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Literary Sovereignties: New Directions in American Indian Autobiography

MICHELLE RAHEJA AND STEPHANIE FITZGERALD

Autobiography has had many functions in American Indian communities: as a powerful means of constructing tribal identities; a form of cultural preservation; a mode of surveillance in the hands of reservation and government agents; a springboard for thinking about issues of sovereignty, nationalism, and historiography; and a therapeutic tool to help deal with historical and personal trauma. Traditional forms of self-life narration existed prior to European invasion and occupation and included pictographic and oral narratives such as personal artistic representations on buffalo robes and naming ceremonies. This tradition of a wide range of personal narrative styles continued and expanded as Indians gained literacy in English and began to tailor their experiences to new literary forms such as the spiritual autobiography and the classic chronological personal narrative, at the same time maintaining older modes of self-life narration.

Scholars such as Gerald Vizenor, Hertha Dawn Sweet Wong, Robert Allen Warrior, Vine Deloria Jr., H. David Brumble, Arnold Krupat, Kathleen Mullen Sands, and David Murray have opened up the field of American Indian autobiography by considering not just the ethnographic and practical uses of Native American autobiographies, but the various cultural, political, personal, historical, and linguistic contexts that inform indigenous subjectivity. Much of the previous scholarship focused on the important issues of mediation, yet this discussion often obscured the Indian voice of the text and shifted the focus of the scholarship away from indigenous lived experience to that of the non-Indian editor.

Autobiography constitutes the most prevalent form of discursive production by indigenous people in North America. As such, it has the potential to contribute in meaningful ways to tribal communities' processes of nation building and the reconfiguration of tribal intellectual and cultural sovereignty through the recovery of Native voice and agency in mediated texts. As the contributors to this special issue demonstrate, personal narratives are employed for a variety of political tools, such as recognition struggles, and

foster empowering intellectual discourse around issues of community, gender, race, identity, and history. The collection of essays that follows engages with these previous interventions into Indian autobiography, but also opens up new ways of reading tribal self-life narration.

The authors of these articles seek to start a new conversation about American Indian autobiography in ways that aren't prescriptive. For example, several authors draw from recent indigenous scholarship that advocates renewed attention to oral narrative and tribal histories. James Watkins's "The Double-Weave of Self and Other: Ethnographic Acts and Autobiographical Occasions in Marilou Awiakta's *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom*," examines Cherokee basketry traditions to argue that Awiakta's hybrid text is simultaneously an autoethnographic expression and a conventional Western autobiography. In Awiakta's text, Watkins contends, the autobiographical subject imagines herself as Selu, a woman whose life-giving act allowed the Cherokee people to learn how to farm maize, and thus finds strength and protection in her connection to the dual weave of her own identity. Likewise, Joshua Nelson revisits the writings of Catherine Brown, a nineteenth-century Cherokee memoirist and Christian convert often held up as an example of a wholly assimilated figure, in order to demonstrate how she maintains her Cherokee identity and, similar to Awiakta, forges a connection to Selu by understanding traditional Cherokee practices to be always already fluid and kinetic, stretching to incorporate new beliefs, such as Christianity, without breaking.

Sam McKegey opens up a discussion of the traumatic history of the Canadian residential school system in "I was at war—but it was a gentle war': The Power of the Positive in Rita Joe's Autobiography" by examining how the Mi'kmaq writer Rita Joe's narrative of her experiences at boarding school, experiences that are surprisingly positive, engages with issues of healing and allows for a space of divergent critical academic and community discussions of survivors' memories of residential school and its aftermath. Discussing Debra Magpie Earling's *Perma Red*, a text that is usually categorized as fiction, Jane Haladay fruitfully reconsiders the genre constraints and possibilities of autobiography, as well as the symbiotic relationship between imagined and archival family histories, in her essay "It Just Seemed to Call to Me': Debra Magpie Earling's Self-Telling in *Perma Red*."

The first scholarly work to examine George P. Horse Capture's publication of the complex collaborative autobiography by Bull Lodge, the Gros Ventre warrior and spiritual leader, *The Seven Visions of Bull Lodge, as Told by His Daughter, Garter Snake*, Joe Gone's "'As if Reviewing His Life': Bull Lodge's Narrative and the Mediation of Self-Representation" presents this "as-told-to" autobiography not as an anthropological document of prereservation-era life, but as a creative process of self-fashioning, both by Bull Lodge and by the Gros Ventre contributors who have helped shape the text over time. Michelle H. Raheja's "I leave it with the people of the United States to say': Autobiographical Disruption in the Personal Narratives of Black Hawk and Ely S. Parker" also intervenes in the debate surrounding collaborative autobiography, a form that has been considered "inauthentic," suspect, and lacking

in indigenous agency, contending that the silences and textual aporias in the personal narratives of the well-known Sauk warrior Black Hawk and the Seneca statesman Parker suggest alternate historical realities and constitute a form of literary sovereignty by demonstrating through these gaps and interruptions that the dynamic expression of tribal cultures continues through new technologies and within difficult contexts. In her essay “Intimate Geographies: Reclaiming Citizenship and Community in *The Autobiography of Delfina Cuero* and Bonita Nuñez’s *Diaries*,” Stephanie Fitzgerald examines the ways in which these two little-known autobiographies by California Indian women probe the complex relationship of law and American Indian identity in the twentieth century, and calls for an approach to American Indian women’s autobiographies that balances the recovery and recognition of Native agency and voice with the processes of creation that shape them.