

# *The Book of Jessica:* The Healing Circle of a Woman's Autobiography

I have been drawn to write about *The Book of Jessica*—against the advice of all my friends and relations'—because it crosses a number of significant boundaries: between life and art, between context and text in autobiographical genres, between ceremonies of religion and of theatre, between oral and written narratives, and between two women, one Métis and one white. Absorbed at a very personal level by the ways in which we make sense of ourselves, I have been reading and listening here to a multi-storied “poetics of differences” (Neuman, 213-30), and I wonder whether it is not what I understand as a native aesthetic (which certainly inspires and guides this text despite the final editorial control of the white co-author) that challenges all these boundaries as boundaries, transforming the conflictual binaries of the original situation into a continuous and, I will suggest, a healing circle.

Because this text depends on elements of Canadian history, including colonial appropriation of land and power and the possibility of an imperialist feminist appropriation in this case of the Métis voice, it is ironic that I, as a white academic, with an appropriately British (read imperialist) education, should pronounce on it in any fashion. I am reminded of Leonore Keeshig-Tobias' scathing point (173-77) that university professors have stepped into the shoes of the missionaries and the Indian agents. So I enter the dialogue (attentively) from this limited and specific position because the complexities of the text raise important questions—for women's writing and its efforts to identify women's experience, for cross-cultural reading and its

problems for interpretation, and for theories of autobiography which struggle continuously with the relation of life to text and of genre to life-writing.

*Jessica* is a play. It grew out of a collaborative process that began in the Theatre Passe Muraille in the fall of 1976. This mobile “guerrilla theatre” without walls made docudrama its trademark during the early seventies, focussing on local communities and alternative histories (see Wasserman, 16ff). Brian Arnott stresses the “conscientious effort” of the Passe Muraille “to give theatrical validity to sounds, rhythms and myths that were distinctively Canadian” (107). Maria Campbell, who had already published *Halfbreed* in 1973, approached Paul Thompson of Theatre Passe Muraille because she had been convinced by Clarke Roger’s production of *Almighty Voice* and then by Thompson’s production of *The West Show* that this kind of theatre could empower the Métis community. “My weird world appeared normal to him,” she says in *The Book of Jessica*, “so I talked and talked” (16).

At this point, in 1976, they agreed to an exchange; Campbell would learn from taking part in “the process,” and in return she would “give [her] bag of goodness knows what.” (This “exchange” between Maria Campbell of the Métis community and the Theatre Passe Muraille provides a cross-cultural subtext to my discussion of “appropriative autobiography.”) “The play,” she explains, “would be about being a woman and the struggle of trying to understand what that meant.” “Goodness knows what” was based on *Halfbreed* but took on a life of its own when Thompson called in Linda Griffiths, the white actor/improvisor, to “study” Campbell and to play the role of a young Métis woman from her experience of Campbell’s life. Painfully between them, the two women evolved a third; *Jessica*’s name comes from a Waylon Jennings song they heard on the car radio as they travelled through the interior of Saskatchewan together.

*The Book of Jessica*, which ends with the final text of what was, over long process, an improvised play, dramatises their “struggle of trying to understand.” The struggle, of course, is not simply that of understanding what “a woman” means but also of understanding how women across barriers of race, culture, privilege, and age, interpret “a woman” for themselves and for each other. “Eighteen years separated us,” Griffiths says, “as well as race, class, culture, social work, political work, and, in its own category, what Maria called ‘the street’—almost every boundary I knew, and lots I didn’t know” (21). Griffiths persisted with revisions to the play despite Campbell’s

anger and withdrawal and the final text carries her name as first author. It was Campbell, however, who suggested both that they talk through their difficulties with each other and that the edited transcripts from these talks contextualise the published form of the play. Interestingly, Campbell withdrew from the final editing of the transcripts in order to run for political office. Griffiths took final responsibility for the editing and for the narrative thread that ties the transcripts together.

Appropriation in this context probably begins with Clarke Rogers' production of *Almighty Voice* which had the Native community, as Campbell puts it, "in an uproar. It was a play about Native people done by whites; it also delved into a spiritual world that we felt should be interpreted by Natives themselves. I went to denounce it, and ended up defending it" (16). Campbell became complicit with her acceptance of Linda Griffiths for performance and with her introduction of Griffiths into the Native community and into their spiritual practices. Most immediately, she met opposition from Hannah, her friend and teacher, who was "absolutely against it" (25). She exposed herself both to Griffiths' possible desecration of these experiences and to the possible outrage of the Native Elders when the play opened in Saskatoon in 1982.

Griffiths' appropriation is obvious and has come under very recent fire (see Hoy). "I was white," she writes, "Really white" (15). Yet she first read, then enacted, and then wrote the life of a Métis woman who was old enough to be her mother, and did so, furthermore, in terms of Native spirituality. (I suppose her transgressions somewhat modify my own.) Without downplaying the questionable nature of all these decisions, I would like to focus here on the possibility that the text we now have actually reasserts a Native voice in a situation we might commonly describe as appropriative. (At the simplest level, for instance, Campbell stops Griffiths in her description of the sacred ceremonies at the farmhouse. "[Y]ou were invited into that circle," she says, "to help you understand, not to write a book about it" (27). Repeatedly, through this brief argument, Campbell corrects Griffiths' assumptions about her role and challenges her to use experience, not interpretation, as her artistic medium.) I think the empire speaks back throughout this text in unexpected ways that inform the final product beyond anything Griffiths could have controlled if she had wanted to, and in ways that should seriously affect our thinking about gender, genre, and voice.

In “Mimesis: The Dramatic Lineage of Auto/Biography,” Evelyn Hinz has argued thoroughly and convincingly, on historical and theoretical grounds, for the close relationship of drama and autobiography in the western literary tradition (195-212). In this case, I would like to suggest that Campbell’s choice and use of drama develop out of ancient and ongoing Métis and First Nations traditions. Clearly, the methods of the Theatre Passe Muraille, which were of specifically European origin, are relevant to this discussion, not least because they were reacting to the perceived elitism of traditional theatre. Our focus here, however, is less on the play than on the extended dialogue that constitutes the main body of the book and on the ways in which Campbell seems to control that production of her life story as process. Her recognition of drama as a power tool for community work, her guidance of Griffiths through experiences that were foreign to her and that activated all the white woman’s anxieties, and the building of both play and contextualising text out of oral exchanges—this sequence describes a distinct aesthetic that depends on oral traditions, recognises the spiritual as central to daily life, the individual as centred in the community, and art as closely related to political value.

Campbell also assumes the need consciously to negotiate thresholds between experience and the representation of experience. Just as she breaks into Griffiths’ “description” of the native ceremony and insists she play back her own experience of it, so the rape scene and the creation of Wolverine become powerful as Griffiths reacts to Campbell’s experience from the previously unidentified sources of her own. The rape, for example, in which Griffiths becomes the 12-year-old Jessica first “down on the ground . . . screaming and biting” and then sobbing, and finally singing herself a lullaby, reduces Campbell to tears. Dialogue between the two women is prefaced in the text as it would be in a play text by the first name of the speaker. “Afraid to face [Maria],” Linda says “I don’t know if I sang the song you maybe sang, or if you sang anything, but . . .”

MARIA “You really did sing the song.”

LINDA “My mother sang that song.”

MARIA “My mother too.”

“As we held each other,” Griffiths concludes, “it was as if I’d unleashed my own memories. Not a story, or even acting, but something else” (46).

Such negotiation between experience and its artistic re-presentation is

continuous through *The Book of Jessica*. The formal construction of such drama grows out of/spills into the whole process of exploratory dialogue that is both dangerous and explosive but that contains its own tropes for recovery. This repetition and replay, furthermore, deconstructs conventional binaries that privilege one and disadvantage the other. The relationship between the two women in the text refuses the oppositional and works instead toward a mutual recognition.

Finally, the circular drama of text and context, of life and art, and of cross-cultural reading is self-reflexive so it resists both final appropriation and closure. Barbara Godard has described the Trickster workshops that understand the word (as in the oral context that enables progressive and emergent meaning) as “a process of knowing, provisional and partial, rather than as revealed knowledge itself, and [as aiming] to produce texts in performance that would create truth as interpretation rather than those in the Western mimetic tradition that reveal truth as pre-established knowledge” (184). Godard’s Western, mimetic tradition, of course, is the literate tradition that privileges the eye over the other senses and allows us to assume that meaning and truth become available instantly and can be firmly established. When Jessica recognises and names herself at the end of the book, she has accepted the Old Way of the spirit world of her grandmothers and has been granted her powersong, but her reintegration is only the beginning of the healing process that Campbell wants for the Métis people. Her self-naming power is also part of an ongoing process in which such healing may be inter-personal and cross-cultural like the long dialogue between these two women that leads up to it.

**A**rnold Krupat describes Native autobiography as a post-contact phenomenon largely dependent on the interventive ethnographer. Narratives by and about Native people have changed in style and structure from academic analysis of the reified “primitive” to unreflective romanticism about the indigene, to the current self-consciousness that acknowledges not only that the ethnographer is inevitably biased but also, as Robin Ridington puts it in his introduction to *The Trail to Heaven*, that the modern ethnographer is involved in mutual, interactive interpretation, that the object of study is also a subject ethnographer. (Involvement and response of the subject, whether this Métis woman or the local farming community in southern Ontario, etc., seem to be central to the work of the Theatre Passe Muraille.)

*The Book of Jessica* posits Griffiths, as it were, in the role of the white ethnographer and replays variations of white/Native relations. Campbell takes Griffiths home to study the Native community but reverses the situation that Penny van Toorn describes as typical in which the autobiographer is demoted to “native informant” under the aegis of the “patron discourse”; “the dominant culture,” as she puts it, “issues minority writers with their licenses to speak (which is also, of course, the site where mechanisms of exclusion and suppression operate)” (103).<sup>2</sup> At the personal level, Griffiths experiences the desires and anxieties that are commonplace in white Canadian interpretation of the Native. What she does not encounter is what Spivak has called “the Imperialist’s self-consolidating Other” (quoted in Fee, 176). She, and not Campbell, is Other. She needs to “brown up,” and Campbell applies makeup; this is enabling (“like wearing an invisible cloak” [45]), and frightening when it turns streaky, refuses to work. She is ashamed and walks, as she had read in *Halfbreed* of the Métis walking when among white people, “with [her] head down around Native people. I felt ashamed,” she says. “I felt them watching my skin” (50). (Penny van Toorn has drawn my attention to Joan Crate’s poem (in Petrone, 161), from *Pale as Real Ladies*, to which Griffiths’ situation seems to be responding; here, little half-Native girls

. . . curl [their] hair and dust talcum powder  
 over cheeks and eyelids,  
 turn pale as real ladies.)

Griffiths tells how Tantoo Cardinal taught her to chant on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River. “She never made me feel stupid, no matter what kind of sounds came out. Still, I had an image of myself on stage in brown greasepaint and borrowed feathers, singing a power song, with the elders going, ‘You’ve got to be kidding’” (52). At the farmhouse ceremony, Griffiths had felt the need to chant: “If I had been able to chant, if I hadn’t been afraid of my uncertain voice mixed in with the strange nasal call of the people around me, then it might have been easier. But I felt myself to be still a watcher, as if the comforts of the ceremony were not for me” (29). (Her sense of exclusion and her rendering of Jessica’s powersong are both important for this discussion.)

Although Griffiths attempts to efface herself, believing her role is that of medium, she is no better able than the ethnographer to be a truly blank receptor. For Campbell, this “blank receptor” is not blank at all but comes,

indeed, culturally endowed with abject guilt, with loss of history, and with the limitations of a rational straitjacket. At this continuously negotiated threshold between life and art, Griffiths' "professional" silence obstructs the transformative process. "Why is it okay to lay my guts all over the table," Campbell asks, "but you can only take some of yours, and by the way, madam, let's make sure they're the pretty ones. I've had a hard time with this the last few years, you being so virginal. Don't ask me to do something that you're not prepared to do, and if you're not prepared to do it, then understand why I'm nervous about working with you" (88) Only as Griffiths learns to stop smiling like the Virgin Mary and acknowledge her own self-hatred, shame, and emptiness can "exchange" reanimate the process. It's a late development in which Campbell says:

[Y]ou're letting me see you, you're talking to me. You're letting me see you as an equal with things inside.

When I say I saw the Virgin Mary, pure and empty, that's all I could see because you didn't give me anything else. . . . I'd come home after talking to you for hours and not feel you at all. . . . Do you have any idea what you did for me when you told me you'd been a booster? I just about fell off my chair. You're freaking out now because someone might read this. Hey, she's real, she's been in conflict, she farts in the toilet too. Talk about not being able to feel me, because I was 'dignified,' well, you sure had me fooled (87).

Because this Métis woman, furthermore, is very much alive in the present tense, and very much in the process of working within and for her own culture, conventional Eurocentric responses of nostalgia, romance, or guilt are all appropriative/inappropriate responses to her which Campbell energetically corrects. Griffiths, for example, contrasts "the awkwardly modern people who had eaten lunch" with the (surprisingly) same people during the farmhouse ceremony who "were now what I imagined 'Native' to be" (27). Her imagination, of course, is based in western literary traditions and assumptions. In dialogue, Linda has been "inspired and touched" by photographs of another ceremony. "Those guys that snuck in and painted pictures and tape-recorded and begged people to tell them things, were recording something that was dying." But Maria challenges her angrily: "[W]ho told you it was dead or dying? Those men who snuck in? Do you want to learn by sneaking around? That attitude of 'dead or dying' is what's killing us" (28). Griffiths' conventional responses create hierarchical binarisms that enable only limited, one-way, and linear movement from white to Native. Campbell rejects such binaries, associating the Church, for exam-

ple, in *Halfbreed*, with cast-off clothes. Native communities do not provide handouts but redistribute wealth from their store of what is most valuable so that exchange is generous and social and bonding.

Campbell deflects Griffiths' liberal guilt about Native people by sending her back to her own history and culture and to her own sense of oppression. She sends her to books not about the Native but about the Celt and about the goddess traditions. "Passe Muraille was known to be a political theatre," she says. "[H]ow could you be political without knowing your own stories? And they were no different from the stories of Halfbreed or Indian people" (36). Driven back again on herself, Linda acknowledges her first-hand experience of being "semiotically controlled": "How could I speak about my own pain?" she asks. "All my life I'd been told I had it good—white, two parents, a nice home, only two kids in the family, two cars, . . . a decent education, no trouble about food, no beatings, no overt violence. . . . Everything repressed under the dining room table. . . . I grew up desperate for the stories that would fit my nightmares" (75-76). "I know I'm from the underneath," she acknowledges, "because of the way I feel, because of the anger I feel. I feel like I'm shaking my fist at someone on top of me, and I look . . . I'm from the Canadian middle classes, who the hell am I shaking my fist at? . . . You say that if we understood our history, everything would be stronger. But it doesn't feel like that to me" (97). Historically, or from sense-memory in the Stanislavski tradition, Griffiths needs to learn the traditional Native principle of circularity that Tomson Highway has described as "the way the Cree look at life. A continuous cycle. A self-rejuvenating force. By comparison," he says, "Christian theology is a straight line. Birth, suffering, and then apocalypse" (quoted in Johnston, 255). Guilt, says Daniel David Moses in "Preface: Two Voices," sounds like the opposite thing to healing. "It seems that you don't want to heal, you want to keep the wound" (xvii). (This dialogue-for-preface shares several topics with the Griffiths-Campbell dialogue.) Campbell's responsibility for the healing circle includes Griffiths in its protective embrace.

As the ethnographer is transformed into two interactive subjects, so is the autobiographer. Her subject is not unified or autonomous but plural and contested. Hinz has already challenged the received distinction between the European as individual and the Native North American as a member-of-community in her brief analysis of the role of autobiography in self-interpretations: "Perhaps . . . the reason auto/biographical documents are rare in



primitive societies has to do with the fact that ritual performs a self-exorcising role for their members; and perhaps the reason auto/biographical documents are so abundant in the Western tradition has to do with the extent to which they provide a sense of the communal that we lack” (Hinz, 208).<sup>3</sup> In her introduction to *Life Lived Like a Story*, Julie Cruikshank contrasts the assumptions about autobiography in Native and European traditions and shows how these affect narrative technique. Whereas she wanted to know about the impact of change and development on the lives of three Yukon Elders, they understood their lives in terms of kinship and landscape and shaped their narratives to include mythological tales, songs, and long lists of personal and place names. Ong has suggested that the self is only visible in an oral culture through the eyes of others, that we depend on the technology of writing and print to split the subject for self-reflection (152). Cruikshank’s questions, in other words, and the answers she receives demonstrate very distinct modes of understanding and vividly reflect their re-contextualised cultures of origin.

The years of dialogue that make up *The Book of Jessica* replay uninformed assumptions, renegotiate misunderstandings, play back to each other what each has heard. The ostensible purpose of those earlier conversations that were not recorded during which Griffiths was learning to be Campbell was to enable Griffiths to “sybil” Campbell. That is a strange verb. It suggests the mystery of interpretation with the power of the actress to body forth another’s life. Her sybiling powers must have been extraordinary because Campbell recognises herself again and again with anger and pain. But this interpretive role is not one-sided. As with the circularity of exchange, while Griffiths sybils Campbell, so Campbell works as Griffiths’ mother/shaman to induct and protect her in this shared and dangerous enterprise within the Native spiritual traditions. The Métis, she points out, have always been guides and interpreters (as, in another reversal, Griffiths is too). They have linked the Native and the white in cultural/textual *métissage*, emphasising a transcultural rethinking of identity, what Lionnet describes as “relational patterns over autonomous ones, interconnectedness over independence . . . opacity over transparency” (245).<sup>4</sup>

Just as the ethnographer’s reading of the Native translated, historically, into autobiography for white consumption and needs now to be regrouped in the Native experience and in appropriate media for expression of that experience so, too, written literature affects what originates in

an oral tradition. For Native people the danger is at least twofold. Firstly, art is sometimes more privileged and therefore more powerful than ethnography (reaching a wider audience) and may involve more significant damages of appropriation. Secondly, written literature fixes in permanent form precisely that which needs to be mobile, altering in the process what is said, how it is said, and how it is read and understood. “That’s why I hate working with the English language,” Campbell says at one point, “and why I have a hard time working with white people, because everything means something else” (17).

In part, language and translation are the issues. Looking for her Métis grandmother, Christine Welsh in the NFB film, “Women in the Shadows,” feels silenced, for example, by her lack of language and is told she looks as if she ought to speak Cree, that she would understand her own emotions in Cree. Original languages, of course, connect with ancient cultures. Campbell includes Cree words in her texts for children to ensure that the Métis adults of the future acknowledge and take pride in their past. One positive feature of English (in this case) as a dominant language is that, as Beth Cuthand puts it “we could communicate with each other. I fully believe,” she continues, “that we can use English words to Indian advantage and that as Indian writers it’s our responsibility to do so” (53).

But the issue is not simply one of language. Added to the alien language is the problem of authoritative voice. “I started writing by accident,” Jeannette Armstrong says. “[A]ctually, I started answering back. I would start by saying ‘That’s not true! Indian people don’t see things that way; we see it this way’” (55). But at university she learned “that there is a certain elite way of writing that is acceptable, and if you write within that framework you can be heard by the public at large.” Nowhere has this distinction between how Native people see things and how they are heard in the colonizer’s idiom been more dramatically made than in Chief Justice Allan McEachern’s decision on 8 March 1991 on the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en land claims. Campbell may urge Griffiths to reconnect with her own history, saying magic and power and history are inextricably related, but McEachern dismisses Gitksan history because it is all oral. *The Vancouver Sun* of 9 March 1991 quotes him as saying: “I am unable to accept . . . oral histories as reliable bases for detailed history, but they could confirm findings based on other admissible evidence.” If oral histories are neither reliable bases for western understanding of “detailed history” nor admissible

evidence in a non-Native court of law, we may well ask ourselves just how the First Nations can translate from one form of authority to another and how one Métis woman can reinterpret and renegotiate the painful relations of Native and white.

To return to Beth Cuthand: “We come from an oral tradition where our values, our world views, and our system of beliefs are transmitted orally. In this process, there is something more than information being transmitted: there’s energy, there’s strength being transmitted from the storyteller to the listener and that is what’s important in teaching young people about their identity. What we’re doing as Indian writers is taking that tradition and putting it physically onto paper and getting a broader distribution of those stories, because it’s really important for us, in terms of our continuing existence, that we transmit our identity and strength from one generation to another” (54). This consciousness of loaded cultural value, this foregrounding of addressivity, and this responsibility of the individual storyteller to the community and to the future seem to derive from Native traditions and to include Campbell’s “bag of goodness knows what.” Certainly *The Book of Jessica* challenges the hierarchies of discourse that block exchange or reciprocity. Use of first-person dialogue, as Janet Silman noted in her *Globe and Mail* review of 4 November 1989, “was absolutely right for this book, because the spoken word has an immediacy and dynamism which, even when recorded on paper, still can connect as third-person prose seldom does.” Immediacy perhaps equates with Ong’s sense of urgency at the heart of oral cultures and dynamism with the effect of language on listener/s both within and without the text.

**F**or discussion of genre, we need to hold in place here Bakhtin’s understanding (95) that the addressee assumed in each speech genre defines the genre. These genre boundaries too become permeable or mobile as Griffiths and Campbell address each other, address live audiences (very specifically the Native Elders and white critics) through performance, and address us as readers and, indeed, theorists, through the printed text.

Printed text, however, poses the danger of a potentially final idiom that privileges one audience above another. “[I]t does work better when we talk,” Campbell tells Griffiths. “Because when it’s written, it just sounds too . . . it sounds written” (67). Print represents one conclusion of negotiated meaning and connects in this text with the written contract by which

Campbell felt so hideously betrayed, and, quite explicitly, with land claims and with the continuous displacement of the Métis by white settlers. (In *Halfbreed*, Campbell positions her own life in the context of Métis beginnings, the history of white settlements, the Riel Rebellion, the Battle of Batoche, and the migrant destitution of the Road Allowance people.) The theatre contract is like so many other white/Native treaties; the white authority draws it up and asks for friendly approval, but the different peoples are meaning different things. Such agreements are too rarely double-voiced and tend, rather, to be appropriative. Griffiths wonders whether *Jessica* is a treaty. “To me, it was a sacred thing,” she says. “A treaty is a sacred thing,” Campbell agrees, “but a treaty has to be two equals, two people sitting down and respecting what the other one has to offer, and two people doing it together, negotiating. Otherwise, it’s not a treaty” (82). She is describing, of course, the ideal, the sacred, not the historical. The printed forms threaten, however, to fossilize both relationships and texts that are still volatile and in process of negotiation. Such forms represent ownership to the white and that term does not seem to translate into Native languages or to belong in the cultures that the languages express.

Interestingly, these two women focus their talk about contract and treaty on their feelings of joint ownership of *Jessica*, the land that they have both worked so painfully and hard. (This spatial metaphor for the text is possible only for print, not for oral narrative. Campbell’s independent use of print, like her work toward the contextualising of an improvised play in print, reminds us that her traditions are hybrid and that Métis involves integration.) Interestingly, too, Batoche, and the centenary celebrations of the Battle of Batoche figure largely in Campbell’s ability to rethink and renegotiate their relative positions. As with her work with women in prison, Campbell seems to gain strength from positions perceivable as weakness: “vulnerability is strength,” she says in her interview with Doris Hillis (50). “That goes back to my grandmother, because she said that’s what the circle is: give everything away and it will all come back.” She struggles in these dialogues not for ownership versus appropriation but for a listener who really hears her and whose response is appropriate to what she has heard.

For all Griffiths’ serious attention and her remarkable intuitions (and Campbell acknowledges these as in the dance of liberation, for instance, that Griffiths introduces after the rape scene) Griffiths has a lot to learn. As with her fear that their project would die unless she completed it, Griffiths

expresses her passion for the treasures of Native spirituality in an extended explanation and appeal: “I’m just like all the other white people,” she says. “I’m a gold digger. . . . I saw your culture, and it was like a treasure chest opening up. . . . I am a gold digger. I went for that treasure chest with everything in me, my fists were full of your gold, my fingers closed in on your jewels. . . . So I’m a gold digger. I was then and I am now. And it hurt so much then, and it hurts so much now, to see magic come alive and then have your wrists slapped because that magic can never be yours” (84-86).

If we think in terms of negotiated meaning, of the processes of interactive readings, and of the limited value of the printed word, Maria’s answer is particularly challenging: “Nobody ever said the magic wasn’t yours,” she says, “that the power wasn’t yours, nobody ever slapped your wrists, that was your interpretation of what you were being told. You just said that you were tired of interpreting all the interpretations of the Cross, all the witches, all the things that theatre and poetry had done to those images. All I was trying to tell you was that if you were tired of it, then why are you trying to do the same thing to us? Then one day the same thing will happen to our stuff, the same thing that happened to European culture. . . . Maybe I get overly uptight when I tell you, ‘Don’t do that,’ but it’s only because, if we exploit it and don’t even fully understand it ourselves, then we’re giving something away to be abused” (86). Exploitation here may describe claims and “treaties” that fail to acknowledge the varieties and dynamic continuities of lived experience, or the ways, indeed, in which lived experience can spill into its own representation. Campbell seems to be privileging the living that generates life-story and fearing, indeed, the story that may prematurely “conscript” the living.

**T**heatre was a natural choice for the author of *Halfbreed* precisely because it works as live performance and blurs the boundaries between contingent reality and its narrative interpretation. “Theatre . . . gives the oral tradition a three-dimensional context,” Tomson Highway explains, “telling stories by using actors and the visual aspects of the stage” (Petronie, 173). It provided one more way in which Campbell could extend the story she needed to tell beyond the limitations of the printed word and ensure its return to the community. This particular theatrical drama, furthermore, enacts the drama with which we began—about who may speak and who may listen and what the listener may do with what

she hears. Drama can work as process—back into the past and forward into political effect. It contains revolutionary potential; you speak and I listen and play back what I have heard; in *The Book of Jessica*, such exchanges involve rage and silence and magnificent instances of hard-won empathy. The dialogue/drama continues and diminishes its own possibility of closure.

For this Métis woman, furthermore, the performance of relationship, the intersubjectivity with a white woman, becomes performatively significant for the autobiographical act. For her, as Jessica, and as Maria-and-Linda, the woman-self is not singular but interactive, mediating and mediated. And this mediation, that is performed agonistically by two women of each other, sets up a cyclical motion. “This mind goes in circles,” says the grandmother-figure of Vitaline in the play. “[A]nd don’t you forget it” (167). Her circles are those of the grandmothers, of the spirit world, of prayers for protection, of relationships in process, of recognition that all life forms are connected and responsible to each other, of performance that contains but does not confine evolution of character and of life story. Both the play and its dramatic context connect the inner life with its outer appearance in repeated transformations so that these women are both mother and daughter, both hurting and healing, both present and absent as befits the best of autobiographers—readers, writers, and performers for each other.

It is possible that Campbell withdrew from the final editing of *The Book of Jessica* because she foresaw no possibility of an appropriate representation of her life experience. I wonder, however, whether her “bag of goodness knows what” does not include this crossing of generic boundaries between ethnography, autobiography, and drama, whether she does not overrule the traditional genre boundaries of western literatures in order to connect her life with its spiritual roots, and its dramatic presentation with sacred ceremony. She creates a safe place in which, as she puts it, she can move forward by looking at what she is afraid of and gain strength from recognition. The courage of her enterprise becomes vivid in a brief story she tells of turning to face the devil from whom she has been running by the river in Saskatchewan. The interactive value of her enterprise includes Griffiths and *her* worst fears—even to the creation of Wolverine and the danger that two women begin the work and only one may survive. Because Campbell understands the magic properties of language to create reality, she performs the ultimate transformations of past times that have been intolerable to them both, through healing, into a new and integrated order from which Jessica is born.

Writing from a non-Native perspective must have, as Jeannette Armstrong tells us, “a lot . . . to do with listening first of all, listening and understanding and waiting till that understanding has reached a point at which you can say, do you mean this and that person says yes, I mean this” (in *Telling it* 51). “People at large,” says Profeit-LeBlanc, “can have a glimpse of understanding.” But, she adds parenthetically, “(You can never fully understand)” (115). Whatever happens in *The Book of Jessica*, however, is important to my own search for the voices and genres of autobiography. My discussion, therefore, is interrogative and my questions remain questions.

NOTES

- 1 My thanks for significant help with this paper may serve as a precursive comment on the problems it raises. Margery Fee, Eva-Marie Kröller, Arnold Krupat, Penny van Toorn, and Jerry Wasserman were generous with scholarly information. Blanca Chester and Valerie Dudoward, Marilyn Iwama, Jenny Lawn, Sharon Meneely, Dorothy Seaton, Julie Walchli, and Penny van Toorn kindly allowed me to read unprinted work. Marilyn Iwama, Jenny Lawn, and Penny van Toorn took their red pencils to my early drafts. Elizabeth Emond checked the accuracy of quotations. Both this paper and my working life have been enriched by such collaboration; as ever, the mistakes remain my own.
- 2 Terry Goldie has referred to the indigene as a “semiotic pawn on a chessboard under the control of the white signmaker” (70). Griffiths’ recognition of the ideologies controlling her perception of what Marcia Crosby has called “the imaginary Indian,” and of herself as also semiotically controlled, is important for the “exchange.”
- 3 Arnold Krupat tells me: “[o]ne reason there aren’t autobiographical documents in Native cultures is demographic: no small scale society, in which everybody knows everybody else and their business would *need* to hear people tell of their lives. They know their lives and know their own lives are known. The other reason, more complicated, is that narratives ostensibly about other people, “mythic” or “historical” are also taken as bearing on one’s own life history.” Letter dated 25 November 1993. Krupat’s comments on this paper were generous and constructive but did not support my reading.
- 4 The indeterminacy that Lionnet describes as *métissage* appears also in *Jessica*, the play; transformations blur the boundaries established in traditional theatre by scenes. Jerry Wasserman has pointed out in conversation that *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*, by Monique Mojica, another Métis writer, is the only other play he knows that uses transformations.

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