

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

“It Just Seemed to Call to Me”: Debra Magpie Earling’s Self-Telling in Perma Red

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/14z4z333>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 30(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Haladay, Jane

Publication Date

2006

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

“It Just Seemed to Call to Me”: Debra Magpie Earling’s Self-Telling in *Perma Red*

JANE HALADAY

Debra Magpie Earling, author of the 2002 novel *Perma Red*, does not appear as a named character in her text, which has been designated as a work of fiction.¹ Yet the content and construction of the novel have been major forces both arising from and shaping Earling’s autobiographical experiences within her immediate biological family and as a member of the Salish-Kootenai community. Intertextual readings of the interviews, short stories, and personal dedications Earling has published before and since *Perma Red*’s publication powerfully articulate the autobiography embedded in this novel. Eighteen years in the making, *Perma Red* is an intricate, intimate expression of self-life narration that is Earling’s act of publicly honoring the Aunt Louise she never met but who has lived with Earling daily through family and community stories.

Perma Red is set on the Flathead Reservation in western Montana in the 1940s, where turbulent Native-Anglo antagonisms continue to constrict social, educational, and economic spaces for the reservation’s Native inhabitants as part of the colonial legacy. In lush prose, with minimal dialogue, Earling describes Louise White Elk’s difficult, dangerous life and in doing so offers up an eloquent fictionalized eulogy to Earling’s actual Salish Aunt Louise, who died brutally and young on the Flathead Reservation in 1947. In rendering this fictionalized portrait of her biological aunt (whom I refer to exclusively as “Aunt Louise” in this essay, to distinguish her from the fictional “Louise White Elk” or “Louise”), Earling not only demonstrates her characters’ bonds of female kinship through memory as a site of empowerment, but Earling

Jane Haladay holds a PhD in Native American Studies with an emphasis in feminist theory and research from the University of California, Davis, and an MA in American Indian Studies from the University of Arizona. Her work focuses on literary practices of decolonization, indigenous self-determination, and the subversion of ethnic and gender stereotypes in the writings of twentieth-century and twenty-first-century Native American and First Nations authors.

herself becomes a significant “cotagonist” through her storyteller’s memory and voice, constructing her own family history within the continuum of Bitterroot Salish community.²

Originally, Earling intended an even more biographically “accurate” rendering of Louise’s life story than the one that appears in *Perma Red*. Earling grappled with what it would mean in relation to the authenticity of her Aunt Louise’s story to allow the fictional Louise White Elk to survive in the novel. Eventually, Earling states in a 2002 interview, “it occurred to me that [Aunt Louise] was only 23 when she died and if I could change the story and allow a different scenario to take place—what would have happened if she lived. Giving that chance of hope in fiction is a really good thing.”³ By “changing the story” in this manner, Debra Magpie Earling perpetuates the role of her Bitterroot Salish storytelling forebears, and all Native storytellers whose adaptive modifications of original cultural stories over time generate what Leslie Marmon Silko has described as “a new story with an integrity of its own, an offspring, a part of the continuing which storytelling must be.”⁴

That Louise White Elk is alive at the end of *Perma Red* (that she was, in fact, resurrected by Earling after the unpublished manuscript had already been circulating in the publishing world for six months with Louise having been killed, as Earling’s Aunt Louise was) resonates with the sorts of complex editorial and personal decisions and relationships that persist for Native women authors into the twenty-first century. Shortly after Earling’s manuscript had been read by a number of publishers, with many interested in the book but none willing to publish it because of its unrelenting violence, Earling “started to think, ‘Louise’s story is not going to be told.’” She began to wonder, “‘Should I bring Louise back? Is that it?’”⁵ The revised conclusion of *Perma Red* and Earling’s choices in making this decision also speak to contemporary Native authors’ power to use fiction to right historical wrongs through print. At the same time, Earling’s insider rewriting of history allows for the facts of one individual Native woman’s life (Aunt Louise) to emerge through published discourse around the novel’s altered conclusion. As Earling observes, “there is a peace in this ending I can’t find in the real story.”⁶

THE RUGGED PATH TO PEACE

Despite the peace in Earling’s revised conclusion, Louise White Elk’s path to that peace is anything but tranquil. Earling manages to balance descriptions of the beauty of Flathead land and the grace of specific characters with scenes of graphic brutality and poverty in Native life on the reservation of the 1940s. *Perma Red* is a blood-soaked book, from the novel’s second sentence in which Louise’s bloody nose flows so freely that she feels Baptiste Yellow Knife, the boy who had blown his love medicine powder into her face to make her sneeze to the point of nosebleed, “had opened the river to her heart” (3). From this bloody opening of both heart river and novel Louise White Elk is bloodied successively by a deer crashing through the car windshield in a nighttime auto accident; by her newlywed husband, Baptiste, who nearly beats her to death and rips open her breast with a broken bottle edge; by her

obsessive Anglo lover Harvey Stoner's pummeling; and by a second car crash with Stoner and the cowboy Jules Bart near the end of the novel. Coyote-like, Louise squeezes out of each of these near-death episodes battered but alive. When we are finally given the shaky, scarred, but living Louise White Elk at the novel's close, her survival seems as extraordinary as it is well earned, both for Louise and for readers who have shared her struggles. It is hardly a fairytale ending. The "peace" of Earling's invented conclusion to her Aunt Louise's real-life story arrives having been well paid for during the life of Louise's fictional counterpart.

The novel is written as multiple narratives, primarily in Charlie Kicking Woman's (the tribal police officer's) first-person voice and from Louise's limited omniscient point of view. "As for Louise not having a voice," Earling explains in an interview, "I couldn't capture her in first person. I tried to, but I couldn't. I realized she was an elusive character. Even in third person, she remains elusive."⁷ Although she undresses for four men in *Perma Red*, Louise will not expose herself to anyone through language. Even readers can never get too close to Louise, and instead we work to keep up with her constant motion: she is walking, running, lighting a cigarette, swimming, dancing, drinking, changing clothes, fighting, fleeing, hiding in deep grass; always she is constantly, vaguely, waiting. Earling represents Louise White Elk as a fierce, independent, searching, and silent young woman who is chronically hungry, physically and psychically. Louise craves belonging yet at times rejects connection with both whites and the Indian people to whom she most fully belongs. With her mother dead and her father living with his second wife, Louise is fully engaged in surviving. Living in dire poverty with Grandma Magpie and younger sister Florence, Louise has too little to waste, including words.

Her combined physical beauty, incautious defiance (which at times makes her vulnerable to violence), and inability to accept reservation colonial authority and male domination cast Louise as a force to be safeguarded within her Salish community. These traits mark her as an object of admiration by more timid souls like Charlie Kicking Woman, who can only fantasize about such blatant disregard of existing power structures, including federal legal and educational institutions. In modeling Louise White Elk on her aunt, Earling explains:

She seemed to be representative of those young men and women I've known on the Reservation who are so brilliant and talented and beautiful and somehow you can't get through to them. You want them to live a good, happy life and they show so much promise. And yet, something happens. They're haunted by things that you never quite understand. A lot of times we lose those people in our tribes. So Louise was, in some ways, that person who binds a community together in a way that they all begin to focus on saving that one person.⁸

In their individual ways Charlie Kicking Woman, Harvey Stoner, and Baptiste Yellow Knife—the three very different men who love and obsess over Louise—each speak to Louise's yearnings to cross the borders of her limiting, cramped

existence. Earling explains: "There were so many Indian people, especially in the 1940s, who were captured in some way by the authority of the United States government. They were literally wards of the government. . . . And so there was always that desire to leave, to get out from under oppression, but also to stay home and be free. I think Louise represents that. She's running away from the idea that she's not free."⁹

Quite different from the roles of the significant men, the roles of the female cotagonists in *Perma Red* demonstrate the power of enduring connection through physical, spiritual, and emotional nurturance and health. Charlie Kicking Woman, Harvey Stoner, and Baptiste Yellow Knife register different measures of power in their efforts to control and possess her. The female cotagonists in *Perma Red*, by contrast, provide Louise with grounded sources of power that do not demand a return beyond the tacit obligations of kinship, obligations that Louise is not only inspired to fulfill but that nourish rather than deplete her.

Although Louise wonders whether she is defined by particular men in her life, it is the significant women in *Perma Red* who give definition to Louise—specifically, Grandma Magpie and Louise's younger sister, Florence, both of whom are modeled in part on Earling's own influential female relations. Louise White Elk's warrior spirit is grounded in the stories Earling heard about her Aunt Louise's bravery from her mother, Florence, the namesake of Louise's sister in the novel.¹⁰ Earling's mother had

told me stories about [Aunt Louise's] death and how fearless she was in life—"Louise was not afraid of anything." She rescued my grandmother from the pond behind their house. This was a bottomless pond; cows used to disappear in it. My grandma fell through the ice and my mother said everyone was screaming and they were afraid to go out on the ice. But Louise wasn't. She took right off and went out and saved my grandmother. She also saved my mother once when she was young and someone had come to visit. My mother got in their truck and started fooling around with it. She let out the brake and started rolling downhill really fast. My mother said Louise ran after the truck and climbed on the floorboard and was able to stop the truck [and] save my mother. Louise always said, "I'm not afraid of the dead; I'm not afraid of ghosts." And her fearlessness made her feared and admired, in some ways.¹¹

In *Perma Red* this autobiographical story of Aunt Louise saving Earling's mother in the pond shapeshifts into one of Charlie Kicking Woman's stories illustrating Louise White Elk's physical strength and bravery. "There was a wildness about Louise," Charlie muses. "Once, on a dare, she swam the white, churning waves of the Flathead River. I saw her dive down between the boulders that writhed the furious current. She had jumped into the deep pond at the Magpie place to save her grandmother when she broke through the ice" (23). Louise's most reflexive emotional moments involve her grandmother and sister. Memories of Grandma Magpie's house, activities with Grandma

and Florence, and the stories Grandma tells her are the strong medicine to which Louise consistently turns for healing throughout her chronically chaotic existence. Louise's loyalty to these women and their shared experiences underscores the significance and continuity of female community in Earling's novel and life.

The images Earling associates with Grandma Magpie and Florence are of earth and water, of plant life and river path. Earling's images shimmer with the power of human integration with the natural world, with Salish women's abilities to read and speak the organic language of their homelands, and with the land's ability to bring forth life and to reclaim it through death. It is this totality that Earling depicts in the relationship between Louise, Grandma Magpie, and Florence White Elk. Louise's grandmother and sister are like the Flathead River, which snakes through the reservation and the novel, a bloodline and spiritual current consistently mapping Louise's way back home. Simultaneously, the written story of Louise's journey becomes one way that Earling maps her own way forward as a living descendant of Aunt Louise.

WEAVING THE TIES THAT BIND IN LITERATURE AND IN LIFE

The lives of Louise, Florence, and Grandma Magpie cannot be separated in this novel, a fact that speaks to Salish values honoring holism and community consolidation as a partial antidote to colonial fragmentation. Although each woman has a distinct character and is capable of speaking and acting independently, the threads of those independent characters' speeches and actions are woven together over time to strengthen the integrity of a much larger fabric of relationship among the three women. Similarly, the lives of Debra Magpie Earling and her female relatives cannot be considered as separate from the creation of *Perma Red*, as Earling herself has explicitly repeated in her published remarks about the novel. Earling's extraordinary efforts to see her Aunt Louise's fictionalized life story finally make its way into print exemplify the powerful influence on Earling—who never actually knew her Aunt Louise¹²—of stories and multiple Flathead Reservation communities.

The struggles Louise White Elk faces to stay alive in *Perma Red* seem to symbolize the obstacles Earling endured in bringing Louise's story into being. Earling worked on *Perma Red* for almost twenty years, beginning as an undergraduate at the University of Washington in the mid-1980s. Half of her typewritten original draft of the novel was lost in a fire at Earling's family cabin in 1984, as she was about to enter her senior year of college.¹³ But like Fox stepping over his dead brother Coyote, Earling brought her novel back to life. Although she had grown up in Spokane, Earling later returned to the Flathead Reservation, and it was there that "old family stories rushed to her. She had heard of the Aunt Louise she had never met. Now back in the heartland, at the old Magpie allotment near Perma, threads of this elusive relative kept returning."¹⁴ Earling's own autobiography is deeply informed by an amalgamation of her relatives' stories of Aunt Louise, Salish cultural stories, and the stories of non-Natives living on the racially mixed Flathead Reservation.¹⁵

The novel that was finally published as *Perma Red*, bearing Debra Magpie Earling's name on the cover, is a literary embodiment of Salish community self-determination. Earling's statement in the Contributors' Notes for *Gathering Ground*, an anthology in which she published "the initial seed"¹⁶ of *Perma Red* as a short story by the same title in 1984, makes the communal process of the creation of *Perma Red* explicit:

I am a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation located in Montana. The story "Perma Red" is based upon the life of my Aunt Louise, who died tragically in 1947 at the age of twenty-three. I am currently working on a novel about her life struggle. To the daughter of Louise, my sister Cheryl; and to the memory of my great-grandmother, Cecille Charlo Vanderburg, I dedicate this story. I am ever grateful to my mother, Florence McDougall Earling, for the gift of her stories.¹⁷

As do many Native authors, Earling acknowledges and honors the female relations (great grandmother, mother, and sister) whose lives and stories have given shape to her own. Earling continues to pay respect to stories and kinship in her dedication of *Perma Red*:

*For my mother and father
who give me the loving gift of their stories
and
For my sister Cheryl in memory of her mother, Louise,
Perma Red no more!*¹⁸

In the novel's acknowledgments Earling writes her thanks to still other family members, further revealing the intricate web of relationship that has allowed *Perma Red* to exist and Debra Earling to persist: "I am grateful for the support of my family, my brother Robert who rescues me, my brother Dennis who keeps me humble, my brother James Bureau whose good heart shines, and my great-grandmother Cecille Magpie Charlo who loves me beyond death, all of you." Though written by an individual, *Perma Red* is impossible to consider as an independent creation, somehow outside the crucible of family and cultural community, nor can it be viewed as entirely fictional although it is marketed as a novel.

In the long years leading up to *Perma Red's* publication, Earling provides glimpses of the novel's process of construction through short stories in various journals and anthologies published throughout the 1980s and 1990s. These stories, compelling in their own right, form a fascinating archive that charts Earling's journey through writing her Aunt Louise's story. Many pieces prefigure—and sometimes literally recreate—the situations, characters, and dialogue in *Perma Red*. The short story titled "Perma Red," for example (which Earling worked on as an undergraduate under the tutelage of James Welch) introduces us to Louise, her relationship with her grandmother, and

the circumstance of Louise's mother's death.¹⁹ But in the short story "Perma Red" we also meet Louise's Aunt Susy and cousin Victor, neither of whom appear in the novel. In the first paragraph of this 1984 short story we find Louise walking home after a night of drinking, dropped off far from the town of Perma, where "the bastard [an anonymous man] had let her off outside Ravalli on Highway 93."²⁰ Immediately, we enter Louise's world of limited mobility, drinking, nightlife, liaisons, and the predicaments in which she finds herself as a result of this volatile combination. "It was the first story I ever wrote," Earling says of "Perma Red." "From that first seed, I knew that I had so much more to write about. It just seemed to call to me."²¹

While Earling clearly struggled with writing Louise White Elk over the following years, the tough, beautiful character we are ultimately given seems to have transformed very little during the eighteen years between her appearance in the story "Perma Red" and in the novel of the same title. Other characters, however, underwent gender changes or sexual reorientations or were dropped entirely from the first enormous draft. Earling's original manuscript (that is, the full draft completed *after* the partial draft had burned) "ballooned to eight hundred pages and had seven first-person characters and one other third-person narrator" until Earling began eliminating characters.²² The novel "went through at least nine different rewrites" before appearing as a lean, 288-page manuscript.²³

One interesting first-person female voice that appears in Earling's pre-novel short stories but is not heard in the novel is Myra, in the short story "Changing."²⁴ Myra is the voice of *female* desire for Louise that we do not get in *Perma Red*, adding a noteworthy dimension to the theme of multiple male gazes directed at Louise in *Perma Red*. As with other characters beyond Louise, Florence, and Grandma Magpie in *Perma Red*, it is not clear whether Myra has a direct connection to Earling's autobiography. However, in creating an eight-hundred-page initial manuscript based on the stories and voices of the many people who actually knew Earling's aunt, it is possible Earling may have heard tales of homoerotic desire around Aunt Louise.²⁵

The homoerotic vignette that Earling offers in "Changing" centers, as does much of *Perma Red*, on Louise's physical body, her nakedness, her flesh as the site of fantasy, desire, and self-reflection by another person. Like Charlie Kicking Woman in the novel, Myra watches Louise undress and bathe, and Myra carefully takes in each sensual detail of Louise's body:

She pulled her dress off over her head and dropped it to the floor. I talked about my new clothes . . . looked out the window, tried not to watch her standing naked in the middle of the room. . . . I could see the curve of her shoulder, the smooth cup of her breasts lavender-edged. The dim light coming in through the window. I looked at my dry, wide hands, black-pored and short-fingered. I listened to the sound of water and soap smile on Louise's thigh. She put her foot on the chair and washed the inside of her legs, from the hollow of her foot up a long length of calf. She didn't use a wash cloth, only her hands shining like oil. I stared. . . . I felt funny. I felt lonesome.

. . . Lonesome for all the small things I would never be a part of, silly things, like my mother's clean sheets, nail polish, perfume, and the smell of Louise's skin.²⁶

This scene is more complex than the novel's episode in which Myra's words are repeated almost verbatim by Charlie Kicking Woman when he watches Louise bathe. Charlie's desire for Louise is blatantly sexual, whereas Myra's is tangled with a wealth of yearnings and tensions she does not fully understand, though they are "connected somehow like a mystery some women shared."²⁷ As Louise finishes bathing, Myra thinks: "I wondered who else had seen her in her nakedness besides me. I had a tightness in my stomach I didn't understand."²⁸ In the novel Charlie wonders the same thing as he sees, like Myra, that "the smooth cups of [Louise's] breasts were lavender-edged" (234): "I watched as she put her foot on the chair and washed the inside of her leg, from the hollow of her foot up a long length of calf. She didn't use a washcloth, only her hands shining like oil. I stared. My cock was so hard it lifted the covers. I could smell her skin. I wondered how many people had seen her in her nakedness. I felt my stomach tighten to think of Harvey Stoner touching her" (234–35).

Whereas Charlie focuses his ruminations on Louise's nakedness specifically around his own overt sexual desire and his jealousy at the knowledge that Louise's body has been seen and handled by other men, Myra's erotic longing for Louise is more submerged, more diffused, more intimate, and particularly female. Myra's desire for Louise is also a desire for herself, a homely young woman's self-conscious longing for the uncultivated female beauty that Louise naturally, effortlessly exudes. Myra considers herself socially and economically superior to Louise, yet in these brief moments of scrutiny (of Louise and of herself) Myra is made painfully aware of the limitations of social and economic advantage. When Myra sees the well-worn dress Louise plans on wearing after her bath, she "held up the flowerprint dress and [she] felt sorry for Louise."²⁹ But Myra soon witnesses the shabby dress's transformation through contact with Louise's flesh. It is Louise who animates the dress:

The dress moved like spring grass in wind. . . . The ugly dress on the chair seemed to have changed. I thought it must be the light or something to do with Louise. Even though the dress was worn, it showed up vines of morning glories the color of dawn clouds, poppies were melon-colored. . . . It had only become more beautiful, something you couldn't buy in a store. . . . And even my hair, the most beautiful hair, my mother had said, could not console me. I felt sick with ugliness.³⁰

In both "Changing" and *Perma Red* Earling writes Louise's compelling physical beauty in imagery that is closely associated with the power of the land ("dawn clouds," "spring grass in wind," "melon-colored" poppies) and needs no embellishment through artificial means such as makeup, hair styles, or the latest fashion trends, which Louise cannot afford in any case.³¹ And although Myra does have access to these external accoutrements, they are unable to

generate the graceful loveliness that Louise doesn't have to work for and that Myra futilely craves.

In interviews Earling has not remarked on her choice to erase the scenes of homoeroticism she sketched in earlier short stories or on what that choice might mean in relation to the story of her Aunt Louise. Although we lose Myra's voice (and thus a fascinating perspective on female desire for Louise) in *Perma Red*, the shifting of Myra's perspective into Charlie's exhibits the potent current of multigendered erotic desire for Louise that Earling represented in her short fiction while simultaneously working toward Aunt Louise's ultimate fictional portrayal in the novel. In her crafting of *Perma Red* Earling realized that letting go of many of the character voices in earlier drafts was necessary because it was clear that "Louise's story was coming up to the forefront and that she was carving those other stories away. . . . Working on this novel for so long, many of the chapters had already been published elsewhere. So chapters that don't appear in the novel are out there anyway."³² In this way the collective of Earling's previously published stories informs the final novel *Perma Red*, just as the community formed by Grandma Magpie and Florence informs Louise White Elk's identity. Though they are not all visible, their traces resonate within the final story. Earling remarks, "There were so many other stories woven into the novel. I had many non-Indian characters in the story. I was trying to present Reservation life from multiple perspectives and what happens when one individual in a tribal community who is beloved and wild at the same time becomes one of those people we as communities all turn toward and try to save."³³

THE STORY OF HER TELLING IS THE TELLING OF HER LIFE

In the manner of a traditional storyteller Earling has practiced telling the same story over time but with variations in each telling. In all of these versions, with their fascinating differences (some subtle and some substantial), Earling tells the story of a powerful woman involved in the complex network of relationships that has long informed, and still informs, life on the Flathead Reservation. The oral storyteller's prerogative of repetition with modification complements the creative writer's revision process. Indeed, as Arnold Krupat writes in his discussion of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*, "in the context of Native American storytelling, repetition of the 'same' story on several different occasions is standard procedure, 'originality' or noticeable innovation having no particular value."³⁴ In *Perma Red*, Earling's "wild, tough, and pretty"³⁵ Aunt Louise becomes pretty, wild, and tough Louise White Elk; Aunt Louise's death in a fatal winter car crash returns as Louise White Elk's timely rescue from that violent, freezing death by Charlie Kicking Woman. In the long, careful process of telling her Aunt Louise's story by listening to a cooperative of real voices and writing a community of fictional ones, Debra Magpie Earling illustrates Silko's contention that in traditional storytelling "the remembering and retelling were a communal process."³⁶ What Krupat has written of Silko's retellings proves equally true for Earling: that her "relation to every kind of story becomes the story of her life."³⁷

Although Earling has fictionalized the lives of her family members in *Perma Red*, and has omitted herself as an actual character, her presence in both her biological and fictional families at once animates and is animated by each of these two communities. In the process of fictionalizing Aunt Louise's life Earling states, "I actually prayed to my aunt and told her that I was sorry but I just couldn't hold true to the facts. Once I let go of that idea and just wrote the story as I understood it—fictionalizing it and allowing it to become my story—. . . I did actually reveal the truth of her life, even though there was nothing of the facts of her life there on the page."³⁸

Although claiming that there is "nothing of the facts of her life there on the page" is slightly disingenuous (*many* facts are there, if reshuffled and reworked), Earling's recognition that "truth" is not necessarily contained in facts underscores how many Native writers deploy fiction to make visible to a wider audience certain silenced or little-known historical truths about their people. Earling's novel is a tribute to her aunt's life, a life that has been a major presence in Earling's experience even in the physical absence of Aunt Louise. In *Perma Red* Earling has engaged the symbiosis between historical and fictional realities to repatriate through writing and story that which cannot be physically recuperated. The body of her work stands in, to some degree, for the absent body of Aunt Louise.

Earling's decision to change the novel's original tragic ending depicting the literal circumstances of Aunt Louise's story to the more positive conclusion of Louise White Elk's survival seems to have been the largest fact Earling wrestled with fictionalizing in order to remain "true" to her aunt's life story and to that story within her own life. Yet, as I noted earlier in this essay, no careful reading of *Perma Red* could interpret its conclusion as the happily-ever-after variety simply because on the closing page Louise is alive and standing. When Louise sees Baptiste for the first time since believing he was killed, "She wanted to run to him" (296) but she cannot. Her body is still too broken from the worst of the many thrashings she has endured over the course of the novel. When, in the novel's final sentence, Louise "stepped forward" from Grandma Magpie's porch to greet her husband, we know she is stepping once more into the minefield of rattlesnakes, hungry rivers, colonial authority, male violence, and material poverty that have thus far defined her life on the Flathead Reservation. Being alive and momentarily happy is no assurance of continued contentment for the restless Louise White Elk, and questions remain in Earling's conclusion. It is this ambiguousness, I believe, that makes Earling's revised conclusion as authentic as any other, whether or not it is factual in relation to Aunt Louise.

"The hope of 'Louise' in real life," writes Mary Scriver, "is, of course, Debra Magpie Earling! It is Debra who takes the best of Louise and creates a new version that can live, if only in a book."³⁹ Understanding the connections between Earling and her aunt and other female relations, and how these relationships have informed the creation of the cotagonists Florence and Grandma Magpie in connection with Louise White Elk, it seems somehow inadequate, inaccurate even, to say that Louise's story lives "only in a book." But it is quite true that through the publication of this book, Aunt Louise's

story gains new life through her niece, Debra Magpie Earling. Through *Perma Red* Louise White Elk survives to see her husband, “wearing his finest silks,” ride to her on his beautiful horse, with “Champagne’s beaded harness . . . glittering in the sunlight” (296). Earling asserts, “Our ancestors want us to tell their stories—or they’re people whose stories need to be told. I can’t deny this story. I certainly hope I honor it.”⁴⁰ Together, Louise White Elk and Debra Magpie Earling step forward.

NOTES

1. Debra Magpie Earling, *Perma Red* (New York: Blue Hen Books, 2002). All quotations from and references to the novel will be noted parenthetically by page number in the text proper.

2. The term *cotagonist* is an attempt to interrupt and extend the critical language of the Western European literary tradition in alliance with those Native Studies scholars who, like Anishinabe scholar Kimberly M. Blaeser, recognize the “distinction between applying already established theory to native writing versus working from within native literature or tradition to discover appropriate tools or to form an appropriate language of critical discourse” (Kimberly M. Blaeser, “Native Literature: Seeking a Critical Center,” in *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*, comp. Jeannette Armstrong [Penticton, BC: Theytus Books, 1993], 56). Although the term *cotagonist* derives from a combination of Latin and Greek rather than from indigenous American languages, in this term I am attempting, however imperfectly, a closer expression of the workings of Bitterroot Salish community as Earling represents it in *Perma Red* than the terms *minor character* or *secondary character* suggest. Similarly, scholar Jace Weaver’s theory of “communitism” derives from “a combination of the words ‘community’ and ‘activism’” to describe his “hypothesis that Native literature both reflects and shapes contemporary Native identity and community” (Jace Weaver, *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997], xiii, ix). Because I am not a Salish speaker or a Native community member, I have opted to adapt a term from my own literary linguistic traditions rather than appropriate a Native language term that might have different meanings to different Native speakers. I look forward to the contributions of future Native Studies scholars who will utilize even more apt indigenous language terms for describing character relationships in Native fiction written in English.

Meanwhile, where the term *protagonist* promotes the notion of individualism as the focus of a novel (even within novels with multiple protagonists), *cotagonists* suggests fictional characters who collaborate with the “main” character of the story and thus deconstruct the concept of a single character’s primacy. While the etymology of *protagonist* outlines multiple meanings, one may be derived from the Greek *proto* (“first”) and *agonistes* (from *agon*, a contest or gathering, and *agein*, “to lead”). In common literary usage then, the “protagonist” is the central character on whom the reader’s attention is focused. Refuting this hierarchical concept that fixes the narrative on a central figure or solitary leader within the construction of character significance in *Perma Red*, *cotagonist* uses the Latin prefix *co-*, signifying joining together and mutuality. Thus, in their practice of shared leadership, cotagonists are not subjugated in their relationship to the protagonist, even if the former appear less frequently in the

chronological events of the story. The power of the cotagonists resides in their ability to deeply impact protagonists through spiritual and emotional bonds that move easily across the artificial borders of time and space.

3. David Abrams, "Writing the Great (Native) American Novel—An interview with Debra Magpie Earling," *The DOJ, Drexel Online Journal*, <http://www.drexel.edu/doj/archives/2002/artsand/dabrams2.asp> (accessed 23 April 2003), n.p. (copy in possession of the author).

4. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Storyteller* (New York: Little, Brown, 1981), 227.

5. Joanna Smith Rakoff, "Debra Magpie Earling Avenges the Dead," *Poets & Writers* 30, no. 3 (2002): 59–64.

6. *Ibid.*, 62.

7. Abrams, "Writing the Great (Native) American Novel," n.p.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. Louise's independence, physical prowess, survival skills, and willingness to fight to save her relatives is in keeping with many Native women who historically adopted roles as warriors alongside the men of their tribes. In her essay "Warrior Women—Sex Role Alternatives for Plains Indian Women" (*The Hidden Half: Studies of Plains Indian Women*, ed. Beatrice Medicine and Patricia Albers [Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983], 267–80), Lakota anthropologist Beatrice Medicine explains that the "warrior woman" role "was widespread in North America," not only among Plains Indian women but within Kootenai, Navajo, Tlingit, and Ottawa cultures (267). Medicine asserts that the warrior woman role "challenges pervasive ideas about the passivity of native women" and was not "a form of deviant and idiosyncratic behavior, but . . . a healthy and self-actualized role" (267).

11. Abrams, "Writing the Great (Native) American Novel," n.p.

12. Gwen Lankford, "Never Truly Passing," *Indian Country Today*, 17 July 2002, D1.

13. Smith Rakoff, "Debra Magpie Earling Avenges the Dead," 60.

14. Lankford, "Never Truly Passing," D1.

15. Currently, 27 percent of the Flathead Reservation's population is Native, while 73 percent (of 26,203 people) is non-Native. See *Perceptions, A Special Report on Race in Montana by the University of Montana School of Journalism*, http://www.umt.edu/journalism/student_work/Native_News_2005/ (accessed 3 November 2005).

16. Abrams, "Writing the Great (Native) American Novel," n.p.

17. Debra Cecille Earling, Contributors' Notes, in *Gathering Ground: New Writing and Art by Northwest Women of Color*, ed. Jo Cochran, J. T. Stewart, and Mayumi Tsutakawa (Seattle, WA: Seal Press, 1984), 184.

18. The novel's title, *Perma Red*, derives from this phrase being used as an epithet toward Louise. "Perma Red," Earling writes in the text, "was the darkest name they called her. . . . It meant all the bad names polite company could hiss. Red-light district. Slut. Louise understood the meaning of the name, a label that said she was Indian and nothing more. She came from Perma and she could never change her life standings. She wouldn't let that name claim her" (229). Nor does Earling allow the name to claim her Aunt Louise. Instead, Earling makes "Perma Red"—its racist and sexually degrading connotations and its embodiment in the character of Louise—a focal point of any conversation about the novel by making it the book's title. Going one step

further, Earling's defiant announcement in her novel's dedication that her own Aunt Louise is "Perma Red no more" fully blurs the boundaries between fiction and fact before readers even begin the novel and ultimately allows the author to recuperate this derogatory label on behalf of her aunt. "Perma Red" becomes a colorful banner boldly flying in the face of Louise White Elk's and Aunt Louise's detractors.

19. Debra C. Earling, "Perma Red," in *Gathering Ground: New Writing and Art by Northwest Women of Color*, ed. Jo Cochran, J. T. Stewart, and Mayumi Tsutakawa (Seattle, WA: Seal Press, 1984), 106–12.

20. *Ibid.*, 106.

21. Abrams, "Writing the Great (Native) American Novel," n.p.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. Debra Earling, "Changing," in *Circle of Women: An Anthology of Contemporary Western Women Writers*, ed. Kim Barnes and Mary Clearman Blew (New York: Penguin, 1994), 58–61.

25. In another character construction that Earling does not include in the novel, the ostensibly heterosexual Jules Bart of *Perma Red* has a fascinating homosexual encounter with the Salish man Antoine Pretty Chief, whom Bart describes as "so pretty he took my breath." See Earling's short story "Jules Bart, Giving Too Much—August 1946 (1991)," in *Song of the Turtle: American Indian Literature, 1974–1994*, ed. Paula Gunn Allen (New York: Ballantine, 1996), 212–15.

26. Earling, "Changing," 59.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 60.

29. *Ibid.*, 59.

30. *Ibid.*, 61.

31. On one occasion in the novel Harvey Stoner treats Louise to a new dress, shoes, a beauty parlor hairdo "like Lana Turner's," and "deep-red lipstick" (141). Interestingly, Earling writes nothing of the total effect of this "makeover," and the whole scene has the feeling of little more than an excited child playing dress-up. Although she undoubtedly looks stylish, these embellishments are clearly unnecessary for calling attention to Louise's inherent beauty.

32. Abrams, "Writing the Great (Native) American Novel," n.p.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Arnold Krupat, *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 165n19.

35. Lankford, "Never Truly Passing," D1.

36. Leslie Marmon Silko, quoted in Krupat, *The Voice in the Margin*, 163n18.

37. Krupat, *The Voice in the Margin*, 164.

38. Abrams, "Writing the Great (Native) American Novel," n.p.

39. Mary Scriver, "Re: 'Perma Red,'" 14 July 2002, online posting, *SAIL Discussion Group*, ASAIL-L@LISTSERV.UGA.EDU. Used with the author's permission.

40. Lankford, "Never Truly Passing," D1.