

Multivocality, Identity and Tradition in Michael Dorris's *Yellow Raft in Blue Water*

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Abstract: This article explores Michael Dorris's 1987 novel *Yellow Raft in Blue Water*. Although Michael Dorris is currently viewed as a *persona non grata*¹ by the American academia, *Yellow Raft in Blue Water*, probably his masterpiece, is still worthy of analysis both as a text *per se* and as a novel written by a self-identified Native American attempting to write from within Native American experience. The novel consists of three deeply intertwined narratives about the lives of three consecutive generations of Native American women. Issues of identity in a bi-cultural (and even multi-cultural) setting as well as the clash between tradition and contemporaneous life as they are depicted in the novel is addressed, and the narrative character of the work is discussed using Gordon E. Slethaug's insightful concept of multivocal narrative..

Michael Dorris's novel *Yellow Raft in Blue Water* consists of three narratives that at a first glance seem unconnected but which are in fact deeply intertwined. The narrative structure is described in the last sentence of the book: "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."² Together, the three narrative strands form a novel of three protagonists' life formation, each of a different kind, yet in some ways paralleling and reflecting on the other two, thus each narrative forms a background and a framework for the other two. Unlike the second and third narratives, the first one covers only a brief period of time, a period when adversity makes the protagonist mature very quickly; in this way, the other two narratives fill in the gaps of the first one. By focusing on three consecutive generations of Native American women, Dorris's three-layered novel also tells the history of the protagonists' community,

¹ Dorris was accused of sexually abusing his children but before the court hearing started Dorris committed suicide, thus leaving many questions about his life and the split between his public persona and his private life unanswered (and unanswerable). For more see for example <http://www.startribune.com/local/83838677.html?refer=y>.

² Michael Dorris, *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1987), 343.

placing the individual stories in the context of a communal narrative. Gordon E. Slethaug notes on the novel's narrative structure: "Multivocality exposes cultural assumptions underlying traditional modes of narration, and, within such a multivocal text itself, each narrator's view must be positioned against the preceding one so that one voice transgresses, reconsiders, and rewrites another."³

The first narrative relates the formative period in the life of the teenage girl Rayona, the second the growing up of Rayona's mother Christine and the third the story of Rayona's grandmother, called Aunt Ida, who is the family's matriarch. Each of the protagonists has a difficult task to struggle with: for Rayona it is her dual heritage, for Christine the consequence of her jealous relationship to her brother Lee, and for Ida her decision to take upon herself the responsibility for raising her father's illegitimate child. All three protagonists grow up in variously dysfunctional families, thus by presenting the lives of three generations the novel also uncovers hurtful patterns of behavior – emotional withdrawal, silencing the past, lack of effective communication.

All three protagonists, each in her own way, have to negotiate their living in (or in-between) two worlds – that of the Native traditions on the reservation and the white, Christian, English-speaking America around. All three are bilingual but while Rayona and Christine mostly use English, Ida speaks her native tongue. At one point Christine comments on Ida's language:

Actually what [Ida] said was sharper than that since she said it in Indian. English is mild in comparison, full of soft sounds that take the punch out of your thoughts. When she did speak English, Aunt Ida pronounced each of her words separately, as if surprised to find her own voice using a language she only heard in church. [...] Her face said she doubted these noises meant anything a person could decipher [...] Around us she didn't bother with English at all, and in Indian her words poured like thick whiskey that had never seen water.⁴

Although the novel is written in English, in the beginning of Ida's story the protagonist explains that even if she "can speak their English better than they think" she prefers her "own language [...] words that shaped [her] construction of events [...] words that gave [her] power."⁵ Dorris thus creates the illusion of presenting an English translation of Ida's story that was also originally Native American linguistically. And by stressing that Ida's "recollections

³ Gordon E. Slethaug, "Multivocal Narration and Cultural Negotiation: Dorris's *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* and *Cloud Chamber*," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 11.1 (1999): 19.

⁴ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 141.

⁵ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 273.

are not tied to white paper”⁶ and that she changes the story, “add[s] to it, revise[s], invent[s] the parts [she] forget[s] or never knew”⁷ he invokes the orality of the traditional storytelling.

Both Christine and Rayona face occasional difficulties with being bilingual. Thus for example Christine admits that after many years spent away from the reservation: “Indian was strange in my speech and in my ears. Half the time I had to translate to myself.”⁸ But despite the fact that she raises her daughter in Seattle and speaks mostly English herself, she teaches Rayona “to speak Indian as good as English” in order for Rayona to know who she is.⁹ Yet Dorris avoids identifying Rayona’s roots with a particular tribe and uses a kind of pan-Indian context instead of a tribal one. In an interview, Dorris and Louise Erdrich openly stated that they intend pan-Indianism as a means of being more universal, presenting Native Americans in a non-stereotypical way.¹⁰ The different level of command (or of centrality) of English as it changes from generation to generation reflects the gradual process of assimilation, a process universal among the Native American population. David Cowart suggests that “[Dorris] 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.”¹¹

The issue of identity is most foregrounded in Rayona’s story of coming-of-age because she is a mixed-blood of Native American and African-American¹² origin, or, as Dorris himself described her in an interview, “she is a combination ethnically.”¹³ As such she is often subject to racial discrimination and ostracizing for *both* parts of her heritage. Her mother is Native American and her father black, yet in her identity quest Rayona is not helped much by either of them – her father is mostly absent and her mother, with whom Rayona has a rather tense relationship – is terminally ill. The parents are no longer together and Rayona remembers what her mother used to say to her father: “We’re the wrong color for each other.”¹⁴ Aware of the skin color issue, Rayona comments: “Once, in a hardware store, I found each of our exact shades on a paint mix-tone chart. Mom was Almond Joy, Dad was

⁶ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 273.

⁷ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 273.

⁸ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 190.

⁹ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 212.

¹⁰ Laura Coltelli, *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 43.

¹¹ David Cowart, “The Rhythm of Three Strands: Cultural Braiding in Dorris’s *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 8.1 (1996): 3.

¹² In Dorris’s next novel, *Cloud Chamber*, we learn that Rayona’s father’s family is racially mixed, too – his grandmother is white and Irish. But because there is no such suggestion in *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* and the present paper discusses this novel alone, this fact is not taken into consideration in the analysis.

¹³ Coltelli, *Winged Words*, 51.

¹⁴ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 9.

Burnt Clay, and I was Maple Walnut.”¹⁵ Already in the opening scene of the narrative when fifteen-year-old Rayona visits her mother in the hospital, her awareness of her unusual heritage is underscored – when her father enters the room Rayona notices the attention they get: “The two other sick women in the room are awake, and as alert and interested as if they were watching TV. [...] I can read their thoughts: *That little Indian woman, I don’t know what tribe, with a big black man. And a child, a too-tall girl. She looks like him.* They are delighted. They have a story to tell.”¹⁶

Throughout the narrative, Rayona makes frequent comments on her skin color, for example: “In the sunlight my skin is the color of pine sap.”¹⁷ “The skin of my long arms is brown and smooth, too dark to notice.”¹⁸ People often do not know where to place her, either recognizing and /or acknowledging just one part of her heritage (“He didn’t mention you was Black.”¹⁹) or seeing her as neither one, as for example when, due to frequently moving around, she always remains for her classmates “the new kid,” one they see as “too big, too smart, not Black, not Indian, not friendly.”²⁰

As any child, Rayona longs for a loving and supportive family but unfortunately, she does not really have one. Although she lives with her mother, she also has her experience with foster homes where she was placed whenever her mother was recovering from bouts of excessive drinking. The loneliness makes Rayona mature for her age – as for example when she reflects on the futility of her attempts to keep her father a part of her life: “I have tried things on Dad, too, before I became no fool: tears, good grades, writing letters, getting him presents. At first every one of them seemed to do the trick. He’d smile or send me a postcard or promise to call tomorrow and then weeks would pass.”²¹ She even wanders around his mail delivery route and dreams of meeting him and sharing lunch with him “and people passing in cars would smile at us, a father and a daughter who looked so much alike, having their lunch [...] just because they enjoyed being together.”²²

Rayona’s sense of abandonment and lack of self worth only increases when her desperate mother takes her to her Native American relatives in a Montana reservation and without a word of explanation leaves Rayona at her grandmother’s. Although Rayona’s grandmother Aunt Ida still speaks the tribal language and knows traditional dancing, she is

¹⁵ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 9.

¹⁶ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 7. Italics in the original.

¹⁷ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 54.

¹⁸ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 67.

¹⁹ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 71.

²⁰ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 25.

²¹ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 9.

²² Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 9.

not really the traditional wise elder – she patterns her life by TV shows. Aunt Ida is not in touch with her family or with her community and therefore cannot be truly helpful in Rayona’s identity quest. It is the priest from the reservation parish Father Tom who tries to engage Rayona with her peers but when he introduces her to a local youth group, she is painfully reminded of what her body signifies: “The two [Indian teenagers] look me up and down. I know what they see. Wrong color, outsider, skinny, friend of the priest.”²³ Instead of receiving support from her extended family, Rayona is in fact bullied by a relative, her full-blood cousin Foxy: “You’re the one whose father is a nigger.”²⁴ Thus Rayona’s community refuses her as an outsider, as different, as a lesser member of the community, even an enemy: “Foxy calls me ‘Buffalo Soldier’ after the black men who were cavalry scouts and fought Indians a long time ago. He leaves a note stuck in the Africa section of my geography book. ‘When are you going home?’”²⁵

She is surprised and hurt that even another mixed-blood classmate “who has the blond hair and green eyes of his white mother” exhibits the same kind of racist behavior as Foxy: “You sure you ain’t looking for the *Blackfeet* reservation?”²⁶ Rayona’s position does not improve with time and the ostracizing continues: “As the days get longer and hotter, Foxy starts in about my Coppertone tan.”²⁷ When drunk, Foxy’s insults get even worse: “I saw this dark patch against the wall and I thought, Foxy, either that’s the biggest piece of horse shit you’ve ever seen or it’s your fucking cousin Rayona.”²⁸ The unhappy and frustrated Rayona concludes: “I haven’t become popular and I haven’t turned invisible.”²⁹ Rayona longs for invisibility so that no one could “read her body,” read the visible signs that mark her as an outsider, as one who does not belong. Foxy and others like him never get beyond Rayona’s physical appearance, never even trying to see the person inside the body.

Father Tom tries to be helpful by acknowledging Rayona’s situation:

“It’s not easy being a young person alone at your age,” Father Tom says, “when you’re different.”

“I’m not different.”

“I mean, your dual heritage,” he says. “Not that you shouldn’t be proud of it.” This is the first time he’s admitted to my skin color, to the shape of my nose, to the stiff fullness of my hair.³⁰

²³ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 40.

²⁴ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 41.

²⁵ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 44.

²⁶ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 44.

²⁷ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 47.

²⁸ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 102.

²⁹ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 47.

³⁰ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 51.

However, Father Tom does not make the situation any easier when he finds himself physically attracted to Rayona. While Foxy reduces Rayona to a racial identification which he finds ugly, Father Tom reduces her to an object of sexual desire: “You have reached the age of puberty and are turning into a young lady. [...] An attractive young lady.”³¹ He even encourages Rayona to leave the reservation (so that she cannot report his sexual advances) and go back to the city. He suggests that she could find people in Seattle who share her dual heritage, so she “won’t feel so alone, so out of place.”³² To help her in her identity quest, he offers a cheap would-be Native American piece of jewelry: “Wear this. Then people will know you’re an Indian.”³³ As Native American literature scholar Louis Owens states, Father Tom makes it sound as if “identity is all surface,”³⁴ a mask to be put on or taken off at will: “With the medallion, Rayona may become Native American rather than African American.”³⁵ The gift of the Indian medallion not only reduces the issue of identity to mere surface, to a generally recognizable icon, it also suggests that Father Tom considers Native American identity somehow privileged or more easily acceptable than African-American identity, therefore revealing his own racial prejudices.

Repeatedly abandoned, racially and sexually assaulted, never fully acknowledged as a unique person, Rayona decides to remain in the wilderness, where Father Tom has literally abandoned her. She thus symbolically repeats the “lighting out for the territories” of Huckleberry Finn, who similarly flees from a civilization he fears and distrusts into nature. . In this neutral territory, both Huck and Rayona can be who they really are. The raft from the novel’s title becomes a site of initiation for Rayona (Father Tom has tried to seduce her on the raft; later she relaxes and meditates on her identity there) as well as it was for Huck Finn. Alone and away from all who betrayed her, Rayona’s life begins anew. She finds not only a place to stay and a temporary job at the Bearpaw Lake State Park, but more importantly a young married couple - Evelyn and Sky - who become her surrogate parents. They are both employed at the park - Sky runs a gas station and Evelyn works as a cook. They are friendly and caring people and they accept Rayona regardless of her heritage. She is inspired by Evelyn’s strong will and perseverance as well as by Sky’s good humor and uncomplicated acceptance of things as they come. Rayona is also immediately accepted into the maintenance

³¹ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 46.

³² Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 58.

³³ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 58.

³⁴ Louis Owens, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 221.

³⁵ Owens, *Other Destinies*, 221.

crew. Even if she is an oddity there because of both her gender and race, the manager sees this in positive terms: “You know, we’ve never had anyone of your race to work here before, and we’ve never had a young lady employed in park maintenance. You are something of a ground breaker, and I expect you to do us proud.”³⁶

Michael Dorris distinguishes two kinds of belonging which define our identity. On a larger scale, each of us is “a part of a people, of a complex society that defines us – such as being American”. But he also speaks of belonging, “if we are fortunate,” into “a small, more particular community, defined by ethnicity or kinship, belief system or geography.” He concludes that it is “in this intimate circle that we are most ‘ourselves’.”³⁷ Rayona’s case well illustrates this concept. Growing up in the post-civil rights era, she is accepted into the larger community: her belonging as an American is never questioned, her rights as a citizen never compromised. But she is not fortunate enough to belong in the intimate circle of her kin – there she must struggle hard to finally gain acceptance.

Dorris adds another interesting aspect to the issue of Rayona’s identity quest. While cleaning the campsite, Rayona finds a piece of a handwritten letter from parents to their daughter at a summer camp. The warm words of familial support touch her to the point that she saves the letter and in her longing for a loving family assumes the identity of the letter’s addressee, i.e. she imagines and on occasions pretends to be the daughter from the letter, a middle-class girl who extends her summer camp experience by taking up a summer job at the state park while her parents travel in Europe. In this way, Rayona tries to patent her own identity but eventually realizes that this is not really who she is, that the adopted identity of a white well-to-do and slightly spoiled girl does not fit her. Although Rayona claims that “[i]t’s as though I’m dreaming a lot of lives and I can mix and match the parts into something new each time,”³⁸ she is not really mixing various parts of diverse identities but trying on a completely different one in order to fit in, in fact attempting a form of racial passing.

Finally, though Rayona motivated by Evelyn’s ability to stand up for herself realizes that in order to come to terms with her identity and the things that have happened to her, she must return to the reservation and face her kin. She does so accompanied by Sky and Evelyn who drive her back, taking day off under the excuse of visiting a rodeo. At the rodeo, Rayona meets Foxy who he is too drunk to ride and he manipulates her to ride a wild horse in his

³⁶ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 71.

³⁷ Michael Dorris, Foreword to *Kinaaldá: A Navajo Girl Grows Up*, by Monty Roessel (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications, 1993), 6-7.

³⁸ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 80.

place, dressed in his jacket and hat.³⁹ Rayona perseveres in her ride and with determination climbs back on the horse every time he throws her down. Disguised as Foxy, her main abuser Rayona even receives a prize “for the roughest, toughest, clumsiest cowboy.”⁴⁰ When she steps up to claim it, she reveals her true identity and for her courage and determination is cheered at first by Evelyn and then by the rest of the audience triumphing as a rodeo queen. Masking her gender and ethnicity and for the sake of the rodeo ride “passing” as her full blood male cousin, Rayona challenges the community’s assumptions and their stereotypes about racial identification. Rayona not only wins appreciation from her reservation community but at the same time wins over Foxy, turning him into an object of jokes and thus destroying his image of the tough bully.

Nevertheless, throughout her identity quest Rayona is connecting with only one part of her identity, the Indian part, and not with her African-American heritage. Thus rather than mixing different parts of her dual heritage, she makes her either/or choice and claims only one part of her origin.⁴¹

As already suggested, apart from the specifics of three individual lives, by presenting the story of three generations Dorris also depicts the changing historical context. This can be seen not only in the shifting attitude toward the English language but also in the way the characters see and identify themselves as Americans and as Native Americans. Although Rayona’s mother Christine grows up on the reservation, she identifies neither as Indian nor Native American, contrary to her brother Lee, who becomes involved in civil rights movement, finishing high school as a “Red Power”⁴² and calling himself Native American instead of Indian.⁴³ While Lee gets involved in politics and tries to connect to his Native American roots (by braiding his hair, taking part in traditional dances and interviewing elders about the way things used to be), Christine sees herself as “American all the way.”⁴⁴ Until she is disappointed when the expected end of the world does not come, she is a devout Catholic.

Christine even accuses Lee’s mixed-blood friend Dayton of not belonging into the reservation,⁴⁵ disregarding the fact that he is “an enrolled member of this Indian nation.”⁴⁶

³⁹ The rodeo ride is for men only.

⁴⁰ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 112.

⁴¹ In his last novel *Cloud Chamber*, published in 1997, Dorris narrates Rayona’s paternal heritage, which, however, is not fully African-American because Rayona’s paternal grandmother is Irish. In addition the African-American paternal grandfather is absent from the narrative.

⁴² Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 145.

⁴³ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 145.

⁴⁴ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 146.

⁴⁵ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 146.

⁴⁶ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 149.

She thus commits the same kind of abuse that her daughter will eventually be faced with returning as a mixed-blood to her mother's home reservation. To confirm her Americanness, Christine tries hard to manipulate her brother into joining the US army in Vietnam not only to win him over from Dayton's influence, but mostly because she believes it is the right thing for him to do as an American. She considers it a heroic act in the "great warrior tradition of Indian people"⁴⁷ that will boost his popularity on the reservation and will add to his future political career. Christine echoes the official propaganda that according to Slethaug often used the warrior tradition to commit Native Americans "to a national agenda which need not be theirs."⁴⁸ Slethaug suggests "how Native American causes have often been sacrificed to national agendas and wars."⁴⁹ When Lee declares that he is "not going to fight a white man's war,"⁵⁰ Christine accuses him of being "just a yellow kid who's scared to defend his country."⁵¹ Paradoxically, in calling Lee "yellow" she echoes the words of Lee's friend Dayton: "Those Vietnamese ain't so different from us. [...] Same skin, same hair."⁵² Similarly, when Christine accidentally steps into a tavern frequented by African Americans, one of the customers takes her for Chinese. As he relates his mistake to her, he exposes the way he "read her body" in order to identify who she was. "I thought you were Chinese. The bars over in 'Nam are full of Chinese women. But then I looked closer. You've got meat on you, you're solid."⁵³

The unreliability of our tendency to "read bodies" for their racial signs is also illustrated by the example of Father Hurlburt, a local priest of the same generation as Aunt Ida, who is described as "dark-haired and thin, with eyes so blue people wouldn't look into them."⁵⁴ But when he later reveals to Ida that he is part Indian, she "scrutinize[s] him" and concludes: "I could see it."⁵⁵ When Ida stops viewing Father Hurlburt as the (racially) other and as an outsider, thus is no longer relying on the superficial reading of his body but moves beyond and tries to see his personality, they are able to form a deep relationship. Ida makes note of this turning point:

⁴⁷ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 170.

⁴⁸ Slethaug, "Multivocal Narration," 25.

⁴⁹ Slethaug, "Multivocal Narration," 24.

⁵⁰ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 149.

⁵¹ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 150.

⁵² Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 146.

⁵³ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 164.

⁵⁴ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 285.

⁵⁵ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 297.

There was a sadness about him, a lostness that made me wonder for the first time what he was doing here, an outsider, used but not wanted. I never thought of priests and nuns as living apart from the burdens they put on us. For a flash I saw the man within the priest and it startled me. I forgot to turn away and we looked at each other, curious as two animals who drink from the same stream.⁵⁶

When Father Hurlburt learns Ida's native language, she notices that he speaks it very well, without a traceable accent and thus judging purely from his speech, he might be considered Native American, or, as Ida puts it, as "one of us."⁵⁷ She therefore points to language as another identity signifier.

The characters of Father Hurlburt, Father Tom, and the nuns (both the sisters at the Denver motherhouse where Ida is sent along with her Aunt Clara to await the birth of Clara's illegitimate daughter Christine, as well as the nuns at the missionary school on the reservation) represent the uneasy and often conflicted relationship between Native cultures and the Catholic Church. On one hand, there is Father Hurlburt, the selfless, respectful, devoted humanist, always ready to offer a hand. The attitudes of the nuns in the convent in Denver represent stereotypes and appropriation. Not knowing the real situation, they see Clara as a victim, "an innocent lamb, abused like a martyr by a rampaging beast of a man."⁵⁸ Because she so well fits stories "of their saints [...] of virgins pursued by pagan Roman soldiers"⁵⁹ they treat her well, as a special guest and a promise. On the other hand, Ida, as just a come-along relative is reduced to a convenient workforce, to an almost invisible presence. When she becomes exhausted from the hard work and lack of sleep, she becomes to represent for the nuns all the stereotypes about the Native American – i.e. she has a bad command of English, is lazy because it is hard to awaken her for work, and is not a good enough Christian for being too tired to kneel upright in the chapel. One can only speculate about whether Ida agreed to take upon herself the shame of being a single mother and of raising a child not her own in order to fulfill the Catholic model of martyrdom in the hopes that this might bring her the respect and gratitude of her family and community. While at first she could have felt manipulated into the agreement by her father, there were other occasions when she could have given the burden up, especially once she began to resent it.

While in Ida's life the presence of the Catholic Church has both negative and positive effects, Rayona's experience with Father Tom has only the negative form of his sexual

⁵⁶ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 287.

⁵⁷ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 315.

⁵⁸ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 289.

⁵⁹ Dorris, *A Yellow Raft*, 289.

advances. But the most devastating influence of Catholicism is on young Christine. As one of the sisters at her school is a follower of the cult of Our Lady of Fatima, the nun keeps telling the pupils about a letter supposedly given to a girl by the Virgin Mary at Fatima and which the Pope was supposed to open in 1960. In the nun's belief, the opening of the letter means that the world would come to an end. Christine, then a teenager, meticulously prepares for the end of the world. When nothing happens, she feels deeply betrayed, not only by the fact that the world did not end but also by the nun's elusive answer of "It's a mystery." It is after this experience of being scared for years about the end of the world, of being manipulated into constant penitence that Christine never returns to the church again. When her youthful devotion is so betrayed, she loses faith completely. In that respect, Christine's spiritual coming-of-age is almost antithetical because instead of awaking to spiritual growth, she suffers a fatal spiritual crisis which results in her turning her back on all the teachings and morals the Catholic Church promoted, becoming a party goer and a heavy drinker. Later when her brother Lee dies in Vietnam she tries to drown her guilt in alcohol.⁶⁰

A Yellow Raft in Blue Water is also a novel about coping with various forms of loss. Some of these are personal – such as the loss of faith or trust, the loss of family or health – but many are communal losses as well. Lee's death in Vietnam is a great loss for the tribe, a loss of the promising future represented by the young man's involvement in civil rights and in keeping tribal traditions alive. Even Ida's withdrawal from the social life of the tribe is a communal loss as, instead of providing the community with memory and over time accumulated wisdom, she focuses her attention on the illusionary world of TV sit coms and family sagas. Yet she draws from her tribal traditions in order to find strengths and meaning in her life. Although Dorris is not specific as to which tribe the novel presents and thus stays more on a generic pan-Indian level, he nevertheless uses certain motifs and techniques to evoke the Native American world. One of them is a narrative technique which is circular rather than linear – many events and situations are repeated from different characters' points of view. This is reminiscent of oral traditions of storytelling as well as of gossiping.⁶¹ A recurrent motif is that of braiding. The braiding symbolically represents Rayona's maternal

⁶⁰ Although the topic is beyond the scope of this work, several Native American critics, including Gerald Vizenor (in his *Manifest Manners*) accuses Dorris of repeating the received stereotype of the heavy drinking Indian, especially in his nonfiction *The Broken Cord*. However, in *The Yellow Raft in Blue Water* Christine's excessive drinking seems understandable based on her situation.

⁶¹ Other narratives that recreate the sense of a closely knit community by using the gossipy nature of storytelling to learn what is happening in the community can be found in the novels of Louise Erdrich (Dorris' spouse), particularly in *Love Medicine*, *Tracks*, *Four Souls* and *The Tales of Burning Love*. Her technique of multivocality, however, has also been seen as simply a postmodern literary device by commentators such as Leslie Marmom Silko.

heritage – Christine braids Rayona’s hair at the novel’s opening, Ida braids her hair at the end of the novel, Lee braids his hair as a symbol of his recognition and pride of tribal tradition and of political activism. The braiding further stands for the three narrative strands of the novel. As Slethaug concludes, the braiding is also important as a recognition that “narratives are about ‘catching and letting go,’ that is, recognizing personal and cultural problems and then letting them go through the act of speaking.” At the same time, braiding for him suggests that “something stable and organized emerges from the difficulties of human relationships.”⁶² Thus in Ida’s vague suggestion at the end of the novel that she might reveal all the family secrets to Rayona there is a possibility of a narrative resolution. If Ida relates the complete story to Rayona, the family pattern of silences which have led to withdrawals and consequently to misunderstandings and accusations will be finally interrupted. The three narratives will no longer be only intertwined but will together form one coherent story of Rayona’s family life. The braiding refers to a Native American cultural tradition in which families are often formed around maternal lines. It stands for Rayona’s cultural and spiritual roots, as she inherits the maternal tradition from the female relatives preceding her. Yet Rayona would need as well to reconcile with the paternal side of her heritage should her identity quest be completed, but Dorris leaves this out of the frame of the novel.

A Yellow Raft in Blue Water picture both three individual lives and a family framed by a specific historical context positioned between Native American, white and black cultures. The three women both separately and in their communities experience loss as well as draw strength specifically from this multi-cultural setting. The novel addresses issues of identity, traditions, language, spirituality, and family relationships in the process of the formation of three different characters.

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⁶² Slethaug, “Multivocal Narration,” 26.

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