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BRAIDING THE NEW NATIVE AMERICAN NARRATIVE:  
MICHAEL DORRIS' *YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER*

In his introduction to *American Indian Policy in the Twentieth Century*, noted author and American Indian activist Vine Deloria, Jr., makes the following observation:

There is, admittedly, considerably more to contemporary Indian life than legal and political notions, and it may be that unforeseen cultural changes may create a new climate in which policy considerations can be seen differently. But history tells us that cultural changes of any magnitude follow structural and institutional changes in the manner in which Indians live. The profound cultural changes Indians have experienced in the past century were partially derived from changes in the role and status of tribal governments caused by actions of the United States. Cultural renewal always seems to rush into the vacuum created by new ways of doing things...  
(14)

One measure of the cultural changes Deloria mentions most certainly comes through an examination of contemporary native American literature, and especially how it is read by those outside of native American communities. From *Black Elk Speaks*, narrated by Black Elk to researcher John G. Neihardt in 1932, to the Pulitzer Prize

winning *House Made Of Dawn* by N. Scott Momaday in 1966, native Americans have found a growing audience for their prose works in twentieth century America. But as important as those works are, it is only recently that Native American fiction is reflecting a genuine change in, as Deloria puts it, the “manner in which Indians live” in the United States. And perhaps the most powerful example of that new direction in native American artistic expression is *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* by Michael Dorris. The power that drives this beautiful and moving novel is its insistence on destroying any possible simple understanding of the central characters through a beautifully realized narrative technique that forces the reader backward in time, continuously surprising and de-centering the reader by forcing a complex reevaluation of and change in attitude toward the three generations of female characters. This novel is a clear indication of one specific cultural change within the native American community itself—seeing and accepting the complexity of defining contemporary Indian life—and thus serves as a significant step in changing attitudes toward native Americans by the rest of us.

Without becoming mired in a “chicken and egg” debate—in other words, does the novel—as art—actually mirror changes in society—life—or is it vice versa?—we need simply accept the fact that a significant change in American social history is happening, and that a long awaited “cultural renewal” may now be rushing “into the vacuum created by the new ways of doing things” as the novel suggests. “This is not a story of communities or an attempt at a multifaceted understanding of the web of relationships inevitable in communities,” suggests an unsigned review of the novel in *Western American Literature*, “instead Dorris narrows his perspective to three generations of women in a single, agonizingly fragmented family” (55).

It is, of course, even more fitting then that this tightly focused novel of inter-twined family relationships should be produced by a real-life literary family, a literary marriage, as Michael Dorris (who is a member of the Modoc tribe) and his wife Louise Erdrich (who is part Ojibwa—Chippewa) collaborate extensively on all of the fiction they

produce. The recent novels *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, and *Tracks* carry only Erdrich's name, just as *Yellow Raft* carries only Dorris' name, yet as Erdrich has stated:

We're collaborators, but we're also individual writers. One person sits down and writes the drafts. I sit down and write it by myself or he does, but there's so much more that bears on the crucial moment of writing. You know it, you've talked the plot over, you've discussed the characters. You've really come to some kind of an understanding that you wouldn't have done alone. I really think neither of us would write what we do unless we were together. (qtd in Rouff 85)

Their collaboration is an open secret, even if, as I suspect, it has to this point weighed heavily on Erdrich's talents. But the artistic collaboration within their own family exists, and beautifully mirrors the subtle, yet wonderfully apt, central metaphor in *Yellow Raft*: that of braiding hair. This remarkably simple, and all but mundane act of a mother braiding her daughter's hair (or vice versa)—a personal collaboration in this delicate bit of personal grooming—serves as the novel's soul, and ultimately becomes its message. Thus, in the final paragraph of the novel, Father Hurlburt, the reservation priest, unknowingly establishes the theme that now illuminates everything that has come before in the novel:

"What are you doing?" Father Hurlburt asked.

As a man with cut hair, he did not identify the rhythm of three strands, the whispers of coming and going, of twisting and tying and blending, of catching and of letting go, of braiding. (372)

Father Hurlburt is an outsider, a "man with cut hair," who can not understand the ultimately sociological significance of hair braiding—of twisting and tying and blending and catching and letting go—in the lives of these three Indian women. Thus we see, and the end of the novel, the first issue that the novel confronts: how do non-native Americans begin to understand native Americans? And the second

issue is braided onto the first: how do native Americans begin to understand their own complexity? In working backward through time, in revealing and creating history in reverse, Dorris has already offered his answers.

Nancy Shoemaker, in a "Point of View" essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, provides a useful framework for us to explore the problem Dorris confronts. A Professor of History, Shoemaker relates her continually frustrating problems of trying to teach undergraduate courses in the history of the American West. American students, she points out, are in every case so tied to popular myths about the west in general—and native Americans specifically—that they are absolutely unwilling to hear, much less accept, the historical reality about the settlement of the west. One of the strongest issues she finds is that "most of the students come equipped with the classic stereotypes about Indians, what the historian Robert Berkhofer has called the "Noble Savage" and the "Brutal Savage" (A48). These romantic myths simply refuse to die. Even a so-called sensitive (or is it "politically correct?") film like "Dances With Wolves," Shoemaker points out, ultimately degenerates once again into these same two, simplistic views of native Americans: the Lakotas are the Noble Savages who mystically love the land and accept the converted white man into their midst; the Pawnees, on the other hand, remain the basically naked, apparently homeless, killing machines, or Brutal Savages. "Students still cling to the simplistic image of Indians as Noble Savages," she concludes, "and fail to understand that Indian people are just as complex and varied as white people" (A48). That statement, which should be painfully obvious, but never seems to be, is Dorris' central concern. This continuing problem of comfortable stereotypes, in both life and art, continues to diminish the complexity surrounding native American art, and is exactly what *Yellow Raft* sets out to explode.

An unfortunate lack thus far of serious critical attention to the novel forces our attention here to a brief look at several book reviews which have, like the previously mentioned review in *Western American Literature*, attempted to examine this theme. American reviewers, for

the most part, have generally understood what Dorris is about with the novel. European reviews, interestingly, have not. And the difference is significant.

*Publisher's Weekly*, for example, sees the fusion of two critical problems in the central character of Rayona, who

like Dorris ... is part Native American—in her case “not black, not Indian”—an outsider who offers a unique perspective on a fringe society. ... Rayona, Christine, and Aunt Ida are mothers and daughters bonded by blood, secrets, a destiny to chart their lives to please or spite their parents, and the strength to transcend grief and despair. ... Dorris vivifies ... the mercurialness and immortality of maternal love. (70)

The review correctly draws a focus in the novel on the complexity of the relationships between the three generations of women, compounded by the fact that they also represent three physically different definitions of the native American community. The mixed-race Rayona (her father is a Black American), unlike Father Hurlburt who can not help being an outsider, initially chooses to be an outsider, but is forced back into the community through the inescapable bonds of maternal braiding—through the inescapable strength of both pain and pleasure found in maternal love through time. The same holds true for her own mother, Christine. The mothers thus create both content and form of the story. “I tell my story the way I remember, the way I want,” (297) says Aunt Ida at the beginning of the final section of the novel. “I use the words that shaped my construction of events as they happened, the words that followed my thought, the words that gave me power. My recollections are not tied to white paper. They have the depth of time” (297). Relationships and identity, both personal and communal, arise from this “depth of time” in the novel. By working the women’s history backward, Dorris takes advantage of the inexhaustible “depth” in retelling the history from multiple perspectives. Aunt Ida’s recollections are not tied to “white paper.” Nor are they tied to “white history.” It is

the words themselves, her words—the oral tradition in native American art—that create the history and tell the story.

As a novelist, Michael Dorris embraces Aunt Ida's ability to tell his story—their stories—free of “white history.” But, of course, Dorris consciously ties his story to the “white paper.” “Nearly a decade ago ... Dorris wrote that ‘there is no such thing as ‘Native American literature,’ though it may yet, someday, come into being ... one of the necessary requisites being a reflection of a shared consciousness, an inherently identifiable world view” (qtd in *Western American Literature* 56). *A Yellow Raft* tells Aunt Ida's story, and Christine's story, and Rayona's story, on Dorris' paper as a reflection of this shared consciousness. A point well noted by yet another American review which concludes that:

Perhaps better than any other form of writing by contemporary Indian authors, the novel has begun to fulfil Dorris' requirement. To a remarkable degree, there is a shared consciousness amongst novels by Indian authors, a consciousness defined primarily by a quest for identity as Indians in contemporary American, that is central to nearly every work by an Indian author. (56)

One traditional aspect of this “shared consciousness” which also dominates *Yellow Raft*, as Anatole Broyard states in his review, “Eccentricity Was All They Could Afford,” for the *New York Times*, is that:

Their life is full of images that remind us that the Indian has been “trashed” in our history. When they travel, they pack their stuff in plastic garbage bags. During one of the spells when Christine “loses” her daughter, the way you lose a cat or dog you don't want, Rayona gets a job in a state park spearing litter. (7).

“This is the kind of thing that could scar me for life. I use a phrase I've heard on ‘All My Children,’” (15) states Rayona throughout her section of the novel whenever confronted by “trashed” elements of her existence. But the scaring is necessary, if not exactly what we would

expect it to be, for both Rayona and Dorris. Louise Erdrich perhaps explains this concept best in the opening stanza of her poem “Indian Boarding School: The Runaways” from her collection, *Jacklight*:

Home’s the place we head for in our sleep.  
Boxcars stumbling north in dreams  
don’t wait for us. We catch them on the run,  
The rails, old lacerations that we love,  
shoot parallel across the face and break  
just under Turtle Mountains. Riding scars  
you can’t get lost. Home is the place they cross. (11)

All of the scars in *Yellow Raft* ultimately point toward home, toward family, toward the undeniably complexity of human existence—any human existence. “Riding scars you can’t get lost.” “Baudelaire said ‘I’ve seen everything twice,’” adds Broyard, “and most of us see it more often than that—but it looks different each time” (7). By telling, and retelling, and yet again retelling each life story—in a sense doing narrative braiding—Dorris forces us to see the richness of meaning behind the scars of the lives of these women, rather than the scars themselves. We see three human beings rather than a native American community. In effect, then, Dorris uses recognizable stereotypes about native American culture as a way to destroy those stereotypes. “Riding scars you can’t get lost. Home is the place they cross.” Anything else simply leads into the void of cultural simplification which we have all come to expect concerning native Americans. Are we then faced with a “compassionate novel, or a lyrical one” asks Broyard. “These fears are mentioned,” he answers, “merely to be dismissed. The only thing that isn’t first-rate about *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* is its title, which misleads you about what kind of book it is” (7).

Unfortunately, the title may have done just that: misled European reviewers of the novel. London’s *Contemporary Review*, signals the basic problem. “*A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*,” the unsigned review states, “is long, slow, detailed and very American in style and concept. It may open up a new world to readers not familiar with life among

Indians in the Montana Indian Reservation” (216). The review is as stereotyped as the assumption it makes about the novel. Nothing in this novel is designed to “open a new world” for those readers who want to know all the sordid details—the scars—about life on a contemporary reservation. Expectations about the nature of native American fiction are apparently still held as firmly as the expectations about native American culture. And it gets worse. Peter Parker, writing for *The Listener*, (again from London) claims that “the extent which the Red Man has succumbed to the American Dream may be gauged from this novel” (28). Apparently, that notion about native Americans is held so strongly by Parker that he could easily make the assertion before even reading the novel. Or, perhaps, instead of reading it. In fact, the long cherished notion that all artistic expressions by native Americans, about native Americans would, as a matter of course, center upon the mistreatment of the Noble Savage by American society, seems alive and well throughout his review. Parker ultimately concludes that:

The plot has a certain perfunctory interest, but by far the most absorbing thing about this book is the black picture it paints of a dispossessed people and a despoiled culture. ... Unfortunately Dorris fails to exploit the central irony that his story is about inheritance, but with every page we see how the characters’ own heritage has been eroded. In spite of some fancy (rather than fine) writing, this is an ugly and depressing book, unredeemed by passion, in which the characters remain curiously unlikeable, evoking pity but no affection. (28)

It is hard to imagine a reading of the novel that could be more *incorrect* in every aspect. In one of the novel’s unforgettable moments, Christine joins a “video rental club,” whose membership lasts “for as long as you live” (19). Renting two videos (including the movie “Christine” about a car that murders people: “I am Christine. I am pure evil”), Christine rebuffs Rayona’s concern about taking them with them out of the state to Montana. “They won’t be stolen,” Christine explains, “They’ll be rented for life. It’s completely legal. You just have to read



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the contract the right way" (23). It is apparently still much too easy not to read *Yellow Raft* "the right way." Dorris does not write about a "disposed people" or their "despoiled culture." Yet that anticipated "truth" about native Americans apparently overshadows every part of the novel for many reviewers. Simplicity once again wins out over complexity; change is easier to resist than to accept. Pity here remains the accepted emotional response to any native American narrative. The most unfortunate characteristic of this "pre-packaged" response to the novel diminishes not only the text, but the people in and behind the novel. Nancy Shoemaker mentions that she has learned to refer

to everyone in the past as "they." Even my use of "they" risks defining Indians as "others" pushed into the background of the story. But when students say "we" and "they" these seemingly innocuous pronouns become laden with connotations of inclusion and exclusion. When students use "we," it is not clear who else is in the category with them. ... White students seem to conflate "we whites" with "we Americans" which pushes Indians even further out of the classroom, all the way out of America. I have tried to discuss the use of pronouns with students, but the lesson does not last for long. (A48)

As these British reviews suggest, the problem is sadly not limited to American students. Parker's review, with its "we" see how "they" live underpinning represents the extent to which this problem continues to be universal. *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* is the strongest attack to date on archaic notions of native Americans. It is sadly obvious that it is just the beginning of a long struggle to come.

Sharon O'Brien, in "Federal Indian Policies and the International Protection of Human Rights," raises a final point: the UNESCO Declaration of the Principles of International Cultural Cooperation, Article One, states that "in their rich variety and diversity, and in the reciprocal influences they exert on one another, all cultures form part of the common heritage belonging to all mankind" (Deloria 53). By

refusing to see that individual people together make a culture, American society has long

produced governmental policies and programs that divided communal tribal lands, forcibly placed children in boarding schools and forbade them to speak their Indian languages, and sought to destroy traditional Indian religions. ... Now, however, government policies no longer aim to eradicate Indian culture. Whether they are adequately designed to preserve and encourage the development of Indian culture remains an open question. (Deloria 53—4)

And this “open question” surely includes literature by and about native Americans. Just as Alice Walker seeks to destroy stereotypes of gender and identity concerning black American women in *The Color Purple*, Michael Dorris—and Louise Erdrich—through the complexity of their characters, separate yet ever braided together, seek to dismantle the myths about the noble or brutal savage in American life. Understanding the individual is the first step toward change for everyone, inside and outside native American culture. “Cultural changes,” as Deloria mentioned, “of any magnitude follow structural changes and institutional changes in the manner in which Indians live.” And thus write.

Early in the novel, Rayona, having run away from home, encounters the following sign in a state park: “Attention hikers! If lost, stay where you are. Don’t panic. You will be found.’ I take the advice. I stay, I don’t, and, before long, I am” (65—6). Perhaps with the publication of *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*, the same can finally be said for the native American author.

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