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## **“This is why I’m remembering”: Narrative Agency and Autobiographical Knowledge in Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed* and Joy Harjo’s *Crazy Brave***

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### **Abstract**

*Indigenous life writing, particularly by women, provides a challenge to the academic study of autobiography and to the understanding of autobiographical knowledge. Using the examples of Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed* (1973) and Joy Harjo’s *Crazy Brave* (2012), I look at how notions of self, community, and autobiographical knowledge are negotiated in contemporary autobiographies by Indigenous women, and argue that autobiographers productively draw on and produce different forms of cultural knowledge – about self, about community, about responsibility – in and through narrative in an act that I call with Mackenzie “narrative agency”. Thus, I read these texts not only as examples for the presentation of the individual writer’s knowledge about self and her life, but also of knowledge as to the different ways of telling a life and thereby as a critical reminder of how notions of autobiographical knowledge are culturally embedded and produced.*

### **Résumé**

*Les récits de vie autochtones, et particulièrement ceux composés par des femmes, constituent un défi pour l’étude académique d’autobiographies et pour la compréhension de savoirs autobiographiques. En utilisant deux œuvres comme exemple, *Halfbreed* de Maria Campbell (1973) et *Crazy Brave* de Joy Harjo (2012), j’examine comment les notions de soi, de la communauté et du savoir autobiographique sont présentées et discutées dans les autobiographies contemporaines de femmes autochtones et j’argumente que les autobiographes incluent et produisent des formes différentes de savoirs culturels – concernant le soi, la communauté et la responsabilité – dans et à travers un acte narratif que j’appellerai, en référence à Mackenzie, «action narrative (narrative agency)». C’est pourquoi je lis ces textes non seulement comme exemples de présentation du savoir individuel des auteures sur elles-mêmes et sur leurs vies, mais aussi comme exemple pour leurs connaissances concernant les manières diverses de raconter une vie et comme un rappel critique du fait que les savoirs et les connaissances autobiographiques sont ancrés culturellement et produits par elle.*

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*And what happened, I wondered, if you read and took in every book in every library of the world, learned the name of every seashell, every war, and could quote every line of poetry? What would you do with all that knowing? Would it be the kind of knowledge that could free you? [...] And who decided what knowledge was important to know and understand? (Harjo 2012, 72)*

### **1. Indigenous Life Writing and the Production of Knowledge**

"At the dawn of the twenty-first century," argues Dakota scholar Angela Cavender Wilson (Waziyatawin), "the recovery of Indigenous knowledge is a conscious and systematic effort to revalue that which has been denigrated and revive that which has been destroyed" (Wilson 2004, 359). Wilson focuses on knowledge production in fields such as anthropology, history, law, medicine, and the environmental sciences, highlighting the ethical and political implications of academic practices in light of their colonial heritage. The revaluation of Indigenous forms of knowledge and the critical investigation of what counts as academic knowledge and theory is, for her and many others, crucial to the ongoing project of decolonization in North America.

Yet Wilson's critical reminder of the potentially colonial implications of academic knowledge production also applies to literary and cultural studies. The initial quotation by Mvskoke (Creek) poet and musician Joy Harjo asks what knowledge is, can be, what kind of functions it might have and who defines what counts as knowledge; it points to the very connection between knowledge and power emphasized by Foucault. Harjo integrates these crucial questions into her memoir, thus implicitly also asking what role knowledge production plays for the narrative construction of an individual life. Taking this as my starting point, I will look at the question of how the discourses of the study of autobiography relate to both the study of Indigenous women's life writing, and to the production of categories of autobiographical knowledge in Indigenous women's self-narratives in particular. In the context of settler colonialism, Indigenous life stories, and the control over these stories, have stressed the importance of Indigenous voices as expressing specific experiences, thus presenting themselves as counter-models to stereotypical representations and hegemonic narratives of nation. Indigenous writing and women's autobiographies have played a particularly important role here, as they question both ethnicized and gendered assumptions about the subject and her/his relation to national and other communities. They also question how the autobiographical subject relating (or refusing to relate) to the nation as well as to other collectives is constituted, how primary the nation state is in comparison to other communities – such as Indigenous nations – and how relationality not only to other people but also to the environment or spiritual frameworks impacts the narrative construction of self.

The very notion of narrative identity is at stake in this context, in the struggle for voice as an 'authentic' expression and testimony. Current notions of autobiography as constructions rather than unadulterated expressions of self could potentially be

seen as undermining the political claims implicit in Indigenous women's life writing, claims that appear to rest crucially on a notion of authentic experience and its expression in narrative. Thus, Indigenous life writing provides a challenge to the academic study of autobiography and to the understanding of autobiographical knowledge. These challenges, I want to suggest, concern at least three closely related aspects: the form of what is understood as 'autobiography'; the understanding of the self as relational; and the notion of responsibility in Indigenous life narratives.

My two examples will be Métis writer and activist Maria Campbell's groundbreaking autobiography *Halfbreed* (1973) and Joy Harjo's recent memoir *Crazy Brave* (2012). These texts differ significantly in a number of crucial aspects: the setting (the Canadian West and the US American Mid- and Southwest, respectively), the tribal background of the authors, the time of publication, and the ages of these writers at time of publication. While Campbell wrote *Halfbreed* in her early thirties and became known to a broader audience through the book, Harjo wrote her memoir in her early sixties, already a distinguished poet and well-known musician. The ways in which memories are organized and presented differ significantly; while Campbell presents her life story chronologically within a framework of the narrating I looking back onto her life, expressing what Rachael McLennan in reference to Smith and Watson has called the "autobiographical occasion" (2010, 13), Harjo's narrative is, despite its discernible chronology, much more associative, integrating not only flashbacks but also poetry. At the same time, these very different texts also display a number of parallels that make it worthwhile reading them together in light of autobiographical form, the relationality of self, and the responsibility of autobiographical narration: both women tell a story of establishing agency and of survival of violent abuse and both women use their life narratives to reflect on alternative productions of knowledge as crucial to that survival.

In this contribution, I will look at each of these points as potential challenges to the understanding of autobiographical knowledge. By autobiographical knowledge, I refer not only to an individual's knowledge of him- or herself and his or her life, but also to the integration of different forms of knowledge into the self-narrative, as well as the cultural knowledge of how to narrate and read one's life. Narrative, knowledge, and self are thus connected by what I would like to call with Catriona Mackenzie "narrative agency," even though my understanding of the term differs somewhat from hers. For Mackenzie, narrative agency refers to the conception of personhood; to be person, she writes, "is to exercise narrative capacities for self-interpretation that unify our lives over time," a self-interpretation that is an integral response to experiences of change and fragmentation, and as such "dynamic, provisional, and open to change and revision" (2008, 11-12). I share Mackenzie's understanding of "narrative agency" as interlinked with notions of personhood and self; however, in her conception, narrative agency is also always bound to a normative understanding of what constitutes a good life and to a successful narrative of that life. My own use of the term is descriptive rather than normative and refers to

an individual's capacity for narrative self-*construction* in a complex web of cultural understandings of self and conventions of life writing and life telling, as well as of careful self-positioning vis-à-vis environment, family, community, society, and other collectives.

## 2. Negotiating Self, Life, and Writing: Indigenous Autobiography

The need to expand what is to be understood as 'autobiography' has become obvious in the study of Indigenous life writing in the past 30 years. Arnold Krupat, a scholar who has been among the earliest critics to address these issues systematically, has defined autobiography as a European, even a Eurocentric genre. He has argued that, since "the rise of the author parallels the rise of the individual" (Krupat 1985, 10) in European culture, autobiography has no equivalent in pre-contact tribal cultures, as these cultures have no sense of the kind of autonomous individual underlying the traditional notion of autobiography (11). Native American autobiography thus "could emerge only from cross-cultural contact" (Eakin 1985, xviii). Krupat and Swann confirm this view in their collection of autobiographical essays by Indigenous authors two years later, when they point to the difficulties approaching authors, and even the refusal by some of these authors, to produce an autobiographical sketch:

One Native American poet was cautioned against writing her autobiography by a member of her tribe and could not, finally, produce an autobiographical text for us, asserting the traditional sense of Indian peoples that not the individual as personal self but, rather, the person as transmitter of the traditional culture was what most deeply counted for her. Another poet initially rejected the idea of what she called 'speaking your own stories,' though she later found that she could write some kind of autobiography. (Krupat and Swann 1987, xii)

"Some kind of autobiography" is a telling way to put it, for there appears to be an implicit understanding of what constitutes an 'autobiography,' and the narrative that was finally produced conformed at least to a degree to the conventions of this genre. So while Krupat and Swann meant to highlight the different cultural understandings of self that allowed for or prevented the writing of an autobiography, in effect they also illustrate the cultural specificity of the genre's definition. Hertha Wong has remarked on the tendency of scholars in the field to focus on collaborative autobiographies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and thus to draw reductive conclusions on Native American life writing on that limited basis:

Because Western definitions of autobiography have been applied to indigenous personal narratives, some scholars have concluded that Indian

autobiography did not exist prior to European contact. But Native American autobiographical expressions are not based on Euro-American notions of self, life, or writing. Before the arrival of Europeans, indigenous people had numerous oral and pictographic forms in which to share their personal narratives. Certainly, these narratives were told in different forms, with different emphases, for different audiences and purposes, but they *were* told. (Wong 1992, 12)

More recently and along similar lines of argument Métis scholar Deanne Reder has highlighted, in her discussion and repudiation of Krupat's assumption, that the kind of autobiography Krupat refers to – a written, single-authored attempt to coherently capture an individual life – is a reductive notion of autobiography, that denies other forms of life writing (and life speaking) the status of 'real' autobiographies (1985, 156). As Paul John Eakin has cautioned: "armed with our own notions of what 'a life per se' is, what a 'story of individuation' is, we may not necessarily recognize another culture's practice of identity narrative as such when we encounter it" (1999, 74). This may be obvious for life narratives that follow cultural scripts fundamentally differing from those of the recipient, but it holds true also for examples of the genre that with regard to form and content have grown out of transcultural encounters, written – as the single-authored examples discussed in this contribution – in a recognizable Euro-American tradition, while embedding the text in a web of Indigenous cultural references constitutive for a multiplicity of layers of autobiographical knowledge.

In this contribution, I will continue to use the term 'autobiography' for the texts under discussion. While the heritage of the autonomous Enlightenment individual without doubt appears to make this a problematic term in an Indigenous context, I will follow McLennan's emphasis on the importance of understanding the three components of autobiography not as the sum of self-life-writing, assuming a stable meaning of each term over time and across cultural contexts, but rather as a term that demands an exploration of the ever-shifting relations between these components, which differ in each individual case (McLennan 2013, 6). At the same time, I want to argue that the way in which the relations between these components are negotiated in the individual examples nevertheless references specific conventions of life writing and notions of the self.<sup>1</sup> By so doing (and thus exercising what I have called narrative agency), the autobiographical subject positions herself not only individually, but also politically and culturally. This self-positioning is not necessarily coherent or stable, but neither is it arbitrary; in Indigenous autobiographies in par-

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1 This is particularly complicated in the context of collaborative texts, an important genre in Aboriginal life writing. For an in-depth discussion of questions of collaboration, authorship, voice, and agency see Sophie McCall's excellent study *First Person Plural* (2011).

ticular, it presents a crucial component of positioning the subject as 'Indigenous' at some times, as specifically 'Mvskoke,' 'Métis,' 'Anishinaabe' etc.

Both Campbell's and Harjo's texts clearly investigate both the trajectory of an individual life and the trajectory of "writing a life," thus contributing to the questions of genre and the production of knowledge. I suggest that Campbell, by way of narrative structure, highlights the necessity of reading an individual life in a communal context, thus urging the reader to read her life story on the one hand as representative (at least for the life stories of Métis women), on the other hand as individual, only understandable, 'knowable,' in the context of the history of the Métis people and their conflict-ridden relationship to the majority population. In contrast, Harjo structurally highlights another aspect of life writing: by foregrounding the role of poetry and music not only on the level of plot, but also by making poetry an integral part of the memoir's structure, she offers the associative and metaphorical power of poetry as a crucial component of producing knowledge about a particular life as well as knowledge about the intricacies of writing, telling a life.

### **Individual History and Community: Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed***

Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* presents not one, but two beginnings: the 'Introduction,' in which the autobiographical narrator's return to a place is documented, and the changes of this place – including the emotional impact of these changes on the narrating I – are recorded; and a rendering of the history of the Métis and the Riel rebellion in which a community's history is claimed as part of the autobiographical narrator's life story, without which it cannot be appropriately understood. The narrator 'zooms in' onto her own life, starting with the larger social framework of the Métis as a cultural group. Chapter one sketches the history of the Métis from their move to Manitoba in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to their military defeat at Batoche, SK in 1884. The second chapter focuses on the Métis after their having to give up their life as hunters, and creates a story of a proud people descending into poverty, alcoholism, and desperation. But it also begins to connect this story to the narrator's family's story, and eventually to her own; the individual's story, Campbell suggests, is not understandable without this collective framework.

Like many Indigenous life narratives – including fictional ones – of the 1970s, Campbell's highlights the centrality of return to place and community for the individual and thus rejects a narrative convention of individuation, in which the individual requires a leave-taking from the community in order to mature, a pattern of narrative that William Bevis has referred to as 'homing-in' (1987).<sup>2</sup> This return, however, is not only central with regard to what is being told but also how and why. Campbell uses the story of her return to the place of her childhood to reflect upon the telling of her life that follows the Introduction, justifying the life narration of a

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2 See also Lutz 1989.

woman just over the age of thirty. As a peritext in Genette's sense, situating the narrative, as Smith and Watson explain, "by constructing the audience and inviting a particular politics of reading" (2010, 101), the Introduction is a constitutive part of the self-narrative. The final passage of the Introduction presents a realization that will shape the reader's perception of everything to come. Campbell writes:

Going home after so long a time, I thought that I might find again the happiness and beauty I had known as a child. But as I walked down the rough dirt road, poked through the broken old buildings and thought back over the years, I realized that I could never find that here. Like me the land had changed, my people were gone, and if I was to know peace I would have to search within myself. That is when I decided to write about my life. (1982, 7-8)

Here, the text provides a reflection on the possibilities of writing one's life. Life writing is not only a way of individually coming to terms with a history of dispossession and the experience of violence, but it presents a way of coming to terms with the impossibility of return and thus both supports and at the same time counters a narrative convention of Indigenous (life) writing. Crucial for this text as an autobiography is the 'autoethnographic' gesture in the sense defined by Smith and Watson, that is, as characterized by "its focus on the *ethnos*, or social group [...] rather than on the *bios* or individual life" (2010, 157). The very structure of an individualized introduction, followed by a narrative process of 'zooming-in' from the Métis via her family history to herself positions the autobiographical subject in a context of community narration.

Thus, the Introduction and the first two chapters circumscribe a social and historical context before the third chapter finally begins with "I was born ..." (1982, 19). They are necessary to establish the speaking position as authenticating a particular voice as representative: the voice of an activist with an obligation to tell her story not as a form of individual self-expression but – the structure suggests – out of an obligation to 'her people' to make her story heard as representative of the story of 'the Métis' generally and 'Métis women' in particular. As such, the text does not only narrate an individual life; it also reflects a narrative pattern that can also be found in Native fiction of the 1960s and 1970s: frustration and desperation that make the protagonist leave the community, followed by a further descent into hell and abuse, and finally a return to the community and a new beginning.

### **Life (Writing) and Poetry: Joy Harjo's *Crazy Brave***

In *Crazy Brave*, poetry is both content and structure for the life narrative. On the one hand, the memoir presents the autobiographical narrator as a 'poet in becoming,' by highlighting the centrality of art as a means of survival. Being or becoming a

poet here is not understood as living out a particular talent for personal satisfaction or as a desperate need for creative self-expression, even though facets of the latter are apparent; being a poet is presented as a way of life with a strong spiritual component and as a personal obligation of remembering, witnessing, and truth-telling. On the other hand, by incorporating poems as constitutive elements of the life narrative and by using poetry as a structural device, Harjo's autobiography also explores the role of poetry as a potential repository of cultural and autobiographical knowledge.

Poetry literally frames the text: it begins with a quote from Harjo's "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky" as a kind of prologue and it ends with an emphasis on poetry as a teacher: "I followed poetry" (2012, 164) is the last sentence of the narrative. Throughout the text, Harjo's poems are used to introduce sections of the memoir, and particularly towards the end, the citations become more extensive. While reference to or quotations from Harjo's poetry is, of course, anything but surprising in a poet's memoir, I want to suggest that the strategy of including poems is far more than an expected illustration of the story of a poetic career. Rather, the poems increasingly become an integral part of the narrative, not so much as telling a life but reflecting upon life and its storied character.

This is particularly prominent at the very end of the memoir. While most of the quotations from poems are excerpts, "I Give You Back," a central piece in Harjo's early collection *She Had Some Horses* (1983; it later was often cited as "Fear Poem"), is quoted in its entirety. It is a poem of release, a ritual cleansing of fear. The structure of the first stanza is representative:

I release you, my beautiful and terrible  
fear. I release you. You were my beloved  
and hated twin, but now, I don't know you  
as myself. I release you with all the  
pain I would know at the death of  
my children. (1982, 162)

The ambivalence of fear as both internal and to be externalized finds its powerful manifestation in the poem's enjambments. At the same time, the poem is a form of testimony: "I was born with eyes that can never close" (162). Testimony and witnessing ascribe responsibility to the one testifying; testimony is never for its own sake, but is meant to make others see and act.

The witnessing of atrocities in this poem (rape, slaughter, starvation) and the internalization of fear are directly linked. This link is highlighted by the way in which the poem is placed in the overall life narrative, for it is positioned to mark a point of the autobiographical narrator's liberation from fear: in the context of the memoir, the poem is performative, it enacts what it describes. It follows the description of her struggle with her inner monster, a mixture of mythically imbued struggle and



nightmarish dream, and a dream vision of her future (or, from the point in time of writing, her present) as a poet and musician:

The monster put his hand on me. It did not touch me. He disappeared. I was free. Free. Free. I carried that dream back through several layers of consciousness, to where I stood in the future, with a stack of poems and a saxophone in my hands. That night I wrote this poem. It is one of my first poems. (Harjo 2012, 161)

While this passage connects the poetic beginning to a crucial moment in the life narrative, the focus is nevertheless only secondarily on the beginning of writing poetry. The emphasis is on the connection between the liberation from fear and the possibilities of poetry for one's life. While highly personal, it is the contextualization in the life narrative that gives this lyrical poem an autobiographical twist, but the overall agenda of the poem nevertheless exceeds the individual. As Monika Fludernik has argued, in lyric poetry

[T]he speaker never becomes a character in her own right, never begins to exist in an alternative fictional world. Indeed, lyric poetry is generally taken to be concerned with general truths rather than particular fact. (Fludernik in Kjerkegaard 2014, 188)

"I Give You Back" seeks to create precisely the kind of relation to broader 'truths' highlighted by Fludernik. The 'I' that is in dialogue with fear is an I that can be seen as individual, but also as encompassing all Native Americans. If the emphasis is read as being on the liberation from a fear that is both individual and transmitted across generations, the poem potentially implies an invitation to each and every reader as a human being struggling with fear. The references and some of the formal aspects (such as the repetitions, the importance of the number '4' etc.) point to Native American life realities and aesthetics. The context is autobiographical, but the emphasis on taking oneself back, on not letting oneself surrender to one's fear, clearly encompasses a broader (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) audience. Harjo suggests this reading in one of the paragraphs following the poem when she writes: "There are many such doorways in our lives" (163). 'We' here is potentially generalized across the boundaries of ethnicity, gender, or age, a generalization implied, but not made explicit in the poem.

Thus, the use of poetry does not only serve to comment on a particular life situation; it also becomes a vehicle for transporting the autobiographical I's reflection on how life can be understood. The lines "I take myself back, fear./ You are not my shadow any longer" (163) at this particular point in the life narrative provide a commentary on how to narrate oneself – the very words are a reclamation of life, and this life is embedded in a larger context of story. The final sentence of the

memoir, "I followed poetry" (164), is not therefore to be understood merely as an indication of the beginning of a poetic career – the point where Harjo's narrative ends – but as indicating her understanding of poetry as an interpretation of a connected life: "I wanted the intricate and metaphorical language of my ancestors to pass through to my language, my life" (164), Harjo writes. Life is storied. Kenneth Roemer has argued in his reading of Navajo songs as autobiographical that the merging of song and identity is central in the understanding of these songs as well as of the notion of self that lies beneath it; without song, there is no existence, songs *are* existence (Roemer 2012, 96-97). Roemer speaks about traditional Navajo songs, but "I Give You Back" – in light of the strong influence Navajo thought and culture have had on Harjo's poetry – might be read as resting on a similar connection between song, story, poetry, and self.

Thus, if "I Give You Back" is understood as a 'representative example' for how Harjo's poetry functions in her memoir, the poems do not only comment on particular life situations or even turning points, but they are an integral, even constitutive part of 'making sense' of the autobiographical narrator's life. They function as a self-citation, a self-reference, through which a notion of being one's song, songs and poetry as a form of both autobiography and autobiographical knowledge is confirmed.

Both the function of poetry in *Crazy Brave* and Campbell's structure do not call into question the status of the texts as 'autobiographies;' neither text provides a challenge to the genre through its form, as for instance Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* does. But the characteristics just discussed nevertheless negotiate the relationship between self, life, and writing for, as different as they are, they both put the writing of an individual life in a larger context of community and ways of narrating community relations. Thus, they also point to the second aspect under discussion here: the relationality of self.

### 3. "We enter into a family story:" Relational Selves

The conception of a relational instead of an independent self, by now well-established in autobiographical research, is at least to some extent the result of the challenges posed to the so-called 'Gusdorf model' by the growing number of autobiographical narratives by individuals belonging to or identifying with marginalized groups, particularly since the 1960s and 1970s. In this context, Indigenous self-narratives occupy a special position with a long history of colonial dispossession and a persistent claim to narrative agency; this history is shaped by the complex and tension-filled interplay of oral and written modes of life narratives. This is particularly obvious in collaborative autobiographies, in which the autobiographical self is – literally – constructed dialogically and most often in a constellation of power asymmetry. Collaborative autobiographies raise specific questions regarding agency and relationality (cf. Eakin 1985, xxi), a detailed discussion of which exceeds the

scope of this contribution. However, the function of relationality for narrative self-construction and the different forms it takes play a crucial role for Indigenous autobiographies and for the challenge they potentially present to the understanding of autobiographical knowledge.

Arnold Krupat has argued that in Native American life writing or telling, "narration of personal history is more nearly marked by the individual's sense of himself in relation to collective units or groupings" (1992, 212); he calls this a 'synecdochic' sense of self as opposed to a 'metonymic' sense of self "where personal accounts have marked the individual's sense of herself predominantly in relation to other distinct individuals" (1992, 212). While the assumption of a sense of a Native American self that is necessarily and transhistorically 'synecdochic' is problematic, Indigenous autobiographical narratives indeed tend to stress relations and the social as crucial for narrative self-constitution. As such, they highlight an emphatic and affirmative understanding of the importance of the social for the way in which the self is understood and narrated.

Thus I am not concerned with psychological models of self-constitution that stress the fundamental difference of Indigenous conceptions of self from European conceptions, but instead with specific narrative conventions that emphasize the relationality of self and that make a relational form of life narrative comprehensible in a particular cultural context. Familiar narrative strategies include a tendency towards episodic structure, oral narration, a strong focus on the self as embedded in a genealogy and tribal mythology, and an emphasis not only on the importance of other people and of human community for the individual's self-understanding and positioning (this, obviously, can frequently be found in non-Indigenous life narratives as well), but extending the notion of relationality to encompass human relations to e.g. animals, rocks, trees, or spiritual beings as both an individual and a community relation. In this context, the particular structure of Campbell's text as well as Harjo's understanding of poetry as a bridge between worlds can also be understood as emphases on the relationality of self, for the very structure of self-narration lays claim to a particular cultural tradition and places the autobiographical subject within it.

In the following discussion of Campbell's and Harjo's texts, I will focus on a particular narrative strategy by way of which the relational construction of self is put into narrative practice: the presentation of one particular person as an embodiment of genealogy and tribal culture. In Campbell's text, this is the paternal great-grandmother Cheechum, with whose death the autobiographical narrative concludes. In Harjo's, it is the father, a tragic figure who comes to stand both for a whole generation of Indigenous men in the US in the 1950s and for a connection to a heroic tribal past. These embodiments come to bear very differently on the two self-narratives and are to very different degrees ambivalent in what they (re)present; nevertheless, in each case they remind the narrator of a context of self-knowledge that is dependent upon a specific cultural context and relationality.

### **Of Grandmothers and Lost Fathers: Relationality and Embodiment**

In *Halfbreed*, the narrator's paternal great-grandmother Cheechum embodies traditional values as well as the perseverance of the Métis in the face of a history of dispossession and cultural marginalization. Fagan et al. point out that Campbell "politicizes her kinship ties, linking herself through her great-grandmother, Cheechum, to the Métis people led by Louis Riel in the Rebellions of 1869 and 1884" (Fagan 2009, 259). As such, Cheechum is for the autobiographical narrator not only the one stable person in her life, but she also presents an internalized set of cultural values and behavioral standards *and* a political and historical claim to sovereignty.

In presenting her great-grandmother as a guardian of Métis identity and cultural practice, the narrator does not stop short at the severity and violence of this guardianship. When at one point the young protagonist directs her frustration at her parents, calling them "no-good halfbreeds," Cheechum takes her aside and tells her a story about the destructiveness of community division and then proceeds to punish the girl.

She stood up then and said, 'I will beat you each time I hear you talk as you did. If you don't like what you have, then stop fighting your parents and do something about it yourself.' With that she beat me until my legs and arms were swollen with welts. (1982, 47)

As this act of violence makes clear, Cheechum is not a person without ambivalences. Nevertheless, the corporal punishment does not diminish her function as a crucial relation. On the contrary, the narrator comments on this episode by saying (without a sense of irony) "My first real lesson had been learnt" (47), suggesting in the following that the 'lesson' is indeed the one Cheechum wanted her to learn.

While representing the values of traditional society, the great-grandmother nevertheless is an embodiment of hope for a different future. It is structurally important that the memoir ends with Cheechum's death in 1966, for it signals the advent of a new generation of Métis, an advent that Cheechum appears to have waited for:

Cheechum lived to be a hundred and four years old, and perhaps it's just as well that she died with a feeling of hope for our people; that she didn't share the disillusionment that I felt about the way things turned out. My Cheechum never surrendered at Batoche: she only accepted what she considered a dishonourable truce. She waited all her life for a new generation of people who would make this country a better place to live in. (156)

Cheechum comes to stand for the unbreakable spirit of the Métis; the reference to Batoche, the place of the decisive battle that ended organized Métis military re-

sistance in 1884, invites a defiant redefinition of its meaning: the Métis have not been broken, and the military defeat was only one of many instances in the illegitimate seizing of territory and the push to assimilate. The narrator is part of the new generation her great-grandmother foresaw, a generation willing to work for fundamental change. The ending of the book project is also a new beginning for her: "The years of searching, loneliness and pain are over for me. Cheechum said, 'You'll find yourself, and you'll find brothers and sisters.' I have brothers and sisters, all over the country. I no longer need my blanket to survive" (157). The process of 'finding herself' is the very telling of her life-story; not only in *what* is told but maybe even more so *that* it is told. *Halfbreed* has often been read as story of survival, and the autobiographical narrator's relationship to Cheechum is crucial. It is one of an internalized dialogue between the autobiographical narrator and her great-grandmother, and as constitutive for the narrative construction of self in that it becomes a lens through which to observe and evaluate the narrator's development and her eventual opening up for new exchanges and directions in life. This dialogicity can be extended to encompass the very production of knowledge at work in this and other texts. As Dylan Miner has emphasized, knowledge is not static but "dependent upon active community reception" (170). In Campbell's narrative, the figure of the great-grandmother serves as a representative for this community, or more precisely, for the community as it once was. At the same time, the kind of knowledge she represents and which the autobiographical narrator references as a framework of values is passed on and received in the next step by the audience of the book.

In Harjo's memoir, while the strategy of embodiment is similar, the figure of the father plays a role that differs significantly from that of Cheechum. While Cheechum represents continuity, strength, and cultural persistence in *Halfbreed*, the narrator's father in *Crazy Brave* comes to stand for the loss of orientation experienced by Indigenous men in the 1940s and 1950s. "My father didn't know what he wanted," Harjo writes. "If he was going to have a child, he preferred a son, though in his everyday world in the racist Oklahoma of the fifties, it was difficult for an Indian man, especially one who had no living Indian father or grandfather to show him the way" (2012, 20). The desperate, lost father embodies the predicament of an entire generation of Indigenous men during a time where the official policy, so-called 'termination,' was an attempt to end the special relationship between the government and Indigenous nations and integrate Native American men in particular into the post-war economic boom – with disastrous results for both individuals and communities. For the historian Roger Nichols, the policy even presented a clear continuation of the policies of annihilation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, if by different means (1998, 292). The men described in *Crazy Brave* react to their state of powerlessness with alcohol abuse and intimate partner and self-inflicted violence, as well as child abuse. The narrative makes no attempt to gloss over Harjo's father's (self-)destructiveness, but places it clearly in the context of the historical conquest of Native North America and its effect upon the present. "These fathers, boyfriends, and husbands were all

men we loved, and were worthy of love," she writes. "As peoples we had been broken. We were still in the bloody aftermath of a violent takeover of our lands. [...] We were all haunted" (2012, 158). The shift in pronouns in this passage points to a process of 'postmemorization', to reference Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory in this context. Postmemory, as Hirsch defined it, is

the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they 'remember' only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right. (2001, 9)

Analogously, the memory of conquest, war, and destruction so prominent also in the previously discussed poem "I Give You Back" is a transgenerational memory that serves as a matrix for the interpretation of contemporary experiences. The narrator's father, belonging to a generation no longer grounded in tribal traditions and not yet politicized in the way the next generation would be, comes to stand for a community experience.

At the same time, the father's loss of way is connected to the narrator's own attempt to find her place:

I am born of brave people and we were in need of warriors. My father and I had lost the way. I was born puny and female and Indian in lands that were stolen. Many of the people were forgetting the songs and stories. Yet others hid out and carried the fire of the songs and stories so we could continue the culture. (Harjo 2012, 28)

Passages such as this assign to the figure of the father yet another function: although he has lost any sense of orientation, he nevertheless provides the autobiographical narrator's connection to tribal history. It is through her father's Mvskoke family that she traces her ancestry, and this ancestry is celebrated as one of insistence on cultural and political self-determination.

This kind of ancestry, the narrator emphasizes, is more than nostalgic identification with a lost tribal world and its values; rather, it becomes an individual responsibility. The title of this contribution – "this is why I'm remembering" – is taken from Harjo's memoir. As in Campbell's memoir, the declaration of autobiographical motivation is more than a justification for the telling of a life-story; the text is staged as a form of testimony. Unlike Campbell's memoir, however, Harjo's *Crazy Brave* does not present the autobiographical narrator as the representative of a community. She does not stand as 'a Native woman' for Indigenous women in North America (or even a particular tribal community), but as an individual with a responsibility that binds her to and defines her through her connection to community, genealogy, and family.

The differences between the way in which a similar strategy is used in both texts – the function of a central relation as an embodiment of community experience through which the narrator then defines herself – are most likely attributable to the different historical contexts in which the two memoirs have been published. Campbell's was published in the wake of Métis activism in the early 1970s and at the beginning of a visible Indigenous literature in Canada, while Harjo's comes in the context of diversified tribal politics, the institutionalization of Indigenous Studies in the academy, and a well-established Indigenous literature in the United States (to which her poetry has significantly contributed) forty years later. *Halfbreed* has become a classic since its publication, a culturally and politically important text which has served as a crucial encouragement to many Indigenous writers (Acoose qt. in Million 2009, 59), while *Crazy Brave*, as a very recent text, currently draws the interest it generates from the prominence of its author. Thus, in the final section of this contribution, I will briefly discuss the notions of responsibility taken up in the texts and the ways in which the forms of knowledge they reference and produce are linked to the narrative agency enacted in the memoirs.

#### **4. "I write this for all of you": Autobiographical narration and responsibility**

*Halfbreed* is considered a "watershed for Native literature" and a "standard" (qt. in Fagan et al. 2009, 258). By now, it is firmly included in both school and university curricula. Much of the criticism of the text has focused on the construction of identity, and while this dominant reading is not surprising for an autobiographical narrative, this focus has also been criticized as too narrow. For Miner, "Campbell's body of work is about being, becoming, and belonging, not about the ambiguities of hybrid identities" (2012, 162), even though the identifications formed in the texts tend to shift and blur identity boundaries (cf. Fagan et al.). I read this autobiographical narrative as a self-conscious testimony with an intense political agenda that is less concerned with identity categories than with telling a story of individual survival as one of community survival and continuity. The memoir's emplotment, its already discussed structure that leads from a political and self-reflexive framing to a 'zooming in' from community and family history to individual story, highlights this particular agenda. In the Introduction as well as towards the end of the narrative, the autobiographical narrator addresses the reader directly:

I am not very old, so perhaps some day, when I too am a grannie, I will write more. I write this for all of you, to tell you what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country. I want to tell you about the joys and sorrows, the oppressing poverty, the frustrations and the dreams.  
(Campbell 1982, 8)

This address is both conciliatory and confrontational: it creates a 'we' – 'our country' – but it also emphasizes the political and didactic function of the text. The implied audience in this passage is most likely not Indigenous (or at least not comprised of Indigenous *women*), but presumably a 'national' audience that needs to be educated. The text as such, however, clearly has offered Indigenous people and Indigenous women in particular a sense of identification. *Halfbreed* thus does not only structurally perform and draw on the self as relational; as Fagan et al. argue, the text also significantly contributed to the *creation* of new forms of relationality and connection among Indigenous people in Canada at the time (2009, 267).

When compared to this by now canonical earlier text, Harjo's memoir appears much less overtly political and also much less overtly communal. However, while only marginally concerned with Indigenous activism, the text nevertheless addresses the effects of history and crucial questions of cultural sovereignty; its politics lie in the ways in which genealogical and spiritual knowledge are integrated in its concept of human responsibility. Belinda Acosta has called *Crazy Brave* a "multifaceted creation story" (2014, 160), and this creation story is as much individual as it is communal, moving from the narrating self in ever-growing circles to eventually encompass humanity – a notion of interconnectedness that has long characterized Harjo's poetry and now finds a manifestation also as part of narrative self-constitution.

At the core of this agenda of responsibility is then indeed poetry as well as music, or, more generally, art. The memoir begins with the autobiographical narrator as a toddler who discovers her fascination with music: "My rite of passage into the world of humanity occurred then, through jazz. The music was a startling bridge between familiar and strange lands" (Harjo 2012, 18). As a "rite of passage into the world of humanity," the relationship to music is thus from the beginning presented as more than an affinity to a particular art form; music and poetry are presented as a link between different worlds, and they position the individual in a web of connections, including genealogical and mythological ones. The affinity to poetry and music and the artistic talent, therefore, are not strictly individual but they link the individual to larger contexts of meaning.

As such, they come with obligations. Remembering is crucial and a matter of survival – individually and collectively, physically, mentally, and spiritually. Poetry is a form of re-telling, re-remembering, re-appropriating one's life, genealogy, heritage in face of severe individual and collective loss. As such, the poet is charged with responsibilities towards herself as well as towards others. Early on in the narrative, the autobiographical narrator declares:

I was entrusted with carrying voices, songs, and stories to grow and to release into the world, to be of assistance and inspiration. These were my responsibility. I'm not special. It is this way for everyone. We enter into a family story, and then other stories based on tribal clans, on tribal towns



and nations, lands, countries, planetary systems and universes. Yet we each have our own individual soul story to tend. (2012, 20)

Harjo presents an understanding of the individual as implicated and embedded in various communal stories and with obligations towards them; at the same time, the individual is not reduced to or determined by these contexts. Yet, the larger contexts referenced here provide frameworks of genealogy and language in which the individual story can be told and read. In the end, the narrator emphasizes the already cited close connection between her life and ancestral language (164); in light of the intertwinement of poetry and obligation, she explicitly accepts what she sees as entrusted in her.

The sense of obligation that comes with a gift links poetry to the very act of autobiographical remembering. Autobiographical narration becomes more than individual reminiscence – like poetry it has a communal function. Harjo's text is not an autoethnographic text; even though it references the histories of the Mvskoke people, it does not focus on community history. However, it does insist on the individual's responsibility vis-à-vis communal contexts, and this responsibility is manifest both in poetry and in autobiographical narration. When early on in the memoir the narrator states: "My generation is now the door to memory. This is why I am remembering" (2012, 21), this declaration does more than express the individual motivation for the telling of a life-story; it places the text in the larger context of testimony and highlights the obligations of a generation between dispossession and narrative agency: "As I write this," continues Harjo, "I hear the din of voices of so many people, and so many stories that want to come forth. Each name is a tributary to many others, to many places. [...] These people, our ancestors, want to be recognized; they want to be remembered" (2012, 21). What is to be remembered is the history of dispossession as well as resistance and continuance; but also to be remembered is the history of the Mvskoke nation as shaped by cultural encounters and hybridity. Individual remembering is fed by collective memory; collective memory in turn is transported in poetry. Poetry, the artist's responsibility, and autobiographical knowledge are inseparable in Harjo's memoir.

### **5. The Challenges of Autobiographical Knowledge in Indigenous Life Writing**

The insistence on relationality and cultural self-positioning in both examples raises the question of the challenges texts such as these present to different frameworks of reception as well as to the study of life writing. National narratives lay a particular claim to individual life stories. In the Canadian context, life writing tends to be read as "preeminent among the genres in which the evolving character and concerns of the nation have been and continue to be written" (Egan/Helms 2004, 216). In the case of residential school survivors' stories, as Julie McGonegal has argued, the *Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples* report of 1996 "reproduce[s] and

analyze[s] the testimonies of survivors as part of a larger national project of bringing the 'secret', as it were, of settler colonial violence out into the open, with the ostensible aim of promoting Aboriginal healing and promoting reconciliation" (2009, 69). While making colonial violations a national concern is clearly necessary and was long overdue when the report was presented, the incorporation of the survivors' narratives into a narrative of national betterment is problematic when it fails to question the ineluctability of the nation state. Indigenous life writing, even if it adheres to the narrative conventions that suggest an individual's struggles with national frameworks, or that address a national audience (such as Campbell's and other texts, survivors' narratives, other testimonies), more often than not effectively calls into question the status the nation-state holds in the narration of the Indigenous self and of community – and it certainly rejects its appropriation by the narrative of the (Canadian or US American) nation, often countering the attempt with the insistence on tribal nationalism. Hence, instead of simply being appropriable into the narrative fabric of the multicultural and 'polyphonic' nation state, Indigenous life writing presents a complex maneuvering of subject positions in relation to a broad range of narrative conventions on the formal level, and a negotiation of individual desires, of identifications with a diversity of communities, and of gendered and cultural self-positions and community expectations.

Reading Indigenous women's first-person narratives as "political acts in themselves" (2009, 54), Dian Million argues that they necessarily have an effect upon (white) scholarship. In and through these narratives, Indigenous women do not only create individual narratives of suffering, survival, and definition of self, they also, Million suggests, participate

in creating a new language for communities to address the real multi-layered facets of their histories and concerns by insisting on the inclusion of our lived experience, rich with emotional knowledges, what pain and grief and hope meant or mean now in our pasts and futures. (2009, 54)

The "felt experiences as community knowledges," she claims, crucially inform Indigenous scholars' positions (2009, 54). In light of an agenda of decolonizing the academy, this indeed has an effect upon scholarship, for it further complicates the relation between individual experience and its narrativization – so characteristic for the genre of autobiography – by implying a necessary re-evaluation of individual experience as a basis and form of community knowledge. While the study of life writing has long acknowledged the simultaneously singular and representative character of the subject of autobiography, the focus here is not on representation but on integrating individual experience and its narrativization into a community framework. The effect, clearly, is political, for individual narratives become an integral part of struggles for sovereignty. In this context, current notions of autobiography as self-construction rather than self-expression may be seen as undermining

the notion of testimony and authentic experience so crucial to the political and cultural function of Indigenous self-narratives, which could be seen as presenting yet another form of discursive colonization. However, looking at Campbell's and Harjo's memoirs as examples, I would like to suggest that we can identify a potential common ground on which these more recent shifts in autobiographical scholarship and Indigenous self-narratives – with all their personal and communal implications – stand. I suggest an understanding of stories and storytelling as constitutive for the notion of self as related, placed and embodied, and as constituted by cultural practices; hence, insisting on self-narration as a narrative construction allows to read these narratives as strategic condensation of experience rather than their mere expression, a condensation shaped by cultural conventions and community knowledge. Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham have highlighted

the vital importance and inseparability of the question of culture from both Indigenous injuries and reparations. Culture, broadly construed, cannot be held discrete from political and legal discourse; rather, it is the means through which redress and reconciliation operate as polyvalent symbolic forms which shape and mediate past and present realities through processes of signification. (Henderson and Wakeham 2009, 15)

This clearly applies to life writing and literature as well, for as both Campbell's and Harjo's texts make clear, there is a close relationship between Indigenous social realities, life stories, life writing, and literature. In "The Disempowerment of First North American Native Peoples and Empowerment Through Their Writing," Jeanette Armstrong links life stories and literature (1993, 209). Literature is one form through which life realities and life stories become manifest and understandable, and indeed, autobiographical writers link literature, life and story very intimately.

Thus, pointing to the link between life writing and other forms of writing does not suggest that there is an uncomplicated relationship between life and the writing of lives as mimetic and direct expression in both fiction and autobiography, but rather that there is a conceptual overlap between or rather an embeddedness of life writing in other kinds of stories, written or oral. And further that there is a specific assumption about life writing as not only an individual's story but also as a story with a social and communal (and oftentimes overtly political) function. In the context of Indigenous life stories in particular, these close connections between different individual and collective forms of storytelling highlight the ways in which autobiographical narratives convey not only Indigenous life knowledge – knowledge about how a life is and can be led – but also Indigenous auto-bio-graphical knowledge – knowledge about how a life can be told. Maybe, to come back to Harjo's initial claim, it indeed is "the kind of knowledge that could free" us, that might provide an angle for decolonizing academic work.

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