Chapter 4

Native Women Writing : Beatrice Culleton and Lee Meracle

> All of the ills of colonization have visited us in its many forms of hatred including self-doubt, poverty, alcoholism, depression and violence against women, among others. We are coming out of one or two centuries of war, a war that hasn't ended. Many of us at the end of the century are using the "enemy language" with which to tell our truths, to sing, to remember ourselves during these troubled times.
>
> (Joy Harjo 21)

The post 60's period saw the emergence of strong female voice that questioned both the White world and Native patriarchal world. During the same period, Black writing came to the forefront with its vehement and strong stand on history and continuing effects of specific processes of race-based discrimination within US society. Despite their very different history and background, African-American writing has relevance to the movements for the freedom of indigenous people such as Native America, and other aboriginal groups. Parallels can also be drawn from Tony Morrison's unique Black female aesthetic and Native women's representation in Native texts. As against the feminist mode in western theoretical field, it is more a feminine mode adopted by both Black women writers and Native women writers.

Native women, who are caregivers of the next generation, play an important role as mothers, leaders and writers. By re-inventing the English language, these writers are turning the "process of colonization" around in order to read their literature as a process of decolonization. Their struggles are on two fronts : physical survival and cultural survival. Since oral tradition continues to influence even today, they have adopted the autobiographical mode in bringing about rooted Native women's identity. This autobiographical mode helps in representing both the individual self as well as the collective self that stems from the communal nature of Native pre-colonial days.

Prior to the ground breaking novels in the post 1960's Native women writers had a traditon of writing life stories. Such works as Anna Moore Shaw's *A Pima Past*, Beverly Hungry Wolf's *The Ways of My Grandmother* and Campbells's *Half Breed* gives the reader an authentic look at women's roles within their own societies. Both Culleton and Meracle as will be seen in this chapter present an alternative perspective of the history of Canada and in doing so they affirm and preserve Native views, Native realities and Native forms of telling while actively challenging and redefining dominant concept of history, truth and fact. Both upset stereo-types of Native people and particularly of Native women of mixed blood, while providing a context which speaks to some of the popularised, widely held images of Native people that have been created and maintained by the history and literature of the dominant "White" culture in Canada. They question, blur and displace fixed delineations of genre, culture and race and assert their own space. They show how the social problems plague Native people in Canada and are caused by aggressive and oppressive social political

and governmental systems which reflect embedded notions of imperialism, colonisation and assimilation.

Deanna Reder in her article "Stories of Destruction and Renewal: Images of Fireweed in Autobiographical Fiction by Shirley Sterling and Tomson Highway" brings about the three objectives of autobiographical writings that First Nations try to derive: (a) to write out experiences and their imperialism and colonialism, (b) to author testimonies of survival and (c) to articulate the existence of an everchanging self. The present discussion on the writings by Culleton and Meracle are modelled on the above objectives.

Here it is important to note that writers like Silko and Slipperjack mentioned in the previous chapter talk about women characters and women realities from the praxis of storytelling tradition in order to understand the value of their cultural inheritance. In marked opposition to them, gender politics constitutes a major thrust in both Culleton and Meracle. These two writers problematise feminine search for their identity by contesting and critiquing the hegemonic patriarchal power-structures and the influence of colonialism. Linda Tuhiwai Smith states, in *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999), that "Imperialism frames the indigenous experience. It is part of our story, our version of modernity. Writing about our experiences under imperialism and its more specific expressions of colonialism has become a significant project of the indigenous world" (19).

The critical attention to Native Canadian autobiography is minimal as there is no Canadian equivalent to David Brumble's *Native American Autobiography* or Arnold Krupat's *For Those Who Come After.* In works such as these it is generally conceded that in Native American studies, autobiography is a European invention that is adopted and modified by First Nation authors. (Brumble 131; Krupat 10-15). Krupat argues that Indian autobiography ought to be seen as, "A ground on which two cultures meet.....the textual equivalent of the frontier" (33). This understanding is inadequate for the present Native Canadian autobiographical texts since Krupat's reading is based on texts that are fifty years old and are written in a different historical context. In the subsequent discussion I intend to look at the autobiographical mode of narration in both Culleton and Meracle as a means to re-write / re-negotiate the Native self from the vantage point of Native storytelling.

Barbara Godard observes on Native women writers, "When the written autobiography is utilised by a living person to present her/his Native voice not as vanished and silent, but as living and able to articulate her/his difference, it presents as contradiction. Consequently the autobiography holds potentials for challenging the discursive norms of the discourse on the indigene while displacing the fetishizing of Tradition" (Godard 220). Hence, the form autobiography is very significant. The writer whether it is Campbell or Culleton places herself in the subject of 'I' position and address the other group as 'You'. They

use autobiography as their text, though slightly different in their approach.

Feminist discourse has itself been a politics directed at changing existing power relations between men and women and in society as a whole. These are power relations which structure all areas of life : the family, education, household, political systems, leisure, culture, economics, sexuality and so on. In short, feminism questions and seeks to transform what it is to be a woman in society, to understand how the categories woman and the feminine are defined, structured and produced. In other words, feminist politics is a resistance to objectification of women in society, in literature, art and culture. It is also the articulation of a critical and an intellectual practice which challenges all patriarchal assumptions and norms.

The combined politics of race/gender oppression are perhaps the most insidious. Gender oppression seems best overturned within the context of movements to transform various societies. Native woman just like Black woman (and men) everywhere can be victimised by both the system and the men, their children and others in their lives, precisely because of their lives, precisely because of their race and gender combinations.

Native women writers have come out of their closet and started speaking in order to become "empowered rather than victimised by destruction" (Joy Harjo 21). They have fully realized the marginalisation inflicted on them by publishing industry at large where their words are edited and legitimised still by an

overwhelming male majority. The Native woman's voice has been shaped by people who have control over the narrative production. Native women, who are caregivers of the next generation, play an important role as mothers, leaders and writers. And by re-inventing the English language, these writers are turning the "process of colonization around" in order to read their literature as a process of decolonisation.

Over the years, Native women have been involved with survival struggles. Right from overthrowing of the Hawain Government, Oka Rebellion, contesting the passing of NAFTA agreement and displacement of indigenous land, confronting institutionalised attack on their gender-forced sterilization and so forth. Native women have travelled a long journey in their pursuit of their identity as women and as Native. Their narratives try to re-negotiate their place in White/Native society. By writing for themselves they are re-writing against imperialist order and offering an alter/native perceptions about themselves as Native woman. They are undoing the damaging layers of stereotypes of Native people in general and Native women in particular.

Throughout the twentieth century, new federal policies have been formulated to target the power of Native American woman specifically, usually within their traditional capacity as familial anchors. This is evident in the systematic and persistent forced transfer of Indian children into non-Indian custody, a patent violation of the United Nations' 1948 Convention on punishment and prevention of the Crime of Genocide. As of 1974, the Association of American Indian Affairs estimated that between 25 and 35 percent of all Native youth were either

adopted by Euroamericans or placed in non-Indian foster homes and permanently housed in institutional settings. While another 25 percent were "temporarily" placed in government or church-run boarding schools each year. Although strong agitation, primarily by Indian woman and their supporters, forced Congress to partially correct the situation through passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act (P.L..95-608; 25 U.S.C. 1901 et seq) in 1978, the issue remains a very real one in 1991.

Even more grotesque is the policy of involuntary surgical sterilization- another blatant breach of the Genocide Convention imposed upon Native woman, usually without their knowledge, by the Bureau of Indian Affairs' so-called Indian Health Service (IHS) during the late 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. Existence of the sterilization programme was revealed through analysis of secret documents removed by American Indian Movement members from the BIA's Washington, D.C. headquarters during its occupation by the Trail of Broken Treaties in November 1972. A resulting 1974 study by WARN estimates were probably accurate, as is revealed in a subsequent General Accounting Office investigation, restricted to examining only the years 1973-76 and a mere four of the many IHS facilities. The GAO study showed that during the three-year sample period, 3,406 involuntary sterilizations (the equivalent of over a half-million among the general population) had been performed in just these four hospitals. As a result of strong agitation by Native woman and their supporters, the IHS was transferred to the Department of Health And Human Services in 1978. Thus Paula Gunn Allen has aptly put it,

> Currently our struggles are on two fronts: physical survival and cultural survival. For woman this means fighting alcoholism and drug (our own and that of our husbands, lovers, parents, children): poverty... rape, incest, battering by Indian (and non-Indian) men; assaults on fertility and other health matters by the Indian Health Service and Public Health Service; high infant morality due to substandard medical care, nutrition, and health information; poor educational opportunities or education that take us away from our traditions, language, and communities: suicide, homicide, or similar expressions of self-hatred; lack of economic opportunities; substandard housing; sometimes violent and often virulent racist attitudes and educational system that wants only one thing from Indians: our invisibility, and our collective death... To survive culturally, American Indian woman must often fight the United States government, the tribal (puppet) governments, woman and men of their (nation) who are... threatened by attempts to change .... The colonizers, revisions of our lives, values, and histories. (103)

The Native woman's response to the sexism internalized by their male counterparts as part of the colonizing process was to resume the time-honoured practice of establishing the political equivalent of traditional woman's societies. WARN was first, initiated in 1974. It was followed by McCloud's Northwest Indian Woman's Circle in 1981 and lately, the indigenous woman's Network (IWN). Formed by Winona LaDuke and Ingrid Wasinawatok-El Issa (Oneida), a long-time AIM member and mainstay of the International Indian Treaty Council, IWN has lately begun to publish a journal entitled indigenous Woman. The

purpose of such organizations has been explained by WARN founder Phyllis Young (Hunkpapa Lakota):

> What we are about is drawing on our traditions, regaining our strength as woman in the ways handed down to us our grandmothers, and their grandmothers before them. Our creation of an Indian woman's organization is not a criticism or division from our men. In fact, It's the exact opposite. Only in this way can we organize ourselves as Indian woman to meet our responsibilities, to be fully supportive of the men, to work in tandem with them as partners in a common struggle for the liberation of our people and our land... The men understand this, and they support our effort. So, instead of dividing away from the men, what we are doing is building strength and unity in the traditional way.

Correspondingly, the power and presence of woman within the Indian liberation movement, already strong, has if anything increased since the 1960s and 1970s.

Akin to the post colonial writers and theorists, post colonial women writers participate actively in the ongoing process of decolonizing culture. Using the colonizer's language i.e. English along with oral traditions and their revision of western literary forms, women writers are creating an/other version of the women's place/space in society. There texts therefore challenge the dual oppression of patriarchy that preceeded and continues after colonialism and that inscribes the :

concepts of womanhood, motherhood, traditions such as dowry, bride price, polygamy and a worsened predicament within a capitalist economic system introduced by the colonizers. Women writers deal with the burdens of female roles in urban environment (instituted by colonialism), the rise of prostitution in cities, women's marginalization in actual political participation..... (Katrak 257). Western feminists have been accused of having "colonized the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in third world, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular "third world woman" – an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorising signature of western humanist discourse" (Mohanty 260). Such a kind of essentialism is strongly negated by women of colour including Native women. Their exclusion from any kind of representation has left them dehumanized, and commodified. For Mukherjee, feminist theory is beginning to address the question of race as well as of class in tandem with the question of gender. Although the intellectual inquiry of feminism has theorized the concept of gender as sexual difference central to representation, the feminists too have felt that the asymmetry of all gender system is part and parcel of representation.

As Native Indian woman writers became fluent writers of English they began publishing their own life stories. Such works as Anna Moore Shaw's *A Pima Past*, Beverly Hungry Wolf's *The Ways of My Grandmother*

and Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* give the reader an authentic look at woman's roles within their own societies.

Ground breaking books focusing on many aspects of the lives and literary tradition of Native Woman appeared in the 1980's. Lakota anthropologist Bea Medicine published her pioneering research about self actualizing plains Indians woman in *The Hidden Half.* Gretcher Bataille examined Indian woman's autobiographies in *America Indian Woman.* Paula Gunn Allen explored the oral and written literature of First Nations Woman in *The Sacred Hoop,* demonstrating how their sacred traditions shape their world view. Other writers like Leslie Silko, Louise Erdrich, Lee Meraele, Ruby Slipperjack and Jeannette Armstrong have in their ways brought about feminine discourse to contest the misappropriation of the image of Native woman in the received White discourse. In order to topple the heirarchizing discourse of men, Native woman writers try to locate the roots of their oppression on the basis of race, gender and class in North American cultural history and bring about an alternate concept of difference that has strongly damaged their sense of true identity as woman and also as Natives. In this regard Meracle's remark is worth mentioning:

> The denial of Native womanhood is the reduction of the whole people to a sub-human level. Animals beget animal. The dictates of patriarchy demand that beneath Native man, comes the female Native, the dictates of racism are thus that Native men are beneath

White woman and Native female are not fit to be referred to as woman (20).

In the field of autobiographical works, the number of Native women's books is outstanding. Minnie Aodla Freeman, Maria Campbell, Rudy Slipperjack, Alice French, Ignatia Broker, Lee Meracle, Madeline Katt Theriault, Verna Patronella Johnston, Florence Davidson, Mary John, Gertrude Bonnin and other tell their stories for all to hear, and witness the truth of Native lives. Throughout these writings, strong female images and personas are evident. The Cheyenne saying, "A Nation is not conquered until its women's hearts are on the ground", becomes a prophecy about Native women's writing. "First Nations women's hearts are not on the ground. We soar with the birds and our writing soars with us because it contains the essence of our hearts". (Brant 179)

Deep connections with female Elders and ancestors are another truth that Native women witness. Grandmothers, mothers, aunties, all bound in their writing. This respect for a female wisdom is manifested in their lives; therefore, in their writing.

One can see the influence of Native culture on some of the Canadian novels. For Emily Carr, initiation into Native culture or contact with a Native person is the rite of passage. Jules Tonneue, the Green-world lover in Margaret Lawrence's *The Diviners*, acts as Shaman. Similarly the nameless protagonist of Atwood's *Surfacing* also weaves connections with the last tradition of the mother when she gives birth to her new self with the birth of the child. Marie – Francoise

Gueder has documented Atwood's use of Indian themes and motifs, especially the vision quest typical of Angonkian Indian culture and the shamanic initiation. The protagonist goes through a process of purification, which includes the observation of taboos, bathing, fasting, prayers and visions.

It is important to examine the works of three White women often identified as works by Native writers. These are Anne Cameron's *Daughters of Copper Women*, Lyn Andrew's *Medicine Women*, and Rosanand Vanderburgh and Nan Salerno's *Shaman's Daughter*. These are quest narratives "that exhibits a concern with origins, with the immanence of the spirit, and with closeness to mother earth – all key elements in the rising tide of White women's spirituality" (Godard 139). The influence of oral tradition, specifically the reference of old woman and the grand mother figure exemplify the gynocratic principles of Native society. She relates the gynocratic origins of Nootka society.

> "For years I have been hearing stories from the Native people of Vancouver Island, stories preserved for generations through an oral tradition that is now threatened. Among the stories were special ones shared with me by a few loving women who are members of a secret society whose roots are back beyond recorded history to the dawn of Time itself. (Preface).

It is the old woman, who is the unifying link in the 18 stories than Camaron has written. The first half provides a mythic genealogy for the human race: ".....we are all related, for we all come from the Belly of Copper Woman..." (39).

The second half of the collection shifts to the present and to Granny, the matriarchal presence, who tells the old woman stories to her grand daughter, who will memorise and transmit them in turn. Many of these stories deal with the oppression the Nootka experienced upon first contact with the White man and describe the heroic efforts of the woman's warrior society to defeat the invader by offering themselves to the sailor, in order to set a trap for the invading navy. The book ends with the grand daughter's decision "to write down the stories Granny had given me permission to put on paper for the first time." (140-141).

Daughters of Copper Woman is clearly an example of feminist revisionist myth-making, an active contemporary genre, in which writers appropriate mythic material and use it to remythologize a female world in which women will be empowered.

Lynn Andrew's *Medicine Woman*, is the story of the shamanic initiation of a Californian dealer in Native art. The quest narration unfolds the phases of her walking "the road of the marriage basket" – the ancient way of woman. The narrator needs to teach her to make contact with her medicine power, to become a dream, she needs "to reach out for that high warrior waiting in the woman's lodge" (157). Andrew's quest like Cameron's involves the remythologising of a lost Amazonian world.

Shaman's Daughter by Rosamond Vander Bough and Non Salerno is about the same shamanic experience. It is the story of the decline in power as a result of

changes in Native lifestyle. As the title suggests, the shaman is a man Jules, a powerful leader of the Ojibway Mideuivine. His daughter too undergoes the traditional Ojibway power vision in adolescence and receives the powerful bear as guardian spirit. This gift, it is suggested throughout the novel, is what gives Sophia (Supaya) a strong sense of self in contrast to others in her community who suffer great inner division, as a result of increasing acculturation.

> We do not write as individuals communing with a muse. We write as members of an ancient, cultural consciousness. Our "muse" is us. Our "muse" is our ancestors. Our "muse" is our children, our grandchildren, our partners, our lovers. Our "muse" is Earth and the stories She holds in the rocks, the trees, the birds, the fish, the animals, the waters. Our words come from the very place of all life, the spirits who swirl around us, teaching us, cajoling us, chastising us, loving us. (Beth Brant, p.178)

Louise Erdrich represents a strong feminist ideology in the presentation of women characters. The gender related difference on racial and colonial grounds get over turned in favour of the female/women and perhaps support the idea of "new women" akin to feminist theoretical praxis. In the novel although men accept inevitable doom in their lives, the women approach the same, reservation with a different outlook. The feminist leaning is seen especially in the presentation of the character Marie and Lulu. They not only survive with a satisfied existence but are able to carry on without the support of a male figure. This point can be traced back to the fact that Natives in pre-contact days were matriarchal societies, but the germ of colonialism had killed this system giving

it a patriarchal order on the idea of White imperial rule. The strong leaning on woman characters enables Erdrich to make an examination of Native woman and illustrates the gynocratic nature of tribal life. With the help of characters like Marie and Lulu, Erdrich attempts to define Indian womanhood in order to counter the ignorance and misinterpretation common in North American society. One of the pioneering works done in this area is *The Sacred Hoop* by Paula Gunn Allen. Characterizing the source and process of her development of ideas about Indian woman Allen says :

> My ideas of womanhood, passed on largely by my mother and grandmother. Laguna Pneblo women, are about practicality, strength, reasonableness, intelligence with and competence . . . . . The woman I grew up with more of them appeared weak or helpless, rest of the presented herself tentatively. Now here in my mind is there a foolish woman, a vain women or a plastic woman, though the Indian women I have known have shown a wide range of personal style and demeanour (44).

Women writers of African descent in Canada, such as Dionne Brand, Makeda Silvera, Afua Cooper, and M. Nourbese Philip have been engaged in rediscovering their mother culture through the language of their grandmothers and elders.

Canada has had an uncomfortable history of denial and erasure when it comes to the history of Black People (and Black women specifically) here.

This history has resulted in the marginalisation, until very recently, of Black literary voices from the mainstream; thus it appeared, for Philip, that "there was nothing there" (19). Philip's sense of Canada's forbidding landscape, both real and imagined, is not new : Canadian literature is by and far populated by writers who sought to break with the old (England) in order to bring in the new (Canada). Margaret Atwood states in her 1971 text *Survival* that "the central symbol for Canada – and this is based on numerous instances of its occurrence in both English and French Canadian literature – is undoubtedly Survival, la Survivance..." (32).

The theme of survival is evident in Philip's poem "She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks", in which Canada serves as the backdrop for much of the struggles her characters take on; in this sense, Philip's work – as in the case of most writers of the African diaspora writing in Canada – belongs to an expressly Canadian tradition. In a lerger context her work belongs to a female Caribbean literary tradition which defies national boders : in that survival, for the Afro-Caribbean woman, is not a question of simply making it back "from the awful experience – the North, the snowstorm, the sinking ship – that killed everyone else" (Atwood 33), but of recognising that the process of conquering the great North American frontier resulted in the genocide of indigenous peoples in all of the Americas as well as in Africa – a genocide which continues to this day. Survival, then, in this context, is part of a global, collective

effort to struggle not against the elements but against generational, human destruction.

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Mother and Daughter in Philip's poem survive in exile and it is not clear that either of them knows the face of the woman they look for, just as it is true that we often attempt to reclaim the past with little knowledge of the shape of those people and cultural markers which were taken from us, destroyed or manipulated to fit new contexts. In "Clues", again the Mother speaks:

> She gone – gone to where and don't
> Know
> Looking for me looking for she;
> Is pinch somebody pinch and tell me,
> Up where north marry cold I could find she –
> Stateside, England, Canada – some-
> Where about (30)

By the end of the series of poems, the daughter sits in the "Adoption Bureau" with a sense of being searched for and she too searches:

> Something! Anything! Of her.
> She came, you say, from where
> She went – to her loss:
> "the need of your need"

in her groin (36)

The only hope for these women is to find one another in the annals of history – annals from which they have been cut out and forgotten.

The mother and daughter Philip brings to life in the collection are representative of all Black women living suspended between the past and present as the quality of their lives is determined not by themselves but by their oppressors. The use of the Mother / Daughtrer bond is a metaphor for the generational disruption of that bond through racist and sexist oppression.

Writers like Maria Campbell, Beatrice Culleton, Jeannette Armstrong, Ruby Slipperjack, Lee Meracle and Rita Joe thus feel the need to articulate their reality and their non-hierarchical, holistic and mythic consciousness. The sense of exile from oneself and others caused by biases and misrepresentations and the loss suffered by both the colonised and the coloniser, are beautifully brought out in quiet, Native rhythms in Rita Joe's "I Lost My Talk"

I lost my talk
The talk you took away
When I was a little girl
At Schubenacadie school.

You snatched it away:

I speak like you

I think like you

I create like you

The scrambled ballad, about my word.

Two ways I talk

Both ways I say,

Your way is more powerful.

So gently I offer my hand and ask.

Let me find my talk

So I can teach you about me. (113-114)

Women belonging to minority groups in Canada regard the re-writing of history from their subject positions as women, as crucial to their own spiritual survival and that of their people. They feel that the loss of identity which accompanied cultural imperialism can be combated by refusing to forget their language, rituals and cultural practices. Nourbese Philip asserts that "to forget is to collude in one's own erasure" (*Frontiers* 20). She regards the determination to re/member as a "a revolutionary act" (*Frontiers* 56) impelling both the writers and their readers to action. First Nations writers insist that non-Natives have barefacedly distorted historical facts to suit their fascist designs.

By positioning themselves as aboriginal, Black, South Asian, Chinese or Japanese, Canadians, by writing from the specificity of their community's experiences, they have called into question the universalist feminist stance adopted by White Canadian writers. As Dionne Brand, a Black writer, says from the non-White reader's perspective, White writers' works deal with White experiences and are therefore as hyphenated as the works of non-White writers. Again Arun Mukherjee remarks:

> As to the negative qualifier in 'non-White', I have absolutely no problems with that. After all terms like "non-violence", "non-co-operation" and "civil disobedience" also use negation. Moreover, "non-White" is only one aspect of my multiple identities, for I am also a woman of colour, a Third Worlder, a South Asian, an East Indian, an Indian, a Punjabi, and a Mukherjee...I use the term "non-White" in order to talk about the binary relationship of power where "White" is the dominant term because there is no denying the fact that we live in a racist world order. (Arun Mukherjee 202-3).

Differences of race, class and sexuality transform women's experiences of oppression. The term "women of colour" is thus a heavily loaded one. It was embraced as an emanicipatory strategy and theoretical site in which to locate the struggle for self-representation. The speaking subject

appropriates experience, language, history and sexuality to counter Anglo-European imperialistic designs.

Dionne Brand claims that she does not write from the margins of the Canadian tradition but from the centre of the Black tradition which she defines as African-Carribean, African American and African Canadian. Himani Banerjee similarly writes about the 'gaps' and 'holes' a non South Asian writer may experience while reading her texts because her allusions are not to Greek, Roman, Biblical texts but to Indian texts and the Bengali writers she grew up with. Claire Harris suggests that her use of African and Caribbean themes and styles "interrupts and moves beyond Canadian literature as it has been defined..." The master narratives of the two founding races / people / cultures have ceased to be the only expressions of Canadianism. The old Canadian nationalism founded on racial purity and cultural duality is being challenged. In Claire Harris's words "we need a new vision of Canada .... one that includes all its people as full and legitimate citizens."

Joy Kogawa at the conference, "Writing Thru Race" emphasises the bonding of sisterhood in these words:

> What I felt at Writing Thru Race was that this was not a place of inadequacy, this is a wonderful community of people and there is power here, tremendous power. And it is not just the power of originally bright people, it's the power of people who have

> something extremely important to say and who have been through the crucible, they have been through the fires, and because of that there's something that has been purified. (*Other Women* 25).

In this way, Maria Campbell's somewhat fictional autobiography is extremely important because it functions as an important model for achieving wholeness and connectedness for indigenous women in North America, who were like so many other indigenous peoples, as Howard Adams maintains in *Prison of Grass*, very "isolated and individualised people" (178). Lastly, her text is an important legacy for indigenous women because it represents indigenous women in the persons of Cheechum, Grannie Campbell, Qua Chich, Grannie Dubuque, and her mother to a somewhat lesser extent, as survivors of the oppressive colonial regime, and abusive relationships, as well as systemic racism and sexism.

The author maintains that her Cheechum is her greatest source of inspiration, strength, and love. She remembers Cheechum as a small woman who tenaciously clung to her own way of life despite numerous and powerful threats from the various agents of colonisation. She writes,

> Cheechum hated to see the settlers come, and as they settled on what she believed was our land, she ignored them and refused to acknowledge them even when passing on the road. She would not become a Christian, saying firmly that she had married a Christian and if there was such a thing as hell then she had lived there; nothing after death could be worse! (15)

Maria Campbell was 33 years old when she wrote her story. It grew out of anger and frustrations. In the interview with Hartmut Lutz she talks about the writing process which led to *Halfbreed*:

> When I started to write *Halfbreed* I didn't know I was going to write a book. I was very angry, very frustrated.
>
> I wrote the book after I had the dream! I had no money, and I was on the verge of being kicked out of my house, has no food, and I decided to go back out in the street and work. I went out one night and sat in a bar. And I just couldn't, because I knew that if I went back to that, I'd be back on drugs again.
>
> I always carry paper in my bag, and I started writing a letter because I had to have somebody to talk to, and there was nobody to talk to. And that was how I wrote *Halfbreed* (53).

Her writing thus becomes an act of resistance. Through the construction of her text, Campbell looks back upon her life with renewed vision and a stronger connection to those powerful resourceful and dynamic women who came before her. What she writes has rarely been said by indigenous women in North America. The racism and sexism that she suffers is something that too many indigenous women have suffered. Her voice allows this suffering to be heard. Campbell has first hand knowledge of this suffering and has survived the

genocidal attempts to do away with her people's way and survived too the colonial oppression, abusive men, and systemic racism and sexism. She refuses to let her ancestors' sufferings be whitewashed by liberal do-gooders. Speaking with Lutz she states:

> Canada's history, the history of Canadians, is that they are killing us with their liberal gentleness. Helping us, being kind to us. "We don't have horrible racism in this country", is one of the things they saw. They tell us, "We never had slavery here, we never had this", but some of the horrible things that have happened are worse, or every bit as bad. Because the kinds of things that have happened to aboriginal people in Canada are things that were so "nice" that nobody's ever bothered to record them because they were done in such a nice way....(58-59).

In the following pages, it is proposed to read Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree* and *In the Shadow of Evil* along with Meracle's *I am a Woman* and *Ravensong* as narratives of pain and agony experienced by Native women on account of racism, sexism and classism. Race and gender politics are central to the novels mentioned above. Both the writers question the White patriarchal order that has resulted in subsuming the Native woman's identity. Culleton in particular reflects a sharp critique of colonial regime that devastated the Native woman's sense of identity. The narrative is a narrative of crime and violence as reflected in the Red world both at the hands of Native male and White in general. In Cathy

Ford's feminist stand "------ writing about crime and violence is a necessity, we need to make an effort to speak for other woman" (42).

Beatrice Culleton's first novel, *In search of April Raintree* was published in the year 1983; It was later edited for school children. The primary focus of the book is on the two Metis sister April and Cheryl caught amidst the dominant order in search of cultural self definition as metis.

A thinly disguised autobiography, the novel was written after the suicide of the writer's second sister and problamatizes the Native quest for a distinct identity. The quest-motif in the novel posits pertinent question on the impersonal foster homes, suicide, alcoholism that pervades Native society. In the voice of April Raintree, Culleton begins her search:

> Memories, some memories are elusive fleeting like a butterfly that touches down and is caught. Others are hunting. You would rather forget them but they won't be forgotten..... Last month. April 18th, I celebrate my twenty- fourth birthday. That still young but I feel so good. (ISOAR 9)

The revisioning of childhood memories is used as a device by the writer to find a new vision for the protagonist.

At the outset it becomes clear that it a family ravaged by problems of alcoholism and poverty, where in both the sisters April and Cheryl are

forced to go into foster homes. Unlike Culleton, here the experience of the foster home is both painful and cruel. In the words of Margery Fee, "Beatrice Culleton's *April Raintree* (1983) and Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash* (1985) expose the fake ideas and debunk the "Choices" that White acculturation has forced on Native people in Canada" (168). It is in this connection that the presentation of the two sisters based on the assimilate/perish model is worth note taking. We find the elder sister April who shuns Native identity by getting assimilated into the White order. And on the other hand Cheryl upholds Native identity. Culleton blatantly reflects the evils of racism in April's rejection of anything that is Indian and is best exemplified in the following manner:

> Being a half-breed meant being poor and dirty. It meant being weak and having to drink. It meant being ugly and stupid. It meant living off White people. And giving your children to White people to look after. It meant having to take all the crop White people gave. Well I wasn't going to live like a half breed. When I got free of this place, when I got free from being foster child, then I would live just like a real White person. (49)

The above lines can also be interpreted from Abdul R. Jan Mohammad's concept of "Manichean aesthetics" that sets up a system of opposition White / Black / good / evil civilized / barbaric etc. Such a model of colonization has been widely applied by the colonizer to suppress their subject. In the case of Canada, the same model has been applied at both

socio-economic levels and ideological and literary levels too. So much so that in order erase the Native from the minds of the people the history books created on other-ed vision of the Native as people who, " scalped, tortured and massacred brave White explorers and missionaries" (ISOAR 57). In upholding her identity as a Native, Cheryl, questions the presentation of history in the dominant discourse:

> If this is history, how come so many Indian tribes were wiped out? How come they haven't got their land anywhere? How come their food supplies, were wiped out. How come they haven't got their land anywhere? How come their food supplies, were wiped out. Lies ! Lies ! Lies ! your history books don't say how the White people destroyed the Indian do is teach a bunch of lies to cover your own tracks ! (57)

It is lamentable to see that the foster homes too are the institutionalised structures that cater to the racist mentality. One such example is the De Rosiers, where April and Cheryl had to face a regimented schedule and also face the stigma of 'Native girl syndrome'. To reject the notion of such a label is the task of most woman writers. One of the foremost writers who raised voice against such a misrepresentation was none other than Maria Campbell. Her *Halfbreed*, written in an autobiographical mould reflects the evils of colonization and gradually proceeds to the awakening of the Native. Though the device of autobiography the writer's need to write about her own self people and time gets restored. It is not merely a

reclamation project undertaken by the writer but a means to convey the injustices and violence committed by the colonizers from the Red River Rebellion of 1884 to the formation of Louis Riel's government, its fall and the late post 1960's American Indian Movement, it entails the saga of metis struggle.

Both *Halfbreed* and *In Search of April Raintree* therefore reflect the evils of racism and sexism in the Native world by the dominant White order. Unlike Halfbreed which uses political evidences, in *In Search of April Raintree* brings in the psychological transition of the Native in their forced acculturated status. The dialectics of White / Native conflictual relationship is the central focus in both the fictional accounts. In *Halfbreed* these distinctions are vividly seen where societal structures, created differences on social grounds. Incidentally it is the educational institution where these distinctions are seen in concrete manners. Instead of inculcating the true sense of equality it creates a hierarchy where the White sat on one side of the room and the halfbreeds on the other. This othering mentality transcends the mere White/Native opposition as suggested by Maria, "Indians were very passive they would get at things done to them but never fight back where as halfbreed, were quick tempered, quick to fight but quick to forgive and forget" (ISOAR 57).

In attempting to write her own story Maria rejects the notion of skidrow woman or squaw given by the colonizer. According to Down Thomson the

word squaw itself is excluded from man/woman opposition, thus deleting the gender issue. Such a label excludes Native woman not only their personhood but also womanhood. Maria's transformation as a Native activist is not merely the realization of the wrongs done to her in particular or to her people in general but a third alternative undertaken to rebuild her people mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Belonging to a group of road Allowance people, "their generation was completely beaten, the felt shame and with shame the loss of pride and strength to live each day" (*Halfbreed* 8). With the Native resurgence, changes were taking place as seen in the closing pages of the book, "change will come because this time we won't give up there is a growing evidence of that today" (189).

The story of April and Cheryl reflect the same change in their predicaments in a forced acculturaturated / colonized state. Unlike her sister Cheryl, April doesn't look Indian and is able to internalise the White position and life as well. Her marriage to Bob Radcliff is a stepping stone for April into White society. Her rejection of anything that is Native is reinforced by the treatment meted out to Native Indian by the White community. The following observation by April typifies the racial antagonism prevalent:

> I began to notice what being Native was like in a middle class surrounding. Sometimes service was deliberately slow, sometime I'd overhear comments like who let the Indians off the reservation".

Or we'd be walking home and guy would make comments to us as if we were easy pick up. (ISOAR 107)

Living in such a dilemma, April's marriage to Bob Radcliff offers her a more respectable living. However as the narrative develops, we perceive that this is merely a false state. From the beginning, the Radcliff mansion appeared to her another foster home, where she was ordered to address the mother- in – law as "mother Radcliff". Gradually she realises that lives of these people was aimed "..... at only two thing: money and power. They were hypocrites all of them" (125). This is further heightened by April's realisation that her mother in law feared of being grandmother to little halfbreeds. Both Radcliff and his mother enact the role of a typical colonizer for whom the Natives are humans but mere objects to be used and thrown away.

Diametrically opposed is the case of Cheryl who grows up by upholding her Metis heritage. She moves to a Native friendship centre, as a social worker. Her search for her family roots proves fatal when her ideal father and friend mark forced her into prostitution. Both sisters end up as losers. April's gruesome rape and Cheryl's suicide are instances of inability to cope in an environment where they are reduced to a sub-human existence. The most barbaric exposition of the White man's misdeals is found precisely in the novel's rape scene where April's body becomes the site of racist and sexist violence. Here April's rape is both a racial and gender issue. She is brutally dealt because of the fact that she

is both a Native and a woman. The gruesome rape is reminiscent of the violence perpetrated by the colonizers and their lack of understanding of Native Indian's human identity. In Lee Meracle's expression the Native woman, "have been the object of the kind of sexual release of White males whose appetites are too gross for their own delicate woman (18). The Native women is therefore doubly exploited compared to her male counter parts and further exposes the fact "sexism like racism is not an abstract in the ideology but an inherent part of our lives" (IWA 14). April's acceptance of Native identity is a consequence of Cheryl's suicide and offers a promising future in the closing lines of the novel, "All life dies to give new life. Cheryl had died. But for Henry Lee and me, therefore would be tomorrow. And it would be better, I would strive for it, For my sister and her son. For my parents. For my people" (228).

Women were relegated to the position of the other in White patriarchal order, to strengthen the hold of the man. Such a patriarchal system rejects female bonding of any kind as it decentres the male. Moreover it misconstructs women in all possible ways and consequently dehumanizes them. In their quest for self definition, Natives women have found some alter/native ways to reconcile traditional tribal perceptions of women within the conflicting standards of the dominant White order.

When Maria Campbell wrote her ground-breaking *Halfbreed*, she took up the theme of despair that comes as a result of the imbalance that racism and poverty created in people. Maria has a grandmother whose words and strength

give her nurturance and hope and a way back to the Good Red Road. "The Good Red Road is a way of life among Native peoples that is one of balance and continuity". (Beth Brant, 79) Again, this seems to be the overwhelming message that Native women bring to writing. Creating a balance in their protagonists' worlds, remembering what the Elders taught, recovering from the effects of colonialism.

Rejection of the versions of 'history' propagated by the dominant culture continues to be a serious concern for most of the Native writers. Several writers including Campbell, Culleton and Lee Meracle have experienced this issue even within the school – educational set-up. In her self-published book *I am Woman*, Meracle says that schools are "ideological processing plants" (113) that inculcate racism in the students who are taught the coloniser's narrative of integration and hatred of difference. Like the fictional character, Cheryl, Meracle, as a school child, also confronted a teacher about the portrayal of Metis people and later recalled the experience in her life writing:

> The teacher called my turn. I glanced at the clean White page with Black characters all over it. 'Louis Riel was a mad man, that was hanged...'. I could not buy that anymore than I could the 'cannibalism' fairy tale of fifth grade. I could not forsake my ancestors for all your students to see (Meracle 111).

By confronting the hegemonic, racist underpinnings of the colonial, oppressive powers in the dominant society, the autobiographical writing of Native women

can be, and in the cases of Campbell, Culleton and Meracle are, as Doris Sommer suggests in her essay, "'Not just a Personal Story': Women's *Testimonies* and the Plural Self", "a medium of resistance and counter discourse, the legitimate space for producing that excess which throws doubt on the coherence and power of an exclusive historiography" (quoted in Smith and Watson xiii). Lifewriting is in this way, political, disruptive and empowering. In her essay, "Construction of the Imaginary Indian", mixed-blood writer Marcia Crosby contends that lifewriting is a way to confront and resist the homogenisation of First Nations people and the imposition of "the West's postmodern centre / margin cartography" (Crosby 267). Crosby goes on to state, "I ...consider it an act of affirmation to speak in the first-person singular, refusing an imposed and imaginary difference in order to assert my own voice" (Crosby 267-268) Campbell asserts her own voice by telling her version of the history of her Metis people then moving forward to tell of the history of her own community and family. At this point, Campbell also briefly recounts her personal family history and genealogy beginning with her "Great Grandpa Campbell" and finally stretching forward to her children's generation. In this telling, history is not linear, chronological and progressive, it is a spiral in which there is no clear beginning of end. It is a web in which people, actions and events are interconnected and not easily disengaged or delineated. Cause and effect are not simply revealed through a listing of successive dates of events but are enmeshed in a tangle of events, emotions, histories, beliefs, values...

Campbell begins her community and family history by tracing the movement of several halfbreed families to the Prince Albert region of Saskatchewan where

they were gradually dislocated and forced by unjust government policies to live as squatters on their own land before finally being left as homeless, disenfranchised outcasts dwelling on the thin margin of "crown land" set aside on either side of planned and completed roads. Living as squatters on road allowance land these Metis descendants of the First Nations and early settlers had no treaty rights as Indians and no land rights as settlers and so were left without legal or political power and recognition. Campbell, in an interview with German scholar Hartmut Lutz, says that the Metis were "Forgotten People", marginalized geographically, politically, socially and economically:

> You know, Indian people went to school, my people didn't because we aren't allowed to go to school until 1951. We couldn't go to Indian schools, and we couldn't go to White people's schools, because we didn't pay taxes, we weren't landowners (Campbell in Lutz 51).

Jeannette Armstrong, in her essay "Racism: Racial Exclusivity and Cultural Supremacy", explains how racism functions and, in Canada, how "culturally supremacist racism" continues to subjugate and destroy Native peoples where the death rate "no less than in other colonised countries where physical force is used, continues to rise without gunfire" (Kelley 80). According to her, "[o]nce coercion has been exerted to the point of subjugation control is enforced through the functions of society which transmit culture. Continued attempts to force acceptance of principles which are culturally reprehensible results in psychological oppression and an internalised spiritual disintegration" (Kelley 79-80).

This spiritual disintegration, in Campbell's case led to drug addiction, prostitution and near death. Emotionally, spiritually and physically abused because of her identity as a Halfbreed "squaw", Campbell lost her sense of cultural pride and personal self worth. During this time she says "[s]omething inside of me died. Life had played such a joke. I had married to escape what I'd thought was an ugly world only to fine [sic] a worse one" (Campbell 134). After this she refers to herself as being "a walking zombie", "numb and depressed" (Campbell 136), "like a block of ice" (Campbell 138) and at one point says, "I was using pills and drinking a lot, but instead of finding any escape, I became more and more depressed, and began to hate myself" (Campbell 137). She recalls her Cheechum telling her "that when the government gives you something, they take all that you have in return – your pride, your dignity, all the things that make you a living soul. When they are sure they have everything, they give you a blanket to cover your shame" (Campbell 159). "To come out from under the blanket is to face an ugly reality and a painful process of healing". (Smith 107).

Campbell eventually comes out from under her blanket and begins the process of healing by confronting her painful past. For Campbell writing is a form of storytelling and as a storyteller she has said that she considers her role to be that of "a community healer and teacher" (Lutz 42). In writing *Halfbreed*, Campbell teaches by presenting other views of reality and by using different ways to communicate her message. She uses storytelling as a way to teach her audience but she also, more importantly, uses this telling to heal herself and

her community. She began telling her (life) story by writing about the negative aspects of her life and says, "I needed someone to talk to and there was nobody around" (Kelley 7). In the "Introduction" to *Halfbreed* Campbell says that she returned home to "find again the happiness and beauty" (Campbell 2) she had known as a child. It was there amidst the "broken old buildings" that she finally realised that "the land had changed, my people were gone, and if I was to know peace I would have to search within myself' (Campbell 2). This internal, spiritual journey is also a quest for healing and occurs for Campbell through the process of writing. She says the act of writing *Halfbreed*:

> ..,helped me to go through a healing process, to understand where I was coming from. It helped me to stop blaming the victim, and start blaming the criminal. It helped me to realise that it wasn't my fault, that racism was real, that you could reach out and touch it, and that a lot of what happened in my life was a result of racism (Lelley 7).

Both Culleton's and Campbell's texts tackle the lies entrenched in the education system and both are written as the memoirs or lifestories of a young Metis or "halfbreed" woman who recounts her personal and family history from within the context of her social and cultural positioning. However, though there are many similarities in the form and content of both stories, there are also some important, relevant differences which must be acknowledged and understood if a reader hopes to read the text responsibility from where it is positioned within its social and cultural context.

In the Shadow of Evil is the anticipated second novel from Culleton. Set in the foothills of the Rockies, *In the Shadow of Evil* follows the protagonist, Christine as she struggles to deal with the sudden loss of her husband and child. Haunted by her own childhood Christine's life unravels revealing ghosts and events from her past.

The very first chapter ends with the death of Christine's husband Peter and son Todd. Sergeant Trolley informs that Peter's truck had been found in the Peace River and that the currents had carried away his body". (33). She relates this loss to the bad thing, she had committed in the past. As she candidly remembers "I deserved it for having allowed Leona back into my life. Reminding myself of my blame made the point just a little easier to bear" (31).

Leona is half-sister of Christine. Like April and Cheryl in *In Search of April Raintree*, it is Christine and Leona who keep the narrative progressing. Parallels can be drawn between the novels in its depiction of foster homes, violence, abuse and other racist attitudinal problems. Culleton was herself a foster child, who was raped. Just like April in the earlier novel this novel documents the abuse of Christine right from her childhood at the tender age of three in different foster homes.

While the narrative moves back and forth, in present times and the distant past, one is informed about the differences between Christine and Leona. Christine always had an inferiority complex from Leona, as she looked more like a White. She outshined her in many ways and was also responsible for the loss

in Christine's life. It was because of Leona that she broke with Nick, with whom she had a daughter who was left in the Children's Aid, as most unwed mothers do. Leona wants to live with Christine, but she was an alcoholic and it would not be good to have her around Todd. Further "Leona would arouse the ill feelings I had towards my mother and remind me of the bad times in foster homes" (58).

The notion of "something is evil" lies central to the psyche of the protagonist. Looking back Christine ponders:

> I never knew I was evil, not until I was eleven, I think I knew I was bad, but when I was eleven I looked up the word evil and what stayed with me was what I had thought all along – that I was morally bad – and because of that, bad things would happen to me. The worst had happened when I was three, but ever since, what started out good came to be a bad ending (ISOW 103).

As the title suggests, the memories of the past that keep interacting with her present state of affairs are the shadows of evil that keeps haunting Christine. Her mother, Sister Leona, Dr. Coron Nick, Grandpa – Man, Mr. Manley all of them had caused a fractured sense of self in Christine. Poverty and betrayal lie central to most aboriginal woman. And this poverty drives them to wrong path. Some of them become hookers. For Christine : "Just that I became a hooker, I couldn't do older Indian guys because one of them might be my father. Or for that matter, a brother. With my mother, anything's possible" (95).

Racism, both overt and covert was at the root of much of the abuse of Native children. When Christine walked into the school, the other children began to sing a song, "Look at the little Indian. At first I think they be nice. Leona tells them to be quiet and she is mad. That's how I know they are mean to me. I ask Leona what is a little Indian. She told me they were just being nasty. I am scared of them." (106).

The emotional turmoil on the part of Christine puts her on a suicidal path, where she says, "I would put an end to myself because I was the only one who should have died." And that "Life had been cruel to me, but I was now going to put an end to it: (134). In this emotional crisis, she gets solace in the company of a wolf. She buries herself into the wolf's neck and continues wailing. For her "This had to be the wolf kit called Wapan – a wolf who had more heart than I, a wolf who took care of young ones not her own, a wolf who gave comfort to a half-crazy, totally grieving women in the wild" (135). It was Wapan – the wolf that seemed to say to her "Get on with life for life is sacred". Respect for life and animals are central to Native communities. The inter-connection between man and animals is an important Native philosophy. This philosophy is essential for Native cultural survival. Ironically, the novel has a surprising conclusion. Peter and Todd are traced back but Wapan the wolf gets killed by the hunters. The novel ends on an optimistic note with Bob and Leona holding hands together – both healing nicely together. Similarly Christine wakes up in the night, she hears the wolves, and reminisces "Oh to be a wolf, If I were a wolf, I'd be out there running and playing and hunting, living life as it was meant to be lived.

Peter's touch startled me as we both stood there, looking out, I realized I was happy just being me." (316)

Though neglect, violence and abuse are strangers to no culture, Culleton dramatically portays how aboriginals and especially aboriginal women, are particularly vulnerable. Society in general has viewed this violence as part of aboriginal culture, and consequently aboriginal people often believe it themselves. By chasing a happy ending in both novels, Culleton seems to suggest after centuries of oppression there will be love, peace and serenity in the Native world – and that is part of aboriginal culture.

Before 1961, the "woman" question vis-vis Native women did not exist. It was Campbell and Culleton who virtually opened the door - expressing the grim realities faced by Native women in Canada. Alongwith the two writers mentioned above Lee Meracle too does not speak of the distant past but of the present time from 1940's onwards.

Racism is a dominant theme that pervades most of the works by both Culleton & Meracle. According to Mergery Fec; "First Nation's writing examines how racism is internalised and how it circulates" (213). Further it is through racism they Native writers challenge dominant institutions and their representation for Native concerns. In an interview with Jennifer Kelly Meracle makes her stand on racism very candidly:

> It's in my interest to climb the one side right? - to deal with the effect of racism on me as a person. I wouldn't have been able to get out there and say this is worth publishing if I hadn't started with the internalised racism in my life. But then, my survival depends my struggle with it. And I think the survival of all Native people depends on the struggle with that phenomenon in our communities, because we're killing each other. And that's are reality right now. Eighty percent of Native women are very likely to be abused sexually and physically in their lives. That's a huge number. So most of my stories focus on women empowering themselves, climbing that mountain - and it is a mountain of racism - to deal with the violence outside the home as well as inside the home. [87]

Written in the year (1993) *Ravensong* was published soon after Meracle's first novel *Sundogs* (1992). The novel *Sundogs* is set in the crisis movement of 1990's Native struggle, especially the Oka crisis. For Meracle Oka told the Natives, that they are "worthy of great being, not just surviving" (77). Both *Sundogs* and *Ravensong* celebrate the power of spirit in different ways. While in *Sundogs* there is creation of history, in *Ravensong* there is a certain traditional spiritual element. For Meracle it was Raven's song that she heard, which led to the writing of the novel.

Within Native tradition, raven is not only a trickster figure but also the harbinger of social transformation. In this novel, Celia is actually the one

who hears the song from the beginning. Set along the Pacific North West Coast of the early 1950's Ravensong unfolds in an urban Native community devastated by the flu epidemic. Stacey her sister Celia and Raven are the three main characters who keep the narration in moving in its journey of transformation – crucial for Native survival in present time. On one hand Stacey balances her family's traditional ways against White society's intrusive new values. On the other hand Celia imparts visions from the past while raven cautions about further catastrophe if reconciliation doesn't take place among all people. Metaphorically it is through Raven that Meracle talks about the gulf between two cultures. And at the same time, it is Raven who knows that this gulf must be bridged.

Colonialism brought both physical diseases that had a disastrous effect on colonized populations and the new and oppressive value system that challenged colonized culture. On the northwest coast of North America it has been estimated that from first contact to the early 20th century the Native population declined by an 89% (Ubelekar 293). The construction of dirt and disease in the Salish and the European Canadian Communities in the novel by Meracle enables us to look at the discrepancy between the two worlds. One is confronted with two different world views but the difference in their lifestyle and the living condition posits yet another aspect of how marginalisation works.

The novel depicts a White population infected by a psychic disease that manifests itself in the forms of "sexism, racism, rootlessness and suicide". Because western construction of disease tend to be determined by biomedicine, and thus to focus on physical ailment, the members of White town do not see the overt sexism of their society the lack of connection between family members, or their indifference to the physical suffering of their Salish neighbours as illness. While science and technology have brought lifestyle changes that have improved life expectancy and mortality rates, the same has weakened human relationships within communities and increased individual alienation and stress to unhealthy levels (Kunitz 149). In *Ravensong* the White residents of Maillardville enjoy all the physical benefits of modern life. They have a stable health care system, comfortable houses and enough to eat, however, the parents and children feel little connection to each other, and there is no open communication among members of the society. Because they seem physically healthy they cannot see the disease that has infected their souls. Stacey, however, notices a "frailty" among her female White classmates that does not "look physical" (29).

Raven precipitates colonization and thus the series of plagues as a considered plan to cure European culture and thus the Earth. Throughout the novel, the planet is portrayed as a living body that is suffering from a physical disease implicitly located in Europe: "Far away the earth bled, her bleeding becoming an ulcer. Century by century, the ulcer intensified. It grew more serious millennium by millennium, until

neither earth nor Raven had any choice" (191). Because of the severity of earth's illness Raven casts herself in the role of physician and inflicts more pain in order to cure disease. After the influenza epidemic, the village seems hollow and empty. Raven reiterates the basic premise of her plan to alleviate the earth's suffering :

> "Death is transformative" Raven said to earth from the depths of the ocean. The sound rolled out amplifying slowly. Earth heard raven speak. She paid no attention to the words, she let the compelling power of them play with her sensual self. Her insides turned, a hot burning sensation flitted about the stone of her. Earth turned, folded in on herself, a stack of heat shot through her. It changed her surface, the very atmosphere surrounding her changed. (85).

In Stacey's world view, the systems of colonial and sexual oppression are both part of the same disease that is beginning to infect her village. Many Native women note the connections between these two forms of discrimination. Paula Gunn Allen posits that the "physical and cultural genocide of American Indian tribes is and was mostly about patriarchal fear of gynocracy" (3). Likewise, Beth Brant claims that, of " all the horror stories that have been told since we first laid eyes on the whiteman," the one she finds " most telling" is "how Native attitudes towards woman changed and become more like the oppressors" (99). Meracle, too, believes that "racism is layered between the sexism of (Canadian) society and is connected to sexism. So intimately bound are they that

sometimes their separation leads to confusion in the minds and hearts of woman, even fear" (174). The earliest cultural contact depicted in *Ravensong* is marked both by disease and by sexual domination. Stacey's sister Celia has a vision in which a European ship approaches the village and fifty young women are sent aboard. These women became "the first untouchable victims of disease" (10). The connection between sex and death in this encounter undermines the moral sense of the Salish: "A new moral sensibility was required and the old culture died just a little after that. What had been the customary gratification of human need had brought death among the villages" (10). In dominating the woman sexually, the Europeans cause the first of many epidemics that will change the Salish culture. The sexual nature of this early domination sets the stage for the conflation of gender and racial domination throughout the process of colonization.

Stacey learns of the harm that White patriarchal views can do to her culture by observing the "Old snake", a Salish wife beater and child abuser, who is "full of crazy notions about his wife's place" and yells, "and the head of my household" (149). This attitude differs radically from the matriarchal system that Stacey's clan is the last to follow (150). Stacey therefore connects the snake's behaviour with the disease and spiritual malice that will soon infect her people:

> Stacey dreamed of snakes all balled up, rolling out over the earth like pestilence. Snakes full of venom destroying everything in their path. Moving balls of hideous violations who sought everywhere for their victims, destroying them from within. Slime, filth and unease followed

> the snakes as they culled out the powerless, pulling them to their centre. In their innocence the victims' strength fell from their bodies the way Stacey's had just a few movements ago. The fifth surrounded the people, got inside them, wrapped them in sheets of seductive walls. The people moved slower in the filth of the balls of snakes. Without energy they slept, woke only to plod through the rest of the day, returning to hovels of shame to sleep again. (163)

I am Women, the pioneering work by Meracle, is structured on the polemics of race and gender. "Racism is recent, patriarchy is old" (23) is the premise from where Meracle locates the oppression of Native women. Written in a protest mode *I am Women* challenges the assumptions of dominant feminism, as of left-wing and Native movements, with regard to their attempt to limit and contain truth claims of Native women. According to Barbara Godard "the title of Meracle's book is an ironic staking art of claims to generalize about the oppression of women in face of the women's movement's refusal to recognize these truth claims:

> No one makes the mistake of refusing to us as woman either White Woman invite us to speak if the issue in racism or Native people in general. We are there to "teach to sensitise them" or to serve them in some other way. We are expected to retain our position well below them as their servants. We are not, as a matter of course, invited as an integral part of "their movement" – the women's movement (Meracle 20-21).

Structurally the text is interwoven in prose and poem sections with varied movements from anger, rage to love. Written in a first person narration the "textual marker of oral narration is not presentation but representation" (Godard 211). In her complication of stories, she proceeds with her theory on fiction and reality:

> It is the practice of writers to fictionalise reality and prostitute the product of their licentious fantasies. "Artistic license", they call it. (Whoever "they" are). Being not different, I have taken both the stories of my life, the stories of other's lives and some, pure fabrications of my imagination and re-written them as my own..... Usually, where one writes of oneself it is called non-fiction – I dis-belief that Hindsight is always slightly fictious. (Meracle 3-4).

Apart from racism and sexism, the Eurocentric forms of knowledge one severally criticized by Meracle, Education is the primary thrust of racism. Meracle argues "schools have showed themselves to be ideological processing plants (Meracle 113). Moreover the educational scene as staged by Meracle is a scene of mindless repetition, the Native parroting the anthropologist's discourse without understanding the language (Meracle 47-48).

Although it contains a disclaimer that, "Names of persons and places have been changed in some cases" (Campbell 7) Maria Campbell's text is autobiographical, based on her experiences as a "half-breed" woman in Canada. Campbell's story begins with an introduction in which she quickly situates the reader, writer and

text and establishes the retrospective point of view from which she/I is telling her story, documenting her history, and writing her past. It also clearly outlines Campbell's reason for undertaking the project; to tell "what it is like to be a halfbreed woman in our country" (Campbell 2). Inherent in this statement is the suggestion that other accounts of "what is like" are false, distorted and / or incomplete and that Campbell, by speaking about her own life, is presenting a more honest or 'true' depiction. By telling from an insider's point of view, she confronts the lies of history with the realities of her life story.

In Search of April Raintree, a fictionalised 'autobiographical' novel, based on Culleton's own life and experiences, follows a woman's search for her true, hidden, identity. It follows her search for acceptance of who she is as a woman of mixed Native / European ancestry. For Culleton this search, and the writing of it, had to include both sides of her background. It had to allow her to write as a person of mixed ancestry, standing midstream, looking at the positive and negative on each side. For her, that is the only way she can be truthful; that is her role as a writer. She says:

> I've been fair and honest in the book and that's the way I want to keep writing. I want to look for good sides, too, both parties, so to speak. (Culleton in *Contemporary Challenges* 103).

aboriginal Australian writer Sally Morgan's autobiographical family history addresses issues similar to those addressed by Culleton's novel. Although the two books are quite different, both Morgan and Culleton write about the

problematics of defining aboriginal identity, especially for peoples of mixed-blood, particularly those who are fair-skinned and do not fit the public image of who and what an aboriginal woman ought to be. Both books also raise the issue of how the denial of aboriginal ancestry has been encouraged by colonising governments and how ultimately damaging this is to individuals, their families and their communities. In Morgan's book, it is her grandmother and mother who have learned to deny their aboriginality out of fear of racism and oppression by the colonial government. Through their experiences with White society, the two women have learned to fear the government and its ability to dis-empower aboriginal people. Afraid that the system will apprehend their children and take their house, the tow women resolve to maintain their family by denying their ancestry. Morgan's book is about the process of overcoming the fear, understanding it and accepting the family's aboriginal identity.

Early in her search Morgan questions what it means to be aboriginal and for her identity as an aboriginal. Later Morgan realises that if she denies her "tentative identification" with her aboriginal ancestry she would be denying her grandmother as well. She decides to "hold on to the fact that, some day, it might all mean something" (Morgan 141). Some time later she decides to write a book about her family's history so that she can uncover the truth about who she is and why she had been denied her identity as an aboriginal woman. In trying to answer this, Morgan must also uncover and understand the ways in which aboriginal people had been colonised and disempowered by the government. However, as a woman of mixed-blood who had been assimilated

into "White" society, she is empowered by her access to information. She is able to write the book because she employs the advantages of her dual position.

Woman writers of African descent in Canada such as Dianne Brand, Makade Silvera, Afua Cooper, and M. Nourbese Philip are engaged in a critical work which uncovers the conversation between Black Writers / Black Women vis-à-vis their cultural heritage and the language of their grandmother.

Nourbese Philip has worked in particular to retain the loss of African dialects by inscribing in the texts the New World dialects of the English Caribbean. She says.

> .....what I'm to do is final a written form of that spoken language that the people on the street nurtured ---- what used to be called "bad English".... "I/m trying to find ---- the deep structures of that oral language." (1991, 19).

Philip sees in the transformation of language by people of African descent an answer to historical colonisation, that is, the only means by which an enslaved population could both exact revenge and assert cultural autonomy in the New World to which they were brought and to which they were expected to adapt. The "adoption bureau" of the opening poems thus represents the forces assimilation of countless numbers of Africans who in the New World still suffer from the wounds of slavery. Alternative languages become a vehicle of

resistance by which to access African cultures or preserve what little is remembered of them.

Philip's explorations incorporate the interrogation of "standard English" by revealing the depths to which language contributes to the oppression of the formerly and continually colonised. She alternately deconstructs Standard English and reconstructs the Caribbean demotic by unveiling the points of intersection between the violence of imperialism and colonialism and the efforts on the part of the enslaved to maintain cultural and linguistic integrity despite that devastation. As an exiled writer from Trinidad and Tobago, Philip sees Canada as a space in which a New World Caribbean tradition can be forged.

Philip illustrates the degree to which African and Afro-Caribbean cultures have been disrupted in her opening series of poems titled "And Over Every Land and Sea" in which a Mother and Daughter attempt, in vain, by scouring every corner of the earth, to find each other. The mother figure in the poem, "Questions! Questions!" speaks in the Caribbean demotic, summons her Daughter; her questioning voice is full of desperation.

> Where she, where she, where she be, where she gone?
> Where high and low meet I search, find can't, way down the island's way
> I gone --- south;
> .....
> grief gone mad with crazy – so them say.

Before the questions too late, before I forget how they stay crazy or no crazy I mush find she.

(1989, 28).

Helen Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa" comments on women's writing. She must write herself, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history, first at two levels that cannot be separated:

a) Individually, by writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display – the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.

b) An act that will also be marked be seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression. To write and thus to forge for herself the antilogous weapon. To become at will the taker and initiator, for her own right in every symbolic, systembolic system, in every political process (338).

According to Cixous this is how a woman transforms her story into history. As Native women writers, Campbell and Culleton write themselves into history, ascertaining their culture and identity. Their culture was till then erased and voice silenced by the majority community. They were in utter poverty, exploited, misunderstood and misperceived as "gutter creatures". Through their autobiography, they try to establish their space in Canadian history and society.

Culleton and Meracle are both concerned with the history of the Metis people and the way in which this history has been falsely represented by the government colonising culture and how this false representations have been presented as fact in the government and education systems controlled by the dominant culture. Along with other writers both Culleton and Meracle are making an attempt to decolonise the notion of a Native as savage / brute / squaw. In their attempt to decolonise, the Native writers resort to past, history, oral / storytelling tradition as strategies for reclaiming their true self.

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