

# “Being a Half-breed”

## Discourses of Race and Cultural Syncreticity in the Works of Three Metis Women Writers

In his introduction to *All My Relations*, Thomas King asserts that “being Native is a matter of race rather than something more transitory such as nationality”: “one is either born an Indian or one is not.” While King adds that there is no “racial denominator” among Natives and that it is important to “resist the temptation of trying to define a Native,” at least until the body of work by authors of Native ancestry “reaches some sort of critical mass,” he contends that Indianness is an inborn genetic trait (x-xi). The danger of King’s position is elucidated by ethnohistorian James Clifton:

the uncritical use of Indian, White, and Black, and the associated ethnocentric assumptions about ancient differences in behaviour and potentialities, history, and culture effectively block analytic thinking. These historically derived, culturally patterned, institutionally reinforced convictions include such persistent ideas as being and becoming Indian is a matter largely of biological ancestry, that Indianness is fixed by blood. A related assumption is that the labels White and Indian mark sharply defined categories—culturally defined ways of sorting diverse people into a few classes. A further assumption is that these differences are primordial, inevitable, original, durable and natural. (23)

In other words, when race is considered anything more than an “accident of birth” (King xi), biological determinism soon follows and is inevitably used to justify and perpetuate the disempowerment of oppressed groups.

Historically, as Noel Elizabeth Currie asserts, “Europeans constructed the different ‘races’ they encountered in their colonialist and imperialist ventures as ‘inferior’ and ‘savage’ in order to exploit them economically; racism provided a justification, after the fact, for that exploitation” (139). In

contemporary Canadian society, internalized racism is a key element in Native people's oppression. Beatrice Culleton's novel *April Raintree* demonstrates the way in which a light-skinned Metis girl, for whom assimilation into white society appears a possibility, is convinced by her teachers, foster family, and social workers that Native people are responsible for their own disempowerment and that their social positioning is unalterable. Growing up isolated from any Metis community, April Raintree perceives her options as dichotomous: either become the drunken Indian Other or assimilate. In contrast, Maria Campbell's autobiography *Halfbreed* illustrates the validating effects of having been raised in a family with a strong sense of Metis identity. Situating the Metis historically, Campbell characterizes their identity as a cultural construct; her emphasis is thus on ethnicity rather than race. In *I Am Woman* and *Sojourner's Truth*, Lee Maracle too focusses not on race but on cultural heritage and political disempowerment as determinant of Metis experience. Hybrid by definition, Metis identity is *predicated* upon what is "an inescapable and characteristic feature of all post-colonial societies," namely, cultural syncreticity (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 30). Thus, a positivist emphasis on race such as that put forth by Thomas King is peculiarly problematic for the Metis. That racial stereotyping has had a devastating impact on the Metis and other Native peoples is, however, undeniable. Its operation is thoroughly explored in *April Raintree*.

At a young age, April (Culleton's narrator) discriminates between "brown-skinned" and "fair-skinned" children at a playground. She dismisses the former as "dirty" and "raggedy" but is herself rejected by the fair-skinned group, who "didn't care to play with Cheryl and me. They just called us names and bullied us" (6). This name-calling is a literal form of what Marxist critic Louis Althusser terms interpellation, during which individuals "recognize" (or misrecognize) themselves in discourse and adopt subject positions accordingly, and through which existing distributions of power are perpetuated (170-177). In the park, the race relations of the next generation are being established as the children of the dominant group hail the Native children as Other. Later in the novel, members of April's foster family reinforce her racial categorization through such repeated comments as "I know you half-breeds, you love to wallow in filth" (26). Soon April forms what she considers a complete definition of "half-breed":

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 giv-

ing your children to white people to look after. It meant that kids like me, had to take what kids like the DeRosiers gave, and none of that was good. (34)

The only time April refers to herself as a half-breed is “to spite” the DeRosier children when they have done poorly at school: “Hey Maggie, you told us that half-breeds were stupid. Well, if we’re stupid, you must lack brains altogether” (40). The taunt ironically challenges the DeRosiers’ stereotyped view of the Metis and interrupts the dominant racist ideology by foregrounding a moment of contradiction within it. At the same time, the taunt reiterates the terms of the original putdown: “we’re stupid.” Indeed, April continues to believe that half-breeds are stupid, resolving the anomaly through her belief that “I wasn’t a half-breed” (26). Motivated by “spite” instead of by pride, April’s brief acknowledgement of her Metis identity is reactive in nature and does not reinscribe the meaning of “half-breed.”

The roles April and her sister Cheryl are expected to fill in the social formation are mapped on to them from an early age. One of their social workers gives them a “little speech” about what she calls the “native girls’ syndrome”:

...and you girls are headed in that direction. It starts out with the fighting, the running away, the lies. Next come the accusations that everyone in the world is against you. There are the sullen uncooperative silences, the feeling sorry for yourselves. And when you go on your own, you get pregnant right away or you can’t find and keep jobs. So you’ll start with alcohol and drugs. From there, you get into shoplifting and prostitution and in and out of jail. You’ll live with men who abuse you. And on it goes. You’ll end up like your parents, living off society. ...you’re going the same route as many other native girls. If you don’t smarten up, you’ll end up in the same place. Skid row. (48-9)

The social worker’s narrative construct is naturalized by the use of the future tense and the second person pronoun. Because the role of language in the construction of the subject is suppressed by ideology, individuals appear “willingly’ to adopt the subject positions necessary to their participation in the social formation” (Belsey 61), and the fact that these subject positions are *apparently* voluntarily taken up absolves the racist dominant society of responsibility. While April rejects the social worker’s interpellation for herself, she accepts the explanation it implicitly supplies for the situation of Native people in Canadian society.

April refuses to identify with Native people because “in today’s society, there isn’t anything positive about them” (125), and she tells her activist sister Cheryl that “you’ll never change the image of the native people” (90). In her view, the only advantage of biculturalism for the Metis is that it gives

them the perspective of “critic-at-large” (98), able to “feel only the shortcomings of both sides” (white and Indian) (125). In renouncing her Native identity, April joins “many Metis people, especially those who have integrated and/or assimilated with the French Canadians” (Lussier 1). Though April’s attempt to integrate eventually fails, the lasting impression of this novel is April’s preoccupation with passing herself off as white.

In contrast, the narrator of *Halfbreed* only contemplates “calling [her]self French or Spanish or anything else” at one point in the narrative, not because she is ashamed of her people, but because she is ashamed of herself (139). Maria Campbell is subjected to the same racial prejudice as April Raintree and, like April, she initially internalizes shame and hatred. (Hereafter I will use “Maria Campbell” or “Campbell” to refer to the author, and “Maria” to refer to the character within the text). Maria comes home from school and says that she hates her mother, her father, and “all of you no-good Halfbreeds” (50). Thanks to her great-grandmother, the young Maria soon learns the historical and political context of this self-hatred and from then on tries “to keep [her] head up and defend [her] friends and cousins in front of those white kids” (51). Though it is laden with negative connotations, Campbell retains the word “Halfbreed.” The negative image of Native people, including the Metis, is embedded in discourse and a simple substitution of words is not enough to effect a change in consciousness (though terminology can play a role in such change). Instead, Campbell takes on the challenging task of transforming the meaning of “Halfbreed” from within.

**T**hroughout the book, Campbell typifies the Halfbreed people through generalizations that counter the derogatory stereotypes associated with the word “half-breed” in the dominant discourse. Campbell delineates the history of the Metis and demonstrates that they are a unique group, distinct from white Canadians, and “completely different from” their “Indian relatives” (25). “Halfbreeds [are] quick-tempered—quick to fight, but quick to forgive and forget” (25). “Treaty Indian women don’t express their opinions, Halfbreed women do” (26). “Halfbreeds are very superstitious people. They believe in ghosts, spirits and any other kind of spook” (35). Halfbreeds are “noisy, boisterous, and gay” (111), and they “love weddings” (120). “No one can play the fiddle and guitar like a Halfbreed. They can make these instruments come alive—laugh, cry and shout” (115). At funerals, Halfbreeds grieve, “but in a different way. The women [cry], but

they [accept] death,” meeting it “with great strength” and keeping “their grief inside as they [do] with so many other things” (67). Campbell asserts that her “people have always been very political” (72) and characterizes Stan Daniels, a political activist, as “a Halfbreed through and through”:

He could sit down at his table with authority, his wife and children around him, and the room full of noisy, shouting people. He would eat up food as if there would be none tomorrow, slurping up coffee, belching, children climbing all over him, shrieking and laughing. The whole room would revolve around him and there would always be lots of music. (169)

As important as the positive images Campbell offers is the fact that she defines “Halfbreed” in a way that emphasizes ethnicity over race. Ethnicity, “defined by mutable, extrinsic characteristics,”

is marked by a group’s style of dress, by speech, by their learned, culturally patterned behaviours. The presumption is that people joined in an ethnic group share a common historical and cultural heritage.... (Clifton 26)

At the same time as she valorizes Halfbreed culture, Campbell implicitly challenges the Euro-American belief that “blood” is determinant of character and experience, and thus offers a challenge to racist discourse more radical than a mere inversion of terms would have been.

Discourses of race divide people by suggesting that their differences are genetically entrenched. Cultural syncretism, conversely, emphasizes hybridity, and the Metis identity has always been syncretic. Campbell says that her family members “were a real mixture of Scottish, French, Cree, English and Irish. We spoke a language completely different from the others. We were a combination of everything: hunters, trappers and *ak-ee-top* farmers” (23-24). In *The Book of Jessica*, Campbell says:

my people have walked behind other cultures picking up things their parents discarded for generations: moral traditions, sacred things, songs, prayers, everything...a way of tying a scarf, a jig step. When you look at what we have as mixed-blood people you see all these things woven into something that became a new nation. (86)

The principle of inclusivity which characterizes the Metis culture also conduces to the expression of solidarity with other people of colour. Though it occurs in the work of both Campbell and Lee Maracle, this solidarity has been overlooked by critics such as Agnes Grant who, in her discussion of *Halfbreed*, quotes Campbell as saying “I’d hated those nameless, faceless white masses all my life.” Grant then states that “Such blunt comments

about non-Natives...dominate the book” (127). When Grant translates “white” into “non-Native,” she effaces the particularity of Campbell’s sentiment: she says white because she means white, not “non-Native.” As an illustration, Maria is welcomed into a Chinese family when she is abandoned by her husband in Kristen, Alberta. She finds them “kind and happy,” and grows “very fond of them, as they” do of her daughter Lisa and her (128). Maria witnesses the fact that the Sing family is derided by racists in much the same way that her people are. Her identification with the Chinese is later symbolized by the prostitute whose room is next to hers, a “Chinese girl, who was part Indian” (134). The common experience of racial discrimination and oppression unites the groups in an important and potentially pivotal way.

Lee Maracle’s story “Yin Chin” also explores the relationship between Native and Asian people. As a result of the common experience of oppression,

when people of colour get together they discuss white people. They are the butt of our jokes, the fountain of our bitterness and pain and the infinite well-spring of every dilemma life ever presented us. The humour eases the pain, but always whites figure front and centre of our joint communication. (67)

The reactive nature of this communication is necessary at first, but obsession with the oppressor ultimately limits growth. Happily, Maracle recounts the story of a later meeting of a “table-load” of “Asian and Native” people at which, she says, “we ran on and on about our growth and development, and not once did the white man enter the room. ...We had been born during the first sword wound that the third world swung at imperialism. We were children of that wound, invincible, conscious and movin’ on up” (67-68). Maracle here situates the progress of Canadian Natives and Asians within a post-colonial context, thus broadening the group of sympathizers even further. This anti-imperial solidarity is reinforced in the acknowledgements of *I Am Woman*, in which Maracle “expresses her debt to `Native people, Palestinians, Chileans, Philipinos [*sic*], Eritreans, Ethiopians, El Salvadorans, Anti-apartheid activists and Black Canadian and American people” (qtd. in Godard 204). In discussing *I Am Woman*, Agnes Grant denies Maracle’s pointed attack on “white males” when she uses the more sanitized “non-Native men” as though it were synonymous—an imprecision which enacts violence on the text (130). By specifically naming the colonizer, while asserting her solidarity with other groups struggling for an end to oppression, Maracle lays bare the racist (and sexist) biases underpinning global distributions of power.

Maracle further interrogates the dominant discourse in her short story “Bertha” by using the dialogic voice. According to Barbara Godard, “the dialogic or double-voiced discourse—whether parody, irony, parallax, imitation (with a difference), stylization—re-marks convention by incorporating the word of another within it” (197). In “Bertha,” the first story in the collection *Sojourner’s Truth*, Maracle recontextualizes heavily connotative instances of diction and sentence structure in order to undermine the ideologies in which they are based. Mimicking capitalist language, Maracle refers to the workers of cannery row as “very fortunate employees,” a label contradicted by every detail given about their living conditions (15). In describing the workers’ shacks, Maracle employs liting, distinctly nineteenth-century British syntax for increased parodic effect:

At high-tide each dwelling, except the few nearest shore, was partially submerged in water. It wasn’t really such a great bother. ...A good pair of Kingcome slippers was all that was needed to prevent any discomfort the tide caused. ...Besides which, the sort of tides that crept into the residence occurred but twice or thrice a season. Indeed, the nuisance created was trifling. (18)

The long-suffering tone which purports to downplay the conditions of course draws attention to them, and words such as “thrice” and “trifling”—hardly in common currency—are examples of “incorporating the word of another” (Godard 197) for the purpose of irony.

A description of a fight between “X” and “X’s brother” over whether a certain foreman was a “dog” or a “pig” illustrates the way in which Natives’ rage against whites is expressed through violence directed at each other. The labelling of the fighters is a blatant indication of the absence of Natives within the signifying system; their place is marked as the place of a number is marked in an algebraic formula. “X” also evokes the signature of the illiterate. Theoretically, the identification of one character as another’s brother could reinforce the importance of familial ties in the Native community, but in context, the fact that the two men are brothers deepens the pathos of the situation. At the end of the tale, X’s brother, whose identity has already been effaced by his labelling, is killed by synecdoche and in a subordinate clause (“the water that filled X’s brother’s lungs settled the argument forever” [16]), so that even his death is under erasure. In the middle of this scene, the narrator incorporates Marxist terminology—“food being a much higher use-value” (16). Since the dialogue is reported, the question of whether X’s brother actually used the term “use-value” is conveniently

blurred. Regardless, its citation here is both absurd and pathetic, a sharp challenge to the relevance of the Marxist analysis of capitalism, especially given its failure to address systemic racism. Elsewhere, Maracle contends that “the European labor movement was built on our backs” and that “the workers of this land have always had us as a cushion to soften the blow of recession” (*I Am Woman* 138). Though Maracle allows that “to renounce the principles of communism because the character of its adherents contain [*sic*] flaws is absurd,” a Marxist analysis is insufficient to articulate the experience of Native labourers, especially Native women like Bertha (*I Am Woman* 138).

The narrator’s savvy, cynical tone and the subversion of both language and sentence structure are successful instances of interrogating the dominant discourse. At the root of the tension in Maracle’s style is the implication that if a Native woman can excel within white patriarchal discourse, then that discourse, which consigns her to illiterate invisibility, is contradictory and thus lacks validity in its implicit claim to be a totalizing ideology. In *I Am Woman*, Maracle states that “Each time I confronted white colonial society I had to convince them of my validity as a human being. It was the attempt to convince them that made me realize that I was still a slave” (15). Maracle’s chosen strategy in some of the stories in *Sojourner’s Truth* can be seen to circumscribe her: to manipulate the dominant discourse into betraying itself, she adheres (slavishly) to its rules (even dialogic discourse must repeat the conventions it “re-marks” [Godard 197]). At the same time, Maracle declares that “the desire of our people to gain a foothold in this society is arrogantly interpreted as a desire to be like Europeans. ...But quite frankly, we do not respect the ways of European Canada. We seek knowledge that we may turn it to our own use” (*I Am Woman* 112). For Maracle, then, mastering the discourse of the colonizers is not (or is no longer) an “attempt to convince them”; rather, achieving competence within the system is always subsidiary to the goal of subverting it.

**M**aracle’s stated aim in the short story collection is to “integrate two mediums: oratory and European story” (11). She finds that “not much is left to the imagination in European stories,” in which “the answer to the question posed lies within the lines of the story” (12). She stresses that, in contrast to the “instructive” European style, “there is no explanation” in Native stories; “just the poetic terseness of the dilemma is presented” (12). There is, however, a fair amount of didactic exposition in



Maracle's stories. In the story "Too Much To Explain," for example, the motivation of the central character *is* explained: "The little girl, traumatized by the scene, had jumped inside the same trap, running a marathon of imprisoning relationships because she had not wanted to remember" (120). Not only is the surreal "Sojourner's Truth" a "one-joke" story, but the joke is explained for the reader: "Jesus, I am getting tired of this guy. Every rhetorical or philosophical remark prefaced by his name calls him forth" (125). In the first person stories, the narrators tend to maintain an interior monologue in which they situate themselves as superior to the other characters thanks to their comprehensive viewpoint. In "Who's Political Here?", the narrator explains that it is Frankie's

great pretence at morality, his sneakiness and his belief that I belong to my husband that really get to me. If I were to suggest we jump in bed, he would ask me about my husband; he does not think of him while he is brushing my tits, though.  
DING DONG. (30)

(In fact, Frankie withholds his question until after the sex act.) When she discovers that her husband has been jailed for posterizing, the narrator's response is "Who is in prison here? My sentence is 'until death do us part'; he's going to be there overnight. I don't say it; he wouldn't understand" (32). Furthermore, the narrator knows that her husband is having an affair but does not "say anything because [Frankie] would insist that that's different" (36). She adds that she is jealous of her husband's lover, "not sexually, but because my husband and his friends accord her her mind. I can't explain that to Frankie" (37). Regardless of the accuracy of her estimation of Frankie, the narrator, by refusing to voice her insights, seals them into a vacuum that grants them ultimate authority within the story. While Maracle's declared intention is "to draw the reader into the centre of the story" (13), this self-congratulatory form of narration precludes, or at least severely limits, the reader's participation.

Though the narrator of "Eunice" also declines to put her ideas into circulation, her emphasis throughout the story on her own silence contextualizes—and politicizes—the vacuum of interiority. In empathizing with Eunice, an agoraphobe—"In my silence, I don't feel so different from Eunice"—the narrator is explicit about the influence of socially constructed gender roles: "We were both somewhat comfortable in our feminine invisibility" (57). The narrator's gender is, of course, only one of the factors contributing to her invisibility. At a meeting of women writers, the narrator

portrays herself as “lost in a kind of reverent retreat, drifting irresponsibly in and out of the conversation without helping to focus on the project at hand, but still wearing a look of attention on [her] face” (58). The significance of a Native woman’s “wearing a look of attention” amongst a group of predominantly white women writers is suggested by a later story, “Charlie,” in which the central character, a Native pupil in a residential school, uses a “practiced look of bewilderment” in class to avoid thrashings from the white teachers (99). The narrator of “Eunice” breaks her silence to share with the group her insight that “the invisibility” white editors “are responsible for creating is the cause of our death” (61). Otherwise, she scarcely participates in the meeting; the final clause of the story’s penultimate sentence is “I don’t say a word” (64). The narrator of “Eunice” is doubly oppressed as a woman and as a Native, and, like most of Maracle’s first-person narrators, rather than speaking she editorializes heavily. Julia Emberley, in commenting on a scene from Minnie Aodla Freeman’s *Life Among the Qallunaat*, demonstrates how an Inuit woman “is silenced by the seemingly benign generosity of her [white] roommate, and how Freeman strategically displaces this silencing in the writing of this text as an explication of that silence” (168). Maracle’s strategy in “Eunice” is similar. Frequent editorializing is held to be a flaw by Eurocentric literary standards (as in the axiom “show, don’t tell”), but Maracle uses it in response to the silencing of Native women within the white patriarchal discourse that dictates those standards.

In *Halfbreed*, Maria Campbell also challenges Eurocentric standards, in particular, the rules of genre. In fact, the genre of “Indian women’s autobiography” is already hybrid, drawing on traditions of Native orature and on the “written tradition of Euro-American autobiography.” Autobiography is not an indigenous oral form, but “it shares with oral forms some basic characteristics: emphasis on event, attention to the sacredness of language, concern with landscape, affirmation of cultural values and tribal solidarity” (Bataille and Sands 3). In addition, most Indian women’s autobiographies convey a sense of “the connectedness of all things, of personal life flow, and episodes often are not sequential but linked thematically to establish a pattern of character developing through the response to private experience” (Bataille and Sands 8). Working within a syncretic genre, Campbell not only redefines “Halfbreed” in positivist terms but deconstructs racist stereotypes. One of Maria’s employers says that “Indians” are “only good for two things—working and fucking.” She makes “jokes about hot bucks and hot

squaws” as though the Metis were “animals in the barnyard” (109). Campbell undermines the employer’s stereotyped discourse by informing the reader that whenever this woman “got a chance she’d go to dances in nearby native communities and sneak off into the bush with the men. I know she made countless passes at Dad.” She adds:

This was common in our area: the white men were crazy about our women and the white women, although they were not as open and forward about it, were the same towards our men. (108)

By revealing the fetishistic attitude and behaviour of the whites, Campbell subverts the hegemony of the universalist white discourse, offering a corrective local story (note the phrase “in our area”) in its place.

Campbell also uses the form of autobiography to subvert the master narrative of white imperialist history. Using conciseness as a form of understatement, Campbell, in a few pages at the beginning of the book, recounts critical events for the Metis in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and eloquently demonstrates the impact of colonization and racism on her people. She reveals the way in which impossible circumstances produced in the Metis feelings of failure and shame which have been passed down intergenerationally. She explodes the image of lazy, dirty Halfbreeds promulgated by white sources (3-9). Campbell modestly undercuts this exposition by saying, “But I am ahead of myself” (9), as though this causal analysis had been a mere digression, an error in chronology. It is precisely this sort of interruption of linear history which makes *Halfbreed* an act of decolonization. As Barbara Godard says:

Narrative is a way of exploring history and questioning the historical narratives of the colonizer which have violently interposed themselves in place of the history of the colonized. Experimentation, especially with structures of chronology, is part of this challenge, a radical questioning of historiographical versions of the past as developed in the “master narratives,” in order to rewrite the historical ending. (198)

Conventional linear history would tend to flatten out Campbell’s comprehensive analysis under the strictures of chronological order. Indeed, *Halfbreed* was subjected to “the reshaping activities of an editor” (Godard 225, n.49) in order to make it “fit the conventions of Native life-writing” (Godard 204). Fortunately, some of Campbell’s subversive strategies slipped past the editor.

Campbell disregards chronology again when she gives a preview of her childhood games at the end of Chapter Two before recording her own birth at the beginning of Chapter Three. Campbell moves metonymically from a

mention of her mother's books—by “Shakespeare, Dickens, Sir Walter Scott and Longfellow”—to a description of the “Roman Empire” game, which involved playacting Caesar, Mark Anthony and Cleopatra (14). Campbell's disruption of chronology foregrounds the influence of European authors on the children, thus making a deliberate point of cultural syncreticity. By emphasizing commonality instead of difference, Campbell destabilizes white readers' preconceptions about the Native Other. (That the book is primarily addressed to white readers is indicated in the introduction—”I write this for all of you, to tell you what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country” [2]—and throughout the text by such statements as “I know that poverty is not ours alone. Your people have it too” [9]). At the same time as she defies their expectations, Campbell encourages white readers to enter the text through the door of familiarity rather than to look at the “Indian” through a “study window” (Brizinski 300). Disarmed, the reader is less likely to fetishize the information that soon follows about Native ways, such as:

they would take us on long walks and teach us how to use the different herbs, roots and barks. We were taught to weave baskets from the red willow, and while we did these things together we were told the stories of our people.... My Cheechum believed with heart and soul in the little people. (18)

Campbell does not fetishize tradition and certainly does not long for a return to mystical, pre-colonial purity: the Metis are a product of the meeting of two cultures—are, as Duke Redbird says, “THE ONLY ETHNIC GROUP INDIGENOUS TO THE CONTINENT” (53)—and their cross-culturality is “the potential termination point of an apparently endless human history of conquest and annihilation justified by the myth of group ‘purity’” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 36). Bataille and Sands assert that the purpose of “Indian women who consciously” choose “to write their own life stories” is “to correct misinformation about Indians as savages and to bring the Indian and white worlds closer together” (21). This assertion is supported by Campbell's statement at the end of *Halfbreed* that “I believe that one day, very soon, people will set aside their differences and come together as one. Maybe not because we love one another, but because we will need each other to survive” (184). In terms of literary hybridization, Bataille and Sands assert that *Halfbreed* “serves as further proof that the two modes of autobiography, written and oral, continue to exist simultaneously” (116). Indeed, Campbell's colloquial, conversational tone in the book—”I should tell you about our home now before I go any further” (16)—coupled with her use of

(often humorous) anecdote and development by association rather than chronological sequence all represent traces of the oral tradition within the written form. Thus, Campbell's text is a site of cultural syncretism.

**C**ultural syncretism is not to be confused with universalism, which is characterized by disregard for historical, socio-economic and political realities. One specific aspect of universalist thinking in North America, used to rationalize the way in which capitalism perpetuates and depends upon inequality, is the American Dream which promises a “rags to riches” transformation for anyone with enough innate resourcefulness. Significantly, all three Metis authors discussed in this paper challenge the universality of the American Dream. Maria Campbell describes the racial specificity of dreams in no uncertain terms:

I know that poverty is not ours alone. Your people have it too, but in those earlier days you at least had dreams, you had a tomorrow. My parents and I never shared any aspirations for a future. (*Halfbreed* 9)

Beatrice Culleton says that, in order to escape negative images of themselves in the mainstream society, “Some of us drink. Some of us deny our heritage. Some of us merely exist from day to day, with no ambitions and no dreams. ...I had accepted a long time ago, that my dreams would be limited” (“Images” 50). In Lee Maracle's “Polka Partners,” the narrator responds to “polka boy's” plan to create a “centre” by saying:

No one here dreamed dreams like that. Life here is raw, wine is drunk not because it is genteel, but because it blurs, dulls the need for dreams, knocks your sense of future back into the neighbourhoods for whom it works—white folks. (85)

All of these texts concur on the lack of, and necessity for, dreams among Native people. Dreams provide narratives to live by, and *April Raintree* illustrates the current crisis: white society projects the narrative of the “native girls' syndrome” on to Cheryl and April (48). In order to resist this narrative, Cheryl uses a traditionalist fantasy of living with her family as “olden-day Indians” (68), while April dreams of assimilation and a “promising future in white society” (82). Neither fantasy is helpful in transforming the position of the Metis in contemporary society. Like April, Maria initially frames her dreams in terms of materialism:

Take for example the driving ambition and dream of a little girl telling her Cheechum, ‘Someday my brothers and sisters will each have a toothbrush and

they'll brush their teeth every day and we'll have a bowl of fruit on the table all the time and, Cheechum, they'll be able to do anything they want and go anywhere, and every day we'll have a glass of milk and cookies and talk about what they want to do. ...The little girl's Cheechum would look at her and see the toothbrushes, fruit and all those other symbols of white ideals of success and say sadly, 'You'll have them, my girl, you'll have them.' (133-34)

Campbell later indicates that Cheechum's sadness stems from Maria's misguided focus on material gain; elsewhere she cautions her to "find what you want and take it, but always remember who you are and why you want it" (98). Even the young Maria, though, craves agency as well as material goods—the opportunity to *do*, not only to have. Later in the text, this distinction is further clarified:

I began to understand what Cheechum had been trying to say to me, and to see how I had misinterpreted what she had taught me. She had never meant that I should go out into the world in search of fortune, but rather that I go out and discover for myself the need for leadership and change: if our way of life were to improve I would have to find other people like myself, and together try to find an alternative. (166-67)

Campbell uses the leverage of her position of exclusion from the American dream to challenge the materialistic basis of that dream. Instead, she emphasizes the importance of community-based political action in changing the narrative of her people. Adopting a similar position, Culleton says that the Metis-owned and operated publishing company, Pemmican, "has an opportunity to help empower Native people, enabling them to dream" (50).

The challenge to universalism and the inscription of alter/native narratives are characteristic of post-colonial literature, or indeed literature in the process of decolonization. As the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* point out, "in all post-colonial cultures, monolithic perceptions are less likely." Rather, a "hybridized and syncretic view of the modern world...provides a framework of 'difference on equal terms' within which multi-cultural theories, both within and between societies, may continue to be fruitfully explored" (37). The notion of "difference on equal terms" is a Utopian one; we cannot afford to be naive about the realities of access to power. Still, in an example of internal multi-culturalism, the Metis "have taken on a conglomerate of customs, attitudes, etc. to form their own unique identity" (Lussier 1), and cultural syncreticity in Metis literature is a source of strength. Even though there are instances in *Halfbreed* in which Maria's behaviour is explained away by the elders with "It's the white in her" (*Halfbreed* 26), "originally, no

native North American society subscribed to the idea of biological determination of identity or behaviour” (Clifton 11). Those like Thomas King who adhere to blood quantum as the basis for a definition of “Native” do not have the support of Native North American tradition. Besides which, Clifton points out that “modern Indians...are *all* of composite native and Euro-American biological ancestry” (11; emphasis added). Ethnicity, not race, is what may form the basis of a truly multi-cultural society.

The Canadian model of the “multicultural mosaic” is not without problems, some of which Neil Bissoondath has articulated:

We like to think, in this country, that our multicultural mosaic will help nudge us into a greater openness. But multiculturalism as we know it indulges in stereotype, depends on it for a dash of colour and the flash of dance. (502)

Any policy which freezes diversity rather than permitting a fluid movement of differences will eventually become essentialist and deterministic. Additionally, as Duke Redbird asserts, through the multicultural initiative, the Trudeau government “devised a plan whereby minorities could maintain ethnic eccentricities and peculiarities without the basic rights of self-determination” (30-31). The fact that multiculturalism has failed in the past, however, does not mean that the model lacks value. Redbird claims that the “cultural mosaic” was an idea “that Louis Riel had proposed 100 years” before it became the theme of the Trudeau government (30), and he retains the image in his conclusion to *We Are Metis*, which speaks of “the full impact of the consciousness of the Metis people...in the mosaic of Canadian society” (54). Redbird says that “the prophecies of Louis Riel are the song of the Metis soul and they will be sung...in the synchronistic harmony of a pluralistic and truly Canadian reality” (55-56). Campbell shares Bissoondath’s distrust/ disgust with the sort of multiculturalism that would put her “in an Indian woman’s costume, parading around while white people took pictures” of her (155), but can envision a world in which “people will set aside their differences and come together as one” (184). For Beatrice Culleton, “Multiculturalism is instinctively right... Multiculturalism has helped me to begin achieving a pride in being a Canadian citizen.” Culleton believes that multiculturalism is the answer to how to demonstrate Metis participation in Canadian society, the mandate of Pemmican Publishers (now Peguis) (“Images” 50). Maracle warns, though, that “until we are also seen as people, then we are not equal and there can be no unity between us. Until our separate history is recognized and our need for self-determination satisfied we are not equal” (*I Am Woman* 103).

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