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A PLACE FOR THE PERSONAL: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL LITERARY  
CRITICISM THROUGH THE LENS OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

by

Jennifer Scucchi

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

American Studies

Approved:

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Melody Graulich, American Studies  
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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2015

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## ABSTRACT

### A Place for the Personal: Autobiographical Literary Criticism through the Lens of Transformative Learning

by

Jennifer Scucchi, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2015

Major Professor: Dr. Melody Graulich  
Department: English

Up through the 1980s, literary criticism scholarship had been primarily defined by New Criticism, an ideology which suggests that the approach to literary studies should be objective, focused solely on the text itself, and should *not* take into consideration authorial intent or readers' response. While this approach to literary studies seems practical in undergraduate literature courses in which students are still learning *how* to read literature, excluding different approaches to reading, understanding, and writing about literature can and does have inadvertent consequences. Although literary *scholarship* has been increasingly welcoming of alternative forms of literary criticism since the 1980s, including cultural context analysis and reader-response, many undergraduate instructors' *teaching* is still heavily influenced by New Criticism. With declining numbers of students majoring in English (and especially literature) each year, the exigency to make literature studies more meaningful to students is evident.

In this essay I contend that a more inclusive literature pedagogy, which takes into consideration personal experience and reader response as essential factors in *learning*, can work to revive and legitimate literary studies. I use my own experiences with “autobiographical literary criticism”—a hybrid genre which incorporates personal narrative, reader response, and textual analysis—to demonstrate the ways in which literature can cultivate, reflect, and create positive changes within our lives. I examine my experiences, which are explicated in my essay (included here in chapter 2) titled “It’s All Relative: My Journey with Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*,” through the lens of Transformative Learning Theory, demonstrating how and why the transformative process of learning can be enacted through a personal relationship with literature.

(33 pages)

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my amazing husband, Ray Scucchi, who has shown me the true value of stories and how to “just be yourself.” Thank you, Ray. Without you, none of this would be possible.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members, Melody Graulich, Keri Holt, and Lynne McNeill for your enthusiasm and willingness to support this project. Your encouragement and advice were essential to its completion, and I truly appreciate the time and effort you have spent helping me along the way. Each of you is truly inspiring.

I would also like to give a special thanks to my husband Ray, for all of your support, encouragement, inspiration, advice, patience, and love. Thank you to my four beautiful children—Jonathon, Matthew, Abigail, and Degan—for your support and love each and every day. I cannot adequately express the gratitude I feel for the sacrifices you have all made. Just know that it all means nothing without you.

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## CHAPTER 1

## A PLACE FOR THE PERSONAL

*“Literature is not a professional commodity; it resists becoming one more object of study. It moves you and transforms you. It is a living entity. It glows in the dark.”*

*– Radolph D. Pope*

As an undergraduate majoring in English with an emphasis in Literary Studies, I became all-too familiar with writing about literature as if it were an “object of study.” Certainly this is not *exactly* how my instructors had described the type of analysis we were supposed to be writing, but in my years of experience in undergraduate English classes, this was the norm. Seemingly objective, critical, and impersonal writing appeared to be the standard for the type of work I had committed my life to undertaking. I never thought twice about it, assuming that this was, in fact, the best way to write about literature. After all, I had never read a piece of literary criticism, nor been assigned to write any literary analysis essay in which this was *not* the standard. During my four years of undergraduate study I had read, studied, and written so many essays in this style that I was convinced that I could write objective literary criticism for just about any piece of literature I encountered and that those essays would ultimately define my work as a literary scholar.

However, in my second semester of graduate school everything changed, and I began to reevaluate the path that I had chosen. Despite all of the knowledge and skills I had developed during my years as an undergraduate, which I assumed to be the *only*

things necessary to understanding *any* type of literature, it was not enough to contend with the challenge I was now facing: I had been assigned a book that I could not distance myself from enough to analyze it objectively. No matter how hard I tried to take myself out of the novel, I simply could not do it. As Pope explains, this piece of literature had “resist[ed] becoming one more object of study” (506). This novel demanded more of me, and I knew that I could not adequately describe or discuss the aspects of the novel that were meaningful to me without actually talking *about* me. But everything I knew about literary criticism up to that point told me that writing about *me* in relation to a work of literature was not an acceptable or even useful form of expression. I had become conditioned to believe that there was simply no place for the personal in literary criticism—not if I wanted to be taken seriously, that is.

What I did not realize at the time was that there were many other literature scholars who had faced similar predicaments. Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar resonate my own feelings when they say that “we had been trained...in the methods of ‘objective criticism’...a kind of literary survival of the fittest,” (1,4) which Cheryl Torsney refers to as “comfortless” (qtd. in Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar 2), and Peter Elbow likens to an “author-evacuated...rubber-gloved” form of writing (qtd. in Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar 2). The facts were that our literary education had been dominated by New Criticism. First introduced by I.A. Richards in 1929, New Criticism has significantly influenced generations of English instructors who often use this theory to inform their pedagogical choices in undergraduate literature courses. The New Criticism theoretical framework supports an objective, text-only analysis of literature which removes both authorial intent and reader response with the intent of

“bringing literary study to a condition rivaling that of science” (Wellek 611). While a New Criticism approach makes literature instruction seemingly more straightforward (you can either analyze the words properly or you cannot), literature instruction dominated by New Criticism pedagogy is often at risk of removing the very essence of what makes literature valuable—the unpredictability and transformative nature of human life.

Despite its efforts to keep up with science, what New Criticism has actually contributed to is a concerning distaste for literature. As almost any English teacher can attest, students in every level of English education often cringe at the thought of having to study literature. This aversion to studying literature may also be a contributing factor the drastic decline of undergraduates majoring in English in recent years (Klinkenborg; Chase; Flaherty). Even if they enjoy reading literature (which many often do), the second these students are forced to step outside of the literature and examine its text through the microscope of objectivity is the moment in which that literature is at risk of becoming irrelevant to their own lives; thus, the literature is also at risk of becoming irrelevant to our society as a whole, a consequence I’m certain none of us are prepared to accept.

In response to this potential loss of literary value in both our personal lives, and to society as a whole, Diane Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar set out on a mission that they hoped would aid in redefining the roles of literature and literary studies within academia. Their mission was to validate the use of personal writing within literature scholarship, a task that they believed would make literature and literary studies more accessible and relevant to a wider audience. In the fall of 1988, they submitted a proposal to MLA for a panel that would discuss these issues; ultimately the panel

convened at the Midwest/Modern Language Association Convention in St. Louis. It was out of this panel that *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism*, a collection of essays whose success depends on a personal understanding of the literature each contributor is engaging with, was conceived. Printed in 1993, it was the first collection of its kind, despite an increasing presence of “personal voice” in feminist essays since the early 1980s. The books helped legitimize the use of personal writing in literary scholarship and paved the way for future scholars who were able to “know the literature through themselves and know themselves through the literature” (Freedman 8).

Just two years later, Nancy Owen Nelson followed this precedent when she edited and published *Private Voices, Public Lives: Women Speak on the Literary Life*, a collection of autobiographical literary criticism similar to that of Freedman et al.’s collection. Nelson’s collection was developed in response to a panel in which she participated at the Modern Language Association’s 1991 fall meeting. This panel was anomalous compared to the typical presentations given at MLA and other literary conventions in that it was defined by literary criticism that included personal voice. As Nelson explains, each of the four presenters discussed how “the study of text had helped [them] to reconcile the conflict between [their] private worlds and [their] public lives” (xxvi). Though the meeting ended in silence, the sentiments of gratitude and admiration for taking such a risk that were expressed by those in attendance after the panel concluded was evidence enough for Nelson and her colleagues to realize that not only was there a place for the personal in literary criticism, but that this form of criticism was more meaningful to individuals’ lives, work, and identities than were traditional modes of criticism.

What marks these essays as divergent from traditional modes of analysis is that the authors sought out and/or re-examined specific literature that dealt with issues that had not been typically addressed in literary criticism up to that point. For example, Brenda Daly's essay, "My Friend, Joyce Carol Oates," explores how her relationship to the writings of Joyce Carol Oates helped her to come to terms with her father's sexual abuse of her sister and mother. Melody Graulich recounts how she turned to literature that dealt with violence against women to help her understand her mother's story about witnessing Graulich's beloved grandfather repeatedly beat her grandmother through much of their marriage. In her essay "Search and Rescue," Beverly Conner describes how reading and teaching Anne Tyler's *The Accidental Tourist* help her cope with the excruciating grief she endured during the six month period in which her daughter was missing and in the subsequent moments of mourning after they received news she had been murdered.

While each of these women made great strides in redefining the roles and methods of professional literary critics, their voices have only extended so far. Despite the very real and enduring benefits of an autobiographical approach to literary criticism, the influence of feminist theory in nearly every aspect of academia, and the influence of other theories such as cultural context analysis to literature pedagogy, many literature instructors still rely heavily on New Criticism to inform their teaching (Thomas 81). Thus, my own literary education, the core of which took place over ten years after these publications were first introduced, informed me that to succeed in the field I was most passionate about, I would have to ditch the personal—abandon not only my personal

reactions to the literature I love, but also my own identity as a human being in relation to the literature that in many ways helped shape that identity.

In this essay I will take you on the journey that helped me personally overcome these suffocating and suppressive limitations that often result from a pedagogy informed largely by New Criticism. In doing so, I will demonstrate the power of the personal within literary scholarship and within individual lives. Ultimately, I hope to encourage undergraduate literature instructors to adopt a hybrid approach to literary pedagogy, one that works to blend personal writing—in the form of reader response and autobiography— and literary criticism—in the form of textual analysis. In an effort to reignite critical discussion on the use of the personal as a pedagogical tool, I will examine this hybrid genre, which I will refer to as “autobiographical literary criticism” (Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar) as a method for enacting Transformative Learning Theory.

This theory has been on the forefront of adult education since Jack Mezirow first introduced his ideas in 1978. After conducting a study designed to identify factors that aided or impeded women’s success in community college re-entry programs, Mezirow and his research team discovered a “nine-phase process that resulted in a change in ‘meaning perspective,’ which [Mezirow] defined as ‘psychological structures with dimensions of thought, feeling, and will’ and ‘a personal paradigm for understanding ourselves and our relationships’” (Baumhartner 100). Mezirow’s ideas, situated within Humanism and heavily influenced by Paulo Friere, are based on the notion that positive personal and social change first requires a reassessment of personal assumptions and beliefs. A critical examination of these assumptions in relation to an individual’s identity, which is understood to be a product of external forces (social, cultural, political, familial,

etc.), and personal influences (spirituality, memory, experience, etc.), ultimately empowers an individual to enact meaningful changes within his/her own life, and to become an agent of change within the larger communities in which he/she lives (Cranton and Taylor; Baumhartner).

While personal writing should not function as a mere replacement for traditional modes of literary analysis grounded in New Criticism or for other approaches to literary criticism such as cultural context analysis, I will demonstrate how a blended approach can enact the transformative processes required for meaningful change to occur within individuals and ultimately communities.

The process of transformation involves a deep and involved level of critical thinking, the kind of thinking that literature instructors expect their students to learn and eventually master. New Criticism works to develop a particular model of critical thinking that involves close reading and focused analysis on the text itself, skills that are certainly a valuable part of one's ability to understand and write about literature. However, the critical thinking model offered by New Criticism is not the only model of critical thinking that can lead to a greater understanding of literature.

A more personal approach to literary criticism also initiates and progresses its own model of critical thinking. This model often fills in the holes that a strictly New Criticism approach can have, holes that exist as the result of a false separation between works of literature and individuals' lived experiences..When students of literature use personal writing to critically examine their own experiences in relation to a work of literature, they can begin to make sense of these lived experiences, as well as the thoughts and emotions associated with them, through the lens of variety of other experiences that

the literature portrays. This type of critical thinking, which is often primarily driven by empathy and a deep yearning to make sense of the world, ignites the challenging process of shifting “meaning perspective” within individuals. The end result leads not only to a greater understanding of the literature itself and its role within society, but also to a greater understanding of the individual and *his/her* role within society. Ultimately, a blended approach to literary criticism in which both personal and New Criticism approaches are used creates an ideal opportunity for learning and can enact an authentic and meaningful personal transformation.

## CHAPTER 2

## “IT’S ALL RELATIVE”

The following essay serves as a representation of the transformative powers of autobiographical literary criticism. I wrote this essay in 2013, during my second year of graduate school—a full year after reading the novel *Love Medicine* for the first time. Despite this essay’s very real and enduring impact on my life, it was both written and submitted with intense personal skepticism and even fear that were rooted in my learned beliefs and assumptions about literary criticism and the role (or lack thereof) of personal writing within that genre.

In the foreword to *Public Women Private Lives: Women Speak out on the Literary Life*, Jane Tompkins states that the work of each contributing author “give[s] us permission to make ourselves whole through our work” (xiii). While these authors risk “embarrassment, shame, possible ridicule or humiliation, the charges of narcissism and self-indulgence, or even the hazard of self-discovery” (xiii), the writing they produce offers real value to both themselves and their readers. Just like these authors, I too was at risk in choosing to write autobiographical literary criticism (a genre I did not even know existed at the time). I risked embarrassment, humiliation, rejection, and even the possibility of failing the class. But as I grappled with my decision, I realized that if I did *not* write this essay, I would be risking much more—the opportunity to make myself whole. It was a risk I was unwilling to take. And so I wrote – just as my predecessors had done over ten years before—setting forth on a path of uncertainty, but one paved with determination, integrity, and fortitude, and fueled by a heart full of passion and love.

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**It's All Relative: My Journey with Lousie Erdrich's *Love Medicine***

Every so often you come across a book that changes you. I'm not talking about that surface level change that makes you think about things differently for the next few days or even weeks. Or even that book that you will always remember because it had such an interesting plot or memorable character. No, the kind of book I am talking about permeates your entire existence: past, present, and future. It not only changes the way you think, but also the way you feel, act, and speak. It can turn a lifetime of doubt and uncertainty into total clarity, while at the same time flipping all of your certainties upside down, forcing you to see the world through a totally new perspective. This kind of book changes your life forever.

I have come across a book like the one I describe only four times in my life (which says a lot considering I have always been what some might call a book carnivore). The most recent book came at a time in my life that I needed it most, completely taking me off guard and sending my entire existence into a tailspin for over a year. To help you understand where I am coming from, I will explain a little about my life and the circumstances that had led me up to this point.

I was born and raised in an extremely small, isolated community in southwest Wyoming. The population of this small coal mining town was never more than 2,500 people, the nearest town was a 45 minute drive away, and the closest mall another hour beyond that. We had one grocery store, one stoplight, one high school, a one-screen movie theater, 5 restaurants, 7 bars (Lord knows you need a drink in a place like that), and basically nothing else (except, of course, the very first—and I must say likely the

shabbiest—J.C. Penney department store). The town was founded around, and almost wholly depends upon the local coal mine, the largest open-pit coal mine in North America. My father and uncle, just like their fathers, worked their entire adult lives in the mine. Both of my parents were raised in this same small town, which they both despised. But rather than taking a chance and breaking away when they could, they got pregnant and married right out of high school. So they just stayed—forever.

And so I was raised—with a father who earned a middle class income but couldn't control his spending and a mother who refused to get off the couch—I was a poor, coal miner's daughter in a town that had plenty to say about it all. Yes, if there's one thing that defined my childhood more than loneliness, it would have to be gossip. I guess when you grow up and go to school with the same 45 people your entire life—and their parents grew up with your parents, whose parents also grew up with their friends' parents—you learn that there is no such thing as privacy. Fact and fiction get mixed up in the same big bowl of gossip, and before long you can't tell the difference. You quickly learn not to trust anyone with any information for fear it will get out, usually as some distorted version of the truth. You also learn what it means to be judged—constantly. You can't escape it no matter how hard you try, because no matter what you do, say, or don't do and say, the same judgmental eyes are always upon you, waiting for any sign of weakness and the most opportune time to attack.

As a child and teenager, this is how I felt under the constant scrutiny of others. I didn't like being judged, and I certainly didn't like being talked about. But with a family like mine, how could they not talk? We lived in shabby old houses my dad rarely paid rent on; drove an old brown station wagon; wore cheap, worn out clothing; received food

from the church because we couldn't afford to buy it. My mom was very obese and rarely came out of the house; my dad shaved his head bald, wore camouflage every day, and carried a gun everywhere he went (although he had never even served in the armed forces); my older brother was a meth-addicted "gothic," angry at the world and everyone in it; they both blared heavy metal music constantly and plastered questionable band stickers all over our vehicles. My little brother, whom my parents adopted from my dad's sister, was exposed to meth and alcohol as a fetus, causing permanent brain damage that made him normal enough to go to school and interact with other children, but damaged enough to make him a social outcast; he spent his entire childhood in and out of psychiatrists' and therapists' offices, doped up on Ritalin and every other kind of drug they could shove down his throat so that my parents wouldn't have to actually deal with his problems; he spent two years living in a children's home. During this time my father had an affair with the town's post master and announced he was leaving my mom (after twenty-one years of marriage) for this other woman; his announcement came just one week after my older brother was admitted to the mental hospital for his second attempted suicide (while his pregnant girlfriend slept on my couch because she had nowhere to go); and his impeccable timing also occurred just one week before my own wedding; two days later, when his new lover decided to break it off with him and stay with her husband, my father joined my brother in the mental hospital after he threatened to take *his* own life; they let him out a few hours before my wedding, just in time to walk me down the aisle.

And here I was— a shy but passionate girl with dreams, aspirations, and a heart full of love— stuck in the middle of it all, desperately trying to find a way out. I felt like a tight-rope walker in a circus. I was constantly trying to balance the chaos that was my

life with the person I truly was on the inside, gripping it all in my sweaty palms, carefully tip-toeing across the small and wobbly rope that was my only hope for survival.

Meanwhile, the audience locked their eyes on me, just waiting for me to stumble or fall so they could point and laugh, or cringe, or whisper.

It was the whispers that affected me most. I couldn't stand the way that they looked at me, through foggy lenses that had been primarily defined by my family's dysfunction. The whispers never saw who *I* really was, how hard I had worked in school, even from the very beginning, because I knew knowledge was the key to finding my way out; the whispers didn't see the love I had for the world and all the people in it; the whispers couldn't understand the pain I carried with me daily watching my family implode; nor could the whispers know my secrets, because I protected them fiercely. Nobody knew who I really was, and I felt alone, *always* alone.

But my senior year of high school I met a man, a man who was also all alone, just like me. I met him at his lowest point, at a time when he had given up hope that he could ever live a normal, happy life. Much like me, this man had never known true love and was always the one being pointed to and laughed at. It had been just one year since he had buried his six-week old son, and after a lifetime of pain, loneliness, and strife, it was all he could do just to make it through each day. But this man was strong. I saw it in his eyes, and I knew that I would never be lonely again.

So here we are, ten years later; Ray and I have been married for nine. We have three beautiful children, a happy marriage, and an incredibly bright future. I have just finished my first semester of graduate school (something I once believed was only a dream), and I feel confident in my ability to become a successful student and teacher. It

has been five years since I revealed to my family that when I was just ten years old, my older brother had sexually, emotionally, and physically abused me for over a year, all while my mother sat on the couch, oblivious to anything but her own existence. I haven't spoken to most of them since, and the weight that's been lifted knowing that they no longer have the power to control me makes me feel like I can breathe for the first time in my life.

But no matter how much I overcome, and no matter how hard I try, I can never seem to escape the whispers. They haunt me—all of them. I never wanted to be what the whispers had always told me I was. I wanted to run far away from it all, and that's exactly what I tried to do. I had moved away, broken off contact with all of the people and places that haunted my memories, and started a new life. But it wasn't working. I was frantically racing my way through each day, determined not to be “that” person, but not really knowing what person I should be.

It was at this moment that I found what I had been looking for, or rather it found me. All the fear and uncertainty that had been holding me back came alive the moment I started reading. It took me back to all those dark places I didn't want to go. But something unexpected happened. With this book, going back wasn't what I thought it would be. I wasn't scared or ashamed; I wasn't horrified or humiliated. No, this book helped me see my life the way it *really* was. But this was no easy read. I found myself reading chapters and pages over and over again, desperately grasping for the clarity I knew I could find in it. But that kind of clarity doesn't always come easily, and it would take me another year before the book's full meaning would reveal itself to me.

This book, which I had been assigned to read as part of a Native American literature class, was Louise Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine*. I knew after reading just the first chapter that this was the book I was supposed to write about for my final paper, but I didn't realize the course of events that my life would take, and how *Love Medicine* (both literally and figuratively speaking) would become an integral part of it. So I sat down, again and again over the next summer, trying to write something that would give the novel its due respect. But each time I failed, because I had yet to fully understand myself enough to fully understand my relationship with the novel.

So I put it aside, knowing that one day I would understand what it was I needed to say. Life went on; I continued my days as a busy wife, mother, student, and teacher. But the book stayed with me the entire time. I kept it on my night stand for an entire year, reading and re-reading pages and chapters, highlighting and underlining, covering the margins with my thoughts and feelings, trying to relate it to my life as best I could. Then one day as I sat and pondered, desperately grasping for the one thing I could say about the book that would adequately express how it had touched my life, a song by Jack Johnson started playing on my iPod. The lyrics went like this:

Everyone knows what went down  
 Because the news was spread all over town  
 And fact is only what you believe  
 But fact and fiction work as a team.  
 It's almost always fiction in the end  
 The content begins to bend  
 When context is never the same  
 And it's all relative  
 Even if we don't understand  
 And it's all understood  
 Especially when we don't understand

I was struck by these lyrics. I listened to them over and over again, thinking about *Love Medicine*, my life, and everything we had discussed in class. Jack Johnson's lyrics are all about gossip, and I suddenly realized that this is what *Love Medicine* is all about. Not just gossip itself, but the ways in which gossip creates meaning in our lives, both on an individual level, and on a community level.

With a fresh perspective, I began researching what others had said about Erdrich's popular novel, and I found that above all else, what people loved most was Erdrich's use of point of view, or narrative voice. This is what I connected to most as well. The world that Erdrich creates with her characters is a direct reflection of the world I grew up in: one filled with many different people, all related in one way or another, bound together by a web of gossip that stretched on for generations, affecting the lives of every person within the community. I began to think critically about gossip as I looked back through the novel and back on my life, and I realized that gossip played a predominate role in shaping both communities and the individuals within those communities.

The novel itself is organized as a collection of short stories and details the interconnected lives of the Kaspaw and Lazarre families and the community in which they live. Each story is told from a different character's perspective and is not written in chronological order, giving the novel an overall "gosippy" feel. From this gossip we learn about June, whose sad and strange death (detailed in the first chapter) connects the remainder of the stories. June, who somehow managed to survive in the woods as a child after her mother suddenly died, struggled all of her life with alcoholism and depression. She married her cousin Gordie, but their turbulent relationship eventually turned their son King into an angry, violent, and neglectful father and husband. King's brother, whom

was conceived when June had an affair, was ignorant of his parentage until adulthood. He and his cousin Albertine always remain calm and rational during the family's many violent fights; though they often seemed to be the most hurt by watching their family and community go through so many struggles, their pain nurtures a deep and enduring bond between the two.

The gossip in *Love Medicine* also tells us that Marie's husband Nector had a 5-year affair with Lulu Kashpaw, the woman he had intended to marry until a sexually heated moment with Marie changed his mind. Lulu had nine children, most of which came from different fathers, so her reputation in the community was well known; her son Henry Jr. was conceived the night of Lulu's husband, Henry Sr.'s funeral, and it was well known that Henry Sr.'s brother Beverly was the father; it was also suspected that Henry Sr.'s "train accident" was in fact suicide and that Lulu's affairs were to blame for his decision. Lulu's son, Gerry, was also often the topic of conversation within the community. His affair with June produced Lipsha, and his repeated prison escapes and re-incarcerations made him somewhat of a legend in the community.

Ultimately, it is gossip that tells the stories of these and other individuals within the community, demonstrating how each one has been shaped by the words and actions of others. Kathleen Sands once wrote that "gossip affirms identity, provides information, and binds the absent to the family and the community" (14). In *Love Medicine* each individual's identity, as well as the community's identity, is created and affirmed through gossip. The most prominent examples of the effects of gossip in *Love Medicine*, on both an individual and a community level, are found in Marie and Lulu. Though both women disdain the whispers that have surrounded them for their entire lives, these whispers

played an integral part in shaping each one's identity and their role within the community. I see much of myself in these two women; the decisions Marie makes just to prove the gossip is wrong, and the way that Lulu chooses to be who she is, despite the fact that she was "always a hot topic" (233). So I took a closer look at the women, learning who they were; and in return, I learned who I was.

Marie (Lazarre) Kashpaw was, and always will be her own woman. But that doesn't mean the woman she is has not been molded by the opinions and voices of others. When we first see Marie in chapter 1, she is an old woman, but just as strong, intelligent, and fiercely determined as she is in the next chapter as a 14-year old girl. We first get the impression that she is highly respected, but we quickly learn, through Nector's point of view, that Marie comes from a "family of horse thieving drunks" (62) and has not always been a respected member of the community. She was once merely a "skinny white girl from a family so low you cannot even think they are in the same class as Kashpaws" (63). Throughout the novel there is a distinct discrepancy between what Marie sees in herself and what the community sees her as, with Marie's true identity lying somewhere in between it all.

We learn later on how much Marie was affected by the gossip that ran rampant about her and her family. Being a strong and determined person, Marie sets out her entire life to simply prove that the gossip is wrong. When she married Nector she "had decided [she] was going to make him into something big...[so that] they would not whisper "dirty Lazarre" when [she] walked down from church" (89). And that's exactly what she did (or so she believed) when she all-but forced him into becoming a council member, a position that demanded respect from community members.

But even as much as Marie tried to prove the gossip wrong, she could never get away from it completely, and she knew it. Despite Nector's position on the council, it was still not enough to keep certain community members from speaking poorly about her. However, Marie was not one to succumb to other's attempts at power, so she had her own ways of dealing with it. Every time "the old hens were starting to cackle" with their "seven senses for scandal" (92), Marie would always be prepared to turn the tables on them. She understood the power of gossip within the community all too well, and so she too collected "many goods" (93) in town. She "didn't like to be the one to remind these old cows of their own bad lives. But [she] had to protect [her] plans" (93).

But Marie's plans were almost ruined by the other woman whose life was also greatly affected by gossip. Lulu was well aware of the gossip being spread around about her, which was likely much worse than the gossip being spread about Marie, but Lulu reacted to it much differently than Marie. Lulu simply didn't care what others thought of her. She knew who she was, and didn't seem to mind what others said about her on a personal level. Yes, it was true that Lulu had many affairs with men from the community, both married and single. "They used to say that Lulu Lamartine was like a cat, loving no one, only purring to get what she wanted" (276). But in reality, even though "it is true that [she did] all the things they say," she did it because she "loved what [she] saw" (277). She wasn't ashamed of who she was no matter how hard the community tried to make her be, and she never took the whispers to heart.

But the gossip being spread about Lulu did matter, and it still affected her, whether she wanted it to or not. Maybe it was because she chose not believe that people knew more than she thought they did—like her affair with Nector. She claims that

“nobody else ever knew of us” (281). Yet only three pages later at the council meeting, she hears someone say (in regards to her children’s fathers) “ain’t the youngest Nector’s?” (284). It was at this council meeting that we see just how far Lulu’s reputation had been stretched and how much it truly affected her. Nobody at the meeting was willing to listen to Lulu as she made pleas to keep her home and the tribe’s integrity intact, all because of her reputation. But, just like Marie, Lulu only let the gossip affect her so much before she turned the tables.

The antidote to the damage caused by gossip, as we learn from Marie and Lulu, is truth. Lulu only has to threaten to reveal the names of each of her eight children’s fathers for the council to be scared into giving her what she wants. Even if the gossip is true, which it likely is, knowing the actual truth of the matter is too much for the community to handle, because gossip is just gossip, until you know it’s true. Speculation stays just that, until someone reveals the reality of the situation.

This is what Jack Johnson meant when he said that “fact and fiction work as a team.” Marie and Lulu’s lives and identities are a work of fact and fiction, of speculation and truth. And when the content of these things always changes because the context in which these things exist is never the same, the end product—or the reality—is what makes these women who they are. They are a product of it all—fact, fiction, truth, lies, and gossip.

I think back to the first chapter, as Albertine walks into the remnants of her family’s all-too-familiar battle scene.

I saw what they had done. All the pies were smashed. Tore open. Black juice bleeding through the crusts. Bits of jagged shells were stuck to the wall and some

were turned completely upside down. Chunks of rhubarb were scraped across the floor. Meringue dripped from the towels. (Erdrich 41)

The pies in Erdrich's novel are not just pies. They represent many things, mainly individuals, families, communities, and the love that holds each of these things together. But from the beginning of the novel, we know that the pies are not whole. They get smashed, smeared, torn, ripped apart; and they cannot be made right, no matter how hard Albertine tries. But just because the pies are mangled, doesn't mean they are not still pies. We can tell from Albertine's dutiful attempt to put the pies back together, that even though "once they smash there is no way to put them right" (42), it is still worth the effort. And despite the fact that the pies no longer look the way they once did, they are still edible. The fight that caused them to smash could only change the pies so much. Yes, the pies look different—not as neat, pretty, or form-fitted; but the pies are still pies, and they will taste exactly the same, as if they had never been smashed, once that first bite is taken.

Just like the pies, the characters in Erdrich's novel, both individually and as a community, are battered and bruised, torn apart by the effects of other people's words and actions. But it has not changed the essence of who they are or the value of their lives. Both Marie and Lulu are deeply affected by the gossip that has defined much of their lives; but that gossip could only change them so much. Like the pies, these women cannot be destroyed by others; they can only be changed so much. And despite all the gossip, the truths and lies that have battered and bruised them, these women are still invaluable to their families and communities.

Most people don't realize what gossip truly is. Gossip is more than just saying words about another person or spreading information around. Those words have meaning and power, far beyond what we can ever fully recognize. Gossip tells stories, and as Leslie Marmon Silko reminds us, stories "are all we have" (2). I have come to realize, over this last year, that gossip, lies, and truth all have meaning. They define our lives in ways we cannot always understand, but nonetheless, it's a part of who we are. I was the first to say how much I hated gossip, and I honestly still do; but I have come to understand, as Erdrich has so subtly and beautifully demonstrated in *Love Medicine*, that gossip is simply a medium through which we learn who we are, who we can be, and how it all fits into the world around us.

I have learned, just like Marie and Lulu, that the never-ending gossip I lived with for much of my life did in fact define me. But not completely. What that gossip did was give me a reason—a reason to be better, to fight against what others believed I *should* have become so that I could realize who I actually am. Yes, many of the things they said were true, but that doesn't make me any less of a person. I don't have to hide from my past any longer, and I don't have to hate the gossip any more. It helped make me the person I am today—a strong and confident woman full of life, love, and a strong determination—and for *that* I am grateful.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE POWER OF TRANSFORMATION

As English teachers, we often find ourselves *telling* our students about the wondrous and expansive powers of reading and writing. We *inform* them that these things can make a real difference in their lives. We often use techniques that we believe will appeal to them, such as reminding them that writing skills are one of the most desirable job skills employers seek. However, while these strategies may be enough to motivate a few students to expend the time and energy it takes to improve their writing skills, for most students, that connection may simply not be enough.

Like many other English teachers, I started my teaching career with a determination to make a real difference in my students' lives. I wanted my students to experience the incredible transformative powers of reading and writing, such as I had experienced with *Love Medicine*. I had decided that if my students learned nothing else from my sophomore composition course, that they would at least leave with a very real sense of those mysterious and seemingly unattainable transformative powers of writing and reading that are often believed to be reserved only for the elite few. It was a task I knew many others had tried, and the odds of success were not in my favor. I knew I would have to do something different, that the same old thing would never work; to make a true impact, I would have to once again make myself vulnerable.

So the last week of class, with a wide-open heart and a sweaty handful of hope, I sat in front of my students and read the previous essay "It's All Relative" out loud—every last word. It was something I had never seen *any* teacher do, and I was more

nervous to read it to them than I had been to submit it for a grade. What would they think of me? How would they react? Would they laugh, sneer, cringe, or whisper? I had decided it didn't matter, for if my words helped even just one person, then it was worth it.

To my relief, their reaction was not what I had dreaded, but instead what I had hoped for. After reading the essay, I invited everyone to share a piece of their own writing during our last class together; they could read anything they wanted. I had done this in previous classes, only to have one or two students read out-loud, and it was *always* from very impersonal research papers they had written. This time, however, there were *six* students in one class alone that read out loud, and each one chose to read an intensely personal work.

\*Steven<sup>1</sup> shared his personal essay about his struggles growing up in a polygamist family and community and his ultimate heart-wrenching decision to leave the FLDS church and return to school, a decision that also meant being shunned by his entire family. \*Rachel performed original spoken-word poetry that celebrated her mother's courage to leave an abusive husband and raise four children on her own; Rachel's poetry also recounted her own personal struggles with depression and attempted suicide in the aftermath of the sexual abuse she endured from her father. \*Tyson read his deeply moving personal essay that focused on the circumstances of his father's death when Tyson was just 12 years old and his personal struggles with the loss afterward.

It was a powerful moment for everyone in the room and one that I personally will never forget. I spoke with each reader afterward, and they all told me that my courage to

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<sup>1</sup> Each of these students provided permission for me to use their stories, but names have still been changed to protect their privacy.

share a personal piece of writing with them had changed the way that they understood writing, especially its purpose. Never before had they good enough reason or the confidence to share their writing with anyone until they saw for themselves the transformative powers that writing can have. Just as *writing* my essay had done for me, *hearing* my essay had initiated a disorienting dilemma in my students, allowing the transformative processes to begin. For these three students specifically, sharing their own stories ultimately gave them the courage and confidence they needed to overcome the obstacles that had been holding them back in their personal and professional lives.

These life-changing moments are what Transformative Learning Theory is all about and the reason why I chose to read my essay out loud. While Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) has been written about extensively since Jack Mezirow first introduced the concept in 1978, and while there is still a large and complex discussion concerning the theory, the ultimate goals of TLT are essentially the same. Nadira K. Charaniya sums up Mezirow's primary points, explaining that the main principles foregrounding any approach to TLT are that

Learning is all about making meaning; that one learns through a process of making explicit, connecting with, interpreting, remembering, validating, and acting on 'some aspect of our engagement with the environment, other persons, or ourselves.' (235)

TLT is also defined by an emphasis on the *process*, rather than the *product*, of learning, which is driven by an individual's desire to "make meaning based on their own experiences, which in turn influences how they perceive and act" (Kreber 326). The transformative process is first initiated by a "disorienting dilemma" (Tisdell 23)—as was

demonstrated with my students — which incites an individual to reevaluate his/her own assumptions and beliefs in an effort to come to terms with the dilemma at hand (Mezirow 1991). This dilemma thus becomes a mechanism through which critical inquiry and reflection can occur because the individual must choose a course of action—either stick with the original beliefs and behaviors or form new beliefs and behaviors— based on the information available. This dilemma and subsequent critical thinking ultimately leads to a transformation of self that affects nearly every facet of an individual’s life.

A critical reading of the previous essay, “It’s All Relative: My Journey with Louise Erdrich’s Novel *Love Medicine*” demonstrates how the principles behind TLT work together to transform one individual’s beliefs and assumptions—in this case my own—and the subsequent experiences resulting from sharing the essay with my students demonstrates that such transformation can extend far beyond just the individual. From my very first experiences with *Love Medicine*, in which reading the novel created a disorienting dilemma, to ultimately having the courage to actually share my experiences with other people, every step of my writing process echoes the foundational elements that inform TLT.<sup>2</sup>

One of the foundational elements introduced by Mezirow and other early TLT scholars is that transformation is a *rational* process. However, others have since challenged that notion, arguing that along with rationality, transformation is a process

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<sup>2</sup> It is also important to note that I did not become aware of TLT until well after this essay had been written, turned in, and revised; and that the experiences, thoughts, and emotions I describe in the essay were not guided by a predetermined awareness of and progression toward any set of beliefs or strategies. This essay (and all of the elements that work together to make it a cohesive whole) is an authentic description of the actual events that took place within my life.

which also includes emotional, spiritual, cultural, experiential, physical, and relational elements, and that these elements all play a role in transforming an individual's beliefs, assumptions, and actions in some way (Kreber; MacKeracher; Clark; Tyler and Swartz; Charaniya). For me, the process of transformation was ignited by a cultural and emotional response to *Love Medicine* and finalized by a spiritual and physical response to the resulting change in my own assumptions.

The very first time I read *Love Medicine*, I was immediately engaged in a world that forced me to reconsider my beliefs about the role of gossip within my own life. My original assumptions—that my identity had been almost wholly defined by the actions and words of others; that my experiences, and most importantly the gossip I endured because of those experiences, had damaged me in ways I would never be able to get over; and that this demeaning gossip meant I held little value as an individual—were suddenly put into question as I read the stories of Marie and Lulu. With the turn of every page, I found myself connecting to these characters' experiences, thoughts, and feelings in a very familiar and personal way. However, seeing these women's lives and the role of gossip within them from an outsider's perspective gave me the unique opportunity to see my *own* life from this same objective point of view, thus creating a disorienting dilemma because this new situation “was not understandable from within [my] existing meaning framework” (Malkki 208).

These women's experiences mirrored my own, yet I did not look at them in the same ways I looked at myself. I saw Marie and Lulu as courageous, sincere, and determined—values that I deem significant to living a life of integrity. Though I also possess these attributes, I had difficulty seeing them within myself because my existing

meaning framework (which was primarily formed by gossip) told me a different story. Also, I found that these women offered an irreplaceable value to their families and communities, despite the efforts of others to limit them through the use of gossip. But until that point of seeing this value and those qualities in someone else whose life was also defined by gossip, I simply could not see these things within myself. As Mezirow explains, “we have a strong tendency to reject ideas that fail to fit our preconceptions” (Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice 5); thus, I adopted other people’s views of me, assuming that I was in fact inferior to those around me. But as I read about these other women whose experiences reflected my own, I became engaged in a dilemma I could not move past; my assumptions had been challenged in a way I could not ignore, and so began the process of transformation.

As I continued to engage with the novel over the next year, the process of transformation continued. I began remembering important factors that shaped my beliefs as I read about Marie and Lulu’s lives, connecting their lives, my own life, and the roles of gossip within each. The dilemma never left my mind, but rather waded in my unconscious, until those moments in time when I could make other relevant connections, such as those made with Jack Johnson’s song. I wrote notes in the margins of my book, asking “what is truth, and how do individuals and communities define truth through gossip?” and “how does gossip define an individual’s identity, on both an individual level and a community level?”

These questions stayed on my mind as I lived my day-to-day life. I thought about them in relation to my work as a composition instructor and graduate student; to my role as a wife and mother of three; to my relationships with family, friends, and co-workers;

and most importantly to my past life, in which I was often the center of gossip. Each of these elements worked together, over the span of a year, to alter the way that I understood gossip and the role it plays in defining both individuals' and communities' identities. Armed with this new definition and view of gossip, I was finally able to break the chains of uncertainty that had been holding me back for so long, and take my first steps toward being the person *I* wanted to be, and live the life *I* chose to live.

What is truly significant about my story, especially in relation to Transformative Learning Theory, is that the process of transformation depended almost wholly on one work of literature, a novel I would have never imagined could have had such an impact on my life. The novel itself was first published before I was even born; the characters are mainly Native American, which I do not immediately identify with; the setting takes place in an area I am unfamiliar with and much of it during a time before I was born. If asked beforehand whether this novel would change my life, I would have almost certainly said “no.”

But it is exactly for this reason that literature has so much potential to transform. Great works of literature catch their readers off guard, throw them into a world they could have never imagined on their own, forcing them to envision themselves *within* that world (what Mezirow would refer to as a “change in frame of reference”). This type of literature can challenge, inspire, inform, redefine, and re-envision. It offers the perfect “disorienting dilemma” that initiates transformation, plus the supplementary material needed to keep the transformative processes moving forward.

This connection to transformation of self (though it has not ever been specifically addressed in relation to TLT), is one of the very basic reasons we love literature and

dedicate our lives to it. In an effort to justify our work and articulate our reasoning for choosing an often ill-advised profession, in addition to addressing declining numbers of students majoring in English (and especially literary studies), the May 2001 edition of Publications of the Modern Language Association (PMLA), asked literature professors from across the U.S. to respond to the question “why major in literature—what do we tell our students?” The answers given reflect the transformative nature of literature, and offer support for a more personal approach to writing based on the assumption that personal transformation is an essential component to learning. Frederick L. de Naples responds to the PMLA question by saying “when students learn how to understand fiction, drama, and poetry, engage in characters’ lives, and ask questions about the worlds authors create, they very often ask questions about their *own* lives and the lives and issues they encounter” (496). He goes on to explain that “when students make comparisons, they embark on a lifelong journey of evaluation and critical thinking that makes their lives rich and rewarding” (496). Just as Mezirow and other TLT scholars suggest, the “journey of evaluation and critical thinking,” or in other words the *process* of learning defined by a critical awareness of one’s place within the world, is what truly makes a difference in people’s lives. The effects extend beyond the classroom—as can be affirmed by my experiences with *Love Medicine*—and have the potential to reach unlimited realms in space and time.

As de Naples suggests, it is a *personal* relationship with literature that triggers these effects. In her response to the question posed by PMLA, Janet Hadda describes in her essay “Being in Love” how reading and responding to literature is very much a personal act in which “the realm of literature is the realm of the soul” (500). Nadira K.

Charaniya discusses the realm of the soul, or “spirituality,” through the lens of transformative learning. She defines spirituality as “an honoring of a ‘life-force’ that permeates all living things” (232) and is separate from religion, which is defined by English & Tisdell as “an organized community of faith” (qtd. in Charaniya 232).

Charaniya describes the three-part sequence of transformative learning as follows:

The journey of transformation, when considered in the context of spirituality or culture...begins with a strong sense of identity that is confronted by anomalies and challenges. This identity is then expanded through engagement with experiences that are intellectual, relational, and reflective. Finally, the culmination is a clearer or more pronounced understanding of self and of one’s role in the world, a goal that is very much reflective of the transformative learning process...[which] must begin from an individual and personal perspective. (231)

Essentially, Charaniya’s insistence that transformation is dependent on spirituality supports the notion that literature, which Hadda places within the realm of spirituality, is an effective tool through which transformation can be enacted.

But why is literature so capable of enacting transformation; or better yet, why does literature exist within the realm of spirituality? The answer lies in the power of storytelling. Just as I came to understand the truth behind Leslie Marmon Silko’s insistence that “stories... are all we have” (2) while writing my essay on *Love Medicine*, supporters of both transformative learning theory and autobiographical literary criticism recognize the transformative power of storytelling. Because our lives can ultimately be defined as a series of stories, when we tell and listen to these stories, we are bringing

them to life; or as Tyler and Swartz explain in their discussion of the role of storytelling in transformative learning, we acknowledge stories' "life force" (459). Stories offer the "opportunity for exploration of experience that can foster transformative learning" (Tyler and Swartz 460) by engaging people in experiences that allow them to gain an alternate perspective of assumptions and beliefs. Literature invites readers to listen to stories, place themselves within those stories, and gain a broader perspective of the world.

However, even with the many obvious benefits of storytelling, it does not come without risks. Tyler and Swartz explain that "storytelling can be a reflexive act that makes the teller vulnerable" (460). This dilemma can be especially true for literature students and scholars who have been indoctrinated by New Criticism. Brenda Daly expresses these sentiments in response to publishing her autobiographical literary criticism in *The Intimate Critique*, saying "even now I feel that my testimony will be discredited, that it will 'taint' my authority (which must remain lofty and theoretical to be 'important')" (6). Her sentiments are not unfounded, but it is for these exact reasons that we must share our stories. The story is, after all, "a model of knowing, a means of defining our present realities and future possibilities" (Freedman et al. 5). Our stories and identities are inseparable, forever linked by the spiritual life force that defines our humanity, and as Shirley Nelson Garner resolves, "not being ashamed to tell the story means not being ashamed of...the self" (qtd. in Freedman et al. 5).

As literature scholars and teachers, we must begin to reevaluate the role of literature within academia and realize that sharing our own stories, and encouraging our students to share their own stories, can help us make the most significant strides toward making a real difference in students' lives—a goal I'm certain most teachers have

dedicated their lives to. While a re-evaluation of literature scholarship is already taking place, it usually begins within the system itself, looking mainly at the benefits literary studies offers the academy, rather than the benefits it offers students. However, in order to realize the full potential of literary studies within the university and within students' lives, I urge literature instructors to consider taking a different approach. First, let's consider the role of literature within your *own* lives. Think about why literature is important to *you*; how have you been personally affected by different works of literature, and how did those experiences transform you as a professional *and* as an individual? Have you ever been inspired or moved by something you read? I can guarantee for most of us the answer to each of these questions is "yes."

We are, after all, the Humanities. We exist out of the mere recognition that human life—in all of its elements, forms, and capacities—is unique, valuable, and very much worth the time and effort we put into understanding it. By understanding how literature works within the larger field of adult education, more specifically under the umbrella of Transformative Learning Theory, we can better understand the irreplaceable transformative qualities that literature possesses. But in order to mine this potential within our students, we must also reevaluate the ways in which we *teach* and even write about literature. We cannot be afraid to explore the personal, to not only encourage our students to write about literature from the perspective of their own experiences, but to also have the courage to do the same. Transformative Learning Theory gives us an avenue through which we can approach autobiographical literary criticism as a legitimate and effective teaching and learning tool.

At this point you may be wondering what a blended or mixed approach to literary studies might actually look like . My suggestion is to start slow. While personal writing in literary criticism offers many benefits, students first need to learn the basic literary analysis skills that are taught through New Criticism. Just as my essay demonstrates, the ability to closely read, analyze, and quote literature is a necessary part of writing effective autobiographical literary criticism. This is why I suggest assigning students in lower-level undergraduate classes a variety of specific genres first. For example, your students could start by writing a reader-response essay in which they will write about how the assigned novel relates to their life, how they reacted to it, and/or something that it made them think about (outside of the novel). The next essay would ask students to write a textual analysis essay in the New Criticism mode, focusing primarily on the text itself. This double-essay approach, if used with every assigned novel throughout the semester, will get students engaged in both modes of critical thinking that are necessary for autobiographical literary criticism to be successful.

If students use separated approach to writing about literature in lower-level courses, they will be prepared to blend these methods in upper-division courses. The critical thinking and writing skills that develop independently when the genres are separated will be enhanced even more when students blend these learned skills and critical thinking modes together. Of course it may be wise to allow students more freedom when assigning a mixed-genre essay. Autobiographical literary criticism tends to be very personal and intimately connected to the writer, so certainly every novel will not influence every reader to write such an essay. Instead of assigning the essay to one

specific novel, I would consider giving students a choice as to what novel they write the autobiographical literary criticism for.

This suggestion also holds true for graduate students, who would be well suited to write autobiographical literary criticism. Assigning a couple “warm-up” essays might be a good idea, however, as many graduate students may only be well versed in either personal/creative writing or textual analysis. At the graduate level, however, students are more likely to possess the capabilities to engage in multiple modes of critical thinking and writing simultaneously.

While teaching literature with an eye for the personal is a great start, we cannot achieve true change within the academy at large if we, as literary instructors *and* scholars, do not also begin to transform our own teaching and writing. I urge you to remind yourselves what it is that made you fall in love with our profession in the first place, and what keeps you going amidst it all. If we can rally together and bring the personal back into literature; if we can have the courage to not only teach but also write and publish our personal stories, then we can achieve more than we ever thought possible. Not only will our own lives be transformed, but so will those of our colleagues, students, and even friends and families—all for the better. My own experiences with the transformative powers of literature are not unique, and I hope will serve to empower other students, scholars, and instructors to share their own literature “love stories.” For if we adhere to the calling of the humanities, “to make us truly human in the best sense of the word” (Miller), then we will *always* find a place for the personal.

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