The inspiration for this paper arose at a time when I was reading a lot of anthropological theories about knowledge and discourse. One loosely bound group of theorists, the "new interpretivists", took me on a mental journey through a landscape composed of the authors' interpretations of other authors' ideas. Serving as guides through the history of ideas, the intent of these authors is to bring the reader to the view from their mental camp. Once there, the reader looks out at a vista in the morning light of a new metaphor — "dialogue". In view of the abstractness of such forays, it is not surprising that the epistemology underlying this metaphor is that there is no fixed object of study — nothing to be "known" beyond the "contested, temporal and emergent" representations and interpretations of insiders and outsiders (Clifford 1986:19). As Paul Rabinow (1986:235) states, "epistemology, then, turns on the clarification and judgement of the subject's representations." These theorists' perception of the partiality of knowledge has produced for them a "crisis of representation" and "interest in the rhetorics of disciplines" that has induced them to shift their focus from the experience of fieldwork to the written product of fieldwork (Marcus and Fischer 1986:20).

How have these theorists arrived at this ethereal textual landscape? In functionalist ethnography, James Clifford (1988:34–37) argues, experience as a means of knowing was merely the naive, subjective and undemocratic rhetorical strategy of an "I was there" claim to authority. Such claims were based on the epistemological premise that there is a single absolute truth that may be discovered through scientific methods of observation. "Hermeneutically sophisticated anthropologists", however, began to dwell more specifically on the "dialectic between experience and interpretation", thereby giving rise to the "culture as text" metaphor (Clifford 1988:38). Although the interpretation of cultural "texts" denied the assumption of a knowable absolute truth, it retained visual observation as the primary
means of knowing. As well, unlike "discourse", which cannot be removed from the specific occasion of utterance, "culture as text" easily tended towards a totalizing "other", such as "the Balinese" or "the Trobriand Islanders" (Clifford 1988:39). Due to the current globalization of media, economy and culture, as well as the growing impact of attacks on colonialism, this totalization process is no longer tenable. Therefore, the guiding metaphor of ethnographic work has been revised from "reading culture as text" to "communicating cross-culturally through dialogue" (Marcus and Fischer 1986:30, Clifford 1986:12). Whereas at one time visual observation served anthropologists to complete a totalizing picture of cultural life, now "dialogue" serves to represent inevitably partial segments of historically situated discourses.

In accord with this new metaphor, the "new interpretivists" have proposed a model of "dialogic text" as a means to represent more "authentic" representations of the field (Marcus and Fischer 1986:31) and to undermine the ethnographer's "unquestioned rights of salvage" (Clifford 1986:17). Such "experimental writing" includes transcribed interviews, narrative accounts of incidents, dialogues "in the field", and various combinations of verbatim quotes, narrative and discursive analysis (Clifford 1988:42–54, Rabinow 1986:245–6). The irony of the new metaphor of dialogue is that the theoretical writings of its proponents reflect the epistemological premise of knowledge as representation, but do not represent any of the forms of dialogic writing they endorse. Rather, their "modified free indirect style" (Rabinow 1986:244) suggests that they conceive theory as totally apart from ethnography, which apparently remains unequivocally "other". Neither visual observation nor dialogue requires anthropologists to embody the knowledge they represent in their writings.

While reading the theoretical works of the "new interpretivists" I became dissatisfied with the elitism of their big words and cross-references to scholars upon scholars upon scholars. To escape the abstractions of their mental journey, I turned to reading Anishnaabe narratives. I found that these stories exemplify the forms of discourse that these theorists are just now "discovering". It appeared to me that the new frontier of "experimental writing" has in fact been inhabited by Native people for countless generations. Moreover, Anishnaabe narratives are founded upon epistemological models that anthropological theorists have seldom taken
seriously. How deep can the proposed “dialogue” go when Natives are given only subjective voices “from the field” but scholars still maintain the monopoly on theory? A fundamental obstacle to sincere dialogue is that the discursive analyses of scholars still provide the models for the production and contents of generalized knowledge. Proponents of the new metaphor of dialogue allow experiential knowledge and narrative discourse to be held in high esteem for representing the particular, but systematically disregard them as authoritative keys to understanding the human condition.

In this new vista, the basic epistemological assumption — that discursive analysis produces a superior form of knowledge than does experience and narrative — has not been adequately addressed. The power differential between the academy and “the field” remains intact. The dialogic experiment seems doomed from the start if efforts are not made to transcend such building blocks of the enculturation process of the Western education system. One of the challenges to democratizing the written word is that epistemology is inextricably linked to modes of learning. In anthropology, the method of learning has been institutionalized in the sequence: textual and verbal academic discourse to “fieldwork” and back to textual and verbal academic discourse. The result is that experiences “in the field”, and their representations, are predetermined, to a greater or lesser extent, by abstract experiences in the realm of scholarly representation (Rose 1993:194).

In this paper, I present and discuss some of the Anishnaabe stories I was reading as one way to approach these issues. Whereas discursive analyses explicate ideas in the abstract, narratives demonstrate ideas in action. I have combined both of these forms to draw out what Anishnaabe stories say about “what it means to know”. The following story, which Frank Shawbedees told to Basil Johnston (1995:8–15), illustrates how Western education can be encumbering, not only to anthropologists studying Native peoples, but also to Native youth seeking their cultural roots:¹

A young urban Anishnaabe sought an elder to teach him something — he didn’t know what — perhaps knowledge of “good medicine”, but his impatience and assumptions prevented him from “seeing” the teachings. When he found a teacher, he was warned that learning would

¹ I have abridged and paraphrased all stories in this paper. Readers should consult the sources cited in order to fully respect and appreciate these stories.
not be fast. The elder began instructing the seeker by taking him wandering about in the woods. At the bank of a stream, the elder stopped and asked the youth what he saw. “Nothing”, was his reply. That evening the youth complained that the elder was “slow-teaching” him.

The following day, as they were once again out wandering, the elder asked him to pick a certain water lily. Up to his chest in cold water, the youth grabbed for the flower, but the elder told him to pick it by the root. But he learned nothing, became angry and frustrated and then left the elder to return to the city. Upon reflection he realized that the elder wanted to show him that helping fellow humans is neither easy nor beautiful. The water lily on the surface is beautiful, but to get to the source of the beauty you must “dig deep”.

This story reminds me of a time about four years ago when my book-knowledge of Anishnaabe customs exceeded my experience in the community. I was at a music festival at Wikwemikong and spoke to an elder there. But I didn’t really know what I was asking for and ended up getting some advice on how to learn: “Just watch and listen and maybe after a while you will learn something”, she told me. The process of “slow-learning”, as I have come to understand it, begins with watching and listening, then moves directly to enactment, only after which discussion of the teaching may begin. Enactment may be understood as the direct experience of concrete actions. It follows that the gap between academic theorizing, which deals with generalized representations, and experience “in the field” is far greater than that between Anishnaabe narrative, which deals with specific instances of action, and the enactment of Anishnaabe culture. Whereas in the former mode of learning, experience as a means of knowing is discretely severed from the representational realm of textual discourse, in the latter instance it may be seen as the individual enactment of cultural patterns recounted in narrative.

The elder in Shawbedees’s story was encouraging his student to enact cultural symbolism that clearly distinguishes between the reflective surfaces of representation and the embedded roots of experiential knowledge. In my understanding, the image of the lake appears in many Anishnaabe narratives to show how experience (understood as enactment) produces more powerful knowledge than does mere representation (understood as reflections of experience). A story told by Samuel Grey Sturgeon of how “Wesucechak learns about Double-Shout Lake” (Norman 1987:406–410) presents, in narrative form, a complex demonstration of this epistemological position:
Wesucechak was wandering about and decided to visit the first village he created. As he neared the village, he smelled fish and heard noises of women cleaning fish. One old woman talked about each fish as she cleaned it. She had a good memory from what she was taught and from what she saw. Concealed in the bushes at the edge of the village, Wesucechak shouted out “WHO DO YOU THINK MADE PICKEREL? WHO DO YOU THINK MADE THE WORLD? IT’S ME SHOUTING, WESUCECHAK.”

The old woman pretended not to hear him, but addressing a fish, she said “Maybe an old pickerel at the bottom of the lake made the world.” This made Wesucechak very angry and he strode over and stood right in front of the woman: “I’M WESUCECHAK, I MADE THE WORLD!” Finally the woman looked at him and said “Are you Wesucechak? I can’t remember.” “CAN’T YOU REMEMBER? I MADE YOUR VILLAGE. I TAUGHT YOU TO CLEAN FISH!” “Well, I’m still not sure it’s really you. I’ll have to ask old Two Loons. She has the best memory of anyone.” “I HAVE THE BEST MEMORY!” “I remember that Two Loons has the best memory in the world, better than you, Wesucechak, who has none. If that’s who you really are.”

Wesucechak was very angry. He followed the old woman to a lake. “Two Loons”, she shouted. “Two Loons... Two Loons”, the lake shouted back. She dove into the lake. Soon she flew out and stood dripping with water in front of Wesucechak. “I am Two Loons, but I have to dive into the lake to remember that. I have the best memory after I dive into the lake.” Then Wesucechak felt water dripping from himself. “WHO DID THIS TO ME?” he demanded. “That’s just the kind of thing this lake does”, she told him. He was confused, but he bragged and said “I KNEW THAT. WHO DO YOU THINK MADE THIS LAKE?”

They walked back to the village and Wesucechak turned into a deer. He asked Two Loons “WHAT IS MY NAME?” She said “deer horns”. Two Loons noticed that everyone looked worried. She heard someone say “She can’t remember the name.” She cried out, “deer’s sinew... deer eyes... deer voice, deer hooves.” Wesucechak told her, “I’M MAKING IT SO THAT YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN CALL DEER IN CLOSE. IF YOU CAN’T REMEMBER HOW TO SAY DEER, ALL THE DEER WILL BE INSULTED AND THERE WILL BE NO DEER TO EAT.”

Two Loons flew back to the lake, dove in and swam on the lake for awhile. She flew back to the village and began to sing. Her song had many deer in it and the many things you see them doing. The deer were listening and were pleased that Two Loons knew so many things about them. They walked into the village. “They’re giving themselves up”, someone said, and they killed many deer to store and to eat that day. Wesucechak became frightened and turned back to his old self. Two Loons teased him, saying “Wesucechak remembered to change back in time. He’s no longer a deer.”

The laughing sent Wesucechak out of the village. He wandered around hungry. He said “I’LL FIND SOMETHING TO EAT IN A DREAM.” So he went to sleep, but he turned and tossed all night so that when he woke up he didn’t remember which direction he had been walking. He set off again, though, saying “THAT DREAM DIDN’T BRING ME ANY FOOD.” After
a while he smelled some venison. He followed the smell to a village edge. He shouted at the people preparing the meat “I'M HUNGRY!” When no one looked up, he shouted “WHO DO YOU THINK MADE DEER?” Just then Two Loons landed on his head. He was back in the same village.

Two Loons said “Why should we give you food? You tried not to let us eat deer!” “DID I DO THAT, DID I DO THAT?” he said. A villager tossed him some antlers. Another tossed him some sinew, and another some deer hooves. But he threw himself on the ground groaning and begging for meat. He tied the antlers on his head and the hooves to his feet and begged again. Finally they gave him some meat. He tried to get more, but they sent him away. He went walking, but his antlers got stuck on some branches and he tripped and fell over. He groaned and cried for real then. He got up, but he couldn’t walk because of the hooves. He took them off and went walking.

Like the youth in Shawbedees’s story, Wesucechak in Grey Sturgeon’s story shares some traits with inquisitive anthropologists. He is a powerful creator whose appearance is not always as it seems and who can control language. Yet he is a social outcast who is not welcome in village life and cannot procure his own living. At the outset we learn that the old woman has a good memory “from what she was taught and from what she saw.” Her memory improves when she dives into the lake and transforms into Two Loons. When Wesucechak takes away her memory of the word deer, she regains it by diving into the lake. In contrast, although Wesucechak claims he has the best memory, she says he has none, and is proven correct when he can’t remember his own attempt to deprive the village of deer.

The type of memory Two Loons recovers from the lake is the collective experience of her teachers and herself concerning the important food sources of fish and deer. Her memory of many fish and deer demonstrate her complete knowledge of them. Not only does this type of knowledge induce the deer to give themselves for food, but it also gives her more power than Wesucechak, creator of the world. This is because, unlike Two Loons, his power is fragmented and abstract. His deer transformation causes Two Loons to cite parts of the deer, the very parts that impede his flight from the laughing villagers. He knows the parts, but cannot comprehend the whole. The closest he gets to the collective wisdom of experience is when Two Loons first emerges from the lake and he feels himself dripping with water. Yet, this fragment of experience confuses him.

The image of the lake demonstrates duality. The name of Two Loons is dual, as is the name of the lake itself, which has a double echo. The echo
shows the reflective quality of the surface of the lake, which is also suggested in the physical reflection of the water dripping off Two Loons and Wesucechak. Yet the duality and reflectivity of the lake do not confuse Two Loons, as they do Wesucechak. She is able to gain further knowledge of deer by swimming about on the surface, *after* she has submerged herself. A much more straightforward example of the dangers of the reflective surface of such symbolically charged lakes is found in Tom Badger’s story of “Wenebojo and the cranberries” (Barnouw 1977:46):

> Wenebojo was hungry, as usual. He was walking nearby a lake when he saw some cranberries in the water. When he dove for them he hurt his head on the pebbles at the bottom near the shore. After several painful attempts, he noticed the real cranberries above his head, but he was so discouraged that he did not eat them. He went about wandering again.

Renato Rosaldo (1986:108) notes that narratives for “insider audiences” communicate in “telegraphic shorthand”, assuming a tremendous amount of shared cultural knowledge. Short stories like this one are packed with multiple meanings that are applicable to a wide variety of instances. A very particular meaning emerges, however, if we transpose the symbolism of the lake that is more fully demonstrated in the story of Two Loons. In this instance, the surface of the lake contains the past and reflects the present. The real cranberries are potential experience. If you mistake the reflected for the real, then past experiential knowledge is misleading and dangerous. It is foolish and unsatisfactory to replace experience, both potential future and realized past, with its representations. Wenebojo goes away hungry.

As Anishnaabe teacher Shirley Williams (1992:101) has written, water is also the particular power and responsibility of women. This general attribute of water is enacted in ritual. A few years ago, I attended a ceremony in which a female elder told about how Anishnaabe women are the “keepers of the water”. As she prepared and smudged a copper bowl filled with water, she said “Water is women’s ritual element because the water of a mother’s womb embodies her regenerative power. Mother Earth’s heart and veins are the lakes and streams.” She began to pray in Ojibwa as the bowl circulated through the people crowding around. Water and lakes are life-giving in a dual sense: the collective memory provides sustenance and the generative power of women provides human life. In the
following story, which Sam Ozawamik told to Basil Johnston (Johnston 1995:28–31), immersion in the lake cleanses a youth of improper behaviour and prepares him for rebirth:

A young man disregarded his adoptive father’s instructions to go directly to where he was told. Rather, he stopped to visit some young women along the way. The women’s mother became angry, killed him and tossed him in the lake. The old man found his son’s boat, and, in response to his prayer, a fish came to the surface of the water. The old man told the fish that if all the fish brought him the young man’s bones then he would give each fish a name. Many fish brought bones to the old man until finally they were all there. The man restored the youth’s life and named all the fish.

In this story, each fish in the lake got a name (one category was subdivided) because they brought the parts together to complete a whole. Conversely, bringing the parts of the youth together to form a whole restored him to life (many categories became amalgamated). Taken together, the stories I have related about lakes and their symbolism do not dictate any absolute theory of knowledge. Rather, they suggest that plunging into experiential knowledge is necessary to avoid the dangers of surface reflections. They stress the value of “whole” knowledge in the form of recounted and lived experience, but also admit the place of “parts” of knowledge, or categorization. Each type of knowledge must be in proper relation to the other in order for knowledge to provide the power of life.

The existence of text presents special challenges. For most academics, reading, writing and verbal discourse comprise a significant portion of their life experience and communal memory. Such abstract action cannot be described as enactment. Is it possible to escape reflecting reflections of reflections in the written word? A classic dilemma of anthropology is that it is presumed that the readers cannot actually experience the social environment and events represented. The recent suggestion of using dialogic text is merely the latest solution to an endemic problem.

However, anthropologists are not the only group of people who have been plagued with the challenge of “writing culture”. It is possible that Alexander Wolfe’s grandfather, Standing Through the Earth, recognized both the potential of writing for the preservation of cultural tradition, as well as its limitations, when he responded to his grandson’s request for the story of the last grass dance (Wolfe 1992:92–96): “‘This’, he said, pointing
to the sky and around him, ‘what you see around you is a story. What the Anishnaybay does and how he lives is a story.’” Through his grandson’s writing, Standing Through the Earth explains that stories are innate in landscape. The episodes and habitual patterns of Anishnaabe lives are stories as lived and become stories for future generations. He expresses the formula: youth = lack of experience = foolishness; age = experience = wisdom. The stories become accessible, both literally and figuratively, as the youth acquires experience through living.

Given Standing Through the Earth’s emphasis on the relationship between life and narrative, it may seem strange that when asked “about the old hall and about the last time there was a grass dance there”, his grandson represents him as giving a general description of the ceremony of the grass dance, rather than the story of that particular occasion. At the end of this description, though, the narrative explains that because of “forces outside the community”, future Anishnaabek will never see, but only hear of, the sacred ceremony called the grass dance. Like “salvage ethnographers”, either grandfather or grandson (or both) believed that since the contingencies of history would preclude direct experience for their descendants, both general description and episodic narrative were necessary to preserve cultural knowledge. Similarly, Rosaldo suggests that, unlike life as lived, written representations for “outsider audiences” require both general descriptions and episodic narratives. “In talking about a [baseball] game”, he writes (Rosaldo 1986:103), “do we want to know the rules or how it was played? Obviously both matter.”

As Shawbedees’s story suggests, it is true that many contemporary Anishnaabek — like anthropologists — lack experiential knowledge of the context in which cultural meanings are embedded. But does this mean that the impatient Anishnaabe of Shawbedees’s story will never achieve his goal of helping humanity, that Two Loons’s memory is permanently lost, that Wenebojo will forever be diving after reflections, or that the drowned youth will never be revived nor the fish have names? I think not — because, although Nanabush/Wenebojo/Wesucechak was banished to the west, his various personifications nevertheless continually wander among us in this land. This very room may be the site of his battle with Two Loons over contested meanings and powers. Two Loons’s memory is continually refreshed as she dives in and out of the lake and emerges dripping with the history of Anishnaabe experience. The plots and
principles of Anishnaabe narratives are brought to life every time individuals enact them in concrete action.

Colonialism brought a much greater social evil than that of the youth in Sam Ozawamik's story who disobeyed his father's directive. Yet the death of the existing monopoly on the production of knowledge and a collaborative submersion in this land's collective histories may hold out the possibility of regeneration and re-ordering. I suggest that like the youth in Frank Shawbedees's story, anthropologists have sought instant or easy solutions to "good medicine" because of the epistemological assumptions, and consequent mode of learning, they carry with them from the norms of Western education. Traditionally, they have gone into the field for limited periods of time and extracted pieces of knowledge such as "facts", artifacts and stories. Taking away "dialogue" instead may not be much different. The epistemological model symbolized by the image of the lake suggests that this new metaphor may also lead to confusing reflections and misrepresentations. The academic monopoly on theory maintains the traditional hierarchy of power by precluding Anishnaabe participation in model-building and scholars' enactment of Anishnaabe cultural experience.

Instead, I suggest that scholars should learn to "slow learn" — that is, to enact and re-enact the knowledge they represent in text. If non-Native scholars aspire to "dialogue" with Native peoples, on the one hand, they should intertwine their lives inextricably with Native lives, muddy roots and all. On the other hand, they must allow the images embedded in Native narratives to "dialogue" with their lives to at least the same extent as they do the conceptual models of the academy. A truly democratic dialogue does not stop at the levels of vocalization and representation. It proceeds from within the experience of the speakers. In this way, the relationship between experience and representation, as well as that between narrative and discursive forms of writing, may be re-ordered in accordance with the actual and envisioned levelling of power and authority in intercultural social relations. Dialogic texts proceeding from the enactment of Native cultural tenants compose a bridge between cultural experiences that better prepares the reader to cross than do those founded on the abstractions of other scholars' theories. Unless anthropologists accept this challenge they may share Wesucechak's fate of being pathetic parodies of their own transformations and irresponsible wielders of immense power.
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