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"The Rhythm of Three Strands": Cultural Braiding in Dorris’s A Yellow Raft in Blue Water

David Cowart

Readers of Michael Dorris’s 1987 novel A Yellow Raft in Blue Water encounter a succession of narratives chronicling the lives, since mid-century, of three American Indian women. The history of Native Americans, along with their fate in the Twentieth Century, resonates within these personal narratives, and the shifts in point of view allow for the representation of individual and collective experience over several decades. As each narrator tells her story, three generations speak in turn. Moreover, message and medium coalesce as lives lived at apparent cross-purposes prove ultimately the stronger for their differences. As a palliative to the problems of the islanded self in a time of cultural dissolution, Dorris presents a vision of the woven, cable-like integrity miraculously surviving among the members and satellites of the unnamed tribe his story concerns. As Louis Owens has pointed out, the figure for this embattled and conflicted solidarity is that traditional emblem of Indian culture, the braid (218). But Dorris seeks to braid more than Indian experience into his novel. He intimates that life on and off the reservation must be understood as part of the larger braiding, the larger weave, of America itself.

By now theorists of Native American literatures have grown accustomed to a kind of standard problem. As critics such as Paula Gunn Allen, Gerald Vizenor, and Arnold Krupat have argued, Indian writing emerges from the oral and communal traditions of peoples resistant to Western ideas of linear narrative and sequential time, not to mention emphasis on the individual; therefore, the discourse and values of this literature—indeed, its very epistémé—must be differentiated from those of the dominant culture.

Criticism of Native American writing tends—sometimes excessively—to foreground the proclivity of complacent white readers to appropri-
ate the cultural production of the marginalized, ethnic other by projecting Western habits of thinking onto discourse whose integrity is thereby imperiled. At its most extreme this criticism generates considerable hand-wringing about the legitimacy of writers like Leslie Marmon Silko and N. Scott Momaday, writers who work in a genre—the novel—not indigenous to Native American cultures. Have these writers had to compromise their language, their structures, and their vision to breach the supposed cultural and linguistic impasse—to be perceived, that is, as licensed to speak (or, as Foucault has it, "dans le vrai")?

To my mind, the most persuasive of these critics is Arnold Krupat, who has moved, in three important books on Native American literature, towards greater and greater subtlety in assessing its vitality vis-à-vis the circumambient literary culture. In The Voice in the Margin, for example, he proposes the special category of "indigenous literature": "that type of writing produced when an author of subaltern cultural identification manages successfully to merge forms internal to his cultural formation with forms external to it, but pressing upon, even seeking to deligitimate it" (214). In the more recent Ethnocriticism, by the same token, Krupat resolutely affirms the validity of his own analytic practice, even as he judiciously weighs the epistemological question of whether the theoretical procedures to which critics subject Native American writing are not, like translation, doomed endlessly to replicate a framing, Eurocentric epistémè.

Harold Bloom, who in The Western Canon names not a single American Indian writer to his list of twentieth-century authors likely to achieve canonical status, dismisses the scrupulous and well-meaning theorists of minority writing as part of a School of Resentment whose endless reproaches to Eurocentrism do irremediable damage to what in his subtitle he characterizes as "the books and school of the ages." Robert Hughes, similarly, deplores the extensive balkanization of American identity in what he calls a "culture of grievance." But such fulminations miss the complexity of the relationship (indeed, the frequent blurring of boundaries) between mainstream and marginal. The embattled and precarious position of "minor literature," according to Deleuze and Guattari, often proves the source of significant change in the dominant culture’s own literary sensibility. By the same token, the resistance of a major literary tradition—or, rather, of its guardians—to minority interlopers can also have a salutary effect. Such resistance functions like the formal constraints that complicate all literary production. (Frost, one recalls, likens the requirements of poetic form to the net in tennis: it is the very condition of meaningful achievement.) Inasmuch as the overcoming of resistance, formal or ideological, is a source of distinction, it may not be such a bad thing
that the voice in the margin must negotiate its legitimacy within the major or dominant literary tradition. I propose, in any event, to invert the critical paradigm and argue that Dorris’s novel, even with its deference to an oral storytelling tradition, its non-linear movement, its “homing” theme, and its emphasis on communal remedies to individual affliction, addresses itself to a politics of identity less Indian than simply American.

Which is not to say that Dorris, an anthropologist by professional training, ignores the unemployment, the alcoholism, the fragmented families—in short, the pervasive misery—of Native American life. As an anthropologist, Dorris has studied human social relations and culture as they relate to environment and differ from one racial or national group to another, especially over time, and he knows how far America is from the realization of its own collective synthesis, knows how many remain marginalized by the inexorable forces of American life. Thus he complicates the symbolism of his American theme by intimating that an individual or a whole people can be woven unwillingly into a fabric she or they may find uncongenial. To make the point in slightly different terms: Dorris registers the problematic character of America’s assimilation of its minorities. What is remarkable, however, is that the author can chronicle the afflictions of Native Americans—can even set the action mostly in eastern Montana—without ever identifying the tribe to which his characters belong. By the same token, he refers to the language they sometimes speak instead of English as "Indian." Dorris seems to want an element of the generic in his depiction of Native American life.

Why? Dorris has remarked that specificity regarding particular tribes leads to too many letters from individuals claiming to recognize their relatives (Wong 41). But surely there is more to it than this. I suspect, for one thing, that Dorris does not want to speak for any tribe of which he is not a member. He may also wish to defer to what remains of tribal integrity; thus the reader sees in his generic Indians the necessary diffidence of one whose own tribe, the Modoc, has been largely assimilated. Another rationale appears in a 1979 College English article in which Dorris anticipates Krupat’s idea of the "indigenous literature" that results from the encounter of Native aesthetics with non-Native forms. Though he deprecates the Eurocentric tendency to lump three hundred or so separate cultures and languages together as an absurd monolith called Indian culture, Dorris argues for the emergence—in Momaday, Silko, and Welch—of a new, hybrid Native American literature, written for a readership that includes whites as well as Native Americans of all tribes. Auguring his own Yellow Raft, Dorris describes the characters of Welch’s 1974 novel Winter in the Blood as “people who happen to be Native Americans living on a
reservation in Montana." The "culture" of these people "clearly has much in common with rural, white-American society," yet it is also distinctly Native. It is a book about poverty but also about the survival, against great odds, of tradition and of people. Together with such works as Leslie Silko’s Ceremony (1977), it may well be among the first manifestations of a new era in Native American literary expression; at long last a pan-tribal tradition of true "Native American literature" may be happening. (158)

In Yellow Raft, however, the "pan-tribal" seems naturally to engage the yet larger community of America itself. Dorris seems to be meditating on the general American culture as much as on any specific Indian culture. Certainly the ills Dorris documents are not limited to Indians. He writes of people whose mental landscape consists of the same Stephen King-inspired movies and country music songs and consumerism that shape the dreams of the entire American underclass.

Yellow Raft unfolds with a distinctive rhythm as the reader moves backwards and forwards in time, encountering first the story of Rayona, then the story of her mother Christine, and finally the story of "Aunt Ida," whose real relationship to the first two becomes one of the novel’s more powerful revelations. Ray narrates in the present tense, Christine and Ida in the past. All three stories begin with the narrator at fifteen years old. Ray stays fifteen, describing her experiences "between May and August 1986," as Dorris explained to an interviewer (Wong 40). Christine and Ida move forward in time, grow older, as their stories advance on the present. Central to the authorial purpose, the narrative’s wavelike rhythm of overlapping and repetition allows the reader to see generational movement and cultural continuity as well as the reconciliation of radically different personal points of view. This last, a demonstration that truth is relative and that reality changes depending on the perspective from which it is viewed, is a commonplace of modern story-telling technique. From the perspective of her daughter, Christine seems a conspicuous failure as mother, but upon reading the full story of Christine and then Ida, the reader sympathizes with—indeed, forgives—each in succession. Thus the reader shares Christine’s impercipience in a seemingly meaningless scene like the one in which she and Ida visit the dying Clara before discovering—in Ida’s narrative—all that lies behind this visit. Yet, their singularity notwithstanding, the three narratives prove each to be the same profoundly human story of a struggle for integrity, growth, love, and connection—connection to family, community, and nation.

The novel’s backwards and forwards movement functions as a kind of cultural or anthropological analogue to psychoanalysis, in which one
moves into and out of a mental past to come to terms with a psychological present. Dorris, I suspect, holds no brief for the idea of a racial unconscious, but he sketches in the practical equivalent of this familiar Jungian notion in narratives that, outwardly distinct from one another, discover common mythic ground. At the same time he never loses sight of individual or personal experience. Readers come to know Ray, Christine, and Ida at the same time that they gain insight into the race and culture that, even in their disparateness, these self-chronicling characters represent. Thus Dorris documents intersections of the individual and her community the better ultimately to engage a larger theme of American identity in an age in which familial, cultural, and national cohesion have faltered disastrously for Indian and non-Indian alike. Dorris reifies these intersections, at least partly, in his images of braiding; indeed, this homely activity is behind the backwards-and-forwards narrative movement discussed above. Though the novel begins with Christine braiding Ray’s hair in the hospital, one must wait until the last page—indeed, until the last sentence, after Ida and Father Hurlburt have crawled onto the roof in the dark—for the symbolism fully to jell:

The cold was bearable because the air was so still. I let the blanket slip from my shoulders, lifted my arms about my head, and began.

"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 letting go, of braiding. (372)

Ida’s language is suggestive: the three strands are at once hair, lives, and stories—the stories of the three women the reader comes to know in the course of the novel. The author takes as his subject, in other words, the "coming and going," the "twisting and blending," and the "catching and letting go" of human beings, of mother and daughter, of one generation and another.

The phrase "As a man with cut hair," on the other hand, reveals the curiously mixed perspective from which Ida speaks and Dorris writes. It is, of course, the mixed perspective of most Native Americans. "Cut hair," that is, is the marker of maleness only from the point of view of the larger culture within which contemporary Indian life has its being. From the Indian point of view, it is the marker, rather, of whiteness; for at a number of points the author reminds his reader that Native American men have not, traditionally, worn their hair short.4

One may wonder at the absence of male voices, especially when
women’s experience does not prove to be the whole story. After all, the reader also hears a good deal about Lecon, father to both Ida and Christine, and about Lee and Dayton and Foxy Kennedy. Perhaps Dorris means to remind his readers of the familiar sociological point about the pervasive dereliction and absenteeism of fathers in American ghettos. Perhaps, too, he wants a particular type of marriage between form and content—between the theme of braiding and the narrators who embody that theme. The author, that is, seems aware of the ancient tradition of women’s being at once weavers and woven in the human community.

Dorris’s real sympathy, however, remains with the vision of a national (as opposed to a tribal) braided wholeness. Moreover, one credits this novel with adding fresh inflections to the gendered grammar of weaving—for women in literature perennially engage in catching and letting go, in twisting and blending. Shuttle or needle in hand, they occupy themselves with weaving, embroidering, and quilt-making. One thinks of Eve spinning (“When Adam delved and Eve span”), of Arachne’s contest with Athena, of Philomela making of her loom a prosthetic tongue, of Penelope weaving and unweaving, of Queen Matilda and the Bayeux Tapestry, of the Wife of Bath and her cloth-making, of the weaving of Tennyson’s Lady of Shalott, and of the quilt-making tradition in Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” or Bobbie Ann Mason’s “Love Life.” This, archetypally, is what women do: they weave, they quilt, they work cloth, they embroider. In doing so they compose for themselves a myth of womanist purpose, a myth of what women always represent in human society. Women are weavers of their culture and of their world.

In opting exclusively for female narrators, Dorris might seem uncritically to endorse the ancient view of women as what the Anglo-Saxon poets call “weavers of peace.” But he himself, along with Melville’s mat-weaving Ishmael, embodies the possibility that men, too (and certainly sensitive male writers who collaborate with their wives, as this author does), can promote relationship, connectedness, community, family, and all the other cultural desiderata contained in the imagery of braiding and weaving. Though wholly the activity of women and the metaphor for their writing of themselves, the narrative braiding here nevertheless figures in a work signed by a male author, who thereby resists female hegemony in the realm of the weave, the realm of relation, the realm of human connectedness.

Feminism has contributed the phrase “the personal is political” to the lexicon of ideological analysis. But Dorris resists this formulation, too. Binding himself to the unsophisticated perspectives of his narrators, he emphasizes the personal in opposition to the political and thus declines to produce what one might expect from an author so
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acutely conscious of the plight of Native Americans in our time. Even in his references to Vietnam (potentially a matter of great passion) he avoids the easy scoring of points: he has no desire, for example, to underscore the irony when Lee, last scion of a warrior race, allows the hegemonic Anglo-Saxons to dispose of his energies and his life (not to mention those of so many black and Hispanic Americans) to subjugate, on the other side of the world, yet another pigmented population. The author carefully underplays the larger political dimensions of his story, as if to resist Frederic Jameson’s reductive formulation for "third-world" literature, in which "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society" (69). Dorris lays greater emphasis on the intimate, familial tragedy of Christine’s thoughtless shaming of Lee into participation in a fight that was never his own.

Similarly, Dorris is uninterested in an easy demolition of the spiritual chauvinism of Christian missionaries. Although the decent, humane, and part Senecan (322) Father Hurlburt, a good shepherd to Ida, gives way presently to the loathsome Father Novak (a priest guilty, in Milton’s memorable image, of climbing into the sheepfold), Dorris emphasizes not the fact of Christian hypocrisy but rather the universal attenuation of a spiritual life of immense importance, historically, to Native Americans. What is central to the lives of Ida and the young Christine (Father Hurlburt on the one hand, the nuns and the promised end of the world on the other), proves, by the time Ray is coming of age, to be almost lifeless. For Ray, a rich and distinctive spiritual heritage exists only vestigially, in the half-remembered dream of a bear (totemic emblem of power among northwestern tribes) and in her negative initiation in the middle of Bearpaw Lake. Latitude for a spiritual life, in other words, dwindles from generation to generation.

This is not a condition experienced exclusively by Indians—it is part of the American heritage in modern times. Such considerations, it seems to me, lie behind the author’s making Ray a "halfbreed." The racial makeup of this first narrator (unlike that of the similarly burdened Tayo in Silko’s Ceremony) is part of Dorris’s statement about the legitimate submersion of tribal or racial identity in the larger identity of Americanness. That the social, economic, and cultural plight of Native Americans is indistinguishable from the more widely recognized situation of African Americans is, then, only one of the messages contained in Ray’s half black, half Indian racial makeup. Another, more pointed message concerns an idea of racial synthesis. The point behind Ray’s name, which derives from the tag in her mother’s gown, "rayon," is not that she is artificial. It is rather that she is, like rayon, "synthetic": she is a synthesis, after all, a braiding together, of two races. Dayton, the man who takes in first her mother
and then her, is also a mixedblood.

Dorris makes intelligent literary use of his professional knowledge, for anthropologists take a special interest in coming-of-age stories. They know that one of the surest routes to understanding a culture is to study the way its young people are initiated into adulthood. Though Dorris claims not to be interested in the theme, all three of these narratives exemplify it. Coming of age in fiction, however, does tend to confer a spurious order on the many phases of growing up, and part of the point about contemporary life in America (as about life in "advanced" cultures generally) is the absence of recognized rituals whereby the young can make a formal transition to the privileges and responsibilities of adulthood. Thus Dorris devises strategies to engage the theme without overdoing it; and, indeed, such maturation as occurs in these stories is tentative, perhaps temporary. The raft surrounded by water that figures centrally in the novel and provides its title is at best an image of problematic coming of age—just as it is in Huckleberry Finn. It is also, of course, an image of isolation. For Ray, who needs a family and self-respect, the raft and the set of experiences that radiate outward from it become a focus of significance. On the raft she has a sexual encounter, perhaps (the text is obscure) losing her virginity. Of equal if not greater importance, however, is the person she subsequently sees swimming from the raft: Ellen DeMarco, the youthful ideal that, even at their most multicultural, American advertising, film, and television promote. Sleek, attractive, straight-haired, confident, and blessed with a loving and supportive family, Ellen is the person Ray longs to be.

The piece of Ellen DeMarco’s letter that Ray finds is an important plot detail, for it becomes a kind of personal talisman. Her pathetic cherishing of the letter reveals the magnitude of her desire for a stable family. The separate stories of Ray and her mother converge and reach their understated climax at the moment in Christine’s narrative in which Ray finally discards this epistolary reminder of normative family life (292). When, earlier, Ellen inadvertently exposes the lie told Evelyn and Sky, Ray retreats to the lakeside and stares at the raft as Evelyn comes up behind her in one of the novel’s most touching scenes.

I’m not that hard for Evelyn to find. I’m stopped, halfway down the trail, with my eyes fixed on the empty yellow raft floating in the blue waters of Bearpaw Lake. Somewhere in my mind I’ve decided that if I stare at it hard enough it will launch me out of my present troubles. If I squint a certain way, it appears to be a lighted trapdoor, flush against a black floor. With my eyes closed almost completely, it becomes a kind of bull’s eye, and I’m an arrow banging into it head-first. (104)
Much of the novel’s title-symbolism comes together in the meaningfully conflicted imagery contained in words like “launch,” “trapdoor,” and “bull’s eye.” As the place where she was seduced and where she first saw Ellen, her counterrself, the raft is indeed a launch pad: because of what happens on it, Ray strikes out on her own, finds herself cared for by Sky and Evelyn, shows her mettle at the rodeo, and finally settles in with Dayton and her mother. Yet the raft is simultaneously a bull’s eye—that which violently ends the flight of missiles launched by the more primitive technology of Ray’s Indian ancestors (and contemporary Native Americans are in fact torn between a primitive past and a space-age present). The raft is also a trapdoor, which can be a means of escape or the vehicle of sudden disappearance. It is at once trap and door, something that arrests and denies freedom as well as the opening into fresh experience. It is, in short, the end of the old Ray and the beginning of the new.

The yellow raft, then, is a hub around which the author arranges spokewise elements of his maturation theme. That it figures only in Ray’s narrative makes for a certain asymmetry unless the reader recognizes a thematic signature that carries over to the other narratives. In other words, as an emblem of isolation and problematic coming of age, the raft governs the stories of Christine and Ida as much as it governs the story of Ray. The novel repeatedly, in each of its constituent narratives, engages the theme of growing up in a world where the old instrumentalities for personal, familial, and cultural integration are no longer operative. Christine and Ida, too, are isolates, victims of circumstances Dorris imagines, again, as personal rather than political. The raft has been elided from the picture, but each narrator, like Ray, comes to a crossroads where her future life takes shape. Ida must come to terms with the fact that her life and reputation have been sacrificed to preserve the good name of her shallow and selfish Aunt Clara. She must also come to terms with her feelings about Christine, who is not, after all, really her daughter—and about Willard Pretty Dog, who is the father of Lee and who leaves her once plastic surgery has restored his ravaged face to something like its former comeliness. Christine, on the other hand, must accept the final breakdown of her relationship with Elgin, Ray’s father, as well as her own impending death. She must sort out her unresolved feelings about the half sister/half cousin she thinks is her mother (“Aunt Ida”) and about the half or quarter nephew she thinks is her brother Lee. She must also face her guilt at Lee’s death in a stupid war, for Lee went to Vietnam in part to flee the destructive rivalry of Christine and Dayton, his best friend. When, years later, the rivals stumble into a comfortable cohabitation, Christine finds that her troubled daughter can, with
remarkable ease, be introduced into the new relationship. In Christine, Dayton, and Ray, the reader sees, at last, a functioning family.

The strange blood relationships in this novel contribute to its symbolism. Few characters enjoy uncomplicated familial relationships. The point is not “inbreeding”—there is none—but rather a meaningful disorientation of the familiar patterns of kinship (a subject, Krupat remarks in Ethnocriticism, with which "most Native narratives deal substantially" [179]). Though the reader hears nothing about interracial marriage, the curious relationships—where one’s brother proves to be the son of the half-sister one had thought was one’s mother—may reflect the distant and tangled consanguinity of all Native Americans. Yet these relationships must also reflect the shared heritage and frequently mixed bloodlines of all the immigrants to America—the black and white as well as those who migrated across the land bridge from Asia.

Dorris, then, does not seem interested in underscoring the Indian otherness of his characters so much as their common humanity. Even though they live out their lives at the cultural margin, they are presented simply as people, Americans. It is not by accident that Ray’s friends carry her back to the reservation for the second time on the 4th of July. But *Yellow Raft* is hardly a political tract. It is rather a traditional plea for recognition of the common problems that all Americans share as they negotiate their personal autonomy amid the coercive pressures of life in the Twentieth Century. The reader finishes this book impressed less with the disorder of these lives than with a sense of how infinitely adaptable is the human instinct for familial and societal cohesion. These stories are filled with misery, but the individuals peopling them exhibit an extraordinary resilience, a remarkably inextinguishable thirst for connection, for human braiding. This braiding of lives into something ordered, unified, and strong is the very definition of culture. Dorris views Native American cultures as embattled, but he simultaneously affirms the indestructibility of the cultural braid, whether tribal, pan-tribal, or more broadly American.

NOTES

1 In an interview, Dorris claimed that he was not aware of just how neatly he had woven the braiding motif into this fiction (see Chavkin and Chavkin 202).  

2 For a discussion of this theme, as differentiated from "lighting out for the territory" in Euro-American culture, see Bevis.
According to Robert Silberman, "the duplication of episodes is not entirely compensated for by the insights gained from different perspectives" (119n15). It should be obvious that I disagree with this assessment. Dorris pursues empathic fullness, not epistemological iconoclasm.

Another example of this dual perspective is provided by Louis Owens, who notes that Christine is illegitimate only from a Eurocentric point of view. "It is ironic that among many tribes . . . it was once common for a man to take his wife’s sisters as additional wives, especially if his first wife was in need of assistance and one of her sisters, like Clara, needed a home. According to traditional tribal values, at one time there might have been nothing at all improper about Clara bearing the child of her sister’s husband had the situation been handled correctly" (221-22).

Fiction that appears under the name of Michael Dorris or Louise Erdrich is, by their own account, jointly authored—and indeed, the reader familiar with Erdrich (author of Love Medicine, The Beet Queen, Tracks, and Bingo Palace) may recognize "her" style in Dorris’s 1987 novel A Yellow Raft in Blue Water. Dorris and Erdrich want, according to Vince Passaro, "to make themselves, by mutual consent, into one voice, one vision, one language" (161). Thus a critical description of Erdrich’s writing provides a remarkably apt introduction to that of Dorris. When Passaro, for example, describes Erdrich’s style as "a technique of accumulated knowledge, of splicing together different dramatic voices in different times in a series of interrelated stories about the lives, spiritual triumphs and physical tragedies of her mythological North Dakota families" (162), one finds that he has characterized the style of Dorris’s Yellow Raft as well.

Deleuze and Guattari assert something similar: "a characteristic of minor literatures is that everything in them is political" (17). For the Jameson citation, I am indebted to Krupat, Voice in the Margin 213.

For the Pope’s letter and the expected end of the world, Dorris has drawn on his own recollections of parochial school (see Wong 40-41).

This is one of the reasons the Erdrich-signed novels are frequently set in the past, in a time of magical spirituality.

By the same token, Ray’s Uncle Lee, martyred in Vietnam, may remind the reader of Tayo’s brother Rocky, killed in the Second World War. Both of the dead men are remembered as exemplary representatives of Native American culture.

Dorris told the Chavkins that Ray was originally Raymond, but because he did not want to write yet another boy’s coming of age story, he gradually realized, at the prompting of Erdrich, that the character needed to be a girl (201-02), complement to the other female narrators. A story told in women’s voices, Yellow Raft will remind some readers of Christa Wolf’s Cassandra, another meditation on survival after a cultural disaster, as experienced and articulated by women.

This was Dorris’s starting point, both experientially and compositionally. As an eleven-year-old boy in eastern Montana, Dorris swam out to a yellow raft and got into conversation with a survivor of the Holocaust, a Polish Jew with a number tattooed on his arm. The author has remarked in interviews
(Schumacher 179, Chavkin and Chavkin 198) that he swam back from the raft a different person from the one he had been when he swam out to it.

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