Sāhitya
Journal of the Comparative Literature Association of India
Volume 13 (December 2025)

Lee Maracle and Academic Social Responsibility: Reimagining Knowledge, Resistance, and Community

DEBASHREE DATTARAY[1]

The convergence of Indigeneity and academic social responsibility necessitates a radical rethinking of institutional ethics and the purposes of higher education. Avril Bell focuses on the politics of Indigeneity which involves the possibility of facilitating a dialogue between Indigenous activism and the state, urging academia to move beyond symbolic inclusion toward material acts of decolonisation (*The Politics of Indigeneity* 2013). This

[1] Professor at the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

responsibility must locate Indigenous voices and lived experiences at the centre and be grounded in community engagement rather than reproducing colonial hierarchies (*Indigenous Reconciliation and Decolonisation* 2021). Raven Sinclair, Michael Anthony Hart, and Gord Bruyere have also emphasized that Indigenous frameworks of relationality and reciprocity and Indigenous protocols should be crucial for educational and social work practices, shifting the focus from one-way service provision to the building of mutual care and responsibility. (*Wícihitowin*2020). Extending this discourse, Dominic O'Sullivan links Indigeneity to global sustainability, and insists that academic institutions must recognize Indigenous knowledge as essential to achieving social and ecological justice (*Indigeneity, Culture and the UN Sustainable Development Goals* 2023). These scholars demonstrate that academic social responsibility, when informed by Indigenous epistemologies, becomes not merely an

ethical stance but a transformative practice rooted in relational accountability and community sovereignty.

The interface of Indigeneity and academic social responsibility, therefore, facilitates a reimagination and shifting of epistemic authority, transforming the ways in which knowledge is produced, shared, and sustained within the university space. Such a transformation helps to take cognizance of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) as legitimate and essential frameworks for learning and inquiry. Lee Maracle (1950–2021), a Sto:lo writer, activist, and intellectual, exemplifies the process of transformation through formidable scholarship and relentless advocacy which challenged colonial structures within academia. Through her prolific writing, dynamic teaching, and vociferous public engagement, Maracle foregrounded Indigenous perspectives and protocols, fostering relational accountability and ensuring that Indigenous communities are active participants in shaping knowledge and educational practices. In an academic landscape that often privileges Western

epistemologies, Maracle insisted on a fundamental rethinking of how knowledge is defined, produced, and validated. Her work was not merely about making space for Indigenous perspectives within academic institutions; it was increasingly a sustained critique of the foundational structures that exclude, silence, or appropriate Indigenous Knowledge Systems. As she notes in an interview, the written word is often privileged over oral traditions: "People don't view orality as equal to writing. And of course it is! Particularly in our cultures, because we are oral still." ("Lee Maracle Is an Oral Storyteller First and Foremost — That's Been Key to Her Storied Writing Career | CBC Books") Through her writing, mentorship, and activism, Maracle articulated a powerful vision of academic social responsibility (ASR). Her contributions serve as a resounding reminder to academic institutions of how they might reimagine their responsibilities and practices in ways that are genuinely reciprocal, decolonial, and socially accountable.

Memory and remembrance operate as vital instruments of empowerment within Indigenous communities, preserving histories that colonial systems have sought to erase. In her essay pointedly titled *"Just Get in Front of a Typewriter and Bleed,"* Maracle articulates this commitment to collective memory, writing:

> I want to be that kind of writer that will be read by generations of children to come…I want this world to never forget its short but cruel history of racial, national and sexual oppression. ("Just Get in Front of a Typewriter": 41)

Through her writing, public speaking, and editorial work, Maracle has not only articulated the lived experiences of Indigenous communities but has also nurtured and amplified the voices of other Indigenous authors, contributing profoundly to the ongoing evolution of Indigenous literary traditions and cultural self-determination.

Redefining Knowledge Systems:

One of Maracle's most profound interventions in the academic sphere was her insistence on redefining what counts as knowledge. She challenged the epistemological dominance of the Western academy, which often treats Indigenous knowledge systems as peripheral, anecdotal, or folkloric. Maracle argued that these systems are not only valid but vital, offering holistic understandings of the world rooted in lived experience, land-based wisdom, and communal memory. Her critique was not simply about inclusion; it was about shifting the foundations of academic legitimacy to make space for other ways of knowing.

In *I Am Woman* (1988), Maracle's groundbreaking blend of autobiography, political commentary, and cultural theory, she exposes how colonial structures have attempted to erase Indigenous women's knowledge and voices. She writes not from the

position of a passive subject within the academy, but as an intellectual insurgent—asserting that knowledge is not the sole property of universities or scholars, but is embedded in the land, in stories, in women's bodies, and in community. Academic social responsibility, for Maracle, must begin with listening—not in a superficial or symbolic sense, but with the intent to honour, integrate, and be transformed by Indigenous thought. Combining poetry in calligraphic fonts, inner thoughts in parenthesis, and a prosaic font as emerging from a typewriter for the narration, the text delineates various aspects of Maracle's life from different angles. She writes: "On all these scraps are written the people of my passion." (Maracle, *I am Woman*: 1988) The text is divided into chapters dealing with various aspects of Indigenousstruggles, particularly, women's voices, in combating the evil of racism.

For Maracle, finding language powerful enough to convey the pain of colonization has been a lifelong struggle. Throughout her body of work, one of the most

enduring themes is the strength that arises from self-knowledge and cultural connection. In her novel *Daughters Are Forever*, this theme is embodied through Marilyn, the protagonist, who receives guidance and wisdom from Westwind—a figure who represents the natural voice and the ancestral knowledge she has inherited from her Indigenous roots:

> Westwind follows Marilyn. He whispers old story as he tugs and nags at her coattails. He is always beside her. He pleads with her to listen. But Marilyn has no memories of reassurance, no cultivation of thought processes that would guide her to hear Westwind…she does not hear the Westwind- borne voices of her ancestors whispering in her ear. (*Daughters are Forever:*38-39)

Maracle sees "reclaiming ourselves" as central for Indigenous communities, linking cultural revival to addressing violence and environmental harm. She

highlights that Indigenous insights into the interconnectedness of gender, environment, and race offer a crucial contribution to contemporary thought.

> The denial of Native womanhood is the reduction of the whole people to a sub-human level. Animals beget animals. The dictates of patriarchy demand that beneath Native man, comes the female Native. The dictates of racism are thus that Native men are beneath white women and Native females are not fit to be referred to as women. (*I am Woman*: 20)

Storytelling as Pedagogy:

Central to Maracle's vision was the idea that storytelling is not simply an artistic endeavour but has pedagogical ramifications. For her, stories were repositories of law, history, cosmology, and ethics and the teachings of elders. She believed that storytelling engages the whole being—intellectual, emotional, spiritual—and fosters a

mode of learning rooted in relationships rather than abstraction. Maracle inspired an entire generation of writers to move in the direction of deeply embedded IKS. However, she also believed in giving space to the writers. She charts out intergenerational solidarities between authors:

> I help people out — and then you have to let them have the floor. It would be ridiculous not to. You have to praise them and encourage other people to read them. It's a groundswell that's going on with these young writers; I've dreamed of it happening. Before, it was just me and Maria Campbell flapping in the wind all by ourselves. Then Basil H. Johnston came to the scene at the time. One by one, we were just squeezing out books. But now, it's a groundswell. These kids are going to school and graduating, which didn't happen before. ("Lee Maracle Is an Oral Storyteller First and Foremost — That's

Been Key to Her Storied Writing Career | CBC Books")

The pedagogical approach and an insistence on intergenerational connections find a voice in one of Maracle's most profound novels, *Ravensong* (1993). Set in a 1950s Coast Salish community, the book unfolds tormented lives, a rich tapestry of oral knowledge, intergenerational teaching and cultural conflict through the eyes of Stacey, a young Indigenous woman caught between two worlds. Stacey's journey reveals how stories—those told around the kitchen table, those shared in ceremony, and those embedded in silence—carry immense pedagogical weight. The novel's structure itself challenges linear, Eurocentric narrative forms and embodies the rhythms and ruptures of Indigenous orality. *Ravensong* inspires readers to think of literature not as a passive object of study but as an active mode of teaching and remembering. *Ravensong* highlights one of the major influenza epidemics that struck an Indigenous community during what the author calls "the stupidest of

times." One of the devastating legacies of colonial rule has been the introduction and spread of epidemics within Indigenous populations, leading to the systematic eradication of communities and, in extreme cases, the annihilation of entire lineages. Amid such turmoil, the novel is dedicated "To all those women who fought the epidemic when this country was not concerned with our health" (*Ravensong*, 1993), honouring the courage and resilience of Indigenous women in the face of systemic neglect and crisis. The novel exposes the callousness of the 'white town,' whose indifference allowed Indigenous people to perish during the epidemic. At the same time, it highlights the power, resilience, and moral integrity traditionally bestowed upon women in Indigenous communities, showing how they navigated and resisted crises in the face of systemic neglect.

The epidemics faced by Indigenous communities find vivid expression in Maracle's *Ravensong*, where the number of lives lost mirrors the historical suffering of her own Squamish community from 1835 to 1954. From

a population of fifteen thousand, only three thousand remained on the North Shore. Maracle's great-grandmother, T'a'ah, endured the outlawing of her language, medicine, and capacity to care for her family. The gradual decline of women's authority, exacerbated by European contact and patriarchal structures, often contributed to internal community power losses.

Maracle's writing reflects both these losses and the remarkable resilience of Indigenous women. During the epidemics, T'a'ah was the sole survivor among seventeen siblings, singlehandedly sustaining the lineage of the Wolf Clan from 1835 to 1923. In Maracle's Indigenous philosophy, the wolf symbolizes immense responsibility to the community. As she explains in an interview with Margery Fee and Sneja Gunew: "We are Wolf, and we play a very specific role in our community. We're the backward and forward visionaries for people. We're the pack cutters. We're the ones that help people adjust to whatever change occurs." (209)

T'a'ah, who lived until Maracle was nine, profoundly shaped her upbringing. While Maracle's mother battled single parenting, racism, and sexism, T'a'ah's teachings nurtured her. The cradle board, central to this upbringing, allowed children to observe their world, understand power relations, and shape themselves within it. Maracle's grandmothers wielded significant power, while her grandfathers, though less executive, guided the next generation through stories, ensuring the continuity of the path toward the "good life." Building on this foundation of intergenerational guidance and resilience, throughout her remarkable life, Maracle became a powerful spokesperson for both the generations that preceded her and those yet to come. WWU English professor Dr. Theresa Warburton states,

> It's hard to put into words the impact that Lee Maracle has had on not only the world of Indigenous literatures, but the world of literature and cultural critique in general… She wrote adamantly and with a passion that speaks to the

> import she saw in her work; a passion that is traceable from her first text to her last. ("Mourning for Lee Maracle | Center for Canadian-American Studies | Western Washington University")

Maracle passed away on 11 November 2021, but she left a legacy in storytelling which emphasised on the decolonisation of the classroom – not just in terms of content but also in structure. For Lee Maracle, Academic Social Responsibility would require the inclusion of oral traditions and narrative practices as legitimate forms of knowledge transmission. One of Maracle's most significant contributions lies in the interconnectedness she forges between oratory, storytelling, and literary expression. For Maracle, as she explains in *Oratory: Coming to Theory*, writing and oratory should never be treated as separate modes of communication. She asks pointedly, "What is the point of presenting the human condition in a language separate from the human experience: passion, emotion, and character…we all

strive to be orators. An orator is simply someone who has come to grips with the human condition, humanity's relationship to creation, and the need for a human direction that will guarantee the peaceful co-existence of human beings with all things under creation." (*Oratory: Coming to Theory*: 11)

For Maracle, oratory functions as a language that embodies "passion, emotion, and character," whether spoken aloud or captured in written form. In contrast, she critiques the language of Western academia—its theory, rationality, and literacy—for being stripped of these human dimensions: "Academicians waste a great deal of effort deleting character, plot and story from theoretical arguments. (*Oratory: Coming to Theory*: 9)

Maracle's insistence on orality as integral to Indigenous knowledge systems underscores the need for epistemological pluralism—an approach that values multiple ways of knowing (Battiste 2004) (Kuokkanen 2007). Such pluralism, she argues, must be reflected in

curriculum design, pedagogy, and assessment, enabling an authentic space for Indigenous scholarship and resurgence (ASR) within academic institutions. For Maracle, Indigenous Knowledge Systems operate according to distinct ontologies, methodologies and ethical frameworks and is grounded in relational accountability, land-based ethics and communal responsibility. Her fusion of oratory, narrative, memory and lived experience exemplifies a mode of knowledge production that resists compartmentalisation and disciplinary boundaries. In this sense, Maracle's work offers a blueprint for a university that is not just inclusive, but genuinely plural – one that recognises knowledge as relational, situated and accountable to the communities from which it emerges.

Intersectionality and Indigenous Feminism:

Maracle's work also exemplifies a deep commitment to Indigenous feminist thought—a commitment rooted not in theory alone, but in the lived experiences of Indigenous women navigating intersecting forms of oppression. Gender has been an organizing principle in much of Lee Maracle's works since her early days as an activist, orator and writer. Belonging to Métis and Salish ancestry, Maracle's oeuvre is usually set in the backdrop of overwhelming forces of colonialism, sexism, and racism. The subjugation of Indigenous women also invites introspection into the increasing distance between pedagogy and grassroots activism in the academia. In *I Am Woman*, Maracle writes: "Colonialism did not just dispossess us of land; it attempted to dispossess us of our humanity, our womanhood, our sense of ourselves as women." (13) Through this recognition of dispossession, Maracle insists that reclaiming Indigenous womanhood is inseparable from dismantling the colonial structures that continue to sustain academic and social hierarchies.

By focusing on various issues which govern the lives of the indigenous women in Canada, Maracle highlights the realities of political graft, domestic and state-governed violence and rank police brutality within a so-called liberal 'post-colonial' democracy. She critiques mainstream feminism, noting that "White feminism does not account for the colonial experience of Native women. Our oppression cannot be reduced to gender alone" ("Racism, Sexism, and Patriarchy" 34). She articulates the processes of a racist nationalism which has enabled the production of a gendered, racialized, and a dispossessed labouring class. Maracle's works invite interdisciplinary approaches which envision a different subjectivity.

Through her versatile creativity, Maracle maps alternate discourses of history, place, nation, gender, and indigeneity. Through her own life, Maracle demonstrated what an embodied, intersectional, and decolonial praxis looks like. Her insistence on accountability—toward Indigenous women, toward community, toward

history—calls on scholars to go beyond the study of oppression to the work of dismantling it. Academic institutions, she believed, have a responsibility not to observe injustice from a distance but to confront it, structurally and personally.

Mentorship and Community Accountability:

Maracle's commitment to academic social responsibility was perhaps most powerfully expressed through her mentorship. She believed that scholars must be in service to their communities, not above or outside them. Knowledge production, in her view, should never be extractive. Instead, it must be reciprocal, relational, and grounded in the specific needs and aspirations of Indigenous communities. Michelle Cyca writes: "Over her long career, Maracle mentored countless Indigenous writers, thinkers, and activists, always emphasizing the importance of staying rooted in community relevance. She viewed teaching as a form of care and responsibility, one that extended far beyond the classroom. Her

approach to mentorship was not transactional but transformative, guided by a belief in the collective nature of knowledge and the intergenerational duty to pass it on." (Cyca)

This ethic of reciprocity is present throughout her work. In *Ravensong*, Stacey's struggles and insights are shaped not only by her formal education but by the guidance of her elders, her mother, and the stories embedded in her cultural environment. The novel critiques the alienation produced by Western education systems while affirming the power of community-based knowledge. In *Ravensong*, Stacey is unable to reciprocate the affections of the white boy, Steve. Her rejection of him is not rooted in his whiteness, but in his inability to understand or share her Indigenous worldview. The gulf between their experiences and cultural identities is too vast to bridge, as Steve remains an outsider to the complexities of Stacey's community and its lived realities. His lack of an insider's perspective ultimately renders genuine connection impossible,

emphasizing the deep cultural divide that shapes relationships in a colonial context.

> until you have experienced the horror of an epidemic, a fire, drought and the absolute threat these things pose to the whole village's survival – and care about it, care desperately – you will be without a relevant context. (*Ravensong* 186)

While Stacey's community suffers devastating losses from the flu epidemic, Steve's father—a doctor—refuses to enter the village to provide medical aid. This act of neglect starkly exposes the racial and social barriers separating their worlds. Stacey is further troubled by the suicide of her classmate, Polly, who takes her own life after being condemned by her community for alleged promiscuity. Both events reveal the harsh moral and social judgments that shape and confine women's lives. Perhaps one of Stacey's most poignant realizations of the profound distinctions between her Indigenous community and the "white world" emerges in the

following lines: "Polly and Momma were the same women – good-hearted and passionate. In the white world, her Momma would have perished." (*Ravensong*: 106)

Stacey's realization of choice and acceptance marks her gradual movement toward a perspective in which she no longer views her community through the lens of colonial judgment—"their eyes." The emphasis on making choices and embracing others from an essentially democratic and inclusive standpoint is a recurring theme in both novels. The unconditional love extended to the protagonists—Stacey in *Ravensong* and Marianne in *Sundogs* —by their families and communities is both steadfast and transformative. This love acts as a protective and restorative force, enabling them to confront their internal conflicts and overcome the alienation of being "community illiterates" at the outset of their journeys. Ultimately, such love becomes a medium of healing and reconnection, reaffirming the strength and resilience of Indigenous kinship and

collective belonging. The community, which is Salish gains an increasing and a pervasive presence in the narratives of the two novels. However, in both texts, references to the **Salish community** appear only once. In *Sundogs*, Marianne offers her boyfriend and boss, Mark, a "Salish hint" during lunchtime: "It's lunch time," a good Salish hint. It allows him to say he is busy if he doesn't want me and it leaves a sliver of dignity for the unwanted" (*Sojourners and Sundogs*, 171).

Similarly, in *Ravensong*, the reference to Salish culture occurs when Stacey mistakes her younger brother Jim's behaviour—waiting to be served at the table—for male chauvinism. Over time, however, she comes to realize that Jim, like his father before him, has acquired the "unalterable Salish male practice of complimenting the cook" (*Ravensong*, 108).

As the sole explicit references to a Salish background, these moments underscore Maracle's subtlety: she evokes a cultural ethos so deeply embedded

in Salish identity that it does not require repeated affirmation. *Ravensong* and *Sundogs* together articulate an Indigenous worldview that operates as the text's foundational logic rather than its stated subject. Maracle insists that this worldview is integral to the narrative itself—and that it is the responsibility of the non-Indigenous reader to engage with and understand it. This insistence also shaped her broader praxis, as her literary and academic work were inseparable from her commitment to strengthening Indigenous intellectual sovereignty and nurturing the next generation of thinkers to carry forward the work of cultural resurgence and resistance.

Critique of Institutional Tokenism

> By the end of her life, she was recognized and embraced by the Canadian literary scene, but she had to fight to get there. In 1988, the Vancouver Writers Festival declined her request to launch her new book *I Am Woman: A Native Perspective*

> *on Sociology and Feminism* at the festival; she leapt on stage, seized a mic and read anyway. (Cyca)

This delightful anecdote reflects Maracle's journey as an unflinching critic of institutional tokenism. Maracle insists on meaningful change and systemic transformation and not just mere performative inclusion of Indigenous texts in the university syllabi. Maracle demanded that land acknowledgements be followed by land-based policies, that representation be matched by redistribution and that reconciliation necessitated material action and not symbolic gestures. (Winsa 2017). She insisted that social responsibility in academia cannot be mere rhetoric; it must be practice. In her 2018 essay *Scent of Burning Cedar*, she wrote, "I write because I cannot fall silent into a backwash of Canadiana after having produced 15,000 years of story. I write because I want our youth to know that we have value, we have knowledge, and we have a place in this world. The place we have was carved for us by our ancestors, who

loved us so much that they died that we might live." (*Scent of Burning Cedar | the Walrus*)

This commitment to integrity made Maracle a powerful and sometimes uncomfortable voice within academic spaces. She refused to be palatable. Her presence—on panels, in classrooms, in her writing—was a challenge to business as usual. She held institutions accountable not just for what they included, but for what they excluded, silenced, or distorted. For scholars, educators, and administrators, her legacy is a call to self-examination, transparency, and action.

Toward a Transformative Academic Ethic

In her 2017 collection *My Conversations with Canadians*, Lee Maracle wrote,

> I have seen many of you at book launches, panels, conferences, gatherings of all sorts, including protests against some injustice or other of which there are so many. Not a single Canadian has ever approached me to say: 'Why

> are there so many injustices committed against Indigenous people?' or 'Why is there not a strong movement of support for justice and sovereignty for Indigenous people's sovereignty movement in Canada?' Canadians love causes, but they love the causes that are far away — out of their backyard, so to speak. (Conversation 1: Meeting the Public)

In her uncomfortable questions and deep-rooted belief in Indigenous ways of knowing, in the power of storytelling, in intersectional resistance, in reciprocal mentorship and in unwavering commitment to community, Maracle provides a blueprint for how academic institutions might evolve toward justice, relationality and relevance. Her vision of academic social responsibility is not only based on the necessity to diversify knowledge base but to decolonize its values, structures, and purposes.

Maracle's relentless interventions must also be read in terms of Canada's broader social and political landscape. Policies of assimilation, containment and symbolic reconciliation have marked Canada's historical and ongoing management of Indigeneity. Although Canada positions itself as a liberal, postcolonial democracy, the fraught trajectory of the Indian Act, residential school system, contemporary debates around land acknowledgments, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Indigenous sovereignty offer a different tale of settler colonial structures. Through her lifetime and prolific work as an author, elder and storyteller, Maracle has repeated challenged such contradictions. Her work emphasises on the futility of reconciliation without land restitution, political autonomy and material justice. Her critique extends beyond literary or pedagogical concerns and confronts the nation state's ubiquitous reliance on education as a tool of epistemic regulation and cultural erasure. Academic institutions often built on Indigenous land and

with a history of excluding Indigenous people are not neutral spaces but deeply implicated in the reproduction of settler knowledge systems. Her work resonates strongly with Indigenous resistance movements such as *Idle No More*, which foreground the inseparability of land, law, knowledge and governance. Maracle's writings demand an acknowledgement of responsibility and a resistance to Canada's narrow definitions of expertise and evidence. Her writing demands that necessity of new, emergent paradigms in conceptualising Indigenous struggles. In her work, Indigenous knowledge is not merely cultural heritage, but constitutes a living, political and future oriented system of thought.

Maracle's writing—whether in *I Am Woman*, *Ravensong*, or her essays and speeches—challenges scholars to reimagine knowledge as communal rather than individual, as rooted in land and history rather than detached objectivity. She reminds us that Indigenous peoples have always theorized, always taught, always resisted. The role of academia is not to discover or

validate this knowledge but to create space for it to thrive on its own terms. In honouring Lee Maracle's legacy, we are reminded that academic social responsibility is not a concept to be theorised alone, but a practice to be lived—through the stories we tell, the voices we amplify, the communities we serve, and the systems we dare to change.

In "Scent of Burning Cedar", Maracle writes:

> Indigenous women writers spend their lives learning the culture of the others and figuring out how to transmit who we are to contribute to transforming the damaging culture that the newcomers brought. We struggle to do this by nurturing a new sensibility on this continent. I struggle with them. Embedded in our story is the new story that is waiting to be born. By writing, I reach a larger audience and can continue to reach greater and greater numbers. Writing has made me an agent of transformation on a grand scale in

> the world I inherit. I have a voice in many countries. (*Scent of Burning Cedar | the Walrus*)

In essence, Maracle's writings locate the agency of Indigeneity in redefining academic social responsibility as not merely public service or inclusion, but as an ethical and ontological commitment to relational accountability — to people, place, and the planet.

As institutions increasingly speak of equity, inclusion, and reconciliation, Maracle's work serves as both guide and mirror. It demands that we go beyond symbolic commitments and toward structural change. It calls for a pedagogy that is not only decolonial in content but liberatory in intention. And it reminds us that the university must not be a fortress of exclusion, but a site of transformation—a place where knowledge can be used in the service of justice, healing, and collective flourishing.

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