A CRITICAL APPROACH TO LOUISE ERDRICH'S *THE ANTELOPE WIFE* AND OTHER EMERGING NATIVE LITERATURE AS A STEP TOWARDS NATIVE WAYS OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

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ABSTRACT. The struggle out from *administering* education, since the 1972 policy *Indian Control of Indian Education*, has evolved into a more empowering and reflective concept. Native people are now defining education in their own voices and in their own terms. This essay examines the movement to design culturally relevant paradigms for education and extends the search for meaning through exploring the literature of Native people.

FAÇON CRITIQUE D'ABORDER L'OUVRAGE *ANTELOPE WIFE* DE LOUISE ERDRICH ET D'AUTRES LIVRES AUTOCHTONES ÉMERGENTS POUR COMPRENDRE LES MODES D'APPRENTISSAGE ET D'ENSEIGNEMENT DES AUTOCHTONES

RÉSUMÉ. La lutte pour se sortir de l'*administration* de l'éducation, depuis l'adoption en 1972 de la déclaration de principe *La maîtrise indienne de l'éducation indienne*, s'est développée en un concept plus réfléchi et plus habilitant. Les peuples autochtones définissent désormais l'éducation dans leurs propres termes et dans leur propre optique. Cet essai analyse le mouvement qui vise à concevoir des paradigmes culturellement pertinents pour l'éducation et élargit la quête d'une signification par l'étude de la littérature des peuples autochtones.

Background and educational context

In the summer of 1998, my colleagues and I decided to do what we, as experienced Native educators, lecture our students to do in order to deliver education to Indian students: reshape our course to make it culturally appropriate. Thirty Mohawk, Cayuga, and Oneida students enrolled in teacher pre-service at Brock University in Ontario eagerly committed to completing their final semester leading to teacher qualification. The program staff decided that the concluding months would be different from previous semesters. Our decision to revamp the course was influenced by a lingering concern that although the course was Native-content based, instructed by Native teachers, and delivered in a Native community, there

was little to distinguish it from other courses within the university. We gathered our courange and conceded that efforts to design a Native teacher training course remained, in fact, modelled on Western pedagogical practices of teaching and learning. Long discussions set our direction to keep the Native context for the course but, in addition, to experiment with ways to put Native *worldview* into education practice. In short, we attempted not only to define "Indian Education," a phrase that rolled so easily and deliciously off our tongues over the years, but to apply it in a way that would demonstrate to Native teachers what it was and how it worked.

Native education has evolved considerably since the 1972 policy paper *Indian Control of Indian Education* affirmed that Native people retain the responsibility to deliver culturally-based education to Native students. The landmark policy initiated the challenge Native educators still face today, to define education based on life principles embedded in our worldview while balancing theories of dominant Western models. However, like implementation of the *Indian Control of Indian Education* policy, the practice of affixing Western theories to Native education practices resulted simply in participation in, and administration of, programs developed elsewhere. Students today expect more. They are no longer satisfied with acquiring certification and diplomas from school systems, particularly universities. They expect that education should strengthen Native languages and cultures, moving away from acculturation and assimilation as final ends to revitalizing and renewing cultural identity and dignity (Barman & Battiste, 1995, p. xi). To accommodate the shift from restrictive to empowering goals, Native educators – no longer content with infusing cultural knowledge in Western practices – build contemporary structures, learning tools and theories within paradigms of Native thinking and organizing. According to Taiaiake Alfred, respected Hodinohso:ni philosopher, time has not diminished the power embedded in cultural principles and their complex logic to initiate transformative change. Renewed faith in the wisdom of our traditions moves Native people to develop structures that are neither derived from a Western model nor a reaction against it (Alfred, 1999, p. xviii).

In aid of my own learning as an educator and assistant to Native students and their teachers, my search for culturally respectful ways of assessing learning materials led me to a review of Native literary materials, writers and their art. What began as a book review for *The Antelope Wife* (1998), by Louise Erdrich, evolved to a search for a culturally relevant paradigm of literary analysis and its application in two parts. First, to determine literary theory that most befits analysis of literature by Native writers, I conducted a brief review of work on this topic by contemporary literary critics. Second, based on the theory best suited to dialogue about Native literature, I explored its application to Louise Erdrich's novel, *The Antelope Wife*. In this essay, I present the results of my search.

Native stories: From oral to written narrative

Through stories and storytelling, Native people teach a way of life. Although oral traditions have always existed, literary references dating back to the early 20th century indicate the absence of printed texts by Native writers in Canada and the United States. With few exceptions, Native novels and stories that pre-date 1960, such as James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, Frank Waters's *The Man Who Killed the Deer*, and Oliver LaFarge's *Laughing Boy*, were written by non-Indian writers (Allen, 1986, p. 77). By the mid 1960s Native authors began writing down their own stories and expressing their views on society. The publication in 1968 of Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (in the United States) and Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* in 1973 (in Canada) signalled the beginning to Native writers crafting their own stories, but at the same it time raised a perplexing issue. In *Approaches to Studying Native Literature*, Monture and Bowerbank (1995) raise the concern that while Native writers "struggle to be heard, they also struggle to reconcile their own values and traditions with those of the non-Native world, and while their writings are subjected to analysis by Eurocentric, academic modes of thought, the struggle is often lost; the message misinterpreted" (p.1).

> . . . Native writers and scholars recognize that, in order for a more complete understanding to take place, we must establish our own uniquely Native critical paradigm. While there is no definite, agreed upon model of Native literary theory as yet, or if ever, I envision that such an approach to Native literature may be likened to a "non" Western approach, involving much word play, a few inside jokes, self deprecation, humour, anger, sadness, and elation–all in equal amounts in order to bring about a balance of literary voice that speaks to and for all people. (Monture, 1996, p. 123)

It is clear that a central tenet in interpretation of Native stories is acknowledgement of the underlying complexity of identity, culture and history as it is particular to Native society. Paula Gunn Allen, a well-known US Native scholar and writer, states that "it remains for scholars of American Indian literature to look at this literature from the point of view of its people. Only from this vantage can we understand fully the richness, complexity, and true meaning of a people's life" (1986, p. 75). Native authors claiming their "voice" in a literary world recently freed from perceptions that "native people are voiceless" (LaRocque, 1991, p. 192), are determined that authentic Native voice be heard but that similar authenticity be applied to interpretation of their stories.

> It seems a host of non-Native professionals (publishers, editors, producers, directors) have assumed . . . they now know best how to present the Native image, the Native perspective, never dreaming, that it may be really their own perspective. (Keeshig-Tobias, 1991, p. 174)

Literary criticism: A Native paradigm

Native scholars refrain from the contention that literary criticism of Native literature is exclusive to Native writers but, because published criticism prior to 1987 is predominately written by non-Native academics, a large number of Native writers have been "forced, in a way to become their own literary critics as a means of expressing themselves and their art" (Monture & Bowerbank, 1995, p. 3). Numerous issues of literary criticism and interpretation of Native Literature stand while Native and non-Native academics strive to cross a bridge ". . . where we are looking at who we are . . . and begin to speak a real language that is understood and known between people as relationships" (Armstrong, 1990, p. 48). In Native culture, it is a strong belief that building relationships between individuals and cultures promotes acceptance which is the cornerstone to the growth of trust. The term "relationships" implies that only by honouring the true nature of people and cultures is trust promoted to create an environment where real communication and understanding takes place. Defined in this context, the search continues for a "uniquely Native critical paradigm" for use to critique and understand Native literature.

Accomplished Native American scholars, writing eloquently and insightfully, have set standards by which to define and measure etiquette in Native literary practices. Like no scholar before her, Paula Gunn Allen puts into words Native concepts of literature understood from the culture where they originate. In *The Sacred Hoop*, she establishes that "to a large extent ceremonial literature serves to redirect private emotion and integrate the energy generated by emotion within a cosmic framework" (1986, p. 55). Allen's conclusion that "American Indian thought is essentially mystical and psychic in nature" (p. 68) is reflected in serious scholarly treatises on American Indian literature. Evidence supports the eloquence of the Native literary voice, yet omitted in Allen's published work is *a definition for the context* of her criticism that may be particular to Native perspective. Instead, Allen uses established methods of literary criticism, translating and discussing her understanding of Native texts and reporting her observations. She inadvertently accepts this method of scholarship and simply proceeds to do it – much like myself and educational colleagues accept that teacher in-service programs delivered in a Native community by Native instructors is distinctly Native.

In *Narrative Chance*, Gerald Vizenor provides a brilliant explication concerning "four postmodern conditions in the critical responses to Native American Indian literatures" (1989, p. ix). He explores implications of false notions and representation of Native Americans in literature in "Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance." Vizenor, like Allen, is a most honoured Native American scholar and academic. From a Native perspective, his publications redefine the history of literary criticism for Native

American literature and, indeed, recorded American history. But like Allen, his analysis assuages literary misunderstandings with legitimate Native perspective yet forgoes the potential to explore *a method for scholarly argument* that differs from that used by critics with whom he disagrees. The impetus of Vizenor's writing is to set the record straight on what is "Indian" in literary texts and how critics wrongly interpret these texts. He overlooks the issue that it is the approach critics use to interpret Native literature that is inappropriate or that he can draw from his understanding of Native culture to design criterion that is appropriate.

> *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* tells stories about relationships . . . I interweave a myriad of voices with autobiography and theoretical discourse to create a document representing exchanges that open the world people share with each other. As such, [the book] collapses the dichotomy between personal narrative and scholarly argument. Many scholars still see criticism as a meta-discourse that works in the hands of scholars to distance itself from the texts and subjects it studies. I not only take issue with this sense of criticism but also work to demonstrate how criticism might be other than these scholars understand it. (Sarris, 1993, p. 6)

The literary criticism technique of Greg Sarris finds its source in the storytelling traditions of the Pomo and Miwok Indian tribes that originate in present day California. In *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, a treatise on an approach to Native literary texts, he contends that a story exists apart from the storyteller and the listener so that the story's meaning is dependant upon the history, cultural context and life background that teller and listener bring to the experience. To record the story in text, in reality, becomes the story of the listener hearing the story. "Interaction serves as the basis for dialogue within and between people that can expose boundaries that shape and constitute different cultural and personal worlds" (p.4). Dialogue as conversation or talking back and forth between two people occurs when a listener or "reader's intermingling voices hold dialogue with the intermingling voices of the [story]" (p. 5).

Applied to literary argument, Sarris implies that critics, although truthful, impart truth based on "their purposes and biases as readers" gleaned from their relationship with the worlds of what they read about Indians. He suggests that Indian texts can both be "informed" by critics and "can inform" critical enterprises so that there is:

> genuine critical activity – where both the critics' history and assumptions as well as those of the texts are challenged and open. At some point between critic and text there is a dialogue of sorts, even if it is merely the critic responding (dialoguing) by saying "this is what you are saying and I won't hear anything else," that is, responding in a way that prohibits the text from talking back to and informing the critic about what the text said. . . . Literary critics do not record their dialogue or even the nature

of their dialogue they may have had with what they are reading. Instead they report outcome, what *they* thought or concluded. (p. 128)

Initiating dialogue, whether between people or critic and text, lends an opportunity for exploration of self and cultures in a way that one-sided communication does not. Only through questions and answers can people and readers consider diversity in culture and experience while facing the possibility of biases and misunderstanding. Interaction is the key for coming to terms with misconception and resolving to pursue broader understanding. By allowing for, and courageously acting upon the possibility that texts – like people – can be perceived from within a worldview extrinsic to self, the potential for respectful interaction and clarity is increased.

Keeping Slug Woman Alive represents an innovative exploration into criteria essential to a Native critical paradigm. Although Sarris stops at prescribing a virtual construct and its application, his work establishes important sign-posts in a critical framework that can be understood as uniquely Native. Concepts of "talk" – much revered in Native American ideology – between writer and reader, combined with the origins of his work, set Sarris apart from other literary scholars. He challenges critics to read and write about American Indian literature in a way that establishes – and reports – the dialogue between reader and text that exposes "the intermingling of multiple voices within and between readers and what they read. The objective is to report as clearly as possible that dialogue where the reader informs or is informed by the text" (p. 131). Storytelling, a fundamental aspect of Native culture, influences Sarris's view that the language of written analysis can be a "mode of expression that is performatory as well as expository [using] stories not only to show how they might be used in critical discussion but specifically to place them in the context of those critical discussions in order to inform, often by means of their different narrative forms, the content and nature of the discussion" (p. 7). Finally, to augment Monture's prerequisite that a Native critical paradigm "involve much word play, a few inside jokes, and humour" (1996, p. 123), Sarris suggests that literary analysis can exemplify ideas and argument in a manner that "proves interesting and informative . . . and people can read and enjoy" (p. 7) literary criticism.

Sarris leaves critics a series of questions applicable to methods and modes of critical analysis that enable interrelated and relational communication. Are conditions and scenes the same for all American Indians? Is life on or around the [Pomo and Miwok] reservation the same as life on or around a fictional reservation or community? How has the author as a writer understood the history of the people he writes about? Am I merely projecting my experience and ideas from my community onto the text? How might I be perpetuating biases, limiting communication and understanding, rather than undoing biases and opening communication and understanding?

Experiencing text: An initiation with Louise Erdrich

To review *The Antelope Wife* by Louise Erdrich (1998), I began this essay with a story that illustrates my history, cultural context and life experiences that lead me, first, to search Sarris's work for a culturally relevant critical paradigm. Similarly, my interest in applying Native *worldview* – defined by Yup'ik (Alaska) educator, Oscar Kawagley, as "a cognitive map that consists of the principles that we acquire to make sense of the world around us, including values, traditions and customs from myths, legends, stories, family and community" (Kawagley, 1994, p. 7) – to academic discipline, influences my understanding of Erdrich's work. In the final third of this essay, I will attempt to apply Sarris's precepts to dialogue, in a limited way, about how Erdrich infuses a Native worldview to the act of writing fiction.

As I read and think about *The Antelope Wife*, I find myself coming back to the concept that I am not so much reading the text as I am experiencing it. Erdrich promulgates a narrative style and content set down in *Love Medicine* (1984) and *Bingo Palace* (1994) that speak to setting, characters and themes central to Native Literature. In *The Antelope Wife*, Sweetheart Calico, the "deer wife," is Erdrich's fictional character that originates from Chippewa myth, teaching that love is nurtured only in freedom. The Native ideological concept of The Twins* intertwines and "beads" the fate of the characters between chapters. Erdrich balances humour with doctrine by characterizing "Windigo," a shadowy spirit entity, as an animal that enjoys telling jokes. Themes relative to symptoms of repressed cultural oppression, such as alcoholism, gossip, internalized self doubt, are dealt with and, in a contemporary setting, resolved.

By "experiencing" the text, I refer to the process evoked by the Inuit term *isumaqsayug* which means to learn by imitation; By passing knowledge through observation embedded in a familiar environment, integration into a shared social context occurs. This kind of interaction focuses on values and identity, established through relationship to other persons and to the environment (Stairs, 1995, p. 140). That is, knowledge is internalized as "experiential" because concepts are relevant and familiar to what the learner knows and can readily use. Applied here, in the context of literary criticism, the term "experiencing the text" means that I am immediately engaged in Erdrich's fictional narrative because it resonates familiarity and meaning. I recognize Erdrich's setting, themes, and characters – including their subtleties – without explanation and use that knowledge to understand her story. Given that experiential interaction, a highly esteemed American Indian philosophical principle, is intrinsic to how Native writers view the world and their work, how then does Louise Erdrich precipitate the reader to "experience" her text.

Early references to legends, such as "Four Soul" in *Bingo Palace* and Lulu Lamartine's myth-like search for "Indian roots" (Lutz, 1991, p. 81) on Moses Pillager's island of Matchimanito in *Love Medicine*, appear in Erdrich's work. In *The Antelope Wife*, I understand the art of storytelling is moved to written text in an approach that transforms – as opposed to references – the novel in its entirety, to a myth. Erdrich retains the characters and themes of the original Chippewa legend that was probably told orally, but in imaginative written text she seamlessly fuses the world of fable-fantasy with life set in contemporary conditions. Erdrich resists the use of powerful cultural symbols – of which the deer is one – sometimes inserted to bring authenticity to contemporary literature but instead moves mythical characters through struggle and conflict toward resolution that we as readers understand as a human condition. Using this approach, Erdrich inspires the original legend to written literature so effectively that it is often difficult – and intriguing – for the reader to discern what is myth and what is Erdrich's story. The antelope wife from the legend is animated to a central character in the novel, retaining mythical qualities that move her "wicked hoof" to "supple gait." The fabled wife character, wearing beads coloured the "blue of time"appears first as a child reared by deer, but retains mortal connection to the heroin, Rovina, to the old grandmothers, and to Rovina's children. In this way, I read Erdrich's text, threaded by supernatural caricature, as a myth recast through her characters to living emotion, insight, and belief for the reader to intimate and experience.

Hope, humour, and healing

Key concepts in *The Antelope Wife* are humourous ones. Like the mythical central figure, several characterizations of a dog link the story through reappearing comic episodes. A sacrificial white dog chronicles his escape at each occasion that reverent villagers "got the hatchet out." The dog speaks. "I see cold steel. I'm gone. I have puppies, after all, to provide for. I have a life." Erdrich conceptualises traditional teaching of serious cultural concepts so that I, as a reader, am engaged by her use of humour to enliven abstract storytelling to immediacy and presentness. In many Native cultures, a sacrificial white dog plays a significant role in ceremonies considered sacred, yet her use of humour reflects more on herself as the writer than on the reverence of the sacred gift or traditional teaching. The function of humour in Native American cultures serves to comment on the way people interact with each other and teasing about how they (and the provocateur includes himself) act is part of the fun. For example, in Hodinohso:ni culture, the term "use a good mind, now" teasingly calls attention to potentially inappropriate behaviours like bragging or stretching the truth, yet its origin lies in highly reverent teachings about ethics for cultural and social survival. Through her interpretation, as the writer, about how Native people interact

in humourous ways, Erdrich includes herself, and invites the reader to experience the text within a shared cultural context.

The prolific literary accomplishments of Louise Erdrich evoke scholarly analysis of her work that is also abundant. A common focus to literary argument centres on Erdrich's treatment of the Indian "condition" in the current world setting. Peter Matthiessen prefaces *Love Medicine*, by stating, "Erdrich conveys unflinchingly the funkiness, humour and great unspoken sadness of the Indian reservations, and a people exiled to a no man's land between two worlds" (Sarris, 1993, p. 143). With respect to the same novel, Robert Silberman suggests that, although Erdrich moves from "a world that is oppressive and fatalistic," she continues to "work within the older conventions" established by early Native American authors (Silberman, 1989, p. 103). This does not ring true to me. In *Love Medicine*, I understand the characters to move beyond isolation to examine personal and cultural history in a self-healing way. *The Antelope Wife*, Erdrich's most recent novel, validates for me, a sense of hope. "The mystery where earth meets sky" permeates narrative thought so that even the deer wife, freed from oppressive husband ownership, "kept moving, until she was a white needle, quivering, then a dark fleck on the western band" (p. 230). Positive resolution, combined with humourous quirks, in a setting that celebrates cultural symbols, helps me to integrate inspiration, passed by Erdrich through reading, into a shared social context.

Can I take the examples cited to conclude that Erdrich accomplishes infusion of the Native worldview to the act of writing fiction or do I "as a reader, and ultimately, the writer of this [essay] position a mirror so that certain reflections occur" (Sarris, 1993, p. 120)? Does my agenda and personal history surface to influence my perception of Erdrich's literary style and methods? I return to my beginning story, as mediator, to reflect on my dialogue held with text of *The Antelope Wife*.

Native writing, learning, and teaching

The teacher training staff used a concept of co-operative education that we defined as specifically "Hodinohso:ni." Class opened and closed with the Thanksgiving Address ("Ganohonyohk" in the Cayuga language). During the opening circle, students reviewed positive learning experiences and set plans for each day. Course codes and titles were removed from the syllabus, replaced instead by a single, holistic curriculum integrating skills and content requirements for education enterprise, teaching methods, evaluation and education philosophy. The curriculum was "instructed" by community elders and educators. Students, working in groups of four, received a single grade for one assignment that incorporated the total semester's learning. Accustomed to numerous, intense and non-related assignments of course work, students were at first apprehensive. Once they realized, however, that

serious training requirements were met, they focussed their energy on the business of teaching. Insightful and innovative strategies cultivated in this creative learning environment were reflected in their teaching methods. Education theories applied to cultural context were more meaningful because students examined issues from a perspective that parallelled their own way of understanding and interacting. Inspiration and pride in Hodinohso:ni culture, modelled by respected elders in the classroom, were consistent goals for lesson outcomes.

Questions relating to my interpretation of Erdrich's work are many. Through my work with training teachers I proved to myself that infusion of Native values, traditions and customs into educational practice is possible. Students transferred their skills, learned through emancipatory practices that flow from a Native, non-Western framework to become creative, self-actualized teachers. For example, many used the Thanksgiving Address ("Ganohonyohk"), which embodies the Hodinohso:ni cosmology, as the source to develop curriculum and to build class timetables. Others initiated teamwork between schools and agencies to build interdisciplinary programs and management structures to better serve the community, in a holistic, culturally sensitive manner. That teachers reached beyond established boundaries to develop methods and structures respective of their identity is clearly reflected in their classrooms. Because they benefited and, I believe, were transformed as teachers through culturally relevant training, do I read into Erdrich's texts that it is the goal of all Native professionals to initiate transformative change through their work? Because my personal aspiration is to overlay my worldview on how I write, just as on how I teach, do I perceive that process to occur in Erdrich's work? In fact, by concluding that Erdrich applies Native methods to the art of writing fiction, do I imply that this endeavour should be the preoccupation of all Native writers and educators? These are just some of the questions I raise to expose my interaction with Erdrich's style of writing based on my experience as an educator and to extend my story of that interaction to others. Other readers with other stories will write beyond what I have said. Erdrich's words and the teachers with whom I work evoked in me an overwhelming need to verbalize and place into context what I understood. In doing so, I am certain of what I saw and experienced.

NOTE

* Native Ideology references the concept of twins as the struggle between positive and negative forces toward the goal to attain life balance.

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