Giveaway: Native Lesbian Writing": "Native women's writing is a grief-filled art. And we have much to grieve—our losses of land, of people, of children, of language, of religion—yet the work is not bitter or mournful. It is testimony. *I suggest that Native lesbian writing brings an added dimension to grief and celebration*" (946; my emphasis). "When one is a Native lesbian," Brant writes further, "the desire to connect all becomes an urgent longing. Faced with homophobia from our own communities, faced with racism and homophobia from the outsiders who hold semblances of power over us, we feel that desire to connect in a primal way" (*Giveaway* 945). Brant's writing thus demonstrates a deeper theoretical and political significance when considered in relation to homophobia and heteronormativity.

The colonial, patriarchal, and heteronormative backdrops against which Brant writes also constitute the political character of her work. Indeed, much of the power of Brant's writing comes from its fierce articulations of and protests against homophobia in relation to racism and sexism and, moreover, her refusal to be silenced by these interdependent systems of oppression. For instance, she states in *Writing as Witness* that, "I want to say that homophobia is the eldest son of racism and one does not exist without the other. Our community suffers from both – externally and internally" (77). "[P]erhaps this is the key to understanding homophobia within my Nation," she writes further, "[t]he love that was natural in our world, has become unnatural as we become consumed by the white world and the values therein. Our sexuality has been colonized, sterilized, whitewashed" (*Writing* 59-60). As these passages indicate, Indigenous systems of gender and sexuality continue to be primary sites of colonization, leading to disproportionate violence not only against Indigenous women but also against queer Indigenous and Two Spirit peoples. As Lisa Tatonetti writes in *The Queerness of Native American Literature*:

Understandings of gender and sexuality in North American Indigenous communities differed significantly from those of the Spanish, French, and Anglo conquistadores, explorers, missionaries, travelers, settlers, and early anthropologists whose documentations of encounter provide much of the written records of these historical periods. Many Indigenous communities recognized third and fourth genders and acknowledged roles for tribal members whose gender expression existed outside a naturalized male/female binary....These complex gender roles and performances countered dominant European gender ideologies, and thus, as times, explorers and settlers responded to such differences with horrifying violence. (x)

Cherokee two-spirit scholar Qwo-Li Driskill attests further to the ongoing colonization of Indigenous gender and sexuality in his essay "Stolen From Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic,":

A colonized sexuality is one in which we have internalized the sexual values of dominant culture. The invaders continue to enforce the idea that sexuality and non-dichotomous genders are a sin, recreating sexuality as illicit, shocking, shameful, and removed from any positive spiritual context. Queer sexualities and genders are degraded, ignored, condemned, or destroyed. As people often raised under dominant culture's values through our homes, televisions, or teachers, Two-Spirit erotic lives continue to be colonized. (54)

Brant prefigures the ideas of Tatonetti and Driskill in her essay “Physical Prayers,” writing that, “[t]hose first whitemen who stumbled across our world had no experience of how we thought and believed. They couldn’t grasp the concept of...[p]eoples who were not ashamed or afraid of bodily functions and sexual acts....The whiteman saw none of this except for the unashamed celebration of sexuality” (*Writing* 59). Brant’s keen awareness of the intersections between racism, sexism, and homophobia demonstrate the political importance of her writing; moreover, her awareness of these intersections constitutes a methodology and a theory for decolonizing queer Indigenous and Two Spirit identities and experiences.

In considering Brant’s writing as not only Indigenous feminist theory, but also as *queer* Indigenous feminist theory, I turn to Arianne Burford’s useful essay “‘Her Mouth is Medicine’: Beth Brant and Paula Gunn Allen’s Decolonizing Queer Erotics.” Burford begins her essay with the following assertion about Brant’s and Gunn Allen’s work: “[both] provide a theory about how story and the erotic can destabilize colonial, heteropatriarchal power structures to envision healing from historical and present day traumas rooted in violence against Indigenous land and people” (168). Here, as in my analysis of Maracle’s writing, theory is liberated from its white patriarchal strictures to include stories of survival and continuance from the margins. In writing about Indigenous, queer, and queer Indigenous communities, Brant therefore “express[es] a methodology—and thus a theory—for hope, survival, and change, spoken into existence through language. It has the power to transform, reshape, resist, and revision the world” (Burford 169).

Furthermore, Brant’s attention to the interconnections between colonialism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity reveal the Eurocentrism of much contemporary Queer Theory, which often fails to include colonialism as an explanatory frame. In her essay “Recovery and Transformation,” Brant acknowledges the inadequacy of mainstream queer theories and movements to account for “[a] history that involves so much loss”: “a hegemonic gay and lesbian movement cannot encompass our history – history that involves so much loss. Nor can a hegemonic gay and lesbian movement give us tools to heal our broken Nations” (*Writing* 45). Brant’s analysis thus demonstrates, in Burford’s



words, “the importance of building alliances across, between, and from within Queer Theory and Native Studies...far beyond mere inclusion of Indigenous stories, histories, and realities in Queer Theory” (Burford 176). Indeed, the emphasis on healing and survival as political acts in Brant’s writing also constitutes its importance as queer Indigenous theory, actively “imagin[ing] a future where queers and Indigenous people, and queer Indigenous people are not ‘supposed to die out’ or ‘go away to nowhere’ by suicide, assimilation, erasure, lack of recognition, academic exclusion, or other forms of violence” (Burford 168). Furthermore, as Tatonetti notes, writing such as Brant’s “mark[s] a shift from literary criticism *about* queer Native and Aboriginal literatures to a Two-Spirit/queer Native *theory* undertaken *by and for* queer Indigenous peoples” (26). Thus, not only does Brant’s writing make queer inroads into Indigenous feminist theory, it also lays the groundwork for the flowering of contemporary queer Indigenous studies.

The primary motivation for Brant’s writing is perhaps best encapsulated by the following statement: “Two-Spirit writers are merging the selves that colonialism splits apart” (*Writing* 18). For Brant, colonialism is fundamentally “a shattering of our cultural and community systems” that “has often led to a split within our individual selves and souls” (*Writing* 68). She writes further that “evils” such as “alcoholism, drug addiction, disrespect for women, incest, suicide and homophobia...are the result of the self-loathing that imperialism has forced into our minds” (*Writing* 68-69). Thus, to write as a Mohawk lesbian, about being a Mohawk lesbian and about other queer Indigenous and Two Spirit peoples is to use language to bring wholeness to fragmented selves and communities. As she writes in “Writing as Witness”: “I am making communion with my people, with Creator, with myself – all those pieces becoming one. All working together. All dancing and feasting together. It is *why* I write. To make a whole. To take these splits forced on us by racism, classism, homophobia, colourism, and baste them together. To weave a cloth that holds our dreams and our stories” (*Writing* 81). One important way that Brant uses language holistically is by incorporating Mohawk oral stories into her writing: “It is said that the Mohawk language was first spoken by a woman, and it became

her responsibility to teach all who came from her womb. Racism and homophobia were unknown words to her and her descendants” (54). Brant writes further that,

I don't know if all First Nations had words or expressions to connote their Two-Spirit members. I cannot find a word in Mohawk that describes me, however, Mohawk is a woman language; if gender is not described in other terms, it is assumed to be female. Perhaps a Two-Spirit was not an *uncommon* enough occurrence to be granted a special world. And perhaps a gay man was known by a female term, and a lesbian like myself was a woman among many other women. I *am* certain that I am not the first Mohawk lesbian to walk this Earth, and that certainty has helped ease the pain I feel when confronted by another Native who discounts me because of my sexuality. (*Writing* 58)

As these statements imply, one of Brant's main points in her writing is that sexism, homophobia, and transphobia were not part of Indigenous traditions prior to contact because these realities were not reflected in the Mohawk language or oral tradition, thus giving her writing an powerful oral precedent. Driskill echoes this notion by stating that, “[i]t is in our stories, including our written literatures, that I search for meaning and reflection of my Two-Spirit body in order to survive in a world in which people like me are routinely killed” (56). Brant's work is thus a testament to the power of words and language to bring wholeness and healing amidst fragmentary systems of oppression.

Brant's linguistic prowess is further analyzed in Linda Cullum's essay “Survival's Song: Beth Brant and the Power of the Word,” which describes how Brant's writing combats the silencing effects of colonialism and heteropatriarchy. Whether through the erasure of voices outside of the norm or through “the ways in which those beyond the dominant culture may silence themselves out of fear or shame” (131), Cullum suggests that Brant's keen awareness of the silencing tactics of dominant culture comes from her complex identity as “First Nations, lesbian, mixed-blood, urban, [and] not educated in the western ‘tradition’” (*Writing* 3). Brant's writing thus resonates with Janice Gould's description of her own lesbian Concow writing as “...an epistle from the borderlands, that liminal space of the Other, marked by the absence of legitimacy, security, and the known facts of the universe” (32). Indeed, the marginalizing and silencing of Brant's voice arguably contributed to her beginning to write later in life: “[n]ot coming to writing and public speaking herself until middle

age,” Cullum writes, “Brant understands the fundamental necessity of being able to tell one’s own story. Either directly or metaphorically, this understanding informs virtually everything Brant writes” (133). If silence is deadly, the opportunity to tell one’s story in one’s own voice is life-giving, even life-saving. As Brant writes, “I never planned on being a writer. It was not even a fantasy of mine. Born in an urban Mohawk family, story was a given, not something to search for or discover. But the gift of *writing* came long after my birth. Forty years after” (*Writing* 106). Brant also writes about the pain of isolation of as a Mohawk lesbian writer and the difficulty of finding others like her:

When I first began to write in 1981, I had no models for being an Indian lesbian, much less one who wrote. I tumbled and wrote in aloneness. And somewhere inside I knew that *alone* did not mean *lonely*. I 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. (*Giveaway* 945)

Again, Brant’s willingness to both name herself and claim the words used to describe her—Mohawk, lesbian, writer, etc.—constitutes the restorative power of her writing. As Cullum writes further, “Throughout her writings, Brant demonstrates that although the loss of one’s voice can be quite literally deadly, when words can be found, their powers are restorative and, indeed, ‘magical’” (134). Thus, after combatting the silencing effects of colonialism and heteropatriarchy for most of her life, Brant reclaims and reinvents the enemy’s language (Archeluta 91) as a means of reclaiming and restoring herself and the communities she writes for.

It is precisely Brant’s awareness of the dangers of being silenced that causes her to characterize writing by other Indigenous people, particularly other queer Indigenous women, as a gift. In writing about the work of Vickie Sears and the aforementioned Gould, also Indigenous lesbian writers, Brant states that, “...what inspires me and touches me are the acts of love in [their] writing. Taking words learned from the enemy, beading them together to make a gift of beauty, is a giveaway of lasting love” (“Giveaway” 945). Explicitly connecting her lesbian identity to her identity as a writer, Brant also writes that, “I accept that writing is a gift brought to me. And being a writer is not a separate entity from the rest of me” (*Writing* 80). These passages suggest that Brant understands this gift as one of voice, recognition, and healing in a larger context of silence, erasure, and violence.

Although she does not say this explicitly, she clearly suggests that the myriad, intersecting systems of oppression that threaten one's erasure make the gift of that person's writing all the more significant. For instance, Brant dedicates an entire essay to conceptualizing Indigenous lesbian writing as a gift, a gift which is threatened by racism, sexism, *and* homophobia. In "Giveaway: Native Lesbian Writers," Brant describes the relief she experiences when reading the words of other Indigenous lesbians: "...I come to the place where past, present, and future speak. An Indian place. A place to call myself and to call the spirits. Being a Native lesbian is like living in the eye of the hurricane—terrible, beautiful, filled with sounds and silences, the music of life-affirmation and the disharmony of life-despising. To balance, to create in this midst is a gift of honour and respect" (944). Brant also expresses her anger about how the mainstream too often ignores these women's voices, particularly the publishing industry: "And if you ask why you have not read or heard of these women, ask it of 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" (946). Indeed, she views the ongoing marginalization of queer Indigenous women's voices as a continuation of colonial violence, which forces queer Indigenous and Two Spirit writers back into the closet, "[k]eeping ourselves secret, separating parts of ourselves in order to get heard and/or published" (*Writing* 16). Not only has this enforced splitting "been detrimental to our communities and to our younger sisters and brothers who long for gay and lesbian role models" (*Writing* 16), Brant argues that it forecloses the possibility for more complete decolonization efforts. "[Being a lesbian] makes me more complete in myself, and a whole woman is of much better use to my communities than a split one," she writes, continuing that, "[w]riting with our *whole* selves is an act that can re-vision our world" (*Writing* 57; 17). Indeed, Brant wants to help her communities heal from the destructive effects of racism, sexism, and homophobia, which can only happen if she herself is healed. In this way, Brant advocates for the centrality of queer Indigenous and Two Spirit lives, experiences, and desires at the center of decolonization efforts, lest these movements perpetuate divisive colonial practices.

The primacy of the erotic in Brant's writing is one of her most significant contributions to queer Indigenous studies and to the field of Indigenous studies more broadly. As Womack writes, "I believe that Beth Brant excels at erotic writing—specifically, naming the creative possibilities of same-sex desire...[and] when Brant writes about same-sex couples their individual personalities emerge and challenge generic assumptions about entire races of people" (367). Indeed, incorporating queer erotics into her writing becomes a means for Brant to revise dominant (mis)understandings of queer Indigenous identities, including her own. Further, in writing about the erotic, Brant demonstrates a keen understanding of the discursive construction of her identity as a Mohawk lesbian, which she attempts to reconstruct and reclaim: "As a lesbian, I know that the dominant culture only sees me as a sexually uninhibited creature. As a Native lesbian, I know the dominant culture does not see me at all, or sees an aberration of a 'dead' culture" (*Writing* 56). The complications of Brant's position proliferate when the heteronormative discourses that reduce her queerness to perverse sex acts intersect with racist and sexist discourses that confine Indigenous womanhood to either virginal Indian Princesses or squaw sluts. Indeed, these interlocking systems of oppression make it nearly impossible to find one's voice without it being distorted or destroyed by the dominant culture's moralistic gaze, which Brant expresses in the following: "To write or not to write is a painful struggle for us. Everything we write can be used against us. *Everything we write will be used against us*" (*Writing* 53). Gould echoes this statement: "I am aware that speaking about a lesbian American Indian erotics, and even more in speaking about lesbian love, I am being disloyal and disobedient to the patriarchal injunction that demands our silence and invisibility. If we would only stay politely and passively in the closet, and not flaunt our sexuality, we could be as gay and abnormal as we like" (32). As these passages suggest, existing and writing as a queer Indigenous woman is a site of profound violence, both physically and symbolically; that the erotic continues to occupy a central position in Brant's writing thus testifies to the political necessity of her work.

Brant's erotic writing takes on even greater political significance when considered alongside the continued marginalization of Indigenous women's erotic writing, which Deborah Miranda

describes in her essay “Dildos, Hummingbirds, and Driving Her Crazy: Searching for American Indian Women’s Love Poetry and Erotics.” Miranda attributes the ongoing exclusion of Indigenous women’s erotic writing, firstly, to the preponderance of stereotypical depictions of Indigenous peoples’ sexuality: “For American Indians, the constant barrage of literary representations depicting Native men as ‘buckskin rippers’ and Native women as either squaw sluts or Indian princesses left very little room for any kind of acceptable expressions of personal sexuality in the few literary venues open to us” (140). Secondly, she describes how the imposition of foreign systems of gender and sexuality continues to constitute a form of trauma that adversely affects Indigenous peoples’ relationship with their sexuality on individual and communal levels:

Self-hatred or self-fear is often combined with a kind of erotic starvation brought about by histories specific to a community’s experience, such as...the strict separation of boys and girls during long stints at Indian boarding-school (such distances not only changed Native courtship and coming-of-age experiences, but also inscribed a European, Christianized dogma regarding the ‘dirtiness’ of Native bodies and sexuality in general). (140)

Perhaps most significantly to Brant’s writing, Miranda expresses how, in the larger context of colonial and heteropatriarchal violence, erotic fulfillment is often seen as nonessential: “Reluctantly,” she writes, “we could conclude that the erotic is a luxury, something which must be earned *after*, not during, a more primal struggle for physical survival; and which, in many cases, can never be earned at all” (141). The significance of Brant’s writing, then, lies in its affirmation of the erotic as a decolonizing force; sexuality is not a luxury to be earned but rather an integral practice of survival—anything less would be reenacting colonial violence. Further, as Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) writes, “To ignore sex and embodied pleasure in the cause of Indigenous liberation is to ignore one of our greatest resources. It is to deny us one of our most precious gifts. Every orgasm can be an act of decolonization” (106). Indeed, Brant’s erotic writing prepares the ground for more fruitful articulations of sovereignty vis-à-vis sexuality, which is one of her writing’s greatest strengths.

Brant’s writing thus unites Driskill’s concept of a *Sovereign Erotic* with Scott Richard Lyons’ notion of *rhetorical sovereignty*, the latter defined as “the inherent right and ability of peoples to

determine their own communicative needs and desires...[and] to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse” (449). “When I speak of a Sovereign Erotic,” Driskill writes, “I’m speaking of an erotic wholeness healed and/or healing from the historical trauma that First Nations people continue to survive, rooted within the histories, traditions, and resistance struggles of our nations” (51). Significantly, Driskill states that, “I do not see the erotic as a realm of personal consequence only. Our relationships with the erotic impact our larger communities, just as our communities impact our sense of the erotic. A Sovereign Erotic relates our bodies to our nations, traditions, and histories” (52). Brant’s work exemplifies a commitment to writing a Sovereign Erotic into existence through her continued insistence on sexuality, especially queer sexuality, as an inherent and honorable element of Indigenous lifeways. In “creating literatures that reflect Sovereign Erotics,” Driskill states, writers like Brant are “participat[ing] in the process of radical, holistic decolonization” (58). Further, like Lyons, Brant locates cultural violence at the scene of writing, such as at boarding schools or residential schools: “Through the use and enforcement of [the Bible] those written words, everything that *we* had known was shattered. Our world was splintered, and we are left with the excruciating task of finding the pieces of our world and making it right again, making it balanced again” (*Writing* 50). Writing thus becomes an opportunity for Brant to correct misconceptions about her communities, which she describes in the following: “when 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” (*Writing* 54). The erotic is central to Brant’s articulations of sovereignty and decolonization, which further unsettles the terms of colonialist heteropatriarchal discourse; in doing so, her writing prioritizes a hitherto marginalized mode of discourse, thus writing a Sovereign Erotic into existence.

An important intertext for understanding Brant’s erotic writing is Audre Lorde’s essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” Like Driskill—who draws from Lorde directly for his definition of a Sovereign Erotic—Lorde understands the erotic as not simply referring to sexuality but, rather, as encompassing a larger mode of being: “When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion

of the life-force of women<sup>2</sup>; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (55). When considered alongside Brant’s articulations of colonization as distorting “[t]he love that was natural in our world” (59), Lorde’s description of how oppression—specifically, patriarchy—constricts one’s life-force is illuminating: “In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information in our lives” (53). Reading Brant’s work through the lens of Lorde’s erotic-as-power is important given Brant’s significant contributions to other women/queer-of-colour movements. For instance, Tatonetti writes that, “the best-known early articulation of Two-Spirit concerns can be found in the influential women/queer of color anthologies that emerged in the 1980s” (5). I can only gesture towards the importance of this coalition-building to demonstrate Brant’s participation in other activist communities and discursive productions.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, Lorde’s definition of the erotic closely aligns with a recurring image in Brant’s writing: a sacred place from which writing and words flow. As Lorde writes, “the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough” (54). For instance, Brant writes that, “I feel that...sacred silences are the places *from* which we write. That place that has not been touched or stained by imperialism and hatred. That sacred place” (*Writing* 20). Given the intimate ways that Brant describes the connection between her writing practice and her sexuality, I suggest that Lorde’s definition of the

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<sup>2</sup> Although Lorde’s article presumably refers to cisgender women and their myriad oppressions under patriarchy, numerous writers have since adapted the terms of her discourse to encompass all genders and sexualities oppressed under colonial heteropatriarchy, including transgender and non-binary identities, which is the usage I intend here.

<sup>3</sup> In *Writing as Witness*, Brant describes working with Adrienne Rich and Michelle Cliff on a special issue of *Sinister Wisdom* dedicated to Indigenous women’s writing (75-76). Furthermore, it is almost certain that Brant would have read feminist anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, which Tatonetti notes features the writing of five queer writers who identify either as Native or Native and Latina, including Barbara Cameron (Lakota) and Chrystos (Menominee), both of whom Brant has frequently written about (6).



erotic as “a well of replenishing and provocative force” corresponds to the sacred space that Brant so often writes about—this internal place that has not been colonized and is therefore able to provide reliable and much sought-after access to personal and collective truths. With respect to with this place, I think Brant would agree with Lorde when she writes that, “[r]ecognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama” (59). In these ways, Brant’s writing further corresponds with Driskill’s definition of a Sovereign Erotic as a decolonizing mode of being.

One can trace Brant’s commitment to writing a Sovereign Erotic into being in her piece “A Long Story.” This story, which first appeared in Brant’s inaugural collection of writing, *Mohawk Trail*, describes the plight of two Indigenous women whose children have been taken away from them. The first is an Indigenous woman living in 1890 whose children have been taken to residential school, and the second is an Indigenous woman living in 1978 whose daughter has been removed from her care because she is a lesbian. By envisioning this transhistorical connection, Brant draws attention to the continuation of racist, patriarchal systems that have enabled the removal of Indigenous children from their communities in the past and during the story’s present albeit in different institutional guises, as implied by both the title of the story and the section of *Mohawk Trail* that the story appears in, entitled “Long Stories.” This connection also demonstrates the ways that both Indigenous and same-sex parents are frequently characterized as “unfit” for raising children by the settler state. As Burford writes, “the format of the story demonstrates that the building of the U.S. colonialist regime was founded on cultural genocide and a particular construction of Indigenous people and family as other to the proper heteronormative U.S. white citizen and family” (174). In this way, Brant simultaneously demonstrates settler colonialism’s dependence on heteronormativity to define who is and is not considered fit to be a good parent or, rather, a good *mother*. This story is particularly adept at demonstrating the specific ways that colonialism and heteropatriarchy discipline and punish Indigenous mothers, both gay and straight, as reflected by the disproportionate burdens each woman faces in the story compared to the fathers of their children. For instance, the unnamed

woman describes herself as “a dead woman” who has “stopped talking” (77) and Mary, the lesbian mother, is introduced by a recurring nightmare of her daughter dying: “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” (78). Indeed, the mental and emotional distress that both women experience stands in contrast to the characterization of the male characters, who are dark or non-existent figures. The story thus paints a picture of the myriad losses endured by specifically Indigenous mothers through the heteronormative conditioning of colonialism.

The story also demonstrates the rhetorical violence of colonialism and heteronormativity. For the unnamed mother, this violence is encapsulated by the word “civilized”: “We signed papers, the agent said. This gave them rights to take our babies. It is good for them, the agent said. It will make them civilized, the agent said. I do not know *civilized*” (77). The unnamed mother’s bitterness and suspicion regarding “civilization” is thinly veiled in this passage, though her suspicion and bitterness quickly turn to rage and grief upon receiving a letter purportedly written by her children from boarding school: “The agent was here to deliver a letter. I screamed at him and sent curses his way....This letter hurts my hand. It is written in their hateful language. It is evil, but there is a message for me” (79-80). Her suspicions are confirmed upon reading the letter, which reveals that her children’s names, She Sees Deer and He Catches The Leaves, have been effaced by the colonial education system: “I am confused. This letter is from two strangers with the names Martha and Daniel. They say they are learning civilized ways” (80). Seeing nothing of her children reflected in the duplicitous language of the letter, the mother quickly tears it to pieces and burns it. For Mary, the other mother in the story, the word “lesbian” has the potential to be similarly destructive: “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*” (85). In the story, the word “lesbian” has been used coercively by patriarchal institutions to take Mary’s daughter away from her; indeed, Mary’s existence as a lesbian is too threatening to both her ex-husband and the state to go unpunished. Unfortunately, this reality is all too common for lesbian women and, as Gould writes, “this is not an

unusual predicament for lesbian mothers, many of whom choose to live secretive or celibate lives if they fear their ex-husbands will threaten to have the courts remove the children from their care and home” (37). That Mary also receives a letter from her daughter, just as the unnamed mother receives a letter from her children, further solidifies the connection between heteropatriarchal and colonial violence. As with the first letter in the story, Mary’s letter is made “ugly” by the lies it contains: “I open the letter....She doesn’t ask about Ellen. I imagine her father standing over her, coaxing her, coaxing her. The letter becomes ugly. I tear it in bits and scatter them out the window” (82). Indeed, the rhetorical violence committed by the words “civilized” and “lesbian” have all too material effects for both mothers in the story, who are physically overcome with grief over the loss of their children. Nevertheless, that both women also tear up the hateful words contained in the letters demonstrates their ongoing resistance to colonial and heteropatriarchal regimes.

For Cullum, these parallel storylines suggest that, “our language—indeed, our very selves—becomes false and ugly when the words we speak are not our own, when they are forced on us, external to our real center, silencing our own truths” (132-133). The story also demonstrates that words that have been used to destructive ends have the potential to be reclaimed as a means of healing. For instance, at one point in the story, Mary’s lover wonders aloud if she should disappear so that Mary can “attempt to erase her lesbian identity and get custody of her child” (Burford 174). In a powerful affirmation of the erotic, Mary insists on Ellen staying with her, encouraging her to claim their identities through lovemaking:

She comes to me full in flesh. My hands are taken with the curve and soft roundness of her. She covers me with the beating of her heart. Heat is centering me. I am grounded by the peace between us...Our bodies join. Our hair braids together on the pillow...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 center of my soul is speaking to her, I am sliding into her, her mouth is medicine.... (82-83)

The claiming of a lesbian identity through queer sexual desire to offer greater access to healing in the world of the story; the other, unnamed mother’s relationship with her husband is emotionally unsupportive because of his drinking. Indeed, the healing nature of a specifically queer sexuality is

supported on a linguistic level in the above passage. As Burford writes, “Healing language such as ‘her mouth is medicine,’ ‘removing pain,’ and ‘her heart is the earth’ roots them together and to the land as part of their resistance to the colonialist legal system and its heterosexist institution of marriage” (175). Further, referencing the healing language in above passage, Cullum writes:

...words are brought forth in a climate of comfort, and through their very expression, they reify and continue the atmosphere of love and safety from which they issued. This vision of language as dependent on, and safeguarding, the connections that potentially exist for all of us--with ourselves, our heritage, our words and stories, and with one another--is foregrounded in Brant’s work by a number of interconnected metaphors, taken, not surprisingly, from the world of nature and humanity. (136)

Furthermore, by accessing this “place of power,” Brant’s characters are also able to access or create a sense of wholeness, which is signified by the interweaving of hair and of bodies.<sup>4</sup> In this way, the women’s love-making is characterized as a decolonizing force, fighting a system that tells them their love is not an appropriate basis for a family” (Burford 175). Even more, the power of naming and claiming lesbian sexual desire recalls Brant’s own willingness to name and claim her identity, which speaks powerfully to the queer Indigenous feminist ethos of her work.

Brant’s perspective on the healing power of sexuality is explored further in her story “The Fifth Floor, 1967,” which also appears in *Mohawk Trail*. This story details a mixed-race Indigenous woman’s experience in a psychiatric institution after her husband has taken her there for her aberrant behaviour: “Why I am here has something to do with losing myself. I used to be there—a young wife and mother in my house—washing dishes, bleaching diapers, reading a book, watching TV. Then I lost me. My husband tells me I am not myself” (69). The narrator reveals that her difficulties come from being filled with salt: “Inside me there is salt. Drying up fluid...I feel the salt moving inside my body moving through my veins. I am surprised I am not dead. Dried like a fish, salted and ready to

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<sup>4</sup> The metaphor of weaving is an oft-used one to describe Indigenous practices of storytelling. For instance, Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo) discusses storytelling in these terms in “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective”: “...[W]hen I use the term storytelling... I’m talking about something that comes out of an experience and an understanding of that original view of creation - that we are all part of a whole; we do not differentiate or fragment stories and experiences...The stories are always bringing us together, keeping this whole together, keeping this family together, keeping this clan together” (160-61). Thus, Brant can be understood as firmly rooting sexuality, particularly lesbian sexuality, in Indigenous storytelling traditions.

eat” (69-71). As the story continues, the narrator reveals that her husband would rape her when she would “not allow [him] to fuck her” because “she told him his penis would shrivel and die from the wet salt [inside her],” and that she would also avoid touching her children because she was afraid that the salt would scar their skin (72). Although her stay in the mental institution transfers ownership of her from her husband to the hospital—signified by the “white piece of paper” he signed (70)—it provides her an opportunity to recover herself away from the white, patriarchal strictures of home-life, a place that she is continually bleaching and washing (69, 72). Between the bed checks at the hospital, the narrator reveals how masturbation becomes a way for her to re-build a relationship with herself:

I explore the body of this woman. Hastily. Her breasts are flaccid and numb. I punch her nipples, feel them rise. I place my hands at her waist, feel her ribs. Her rib cage is wide and round, like staves of a basket. Her thighs are cold and thin. I stroke the soft place of her inner thighs with both hands. Her skin becomes warmer. She trembles with each brush of my fingers. The hair of her cunt is straight and heavy and thick. I touch the slit, the opening of her cunt, the inside of her. She is wet and open. Her clitoris pulses under my finger. I touch her there. Try to find her. She is wet and open. I taste her off my finger. She is tart, like sweat and medicine. (72-73)

Through masturbation or “self-lovemaking” (Brant *Writing* 17), the narrator begins reclaiming herself; her sexuality is healing and functions as a primary connection to a self untouched by sexism and racism. As she states upon her release from the hospital, “I am taking the woman home with me. It is our secret. She keeps me alive” (75). The dissociating effects of colonialist, patriarchal discourse can thus be combatted by an embrace of one’s sexuality.

This story also points to the irony of sending someone to a mental institution to heal when the root causes of her “illness” can be traced to her institutionalization, first within her marriage and then second at the hospital; indeed, both institutions cause the woman to experience a psychic splitting. It appears that the only healing the unnamed woman truly needs to experience is union with her body and her erotic power, recalling Archeluta’s statement that Indigenous feminism “reject[s] paradigms that ask us to disassociate ourselves from our lived experiences...” (89). In this way, Brant demonstrates the continuation of colonial violence in white institutions. Furthermore, in exploring her

own body as if it were the body of another woman, as the above quoted passage suggests, the unnamed woman's healing must be located in its proximity to queer desire. This moment is reminiscent of Brant's own discovery of her sexuality: "In my thirty-third year of life I was a feminist, an activist and largely occupied with discovering all things female. And one of those lovely discoveries was that I could love women sexually, emotionally, and spiritually – and all at once" (57). Although the story does not explicitly name its queer desire, its queer subtext provides a different reading of the following line: "I am taking the woman home with me. It is our secret. She keeps me alive" (75). The secret is the unnamed woman's queerness, a realization that she must keep hidden from both the hospital and her husband lest they destroy the one thing that will keep her alive, her erotic self-knowledge. The story thus indirectly reflects Brant's own history of an abusive marriage, only fully claiming her lesbian identity once the marriage ended.

Brant's writing also makes explicit the connection between sexuality and sovereignty in her story "This Place" from her second collection of writing, *Food & Spirits*. In this story, David, a young gay Mohawk man, returns to his home reserve to die after contracting AIDS in the city, where he fled after experiencing homophobia from his Mohawk community: "It seemed like I had to make a choice to be gay or to be an Indian," David expresses (70). One way that Brant makes the connection between sexuality and Nationhood is by embedding a passage from Mohawk nationalist leaders Tyendinaga (Joseph) and Molly Brant in the text, which Joseph, a Two-Spirit medicine man, gives to David as a means of helping him come to terms with his mortality (57). Craig Womack attests to the significance of this inclusion: "By linking a political accord to David's personal health, the Brant story extends sovereignty beyond the legal realm and includes issues of personal and sexual sovereignty; just as importantly, it extends David's issues beyond the personal and sexual realm and includes the larger treaties and accords that remain essential to Mohawk nationalism" (380). Another way that Brant makes this connection in the story is during the stream-of-consciousness passages in the latter half of the story that blur the personal and the political, the individual and the collective. For instance, after Joseph administers trance-inducing medicine to David, the latter's memories of his first

love begin to overlap with Joseph's stories about Mohawk resistance to colonization, which are signified by italics. The importance of this passage warrants quoting at length:

David was falling he fell into the sound of the turtle's rattle he fell into the turtle's mouth he shook his body shook and...*fought them*...he fell into the sound of the rattle he was the rattle's sound the music the music he was dancing dancing with the first man he ever loved they were dancing holding holding the music the music the turtle's music was in them through them in them...*killed us*...he went home he went with the first man he ever loved the music was beating was beating their hearts the rattle the music they fell onto the bed the music the music touched them the turtle touched them the rattle touched them they touched they touched the touching was music was music his body singing music his body the rattle of the turtle the first man he loved...*we fought back*...their bodies singing shaking joining joining everything was music was music so good so good good the first man he loved Thomas Thomas...*they kept killing us off*...Tommy Tommy singing sighing joining...*but we*...singing our bodies singing Tommy David Tommy Tommy...*survived*.... (62-63)

Indeed, this passage ties Mohawk resistance to colonialism to the expression of queer Indigenous desire, deftly illustrating Driskill's concept of a Sovereign Erotic. Moreover, this interweaving affirms queer Indigenous peoples as rightful and honourable members of the Mohawk nation, thus transcending the homophobic prejudice that cause people like David to leave their communities in the first place. While Brant's other stories explore a more personal relationship with sovereignty—the relationship one has with her own body and sexuality—"This Place" is clear in its articulation of queer Indigenous sexuality as integral to sovereignty, and vice versa. It is in these articulations that Brant's writing demonstrates its greatest decolonizing potential.

The generosity of Brant's writing continues to inspire those who follow in her footsteps. Indeed, her work continues to enable a revising of heteropatriarchal colonialist discourse beyond vistas that even she could imagine, which include the necessary stories and critiques from the next generation of queer Indigenous and Two-Spirit voices, such as Gwen Benaway (Anishinaabe/Métis), Waawaate Fobister (Anishinaabe), Billy-Ray Belcourt (Cree), and many others. Furthermore, Brant's writing continually affirmed the importance of strong connections to oneself and one's community and, although she is no longer with us on the earthly plane, her writing remains as a testament to the ongoing relevance and necessity of her claims, especially when queer Indigenous and Two Spirit people continue to experience alarming rates of violence within and without their communities.

Indeed, her writing continues to bear fierce, hopeful fruit in the ongoing struggle for queer Indigenous and Two Spirit survival. Nevertheless, by virtue of her existence and her willingness to write herself into being, Brant has made this struggle a little easier for those who have come after her. In this way, her writing truly is a gift that continues giving.



### **Conclusion: Writing Towards Indigenous Feminist Futures**

In writing about the work of Lee Maracle (Stó:lō) and Beth Brant (Mohawk), my intention has been to demonstrate how different approaches to Indigenous feminist writing can envision a broader picture of Indigenous feminist futures. For instance, Maracle's writing demonstrates the necessity of culturally-specific modes of writing that affirm and reflect distinct Indigenous cosmologies and modes of theorizing, such as Stó:lō oratory, as integral to this project of envisioning. Even more, the ways Maracle's writing praxis identifies and dismantles colonialism and patriarchy as a means of liberating Indigenous womanhood from discursive and literal strictures further constitutes her writing's decolonial potential. Indeed, Maracle's writing praxis is a transformative project, one that writes Indigenous feminist futures into existence. Brant's writing, on the other hand, illuminates the necessity of queer Indigenous critiques and modes of theorizing to decolonial projects; indeed, Indigenous feminism cannot reach its full potential for liberation if it ignores (queer) gender and sexuality as organizing principles. Brant's work also demonstrates how, in many ways, Indigenous feminism can already be considered queer, due to the labour of queer Indigenous women to Indigenous feminist causes and due to the links she makes between racism, sexism, and homophobia. Taken together, both writers' projects constitute a staggering contribution to Indigenous feminist theory and practice, and to the field of Indigenous studies more broadly.

There is some sadness in describing a future for Indigenous feminisms in the context of Brant's passing in 2015. Certainly, when I began researching this project earlier that year, I had anticipated learning more about Brant's recent projects and political activities; she was (and is) an inspiring thinker, and I was curious about her absence from publication in recent years (I had even fantasized about meeting her and basking in her hard-fought-for power). Although the Indigenous literature community has benefited from her already prolific literary output, Brant's passing represents a loss to queer Indigenous feminist knowledge creation. This loss is exacerbated by the recent passing of Connie Fife (Cree), another Indigenous lesbian writer, and by the earlier passing of foremothers to the field of Indigenous lesbian writing such as Barbara Cameron (Lakota) and Paula

Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo). In evoking these women's names, I do not wish to only grieve their passing and the life-saving knowledge that passed with them, nor do I wish to perpetuate the tired vanishing Indian stereotype. I do, however, wish to ask questions about how, as Indigenous literature scholars, we might do greater justice to these women's written legacies, particularly because of the colonial, heteropatriarchal precarity under which their writing was produced.

Indeed, envisioning Indigenous feminist futures involves holding space for the queer Indigenous female writers that have labored to create the present moment in Indigenous literature. Beyond simply recognition, holding space for these women means saying their names, teaching their texts, and describing their historical struggles for autonomy, within and without the academy; it means refusing to let their knowledge pass with them. Further, envisioning Indigenous feminist futures means creating space for young queer Indigenous writers of all genders to have their voices heard, whether in conversation, in the classroom, or through publication. This work has already begun across Turtle Island, continuing to bring, as Brant writes, "transformative love to those who would receive it – our people" (*Writing* 47). Indeed, transformative love is what motivates both Brant's and Maracle's work—as it does for so many Indigenous feminists—and writing Indigenous feminist futures into existence means giving this deep, ancient love a world to exist and create in. After all, the fierce love of those who came before us is why we are here.

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