

Making Paper Talk: Writing Indigenous Oral Life Narratives

Michael Jacklin

Attempts to record the oral are always limited but translators of Native literatures and many contemporary tribal authors as well work to retain the oral presence. They attempt to write in a way that encourages re-speaking: the imagined rediscovery of inflection, gesture, rhythm and so on. In this attempt, how words are written becomes vitally important. (Blaeser 55–56)

How spoken words are written is a core concern in collaborative Indigenous life writing. Especially important, as Kimberly Blaeser notes in the citation above, are the efforts to present Indigenous narratives in a visual form that will facilitate their re-speaking. Mindful of this goal, my argument will concentrate on the particular dilemma of presenting Indigenous narratives in paragraph form or formatting them in an arrangement resembling poetic lines. While aware that this is but one of many considerations in the process of transforming speech to writing, I argue that in a number of Indigenous life-writing publications it is a crucial decision, and one with significant repercussions that warrant this focused approach.¹

In her contribution to the collection *Talking on the Page: Editing Aboriginal Oral Texts* (1999), Blaeser argues that “the relationship between the oral tradition and the written word, between story telling and story writing and reading, informs all contemporary encounters with Native literatures,” while at the same time she recognizes “that the oral can never be fully expressed in the written” (55–56). Her comments agree with those of scholars from a range of fields, including oral historians Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer who, in the same collection, detail how “at each stage of the recording and documentation of oral literature, something gets lost as the dynamics move

from the performance to the printed page” (6). If the oral text is recorded on video, the relationship between speaker and listener may remain unclear; if on audiotape, gestures, expressions and body language are lost. In transcription, aural qualities of voice such as pace, volume, and changes in delivery are difficult to convey. Added to these is the concern that the print version may impose a sense of fixity and permanence that threatens to override the dynamic and fluid nature of oral performance (6–7).

Yet the attempt to convey an approximation of the oral experience on the page is a goal that underlies most if not all collaborative Indigenous life writing. This is clear in the textual formatting of collections such as those by Freda Ahenakew which maintain a strict adherence to transcribing the spoken words of her narrating partners exactly as uttered, with pauses, repetitions and false starts all retained in both Cree and in the English translation. It is also discernible in an entirely different text such as Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson’s *Stolen Life: Journey of a Cree Woman* (1989), with Wiebe’s emphasis on the oral quality of Johnson’s narrative, even when that narrative is taken from her written journals. “She has a natural gift of language,” Wiebe writes. Her thinking is “often circular, revolving around a given subject, and her writing almost oral” (xi), an impression that Johnson reinforces: “I tell little stories so you can see, live, feel what I am trying to explain to you. Like I’m figuring it out, out loud” (11).

Decisions regarding the translation of spoken voice to printed page often seem to be the prerogative of the editor, the collaborator responsible for the written outcome of the narrative exchange, but the process is seldom completely attributable to one participant. While a final decision must be made at some point, in many cases that decision is reached only after negotiation between all parties, which may well extend to include family members of the Indigenous narrator on the one hand, and colleagues and professional consultants to the editor on the other. Recalling Jerome McGann’s argument that textual production issues through just such “complex networks of communicative exchanges” (62), the tendency of assigning editorial choices exclusively to the writing partner may be tempered with the recognition, as in other aspects of collabora-

tive writing, that shared and overlapping involvement and investment by all concerned contribute to the various forms in which Indigenous life narratives reach the page.

I. Writing Oral Narrative in *Life Lived Like a Story*

Amongst collaboratively produced Indigenous life writing texts in Canada, *Life Lived Like a Story* (1990) is a well-regarded example of culturally sensitive transcription and editing. Part of the book's success can be attributed to its balance between poetic representation and paragraph format for the narratives of Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned, the three Yukon elders whose life stories non-Indigenous academic Julie Cruikshank has edited and compiled.

The elders are women of Athapaskan and Tlingit ancestry from the southern Yukon born just before or just after the Klondike gold rush at the end of the nineteenth century. Their involvement with Cruikshank and their sharing of personal and traditional narratives with her began in the 1970s when Cruikshank was engaged in recording life histories of Yukon Native women. Cruikshank's aim was to document social change that had resulted from disruptive events such as the gold rush or the mid-twentieth-century building of the Alaska Highway. Although this may imply, misleadingly, that the collaboration was instigated by the non-Indigenous researcher to meet her purposes, the actual initiation of their collaboration was more of a cooperative process. Cruikshank explains in her introduction to the book that she had been living and working in the Yukon for some time when, in 1974, she was approached to help write the life histories of several elders. She explains: "Several women independently suggested that I might make a substantive contribution by working with their mothers or grandmothers recording life histories in a form that could be distributed to family members" (13). In Cruikshank's view, this was a proposal from which everyone involved could benefit:

I could learn something about the changing roles of women, the older women with whom I was working could produce their own booklets of family history in their own names, and

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younger family members would be able to put that material to whatever use they saw fit. (13)

Over a number of years these anticipated benefits did indeed materialize: booklets were published in the names of each of the elders and their stories were disseminated locally through newspapers and radio broadcasts. Moreover, the Yukon Native Languages Project published other booklets using narratives by Angela Sidney and Annie Ned while Cruikshank published academic analysis of the collaborations.

In terms of collaborative Indigenous life writing and its formatting for the printed page, an important aspect of their work is the relationship between the personal stories and traditional narratives told by each of the three elders. Although Cruikshank saw the project as mutually beneficial with overlapping goals for each participant, initially her particular interest in assisting the elders produce their life histories was based on the assumption that in telling their lives the women would also contribute to the documentation of social and cultural change in the Yukon over the past century. In her work with Angela Sidney, for example, Cruikshank writes that when they began, “I had specific questions for her ... mostly about how her life differed from her mother’s and how events like the gold rush and the construction of the Alaska Highway had affected women’s lives” (24). Sidney complied with brief answers to personal or historical matters but was much more interested in providing traditional narratives for her life history booklet. The situation was similar with Kitty Smith, who also “patiently” answered questions about her childhood, “then shifted the focus of our visits to record a seemingly endless number of lengthy traditional stories” (164). Likewise, Annie Ned provided “very little information we would recognize as personal” (270), delivering instead formal speeches and songs. As Cruikshank comments in her introduction to Ned’s section of the book:

Most of my questions about her youth are met with formal oratory, with speeches she offers as a demonstration of *how* she actually learned as a child. Whenever possible, in fact, she shifts the ground from discussion of her own life to a speech, using this form to discuss “what kids should know.” (274)

The disparity between Cruikshank's view of life history and that of the three elders prompted her to reassess her approach. Over time she came to recognize that the elders were providing her with material that each believed to be "an authoritative account of a life" (270), and that personal narrative could only be appreciated and properly understood when accompanied by the "cultural scaffolding" of traditional stories, songs and oratory (165). Cruikshank writes, for example, that once Angela Sidney was confident that the foundation of traditional stories had been established in their work together, "more and more of our discussions began turning to her own experience" (26). When the life stories of these three elders were to be compiled into a single book, then, each life story consisted of traditional narrative and oratory alternating with personal and historical narratives and the decision was made to differentiate the two types of narrative by formatting the first in poetic line and the second in prose paragraphs.

This decision to use broken line or visually poetic text for traditional narrative is justified in terms of the work of Hymes and Tedlock. It is also warranted in terms of reader response. "Native women who know the storytellers and have read various versions of the text say that they find it easier to 'hear' the speaker's voice when reading this form," Cruikshank writes (18). She states, however, that this layout "may be better suited to poetry and to traditional narrative than to discussions of [personal] experience." Therefore, she explains, "I have retained something closer to paragraphs for sections Westerners normally associate with autobiographical accounts and have distinguished the [traditional] explanatory stories by using phrases and breath groups" (18). Here, Cruikshank does not expand on why a poetic line arrangement following the pauses of the original oral performance may be "better suited" to traditional narrative rather than personal accounts. If the decision is partially a response to Indigenous readers finding the "speaker's voice" more accessible in poetic line, then retaining paragraph form for personal stories may seem odd, especially if this format distances those same readers in terms of their experience of written text as voice. It could be argued that the decision re-produces, in a way, the original discrepancy between the researcher's and the narrators' assumptions regarding life

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history, with prose form signalling familiarity and conformity to the expectations of non-Indigenous readers (visually and conceptually), and poetic lines marking the space of otherness. The point here is not that Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers may perceive textual layout differently but rather that a high degree of familiarity with the conventions of Western writing establishes a set of expectations regarding the appearance of certain kinds of texts. The Dauenhauers raise this issue regarding reader reception of their own work in translating the oral narratives of Tlingit elders to the page. They write:

the most puzzling thing about the page [layout] for some white or highly acculturated Tlingit readers was the short line format. Poetry has short lines and a ragged right margin, and prose is rectangular with a flush right margin; therefore these can't be stories but have to be poems. This seemingly trivial issue presented insurmountable barriers for some readers. (24)

There are, then, seemingly crossed consequences stemming from the decision to use broken line formatting for oral narrative. For some readers the result is familiarity, the enhanced ability to hear the speaker's voice in the words upon the page. For others, the outcome is strangeness, an exotic appearance signalling poetry rather than prose, which in conventional discourse is marked by paragraph layout.

In my interview with her, Cruikshank was able to shed more light on this decision to differentiate traditional and personal narrative through textual format.

MJ: So, my first question is, did this [formatting] happen in transcription?

JC: It didn't happen when I transcribed. It happened after the first set of booklets had been published and then sitting down with grandchildren and saying, "What do you think works here?" And the general response was, "I can hear my Grandmother's voice when you do it in these broken lines, and I can't hear it when you do it in paragraph form."

MJ: So you offered a version in broken lines?

JC: Yes, just to try it. We'd sit down. I mean this was with different people at different times. But there was just a general consensus that, "when you read this, yes, I can hear her voice," whereas—and you'll see this with the first booklets we did for schools—it's paragraphs and they don't speak that way. So, it's an imperfect system but I'm happy enough with that and the response from family members certainly was always good.

MJ: My question is that if family members felt they could hear the voice more clearly in that poetic form, with the breaks at pauses following breath, then why not use that for both personal and traditional narratives?

JC: Right. That's a very good question. In *Life Lived Like a Story*, it was an editorial decision with the editor. When I originally wrote this as a thesis, I transcribed all the stories—both personal and 'traditional'—in a one-volume appendix, with all the text in these broken lines. But when I revised it as a book manuscript, the editor's response was that it was too long. She argued that if I was trying to show that the ancient narratives actually frame stories of personal experience, it made sense to use different styles of writing in each case. Initially I objected, but she insisted that shortening was necessary to make it a manageable book length. Eventually I became convinced that this was not such a bad way of organizing the stories. Narrators actually tell them differently too. When they are telling the older stories, it is more of a formal performance. With the life stories, we'd often be sitting in the car and talking, or traveling and sharing a room somewhere and we would just be talking. So there's a way in which the style of presentation did differ. (Jacklin "Interview" n.pag)

Cruikshank's comments demonstrate the complexity of communicative exchanges that contribute to the decision-making process regarding formatting spoken words on the page. From her explanation four points emerge most clearly. First, the decision to format in poetic line was reached in consultation with family after paragraph form had been tried

in the initial publication of booklets and found wanting.² Significantly, the decision to use poetic line was applied, at this stage, to *all* of the narratives given by the elders. In Cruikshank's PhD, from which *Life Lived Like a Story* was adapted, poetic line is used consistently for the women's narratives, both personal and traditional. Here, the application is based on the reception of the text by readers who are familiar with the narratives, and are also familiar with the narrators. Second, the subsequent decision to differentiate the traditional from the personal was suggested primarily for reasons relating to the publisher's concerns. A volume in which all of the women's narratives appeared in poetic line would be excessively long and by implication too costly to publish or market successfully. The suggested compromise of using prose paragraph for personal narratives was, therefore, a decision driven by production and market considerations. Third, a rationale for this decision was proposed based upon the differentiated arrangement of the narratives, with traditional stories framing and explaining personal ones for each of the three elders, a conceptual arrangement that Cruikshank had already established for the material and which had developed from her gradual realisation that this was the elders' intention and one that reflects the elders' understanding of life story. Therefore, the editorial recommendation to use poetic and prose formats for traditional and personal stories respectively conveyed in strong visual terms that framing function. The final point concerns a differentiation in the style of performance or oral delivery. According to Cruikshank, the manner of oral delivery varies depending upon whether the narrative is personal and rather informal, or traditional and therefore more formal in style. This contributes, no doubt, to Cruikshank's assertion that poetic or broken line format is "better suited" to the more formally delivered traditional narratives.

Yet the arguments seem to pull against each other. Using poetic line for all the narratives is justifiable if the objective is to produce a text accessible to and usable by local readers. If the poetic line facilitates the ability to "hear" the speakers' voices, then something of that voice would by implication be less accessible in paragraph form. Using paragraphs to indicate personal narrative is also open to question in relation to the elders' own insistence upon the interrelationship of personal

and traditional narratives and their implicit claim that traditional narratives remain relevant to the dilemmas of contemporary Yukon life. Differentiating between formats implies a formal demarcation while the elders' point is that the traditional and the personal interpenetrate; they are not separate. This interrelationship of personal and traditional story would also extend to the style of delivery or performance in some sections that have been formatted in paragraphs in the sense that personal narrative may also be delivered in a manner that is quite formal. This is evident in the way each narrator's section begins with a *Shagóon* or family history. Cruikshank explains in the book that the elders made it clear that "the proper way to talk about the past is to begin with clan history" (347), implying a formality that would certainly be evident in the oral performance. Ned, for example, begins

I'm going to put it down who we are. This is our *Shagóon*—our history. Lots of people in those days, they told their story all the time. This story comes from old people, not just from one person—from my grandpa, Hutshi Chief; from Laberge Chief; from Dalton Post Chief. Well, they told the story of how first this Yukon came to be.

You don't put it yourself, one story. You don't put it yourself and then tell a little more. You put what they tell you, older people. You've got to tell it right. Not *you* are telling it: it's the person who told you that's telling that story. (278)

Ned emphasises here the "right" way of telling stories, including the formality of beginning with lineage narrative. Similarly, Sidney includes in her *Shagóon* a story of why the *Deisheetaan* nation owns Beaver: "[J]ust like the British have a flag, we have Beaver, and we have our songs—they belong to us. This is the story about it" (37). Both of these sections appear in paragraph form because they are personal history, yet they also demonstrate the interpenetration of traditional and personal narrative and the formality that may be shared by both, suggesting that it may not always be easy, nor appropriate, to demarcate the two. The visual delineation achieved through alternating sections of prose with others set in poetic line seems aimed, in fact, at a wider national or interna-

tional readership for whom traditional Indigenous narrative appearing in poetic line is not unusual, but for whom life writing in terms of personal narrative continues to mean prose.

Cruikshank says that the outcome may not be perfect, but the process has provided a publication that both she and the narrators' family members are satisfied with and one that is being put to a variety of uses, from local story-telling festivals to its dissemination via university courses across Canada. It is also, and importantly, an outcome that has gained critical praise and one that may well influence future publications of Indigenous life writing.³

II. Writing Voice in *Stories of the Road Allowance People*

Stories of the Road Allowance People (1995) moves this article to the limits of the term life writing. Integral to the preceding discussion is the relationship between personal narrative and cultural knowledge and their respective representation upon the page. Cruikshank in her work with Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned realized that their focus on traditional stories, place names and language was an effort to provide her, listener and scribe, with the cultural understanding necessary to appreciate how their personal lives had been shaped and guided by the narratives of their culture. They meant to teach her, and their readers, that those traditional narratives and oratory remain the bedrock upon which Indigenous experience in the Yukon may continue to stand. Cruikshank, in dialogue with readers and editorial staff, chose to represent that cultural foundation to Indigenous life writing through poetic line. Maria Campbell, who over a period of nearly twenty years collected and translated the texts that make up *Stories of the Road Allowance People*, applies poetic line throughout her collection of Metis cultural narratives because, arranged on the page in lines, these stories can be re-spoken with ease and thereby continue to work in the lives of her readers.⁴ Like the Yukon elders, Campbell insists that narratives of culture are the basis of identity, and provide the conceptual tools with which a life story gains meaning.

Stories of the Road Allowance People aims toward that identity work through which lives are inscribed. It is not the life story of any one individual. It is, rather, a collection of narratives given to Campbell by

the old men of her community over a period of eighteen years. The stories were told in Michif, which Campbell then translated into a style of English that attempts to convey the oral quality of the narratives and the voices of the storytellers. Campbell chose to set the stories on the page in broken line resembling poetic layout, as in the previous texts discussed. For example, the story “Joseph’s Justice” begins:

You know dah big fight at Batoche?
Dah one where we fight dah Anglais?
Well dat one.
Dis story he happen den
an dah name of dah man is Joseph.
He was a Halfbreed guy
An he don take part in dat war. (105)

The reference to Batoche draws attention to the centrality of place as well as language in these stories. For Metis people everywhere, Batoche is home, Campbell says in an interview with Doris Hillis. It was at Batoche that the Metis led by Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont faced the armed forces of the Canadian government in the last battle of the uprising known as the North-West Rebellion. When Campbell explains to Hillis what Batoche means today, she says, “everybody has to have heroes, everybody has to have a place, a sense of history, a place to retire to, and we have no place else like that in Canada, not for my people. *Batoche is that place for us*” (50). Likewise, Campbell has been concerned throughout her writing career with the issue that for Metis readers the narratives available through Canadian publishing have not provided a place or a voice with which they could identify. The narratives in *Stories of the Road Allowance People* give to their readers that sense of place, and voice, and history. In doing so, they create a “cultural scaffolding” similar to that which Cruikshank came to understand as necessary for the understanding of the personal narratives of Yukon elders and it is for this reason that I place this text next to *Life Lived Like a Story*. These, too, are the stories of elders, stories given to help make sense of life.⁵

Jennifer Sabbioni writes from an Australian context that Indigenous life writing texts operate as “energisers of cultures” (72). Reversing the

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terms, I would like to suggest in the case of *Stories of the Road Allowance People* that stories of culture are offered as energizers of personal narrative and of narrative exchange. To make this point I need to provide a lengthy extract from my interview with Maria Campbell regarding her process of writing the stories and the interrelationship between place, language, voice and history:

MJ: Can we begin by talking about how *Stories of the Road Allowance People* began? What gave you the impetus to bring these stories into a published form?

MC: I didn't think of publishing them in a book form until about 1987–88. But the first story that I worked on was "La Beau Sha Shoo." I was living in Edmonton at the time and I was asked to speak at a conference on language. And I didn't know how to talk about language because nobody at that time even knew about Michif as being the language of Metis people. I thought about all kinds of things and I decided I would translate my father's story. It was my father that gave me that particular story. Also it was a way to honour him because all of his life he had talked to us about keeping our language, making sure we didn't lose that. And as a writer I found that more and more when I tried to write, I was having difficulty writing in English. During that time I was going through a whole period looking at why I was having difficulty writing when I could articulate very well when I was speaking but when I went to write it was like I couldn't speak English. So I decided that I would start off with writing "La Beau Sha Shoo." I wrote it in, quote, "good English" first and it didn't work. The story just didn't work but I published it like that. I published it in a little local magazine that came out and writers and poets and stuff put little articles in there and I published it there. But what I did was I just made notes for the conference and when I was speaking I'd use that as an example of how doing linguistics—which is how Indian languages are taught, Cree and those languages—wasn't enough because those things were soulless. They didn't have any guts. They

didn't have any life in them. They just became like the alphabet. It was stories that were important to retaining language and also retaining culture. And so I told the story. I spoke it the first time and I spoke back and forth between Michif and English, like I would do one then I would translate it. But I still didn't think about publishing until this little magazine asked me to do something and I thought, "I'm going to try this. I'm going to translate this story and work on it." But I just couldn't do it. This was quite amazing. Here I was having problems writing in English and then when I actually started work on a translation of a story, I was writing it in proper English but I was losing my story. I felt like I was stuck somewhere in the middle and I couldn't put life in it the way I could when I was speaking. And so I went through two or three years with that story, over and over again, trying to understand what was wrong. Why could I write this way when I was writing creative pieces but when I tried translating, why couldn't I do it so that it would be alive. Then my father came to visit me one day. To make a long story short, I was also studying with an old man and when I explained to him my problem, he said, "Well, your problem is that this language that you're using doesn't have a mother. You have to find the mother for it before you can use it. If you can find the mother, then you can be the boss of it. But right now," he said, "it's the boss over you, so it does to you whatever it wants." He said, "You won't be able to write in Cree. You won't be able to write in English until you learn to do that." And I didn't understand what that meant. So it was a whole journey. I always think of *Road Allowance People* as a journey, not just a journey into language but a journey into a way of life and culture.

MJ: From that first story, it took two or three years, and then achieving that story gave you the confidence to work on others?

MC: Well no. What ended up happening is I put it away because I wrote it and published it but it was never right. I knew

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that. And I read it back to my father and he never said nothing to me. I told him, "I don't know what's wrong." But he never told me what was wrong. Then by this time I was working with several other old men. These were old men I'd grown up with. I knew them and just got caught up in stories. And I don't even know what happened or how it happened but it ended up that was what I wanted to do. It was kind of like I guess a creative writer would say that all of sudden you get an inspiration. Well I'd meet these old people and they'd inspire me so I became their student. And I started to work on translating the stories. I called it translation at that point but the stories piled up. They'd give me tapes and I'd listen to them and then translate them but there was something that was always missing from the story. The old men were missing from the story. But I had lots of stories. Then one day my father came to visit and he was talking to my kids who were over having breakfast with us and my Dad always cooked breakfast for us. That was his thing when he was visiting. And he always told stories, as soon as he was in the house. And he was frying some meat, cutting up some moose meat. And as he was cutting it he was talking, and for some reason I all of sudden heard him—not the story, but his voice. And as soon as that happened it was like "Bang." I got it. And I left the breakfast table and went into my room and started working on the original story that I'd worked on, "La Beau Sha Shoo" and it was just a matter of . . . I just talked it and I used my Dad's voice. And it was amazing. It was like something happened. I mean I could smell those old people in the room. And then it was like I was possessed. I redid all of the translations. And then I went back to the old people because nobody would ever tell me these were wrong. I'd read it back to them and say, "What do you think?" "Well, it's not bad my girl," and that would be it. But when I finished that one I sat down with my Dad that night and I said, "Listen, I think I got it." And he just laughed. He didn't tell me it was good or anything. He just laughed. But I knew that I had it. And I still had to do lots of fine tuning.

MJ: His laughter was approval.

MC: Yeah, the laughter was approval. And then I started to work on the others and so I did another draft of all of them. And by this time I think I had about thirty-two, because I've got lots of stories. And I worked on those for several years but by that time I knew I was going to publish them.

...

MJ: What about the physical layout of the text—the choice of it appearing in verse form?

MC: I didn't do that on purpose. What I did ... when I write, once I know the story, what I do is go by breath. I don't pay attention to commas, punctuation or proper structures. I go by breathing and it's a very oral way that I work, so I just go. That's how I let it fall on the page.

...

MJ: Well, because you use the stories in class, how do students interact with the text the way it is laid out? Does it help them?

MC: Well, what we do is ... this is oral. It's not meant to be read. It's meant to be spoken and we speak it. I get them to speak it. Because I teach oral literature, anything that I give them, I tell them they have to read it to their family. It has to be read out loud and they have to practice it a bit before we go into discussion with it. And we talk about that. We don't talk about the stuff on the page, other than I tell them the process it went through. But the important thing is, "What did it do for your family? Who did you read it to? What happened?" Practice by yourself first and this is the rhythm for it. And it's not a hard rhythm to follow once you get comfortable with the dahs and dis and those things. Because of the way it flows on the page, you should be able to pick those up pretty easy.

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MJ: Could I ask how *The Stories of the Road Allowance People* is committed to place?

MC: The rhythm of the language, the dialect, some of the sayings, the way people speak. I think in there is where it's the strongest. Probably all kinds of other ways, but for me that's what made my commitment. When I got that, when I finally got it, when I heard my father's voice for the first time and I realized that that was me and I had worked so hard not to talk like that because we're taught in school to speak proper English. And listening to my teachers tell me, "What language are you speaking? That's not French." Listening to French people laugh at us because we were speaking bad French. Listening to other people whose bits of language that we had. It was all of those things just in a matter of seconds that all came home for me and made me realize place. And what that did for me was transport me. I can still see my Dad standing there, cutting this moose meat ... and me hearing him, for the first time. And it was like listening to music. It was like an orchestra. I could hear my grandmother's voice. I could hear all these people in the evening laughing and talking. Like I was there. It took me right to the middle of that. And it was like I sunk into it. And I thought, "I'm home." Although I didn't think that. But I was. It was like, bang, here I am. And for me, that entrenched my commitment and responsibility. I'll never be able to get out of that. Nobody will be able to move me out of that again. They might help me to look at other ways of doing things, and better ways of doing things. But nobody will ever make me want to leave that place again. So I believe that's in the book. Somehow I think that's in there. And I believe that because I see people, other Metis people and how that book affects them.

MJ: In what way?

MC: I was in northern Alberta about five years ago and I was working in a community that's going through land claims negotiations. I went into a house. My car broke down and I went

into a house and *Road Allowance People* was lying on the table. They didn't know who I was and I asked them if they'd come and help me. And I said, "Who's reading the book?" And the woman said, "It's a really good book. I've been reading it to my Dad." She said, "Every night my family just sits around and we just kill ourselves laughing and then we end up with Grandpa tells us all these stories." I never did tell them who I was because I know what it's like sometimes. But I came away from there just ... that said it all for me. Without telling them, they were doing what.... And then a girlfriend of mine whose father had cancer and was dying, she told me that her Dad was so depressed. The medication was making him really depressed and he was on the verge of death. So she took the stories in and read them to him and she said he started to laugh and then he started to remember things in the stories and he just felt really good. And his death was really good. So for me those are ... I hear stories like that and I think that the book has done what it was supposed to do, no matter how I feel like I'd like to rework it again. I can't do that. Once a gift is made you, you leave it alone. And that to me is giving back. I'm giving, but I'm getting back. When I hear something like that it gives me energy to continue the work that I do. I'm now working with old women finally, which is what I started out to do, and ended up with all those old men. Those old men taught me to respect the role of men and the place of men in our history and what happened to men as a result of colonialism. So there were many reasons why I ended up where I was: my politics, I was really into feminism. It was a journey that really helped me to balance and heal, as much as I hate those words because they are so overused, but it did all those things. It took me home. It helped me find my way home. (Jacklin "Interview with Maria Campbell" n.pag)

"The book has done what it was supposed to do," Campbell says. What becomes clear from the above explanation of the book's production and its circulation is that *Stories of the Road Allowance People* is a

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work designed to promote language and culture among local readers who hear in the narratives their own voices and the voices of their elders. “Without telling them, they were doing what ...” Campbell begins to say, meaning that her readers’ account of these narratives being read aloud to family and in turn prompting the telling of more stories is exactly the outcome she had envisaged. The book is designed as a catalyst, an energizer, a way of writing spoken voice to encourage re-speaking, as Blaeser writes, and this re-speaking is essential to the process of exchange in which cultural and personal narratives interpenetrate.

Campbell’s comments relate directly to the central concerns of this article, primary of which is the issue of format, the arrangement of spoken word upon the page. Although Campbell seems to make light of this when she says, “we don’t talk about the stuff on the page,” she is, of course, indicating the obvious fact that the printed page is not where the story is contained, nor where it does its work. Yet the printed page and the format in which the stories appear are what facilitate their sharing for many Indigenous families today. And as her explanation of her efforts to convey the sense of voice upon the page demonstrates, the achievement of a correct form did not come easily. It was, in fact, a lengthy process of consultation with those whose stories she wished to write, including her father and the other old men with whom she studied.

At the core of Campbell’s struggle with these texts is translation. As Campbell explained in the interview, she began to write the stories of her father and her teachers and translate them into “good English,” but she realized that “it didn’t work” (n.pag). For Campbell, the Standard English of the colonizer could not serve to carry these stories, and especially could not help them return to the communities of their telling. As she says in the interview, language use and language denial was bound up with the processes of subordination endured by the Metis who, especially in school experiences, were made to believe that Michif was not a language at all.

The opening of the story “La Beau Sha Shoo” illustrates the relationship between language and identity formation working upon Michif speakers. The narrator recounts a story he heard from Ole Arcand, a Metis man who inspired those around him with his confidence, his talk

and his good looks. The narrative begins with mention of a “Red River sash” that Ole Arcand wore. This type of sash is a particular item of prestige, as the narrative reveals it was worn by the fighters at Batoche and taken from them along with their guns following their defeat:

I member he use to hold up dat sash
an tell me an Frank
dats my younger brudder
dat dis was our culture.
We don speak Anglais very good in dem days
just kind of Halfbreed mixture
so we never understan dat word culture

But boy!
He shore sounds good dat word real important.
Us Halfbreeds
we don have much to feel important about in dem days.
I guess dats why we use to love him so much dat ole man.
He make us feel like we got someting. (51–52)

The passage conveys the speaker’s ambivalence towards both English and Michif. It also emphasizes that for the speaker the *sound* of words is crucial. How words sound, rather than how they look, is the key to Campbell’s translation, as should be obvious from the passage. The ‘d’ substitution for the English ‘th’ and the dropping of syllables such as the ‘re’ from ‘remember’ work towards making the text easy to re-speak in qualities that will be familiar to those whose families include speakers of Michif and English. The point of her translations is to provide a text true to the sound, the voice of those who gave her their stories which, although they could have been told originally in Michif, or Cree, or even the style of English above, needed to be given a consistency of treatment that would read with familiarity. For readers, and especially for Metis readers, reproducing the sound of the narratives is easy, Campbell says, because of “the way it flows on the page” (n.pag).

The way in which *Stories of the Road Allowance People* generates in its reading the telling of other stories, both cultural and personal, returns this article to the comment cited at the opening, reminding us

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that although a written text is not and cannot be an oral performance, speech and writing continue to demonstrate their interrelatedness. The examples of collaborative Indigenous writing that I have focused on here offer solutions to the question of how or whether paper can be made to talk. The question of whether poetic line or prose paragraph best serves the purposes of writing voice in Indigenous life writing has no one answer. The writers discussed here who are responsible, through a process of consultation, for the transformation of voice to page seem to agree upon the facility of re-speaking made possible by the use of poetic line. Constraints may dictate otherwise, including production factors of length and cost, or assumptions regarding mainstream tolerance for a system of marking voice that spells out difference. On the other hand, that very marking of difference can be read as a conceptual frame or, equally, a marketing tool which ties Indigenous oral narrative to the traditional, the spiritual, and the exotic. And from yet a third perspective, the marking of difference through broken line format and, in some cases, through dual language presentation serves the political function of asserting the survival of Indigenous languages, narratives and cultures and their continuance through the coming generations. Yukon elder Annie Ned in *Life Lived Like a Story* says,

This story that I tell
Lots of people tell it.
Same story, same story,
That's the one I use,
What they get taught from Grandma, Grandpa,
That's right, too. (320)

Collaborative life writing, bringing spoken word to written page and setting Indigenous lives and narratives on the line, carries story forward, the “same story” transformed, yet working, and shaping lives in every new telling.

Notes

- 1 In 2002 I was able to travel across Canada to interview authors involved in collaborative writing, with the assistance of a travel grant from the Association of

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Canadian Studies in Australia and New Zealand, and a study grant from Deakin University, and I would like to acknowledge their support of my research. My reading and understanding of the publications discussed in this article owe much to the generosity of two of the writers I was fortunate enough to visit and consult with at that time. I wish to thank Julie Cruikshank and Maria Campbell for agreeing to speak with me about the complexities of the collaborative processes in their respective work.

- 2 Consultation was actually more multilateral, including not only family members but others involved in both producing and using such texts. At another point in the interview, Cruikshank explained:

JC: There were a number of younger people who were really working out the whole idea of public storytelling. There's one woman who's close to my age. Decades ago, she started reading from one of the booklets of stories we had compiled on the radio every morning. At first, when she was actually just reading from the booklet, it sounded very awkward—we talked about this and I know she agreed. It just did not sound the way an elderly storyteller would actually have told the story. It sounded like someone reading paragraphs.

MJ: That's a really valuable point.

JC: And then she started telling the stories rather than reading them, and the more she did this, the better she told them. Since then, she's done this all over the world.

MJ: Who is that?

JC: Louise Profeit-Leblanc. She probably one of the best storytellers I know. She's a great talent. And of course she's older now. She does this wonderfully. But we've talked a lot about her progress as a storyteller. She says that she would never read them aloud now. She tells them. And she tells them in the same way the women do, with those pauses, with the intonation, with the accent, with everything. And it's great to hear her. She's very, very, very good. So these decisions really evolved in conversation as much as in my computer.

She also mentioned talking to the Dauenhauers about this same issue:

JC: They're great. It's the same thing. If you read their books ... they're an inspiration for me. The Dauenhauers do wonderful work. We've talked a little bit about this. Nora was interested in this whole process. But you have to read the stories they record out loud to really appreciate them. Students can't read them in Tlingit, but they can read them in English translation and when they read them aloud they say it makes a great difference. If they try to read them silently to themselves in their heads, they can't follow them as well. And I'd like to think it's the same with these women's narratives. And it certainly is for their children and grandchildren.

- 3 It is worth noting briefly that an early publication *The Days of Augusta* also uses alternating prose and poetic layout, but without the strict consistency of *Life Lived Like a Story*. In the life story of Mary Augusta Tappage, both poetic and prose formats are used for personal, historical and traditional stories alike, the criteria seeming to be the length of the particular narrative. When I suggest that *Life Lived Like a Story* may become a model for future Indigenous life writing publications, I refer to its acknowledgement of the importance of traditional stories in Indigenous life writing while at the same time differentiating consistently between the traditional and the personal through format.
- 4 It should also be noted that the book is illustrated with paintings by Sherry Farrell Racette, and that the illustrations are integral, too, in the processes of narrative production which can result from these stories being re-spoken.
- 5 Briefly, I have chosen to include *Stories of the Road Allowance People* in an article on collaborative Indigenous life writing because the narratives offered in the book are, in an important sense, the life writing of a community: narratives that continue to give meaning to individual lives, as the discussion which follows—and particularly the interview with Maria Campbell—will demonstrate. The point I wish to make is that personal and traditional narratives in Indigenous life writing interpenetrate. In the case of *Stories of the Road Allowance People*, the interpenetration and interaction occur mostly outside of the published text, as Campbell explains. Other Indigenous life writing texts fall closer to the model of *Life Lived Like a Story*. An interesting comparison can be made with the Australian publication, *Wandjuk Marika: Life Story* (1995), in which traditional and personal are integrally related, and in which, as in *Life Lived Like a Story*, paragraph and poetic-line format alternate. Also interesting in this context is the Australian text *Nyibayarri: Kimberley Tracker* (1995), by Jack Bohemia and Bill McGregor (in which, apart from a single page, paragraph format is used throughout). In his introduction to that text, non-Indigenous researcher McGregor writes that his collaboration with Bohemia got off to a difficult start, until McGregor decided to play him a recording he had previously made of an Aboriginal narrative told by another speaker. Hearing this other story “unleashed a flood of stories” from Bohemia covering all aspects of his life from “stories about traditional times; myths, both secret/sacred and just-so stories; songs; personal reminiscences, particularly of his life as a stockman and tracker; stories about earlier Aboriginal-white contact this century and late last century; and so on” (viii). This sounds very similar to the storytelling Campbell describes as prompted amongst families hearing narratives read from *Stories of the Road Allowance People*.

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