Mapping Out a Treacherous Terrain:

Working at the Crossroads of Autobiographical Studies and Inter-American Literary Studies

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Abstract

What does it mean to do autobiographical studies within the realm of Inter-American studies? What does it mean to study the story of a self within the context of such a huge terrain—geographic, cultural, linguistic, ethnic? In this chapter I look briefly at two Indigenous bilingual texts from Canada, using both Cree narrative theory and testimonial theories to show how different perspectives change our understanding of those life narratives and to underscore our responsibilities as scholars to read the texts within "the living web of the people and tradition from which they both arose" (Gunn Allen xi). The texts chosen are bilingual texts, life narratives of Cree women, printed in Cree and English. I argue that a recognition of literary and rhetorical sovereignty means that we do not impose critical terms from other cultural traditions in our readings of Indigenous texts.

¿Qué significa trabajar en la disciplina de los estudios autobiográficos dentro de la disciplina de los estudios interamericanos? ¿Qué significa estudiar la historia de un ser dentro de un terreno (geográfico, cultural, lingüístico, étnico) tan enorme? En este capítulo, yo examino dos textos indígenas bilingües del Canadá, empleando ambos la teoría narrativa Cree y las teorías de testimonio para mostrar que los acercamientos teóricos diferentes a las narrativas de vida resultan en lecturas diferentes de los textos y para subrayar que nuestras responsabilidades como académicos nos exigen que leamos los textos dentro de "la telaraña viva del pueblo y de la tradición de la cual surgen" (Gunn Allen xi). Los textos son bilingües, narrativas de vida de mujeres Cree, publicada en Cree y inglés. Afirmo que un reconocimento de la soberanía retórica y literaria significa que no imponemos términos críticos de otras tradiciones culturales en nuestras lecturas de los textos indígenas.

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In 2004, Earl E. Fitz, a leading scholarly voice in Inter-American literary studies, saw Inter-American studies as an "exciting and fast developing new field" with "the potential to revolutionize not only how we think about the Americas (including their relationships with Europe and Africa and their pre-Columbian worlds), but about the various disciplines—from literature to economics, from politics to law, and from anthropology to music—that link them together." Inter-American studies is seen as an "emergent (and therefore disruptive) intellectual discipline" that is making its mark particularly in the realm of literary studies. Fitz makes powerful arguments about the need to learn other languages, and include that training in our doctoral programs, so that future scholars in our field can read literature from more than one culture of the Americas. As "[i]nnovative, engaging literature has long been written [and I would add spoken, for the long and important oral traditions] throughout North, Central, and South America in languages other than English," the knowledge of other languages is crucial (Fitz n.p.). Sophia A. McClennan, another important voice in the field, argues that Inter-American studies ought to "signal greater awareness of the ways that the cultures of the Americas can be productively analyzed" in a comparative way and "represent a displacement of US culture as the central signifier in the region" (393). McClennan sees the Inter-American approach as one that "is able to put pressure on nationalist and cultural essentialist epistemes by focusing on the ways that culture often transgresses borders, both geographic and identitarian" (393). Rather than enter here into the broader discussion of the challenges facing the discipline of Inter-American studies, a discussion both Fitz and McClennan aptly take up elsewhere, I want to focus this essay on what it means to do autobiographical studies within the realm of Inter-American studies? What does it mean to study the story of a self within the context of such a huge terrain—geographic, cultural, linguistic, ethnic? When we look at all the Americas, we are looking at thirty-five countries and

twenty-five other territories, bodies, or collectives; about sixteen and a half million square acres of land; more than 950 million inhabitants; and a lot of different languages, races, ethnicities, religions, sexualities, and cultures. What can the story of one self signify in such a vast and complicated terrain? What are the challenges and the benefits that come from looking at autobiographical traditions in the context of the Americas? How can we do ethically responsible work that keeps each life narrative connected to the specific culture from which it has sprung while trying to engage in conversations across broader territories? Which critical approaches might cross borders and which do not?

Looking at autobiographical works from across the Americas can give us a better understanding of how subjectivity "has been produced, imagined, scripted and resisted" (Whitlock 2) by women writing in and from different locations. A greater appreciation of how women across the Americas take up different autobiographical genres, how they put them to work to construct their own identities and resist the imposition of other identities, can deepen our understanding of women's writings in the Americas and of contemporary autobiographical traditions as well. As I have argued elsewhere, "women of the world do not speak in one voice nor do they share one common experience; studies of women's autobiography that center on writings by women of one race, one culture, or one nation can suggest a more monolithic sense of women's lives or women's writings than is warranted" (Beard 3). As scholars, we must exert care not to fall into the misrecognition and misidentification pointed out by Sara Castro-Klarén when she discusses "how differences in positionality affect an unspoken and readily assumed *continuity* of identity between subject of enunciation and object of study" (33). By placing the study of women's autobiographical genres in the context of a plurality of women's voices from various corners of the Americas, by paying close attention to those voices, to how those women

use their autobiographical writings to uncover mechanisms of oppression and to discover their own sources of strength and power, we might also gain a greater understanding of how autobiographical genres can function as political tools. But mapping out this terrain comes with challenges, as not all our critical approaches translate well across borders. For example, although students or scholars use magical realism to discuss Indigenous literary works from the US or Canada,[1] it seems to me an example of a term that does not cross cultural borders very well. Are there terms in autobiography studies that can cross cultural, linguistic, or other borders? What are our ethical responsibilities as scholars working at this crossroads?

As teachers and scholars working in the Americas, we have an ethical responsibility to hold close Janice Gould's words from "The Problem of Being 'Indian,'" when she reminds us that "there is not a university in this country that is not built on what was once native land. We should reflect on this over and over, and understand this fact as one fundamental point about the relationship of Indians to academia" (81-82). While Gould refers to the United States, all of us working in the Americas need to reflect on what this point means for ourselves and our students, Native and non-Native. Whose land are we on? What are the specific histories of the Native nations who have historical claim to the land from which we write? What does it mean to me, my students, and my colleagues, that our university is located on unceded Papaschase Cree land? If we are working on stolen, colonized Indigenous lands, what does that mean for our relationships to the texts we read and teach? The land on which we teach?

In this chapter, I look briefly at two Indigenous texts from Canada, using both Cree narrative theory and testimonial theories to show how different perspectives change our understanding of those life narratives and to underscore our responsibilities as scholars to read the texts within "the living web of the people and tradition from which they both arose" (Gunn

Allen xi). The texts chosen are bilingual texts, printed in Cree and English. In both cases Cree women told their life stories, in their native Cree, to Freda Ahenakew, who is also a native speaker of Cree and a grandmother, like the women whose texts are collected. Ahenakew then worked with H. C. Wolfart, a non-Native linguist, in the construction of the written texts. The texts discussed here are two in a larger group of Cree life narratives compiled by Ahenakew, often in collaboration with Wolfart.

Their Example Showed Me the Way

In June 1988, Emma Minde told parts of her life story to Ahenakew. The resulting text, *kwayask ê-kî-pê-kiskinowâpahtihicik: Their Example Showed Me the Way: A Cree Woman's Life Shaped by Two Cultures*, presents the Cree text and the English translation on facing pages. The text is edited and translated by Ahenakew and Wolfart, with their prefatory material, an introduction by Wolfart, and a substantial Cree-English glossary. With the Cree-English glossary and the English index to the glossary, the work is clearly intended to serve as a Cree language resource and, indeed, was named the 1998 Scholarly and Academic Book of the Year by the Book Publishers Association of Alberta. But the text is also a life narrative, an eyewitness account from a Cree woman who lived through what is presented as an important period for the Plains Cree.

Minde's life narrative includes her experiences at Catholic Indian residential school in the 1920s, recounts how she left home in 1927 for an arranged marriage, and focuses on her relationships with the adults who shaped her life after her marriage—her husband's parents and his uncle and aunt. In telling her own story she also tells the stories of these two older women, both of whom are considered her mothers-in-law. These kinship relationships are crucial to the manner in which Minde narrates her story. For kinship, as Neal McLeod reminds us, "keeps

narrative memory grounded and embedded within an individual's life stories. It also grounds the transmission of Cree narrative memory: people tell stories to other people who are part of the stories and who assume the moral responsibility to remember" (*Cree* 14–15). Minde tells her story to Ahenakew, giving Ahenakew the moral responsibility to remember, but the publication of the text makes all readers responsible for remembering the stories. As readers, we may understand the narratives differently than Minde did, but the narrative process has tied us together and given us a responsibility to bring the stories into our lives and to respond to the calls for action.

I could read Minde's narrative, in part, as an example of testimonial literature. Reading the text as a testimonial work would allow me to highlight questions about the subject's terms of self-representation, who has the power to establish or change those terms, and how different circumstances can change the rhetorical strategies employed (Bartow 230). A basic definition of *testimonio* comes from George Yúdice, who describes *testimonio* as "an *authentic* narrative, told by a *witness* who is *moved* to *narrate* by the *urgency* of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.). Emphasizing *popular oral discourse*, the witness portrays his or her own *experience* as *representative* of a *collective memory* and *identity. Truth* is summoned in the cause of *denouncing* a present situation of exploitation and oppression or *exorcising* and *setting aright* official history" (qtd. in Gugelberger and Kearney 4). Minde tells an authentic narrative, her own experience is portrayed as representative of a collective memory and identity, and she summons the truth in order to exorcise or set aright official history.

With *testimonio* and autobiography, both terms that are difficult to pin down, it is hardly surprising that, in *kwayask ê-kî-pê-kiskinowâpahtihicik*, the editor-transcribers have trouble settling on the genre of the text they are presenting. The preface presents the text as "personal

reminiscences," "autobiography," and a "sketch." Wolfart's introduction explains that in "tenor and perspective, the narrative of Emma Minde is above all autobiographical; to a lesser extent it is also historical" (xv). He further discusses Minde's use of characteristic features of Cree literary form, classifying her discourse as belonging to the genre of *imowin* texts, "in which narrative stretches are interspersed with didactic or homiletic passages" (xx). Within that genre, her text includes both *âcimisowin*, autobiographical text, and *kakêskihkêmowin*, or counseling text. Wolfart highlights Cree verbs in her text that are used for advice and counsel, for teaching, and for giving advice to young people, to underscore the *kakêskihkêmowin* elements of her text.

Reading the text as an *imowin* text highlights certain aspects of Minde's narrative. Reading it as a testimonial text highlights the resistance strategies at play in the work. Chapter titles such as "Emma Minde's Life," "Family Background," and "Childhood Memories" remind readers that the editor-transcribers have certain ideas of what makes up a coherent life narrative, while the beginnings of the chapters are the key moments when Minde reminds the reader of the contestatory process through which the text was constructed.

"*awa kâ-kakwêcimit iskwêw aw ôta kâ-pîkiskwêhit*" (12). "This woman [Ahenakew] asked me, when she made me speak in here [the tape recorder]" (13) is the beginning of the second chapter, entitled "Family Background" in English. (The Cree chapters do not have titles—underscoring that these titles are the imposition of the editor-transcribers-translators, ordering and imposing an ordered life narrative for the Euro-Canadian readership. The lack of titles in the Cree version also suggests that the chapter titles in the English translation may not reflect a sense of order or a life narrative that Minde herself would have chosen.) The question being asked is about her grandparents; Minde speaks about her grandparents in one short paragraph, ending, "That is as much as I knew of my grandfather and my grandmother" (13). She

begins the next paragraph declaring, "And now I will go back and talk about when I came to live at *maskwacîsihk*; I have been living here a long time already, it must be almost sixty years that I have been living here" (13). Having dispatched with the topic Ahenakew wanted to discuss in one brief paragraph, Minde asserts narrative control and returns to the part of her life narrative that she wants to tell. We could read these sentences as the resistance strategies of *testimonio* at work, with Minde's texts bearing out Doris Sommer's claim for *testimonio* that the genre may be "a medium of resistance and counterdiscourse, the legitimate space for producing that excess which throws doubt on the coherence and power" of more traditional Western literary genres (111).

Chapter III, "Childhood Memories," begins in a similar fashion, as Minde says she will tell as much as she can remember about her childhood, "it is this woman [Ahenakew] who is making me tell about it, that is what she wants me to tell her about, how I was—how things used to be in my childhood" (19). Chapter V, "The Marriage of Mary-Jane and Dan Minde," begins, "It is these Mrs. Ahenakew wants me to tell about, my father-in-law and my mother-in-law, how things used to be when they first got married" (65). The following chapter, "Self-Reliant Women," begins with Minde insisting again that she is speaking in response to prompts from Ahenakew: "Another thing this woman wants from me when she is recording these stories, she wants to know what women did long ago, how they themselves made a living and how they made a living for their children" (75). Minde speaks about beadwork and other things she learned from her mother and her mother-in-law. Whenever a tape ends and they have to start again on a new tape, Minde reiterates that she is speaking at the insistence of Ahenakew.

In these remarks at the beginning of each chapter, Minde makes clear that Ahenakew wants her to talk about certain topics, while Minde is more interested in telling her story another

way. While reading the work as testimonial literature would allow us to focus on those moments as powerful acts of narrative resistance, that reading is not an appropriate one. Minde's remarks that she is speaking only at the insistence of another person are typical of Cree rhetoric. Her comments also evoke the self-effacing statements common to Cree storytellers who often begin stories, "*môya mistahi ê-kiskêyihtamân*" ("I do not know much"; McLeod, *Cree* 5). As McLeod reminds us regarding these expressions of humility by older Cree storytellers, these phrases are critical in understanding Cree narrative memory. "People did not believe that they had power over the narrative, or owned it; rather, they believed that they were conduits, that there was a balance between the individual and tradition" (*Cree* 16).[2] The collected speeches in *Ana kâ-pimwêwêhahk okakêskihkêmowina: The Counselling Speeches of Jim Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw* also provide examples of this humility: "Well, this which I am about to discuss, I wonder if I will be able to discuss it with proper faithfulness, just as my late father had told me the story about it" (107). These moments I highlight at the beginning of the chapters of Minde's text are common in Cree narratives.

In stressing the importance of narrative in Cree culture, McLeod affirms, "It is through stories that memory and history are transmitted" (*Cree* 11).[3] The publication of Minde's story in *kwayask ê-kî-pê-kiskinowâpahtihicik* makes the memories public ones, memories to be shared with the community and passed on. McLeod further asserts, "Every time a story is told, every time one word of an Indigenous language is spoken, we are resisting the destruction of our collective memory" (*Cree* 67). The publication of a text like *Their Example Showed Me the Way* resists the destruction of collective memory and attempts to locate a space of understanding between two cultures. These texts can be read as "an attempt to link to disparate locations, and to find a place of speaking wherein the experiences of the present can be understood as a function

of the past" (*Cree* 70). Having survived the residential school experience, Minde anchors herself in *wâhkôhtowin* (kinship), locating herself in a place where she has found understanding and meaning for her life. Minde's strong sense of belonging is revealed as she comes home through stories, for as McLeod notes, "Part of surviving is through remembrance: when you remember, you know your place in creation" ("Coming Home" 17). As ethical readers of her life narrative, we must respect Minde's reality and where she locates herself in the world. Part of how we do that is by not attempting to impose other critical approaches on her life narrative.

Our Grandmothers' Lives, as Told in Their Own Words

Another in the series of works edited by Ahenakew and Wolfart, intended to preserve the words of Cree speakers in Cree while also making them available to other audiences in English, is *Kôhkominawak otâcimowiniwâwa: Our Grandmothers' Lives, as Told in Their Own Words*.[4] In the preface the editors assert their purpose in the first paragraph: "In this book, the spoken work is written down in the hope that the life experiences of Cree grandmothers will reach a wider audience if printed. In presenting the original Cree texts—in both roman and syllabic orthography and accompanied by a careful translation into English—told by seven women, we want to make sure that they are heard speaking to us in their own words" (n.p.).

Some of the terms used in the preface to describe the book echo those used in describing testimonial literature. Wolfart and Ahenakew assert that the "personal reminiscences which make up this book *give voice* to the daily struggle of Indian women during a century of fundamental changes" (n.p., emphasis added). "Giving voice to the voiceless" is a well-known way of describing testimonial literature as well as the title of a 1991 special issue of *Latin American Perspectives* dedicated to testimonial literature in Latin America. The texts in *Kôhkominawak*

otâcimowiniwâwa are presented as ones that "*represent the collective experience* of a small group of Cree women who have lived their entire lives in or near the places in western Canada where they were born" (emphasis added), echoing part of Yúdice's definition of *testimonio* in which "the witness portrays his or her own *experience* as *representative* of a *collective memory* and *identity*" (Gugelberger and Kearney 4). The description of the texts in *Kôhkominawak otâcimowiniwâwa* as "informal and intimate" also evokes the *testimonio* characteristic of "emphasizing *popular oral discourse*" (Gugelberger and Kearney 4).

However, the introduction to the texts, written by Wolfart, underscores important differences from the characteristic texts of *testimonio*, in which the person telling her life story normally tells that story to someone of a different race, ethnicity, native language, or social and economic class. Wolfart's first point in the introduction is vital: "In reading this book, it is essential—especially for the English-speaking reader—to keep in mind at all times that these reminiscences of Cree women were recorded in their own language rather than in English. . . . Theirs is an authentic record: they were not forced to use a foreign language, nor were their texts shaped by an outside interviewer. They told them to Freda Ahenakew, who also speaks Cree as her first language; herself a grandmother many times over, most of the women whose life experiences she collected have known her for a long time. This, above all, makes these reminiscences exceptional: that they were not told to an outsider" (17). Wolfart's insistence on the similarities between Ahenakew and the women whose stories are collected in the volume clearly underscores a critical difference between this text and *testimonios*. Wolfart continues in the introduction to underscore a point that serves as another significant difference between *Kôhkominawak otâcimowiniwâwa* and testimonial works: "[these texts] have not been re-written, smoothed over, cut or otherwise re-worked for some particular audience or some further purpose.

Instead, they are presented in their narrators' own works, as Cree texts, but made accessible to a wider audience through an English translation which closely follows the original" (17).

Clearly, in texts like *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*, the words are not those of the speaker of the life narrative alone but have been subject to reworking by the editor-transcriber (Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, in the case of Rigoberta Menchú). Similarly, in many published works that present stories from Indigenous "informants" told to non-Native anthropologists, the stories have been subject to reworking. Richard Preston explains that he polished the stories from John Blackned that are presented in *Cree Narrative: Expressing the Personal Meanings of Events*. After the taped stories were transcribed and translated by Gerti Diamond, a member of the James Bay Cree community, they were "finally rewritten by me, and I took conscious and meticulous care to hold the distortion of content and style to a minimum while rendering the prose form more even and flowing, and thereby engaging to the non-Cree reader" (67). Preston's explanation of his editorial process implies that a Cree style will not engage a non-Cree reader.

The insistence in *Kôhkominawak otâcimowiniwâwa* that these are the speakers' words, that these are Cree texts, is a significant assertion of Cree literary and rhetorical sovereignty. The goal is not to make the texts somehow more palatable to non-Native readers but rather to preserve them as Cree texts primarily for a Cree audience. Jace Weaver, Craig Womack, and Robert Warrior, in *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, remind us that what is at stake in their call for literary nationalism is "nothing less than Native identity, definitional and actual sovereignty. . . . It is about the ability of Natives and their communities to be self-determining rather than selves determined" (41). With the publication of *Kôhkominawak otâcimowiniwâwa* the Cree women who tell their life stories can "be self-determining and not selves determined."

They have the ability to speak for themselves, to set the terms of the conversation and to employ their Native language, all elements of what Scott Richard Lyons calls "rhetorical sovereignty" (449). As critics working in the field of life narratives, part of our recognition of that sovereignty lies in not imposing critical terms from other cultural traditions in our readings of the texts.

In his introduction, Wolfart reminds readers that "what little most Canadians have been able to read about Indian life concerns an earlier period and is focused on the activities of men in the buffalo hunt, in intertribal warfare, and the like" (17–18). While there were literary texts written by Indigenous Canadian women prior to the publication of this text (Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* [1973] and Rita Joe's *Songs of Rita Joe* [1978] would be two examples), it is quite likely that more Canadians had read texts such as those described by Wolfart than the female-authored texts available prior to 1992. Wolfart then sees the texts in *Kôhkominawak otâcimowiniwâwa* as "autobiographical narratives which deal with the daily life of Cree women . . . for the first time" (18). While describing them as "autobiographical narratives," Wolfart also asserts that they "represent a number of literary genres," genres he describes as "plain, almost technical accounts and an extended dialogue, . . . autobiographical narratives which make use of a more elevated literary style and several stories which focus on specific incidents" (18). As in the introduction to Minde's text, Wolfart makes claim to different kinds of narrative, but in contrast to Minde's text, he characterizes little of *Kôhkominawak otâcimowiniwâwa* as belonging to the genre of *imowin* texts. Rather, he claims that "only occasionally is there a definite *âcimowin* 'account, report' interspersed amongst these, most commonly either a *wawiyatâcimowin* 'funny story' or an *âcimisowin*, a 'story about oneself' which lets the audience laugh along with the narrator about some misfortune she suffered" (19).

It should be remembered that when Wolfart, a non-Native linguist, makes distinctions about what kinds of literary genres are represented in the texts, those distinctions might not be recognized by the Cree narrators of the texts. In *The Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen argues that the worldview often held by Native writers does not allow for the strict separation of literary genres: "It is reasonable, from an Indian point of view, that all literary forms should be interrelated, given the basic idea of the unity and relatedness of all the phenomena of life" (62). Wolfart, as a non-Cree person, will not understand the narratives the way the Cree women do. Those of us not brought up in the community and in the language will not have the same understanding of these narratives as a member of the community will have. In stressing the kind of texts presented in *Kôhkominawak otâcimowiniwâwa*, Wolfart notes that "unlike the finely spun memoirs of the European tradition, their memories were presented *viva voce*: impromptu and unrehearsed, full of asides and ad libs" (19). Again, Wolfart repeatedly stresses how "authentic" these texts are, "both in their delivery, told in Cree to a Cree-speaking audience, and in their printed presentation, in Cree and as spontaneous, spoken documents" (19).

The question of, or the demand for, "authenticity" is one thing these Indigenous texts and testimonial texts have in common. Linguists and anthropologists presenting stories from Indigenous informers take pains to stress the "authentic" nature of the stories presented. Similarly, as discussed above, *testimonio* is defined as an "authentic narrative." Georg M. Gugelberger's edited volume *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America* takes the first part of its title from John Beverley's well-known essay "The Real Thing," itself playing off questions of authenticity (and commercials for Coca-Cola). The book cover design is dominated by a black and white photo of Rigoberta Menchú, dressed in *traje*, with microphones in front of her face. Menchú's body faces the reader, but Menchú is looking away, toward

another person (presumably the person holding one or both of the microphones). The person (or persons) holding the microphones does not appear in the photo, but the hands and part of an arm are visible. As in *testimonio*, the physical presence, the identity, and the intervention of the person collecting the story is (never completely) erased. To Menchú's right (the bottom left of the photo), below the hand holding the larger microphone and encapsulated in the circled cord of the microphone, part of another person is visible. We see a bit of *traje* and a pair of folded hands. It appears that another person in Guatemalan dress is to the side of and behind Menchú, waiting with folded hands as Menchú speaks to the press. The upper part of the photo has been blacked out behind Menchú and the hands of the reporters, so that the other person in Guatemalan dress does not appear above the hand and microphone (see figure 1). While in *testimonio* the speaker is seen as speaking in an act of identity formation with others, this photograph (almost completely) erases the person or persons standing with Menchú. The others standing with Menchú are blacked out or cropped out of the photograph, a photographic presentation that suggests the unique subject of autobiography rather than the plural subject of *testimonio*.

[Insert Beard Figure 1]

The photograph presents Menchú as "the real thing"—a black and white photograph with an AP credit has the "authenticity" of journalism, a live shot rather than a posed, studio shot; Menchú is dressed in "authentic" *traje* and jewelry, with the woven textures of Guatemalan fabric then serving as the backdrop of the photo on the cover page; the title words "The Real Thing" are printed in a font that appears "authentic" as handwriting rather than the more "artificial" typeset of the rest of the title, "Testimonial Discourse and Latin America," going

down the right side of the cover, separated from the Menchú photo by a thin blue line. A cropped version of the same photo is on the back cover of the book, so that the Menchú photograph dominates the presentation of the text. She is the cultural icon that symbolizes "the real thing," the authenticity of *testimonio*. While David Stoll's *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* did not come out until after the Gugelburger volume, Menchú also now evokes the controversy that stormed around her work after the publication of a book that questioned the very "authenticity" of the story Menchú shared. So while testimonial literature has traditionally been seen as a chance to "give voice to the voiceless," to be the authentic, genuine, spontaneous discourse of marginalized subjects, much critical attention to the genre has questioned that claim and the desire of readers to read testimonial texts in that way. Authenticity remains both an expectation brought to testimonial texts by many readers and a treacherous terrain to be negotiated by all those involved in the production and reception of the texts.

Authenticity plays out in similarly complex ways in Indigenous literatures in North America as well. Simon J. Ortiz's oft-cited and reprinted essay "Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism" speaks to the swirling claims and desires for "authenticity" of Native cultures. Speaking specifically about Indigenous celebrations in the United States Southwest, he notes that many religious traditions brought by the Spaniards "are no longer Spanish. They are now Indian because of the creative development that the native people applied to them" (8). For Ortiz, Indigenous creative artists (singers, dancers, storytellers, authors) who do their work in the context of their communities and for the benefit of those communities are authentic. It is their struggle for sovereignty—for the ability to create meaning of their own lives—that makes the works authentic: "Throughout the difficult experience of colonization to the present, Indian women and men have struggled to create meaning of their

lives in very definite and systematic ways. The ways or methods have been important, but they are important only because of the reason for the struggle. And it is that reason—the struggle against colonialism—which has given substance to what is *authentic*" (9; emphasis added).

The life narratives collected by Ahenakew can be read as part of that struggle by Native persons "to create meaning of their lives in very definite and systematic ways." As critics working in the field of autobiography studies, in order to approach the life narratives in an ethical fashion we need to understand the context from which they have sprung. Part of our work is respecting the text's sense of belonging to a particular culture and a particular place.

Craig Womack has noted, in *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, that a Native-centered criticism "attempts to find Native literature's place in Indian Country, rather than Native literature's place in the canon" (11). The two Cree texts explored in this chapter have a place in Cree country, both as Cree-language texts and as life narratives of respected Cree women. Placing my discussion of them into a volume dedicated to autobiography in the Americas encourages us to ask how our understanding of autobiographical genres is challenged or expanded by an exploration of Indigenous life narratives in Cree. Could a better understanding of historical and autobiographical narratives of the various Indigenous peoples in the Americas help us both to understand and to question the autobiographical narratives and colonizing practices at play within the Americas?

Conclusion

In her foreword to Lee Maracle's *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel*, Jeannette Armstrong wrote that "the telling of our lives, the back-tracking, the map-making through the treacherous terrain of our individual experiences is perhaps a more important exercise than we Native people readily

appreciate" (15). Working in Inter-American literature requires care in negotiating that treacherous terrain. Recognizing that I do not know all the terrain, I continue to watch for compass points in the stories to guide me. While I could read the two Cree texts discussed above as examples of testimonial literature, to do so would not be an appropriate reading. Recognition of literary and rhetorical sovereignty means that I do not impose critical terms from other cultural traditions in my readings of these Cree texts. As I negotiate the literary terrain of the Americas, I try to keep in mind the ethical consequences of our work. As Jane Hafen remarks in "More Than Intellectual Exploration," "as American Indian scholars, we must remember that which compels our work. What we do is never mere intellectual exercise, but it impacts real people, real tribal heritages. The implications are those of survival" (281). All of us who work in the area of American Indian autobiography—or any area of Inter-American literature—would do well to keep Hafen's words in mind as we do our scholarship and teaching.

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Notes

[1] Gomez-Vega and Walter would be just two examples.

[2] Martin cites another example, from an Iqualit Elder who is asked by Inuit students to tell the story of Sedna and responds, "I'll tell you the story as I heard it. I think our stories vary from community to community even though they are the same *unikkaqtuat* [classic stories]. I want you to know there are variations." (see Fagan, et. al p. 24.)

[3] Ortiz makes a similar claim when he refers to "the oral tradition which includes prayer, song, drama-ritual, narrative or story-telling, much of it within ceremony-some of it outside of Ceremony . . . [as] the most reliable method by which Indian culture and community integrity have been maintained" (9).

[4] In addition to the two texts discussed here, other titles edited by Ahenakew and Wolfart include *Âh-âyîtaw isi ê-kî-kiskêyihtahkik maskihkiy: They Knew Both Sides of Medicine: Cree Tales of Curing and Cursing*, told by Alice Ahenakew; *kinehiyawiwininaw nehiyawewin: The Cree Language is Our Identity: The La Ronge Lectures of Sarah Whitecalf*; *Ana kâ-pimwêwêhahk okakêskihkêmowina: The Counselling Speeches of Jim Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw*; and *John Beaverbone's Story as Retold by Joseph Tootoosis*. They also collaborated on Plains Cree dictionaries and linguistic texts.