

Border-Crossings

Connecting with the Colonized Mother in Maria Campbell's Life-Writings

BY MAUREEN SLATTERY

Campbell inherited the Metis sense of being a non-people and her work aims to re-people her heritage. Her autobiographies mediate her culture through telling her female folk history.

L'auteure examine le récit autobiographique de Maria Campbell, une femme Métis de la Saskatchewan qui discute de son engagement féministe, ses croyances spirituelles, elle tente de combler le fossé qui la sépare de sa mère grâce à des échanges inter-culturels, reprenant ainsi son pouvoir.

In *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture*, Sherry Ortner discusses the image of the "borderland" as a powerful presence in contemporary culture. Borderland thinking took shape within the theorizing of ethnic studies, and emphasized the construction of hybridized identities

for those who live within, yet are excluded from the dominant cultural order. In this article, I enter the borderland of a Metis woman. Maria Campbell, who was born in 1940 in northwestern Saskatchewan, and is currently writer-in-residence in Native Studies at the University of Saskatchewan. Her first autobiography, *Half-Breed*, was published in 1973.¹ Campbell takes us across an historical border from the old world of Metis women with little political choice into their new world of increased choice. Published in 1989, Campbell's second life-writing depicts a cultural and psychological borderland. *The Book of Jessica: A Theatrical Transformation* is co-authored with a white actress, Linda Griffiths, who had also portrayed Campbell as "Jessica" in Campbell's 1982 autobiographical play of the same name. It traces Campbell's transformation while producing her play with Griffiths in the early '80s. The book also includes the play itself. In Campbell's words, the play is "about being a woman and the struggle of trying to understand what that meant" (16). An empowering cross-cultural exchange began between the two feminists. Griffiths says she became half a Half-Breed, while Campbell relates how she crossed a border into her "unexplored white side," reconnecting with the white legacy of her dead mother (1989, 59).

Metis borderlands

In a borderlands perspective the terrain of border

crossings is never neutral and never level. It is never neutral because borderlands are spaces that some people call "home" and define those entering it as Other (Ortner). Discrimination has been unique for the Metis because most are or have been involved in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds, yet many have never felt fully accepted by either world (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples; see also Sawchuk; Lavallée). They have been Other to both natives and whites. Campbell aims to deconstruct this spoiled identity (see Bordewich; Goffmann). The Metis proudly call themselves the "in-between" people, associated with their "historical middle position" between Indians and whites. Metis identity and culture fare best when Metis retain this mediator role (Thomas). Campbell inherited the Metis sense of being a non-people and her work aims to re-people her heritage. Campbell's autobiographies mediate her culture through telling her female folk history (see Barth). The explored side of this history is her great-grandmother Cheechum's native legacy. Cheechum refused to become a Christian, wore moccasins and tight leggings covered with bright porcupine quill designs, was completely self-sufficient, and supported the Metis rights movement. The unexplored side of Campbell's female history is her mother's whitened legacy. She was a Metis who had been educated in white convents, was a devoted Catholic, loved books and music, taught her daughter Shakespeare, and feared the prejudice which came to her family when her husband worked in the Metis movement (Campbell 1973).

The space of border crossings is never level. It is almost always a space of unequal power. The people who occupy this space have their own histories which produce these inequalities. The least excusable form of Metis inequality stemmed from discriminatory governmental policies. The government of Canada refused to accept that Metis matters fell within its jurisdiction under section 91 (24) of the Constitution Act (1867). As a result, the Metis were deprived of land rights, post-secondary educational assistance, and benefits ranging from health care to economic development and cultural support programs available to other Aboriginal people. During the 1870s and '80s when the two Metis Red River rebellions were crushed, the Metis coalesced as a people (see Thomas). In *Half-Breed*, Campbell traces her Metis ancestry from Gabriel Dumont, a great leader from that time. Dumont's niece was Cheechum who never accepted the defeat of the Metis and prophesized that the day of Metis justice would come.

When Campbell trapped and rode horses, she recalls her mother warning her that “men like dainty ladies” not girls who run wild and dress like boys.

Feminist theorizing invites us to see that encounters on borderlands are always gendered, both in practice and in the imagination. Kathleen Sands demonstrates how Aboriginal women have been fantasized in colonial stereotypes alternately as the squaw or the princess; as “primitive sexual object or dusky virgin ‘royalty’” (268). Sarah Carter argues that Aboriginal women were culturally constructed by many whites in the early settlement of Canada as “dissolute” to establish boundaries between Aboriginal

peoples and white settlers, to justify repressive measures against the Aboriginals, and to control their property inheritance when they married whites. While these images did not bear resemblance to the lives of the vast majority of Aboriginal women, they have proved to be “extraordinarily persistent” (Carter 44). Campbell writes of the conflict which Metis women of her generation face between their white education and their native heritage. On the one hand, she says that “the missionaries had impressed upon us the feeling that women were a source of evil” (1973, 144).

Campbell sees how her mother was held back by this vision. Combined with “the ancient Indian recognition of the power of women,” Campbell describes how this white belief leads to the kind of conflict which is “still holding back the progress of our people today” (1973, 144). She refers to her long process of “decolonization” (1995, 2). While *Half-Breed* decolonizes her native female legacy, *The Book of Jessica* decolonizes her white female heritage.

Campbell’s daughter-mother relationship lies like a shadow across *Half-Breed*. She describes her mother as “quiet and gentle” (1973, 150). When Campbell trapped and rode horses, she recalls her mother warning her that “men like dainty ladies” not girls who run wild and dress like boys (1973, 84). Her mother disapproved of Native Indian female traditions to which Maria was so attracted. As a girl, Maria wore waist-length hair oiled with bear grease, but her mother wanted to cut her hair short in the white way. Campbell describes her mother as a fervent Catholic who believed that the priest was picked by God and always deserved a meal of meat even when her family was practically starving. Her mother wanted her father to quit the Metis rights movement during the 1940s because people were calling him a Communist and turning against their family. As a girl, Campbell felt she had to take sides. Cheechum loved Native Indian women’s customs, their trapping and hunting, Native Indian medicine, and she supported the political activism of Maria’s father saying he could give his children no greater gift. Campbell recalls

that by the time she was ten, she shared Cheechum’s views about Christians. Cheechum taught her not to worry about the Devil because “inside each thing a spirit lived ... regardless of whether it was only a leaf or a blade of grass ...” (Campbell 1973, 72).

As Ortner shows, whatever else borderlands politics are, they are always also about “culture.” Culture in the borderlands is both the grounds of negotiation and its object: it sets the terms of the encounters, but it is also what is at stake. Metis culture is more than a mixed Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal ancestry (see Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples). It includes a living spirituality, songs, dances, fiddle music, decorative clothing, oral traditions, as well as ancient customs. Campbell’s life-stories transmit and negotiate her culture, particularly the spirituality whose keepers are women elders. In *The Book of Jessica*, Campbell tells how sacred Metis elders empowered her by reconciling her with her mother. While Indians never let Campbell forget that she was “part white,” only in producing *Jessica* did she actively renegotiate its maternal meaning. Ortner argues that what is needed is a sense of culture without radical Otherness. A perception of radical Otherness is a possible although not necessary outcome of intercultural encounters, and Campbell struggles with a sense of radical Otherness through the cultural contrast between her mother and Cheechum. In *Half-Breed*, she depicts the difficulties of being perceived as radically Other, and her identification with a collective self in continuity with Cheechum. This is a “kinship I.”² In *The Book of Jessica* Campbell recalls how she cathartically confronted the white in herself as radically Other and reconciled her sense of radical difference with her mother.

Campbell’s work crosses an historical border of traditional women born before mid-century who discovered freedom during the 1960s. Unlike many middle-class white women, Campbell was not set free into a world of possibility by the women’s movement (see Josselson). Through extreme poverty at eleven when her mother died, and after Cheechum eventually left their home due to old age, she fell out of Metis ways into a white underworld of prostitution and drugs. Later, the liberation movements offered her a road to recovery. People come to changing discourses of self-definition not only with their own prior and ongoing cultural histories, but with their own prior and ongoing politics. The women’s movement shared liberation issues with other movements of the 1960s and 1970s: concerns for the freedom and equality of colonized peoples. The Native rights and Metis movements protested against the colonization of Aboriginal culture, land, and minds by occupying whites (see Evans; Rhea). During this time, the Metis moved “towards greater political control of their own communities,” reclaiming their heritage from public notoriety or neglect (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 233). By the late 1960s, the Metis had the benefit of experienced political activists, while organizations such as the Indian-Metis Friendship Centres worked to heighten Metis cultural awareness (see

Purich). Campbell tells in *Half-Breed*, how she came to Alberta, worked with Metis and Native leaders, joined A.A. and opened a half-way house for Aboriginal women on the street. Her political struggle provides the frustration and the motivation for her life and works (see Bataille and Sands).

The source of colonization is the loss of memory

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One of Campbell's themes is that the root of Metis colonization is the loss of memory. In a later work, Campbell recounts how an old Metis man compared white power to longevity of their memory:

Sometimes me I tink dats dah reason why we have such a hard time us peoples. Our roots dey hets broken so many times. Hees hard to be strong you know when you don got far to look back for help ... dah whitemans he can look back thousands of years cause him he write everything down. (Campbell 1995, 88)

Campbell's life-writings are no nostalgia trip. When she told a friend that she was writing her autobiography, her friend reportedly said: "Maria, make it a happy book. It couldn't have been so bad" (Campbell 1973, 13). Campbell entertains "dangerous memories" (see Welch 13–22) which bring back white injustice and Metis pain. In contrast to the gendered traditions of the white individualist male autobiography, Campbell recounts the loss and reconstruction of a stigmatized collective identity.³ Rather than a celebration of power, her story celebrates the process of empowerment through constant struggle against collective stigmas. There is no final story.

Campbell recalls that as a child in white schools she was made to feel inferior and ashamed. If she spoke Cree at school she was pushed into a small closet with no windows or light and locked in for what seemed like hours. She was sent away to a Catholic school and made to feel ashamed of her native spirituality. She remembers that even treaty Indians scorned and laughed at her family as Metis: "they had land and security, we had nothing" (Campbell 1973, 26). She writes that one of her teachers read from St. Matthew, Chapter 5, verses 3 to 12: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for they shall inherit the Kingdom of Heaven." Her class discussed this, using Native peoples as examples. This infuriated Campbell, who told the teacher: "Big deal, so us poor Halfbreeds and Indians are to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven, but not till we're dead. Keep it!" (1973, 56). Maria had to

kneel in the corner holding the Bible for the rest of the afternoon.

In *Half-Breed*, Campbell revises her collective identity around the prophetic role of her great-grandmother. Cheechum teaches her that the greatest evil in the world is self-hatred:

the white man saw that that was a more powerful weapon than anything else with which to beat the Halfbreeds, and he used it and still does today. They try to make you hate your people. (1973, 47)

For Campbell, self-hatred is the inner source of colonization. This is the internalized enemy she strives to overcome. Campbell's personal story parallels the collective Metis history. Like the Metis, Campbell was born illegitimately on the trap-lines. Like the Metis, Campbell grew up close to the land, the road, nature, and tradition. Like Metis origins, Campbell knew a brief period of "happiness and beauty as a child" close to the "old people" (1973, 7). Like the Metis, she lost it all under white corruption. Like contemporary Metis, she returns to her roots. Her theme of brief paradise, loss, and recovery is the archetypal story of her people. She is the new Cheechum. When she visits Cheechum at 104, Campbell tells her: "there's nobody I'd rather be like than you" (1973, 149).

Connecting with her colonized mother

While *Half-Breed* depicts Campbell separating from her mother and attaching herself to Cheechum, *The Book of Jessica* describes how she came to a more complete relationship with her mother while producing the play with Griffiths in 1982. *The Book* depicts a different kind of border where she cathartically confronted her experience of her mother's colonization as her own. This occurred in dialectic with Griffiths. Her goal is no longer separation from her mother but autonomy *and* attachment. In *The Book*, Campbell says that the play is about

a woman struggling with two cultures, and how she got them balanced, because when she leaned into one, a part of her got lost, so she [had] to lean into the other one and try to understand and find a balance. Spirits were in both those cultures. (1989, 17)

In *Half-Breed*, she leaned into her native world. Here she tells how she leaned into her mother's white culture while producing the play.

During the 1982 production of *Jessica*, the entry of Metis grandmother spirits into the lives of Metis Campbell and white Griffiths led them to find the relativity of their connection to their roots, and the relativity of those roots in the light of their exchange. Each woman retained her private experiences and her distinct cultural history in relating to collective myths of the grandmothers. Griffiths recounts in *The Book of Jessica*:

eighteen years separated us, as well as race, class, culture, social work, political work, and, in its own category, what Maria called "the street"—almost every boundary I knew, and lots I didn't know." (Campbell 1989, 21)

The play dramatized Campbell's entry into the Metis spiritual world, a theme which had been excised from *Half-Breed* by a white editor. In the play, Campbell's autobiographical character, "Jessica," incorporated Metis animal spirits, like Wolverine, the "rou garous" of oral tradition (Campbell 1995, 28–50). Campbell says that she wrote these spirits into *Jessica* because she sees mixed people as the link between whites and Natives to bring about a spiritual renaissance in the world. She believes in spirits as she believes in rain, family, and friends. With *Jessica* she admits she does something "blasphemous" because many of her people believe that such things should not be performed for the public (Campbell 1989, 49). With the production, Campbell moved to the controversial edge of her "kinship" camp.⁴

Campbell recalls her intense response when she saw white Griffiths play Metis Campbell. Hearing her words mocking welfare Indians in the mouth of a white shocked her. She recalls to Griffiths:

You were playing back my own self-hatred.... And I'd think about how much I hated myself, and I'd get angry, and then would come the questions.... "How did this happen?" It was those white people that came along and did this to us, made us hate ourselves. Then I'd look up and there you'd be, one of them. (Campbell 1989, 31)

Campbell thought she had worked out her self-hatred in *Half-Breed*. This time, the problem could not be resolved through Cheechum, but with a white. Campbell fought this spiritual sisterhood. During the play-production, Campbell discovered that she was also struggling with a hidden part of herself: her mother.

Campbell had had to "rip down the foundation of Christianity" to find the Grandmother at the heart of her native culture. But when Griffiths portrayed "Jessica," Campbell says that she

always looked like the Virgin Mary, passive, a blank look in her eyes, smiling, she never stopped smiling, smiled so much I just wanted to smack her and smack her so she'd stop that smiling. (1989, 20–21)

Campbell saw Griffiths as the Other, radically different. Campbell explains that her own mother had frozen herself into a stance of passive suffering before a statue of a Virgin Mary which looked just like Griffiths. She could barely stand her self-recognition as the white-worshipping mother from whom she had emotionally cut off. Cheechum and her mother, Native Grandmothers and the white Virgin,

came to dwell in the same borderland. Within this context, the dramatic ritual of producing *Jessica* brought Campbell to a discharge of emotion in which she met with her own prejudices toward her mother.

In seeing "Jessica" acted out by Griffiths, Campbell confronted the complexity of her own self. On the Native side of her psychic border, she "was all for revolution, all for change" (1989, 32), yet on the white side of this border, she realized with a shock that "she was the most conservative Catholic woman I had ever met in my life" (1989, 38). Campbell could not imagine how she had ever done the things she had done because this character "Jessica" was so uptight. Before she worked on *Jessica*, Campbell had scorned Catholics and she thought she was free. During the production, Campbell found herself on dangerous ground. She was confused, shook up. She says: "I ended up with fears and uncertainties I thought I had already dealt with. I had to deal with 'her' and she wasn't easy" (1989, 32). The sacred grandmother myth returned Campbell to the need for her own transformation rather than changing Griffiths. When she was tempted to tell Griffiths to get out, go find her own spirits and her own power, Campbell saw "a circle of grandmothers and the circle of grandmothers had no colour" (1989, 17). The play dealt directly with the spiritual power in a culture that by nature belonged to everyone, yet she found herself battling this belief. She did not want to own the mother under her skin. Harriet Lerner observes in *The Mother Dance* that until a woman can begin to identify her mother's strengths and competence, she cannot believe in her own (180).

While Campbell the Metis struggled with her maternal heritage of the white Virgin, Griffiths the white Catholic struggled with the electricity of the Native Wolverine. Learning the spiritual traditions of the Metis to act the part of "Jessica" changed Griffiths. She relates that she participated in a Metis healing ritual and something extraordinary happened to her, something which she brought into the play especially when she incorporated Wolverine, hissing and growling her strength. In the dramatic plot of the play, when "Jessica" can successfully integrate Wolverine, she becomes whole and can stand in the circle of grandmothers to call out her name. Through their distinct experiences of Metis spirits, through their common commitments as women, Campbell and Griffiths found a difficult communion. During the production of the play, a "Virgin Mary" was becoming an active part of the grandmothers' circle. Campbell could only live her native belief of accepting Griffiths in the circle if she opened her borders to her mother. Before the play opening, Campbell and Griffiths chanted an invocation to the grandmothers: "I am afraid as I stand here.... I ask you to help me to have a strong heart.... To tell this story honestly and with dignity ..." (Campbell 1989, 53).

Campbell seemed to have been caught in what can be called the drama triangle. Janae and Barry Weinhold call the drama triangle a set of dysfunctional transactions

between three positions on the triangle: the "Persecutor," the "Rescuer," and the "Victim." Silencing white culture, Campbell blamed it for her self-hatred as a Metis. Entrenching herself in the native camp, Campbell's "Rescuer" had been Cheechum and the grandmothers. As she struggled to accept Griffiths, these spirits urged Campbell to a more objective and empathetic understanding of her mother. Campbell came to understand the powerful cultural forces which had diminished the spirit of Griffiths, her mother, and herself. While producing the play, it became evident to Campbell that Griffiths was finding an interior "blankness" of repression that many white women connect with. Griffiths told her that she could be a medium for other characters but that her own self did not seem important. Campbell, the "colonized," turned out to be more connected to her roots than Griffiths, the "colonizer" (Steed M3). During the play-production, Campbell discovered herself trying to redeem Griffiths from the same cultural forces which had paralyzed her mother.

The grandmothers refused to let Campbell close her borders into radically separate red and white lands. The process of producing the play entertained a borderline dance between her White Virgin mother and Native Grandmothers. The dance was intra-psychic and interrelational. Instead of getting stuck in her anger at Griffiths, Campbell moved camp. She found she needed to decolonize her mother, that side which she had been afraid to acknowledge. This freed her. Carolyn Heilbrun has written that the expression of struggle is characteristic of post-1970 women's life-writings. In *The Book of Jessica* Campbell and Griffiths share this era. Despite 12 years and different cultures between them, they both aim to construct themselves as women. Neither feel obliged to follow a cultural plot as a fixed prototype. Campbell writes: "History calls them a defeated people, but the Metis do not feel defeated, and that is what is important.... They know who they are ... the people who own themselves" (1983, 46). Metis spirits became part of her empowering treaty with her mother. Healing her maternal split, Campbell can own herself as a Metis on an open border between Native and white cultures.

A cultural historian, Maureen Slattery is a graduate of Columbia University and the University of Montreal. She has published two books and 18 articles. She teaches graduate courses in Methodology and Marginality, and Women's Life-Histories: Discourses of the Self. She is Vice-Dean of the new Faculty of Pastoral, Mission, and Communication Studies at St. Paul University, an affiliate of the University of Ottawa.

¹Campbell calls herself a Half-Breed, a term used for Metis with Scottish or Irish heritage as well as French and Native Indian ancestry.

²Arnold Krupat observes that the "I" of the indigenous American is a "collective construct" (121). Marshall Sahlins refers to "the kinship I" (13).

³On the role of collective and relational identities in women's autobiographies as distinguished from the patriarchal individualistic tradition, see Friedman.

⁴Other mixed-blood female authors of Campbell's generation who publically struggle with their mixed-blood identity emphasize the Indian component in that identity yet write to a white audience to bridge the gap between their white and aboriginal traditions are: the mestizo Indian, Paula Gunn Allen (b. 1939) and the mixed-blood Cherokee Indian, Diane Glancy (b. 1941). A Lakota woman who struggles as a lesbian to bridge the gap between Native and non-Native communities is Beverly Little Thunder.

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MARILÓ NÚÑEZ

Mother ...

There are times when I take for granted
the power of your love.

You sit on the sidelines
always ready with the glass of water,
the moist towel on my forehead and
cool hand on my arm.

I'm running without looking back,
without seeing your beautiful face
always right there beside mine.

Sometimes, I cry for you
I am a selfish child
again wanting mama to be there
at night beside me,
her cushiony warmth
cradling my fears with
determination.

Sometimes, I scream
I am angry at the world,
too many battles to fight
too many victories to win.
I want to give up.

Your eyes sparkle with
vehement anger back.
No! you will not fall.
Run until you can't run
anymore. Then I will run
for you, never say never again!

Sometimes, I smile
you are my mother,
nothing can make me want
to run faster and with greater skill.
I will finish at the finish line number one
because you are my mother.

Mariló Núñez was born in Chile, but grew up in Toronto. She has the wealth of two beautiful countries to inspire her writing as well as her acting.