

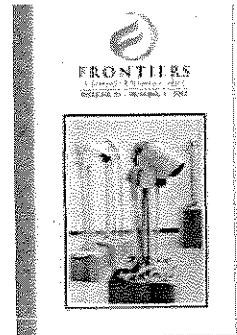
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**Introduction: "It Is What Keeps Us Sisters": Indigenous Women
and the Power of Story**

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Introduction

"It Is What Keeps Us Sisters"¹:
Indigenous Women and the Power of Story

INÉS HERNÁNDEZ-AVILA

IN THE MIDST OF WAR, WE BEAR WITNESS, WE CREATE

This special issue on indigenous women is framed for us, as coeditors, by the sad, outrageous, horrifying facts of September 11, 2001, and all that has come in the aftermath. It would be hard to speak of the work of the women included here without so much as a mention of the times in which we live. This collection of Native women's writing and art marks the new century and the moment of its birthing is a time of grievous upheaval for humanity and for the planet. This volume must be seen as an articulation and rendering of our voices in the face of the current war. Yet, it is important to note that for us as indigenous women, the war is not so new. It is, in fact, all too familiar and intimate to us. We have only to look at some of the earlier collections of indigenous women's writing to bring this point home strongly. In *Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women* Paula Gunn Allen writes,

War stories seem to me to capture all the traditional themes of Indian women's narratives: the themes of love and separation, loss, and most of all, of continuance. Certainly war has been the major motif of Indian life over the past five centuries, so it is perfectly fitting that we write out of our experience as women at war, women who endure during wartime, women who spend each day aware that we live in a war zone.²

This volume reflects these same themes in 2002. We live in the war zone; "how well have we 'survived the onslaught of destruction[?]" This is a question posed by Joy Harjo in the introduction to *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writings of North America*, as she notes, "We are coming out of . . . a war that hasn't ended."³

How do indigenous women writers and artists manifest, critically and creatively, their awareness of this unending war? How do they acknowledge and

pay tribute to their own and others' expressions of indigenous ways of knowing, including principles of humanity and relationship to all that lives? One crucial way is through bearing witness and giving testimony; most importantly, they "tell story." Conscious of the power of language(s)—spoken, visual, silent, sensual, defiant, courageous, laughterful, the languages of song, of the body, the heart, the spirit, the earth, and yes, the mind—they/we tell story. Conscious of the way language(s) mediate, conscious of how narratives are created, how and where and why they emerge, whose interests are served, which stories become official (for some), which ones are ignored (by some), which ones could help humanity and the relations of the earth, they/we tell story. And as Gloria Bird says about *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*, "Each piece [in that collection] has gone into the creation of a narrative that is part of an even larger narrative."⁴

We join this *Frontiers* special issue on indigenous women to that larger narrative; it is our contribution to the story. Leslie Silko, in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* writes, "This perspective on narrative—of story within story, the idea that one story is only the beginning of many stories and the sense that stories never truly end—represents an important contribution of Native American cultures to the English language."⁵ The stories help us all (not only Native peoples) to know who we are in relation to all that is. And as Rayna Green writes in the introduction to *That's What She Said: Contemporary Poetry and Fiction by Native American Women*, "Whether it comes directly from the storyteller's mouth and she writes it down or someone writes it for her, the story has to be told."⁶

How do we know this? Gunn Allen, in *Off the Reservation: Reflections on Boundary-Busting, Border-Crossing Loose Canons*, says, "The old ones' recognition of the intrinsic identity of text and human consciousness informs the structures of the whole of the oral tradition, and critical theory in Indian Country consists of the often subtle junctures of story cycles."⁷ Gunn Allen also notes that essays (and by extension, this special issue on indigenous women) are also stories, with plots and characters. Silko says "language is story."⁸ Through these stories, the past and the future come together in the present in conscious situationality/relationality. Thus, as Silko says, the "stories are, in a sense, maps."⁹ Maps to deep truth(s), maps that help us to know the lay of the land of our bodies, of our points of origin/emergence, of our hearts and spirits, of the universe, of our minds, of the planet we call home, we call Earth. These story maps allow us movement between the past and the future: looking back, we look forward, looking forward, we look back, always conscious of how the present moment at once holds both past and future.

The women represented in this volume give us maps, give us stories, give

us indigenous women's perspectives and ways to make sense for ourselves of the crazy sicknesses, the raw ruthlessness, and at the same time, the amazing gracefulness of the world in which we live. In academia, some of us speak of "theory in the flesh" to contest what is regarded as disembodied theory (theory to which no body is attached, much less a heart or spirit). It is time to extend the idea of "theory in the flesh" to *a theory in the flesh and in the spirit rooted in the earth*. This is what indigenous women have to offer, even when they are urban Indians, living away from their homelands. They/we have something, call it memory, the root of the truth, that calls into our deepest reaches powerfully. Witness the work of Lillian Pitt, her pieces *Flow Between Mind and Earth* and *Gathering Energy from the Milky Way*, that reflects this call.

Beth Brant writes in the introduction to *A Gathering of Spirit: Writing and Art by North American Indian Women*, "The story . . . hasn't changed for hundreds, maybe thousands of years. The retelling. The continuity of spirit. We believe in that. We believe in community in its most basic form. We recognize each other. Visible spirit."¹⁰ This is the key—community. The stories are given back and forth, shared and cherished. They are sustained by humans, by the relations in the natural world, by those in the spirit world, by the earth herself. The spirit(s) speak(s) in stories. Brant says,

Who we are is written on our bodies, our hearts, our souls. This is what it means to be Native in the dawn of the twenty-first century. Witness to what has been and what is to be. Knowing what has transpired and dreaming of what will come. Listening to the stories brought to us by other beings. Renewing ourselves in the midst of chaos.¹¹

For the renewal, we go back to the beginning, to draw from the strength of our originality, to remember who we are, in relation to each other, in relation to our peoples, in relation to the earth. It is for this reason that we (as coeditors) chose Karen Goulet's *Sisters in the Beginning* as the cover art for this volume. In this community of women that people the pages of this issue, we honor and respect each other's stories, each other's peoples, each other's beginnings, just as we joyfully and firmly acknowledge the larger indigenous women's community of which we are a part, as well as the larger communities to which we also belong.

A heartfelt message to the readers of this volume: Silko says that "A great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener; the storyteller's role is to draw the story out of the listeners. The storytelling continues from generation to generation."¹² We trust that the work of the writers and artists included here will move something in you as readers, both indigenous and nonindigenous (although in many ways, everyone is at least ancestrally indigenous to some

land base). In either case, we hope the contents give you strength and inspiration, and for some of you, we hope the work helps you to think outside of boxes. In place of distortions, we hope you find clarity. In the introduction to *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*, Bird says, "There is hope that in 'reinventing' the English language we will turn the process of colonization around, and that our literature will be viewed and read as a process of *decolonization*."¹³ Again, we are in agreement with her intentions, and those of Joy Harjo, for their volume. This special issue adds to the work of decolonizing and renewal that is going on throughout the country, indeed, throughout the Americas, by indigenous women in and with their communities.

"DON'T FENCE ME IN"¹⁴

Paula Gunn Allen's essay, "A Funny Thing Happened on My Way to Press," sets the tone for this issue by consciously "selfing" the readers of this volume. The essay places a house of mirrors as if it were in the pages of the text, each reflection resembling the face(t)s of representation that are predictable and the guises of history that have currency even now. A careful reading of the writing and art herein will reveal the way in which indigenous peoples have been systematically contained, their movement restricted, and their identities institutionally "two-dimensionalized."

Jean LaMarr's box assemblages offer a sampling of the films or filters that Gunn Allen describes. The sites/sights articulated by LaMarr's gaze project the films/figures as literally boxed in; "category-zations" of some might say, "Native kitsch," redoubled and still frozen in time. Her work illustrates boxed "culture" fed back to a consumer society craving/searching for/thirsting for what is Indian, wanting to gaze freely at the Natives and partake of what is "authentic," as long as what is "authentic" meets *their* expectations. That a Native artist is reassembling the narrative in such a way is probable cause of discomfort for some readers, and the implicit message in pieces like *Fine Feathered Friends* and *Wild West Princess* approximates something like, "Is this the way you want to know us? If so, here's the package, you have boxed yourself in, and this is all you will ever know. Is this the language you use to name us? If so, we give you back your language. It is yours, not ours."

In like manner, Laura Youngbird's *Assimilation Dress* draws us to the boarding school experience. As we look at the word "assimilation" over and over again, we find the dress unnatural, hiding curves, covering the body, poufing the arms, masking the earthly fluidity of body's motion. It is tight from waist to neck, hiding, hiding the body, and yet, the subversion of the highlighted portion of the word is centered right at the waist, at the navel of the woman, of

the earth, “Elation?” “Elation,” the woman energy like a sun in the middle of the foreign garment shining through. In a similar manner, Kimberly Roppolo’s poem “Carnival Pictures” tells us the stories of photos—windows of captured exhaustion, youth, worn images, worn trails, worn loneliness, giving birth to death, and yet, the grandmother’s dreaming will that brought her into being. In the poem “James Hunter Henry ’85,” Anne Waters looks at the containment in photos and sees images trapped in museums, in displays (another kind of box). She brings the person out through the film, so that we see him as someone who is fully human, someone who touched and was touched, a man of flesh and blood.

In Elizabeth Woody’s “Skullduggery,” bones are boxed, grave robbers steal human remains, and Woody asks, “How do you react when cultural theft becomes the norm and pain as a constant pulse matches the heart, automatic and certain?” Gail Tremblay’s *The Things Colonial Angels Witness* gives us both the view “inside the box” and “outside the box,” so that we see the humanity of the women emerging as they begin to manifest in their own open spaces. Renya Ramirez’s essay, “Julia Sanchez’s Story: An Indigenous Woman between Nations,” presents us with still another kind of box, looking at the border as another kind of confinement, as she extends Renato Rosaldo’s notion of cultural citizenship to include Julia Sanchez.

These stories are all related. They are part of the larger story. Gunn Allen writes in *Off the Reservation*,

Most of us, given the opportunity to learn the words, would probably choose “Don’t Fence Me In” as our pan-Indian anthem. And perhaps, as our traditions have always been about liminality, about voyages between this world and many other realms of being, perhaps crossing boundaries is the first and foremost basis of our tradition and the key to human freedom and its necessary governmental accomplice, democracy.¹⁵

“THE CURVE OF A WOMAN’S BREAST”¹⁶

In speaking about human freedom, Deborah A. Miranda’s article, “Dildos, Hummingbirds, and Driving Her Crazy: Searching for American Indian Women’s Love Poetry and Erotics,” calls attention to the silencing of Native women’s sexualities, sensualities, and luscious fullness as human beings. She emphasizes the need to provide spaces for the expression by indigenous women of their love/erotic life. The work by several of the women in this volume begins to fulfill her desire. The sensual strength of Luafata Simanu-Klutz’s poem “On Being Samoan, On Being Woman (*E au pea le Ina ‘ilau a Tama’ita’i*)” delights

in the image of women “having perched our breasts at the rooftops / Basked in the sun; the leaves around our waists.” Gloria Bird’s poems, “The Symptoms” and “Creation Story,” map the trails of desire, longing, the fever, the frenzy. The poet writes, “When the pumpkin moon rose full bloom yesterday, I broke,” and she reveals to us bodies as earth smoldering. In “Between Songbirds and Crows” Elizabeth Woody describes the dusk of captivating arousal; she writes, “No one walked here, before you”—the journey of spirit, the fire in the sky, in the earth, the erotic moment of longing/aching, time and space of heat, fire, the “arousal of Mars.” Terry Gomez’s “The Naked Pope” not only “strips” European culture, including the Vatican, but is also about sisters who know love, sensuality, humor, courage, and sense of self. With zest and a fine-tuned sense of play, Gomez introduces us to the word *tsikoo-ban*—“he killed you with sex through his singing”—and describes the attractiveness of a “Real Indian [woman]. One that has a stomach but can still hold it in pretty good when she needs to.” Brant says in “A Gathering of Spirit,” “The core, the pivot, is love. We love with passion and sensuality. We love—with humor—our lovers, our relations, our tricksters.”¹⁷ Alice Rose Crow, in her poem “*Illumin* No. 1” agrees; she says, “Love / it’s all about / Love.”

HOMELAND AND HISTORY

We know the story. It is a long one, centuries old. Alice Rose Crow’s “Manufactured Stress” focuses on the global economy, which is not new to Native people—indigenous communities throughout the Americas have been living with the consequences of globalization for more than five centuries. The poet asks, “What do our children see?” Karen Goulet’s piece represents *The Story She Held Inside*, while Michelle LeBeau’s essay, “A Healing Process,” answers that question from her perspective, demonstrating the way in which history lives inside a woman, the way in which we come to know the furious wind of violence and the fierce courage to survive. In speaking about her relationship with her grandfather, LeBeau says, “We take a journey with words, and in our minds, we go there.” She “prays for strong memory.” Silko writes,

The storytelling had the effect of placing an incident in the wider context of [a people’s] history so that individual loss or failure was less personalized and became part of the village’s eternal narratives about loss and failure, narratives that identify the village and that tell the people who they are.¹⁸

Mary Black Bonnet’s story is connected to the story of her people; her essay “In Search of Mother Turtle” is her personal narrative, but it must be seen as a part

of the collective story as well. Just as she writes, "I'm having to make my own way," we all have to make our own way, and we do so on these pages together. And as Silko says, "No matter how funny or sad an incident might be, someone [in her community] could always recall a similar incident," thus allowing a natural mechanism by which an individual could see herself or himself in relation to the community, as opposed to feeling separate(d) either by good fortune or misfortune.¹⁹ Even though Silko writes about the Pueblo people, this understanding could be easily extended among tribal peoples/members of other indigenous nations. Gloria Bird, in her essay "Breaking the Silence: Writing as 'Witness,'" says about herself, "I feel a need to ask that the reader focus less on the perceived pain that has been handed down through the generations and more on the larger issue of decolonization of the mind that comes with identifying the source of the pain in order to be free of its power over us."²⁰ The way we honor, the way we love, in the war-zone, conscious of the way history lives within and around us, shaping our identities and our values, our nourishment and valor—these are the themes present in Bird's series of poems, "The Roots," "My heart is a Root to this Earth," "A Crossing," and "Children of War."

"IT IS WHAT KEEPS US SISTERS"

This volume holds the language of bearing witness and giving testimony. It holds the language of the body, of silence, of manifestation, the language of the earth, the language of sisters who know they can (re)connect through the land, through memory, through spirit. This reconnection is found in Esther Belin's "The Footracer's Blood" and "Dootlizh" (through the color and mystery of language); in Diane Glancy's "The Moon on Their Breath" where the "Wind in the trees . . . [is like] the sound of pencils writing in school," where trees are the hair of spirits after the glaciers melt; in Elizabeth Woody's "Flight," where "The evergreen crests collect arches of pinion to mingle with cloud."

Prayer also has a strong presence in this volume. Lebeau's essay and Janice Gould's "Prayer" find acknowledgement in each other of the connection to male ancestors who are beloved to these writers. Woody's poem "Coma," written for her sister, says, "I wail in sleep for you to live, welled tears roll to dry salt and wounds in the morning." These tears are related to the ones described in Gould's poem "Spring," which is about her coming out as a lesbian to her mother, only to be astonished by unexpected acceptance, causing her to shed tears of release and fright. Again, the stories are part of larger stories, and long (sometimes ancient) memories, and to say so does not diminish in any way the

intensity of the individual experience and expression. Prayers can be tears shed, they can be the leap of faith / the breaking of silence, they can be the creative act itself, the turn of language, the shape and color of art. Carolyn Lei-lanilau tells her daughter "*E ho'i mai*, return home to yourself . . . return to your strength." Each of the writers/artists in this volume returns to herself, and in so doing, creates the weave of those larger stories.

Mary Lockwood's use of the term "vision" in her personal essay "Tundra Gathering" brings the word down to earth, to the sacredness of family togetherness, as we are shown a feast of nurturing and sustenance colored the blue of berries and the glimmer of late salmon, sounding the joy of laughter, story, the strumming of Hawaiian songs, the final perfect touch. Della Frank's "Homeland" contrasts to Lockwood's essay because the memory of the bear that brings in the mother's birth sets in motion the love, ache, longing for the earth, for the mother, in a refrain, homeland, mother, homeland, grandmother, homeland, homeland. Indigenous women readers will be aware of both of these kinds of memories/visions. LisaNa Red Bear's *Corazon de mi Madre* allows us the visual loving image of her mother that resonates with the other cherished images, as does Lei-lanilau's essay "Oli Makahiki, Chant Composed as a Gift for My Daughter Kalea-Qy-Ana during Makahiki, the Rest Period from October through January" and Jean LaMarr's "Transformations." In "Front Porch Ceremonies," Kathryn Cooper writes of ordinary days of sacredness, when a cigarette is a tobacco offering, the water in the sink purifies, connects, and releases the "storms behind the caves of our eyes." She says, "Our grandmothers, awakened by this ceremony; roll over inside us / and find their way through torn screen doors / shaking rattles of waggish privity / Their gift to the fire the truth of who we are." The truth of who we are. The story of who we are. It is here.

CLOSING WORDS

As coeditors, we consciously chose to use the term "indigenous women" in the call for submissions, trusting that by doing so, we would expand the notion of "Native-ness" to reach beyond the obvious (and mainland) borders of the United States. We are fortunate to have work by indigenous women from what might be called broadly the Pacific region, that is, the West Coast, Alaska, Hawaii, and the Pacific Islands, along with work from other parts of the country as well.

We thank Sue Armitage for the invitation to put together this special issue, and we thank the staff of *Frontiers*—Patricia Hart, Sandra Martin, and Tanya

Gonzalez—for the support they gave us throughout the project. We frame this special issue with pieces by ourselves as coeditors that speak to September 11, 2001, and to the times we are in. And we know, we trust, as Alice Rose Crow says, that “the wind carries prayers for peace.”

NOTES

1. This line is from Kathryn Cooper’s poem “Front Porch Ceremonies” in this volume.

2. *Spider Woman’s Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women*, ed. Paula Gunn Allen (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 18.

3. Joy Harjo, “Introduction,” in *Reinventing the Enemy’s Language: Contemporary Native Women’s Writings of North America*, ed. Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 21.

4. Bird, “Introduction,” in Harjo and Bird, *Reinventing the Enemy’s Language*, 29. We want to acknowledge two other volumes of Native women’s writing that are also part of this larger story: *Through the Eye of the Deer: An Anthology of Native American Women Writers*, eds. Carolyn Dunn and Carol Comfort (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999); and *Sister Nations: Native American Women Writers on Community*, ed. Heid E. Erdrich and Laura Tohe (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002). We also acknowledge all the other venues where indigenous women’s writing has appeared.

5. Leslie Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 50.

6. Rayna Green, “Introduction,” in *That’s What She Said: Contemporary Poetry and Fiction by Native American Women*, ed. Rayna Green (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 2.

7. Paula Gunn Allen, *Off the Reservation: Reflections on Boundary-Busting, Border-Crossing Loose Canons* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 11.

8. Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of Spirit*, 50.

9. Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of Spirit*, 57.

10. Beth Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit: A Collection by North American Indian Women* (Rockland ME: Sinister Wisdom Books, 1984), 12. *A Gathering of Spirit* was first published in 1983 as a double issue (22/23) of the journal *Sinister Wisdom*.

11. Beth Brant, *Writing as Witness: Essay and Talk* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1994), 74.

12. Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of Spirit*, 50.

13. Bird, “Introduction,” in Harjo and Bird, *Reinventing the Enemy’s Language*, 25.

14. Gunn Allen, *Off the Reservation*, 12.

15. Gunn Allen, *Off the Reservation*, 12.

16. This line is from Anne Waters's "a poet's poem" in this volume.
17. Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit*, 13.
18. Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of Spirit*, 91.
19. Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of Spirit*, 90–91.
20. Gloria Bird, "Breaking the Silence: Writing as 'Witness,'" in *Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers on Writing*, ed. Simon Ortiz (Tucson AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1998), 30.