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Collaboration and Resistance in Indigenous Life Writing

Collaboration is marked by indeterminacy. It is, by nature, intermediary, interposing, intervening. In Australia, collaboration between Aboriginal and invader/settler subjects in the unfolding of colonial engagement is a topic that has received limited scholarly attention. Some studies have dealt with native police and Black trackers;¹ others have examined local negotiations of power and discourse;² but the only broad survey of collaboration is Henry Reynolds's *With the White People* (1990). In this work Reynolds traces the varied modes of collaboration existing between the Aborigines and the European colonists of Australia from first contact and early settlement through to the First World War. Reynolds's study of Aboriginal collaboration is intended to complement his earlier book, *The Other Side of the Frontier* (1981), which had focused primarily on Aboriginal resistance. He begins *With the White People* by acknowledging that his earlier work on resistance covered "only part of the story" (1). In Reynolds's words, "for every tribesman and woman who defied the whites there were others who worked for the interlopers assisting in the process of colonisation" (1). Reynolds charts Aboriginal assistance to European explorers, the work of the Black troopers, Aboriginal contribution to pioneering and the pastoral industries, and the complexities of frontier sexual relations. Reynolds says that scholarly attention to Aboriginal and settler Australian collaboration challenges settler histories that claim Australian nation building as an exclusively European achievement. Equally, however, he says that collaboration is a theme for which few Aboriginal activists hold any enthusiasm, collaboration being associated with either surrender to white control, or participation in frontier violence. Reynolds ends this work emphasising that "the two themes of resistance and assistance, of confrontation and collaboration, are

threaded through the history of Aboriginal response to the Europeans over the last two hundred years" (233).

Reynolds's remarks, I believe, are also relevant to the study of Aboriginal life writing produced through collaboration, that is, texts which reach publication through the joint efforts of narrators and editors.³ In this article⁴ I will look at how both resistance and assistance operate in a number of Aboriginal texts and I will argue that neither confrontation nor collaboration need be privileged or valorised, that both are, as Reynolds says "threaded." To do this I will draw upon two texts from north-west New South Wales: *The Two Worlds of Jimmie Barker* (1988 [1977]), and *Goodbye Riverbank* (2000). I will then turn to a Canadian First Nations text titled *I'll Sing 'Til the Day I Die* (1995), which offers several points of comparison with the Australian texts. Finally, I will offer a brief comment on how these works may contribute to the processes of reconciliation between first peoples and settler societies in both nations.

Textual collaboration, unlike its historical counterpart, has been the object of considerable scrutiny in Australia. Much of the critical literature focuses on the extent to which these mediated texts may retain their oppositional potential in the face of a range of constraining factors resulting from the editorial and marketing decisions which ultimately frame the Indigenous narrative and influence the reception of the text. Aboriginal writers such as Ruby Langford Ginibi or Jackie Huggins are particularly critical of factors in textual production which may result in Aboriginal opposition being muted or compromised.⁵ Mudrooroo has written disdainfully of many collaborations, terming the narratives "captured discourse" (Johnson 27), and "flawed texts" (Narogin 153).⁶ Non-Aboriginal critics also express concern regarding the way framing devices such as front cover designs, prefaces and introductions, afterwords, and back cover blurbs all function to establish a sense of familiarity for non-Aboriginal readers and thereby undermine the political and oppositional stance of the Indigenous narrator and subject of the text.⁷

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It cannot be denied that such discursive mechanisms operate powerfully, or that such processes of containment come into play. It is disconcerting, however, that in structuring critical attention so that the Indigenous narrator is read predominantly as resistant or oppositional while the processes of publication or marketing are read as forces of containment, a dichotomy is set up which may underplay the complexity of the subjectivity of the narrator or the intersubjectivity of the process of narrative exchange which underlies the textual production. In many if not most collaborative texts, the threads of resistance and assistance are braided, just as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal histories are entangled.⁸

The Two Worlds of Jimmie Barker displays this entwining of opposition and accommodation, beginning with the encounter between Jimmie Barker and his transcriber and editor, Janet Mathews. In the 1960s, Mathews was a researcher for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies recording Aboriginal song and language throughout NSW. On a field trip to the north-west of the state, she was advised to contact Jimmie Barker who she was told was a “key figure” in the area (ix). Mathews describes her arrival in Brewarrina, emphasising the difficulties of fieldwork - the extreme age and frailty of many of the Aboriginal informants, their shyness, their fear of her tape-recorder (ix-x). Barker recalls: “a policeman told me that a white woman was visiting the town collecting Aboriginal languages and music on a tape recorder. I told him that I was not interested and that I knew no Muruwari” (173). However, Mathews approaches Barker on her second day and he allows her to record him, but she is not very satisfied with their meeting as he too seems shy and, Mathews says, “slow in answering questions” (x). She is about to leave when something happens which truly initiates their collaboration. Barker goes into his hut and brings out his own tape-recorder, explaining that he had bought the machine some time before so that he could record an English-Muruwari dictionary but he needed some assistance with the cost of tapes.

It is useful to place this moment in the context of the collection of oral histories. The proliferation of life histories published in the 1960s and 1970s was largely due to the availability of such small, portable tape-recorders which were typically part of the linguist's or anthropologist's kitting out.⁹ They were a tool of the trade with which data could be extracted and preserved. They were also an instrument of power and some intimidation, often producing a shyness and resistance from narrators. It is significant, then, that Barker had purchased his own tape-recorder and intended quite independently of any non-Aboriginal researcher to use technology to foster linguistic maintenance.¹⁰ It is a moment in which the boundary between informant and researcher blurs. In the ensuing four years Barker recorded over 150 tapes, 110 of these produced on his own with great care and, as he reports, considerable pleasure (175). These were then posted to Mathews. She rearranged this material creating a smooth chronological sequence and integrating cultural description with personal narrative. She also translated the narrative into Standard English, a decision she claims respected Barker's own request (Mathews 4). While it is true that Barker had no control in this process, it is also clear that he was utilising Mathews to achieve his own goals of linguistic and cultural survival as much as she was gaining material from him. What emerged from their collaboration was a product that neither of them had anticipated but which evolved from their overlapping aspirations.¹¹

However, the subjectivity textualised in this project makes for disturbing reading today for two reasons also linked to issues of resistance and accommodation. As Barker's recordings expanded from vocabulary to description of cultural practice and to associated memories of childhood and adolescence, his narrative shifted from life amidst his Aboriginal family and community to life on Brewarrina Mission, a government run Aboriginal mission to which Barker's mother was forced to move so that her two sons could attend school. Barker's education consisted of relentless indoctrination regarding the worthlessness of Aborigines and the contempt felt for them by white Australians. Aboriginal language was suppressed on the mission and

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many cultural practices prohibited. Surveillance was constant, food rations limited, and punishment arbitrarily meted out by a succession of brutal managers.¹² Barker's narrative works oppositionally in its analysis of his own submission to the corrosive and coercive techniques of colonial oppression. He details his own internalisation of the racist discourse to which he is subjected on the mission and which he also found confirmed outside the mission when he left to serve his apprenticeship. Yet his narrative is particularly disturbing because, although he recognises and denounces the process of internalised oppression, he remains unable to overcome its insidious effects. He absorbs the essentialist and assimilationist discourse which surrounds him and in several places in his narrative Barker comments on problems such as alcoholism, gambling, and lack of stable employment in terms of inherent traits (134, 146, 184). Historian Penny Taylor, commenting on these passages, refers to them as "the ultimate irony and sadness of his life history" and notes that "these sections confuse and anger young Aboriginal students" (7).

The text is also disturbing because of Barker's acknowledgement of his own participation in the processes of subjugation. He claims, for example, responsibility for the end of the local practice of Muruwari customs relating to death. When Barker's mother died he refused to carry out the usual practice of smoking the house and destroying her belongings. Instead he kept her photographs, china and linen and gave away her clothes, telling others they could use them or burn them as they saw fit. Barker reported strong disapproval from the other Aboriginal residents, but he says he noticed that "from this time onwards the relatives kept the possessions of a person who died" (130). He also recounts occasions when he dissuaded Aboriginal residents from retaliating against a particularly brutal manager. Barker says: "Any aggression from us could mean twelve months or twelve years in gaol; we must endure these unpleasant events. I prevented rebellion many times, for I knew that the Aborigines would be the sufferers" (159). While Barker's actions were aimed at averting more pain than that already endured, his words are not oppositional. It is particularly disturbing when on the following page he admits that

his own acquiescence meant that he received less ill-treatment than other inmates of the mission. "I suffered less than the others from ill-treatment by the managers," he says. "My attitude was that they were in charge, and if they told me I was wrong or had incurred their disapproval I did not argue" (160). Such admissions surely leave Barker open to criticisms of collaborationism; yet choices were never straightforward, nor consequences predictable. When a manager orders Barker to belt a handcuffed man who had been caught beating his wife, Barker refused, but then says: "Brain gave Dick a horrible bashing and injured him severely, so perhaps I should have done it myself" (158). Barker's reflections draw the reader into the moral grey zone of mission experience.¹³ They resonate with anthropologist Gillian Cowlishaw's remarks of race relations on the colonial frontier when she says: "[t]o understand the past means understanding its moral complexities and ambiguities. While there may indeed have been heroes and villains then, the vast majority of the population were neither, and this is so today" (2000, 21). Barker and Mathew's text remains important for its testimony of the conflicted responses to government policy and mechanisms which were aimed at the subjugation of Indigenous people and the destruction of linguistic and cultural heritage.

Goodbye Riverbank, a more recently published text, provides insight into the ongoing complexities of negotiating between resistance and accommodation in this same region of New South Wales today. Unlike the single subject life history offered in Barker and Mathew's text, *Goodbye Riverbank* is a community oral history project involving the efforts of forty Aboriginal narrators and writers and their non-Aboriginal editor, Cilka Zagar. The book is arranged thematically and chronologically into chapters including first contact, life and work on the stations, child separation, protest and reconciliation. This arrangement means that the narratives are often fragmentary, sometimes no more than a paragraph, rarely more than a page or two. Some contributors appear only once, others return often throughout

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the book. With no information provided regarding the selecting and arranging process, this editorial decision to fragment and fracture the individual contributions may certainly warrant criticism. At the very least readers may wonder whether the narrators were given opportunity to comment on the arrangement.

It is important, however, to look at the genesis of this text and at the intersubjectivity which has occasioned this work. In 1968, the same year that Janet Mathews first sought out Jimmie Barker in Brewarrina, Cilka Zagar began teaching Aboriginal children in the nearby communities of Walgett and Lightning Ridge. Zagar, who had migrated from Slovenia, was to live and teach in the communities for over twenty years before engaging in the production of life writing. In 1990 she published her first book, *Growing Up Walgett*, which presented narratives from twenty of her students whom she had encouraged through classroom work to write about their lives (xiii). *Goodbye Riverbank* also emerges through an educational framework. The narratives that comprise this text were collected from elders and their extended families in order to provide material on local 'transitional history' which could be used in classrooms. Without such texts, Zagar says, "teachers in a small community are often afraid to teach this painful and sensitive part of Australian history" (3). Jimmie Barker's son, Roy Barker, is one of the contributing elders who also recognised this need for local Aboriginal perspectives to be incorporated into classroom material. He and others were interviewed and their narratives transcribed in booklet form for classroom use. Zagar says that people then encouraged her to have the narratives published "so that they can be saved and passed down for the next generation" (3). The initiation and development of the project, then, seems to be one of genuine reciprocity based on long standing trust and ongoing lived relationships amongst all participants.

Like Barker's unsettling narrative, those in *Goodbye Riverbank* also describe an entangling of assistance and resistance. Some of the elders speak about working with the settler Australians in ways that corroborate Reynolds's study of collaboration. Several older women

look back upon experiences as housemaids and domestics with genuine affection for the non-Aboriginal families for whom they worked (52). Men talk about working as station hands and boundary riders, as shearers and sawmill labourers, with pride in the skills mastered and in the satisfaction gained from employment.

But other narrators view relations with non-Aboriginal Australians less positively. Some recall forced removals of families to Aboriginal missions. One narrator recounts his and his sister's escape from Brewarrina Mission and their long trek home (49), reminding readers of Evelyn Crawford's escape narrative in her book *Over My Tracks* (1993). More recent views include a mother's account of an abusive police search and, significantly, a grandfather's criticisms of non-Aboriginal teachers who fail to understand the needs of Aboriginal school children (67, 108).

The most distressing comments in the book, however, come from elders who fear for the social fabric of the Aboriginal community. Many of the narrators speak of the toll that alcoholism has taken on families (5, 36, 53, 68), and of the problems of unemployment, welfare dependency and crime (136). Almost without exception, the elders relate these problems to the loss of moral authority experienced by their community. Ivy Green, in the book's introduction, says that "(t)he trouble today is that people don't know right from wrong anymore, nobody is teaching right from wrong" (4-5). These words echo throughout the narratives. Older members look back to the respect held for Aboriginal beliefs (16), and to the moral instruction passed on in traditional narrative (17, 57, 82). According to these speakers, both the loss of language and cultural practice and the disempowerment of elders have led to a rending of social cohesion. Some narrators denounce the systemic nature of oppression and colonial control and relate their impact on at least four generations in their community. Others insist that race relations be understood on strictly personal terms and downplay the negative effects of state intervention in their lives.¹⁴ For most of these narrators of the Barwon-Namoi community, resistance and accommodation

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intermingle as they look from the conflicted past into an unknown future.

I'll Sing 'Til the Day I Die, a text from one of Canada's First Nations, is, like *Goodbye Riverbank*, a community collaboration. In this publication, narratives from fifteen elders of Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory on the Bay of Quinte in south-eastern Ontario have been collected to provide a text which, as one of the participants says: "comes from the people and tells of our daily lives" (11). Like the Australian book, this text also illustrates a braiding of resistance and accommodation but there are significant differences which must be recognised.

First, the editor and collector of these narratives, Beth Brant, identifies as a lesbian Mohawk writer with family connections to the same community and indeed to some of the elders she interviews. In this respect then, unlike the Australian publications, this text is not produced "with the White people." The local librarian who actually initiated the project says: "This book is truly a collaboration of the people of Tyendinaga, from the idea, to the proposal, to the telling and collecting of stories" (11).

That the editor is herself Aboriginal is important but this does not completely rule out occasional moments of resistance on the part of the elders. Certainly there is both familiarity and filial relationship evident in many remarks. At other moments, however, a process of self-censorship is apparent, especially when recalling racism. To give one example, an elder recalling work with non-Natives says: "Some of the people were nice. Others, well..." and her comment fades into the silence of ellipsis (44). My point is one that Kevin Gilbert makes in his book, *Living Black* (1), that in spite of the rapport between Aboriginal editors and narrators, self-censorship may continue to operate. Brant, whose own writing is often seen as confrontational by non-Aboriginal readers, acknowledges and respects these elders' silences.¹⁵

Another difference has to do with structure and editing decisions. Jimmie Barker's narrative was heavily edited in terms of translation from Aboriginal syntax to Standard English and in terms of the arrangement of personal narrative and cultural description into an apparently seamless text. *Goodbye Riverbank* preserves the syntax and phrasing of the narrators but fractures many individual contributions and arranges the fragments thematically. By contrast, *I'll Sing 'Til the Day I Die* comes closer to maintaining and reflecting the original oral performance with each narrator's contribution presented in an individual chapter. Markers of the recording process are also occasionally retained. Narrator Ike Hill, for example, says: "That machine you're using, it records everything I say? Well, that's the way to do it. I like that machine. So much change around here"(30).

On the other hand, these Mohawk narrators share with the narratives of *Goodbye Riverbank* a certain ambivalence resulting from the intersection of resistance and accommodation across their community. As with the narrators in Walgett, many of the Tyendinaga elders emphasise the value of hard work and often this meant work in the non-Indigenous community. The Mohawk narrators speak openly, however, of conflicted motivations and responses. One elder recalls the advice of his uncle who told him: "Just remember, they won't accept you until you prove that you're better than they are" (58). In *Goodbye Riverbank*, reflections on work expressed pride in achievement. Tyendinaga elders also speak of "the good feeling of work" (107), but more than this they make explicit their refusal to conform to racist stereotypes. The same elder explains: "white society labels Indians as lazy drunkards, and we can't let them make us believe that's true" (106). Employment alongside of non-Aboriginal Canadians is thus articulated as both accommodation and resistance in which both fitting in and standing out play a role. One woman whose husband was a non-Native worker in a cheese factory says: "When I'd have the president of the cheese factory to dinner once in a while, his wife would say to other people, 'You could eat off any one of her floors'... I worked hard so nobody could say bad things about Indians. But why would anyone want to eat off floors?!" (51). The

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woman's humour and her underscoring of the ambiguity of signifiers mark the intersection of both compliance with and resistance to non-Native expectations.

Native language in both its loss and its survival is for almost all of the Tyendinaga narrators the most important site of braiding between opposition and accommodation. A few of the elders have retained the Mohawk spoken in their early childhood but most lost their language through school experiences where the use of Mohawk resulted in physical punishment. Some speak of their parents deciding to use English in an attempt to spare their children from abuse. These narrators express regret but also understanding that families faced little choice but to comply with the government policies of Indigenous language suppression. Brant says that her Grandmother had a similar attitude to language, and that "although she remained adamantly and vehemently Mohawk, she also felt that it was okay to assimilate 'a little' for safety's sake" (1994, 116).

Today in Tyendinaga, policies have reversed and language revitalisation is taking place. One elder relates her experiences of singing in Mohawk, including the singing of Christian hymns and "O Canada" translated into Mohawk for the Queen's visit in 1984 (24). This, perhaps more than any of the other examples or incidents offered in these texts, demonstrates this braiding of resistance and accommodation that marks collaborative Indigenous life writing with traces of both the pain of dispossession and the pride of cultural survival. Anthems and hymns are signifiers of faith and allegiance to dominant ideological structures while the maintenance of language remains an assertion of cultural sovereignty. Such entangling is often ambiguous, at times conflicted. As the woman concludes, "here on Reserve, some of the people don't think we should sing. Some people are ashamed of their Nationality, of Mohawk. And some people think we shouldn't be singing the Christian songs. But," she says, "I like to sing and I'll sing till the day I die" (25).

Collaborative texts such as these are significant to reconciliation processes occurring in both Australia and Canada. In Australia's

reconciliation debate, the point has been raised time and again that we need to recognise the shared past of colonisation in all its complexity.¹⁶ Historian Inga Clendinnen, in the 1999 Boyer Lectures, stressed the need for “good history made out of true stories,” and she also emphasised that true stories, by nature, would be complex, at times ambiguous. We need these true stories, she says: “to make up the history of a nation rather than one simple and therefore necessarily false one” (9). The narrators and editors of the texts examined here offer such ‘true stories’ to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readerships. Memories of tradition and language taken away, of accommodation and contribution to settler economies, of internalisation of and opposition to racist and oppressive discourse, and of cultural affirmation and linguistic revival all move readers toward the sort of imagining that Clendinnen says “expands our moral comprehension” (7). This imagining involves thinking through the hard choices, or the lack of choices, faced by individuals striving to maintain their dignity and their family’s integrity through the turmoil of colonial encounter. *The Two Worlds of Jimmie Barker* supports and augments the narratives of other Aboriginal authors who write and speak of mission experiences and who together ask that non-Aboriginal Australians acknowledge these experiences as part of both our pasts, our shared history of colonisation. The narrators of *Goodbye Riverbank* bring home the fact that this colonial encounter is not confined to the past but is an ongoing site of rupture and conflict in which Aboriginal men and women continue to face tough decisions as they negotiate the entangled paths of resistance and assistance. The elders of *I’ll Sing ‘Til the Day I Die* remind readers, as does Reynolds, “that the same themes run through the history of practically all those people who have been faced with the problem of dealing with European imperialism over the past four hundred years” (1990, 233-234).

As readers, it is important to recognise and acknowledge the generosity of spirit which informs much collaborative Indigenous life writing. Beth Brant stresses the courage needed for this work. She says: “Writing is an act of courage for most. For us, it is an act that

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requires opening up our wounded communities, our families, to eyes and ears that do not love us" (1994, 53). But, she also says: "Our words are...given with generosity and hope" (73). The narratives of these texts are offered in a similar spirit to both the editors and the communities, to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readers. The reading of such narratives, however, entails an implicit reciprocity,¹⁷ in which editors and readers must look to the intersections of resistance and accommodation in their decisions and consider their own participation in the ongoing colonial encounters which shape our nations.¹⁸ Life writing provokes such reflection because "(t)o speak of one's past is always an invitation to others to think and possibly speak of their own. Any autobiographical act has the potential of setting into motion a symposium of autobiographical responses" (Rosen 17).

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Notes

¹ Rowse provides a useful survey of works focusing on the native police forces and the issue of collaboration (16-20). Of these, Fels goes furthest in analysing the agency of Aboriginal participation. A recent collaborative life writing project whose narrator was a Black tracker is that of Bohemia and McGregor.

² See, for example, Cowlshaw (1999).

³ I use the term life writing rather than autobiography or autobiographical narrative in order to open discussion and consideration of a range of collaborative texts including community oral histories as well as single subject life histories. Varieties of textual collaboration are far too extensive to be canvassed here. Briefly, however, Boyce Davies provides a categorisation of collaboration focusing on presentation styles. Egan and Helm offer the concept of “serial collaboration” applied to successive interventions and transformations within a collaborative process. Van Toorn’s phrase, “three-way collaborations” describes life stories “produced by two members of an Aboriginal family and a non-Aboriginal editor” (2001, 17).

⁴ This paper was first presented at “Resistance and Reconciliation: Writing in the Commonwealth,” the 12th Triennial Conference of the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, held in Canberra, July 2001. I wish to thank Wenche Ommundsen and Frances Devlin-Glass for comments on draft versions. Jennifer Kelly, from a distance, and Eleonore Wildburger, at the conference, gave helpful criticisms.

⁵ See Watson; Huggins; and Huggins and Tarrago.

⁶ I recognise that Mudrooroo’s claim to identify as Aboriginal has been unsettled for some time; his work, nevertheless, continues to pose important questions.

⁷ See, for example, Brewster; Nettlebeck; van Toorn (1998); and Egan.

⁸ For use of the ‘entangled’ metaphor in the Australian context, see Bird Rose; Cuthroys; and Ang. For the problematisation of the resistance/complicity binary, see essays in Smith.

⁹ See comments in Lewis (xii); also Rosen (13).

¹⁰ Thomas also remarks on this pivotal moment and emphasises Barker’s control throughout the recording process (2000b). Moreover, Thomas has listened to the complete recordings and reports Barker narrating that he obtained a wax cylinder dictaphone in the 1920s and recorded the old people on Brewarrina mission, an indication of both his long standing interest in technology and his concern for linguistic and cultural maintenance (2000a). These cylinders were lost or broken before Barker met Mathews. Interestingly, this section of Barker’s narrative does not appear in the book.

¹¹ Other examples of the narrator controlling the recording process include Lamilami; Harney and Wositzky; Napanangka et al; and McKellar.

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- ¹² Barker also concedes that there were times of happiness (150, 193), but by far the greater emphasis is on the oppressive conditions. See Attwood et al. for comparison of Barker's narrative to other examples of Aboriginal accommodation to mission life (13-19).
- ¹³ "The Grey Zone" is a term from holocaust survivor, Primo Levi.
- ¹⁴ One woman who was removed from her family after her mother's death says: "I never regretted being put in a home because God only knows what would happen to me if they didn't take me....White people have always been nice to me and I am grateful to them for saving my life" (Zagar 2000, 33). Compare Read, who notes that some victims of separation identify positively with their childhood institutionalisation (67). He also discusses the difficulty some face later in life in recovering Aboriginal identity.
- ¹⁵ See Kelly for an analysis of student responses to Brant's work.
- ¹⁶ See Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.
- ¹⁷ See Moreton-Robinson for reciprocity and relationality in Indigenous cultural domains. Compare Pelletier and Poole for an account of reciprocity in a First Nations community (169-170).
- ¹⁸ This is surely one of the intentions of Aboriginal writers who urge non-Aboriginal readers to look to their own heritage and to their experiences of or involvements in oppression. Maria Campbell says: "if both of us acknowledge that our grandfathers and grandmothers came through great struggles, then we can talk to one another" (in Lutz, 60). Lee Maracle closes her book, *Bobbie Lee, Indian Rebel*, with the admonition: "In my life, look for your complicit silence, look for the inequity between yourself and others. Search out the meaning of colonial robbery and figure out how you are to undo it all!" (241).