Medicine Lines
The Doctoring of Story and Self

by Marie Annharte Baker

L'auteure qui est autochtone explique que l'intrusion des féministes force les gens de son peuple à définir leur travail et leur identité en termes d'opposition. Elle démontre que l'inclusion des unes est nécessairement l'exclusion des autres et pour certaines, ce qui se vit en termes d'appropriation culturelle devient pour d'autres une forme subtile de racisme. L'auteure explique également que certaines structures médicinales inclusives/exclusives protègent son peuple et renforce ses liens.

The Grandmother voice is a "medicine line" which stretches across the generations. Each woman must have this legacy of oral tradition.

The "medicine line" is a boundary line between groups, or perhaps, it may designate a division of territories. Examining ways storytelling constitutes a vital link to the oral traditions is crucial to being an Indigenous writer. The "medicine line" might not simply be a linear extension of a story "told" to a story "written." The direction of the "line" might also spiral up or down. I see this "medicine line" as what connects me as a writer to the most intangible elements of a culture I struggle to understand.

The spider web is an all important image as Spider Woman is a collector of "feathers of every description and color" (Moseley 183). Maybe being a storyteller is like having a hobby of collecting feathers. The story is a helper, a guide, and becomes almost a personal friend. I appreciate the spider web imagery as revealing both fragility and strength. Spider Woman's wall covered with the beauty and softness of feathers suggests the myriad possibilities of each story and of all the stories together. Each of the feathers connects her to some place. In this way, the feathers allow her to travel and she is not limited to her own ecological sphere of influence or niche. Or, the feathers let her survey all the lines of stories as if they were the Nazca lines in Peru. On the ground, the lines seem to have been made by footsteps of antiquity. From the air, the lines reveal a gigantic spider or another shape.

What do the stories convey to me? Right away I hear Grandmother's voice, even if the storyteller is a man. I hear the story with the ears of a grandchild. The Grandmother voice is a "medicine line" which stretches across the generations. Each woman must have this legacy of oral tradition. For me, my grandmother was a kind and accepting influence in my life. She spoke to me in the Anishinabe language. I was probably a rude and spoiled child but I was never made to feel that I was any less than my own relatives. Yes, I was mixed blood but I never knew that "idea" until I was school age and asking questions. I think of the stories as healing because they help us connect to some part of the earth. They remind us of who we are and we are given identity. I think that stories arranged as if on a clothes line are what we see in books or collections of stories. For the writer who must accept the white page as a place to park a story, it is even more important to remember all that is unwritten. Underneath it all, I hear my Grandmother's voice and see her face near mine. The word used by children is *coo coo*. It is short for the more lengthy expression, ***kookum*** or what I sometimes prefer to say as ***nokomis***, or "little grandmother." It just might be that grandmother and grandchild are truly equals as it seems to be in some Indigenous cultures. Each of us who hear a story in this way is a little grandmother.

I've been asked: if the Grandmother's voice is that distinctive an element in Indigenous writing, then why wouldn't everybody, Indian and non-Indian, hear it? I don't know the answer. I am happy to have simply another unexplainable element in my life. At first I thought, yes, if a person had a strong memory of a particular grandmother, it might be easier for that person to identify with this idea of voice as I experience it. I am getting to the white liberal lament that they must have "dominion over" the story and the storyteller. Knowing x number of facts about a particular culture or a particular set of details about a storyteller's life does give some greater expertise.

For me, it is a sensual memory. I am aware immediately of my grandmother's hand. How poor and hardworking those hands must have been! But, what I find amusing is a memory of that very hand, clenched to make a fist landing on my grandfather's face. It is my father's memory of my grandmother and my own birth. How they must have sat around afterwards to laugh. She did it in anger and frustration because my grandfather had been drinking. But, it would have been forgiven. A new grandbaby had arrived and it was time to give thanks. I think the Grandmother's voice is influenced by the harsher realities of life.

In a recent collection of interviews with Native authors in Canada, Hartmut Lutz quotes Basil Johnston about oral texts being "one generation removed from extinction" and, as such, "the spoken word, the verbatim rendering of traditional stories, deserves the utmost attention and veneration" (Lutz 6). It is difficult to disagree with the idea of "salvaging" stories. This call sanctified most anthropological data despite ethnocentric bias toward tribal histories.

But I see this merely as an attempt to fossilize the stories. The process of recording them is like the fixative used by the avid entomologist. Unfortunately, Dr. Lutz's veneration of Native writers follows the criteria of "very Indian," or, "not so Indian" but he avoids pointing fingers at the corner where the "too white" or "identity crisis" writers might be hiding. I find this view disturbing because it is part of the cultural snobbery that currently exists, especially among the "born again" Indian faction. I was glad to have been left out of this collection because of the emphasis on discerning "how Indian" each writer was. For me, maintaining an Indian identity is a struggle.

I am curious about how rigid we are becoming in drawing lines around our work and our selves. Our circles of inclusion are exclusion for others.

My search is for women's stories and for those stories of irreverence/the not-so-sacred. While I do not feel the entire authority for me to pursue my search lies in my facility with language or biological inheritance, I think that the idea of being a beginning writer or even an intermediate one is, itself, liberating. Like the grandchild, one may make the mistake of getting things mixed up or turned around. I am curious about how rigid we are becoming in drawing lines around our work and our selves. Our circles of inclusion are exclusion for others. I know from reading *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors* that I felt extremely non-identified as a Native writer. While much of what was said was eloquent and full of wisdom, my attention was drawn to the colonial overtones of the conversations or lapses into patronizing commentary.

I know I am for "decolonizing" the literature be it Canadian or Indigenous. But I am also intrigued by the concept of boundaries that the editor, Dr. Lutz, attempted to redefine. The emergence of a shared culture is fascinating. The fusion of Swampy Cree-Ojibway traditions which have come to be known as "Saulteaux" is an interesting example of how peoples come together to share a language and stories and a territory. To look only at racial mixing and posit some ideology that might make sense of it is suspect. I am not only a mixed blood, that is, part white. I am actually a product of celtic confusion. I think of what wonderful stories I might conjure by researching the use of smoking pipes by older Scottish settler ladies. My great grandmother had a pipe with a beautiful white tassel. With only one symbol in hand, I find that picture of her to be so inspiring. She was a settler, colonizer, invader, and whatever non-feminist label might fit. I see also that she was privileged to have a pipe and a ritual of her own. I do not see her as hooked to a plough and cultivating the land. I see her not as a matriarch. I may begin to see her as a woman of celtic creation...linking back to her own prior generations of warrior queens. I then think of my Saulteaux auntie making cabbage rolls. I remember a friend's Dakota mother who had a craving for matzoh ball soup one day. Apparently, she had worked for some Jewish families and had found that soup to her liking. I do enjoy the mention of cultural purity but I quickly get bored because it does not seem to have anything to do with the hodge-podge reality that makes up my world. I want to find those "medicine lines" that heal the emptiness and loneliness that I sometimes feel because of how true the stereotypes of Natives have become. The caricatures are believed. I have "pure Indians" in my family but I have "pure bullshitters," too. I like to be equally proud of them.

Actually, I think I am part "bullshitter" or at least I know how to exaggerate. Maybe that is how I have blundered upon the idea of not only to look for the women's stories but also to counteract the effect of cultural appropriation. In my idea for a play, I wanted to expose the "white shamanism" or New Age excesses that seem rampant. At every turn, I see someone clutching a crystal or trying to enter an altered state. The accounts of fake medicine men and women are so intriguing that I found the temptation to write a play about it too strong to resist.

In the scenario, *Albeit Aboriginal,* the two main characters are actually one and the same person. The protagonist is Coyote Girl. (Beth Brant had a wonderful Coyote Girl story in her collection of stories called *Mohawk Trail.* (1989) I loved the Coyote Girl in that story who was gay and made overtures to a fox lady). In my play, her opponent or antagonist was to be Rat Lady. These represent two pulls on the Indigenous women's personality. Coyote Girl is the risk taker. She is the element in our character that keeps us in continual suspense. Rat Lady is naive but also opportunistic. She plays on people's ignorance and makes a healthy profit. Coyote Girl submits to temptation for fun. She prefers to play games with her own kind. To my way of thinking, Coyote Girl is that part of us that is best at creative problem solving and just the one to zap out the right answer when needed. Rat Lady is the naive part of us that believes white people are superior and that they need us to prove that fact more often than not. These two characters are in an Aboriginal soap opera called *As the Bannock Burns.*

While not overstating that Coyote Girl was/is a Trickster figure, I found it tricky to work with the development of the play. What compelled me was a union between the two main characters—one who wants to make quick money and the other who assists. I realized that cultural appropriation most likely occurs because some Indian or Indigenous person may have trusted and cooperated with outsiders for personal gain, personal recognition or just plain hard cash. Many famous Indian and white encounters have always had the element of betrayal or the

"traitor" idea. I find this interesting because anyone might be duped to give away something that is valuable to him or her. Coyote Girl was the only insurance. She seemed to be skeptical and a downright "uppity" Native woman. She was just the sort to upset the plans of whatever colonizer, exploiter, or otherwise enemy who might lurk even within the very self.

The rather simple dialogue I had first imagined came from a poem by Chrystos which named Lynn Andrews as a fake shaman of today's world (100). Coyote Girl in her passionate rendering of this diatribe would accidentally convert Rat Lady. I was unaware of the dynamics of drama:

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conflict, characters, complications... and, ultimately, chaos and crisis on my part. The only conflict I had imagined was Coyote Girl's teasing Rat Lady and then telling her a story that was really about a woman's source of power. I saw it as Coyote Girl giving Rat Lady a story that would heal her delusion about becoming a medicine woman. The real "good stuff/potion/magic" was in the story. This was a trifle too subtle for the theatre. The experience of staging the play was extremely fulfilling, not only for me but also for the women who made up the cast "The Nokomis Players." It quickly became a disappointment, however, when I found out how many women actually believed in pseudo-medicine beliefs and did not understand the whole issue of cultural appropriation.

I entered the play in two theatre festivals. One was a popular theatre event in Edmonton. Too serious. That is the only verdict I made. I noticed that the issue of "cultural appropriation" was quite frightening. I don't know why except that I made "too many comments" on how popular theatre did not rest on the premise of stories from the people. More and more, I was seeing stories ripped off from the people and dramatized by an outside, professional group of actors. Community stories were not, then, a common commodity but rather a rare display. Our amateurish production seemed to go over well but I felt a lot of hostility around discussing what was meant by the term "cultural appropriation." I thought that by staging the play, enough had been said.

The Nightwood Theatre's Groundswell Festival was a much better venue. Shamanism is an attractive topic and Toronto is a "wannabe" capital. It is a fashionable place to show just how "white liberal" or how much of an "Indian expert" you are becoming. It must be balanced with an appropriate knowledge of witchcraft, men's awareness groups, feminist ecological musings and, perhaps, an appreciation of myth. *Albeit Aboriginal* was a hit with a very urbane and radical audience of women. Most of the laugh lines got chuckles. The play had found its audience.

I almost forgot to mention that I did not know how to write a play. I simply submitted my scenario to be "workshopped." I should also mention that the "idea of a play" was so good that I actually won the City of Regina writing award to develop it further. (Otherwise, after the first few bunglings, I would have dropped it. Ouch, the ego!) I had been assured that professional actresses would help me in the writing of the play.

The various improvisational sessions elaborated on the animal aspects of the women characters. Coyote Girl was a lusty woman with a howl that would make any werewolf respond in kind. I thought this overdone but this is Native theatre in the big city. Rat Lady became a Mohawk warrior. Surrealism is maybe what the Native theatre does best. I liked the exaggeration but now I see the need for a different kind of workshop.

I think that the workshop should have begun with the storytelling aspects of our writing. I realize now the timing of those other festivals did not allow for this type of experience. I had been asked repeatedly about the dramatic need of each character. I tried to invent what I thought might work. A suitable background for each of the characters evolved from the premise that each had a lesson for the other. Let's look at the story summaries.

Coyote Girl Baby-sitting the Moon: While baby-sitting, Coyote Girl picks up on her satellite dish an episode of *As The Bannock Burns*. She invades the body of the actress who plays the part of the *Nokomis* or wise one on the show. She begins her take over.

Grandma Muskrat's Version of Creation: When Sky Woman fell down and was placed on Turtle's back, it was the Muskrat who dove to the bottom of waters to get that bit of mud for the Creation of Turtle Island. Her paw full of wrinkles and some of the Original Dirt is her evidence to younger muskrat descendants.

Star Husbands: Two women wish upon stars which they choose for husbands. They go up to the Sky World. Each works hard digging turnips but one day, one of them unearths a huge turnip which reveals the way back to the earth. They both return to their homes.

What emerged from this addition of the stories to the script was more than a rationale for the characters of Rat Lady and Coyote Girl. Rat Lady, while a schemer in her own right, did have a past as a builder. Her Grandma story was that all muskrats were to be honored for their "try, try again" attitude. Coyote Girl's past was as a Creatrix in her own right. She creates by "not doing" or by accident, as it were. When she does do something, it gets corrected. Each woman's story was crucial for the other woman to know herself as well as to know the other. To understand real shamanism means to go beyond the Hollywood version of the stories which are popular or media enhanced. Their stories would both begin and end the scenario...framing it within a larger picture. The soap opera on television series

would be a micro version of the action. The T.V. tube would be their channel to the outside world. This layering or texturing of the script was a definite improvement.

I was reluctant to include the "real thing" because I myself had changed the stories to fit with this particular script. The two star husbands were first mentioned in a story retold by Paula Gunn Allen in *Grandmothers of the Light, A Medicine Woman's Sourcebook*. The idea of "twinning, of complementarity, of duality that is not the same as opposition" is what is represented in the female twins stories. (Allen 141) I saw the Coyote Girl and Rat Lady much like the two women in the story of "The Adventurers." In my reading of Stith Thompson's account of the dispersal of the Star Husband myths, I was impressed by the changes. Either one or two women were mentioned. From this rendering, I was able to determine the link to the creation story. Sky Woman in Beth Brant's story, "This is History" from *Food and Spirits* (1991) is unhappy in the Sky World because of its restrictions. By creating this world, she finds herself. I had heard the Blackfoot version of the woman digging turnips as told by Beverly Hungry Wolf.

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My merging of these stories was to give a background and to instill more confidence in our joint adventure or collaboration on the play. While other Indigenous writers are looking at the oral tradition for unity, I'm not at all sure that this goal is shared by other performing or visual artists. I think to explore the commonalities as women in a male dominated Native theatre scene, we should have more opportunity to take the time to find the "medicine lines" that connect us. Of course, my play wants to do that. I feel compelled to find some unity in these stories even though I have not yet found the actual equivalents in what remains of the spoken story. I believe by adjusting these stories because they are now "in English" will still be a step backwards to reclaiming a woman's history. I do not have answers at this time but only questions that make me want to go further.

My own fears of cultural appropriation have been lessened. The great fears I refer to are simply that each of us who tries to find a connection might make a mistake much like white people who do in fact "steal stories." I am the least likely candidate to retrieve stories but if I sit by the wayside I will find other people with lesser commitment to community and self making their attempts.

To doctor a story means to doctor one's self. I suffer even the most superstitious beliefs about what I do. I was raised in a climate that was mixed Christian and mixed Ojibwe beliefs. For me it has been a lifelong challenge to confront the fear of "saying the wrong thing." I am aware that our Ojibwe group has been stereotyped as "suspicious" and "fearful" by anthropologists. I know that the first thought might be that I am referring to a "colonized" mentality. I simply feel that each of us must have a way of safeguarding the self. It might simply be shifting between the Rat Lady and the Coyote Girl stance.

Recently, I discovered that I have become more outspoken even though I do so more through my writing. I feel it is easy for a woman to be discounted if she speaks up. Writing is much harder to put down. It has its own discipline and I find it a more comfortable parameter, boundary, border or "medicine line" than being a politician. I believe in the old stories. I feel that much beauty remains in these narratives.

I walked away from an attempt to infuse the stories within another structure. I feel that I must try harder to find the people and resources to help me. Even if some of these people are not Indigenous, I am still willing to pursue what I think is valuable about my play. I do believe that the play has a spirit as do other artistic creations. I myself identify with Coyote Girl who is just baby-sitting the moon. I might wander off but the task will still be there. My brush with the "reality," that is, hierarchy, politics, and elitism of Native theatre, does not deter me from what I think needs to be written. I know others will disagree. I do not want to minimize the opposition to my emphasis on women's stories but I can't help but chuckle at how this type of energy does in fact turn out to benefit one's original intent. Coyote has spoken.

An assortment of comments on the responsibilities of storytelling.

Joy Asham Fedorick: I often use a storytelling approach to...get into the right brain where non-linear things can happen (226).

Basil Johnston: There are stories that are universal and almost eternal. Whether they were told 10-, 20-, 40,000 years ago, they still have application. However, some of these stories have to be redone in modern terms. These stories have lessons. Even though the circumstances change, the lessons still remain the same. And in one case I am going to tell a story the way it was told a long time ago, and then I am going to modernize it and generalize it. The belief is that stories are supposed to be static. My approach is that they are not static. You change them and bring them up to date (234).

Ruby Slipperjack: Who am I to come and tell you something? It is there for you to see. The only thing I can do is to remind you of the person you once were, to wake you up and make you remember what it felt like to be...the child is so honest, so open. The child has memory of creation, because the child has not yet lost that connection. That is one thing that we all have in com-

mon. We all have that one thread that connects us to creation (209).

Anne Acco: I always appreciate it when somebody tells me a story. That is the other thing—appreciation. You have to pay homage to the storyteller (134).

Lenore Keeshig-Tobias: This is probably the only contribution I can make to my society: to be a storyteller, and to defend the authentic Native voice, to speak up for the Trickster. To tell people: 'Keep your hands off! If you want to hear stories then you come to me. And you go to my grandmother or grandfather.' The Trickster, the Teacher is a paradox: we learn through the Teacher's mistakes as well as through the Teacher's virtues (84).

Maria Campbell: The tiger lily doesn't try to tell the dandelion story (58).

Beth Cuthand: There are a number of us who are going back to the old stories and using them, or they are using us, as a means of telling a contemporary story (40).

Marie Annharte Baker is a poet, struggling to be playwright and performance artist/storyteller. Her poetry book, Being on the Moon *will be followed by* Blueberry Canoe. *Moonprint Publishers is to publish her chapbook,* Coyote Colombus Cafe, *which is to be performed at the National Storytelling Festival in Toronto, 1994. She recently won a CBC Fringe Radio Drama contest for* Some of My Best Friends Are. *She studies women's literature and playwriting at the University of Winnipeg. She has finally become a Nokomis and is trying to settle down.*

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SANDY SHREVE

Great Aunts

for my great-niece, Ashley Lancaster

Generations fell between us
sheers concealing inner living rooms
All I have are glances back
days of cotton prints and thick-heeled shoes
Alba, Led and Laura
old women who thumped canes
visiting the fringes of my childhood
indulgence dressed in the discipline
of three great aunts

I try to make them up
rouge and lipstick memories
like a little girl in front of mother's mirror
At first my eager hand grabs for heroics
paints exaggerations over ordinary stories
vague eccentricities and kindness
deep and fleeting as the lilac scent of spring
This trinity of spinsters
lived the quiet lives of millions
each noted only on a weathered headstone
left for me their brooches and their books
and their independence

Alba, Led and Laura
now I use their names as passwords
scramble letters for a code to pass along
the anagram is *alure* and a *ballad*:
A passage into song
A choir of women singing

Sandy Shreve 's poetry appears earlier in this issue.