

The Use of the Anecdote in the Critical Study of Aboriginal Literature

A Project submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Masters of Arts in the Department of English

University of Saskatchewan

Saskatoon

By

Robyn Moore

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of the anecdote in critical scholarship as an ethical approach to studying Aboriginal literature. As many scholars are now becoming aware of the damage that has been done to texts by critiquing Aboriginal literature from the position of cultural outsiders, this paper suggests that anecdotal theory proposed by Jane Gallop is an ethical approach to Aboriginal literature. The use of story to generate theory explored by Aboriginal scholars of literature is compared to anecdotal theory, which implies that the use of anecdotes is an ethical approach suggested by Aboriginal culture. Anecdotal theory, the practice of recording a personal anecdote and then “reading” it to generate theory, offers non-Aboriginal scholars as well as Aboriginal scholars a way to connect to the text. Using anecdotal theory helps scholars remain more responsible to the texts they are critiquing; anecdotes make scholars more self-aware and ground them in real experience, due to the anecdote’s embodied nature and use of humour. This paper focuses on Aboriginal texts and scholars from North America. Helen Hoy’s critical work *How Should I Read These: Native Women Writers in Canada* is analysed for her use of the personal anecdote to examine its effectiveness. While Jane Gallop coins the term “anecdotal theory,” this paper attempts to connect personal anecdote, scholar, and literature in a way that Gallop does not.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Kristina Fagan whose help and support enabled to me complete this paper. I would also like to thank Department Chair`s Dr. Lisa Vargo and Dr. Ron Cooley. This paper was in many ways inspired by the Ethnohistory Field School run by Dr. Keith Carlson and Dr. John Lutz. Thank you to the University of Saskatchewan. I am grateful to have a very supportive family. And a special word of thanks to my mother, who taught me from a very young age that “books are our friends.”

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*By the time of the special session 'Women, Native, Other,' my cognitive dissonance was almost paralyzing. To take notes, as my academic training and research dictated, during Lenore Keeshig-Tobias's impassioned account of the place of Anishnaabe story-telling felt grotesque. Even if Native protocol permitted the quoting of such material, to do so was to impress the comments into the service of a very different, even antithetical project. [...] Surprised by tears as I was thanking Keeshig-Tobias afterwards, I marked my crisis disconcertingly by weeping publicly under a tree by the lecture-hall door. The best I could do at articulation for a solicitous white friend was my conclusion that 'anything we do is a violation.'* (Hoy 49)

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This anecdote is taken from Helen Hoy's collection of critical essays, *How Should I Read These? Native Women Writers in Canada*. Throughout this collection Hoy intersperses personal anecdotes into her literary criticism; however, for the purposes of this essay, I will be focussing on this anecdote in particular. In the essay in which this anecdote appears, entitled "'When You Admit You're a Thief': Maria Campbell and Linda Griffiths's *Book of Jessica*," Hoy describes her realization at a conference of the complications involved in being a Non-Aboriginal person in the field of Aboriginal literature. Non-Aboriginal scholars in this field can encounter difficult and deeply political issues; as cultural outsiders, they are faced with the possibilities that their work is appropriating the voice of Aboriginal authors, using culturally inappropriate theories and critical methods, taking space away from Aboriginal scholars, or perpetuating false ideas about Aboriginal people. In response to these problems, many critics of Aboriginal literature are now re-examining past practices and seeking to avoid approaches that perpetrate violence "against Indigenous texts by decades of literary criticism dominated by Non-Native academics wielding analytical strategies developed outside Native communities" (McKegney 56). Faced with these problematic practices, critics have been exploring alternative forms of criticism that may be more ethical. Hoy is one of these, using the personal anecdote in an effort to create a more self-reflective criticism. In particular, she uses the personal anecdote quoted above to point out similarities between herself as a scholar and Griffiths, both who engage in acts of scholarship and collaboration with Aboriginal people, to illuminate her struggles as a critic. Many reviewers

have remarked that the personal anecdotes Hoy supplies do supplement her readings of the texts she examines.<sup>1</sup> However, the theoretical implications of Hoy's use of the anecdote to supplement the critical study of Aboriginal literature have not been thoroughly examined. This essay will examine the use of the anecdote in Hoy's criticism in order to more broadly explore and evaluate the use of the anecdote in the scholarly field of Aboriginal literature. How can anecdotes be used to generate theory? Is it ethical to use anecdotes to critique literature? Is anecdotal criticism effective in contributing to knowledge within the field? This essay ends with my own effort to practice anecdotal criticism.

The word anecdote has many changeable definitions and connotations, which impacts its role in scholarship. It is both a noun and a verb. Replacing a static noun with a transient verb, The Oxford English Dictionary defines anecdote the verb, which is rare, as intransitive "to tell anecdotes" and transitive "To tell anecdotes to; to entertain with anecdotes; also, to make (a person) the subject of an anecdote or anecdotes" (Oxford English Dictionary). In anecdotal criticism, the critic is made "the subject of an anecdote," reflecting on his or her life to generate theory and more responsible criticism. Thus, using anecdotes in scholarship involves the critic taking a more central role in his or her criticism. By focussing on the critic as a human being, who possesses vices and humour, anecdotal theory grounds literary criticism in lived experience, holding the critic more accountable to his or herself and to the Aboriginal texts being studied. In an effort to combat the dryness of criticism and make scholars more critically responsible to the texts they examine, an anecdotal theory, when applied to Aboriginal literature, is an ethical way for Non-Aboriginal, as well as Aboriginal people to engage with the texts. It offers a way for Non-Aboriginal critics to deviate from traditional literary criticism in order to become more aware of their subject position and how it affects their reading.

Jane Gallop coined the term "anecdotal theory" and her work by that title extensively examines the place of the anecdote in academic writing. Gallop recognizes the apparent contradictions between the words "anecdote" and "theory" and lists some oppositions between

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<sup>1</sup> Critics such as James Ruppert, Larissa Petrillo, Gillian Siddal, and Penny van Toorn comment positively on Hoy's use of personal anecdotes, although they do not all use the term "anecdote." van Toorn states, "she has found a versatile, unpretentious voice that can shift from a scholarly 'lit crit.' mode into other tones and registers. She theorizes through story, and there are many good ones in this book" (152). Siddall uses the term "anecdote" throughout her review and points out the value of approaching texts through that lens: "In a critical genre that is fraught with political tension, that is, non-Natives writing about Native work, Hoy's approach is a welcome one, because of its acknowledgment of the important and inevitable interconnections among texts, classrooms, politics, and personal experience" (209).

them: “humorous vs. serious, short vs. grand, trivial vs. overarching, specific vs. general” (2). Anecdotal theory does not privilege one side of these oppositions over the other. Gallop’s treatment of anecdotes does not align itself with the more negative stereotypes; rather, she examines the positive and negative aspects to rehabilitate the status of the anecdote. “Anecdotal theory,” Gallop writes, “would cut through these oppositions in order to produce theory with a better sense of humour, theorizing which honours the uncanny detail of lived experience” (2). The use of anecdotal theory would benefit the criticism of Aboriginal literature which also seeks to break down binary oppositions of Aboriginal identity constructed by colonialism.<sup>2</sup>

### **Textual to Conceptual**

My objective in this paper is to explore the possibility of an ethical anecdotal criticism for Non-Aboriginal scholars. Ideally, anecdotal criticism would incorporate self-reflexivity while still giving priority to the studied Aboriginal text. One way to give priority to the studied text is to look to it for inspiration and direction in creating criticism. Looking to the studied texts, including the history and specific cultural contexts, can aid critics in finding an ethical approach to critiquing them. For instance, the importance of the oral tradition in many Aboriginal texts can be seen as fitting with the orality of the anecdote. Gallop notes that the social interaction of sharing anecdotes usually takes place orally instead of in print (164). She states, “my essays tend[ed] to use gambits of oral storytelling. The essays like to conjure up a here and now where storyteller and hearer are together in flesh” (Gallop 164). The colloquial nature of the anecdote is present as it occupies space between the oral and the written.

Although Gallop’s anecdotal theory is not concerned with Aboriginal literature, it is an appropriate tool as how many Aboriginal written texts contain anecdotes and oral stories. The integral role of oral stories in Aboriginal cultures is noted by LeAnne Howe:

In the beginning there are Choctaw stories. There are Cherokee stories. There are Dine stories. There are Lakota Stories. I am trying to say that we, the people, are

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<sup>2</sup> Tol Foster suggests, “The story of Native peoples has long been told in terms of binary oppositions based in weighted political frames crafted by and favourable to the colonizers: prehistoric peoples against historical peoples; savages against citizens; superstitious children of nature against realist technological innovators and pragmatic Christians; lazy Indians, either the casino-endowed kind or the affirmative action enabled, depending on the context, against hardworking and hard-bitten immigrant Americans who are the true inheritors of the land; Esau against Jacob” (265-266).

derived from creation stories. We are people of specific landscapes, and our specific stories are told about our emergence from a specific place (333).

In recent years, many Aboriginal critics have sought ways to include and incorporate not only creation stories but other types of stories into their theory and criticism. Lee Maracle, a writer and a member of the Sto:lo Nation, suggests the importance of story in theory to Aboriginal peoples:

It takes a lot of work to delete the emotional and passionate self from story, to dehumanize story into 'theory.' So we don't do it. We humanize theory by fusing humanity's need for common direction – theory – with story. (Maracle 237)

Christopher B. Teuton also explores the idea that Aboriginal oral traditional stories can be a theoretical template for criticism in his essay, "Theorizing American Indian Literature: Applying Oral Concepts to Written Traditions." By examining the story of the creation of Elohi, the world, Teuton draws on meaning, ethics, and symbolism in the story to construct a theory of a "socially constructed and culturally informed process of seeing and thinking" (214), which he then uses to examine an Aboriginal text. (194). While Teuton emphasizes the importance of scholarship by Aboriginal people, he does not exclusively advocate it in regards to his process of developing theory out of story. He suggests that all scholars examine how critical thoughts are formed in relation to "non-academic" interactions and forms of expression:

As American Indian criticism continues to develop, it becomes increasingly important for scholars of Native literature to create linkages between diverse forms of linguistic expression and critical thought. This process should begin with acknowledging the ways in which critical thought comes out of social relationships articulated both orally and in print, in the past and in the present. (Teuton 214)

Teuton's approach to literary criticism holds a lot of promise for connecting stories and theory in the field of Aboriginal literature but I wish to branch off from it slightly. I am suggesting that literary theory need not only come from a story that is part of Aboriginal oral tradition, but from any story, or anecdote. Gallop explains the process as "recount[ing] an anecdote and then attempting to 'read' the account for the theoretical insights it afforded" (2).

The history of the anecdote reveals that it has long been associated with dissenting voices and with the formation of "counter-history." The OED defines the noun anecdote as

“secret, private, or hitherto unpublished narratives or details of history” as well as “the narrative of a detached incident, or of a single event, told as being in itself interesting or striking” (Oxford English Dictionary).<sup>3</sup> The anecdote’s earliest associations are closely related with counter-history (Gossman 152). The place of the personal anecdote has been seen as a dissenting voice to the masternarrative of “capital-h” History. As a result, these narratives have been seen as a threat or trivialized. Anecdotes have also been used to set up a hierarchy, seen as valuable only when about certain individuals. In the 1750’s Voltaire thought anecdotes were useful to the public only “when they concern illustrious personages” (qtd. in Gossman 153). This idea is alive and well in more recent times, as seen in *The Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes* (1987), where the editor James Sutherland asks “what can fairly be called a *literary* anecdote? I suggest, this should relate to a writer in his capacity of author” (xiii emphasis in original). Besides the blatant and glaring use of solely the masculine pronoun throughout, a *literary* anecdote is seen to transcend the seemingly mundane quality of the regular anecdote. There seems to be a division between the acceptable anecdote, relating to an important person, and a trivial anecdote, relating to a common person. However, anecdotal theory attempts to dismantle the oppositions within the history and definition of the anecdote.

Characteristics of the anecdote, such as its history of being viewed as a dissenting voice, may resonate with Aboriginal authors. This alternative voice has been trivialized because it is the voice of the common people and because of its use of humour, which is seen as trivial as opposed to more serious professional writing. Humour is also often associated with Aboriginal literature (Fagan 81-82). Perhaps the humour and the alternative dissenting voice appeals to Aboriginal authors. Armando Janetta discusses anecdotes and humour in Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed* and states of anecdotes that “within the hierarchy of literary forms and narrative genres, the ‘minor’ literary forms of folk culture possess little prestige and have suffered neglect. All manifestations of the comic, including the anecdote, belong to these undervalued “minor” forms” (63). However, the postmodern movement re-evaluated the place of the anecdote as undervalued. For the discipline of history, the anecdote gave rise to a “microhistory” that, “by the 1980s, it marked, for many historians, the discovery of a new method, as well as new objects and topics, of

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<sup>3</sup> The first definition refers to what is most likely the text that introduced the word anecdote to the English language. The text is referred to as *Anekdotia* (literally “unpublished” in Latin) in the *Suda*, a Byzantine encyclopedic text, and is attributed to a sixth-century author (Gossman 151). The text was discovered in 1623 and published by the Vatican Librarian, but it was not until after 1650 that the word anecdote entered into the English language (Gossman 151).

historical investigation and analysis” (Gossman 164). For Joel Fineman as well, the anecdote provides new information; he connects the anecdote from history to the literary:

It reminds us, on one hand, that the anecdote has something literary about it, for there are, of course, other and non-literary ways to make reference to the real – through direct description, ostention, definition, etc. – that are non anecdotal. On the other hand, it reminds us also that there is something about the anecdote that exceeds its literary status, and this excess is precisely that which gives the anecdote its pointed, referential access to the real. (Fineman 56)

Fineman views the anecdote as literary while still “rooted in the real” (57). To me, “the real” signifies the lived experiences of the critic. Thus, the anecdote is an important vehicle which can move between the literary and lived experience, giving the critic a site to produce meaningful and responsible scholarship.

### **A Focus on Subjectivity, Not Objectivity**

As a Non-Aboriginal scholar studying Aboriginal literature, I am aware of my position as an outsider while I engage with the texts. Both the insider from a culture and an outsider bring desirable insights to the analysis of that culture. The insider is valuable because he or she has spent his or her entire lifetime living in that context, which is unachievable for an outsider. The outsider, however, produces scholarship that is somewhat objective, seeing qualities of the culture that the insider might overlook. However, for modern critics, who are being influenced by theories such as postmodernism and post structuralism, the concept of objectivity has been challenged. Craig S. Womack, an Oklahoma Creek-Cherokee author and scholar, discusses subjectivity and truth as it relates to experience: “subject positions, and the mediating role of interpretation affect all realities. There is an objective world, but human perceptions will always affect reality because *what* we see is influenced by *how* we see” (393 italics in original). Therefore, how can objective criticism be achieved? Arguably, it cannot, yet some critics still stand outside their criticism without openly acknowledging their subject positions. For example, my background growing up a white middle class female has a bearing on my criticism, as does my subject position of student. Instead of denying the subject position of the critic, instead of disconnecting the body of the critic from his or her name on their scholarship, why not analyse

ourselves the same way we as critics analyse the context of the fictional authors we study? The result brings forth criticism that is rich in meaning, socially relevant and responsible

Sam McKegney, however, raises some potential problems with this “focus inward” approach (59). He cautions that too much focus is being placed on the critic in this type of “intense self-reflexivity,” which tends to be “masturbatory” (59). McKegney begins his analysis of the “focus inward” approach by stating, “yes, scholars need to be aware of their own limitations, and yes, they must be self-reflexive, but no, they do not need to make themselves the stars of their studies, especially to the ongoing neglect of Indigenous voices” (60). While I agree with this statement, it seems unclear where the line is drawn between being “self-reflexive” and being a “star of their studies.” Is it sufficient to be on the “good” side of self-reflexivity by stating in one sentence in an introductory paragraph one’s status as Non-Aboriginal? Or is a paragraph permitted? Should the detail be relegated to a footnote? I would suggest that the critic include self-reflection in the form of an anecdote. After deriving theory from the anecdote, the theory should be used to critique the studied text, which is the focus of the scholarship.

### **Anecdotal Theory: Connecting Body and Text**

The use of anecdotal theory would benefit the criticism of Aboriginal literature, which Womack believes to be too often dry: “I worry about criticism that is not funny. I worry about criticism that is not moving. I have, therefore, a good deal to worry about. Comedy and emotion in criticism, it seems to me, are essential critical aesthetics” (395). Womack believes comedy and emotion to be essential to criticism because they reveal the critic’s passion for intellectual work. Anecdotal theory can provide criticism with the very humour it needs to reflect the lived experiences of the critic. Including anecdotes in criticism also increases its readability. Readers who can connect to the emotion in the text are more likely to continue reading the paper. Criticism that is more widely read influences other scholars and makes a larger contribution to knowledge. Returning to Hoy’s anecdote at the beginning of this paper, readers can see that there is no humour to be found in her distress. While the lack of humour may not provide as much entertainment, it still evokes emotion in the reader. There is something memorable about an anecdote describing a display of public weeping. It evokes emotions such as sorrow, compassion, frustration, and pity in the readers. Evidence of the effectiveness of displaying emotion in *How Should I Read These?* can be found in the reviews of the book itself. One critic,

Gillian Siddall, felt inspired enough to include an anecdote of her own in the review relating to the very anecdote being explored in this paper (209). She relates an experience at a conference where she took notes during the speeches made by Aboriginal people, thinking it was a sign of respect. It was pointed out to her later that it was disrespectful. A Blackfoot man asked her to share with the group the contents of her note taking instead of observing quietly and leaving. After relating the anecdote, Siddall states, “I tell this story because it serves as a metaphor (as well as a model for Hoy's own critical practice) for what Hoy accomplishes in this book” (209). Siddall uses her anecdote to suggest that speaking, even if unsure of what to say, is better than not speaking at all.

The importance of “lived experience” is emphasized through anecdotal theory. The bearing that lived experience has on a critic’s writing is undeniable. However, the lived experience of the critic and his or her body is often detached from the critical text to the detriment of the criticism. Womack states, “critics can be passionate without being *compassionate*. One’s criticism, in other words, needs be checked against the reality of one’s own body, one’s experiences, the knowledge that comes of these interactions. It also, however, must be checked against other bodies, experiences, knowledge” (395-396 italics in original). Womack implies that ethical criticism is achieved through the bodies, through the lived experiences, of the critic and the subject(s) of the critics study. He correlates the experiences of the body with lived experiences. Therefore, what is experienced throughout life with the body becomes a collection of lived experiences through which critics seeking an ethical approach check against their criticism. As well, Robert Warrior, scholar and member of the Osage Nation, promotes embodied criticism. While his paper is directed primarily to Aboriginal critics, the message is the same: “our bodies are a legitimate site for theorizing and that one of the important links between theory and experience is the fact that theorizing is something we do in our bodies” (350). The body and theory are inextricable; it is unethical to ignore the personal in criticism. Just as theory is conceptualized in a critic’s body, it should be measured by lived experience to generate an ethical criticism. Using the anecdote is a way to connect the body of the critic and the criticism being written. After reading Hoy’s anecdote, I have a vivid mental picture of Hoy propped up against the tree in front of a building crying. As a reader, the mental picture adds humanity to the criticism; Hoy is no longer a name, but has a body that cries and sits under a tree. With that particular anecdote, she has achieved an embodied criticism.

### **How Should I Anecdote These?**

Having argued that practicing anecdotal theory is both appropriate and meaningful for critics of Aboriginal literature, I return to the question of effectiveness. Is it effective in providing ethical criticism that contributes to knowledge within the field? To answer that question, I will evaluate Hoy's use of the anecdote. Then I will analyse and flush out ways in which an anecdotal theory could function in the field of Aboriginal literature.

The importance of the anecdote Hoy chose to retell in this chapter lies in its relation to the text she analyses, *The Book of Jessica*, for Hoy, "can be read as modelling aspects of the white scholar-Native writer relationship" (48). She states the chapter will "study how the theory illuminates the practice and how the practice illuminates the theory" (49) Hoy escapes what McKegney deems "focus inward" scholarship. She prioritizes the literature and Native voice structurally, which is reflected in the form of her paper by beginning with an abstract for an analysis of the Aboriginal (or Aboriginal and white in this case) text. It is only after that "academic" abstract that she switches to an anecdote. Before the transition, she writes, "that's the abstract for this chapter, an academic take on the project. Let me try another voice" (49). For Hoy, there is a clear and marked division of the personal and the academic, marking a major difference between her type of criticism and anecdotal theory. To make anecdotal theory a relevant theory for Aboriginal literature, the personal and the academic would ideally be more fully integrated, as it is the lived personal experiences of the academic that influence their theory. While Hoy does integrate the anecdote, she views it as secondary to her academic writing.

As well, Hoy does not fully explain the place of her anecdote in her criticism. The anecdote is written in as "another voice" to relate to the text, but she does not emphasize why she chose to relay that particular anecdote. It appears as though she chose it to be able to relate to ideas and themes found in her studied text, instead of showing how the anecdote generated her theories and how her lived experiences are reflected in her critical approach. The anecdote describes a moment of crisis in Hoy's life. After crying at the conference, Hoy reached the conclusion that she should get out of the field of Aboriginal literature:

I would return to the graduate school my grant-in-aid for further research on Armstrong and other Canadian Native women writers and withdraw my notices of a research assistantship. I would abandon my research plan for a book in the area.

Not because such work was fraught with political awkwardness and potential discredit (oh, really?) but because it was imperialist. It rewrote Native stories from the perspective of a cultural outsider. And it did so at a time when Native reading of the same texts had much more restricted opportunities for formulation and dissemination. (51)

This attitude is described by McKegney as the “Retreat into Silence,” a strategy of ethical disengagement where the critic is so concerned about misunderstanding or recolonizing that they move to another area of study (58). While this strategy may seem noble in that it opens up spaces in the academy for Aboriginal people, McKegney states that this approach is “contrary to the goals of respecting Native voices and forwarding the social and political objectives embedded in texts” (59). Hoy obviously also comes to the realization that by walking away she is disengaging because, of course, she does eventually write and publish the book. However, she does not explain how the decision to continue working in the field of Aboriginal literature was made. She does not explain how that anecdote translates into her theoretical approach or how it has impacted her criticism. In fact, her conclusion to publish and her anecdote contradict one another. For anecdotal theory to work, lived experiences of the critic need to not only reflect, but influence the criticism of the critic.

Instead of using an anecdotal theory, reading an anecdote to generate theory which is then applied to the studied text, Hoy uses the anecdote to rationalize and come to the truth about her crisis. The “truth” she finds in her anecdote is not used to generate theory or applied to the studied text. She writes,

I have not been entirely honest about my crisis over researching Native literature – nor was I with myself at the time. My tormented sense of the impossibility of such work did not derive entirely from a conviction of an absolute epistemological impasse, an impenetrable barrier between cultural insider and outsider that I could only augment by presuming to breach. Nor from a conviction of the inevitability of a colonizing appropriation. Behind those concerns lurked an appalled glimpse of the momentous personal and methodological changes entailed in counteracting my cultural ignorance and presumption. Hell, I like my library fortress, my scholarly garrison. (Hoy 61)

Essentially, fear of adapting her academic research is cited as being the main reason for questioning studying in the field of Aboriginal literature. There certainly is something safe and comforting about staying within the “library fortress” and resorting to writing criticism with the tested collection of critical lenses, but remaining comfortable is not always responsible. Remaining comfortable is not adaptive. Her life experience eventually led her to a truth, but she did not relay that truth through anecdote. Hoy was not completely honest in the anecdote, which resulted in the contradiction in her conclusion to work in Aboriginal literature.

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*After sitting at Grand Chief Archie Charles kitchen table for an hour, the interview ends. One of his daughters is at the stove fixing the family lunch. Before I can leave, I remember the consent form needs to be signed. I take out the form and begin to explain it orally to my mostly blind host and informant. But, he interrupts me, takes the pen, and says jokingly, “This isn’t my first time you know...” My cheeks flush red with embarrassment as I laugh awkwardly and start to leave.*

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This time, the anecdote is mine. I will attempt to read it for its insights and then make an attempt at anecdotal theory. First, I will describe the context of this anecdote. I recently attended an Ethnohistory field school for four weeks in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia where I was one of a group of graduate students who were actively engaged with the Sto:lo people to research topics that were generated by the community. Oral interviews as well as some archival research were conducted. Before we began interviewing, seminar sessions were provided on methodology, proper conduct, and legal matters, such as the consent form. The two main objectives of the field school are:

- 1) To bring history students into an indigenous learning and knowing context where they can foster meaningful relationships with Aboriginal People while practicing oral history and ethnohistorical analysis.
- 2) To make available to an indigenous community highly skilled students with training that can assist in

interpreting complex historical issues identified by the Aboriginal community as having important contemporary significance. (Carlson and Lutz)

It is clear that from the course outline, the field school is meant to be a collaborative effort to serve the needs of two parties. For the students, the benefits are an opportunity to work in the field and attain some knowledge which will benefit them in finishing their degrees. The benefits to the Sto:lo community include scholarly research, which will help them to interpret and learn from the past to provide knowledge for future generations. An individual like Charles participates in the field school for various reasons. I postulate that the participants like to have their stories recorded and stored within the Sto:lo community to live on after they die. Other interviewees spoke of youth that paid no attention to past cultural beliefs and history. The individuals also seemed to enjoy sharing the stories. At the same time, however, Aboriginal stories were being collected and analysed by Non-Aboriginal people. Hoy's fears became my fears as I attempted to "re[write] Native stories from the perspective of a cultural outsider" (51). Furthermore, for myself and the other graduate students, we would attain something tangible out of the experience, a graduate degree. Whereas, for the individual participants, nothing tangible was gained, except for tokens of thanks at the thank-you feast. Does this field school really serve the needs of both parties equally? I found myself in the same place as Linda Griffiths and Helen Hoy, attempting to navigate the line between collaboration and stealing.

The interview with Archie Charles was the first interview I did without previously knowing the interviewee. I was quite nervous, but after being welcomed into his home, our conversation soon felt almost as natural as a chat with friends. My anecdote relates the awkward end to a comfortable conversation. The consent form has to be signed by the interviewee so that their words can be used in the research papers. There are difficulties with presenting the form at the beginning as well as at the end of the interview. To me, presenting the form at the beginning of the interview signalled a more professional and contractual tone. However, asking for the interviewee to sign after the interview seemed somewhat sneaky. The consent form quickly became notorious among my fellow students as the most dreaded part of the interviewing process. The purpose of the form is essentially to allow the information that is disclosed in the interview to be used in research projects, but it is also a legal document used to protect the institutions and to protect the interviewee. The consent form seems to have the power to turn what was a comfortable talk in the interviewee's house into a contrived legal transaction. Suddenly the

collaboration does not feel like an equal project because I am the one with a legal document, putting me in a position of power.

The act of writing the anecdote was easy, however, the act of reading it for theoretical insights is harder. I can remember thinking before I took out the consent form that I should make sure it was clear to him what he was signing. My thinking was impacted by a previous knowledge of treaty signing, a pre-conceived notion of Grand Chiefs, as well as a knowledge of the damage criticism has done to Aboriginal texts. Perhaps Charles could feel my anxiety over the form and used humour to diffuse it. Or perhaps some of my anxieties were grounded in truth but the field school's reputation counted for more. I was working from previous knowledge/ignorance as a cultural outsider to try to predict and account for his feelings as a cultural insider. I can see now that my conception of the consent form was different than his. Moreover, my conception of his conception of the consent form was wrong and grounded in stereotypes. And, my overcompensation for the wrongdoings of the past did not come across as considerate; rather, I created a power dynamic by assuming that I would need to explain the form, implying that I was more experienced in these matters than him. But, as my course outline explained, I was supposed to be the "highly skilled student" using the consent form as one of my tools. The tool was new to me but not new to Charles, who was more aware of the process than I was. Resorting to humour was Charles' way of rectifying my misconceptions. This anecdote subverts and illuminates the conventions of the consent form as a tool of the scholarly "expert."

After reflecting on my anecdote, I can attempt to generate a theory to approach literature. I can see that my idea of a contract and of collaboration differs from Charles,' which leads to many questions: What are the different meanings of collaboration? How does the academy view it? How is it viewed in *The Book of Jessica*? Is *The Book of Jessica* a collaboration? According to which subject positions is/is not *Book of Jessica* a collaboration? How do preconceptions of the word collaboration affect academic research? These questions were generated by my lived experiences described in the anecdote and the answers would also be informed by the same anecdote. While it is not within the scope of this essay to answer these questions, I can imagine the ways in which I could bring the insights from this anecdote to the analysis of a collaborative text, such as *The Book of Jessica*.

## Conclusion

Missing from Jane Gallop's work on anecdotal theory is the relation of anecdotal theory to literature. Even though she is a professor of English, she does not use her anecdotal theory to critique texts. I have attempted to take this next step: to develop a way to relate anecdotal theory to literature. I argue that anecdotal theory is an ethical approach to Aboriginal literature because of its embodied nature, its humour, and its rootedness in lived experience. Elements within Aboriginal texts and culture suggest the use of anecdotal theory would be both ethical and complementary. Anecdotal theory is useful to Non-Aboriginal scholars because it creates self-awareness in the critic, promoting responsible criticism. As McKegney states, "to respect the creative work of Native writers, the intellectual work of Native critics, and the activist work of Native community members, one must engage – listen, learn, dialogue, and debate" (63). The anecdote is the perfect site to listen, learn, dialogue, and debate as it combines personal experiences with academia respectfully. Anecdotal theory is an effective and ethical way to engage with Aboriginal texts.

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