

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

Departamento de Filología Inglesa

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**“WE’D RATHER BE ‘RED’ THAN DEAD” – EMBRACING ONE’S DIFFERENCE
THROUGH SELECTED NATIVE CANADIAN FICTION
FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS**

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Tesis Doctoral presentada por:

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para la obtención del Grado de Doctor y la mención de “Doctor Europeus”

El Director:

Dr. Antonio Rodríguez Celada

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DEDICATION

As in a perfect CIRCLE,
to those who came before me,
especially to the memory of my beloved grandparents and to my ever-present
parents to whom I owe everything I am today,
as well as to my future generations,
embodied in my own seed, my “Little Chief” André.

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ABSTRACT

Native Canadian fiction for children and young adults can be viewed as an important means of cultural transmission and socialisation that contributes, to a great extent, to a community's collective identity. Here begins the first problem posed to us: trying to define the concept of culture and to examine in what way(s) oral heritage forms a part of it. Then, some other questions arise because in Canada, the haven of multiple cultures and ethnicities, debates about national identity re-surface repeatedly and continue to haunt the collective imagiNation of the country. Finding out the place of Native peoples and their literatures is even a greater difficulty, due to the legacy of colonialism. Despite the difficulties, new voices are currently being authorised as Canadian, and difference has now turned into the distinctive feature of the national literature. Jeannette Armstrong, an Okanagan writer, artist and educator, is well aware of the strength that stems from this variety of cultures and, in her works, she advocates for a plurality of voices within and outside of her community.

Using Armstrong's fiction for children and young adults, and looking briefly at some other works by Tomson Highway, George Littlechild, Thomas King and C. J. Taylor, this dissertation examines how literature can be read as a site of resistance and/or of cross-cultural exchange connecting diverse people of different nationalities, generations, languages, religions, genders and social conditions.

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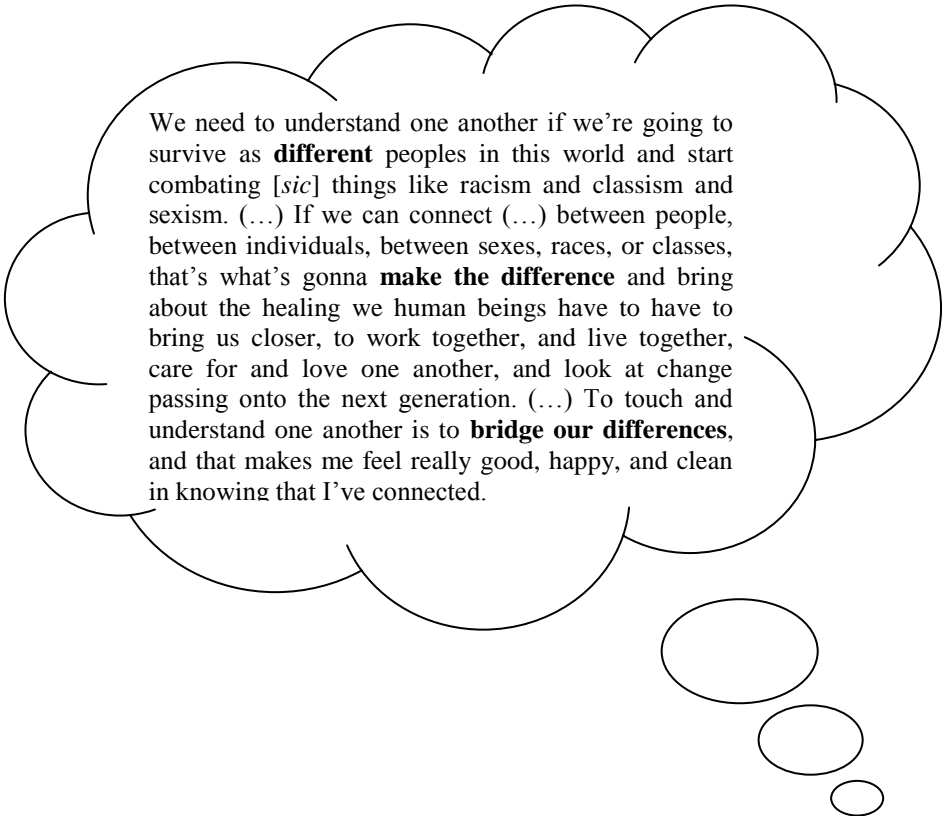
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We need to understand one another if we're going to survive as **different** peoples in this world and start combating [*sic*] things like racism and classism and sexism. (...) If we can connect (...) between people, between individuals, between sexes, races, or classes, that's what's gonna **make the difference** and bring about the healing we human beings have to have to bring us closer, to work together, and live together, care for and love one another, and look at change passing onto the next generation. (...) To touch and understand one another is to **bridge our differences**, and that makes me feel really good, happy, and clean in knowing that I've connected.

(Armstrong qtd. by Williamson, 1993: 22, 25-26)¹

¹ The emphasis put on the co-allofams of “difference”, and other expressions related to it, is my own, because I intend to highlight the importance of embracing diversity and coexistence, as one can notice through the title of this dissertation.

INTRODUCTION

To a large degree the personal identity of contemporary
Aboriginals in Canada is constituted by difference. As they
seek to define their ideal selves, part of their definition is in
relation to what they are not and do not want to be...

(Haun, 2003: 46)

I believe it is important to start by decoding the title I chose for my dissertation, which hides a patchwork quilt of questions that we will find in the fifth and subsequent paragraphs and which constitute the aim of this study. The first part of the title, “We’d rather be ‘red’ than dead”, is a quotation by the Okanagan author whose books I intend to analyse. In fact, Jeannette Armstrong’s protagonist, in her novel entitled *Slash*, participates in several demonstrations and, at a certain point, “[e]verybody walked along chanting the slogan and it was like one huge voice saying, “We’d rather be ‘Red’ than dead”” (1996a: 54). This awakening is something that needs to be achieved and nurtured, according to the author, and it constitutes the main message of her works. First Nations must be proud of whom they are, of their heritage and we all, generally speaking, need to learn how to understand and respect our differences; we need to accept diversity as a positive virtue, to embrace it as an ideal condition.

What differences are being addressed? This is a very pertinent question which must be clarified, since the term difference is part of the title and it has often been a point of controversy throughout the process of conception of this dissertation, due to its ambiguity. To give but one example, during a Symposium in which I participated in May 2008, in Montpellier, France, –this term was debated for its vagueness and broadness, requiring qualification having in view concepts such as race/ethnicity, culture, gender, or class. I believe, however, that even though the term difference is problematic – its meaning is difficult to grasp because it is ideologically, socially and

institutionally constructed; it is fabricated by discourse and influenced by a particular set of historical, cultural, political, social and economic circumstances² –, it is the most appropriate to use in a dissertation where I intend to focus on several inequalities fabricated by a foundational epistemology of Western systems of domination: the superiority of the white over the non-white, of the male over the female, of the monotheist over the polytheist, of the rich over the poor...

The concept of difference will be examined in detail in chapter 6.2, but I believe Jonathan Rutherford's metaphor of 'the desert' to be significant at this point to help us understand, in general terms, the meaning of this controversial word and its importance. From his point of view, a desert is regarded by some people as a barren area capable of supporting few lifeforms, while others think of this very same desert as a delightful place to live. By this metaphor, the writer aims at demonstrating that contradictory viewpoints do not need to be taken negatively; rather, they may lead to positive negotiations and renegotiations that give rise to hybridity as third spaces³. In Rutherford's words,

The desert as a metaphor of difference speaks of the otherness of race, sex and class, whose presence and politics so deeply divide our society. It is within their polarities of white/black, masculine/feminine, hetero/homosexual, where one term is always dominant and the other subordinate, that our identities are formed. Difference in this case is always perceived as the effect of the other. But a cultural politics that can address difference offers a way of breaking these hierarchies and dismantling this language of polarity and its material structures of inequality and discrimination. We can use the word difference as a motif for that uprooting of certainty. It represents an experience of change, transformation and hybridity...

(1990: 9-10)

² Just like the word race, for example, which will be analysed further on, the concept of difference depends on a series of relational dichotomies that categorise people, things and ideas based on systems of domination, as Collins (1991:68-9) points out: "Either/or dichotomous thinking categorizes people, things, and ideas in terms of their difference from one another. For example, the terms in the dichotomies black/white, male/female, reason/emotion, culture/nature, fact/opinion, mind/body, and subject/object gain meaning only in relation to their counterparts... In either/or dichotomous thinking, difference is defined in oppositional terms. One part is not simply different from its counterpart; it is inherently opposed to its 'other'"

³³ As we will notice in due time, the theory of hybridity as a third space that creates opportunities for negotiations, exchanges and new understandings achieved through difference was argued for by a number of influential postcolonial critics, at the end of the eighties, in particular Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall. As the former postulates, "... we see that all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity. But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom (...) So I think that political negotiation is a very important issue, and hybridity is precisely about the fact that when a new situation, a new alliance formulates itself, it may demand that you should translate your principles, rethink them, extend them" (Bhabha, 1990: 211; 216).

Rutherford contends that difference, in contemporary cultural identity politics, has become central for us to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of Others or, in other words, for creating spaces of negotiation and mutual understanding within and between cultures. What is more, one's own sense of identity is delineated and embodied in one's dialogical relations with those Others, whether they are singular or multiple, real or imagined, physically present or absent.

It is with this idea in mind – that there is always something worth sharing and something worth learning from/about the Other – that in my dissertation I will try to explore new possibilities regarding Native Canadian Children's Literature, which will surely constitute a great challenge due to the paucity of research data available to us on this subject. I aim at providing a valuable contribution towards the study of this literary genre that is still in its infancy – if it is regarded through an Eurocentric, postcolonial⁴ approach – and is, simultaneously, as old as the earth –if one bears in mind oral tradition.

More concretely, I aim at providing interpretations of Native Canadian literature for children and young adults, focusing mainly on Jeannette Armstrong's works, because she, as an Okanagan writer, provides us with historical records of Aboriginal life within the present boundaries of Canada, never forgetting young readers.

Understanding racial, religious, cultural, gender or class differences is paramount for building solidarity and Jeannette Armstrong is, indeed, able to establish connections between people, children and grown-ups. Because children are tomorrow's adults, the Okanagan writer believes that it is during childhood that we must be receptive to the values of living together in society.

Even though I am aware that the Indigenous peoples are not all similar and that we cannot treat the different Canadian tribes as one and the same – there is a large diversity in traditions, beliefs, religions and languages among First Nations –, there are obviously some common characteristics in terms of cultural and ideological conceptions, which are reflected in the Native authored book market for children and young adults. As it is, I also intend to present a literary analysis of some children's books by Tomson Highway, George Littlechild, Thomas King and C. J. Taylor.

⁴ The reader of this dissertation will notice that I distinguish between two spellings of the word post(-) colonialism: with and without a hyphen. Even though the interweaving of the two approaches is considerable, I employ postcolonialism without the hyphen to refer to a broader term that is used to indicate a methodology and field of study, whereas its hyphenated version is used as a descriptive word designating the historical stage/period following colonialism in any given case.

In keeping with the theme of these preliminary remarks, and bearing in mind that the self and culture share a symbiotic relationship as we shall shortly see, in my first chapter, entitled “Oral Literature: An Art Form From Immemorial Time”, I have started with the section “What is Oral Heritage? – Working Definitions”, where I will engage in a terminological discussion of some keywords, such as culture, race, tradition, heritage, folklore and memory. From my point of view, these concepts form the basis of the entire study and, thus, require clarification and a theoretical framework within which to interpret, understand and explain selected Native Canadian fiction for children and young adults. In this train of thought, I propose to look in close detail at cultural studies from critical perspectives in an attempt to provide answers to the following questions: What is culture? In what way(s) does oral heritage form a part of a culture? What is meant by oral heritage? How truthful and accurate can oral heritage be? Is oral heritage a valid means of conveying culture and, thus, a collective representation of identity? Are cultural heritage and tradition the same?

Afterwards, in the section that I entitled “Myths, legends and folktales: an approach to some genres of Oral Heritage”, I will narrow the focus of the discussion above to highlight specific genres of traditional oral narratives. I believe that the definition of these genres can be useful for analytic and comparative purposes and, as a consequence, I expect to find out the characteristics that distinguish them from one another and if they can be meaningfully applied to all cultures. Specifically, I aim at analysing if these genres apply to Native Literature or if the First Nations’ taxonomy of oral literature shall be seen from the perspective of different genre theories and analysed in their own cultural context. Since the positive role of difference in cultural identity politics can be suppressed and nullified by ethnocentrism, I believe it is imperative to watch out as to how difference is put into use in specific situations. It is under these circumstances that I find it necessary to propound a semantic approach which allows us to consider different worldviews and cultural backgrounds.

Before concluding my first chapter, I will attempt to bridge the distance between the living character of oral tradition and the static character of the written word, trying to shed some light on questions such as the origins of First Nations’ literatures in Canada; the power of oral tradition to Native peoples; the problematic inherent to colonialism – the use of English, a colonising tongue –, and issues of (re)appropriation, among others.

Building on the discussion generated in the first chapter, the second one will be devoted to a culturally-specific analysis of First Nations' literature, but always informed by the wider context within which it is located and framed: Canadian literature. Nonetheless, Canada's problematic identity which has so long endured in Canadian politics poses itself a dilemma and inevitably leads us to ask the following question, which makes the title of the second chapter: "Is There a Canadian Literature?" I will, then, try to trace the "Beginnings, authenticity and the quest for a national space", opening-up possibilities and discussions as a way to find out whether Native Canadian literature has its own worldviews, themes, symbols, style and other specific literary devices or if it is merely a reproduction of Canadian literature, whatever this may be.

This aim set forth prepares the ground for what follows in chapters three and four, where an outline of Canadian children's literature will be given and an attempt will be made to provide a view, perhaps more of a glimpse, at some children's books by Canadian Aboriginal writers, from 1900s to the present. A myriad of questions emerge from such an examination, which I will endeavour to address, namely: Should children's literature be classified as an ideological domain, a genre with its own subdivisions, where Native authored children's fiction fits as a subgenre? Why has Native fiction for youngsters only recently started to receive some scholarly attention? What is the role that First Nations have played in children's literature? Does Native Canadian fiction for children and young adults enable readers to expand their knowledge about Canadian history, geography, and culture, in general terms? Does it provide a wide audience with a realistic account of experience about Aboriginal life ways or does it simply contribute to strengthen prejudice and stereotypes? Is Native Canadian fiction able to help young people find their own place in the present? Is there a distinctly Native Canadian book market for children and young adults and, if there is, what are the common characteristics of this Native authored subgenre?

This contextual part will be followed by another where, in chapter five, I will provide some biographical data on Jeannette Armstrong, because I believe it is relevant for the interpretation of the texts subject to literary analysis.

We can never forget that an understanding of literature depends not only on the isolated reading of certain individual works and the consideration of the authors' lives and their circumstances, but also upon a solid knowledge and critical examination of the human history, language and culture of which literature forms a part and which it represents. We can no longer be compliant with obsolete or superseded standards that

regard "... a literary work as though it were a 'well wrought urn,' to use Cleanth Brooks's famous phrase" (Mukherjee, 1994: viii), or a fragmentary, "cold, dead objet [sic] d'art" (ibidem); rather, it is "equipment for living" or, in other words, "a comment on human life in all its ramifications" (ix). Thus, as Mukherjee warns us, "[a]s students of literature, our job [is more than] to pay attention to the texture of language, to tropes and figures of speech, to symbols and imagery, and to form and structure" (ibidem: viii-ix). The assumption that "[a]nything else was deemed 'political' and hence outside the purview of 'literature'" must be discarded (ix)⁵.

It is with this idea in mind that I will depart to the discussion of some of Jeannette Armstrong's works in chapters six, seven and eight, in particular *Slash*, designed as "juvenile fiction" in her own words, *Neekna and Chemai*, *Enwhisteetkwa/Walk in Water* and *Dancing with the Cranes*. Among many other questions and concerns, in these chapters I intend to examine if Jeannette Armstrong's works portray Okanagan culture and nativeness truthfully, and how they influence the Native and non-Native reader.

Chapter nine, which opens the third and last part of this dissertation, aims at providing a broader context in which to make sense of the information gathered previously. I will, then, track alterNative routes to understanding children's literature, by analysing, even if briefly, works by Tomson Highway, Thomas King, George Littlechild and Carrie-Jo Taylor. In doing so, I intend to complement the previous two parts with an insight on what links Native Canadian literature for youngsters, exploring how these Aboriginal writers' different backgrounds, experiences and points of view may result in works that bear several common matters and concerns, while, at the same time, contributing to reflecting, recognising and valuing the so many different voices that make up the whole.

Given the goals stated above, I would say that this dissertation clearly has a promise, if not a thesis: it is that Native Canadian literature for children and young adults helps youngsters to realise that everyone plays a determinate and important part in this global world, which means that difference must be embraced as an opportunity,

⁵ As Jeannette Armstrong confesses in an interview with Janice Williamson, Native Canadian oratory "... is often discarded as invalid because it is 'political' or 'sociological'" (1993: 20), hence contrary to an ethnocentric evaluative system that just searches for "metaphors, symbols and archetypes submerged in [Aboriginal] culture", as well as other "underlying givens of European culture that [Aboriginal peoples] must take for granted in terms of structure" (ibidem). It is time for us "to bridge two separate cultures and world-views", by refusing to analyse "... what is 'good' Native writing in terms of a White tradition" (ibidem); it is time for us to revise our evaluative system and learn, from Native peoples, how to adopt an inter-disciplinary approach in the study of literature.

rather than feared or seen as a problem. That is the final message that I would like to pass on to this and future generations.

From a methodological point of view, my study will be built upon a qualitative (as opposed to quantitative) research, that is, I do not intend to assign frequencies or build statistical models in an attempt to explain what is observed. My research consists in collecting, reviewing and critically analysing existing bibliographical sources (books, articles, videos and websites), firstly examining contextual aspects as already mentioned, which illuminate the practical analysis of the literary works that will follow in the second and third parts. Therefore, the methodological framework will be interdisciplinary, drawing upon historical, anthropological, ethnographic, literary and pedagogic approaches, in order to develop a critical interpretation that will be theoretically informed and, to a certain extent, empirically based.

In fact, the scarce resources available in Portugal and Spain on Native Canadian literature for children and young adults could be pointed out as my main difficulty, but this has also constituted a challenge. In January 2008, I decided to depart to British Columbia for a month, trying to collect as much information as I could. As a result, I spent a couple of weeks in Vancouver, where I got the opportunity to visit the Museum of Anthropology and, even more importantly, I could have access to several libraries at UBC, namely Koerner, Okanagan, Education and the XWI7XWA. Furthermore, the library at En'owkin International School of Writing in Penticton together with the interview of Jeannette Armstrong were very fruitful and will certainly enrich the body of my dissertation. Our conversation was videotaped and it will be used throughout my examination of her works, because her words provide great insight into her writing. Even though I had planned a variety of questions, the truth is that Jeannette Armstrong is a communicator *par excellence* and, with her very powerful oratory skills, she opened my horizons to issues I had not yet thought of at the time: for instance, she does not think of herself as Native Canadian, but as Okanagan; she helped me understand in a simple way the reason why the keepers of tradition are grandparents in *Neekna and Chemai* and, after making many other important comments on her books, she suggested some sources that I should look for in order to better understand the Okanagan worldview.

In Vernon, B.C., I also collected some more information on the Okanagan lifestyles, as I was guided through the Day Care and the Immersion School at the local

Okanagan Indian Band. The DVD I was given there – *N'ca'qn S'ookanaqinx: I am Okanagan*. (2004) – will also be another source to support my research.

I would like to conclude this introduction by reiterating that analyses of Aboriginal literatures, cultures and histories are of utmost importance to extend our knowledge of other peoples beyond our immediate surroundings. And I, as a teacher, felt attracted to this area of study, because I truly believe that children and young adults of any country, any race and any belief will specially benefit from this enrichment. Native Canadian fiction for youngsters may contribute to the raising of consciousness of their own **identity**⁶, of respect towards other people's identity, and may be a great weapon for fighting ethnocentric thoughts all around the world.

⁶ By “respect for their identity” I mean that we all, children included, need to learn how to value our culture, our roots, our place in the world. In Jeannette Armstrong's texts, as well as in many other Native and non-Native authored books, the quest for one's identity is a reality. That is an issue which encompasses all cultures: we need to find our true selves and feel comfortable within our own skin.

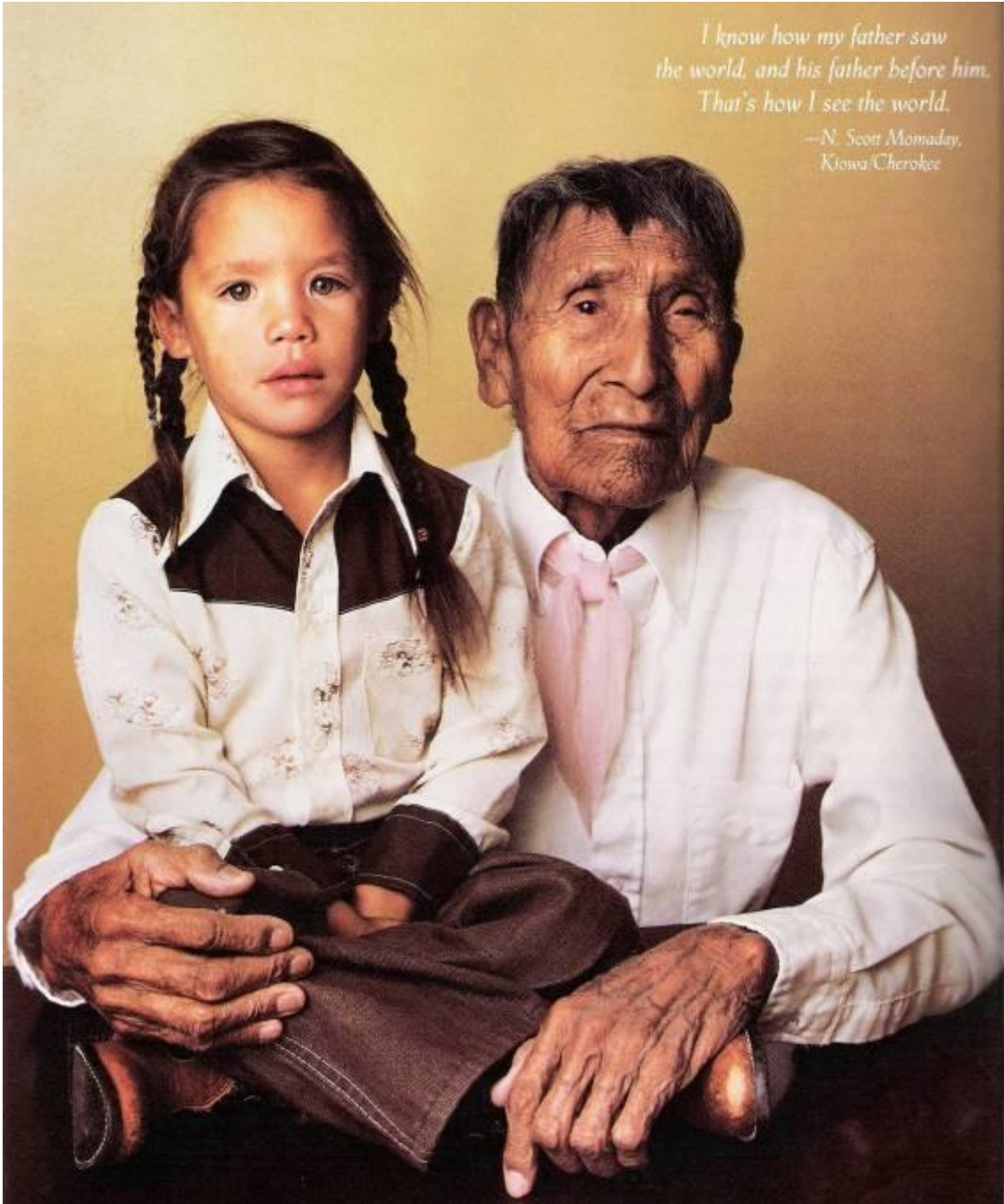


Fig. 1. Native child and grandfather, by Dmitri Kasterine (Maynard, 1996: 356).

CHAPTER ONE

ORAL LITERATURE – AN ART FORM FROM IMMEMORIAL TIME

In this first chapter, I endeavour to prepare the ground for a comprehensive analysis of selected Native Canadian fiction for children and young adults, the primary purpose of this dissertation. With this challenge in mind, I shall start with a consideration of some viewpoints and explanatory studies on **oral literature – an art form from immemorial time**. In fact, this oral art of storytelling is far older than History can trace. Much remains unknown about the origins and transmission of oral literature; yet, in spite of this uncertainty, it has long been acknowledged as a universal human activity and an expression of cultural identity, because it takes place between or among people in all cultures, across all times and places, formally or informally. Therefore, and because we cannot dissociate one from the other – oral heritage and culture – my first section belonging to this chapter will be entitled “What is Oral Heritage? – Working Definitions”. I will delimit the usage of the concept oral heritage in my study by characterising it as a cultural product. After having defined a set of anchor words, which I believe should be the starting point of any research on folkloristics, the next step will be marked by a brief excursion into genre theory in an attempt to foreground the interpretative frameworks that have been central to the debate on oral narrative. As stated earlier, storytelling is a fascinating human activity that bears many striking resemblances across space and time, but shall we adopt a radical universal approach and disregard cultural differences? Can Native Canadian tales, for example, be placed into certain well-recognised formal groups, depending on content, style or purpose? Do such formal groups exist *per se* or do they overlap? These are

some of the questions that I intend to discuss in a section entitled “Myths, Legends and Folktales: an approach to some genres of Oral Heritage”.

Finally, as a complement to the previous two sections, the last one in this chapter deals with the impact that the printing industry has had on the preservation/destruction, dissemination and appropriation of oral literature. Is our oral heritage the result of spontaneous inspiration and anonymous transmission or is this purely oral dissemination model reliant on memory alone? What about First Nations’ oral heritage? Does a non-Native writer have the skills and the resources to tell the tales of a culture other than his/her own? And even if he/she does, is it legitimate for him/her to do so? How important is it to preserve one’s oral heritage in print and to what extent does print alone affect one’s oral culture? These and many more questions will certainly be brought up and discussed throughout this last section, which I entitled “When oral literature gave way to written tradition...”

I shall now proceed to the analysis of some keywords correlated with oral heritage, as previously announced, and then delve into its labyrinthine origins and taxonomies to ultimately delineate its evolution from *orature*⁷ to literature and the consequent impact on the present-day.

⁷ The term *orature* was coined by the Ugandan scholars Pio Zirimu and Austin Bukenya, in the early seventies of the last century, in an attempt to avoid an oxymoron (Mugo, 1998: 46). In fact, as I will explain in more detail in the third section, the coexistence of the two terms oral and literature may seem paradoxical, because literature presupposes written/print discourse while orality implies spoken/performed discourse. This belief was shared by Walter J. Ong, to whom “[t]he term ‘oral literature’ (...) is preposterous – a contradiction in terms. (...) Many other scholars agree with this view and believe that oral performances result in what should be called ‘orature’ and not ‘literature’, even when the texts of such performances are written down in some way” (Pellowski, 1996: 665).

I. 1.1. WHAT IS ORAL HERITAGE? – WORKING DEFINITIONS

In order to accurately answer the question above, there is a need to offer a conceptual framework and critical analysis of some keywords, such as culture, tradition, heritage, folklore and memory, as they support and complement one another. Therefore, I will try to provide answers not only to the prior question, but I will also attempt to assess in what way(s) oral heritage forms a part of culture, and if it is a valid means of conveying a collective representation of identity. These issues assume a vital significance in improving our understanding of the universal reliance upon orality, and especially the cultural context of Native Canadian peoples, to whom oral heritage is a sacred art, for it represents the way of knowing themselves and the world around them.

To start with, and as noted above, I believe that it is of great importance to reflect upon the notion of culture, as it is an all-encompassing concept, which will provide us with a clearer view of how culture has been shaped by oral heritage and, conversely, how culture has affected the development of such phenomenon.

Raymond Williams' complaint "I don't know how many times I've wished that I'd never heard the damned word" (Bennett *et al*, 2005: 63), while referring to culture, is justified by the fact that it is one of the most difficult terms to define in any language. Actually, debates among various intellectuals have been held around this term since it was first used in the Old French language of the Middle Ages, at a time when it was linked to religious connotations "to indicate a religious cult, or religious worship or ceremony" (Rocher, 1988: 46). Furthermore, for a long time, in its most generic sense, the word culture in Latin – *cultura* (from the root word *colere*), as well as in all the other languages which borrowed the root, was also associated with the primary meaning of cultivation. With respect to this, Williams writes that "[c]ultura took on the main meaning of cultivation or tending, though with subsidiary medieval meanings of honour

and worship” (1976: 77). Like Williams, Giles Gunn also observes that “[f]rom the beginning, culture has always been associated with processes of nurture. (...) ... the earliest uses of culture always linked it to natural processes of tending and preservation” (1987: 6).

If “in all its uses [culture] was a noun of process: the tending of something, basically crops or animals” (Williams, 1976: 77); – sometime around the sixteenth century the term gained a metaphoric meaning, becoming commonly used to designate the nurturing of human children. Later, in the eighteenth century, it attained social and historical dimensions when German intellectuals borrowed the term *Cultur* from French, spelling it then *Kultur*, and adapted it to define “... progress, the improvement of the human spirit, a step towards the perfection of humanity. Others used it to mean ‘civilization,’ that is, the refinement of mores, customs, and knowledge” (Rocher, 1988: 46). In other words, and according to the anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn, in the second half of the eighteenth century the German concept of *Kultur* emerged, having grown out of the older meaning and coming to signify then “the distinctive ‘higher’ values or enlightenment of a society” (1952: 67).

It was not until the nineteenth century, though, that the definition of culture was put under the deep scrutiny of intellectual elites. As a result of such intense examination, in 1871, Tylor attempted to isolate and clarify this concept in his major work *Primitive Culture* and gave birth to the first formal definition of the term in the opening sentence of his book: “Culture, or civilization, ... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor qtd. in Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952: 81). Noteworthy here was the assumption, by that time, that culture is acquired within communities of practice and it is not something inborn or hereditary.

If this period was marked by the beginning of an anthropologic/ethnographic discourse, in the twentieth century it hit a crescendo. The term culture was correlated not only with a class dimension, but also with gender and ethnic boundaries. As an example, I would like to quote Sapir’s definition of culture in 1921: “culture (...) is (...) the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives...” (qtd. in *ibidem*: 89). Another quote worth sharing is by Radcliffe-Brown, in 1949: “[Culture is] the process by which in a given social group or social class language, beliefs, ideas, aesthetic tastes, knowledge, skills and usages of many kinds are handed on (‘tradition’ means ‘handing on’) from person to person and from one

generation to another” (qtd. in *ibidem*: 92). We notice, thus, a shift, as definitions start emphasising social heritage, and even tradition⁸, as an inherent element of culture and this because tradition is deeply rooted in cultural patterns and symbols shared by a people. One pertinent point to mention here is that this development owes much to the work of Franz Boas⁹ and his students, who saw the need to challenge the existing evolutionary schemes and to resist the “tendency to taxonomize cultures” (Bennett *et al*, 2005: 68).

We cannot forget, however, that Herder, a visionary, had already shown, in the eighteenth century, the same concern in his unfinished *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, when he claimed that “[t]he very thought of a superior European culture is a blatant insult to the majesty of Nature” (qtd. in Williams, 1976: 79). This philosopher attacked the concept of culture as conceived by the Enlightenment thinkers¹⁰ and “proposed his concept of civilization as an alternative. By civilization he meant essentially a way of life rather than a standard or a process, and one that is commonly found among all peoples even though it is individually expressed by each” (Gunn, 1987: 8). What is more, he was the first “to speak of ‘cultures’ in the plural: the specific and variable cultures of social and economic groups within a nation” (Williams, 1976: 79), which contradicts the statement by Menand, presented in Bennett *et al* (2005: 67), that it was Boas the first to envision “civilization as pluralistic rather than monolithic” (Gunn, 1987: 8). In fact, what happened was that such innovation received little or almost no attention in that century, or in the following, being credited just in the twentieth century to Boas’s disciples.

Actually, in the twentieth century, these anthropologists came to realise that such schemes were too speculative, valuing Europeans as superior to peoples from other parts of the world and, therefore, after some experimental studies, they presented a position known as historical particularism, that is, Boasians claimed that each culture was the result of distinct historical events and circumstances and not merely the product of environment or race. This led inevitably to the notion of cultural relativism, which

⁸ These two terms – heritage and tradition – will be discussed further on in this section.

⁹ This German-born anthropologist was averse to racism and, due to an egalitarian liberal intellectual background, he tried to formulate an alternative conception of anthropology and managed to do that through an empirical fieldwork among American Indians and Eskimos.

¹⁰ The Enlightenment philosophers regarded civilization or culture as a “unilinear process, leading to the high and dominant point of European culture” (Williams, 1976: 79).

assumed that each society could be judged only in its own terms, since there were no higher or lower forms of culture as there were no universal standards¹¹.

This cultural relativism of Boas was further evidenced in the late twenties and thirties of the twentieth century by a growing interrelation between anthropology and psychology, which emerged after Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead's propagation of culture and personality theories. According to these followers of Boas, culture should be regarded as a set of rules governing behaviour, which, in turn, create shared traits and customs among peoples¹². Those common traits and experiences, on one hand, and the fear of the unknown, on the other, have led most of the times to nationalism and to an ethnocentric/eurocentred vision of the world that must be banned, as Benedict remarks:

The study of different cultures has another important bearing upon present-day thought and behaviour. Modern existence has thrown many civilizations into close contact, and at the moment the overwhelming response to this situation is nationalism and racial snobbery. There has never been time when civilization stood more in need of individuals who are genuinely culture-conscious, who can see objectively the socially conditioned behaviour of other peoples without fear and recrimination.

Contempt for the alien is not the only possible solution of our present contact of races and nationalities. It is not even a scientifically founded solution.

(1959: 10-11)

And she went on to explore the idea of cultural relativism, strongly opposing racist assumptions about the natural inferiority of non-white people¹³. From her point of view, our histories of colonialism and imperialism have contributed to our racist perceptions of others and their consequent subjugation, something which must be deconstructed. As a result, endowed with a didactic voice, Ruth Benedict urges us to open our minds to an anti-racist struggle against our colonial, imperial, paternalist and liberal notions of race:

We have travelled, we pride ourselves on our sophistication. But we have failed to understand the relativity of cultural habits, and we remain debarred from much profit and enjoyment in our human relations with peoples of different standards, and untrustworthy in our dealings with them.

¹¹ For further reading, cf. "Mary Kingsley and the emergence of cultural relativism" (chapter 2) in Paul Rich, 1986: 27-49.

¹² This conceptualisation of culture as behaviour, and particularly the quest for dominant personality types and themes within a society, led to national character studies.

¹³ This assumption of natural inferiority also stands true for First Nations, as evidenced in several episodes of Canadian history, for instance when children were forced to leave their reserve communities to attend residential schools, where they were subjected to extreme deprivation, aiming at their transformation from 'savage' to 'civilized'. Many other examples will be brought up in the course of this dissertation, namely during the analysis of *Slash*, a well-crafted novel of resistance.

The recognition of the cultural basis of race prejudice is a desperate need in present Western civilization.

(Benedict, 1959: 11)

The notion that race is socially constructed has become commonplace. We all know that racial divisions are a result of arbitrarily assigned categories which have no real, genetic or biological basis. Instead, the word race is inexorably linked to politics and it is an ambivalent term as it depends on the social milieu and on the historical context of the body politic. Even so, across time, many people have justified their biased behaviour and practices with phenotypical arguments, as Miles and Torres point out:

This language of “race” was usually anchored in the signification of certain forms of somatic difference (skin colour, facial characteristics, body shape and size, eye colour, skull shape) which were interpreted as the physical marks which accompanied, and which in some unexplained way determined, the nature of those so marked.

(1996: 27)

Nonetheless, in a constantly changing world, where the relocation of borders, immigration and multiculturalism are a reality, there is, more than ever, a need **to embrace difference** and adopt the anti-racist slogan which “has been employed as a counter-weight to ideas of racial divisions within humankind”: ““there is only one race – the human race”” (Murji in Bennett *et al*, 2005: 291).

It should be noted that Benedict’s efforts to describe complex societies on the basis of configuration later revealed to be unsuccessful and too simplistic, as Kroeber and Kluckhohn argue, because those observable and empirical characteristics were idiosyncratic:

Whether behavior is to be included in culture remains a matter of dispute. The behavior in question is of course the concrete behavior of individual human beings, not any collective abstraction. The two present authors incline strongly to exclude behavior as such from culture. (...) First, there also is human behavior not determined by culture, so that behavior as such cannot be used as a differentiating criterion of culture. Second, culture being basically a form or pattern or design or way, it is an abstraction from concrete human behavior, but is not itself behaviour.

(1952: 305)

As we have seen, the period from the 1920s up to the 1950s was very prolific for anthropological research. Given that, and in an attempt to give a structured overview of

the notion of culture, the two U.S. anthropologists cited above, A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, compiled 164 definitions in their monograph *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (1952), where they illustrated the development of the term with an emphasis on descriptive, historical, normative, psychological, structural and genetic perspectives.

If efforts to associate culture with the symbolic were noticed in some definitions of the concept in the late 1930s and early 1940s, they became even more systematic in the 1950s, and especially in the 1960s, when research strategies began to emerge and pay closer attention to the *meanings* that cultural elements may hold for the members of a society. As Kroeber and Kluckhohn observe, “[c]ertainly there is as of 1951 a wide recognition among philosophers, linguists, anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists that the existence of culture rests indispensably upon the development in early man of the faculty for symbolizing, generalizing, and imaginative substitution” (ibidem: 300). Actually, this period was propelled by criticisms of conceptualisations of culture as behaviour and by the emergence of the view of cultures as texts, that is, as an interpretative polyphony requiring a negotiation of meanings. More explicitly, culture was then defined as a composite of multiple realities that could not be described from a concrete, unitary perspective:

[C]ulture is inevitably an abstraction. (...) Culture is a design or system of designs for living; it is a plan, not the living itself; it is that which selectively channels men’s reactions; it is not the reactions themselves. The importance of this is that it extricates culture as such from behavior, abstracts it from human activity; the concept is itself selective.

(ibidem, 1952: 120)

The view expressed above is firmly rooted in structuralism. By applying linguistic methods and models to the analysis of culture, anthropologists sought to find the mental structures that underlie cultural systems of perception and of classification of the world. Actually, with the advent of structuralism, the structuralist linguistic methods pioneered by some influential thinkers such as Saussure, Jakobson and Troubetzkoy, among others, were modified and extended in order to examine the unconscious categories and structures in thought and language that organise action and institutions in society. With respect to this link between structural linguistics and anthropology, Kroeber and Kluckhohn comment that:

The study of cultural structures, as opposed to content, has progressed markedly during the last generation. Sapir, drawing upon linguistics where sheer structure is often crucial, showed what a fertile field for analysis this was and how much that was not immediately apparent could be discovered. (...)
(Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952: 358)

As a footnote, they emphasise these linguistic analogies, quoting Murdock:

‘The phenomenon of linguistic drift exhibits numerous close parallels to the evolution of social organization (...). The present study has led to the conclusion that social organization is a semi-independent system comparable in many respects to language, and similarly characterized by an internal dynamics of its own (...).’
(ibidem: 361-2)

Marcus and Fischer also epitomise the structural linkages existing between linguistics and the concept of culture, when they note:

Linguistics became a model for emulation, both because language was seen as central to culture, and because linguistics seemed to have developed a more rigorous way of eliciting culturally patterned phenomena, and of defining these phenomena in terms of so-called deep structures not conscious to speakers.
(1986: 28)

Altogether, it is not hard to understand that language acquired an important role towards the definition of culture as the latter became indissoluble from the hermeneutic paradigm. In other words, structural anthropologists conceptualised culture as a system of shared knowledge, symbols and meanings that provided a group with frames of reference or normative guidance, unintelligible to an outsider. Given this approach, this notion worked symbolically, as it was based on interpretive positions that valued a collective imaginary for the group, constructing its experiences and a conception of identity in a particular way.

This relationship between culture and interpretive anthropology¹⁴ is grounded in Max Weber’s sociological claim that “[t]he concept of culture is a *value-concept*” (1949: 76). Weber, one of the fathers of interpretivism, points out that “[e]mpirical reality becomes ‘culture’ to us because and insofar as we relate it to value ideas. It

¹⁴ According to Marcus and Fischer (1986: 25), “Interpretive anthropology is a covering label for a diverse set of reflections upon both the practice of ethnography and the concept of culture. It grew out of the confluence in the 1960s and 1970s of ideas from the then-dominant version of social theory (...); from Weberian sociology and from the simultaneous impact of a number of philosophical and intellectual fashions, including phenomenology, structuralism, structural and transformative linguistics, semiotics, Frankfurt School critical theory, and hermeneutics”.

includes those segments and only those segments of reality which have become significant to us because of this value relevance” (ibidem).

It is an undeniable fact that we value some “segments”, using Weber’s words, and that inevitably implies issues of particularity and distinction, of unity and diversity. For example, there are certain traits that mark off one non-Native group from a Native one and that evaluative and most times hierarchical connotations of the term culture contribute to emphasise differences while looking at and interacting with the Other. However, we must be aware of the fact that Otherness does not exist as a brute fact, but it is rather a representation of the group both to itself and to others.

This value theory is also intimately related to the binarism between high and low culture, mass or popular culture, which gained weight earlier, during the industrial revolution, due to separations that had class, ethnic and gender biases. The society’s elites considered high culture to be aesthetic and intellectual accomplishments, such as artistic objects, grounded on the quality of durability, as Arendt makes clear:

From the standpoint of sheer durability, art works clearly are superior to all other things; since they stay longer in the world than anything else, they are the worldliest of all things. Moreover, they are the only things without any function in the life process of society; strictly speaking they are fabricated not for men, but for the world which is meant to outlast the life-span of mortals, the coming and going of the generations. Not only are they not consumed like consumer goods and not used up like use objects; they are deliberately removed from the processes of consumption and usage and isolated against the sphere of human life necessities. This removal can be achieved in a great variety of ways; and only where it is being done does culture, in the specific sense, come into being.
(1961: 209)

In other words, those objects worth of value and preservation by collective decision are the ones that will last through the centuries and are likely to be taken as emblems of identity. Contrary to mundane objects, they resist consumerism, thus being granted cultural status.

On the other hand, Arendt addresses low, mass or popular culture contemptuously, metaphorically characterizing it as gluttonous: “Mass culture comes into being when mass society seizes upon cultural objects, and its danger is that the life process of society (...) will literally consume the cultural objects, eat them up and destroy them” (ibidem: 207).

In the twentieth century, following the advent of industrial capitalism, much of what was previously known as high culture became widely available to the public. According to Clifford, from the twentieth century onwards there has been a growing

concern about the democratisation of the culture concept, mainly due to the work – interpretation – of ethnographers:

Art and culture emerged after 1800 as mutually reinforcing domains of human *value*, strategies for gathering, marking off, protecting the best and most interesting creations of “Man”. In the twentieth century the categories underwent a series of further developments. The plural, anthropological definition of culture (...) emerged as a liberal alternative to racist classifications of human diversity. It was a sensitive means for understanding different and dispersed “whole ways of life” in a high colonial context of unprecedented global interconnection. *Culture* in its full evolutionary richness and authenticity, formerly reserved for the best creations of modern Europe, could now be extended to all the world’s populations.

(Clifford, 1988: 234)

As we have seen, the concept of culture has been criticised from a number of different perspectives and suffered numerous shifts. Therefore, we must be very cautious when adopting a single definition amidst the myriad of available ones. What is true, on the whole, is that culture defines who we are; how we, as groups and individuals, think, express our values, behave and communicate. But if culture is necessary for maintaining a degree of continuity within a community, we cannot obliterate the fact that it also means constant interaction with external forces, turning it into an ever-evolving process.

If culture is continually evolving, how is, then, a sense of tradition and heritage so ingrained in cultural patterns and symbols often shared by generations of people? What is heritage and how can one distinguish it from tradition?

Culture has been referred to as man’s “social heritage” and as “the man-made part of the environment. It consists essentially of any form of behavior which is acquired through learning, and which is patterned in conformity with certain approved norms. Under it anthropologists include all the customs, traditions, and institutions of a people, together with their products and techniques of production. A folktale or a proverb is thus clearly a part of culture.

(Bascom, 1965: 27)

Heritage has always been perceived as the remains – material or immaterial – of past human activity or, as Michael L. Blakey puts it, as the product of kinship and tradition: “One’s own social past or background, familial, ethnic, and national,

constitutes much of who we think we are (...). Like lineage, heritage conveys relationships through kinship and tradition” (qtd. in Gathercole and Lowenthal, 1990: 38).

This notion of something that is shared within the community exists since the thirteenth century, as, by that time, it was used to designate “‘inheritance’ or ‘heirloom’”, that is, “the property or land passed through the generations, and acquired by sons (usually) on the death of their father” (Schwarz in Bennett, 2005: 154). Besides this secular sense, the term also included a spiritual one, which was connected to the idea of God’s Chosen People, from whom the Messiah, the redeemer of the human race, shall come. Gradually, the term became broader and more inclusive, today coming to signify everything that conveys cultural significance from group member to group member.

Heritage, thus, depends on the concept of tradition, to such an extent that these terms “often came to be interchangeable or synonymous” (ibidem: 154). However, according to Kroeber and Kluckhohn, there is a very clear conceptual distinction based on the immobility and statism of the former versus the dynamism of the latter:

“Heritage” connotes rather what is received, the product; “tradition” refers primarily to the process by which receipt takes place, but also to what is given and accepted. Both terms view culture statically, or at least as more or less fixed, though the word “tradition” denotes dynamic activity as well as end product.
(1952: 93)

The dynamic feature inherent to the word tradition is justified by its etymological root: this English term, coming from the Latin root word *tradere*, has its origin in the fourteenth century, and it meant to hand over or deliver. We cannot forget that this act of passing something on is, using Williams’ words, an “abstract and exhortatory” activity, implying selection based on respect and duty: “**Tradition** survives in English as a description of a general process of handing down, but there is a very strong and often predominant sense of this entailing respect and duty. (...) [O]nly some of them [of traditions] or parts of them have been selected for our respect and duty...” (1983: 319).

What are the criteria used by groups for choosing and passing down certain objects, heroes, events and oral *realia* from their cultural past? Is it accurate to always associate tradition with the past? How long does it take to turn something into a tradition? These questions have no easy answers. Williams tells us that “[i]t is

sometimes observed (...) that it only takes two generations to make anything **traditional...**” (Williams, 1983: 319). However, it is not consensual, because Sims and Stephens, paraphrasing Toelken, claim that “time may be a matter of ‘years’ or of ‘moments’” (2005: 66) and they even “acknowledge that traditions do not always come to us from generations past” (ibidem: 65). But don’t they?

The sharing of traditions is more than a “linear and chronological” activity; it is connected to Clifford Geertz’s idea of culture as a web: “[v]isualizing culture as a web, and tradition as something that is actively transmitted and circulated across that web, helps us to see that the past is only one part of a very fluid, complex process (ibidem: 69).

In fact, and contrary to common belief, tradition does not simply rely on the past, but rather uses it or some of its elements to illuminate the present and create/maintain one’s sense of group identity. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952: 307) explain that “[h]eritage and tradition, it is true, do involve the past; but their focus is on the reception by the present, not on the perduring influence of the past as such”. We may use knowledge gained from past generations, but we may as well form and adapt tradition from our contemporaneous peers in order to suit our current interests. In other words, tradition involves continuity, appropriation and integration, as Sims and Stephens illustrate through some examples, the first of which I quote below:

A simple transmission of an item of folklore might occur when a child in New Hampshire learns a jump-rope rhyme from her mother and teaches it to her best friend. Not long after, her friend moves to Chicago. She gets together with a few girls to jump rope and recites the rhyme – new to them – and it becomes a part of their local rope-jumping tradition. Perhaps another group of girls jumping rope nearby hears this new rhyme, and learns it by watching and listening as the other group performs it. Even though this tradition has been passed from one generation to another, it has also been shared among peers and has moved into a new geographical community as well.

(2005: 69)

Williams’s theory about a selective tradition makes possible a comprehensive understanding of such a complex phenomenon as oral heritage (the product). Taking a story as an example, one could ask the reason why it may be presented in a number of different versions, not only throughout the world but also within a given country or community. The keywords are memory, selection, continuation, repetition, invention and revision.

The act of storytelling is an art of memory which mediates between continuity in repetition and variation resulting from invention. Sims and Stephens elaborate on this by stating that “[r]epetition is important in establishing continuity, since a group repeats something because it matters to the group; if it isn’t meaningful, it won’t be repeated, and if it isn’t repeated, it won’t become a tradition” (2005: 66). But this continuity does not necessarily mean accuracy and authenticity, because creativity, instead of duplication, may take place. Paraphrasing Hobsbawm and Ranger, Schwarz writes that “tradition [is] increasingly subject to invention in the present” (2005: 154), which, in other words, is the same as saying that authenticity is itself constructed so that “tradition and heritage represent a means for those in the present to organize the (historical) past” (ibidem), as previously noted. Bascom, a titan of anthropology and folklore¹⁵, perfectly describes the way that the whole process takes place:

The development of an item of folklore (...) must have been invented at some time, by some individual. It can be assumed that many folktales or proverbs, like many other inventions, were rejected because they either did not fill a recognized or subconscious need, or because they were incompatible with the accepted patterns and traditions of folklore or of culture as a whole. If they were accepted, they depended on retelling, in the same way that all cultural traits in a nonliterate society depend upon restatement and re-enactment. (...) In the course of this retelling or redoing, change occurs each time new variations are introduced, and again these innovations are subject to acceptance or rejection. As this process continues, each new invention is adapted gradually to the needs of the society and to the pre-existing culture patterns, which may themselves be modified somewhat to conform to the new invention.

(1965: 29)

¹⁵ Folklore is another word which deserves consideration when focusing on tradition, because the latter is the basis of the former. It was coined in 1846 by William Thoms, a British antiquarian, but it “is perhaps as old as mankind” (Handoo, 1989: 1). According to Alan Dundes, “[f]olklore includes myths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, chants, charms, blessings, curses, oaths, insults, retorts, taunts, teases, toasts, tongue-twisters, and greeting and leave-taking formulas (...). It also includes folk costume, folk dance, folk drama (and mime), folk art, folk belief (or superstition), folk medicine, folk instrumental music (...), folksongs (...), folk speech (...), folk similes (...), folk metaphors (...), and names (...). Folk poetry ranges from oral epics to autograph-book verse, epitaphs, latrinalia (...), and nursery rhymes. The list of folklore forms also contains games; gestures; symbols; prayers (...); practical jokes; folk etymologies; food recipes; quilt and embroidery designs; house, barn and fence types; street vendor’s cries; and even the traditional conventional sounds used to summon animals or to give them commands. There are such minor forms as mnemonic devices (...), envelope sealers (...), and the traditional comments made after body emissions (...). There are such major forms as festivals and special day (or holiday) customs (...)” (1965: 3).

Given the large amount of forms and definitions that the term folklore comprises, it is not surprising that it has often been misunderstood and misapplied. Generally speaking, and according to a simpler approach, “[f]olklore is the material that is handed on by tradition, either by word of mouth or by custom and practice” (Taylor, 1965: 34) and that plays a vital role within a society, because it ensures conformity to the accepted cultural norms.

But it has not always been that way. There were times when tradition was understood as a “‘sanctified’ text, merely moved along by a particular person”, usually known as the “tradition bearer”, a concept which stood in opposition to the idea of tradition makers (Sims and Stephens, 2005: 70), and he/she might “be an elder or a person especially experienced in a particular type of performance” (ibidem: 71).

The nineteenth-century romantics, for example, were attracted to folklore collecting and advocated that tradition bearers were merely the reproducers of texts, not their active users. They were regarded as uncreative tellers of oral forms, because the emphasis at the time was on pure transmission of lore. According to Lord Raglan (1936: 130), “[n]o popular storyteller has ever been known to invent anything” and when they do “make minor changes, [it is] mostly for the worse”. It was believed that there was no virtue in originality and, therefore, there had to be great concern about the truth and the performer’s oratory skills to preserve one’s heritage.

Later, by the mid-twentieth century, there was a growing recognition that telling a tale meant more than just reciting a memorised text; it implied creatively improvising while using oral formulae and structural patterns. This did not mean completely free creation, as Vladimir Propp, a Russian scholar, argues: “It can be established that the creator of a tale rarely invents; he receives his material from his surroundings or from current realities and adapts them to a tale” (1968: 4). Destroying the obligatory norms and exercising one’s creative powers through traditions was, then, a difficult and challenging process, because, as we have seen, the idea that tellers were slaves to tradition was taken very seriously. Von Sydow, “[o]ne of the greatest theoreticians in the history of folkloristics”, in distinguishing between active and passive bearers of tradition, synthesises the whole mechanics of folklore transmission:

Active bearers of tradition are those individuals who tell the tales and sing the songs. They may be contrasted with passive bearers (...) who merely listen to the performances of active bearers. (...) If an active bearer migrates from a place before imparting his materials, the folklore may die out in that place. If in the new place (...) the active bearer fails to continue his active role, the folklore may not survive. (...) [I]t is possible for passive bearers to become active bearers in the event of the death or departure of an active bearer in a community. But in any event (...) the number of active bearers is relatively small and (...) the transmission of folklore is carried out in irregular leaps and bounds, rather than by means of smooth regular wave in the form of a concentric circle diffusing outward from a center point of origin.

(1965: 219)

Tradition bearers have been very important to Native peoples as well, because they have been the keepers of traditional knowledge, the teachers of values and morals and popular entertainers within their communities, as will be shown further on, when focusing on Native Canadian fiction for children and young adults. Before that, however, let us conclude this section, by trying to define the concept of oral heritage.

From all that has been said, it is clear that it is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that has so many different layers of meaning to so many different people that it becomes hard to theorise or make generalisations. What is certain is that oral heritage is important in the building of collective knowledge and personal identity, a sense of community and ancestral anchorage. It is the product of oral tradition and this, in turn, “is inclusive; it is the actions, behavior, relationships, practices throughout the whole social, economic, and spiritual life process of people”, as Ortiz claims (1992: 7). Oral heritage supports the idea of we-ness, as it is a fundamental part the culture of a community. Stories are just a small sample of such a large scale phenomenon, but still a very good source for analysis.

I. 1.2. MYTHS, LEGENDS AND FOLKTALES: AN APPROACH TO SOME GENRES¹⁶ OF ORAL HERITAGE

‘One upon a time there was’ – a king, a princess, a poor wood-cutter. Thus, with few variations, begin the folk and fairy tales that are a part of the world’s heritage of traditional literature. Their origins by and large unknown, they survived by word of mouth until they were finally captured on the printed page. (...) These are the stories of ‘Hop-o-My-Thumb’ (England), ‘Rapunzel’ (Germany), ‘The Baba Yaga’ (Russia), ‘The Boy who learned to Shudder’ (Japan). Each country has its store of national tales, and the similarities among them from country to country are quite remarkable.

(Egoff, 1967: 149)

The quotation above functions as a bridge, connecting the first section, in which I attempted to convey the meaning of **Oral Heritage**, to this one, where I will try to define the concepts of myth, legend and folktale, in order to dispel some erroneous popular thinking and as a way to connect the present section to the following one, in

¹⁶ The notion of genre has been one of several defining concepts that folklore scholars made use of in pursuing their studies. According to May (1995: 200), “[f]irst used to define types or styles or modes of writing, such as comedy, tragedy, romance, and irony, today genre is used to describe groups of works containing formally recognized techniques in composition that are commonly discussed in criticism”. The fact that genres require a certain patterned predictability, as stated, and that they come into being within a determined sociocultural context does not imply that they are static textual products, though; on the contrary, they act as dynamic and collective social constructions. In other words, they are cultural artefacts, situated in a dialogic context, because they reflect moral values and social evaluations. As a result, a text is of a certain genre, depending on its meaning, purpose and audience.

Thus, as we will realise, the real challenge in this approach lies in the fact that many folklorists claim that any classification of stories is arbitrary and prefer to use the large generic term narrative. I believe, however, that there are subgenera in their own right, with their unique characteristics, and reject an umbrella of classification. Despite being aware of the slippery terrain on which I am moving, I will take the risk and attempt to provide a framework in which to understand what distinguishes these categories and subcategories, because, just like Honko, I also “think that the delineation of an [*sic*] universal genre system is worth the effort provided that we realise the factual interaction between ideal and real genres... (...) The universal system, whatever its defects, is simply indispensable in scholarly communication” (1989: 16). Discussion on this will be expanded on the following pages and for that I will rely heavily upon Leach (1950), Eliade (1960), Egoff (1967), Honko (1989), Bottigheimer (1996) and Tatar (2003), to name but a few, to draw the fine line among these different types of folk narratives.

which I will focus on the transition of the oral tradition into its written form. I am aware, however, that this semantic approach will lack a sharp focusing lens, due to the fact that it remains a minefield and that the boundaries of these genres seem sometimes slightly blurred.

In fact, as Sheila Egoff argues:

“All primitive peoples make myths. The likeliest reasons are that myths serve to explain natural phenomena, to inculcate in the next generation the values and beliefs of the people, and to provide entertainment. Transmitted by word of mouth and polished in endless retellings, such myths become variously ‘legends’, ‘hero stories’, ‘folk tales’, ‘fairy tales’, and ‘beast tales’”.

(1967: 15)

What are, then, their differences? What are the characteristics that distinguish them? Do these genres apply to Native Literature or must First Nations’ tales, for example, be seen from the perspectives of different genre theories and analysed in their own cultural context?

The origins of the word ‘myth’ date back to the Greek period, when ‘mythos’ meant, in a broad sense, “a fable or story or tale, later contrasted with *logos* and *historia* to give the sense of ‘what could not really exist or have happened’” (Williams, 1983: 210-1). That was precisely the meaning ascribed to it during the nineteenth century, as Eliade lets us know:

In the language current during the nineteenth century, a “myth” meant anything that was opposed to “reality” (...) [and] it was of Christian origin and structure; for, according to primitive Christianity, everything which could not be justified by reference to one or the other of the two Testaments was untrue; it was a “fable” (1960: 23).

This idea of “fable” as a synonym for myth was of great appeal to the Romantics, who valued intuition, imagination and the irrational. Myth was, then, regarded as mere phantasmagoria, lacking any basis in fact, due to its superstitious, popular and spontaneous nature that was mostly associated with religious overtones.

In modern usage, and in Williams’ words, myth is “both a very significant and a very difficult word” (1983: 212), as it encloses at least two quite distinct meanings. On the one hand, it may refer to fabulous accounts, as previous noted; on the other hand, it may be “[a] story, presented as having actually occurred in a previous age, explaining the cosmological and supernatural traditions of a people, their gods, heroes, cultural traits, religious beliefs, etc.” (Leach, 1950: 778). According to the latter perspective, a

myth narrates sacred history and it receives such designation only because we can no longer connect that time with the time of history as written or mythological places with the world we currently live in – as myths took place in immemorial time and place. Claude Lévi-Strauss elaborates on this by noting that...

Un mythe se rapporte toujours à des événements passés : «avant la création du monde», ou «pendant les premiers âges», en tout cas, «il y a longtemps». Mais la valeur intrinsèque au mythe provient de ce que les événements, censés se dérouler à un moment du temps, forment aussi une structure permanente. Celle-ci se rapporte simultanément au passé, au présent et au futur.

(1974 : 231)¹⁷

Mircea Eliade, for example, is a very tenacious advocate for this synchronic/diachronic binarism evoked by Lévi-Strauss, as he also believes that myths express eternal truths. Contrarily to what the Enlightenment thinkers used to argue, considering myths as fictitious, Eliade considers them sacred and exemplary history. As he writes in his *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, a myth

...is thought to express the *absolute truth*, because it narrates a *sacred history*; that is, a transhuman revelation which took place at the dawn of the Great Time, in the holy time of the beginnings (*in illo tempore*). Being *real* and *sacred*, the myth becomes exemplary, and consequently *repeatable*, for it serves as a model, and by the same token as a justification, for all human actions. In other words, a myth is a *true history* of what came to pass at the beginning of Time, and one which provides the pattern for human behaviour.

(1960: 23)

Thus, according to this Romanian philosopher and historian of religion, myths are indispensable to the continuity and unity of the human experience, because they act as reservoirs for the behavioural and ethical code of a particular group. They operate on a deep unconscious level, coming to mind spontaneously, to inspire and justify actions.

Rollo May, an American existential psychologist, also pays special attention to these issues of myth and memory and he relates them to childhood in the following terms:

Some event occurs in our minds, in actuality or in fantasy; we form it in memory, molding it like clay day after day – and soon we have made out of that event a myth. We then keep the myth in memory as a guide to future similar situations. (...) The myth is formed by the child's endeavor to make sense of

¹⁷ My translation: [A myth always refers to past events: «before the creation of the world», or «during the first ages», in any case, «a long time ago». But the inherent value attributed to the myth comes from the fact that the events supposed to have taken place at a certain period of time, also form a permanent structure. This simultaneously alludes to the past, the present and the future.]

strange experiences. The myth organizes experience, putting this and that together and brooding about the result.

(May, 1991: 66)

Generally speaking, myths become symbolic representations of a reality that is kept alive, exercising an overwhelming power over the psyche and culture of a people, as we have previously seen. With this in mind, one question arises: are myths culture-specific or, rather, do they become cross-cultural?

If we take myths of origin to describe how “a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality” (Eliade, 1963: 5) and to represent people’s core beliefs, then they all are linked together, because they are all a product of oral tradition which date back to the roots of humanity, to the dawn of existence, echoing aspects of the universal human condition, regardless of culture. The differences among myths all over the world do exist¹⁸, but these cultural variations are minor, when one compares them to the universal themes that connect us all and to the archetypes that transculturally manifest themselves, instead of being specific to the individual psyche. Sheila Egoff answers the question above very clearly, explaining that...

Although there are polished differences between them [indigenous myths] and their European counterparts, they do take their place in the world commonality of the oral tradition. (...)

These primordial tales, these stories of the world’s beginning that are so remarkably similar from culture to culture, these tales of animals and birds that are indigenous to each culture, yet again so similar one to the other, reveal a world that is in many ways close to that of a child (...). Many of the virtues the tales extol are universal (...).

Although the spectrum of folklore reflects the immense variety of life stories to be told and the subtle cultural variations upon similar themes, most world mythologies appear to share one basic human story – the pattern of humankind’s experience through birth, life, and death.

(1981: 209-210)

From what has been said, we can conclude that a “MYTH varies considerably in its denotation and connotation depending on the persuasion of the user” (Gove *et al*, 1961: 1497). If, on the one hand, there are those who regard myths as fruit of

¹⁸ Maurice Saxby’s entry on “Myth and Legend” (chapter 14), in *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature*, attests to it: “The myths of ancient Greece, which have most influenced the Western world, reflect the pure light, the blue skies, the lofty mountains, the plains and olive groves that shaped the lives of its people. Those of the Vikings are starker, harsher, grimmer and icier, as befits a landscape of forests, passes and ravines, bordered by sometimes perilous seas. The myths of India and the East are more exotic, colourful and flamboyant; those of the Australian Aborigines express a spirituality embedded in the land itself” (1996: 167) and I would argue that the same holds true for Native Canadians.

imagination, as mere deception, distortion or falsehood, on the other hand many see in myths a sacred history, portraying the shared concerns of human beings throughout the ages. It is important to note that this position requires the myth to have a religious background; otherwise, it fails to be considered a myth and acquires the designation of legend or folktale, as Maria Leach points out:

A myth remains properly a myth only as long as the divinity of its actor or actors is recognized; when a trickster becomes human rather than divine, when the hero is a man rather than a god, myth becomes legend, if explanatory or limited to some specific location, or folktale, if more generalized.

(1950: 778)

Besides religious implications, we cannot forget another significant point of differentiation, which is the primacy of myths over the other forms of oral heritage, as Sheila Egoff observes: “While myth, folklore, and legend are all textures of one fabric, the presumption is that myth, the more universal and primal, came first” (1981: 210)¹⁹.

The arguments presented above may fail to persuade if we think, in particular, about some First Nations’ tales, which receive the generic name of legend, even though they are myths of origin and do relate to a religious perspective, since Native peoples “saw the work of the Creator in everything”, in C. J. Taylor’s (1993: 5) words. Why aren’t they myths, then? The answer to that question is quite simple, when one takes into consideration Egoff’s explanation: “... indigenous tales have not yet been broken down into their component parts, as have the European tales with their fairly clear-cut divisions between myth, legend, and folklore. With Indian material, for example, we refer to it all, inaccurately, as legend” (1981: 208). However, how reliable is this source in claiming lack of accurateness in the Native taxonomy of oral literature? Shouldn’t this explanation be perceived as ethnocentric, in the light of a too culture-bound comparison? Doesn’t this justification tend to over-emphasise the one-sidedness of the entire genre system? I must agree with Honko when he argues that...

‘Most of our genre terms such as fairytale, legend, myth, or anecdote are very general or inaccurate from the viewpoint of a particular tradition community. Pure genres seem to be rare. (...) Ideal-typical genre concepts provide us with a common language of forms which should help us to see existing forms and communicate about them. This is more important than the disturbing observation that the genre system of a given culture does not fit neatly into our terminology. The general

¹⁹ Egoff’s observation remains accurate today, after more than twenty years, as we realise after reading Maurice Saxby’s words, which seem more like a paraphrase of the earlier scholar: “While folk – and fairy tale, myth, legend and epic hero tales are all threads of one vast story, it would seem that myth, a universal phenomenon, is the progenitor” (1996: 166).

system of folklore genres upon which folklorists have agreed, or may agree some day, will always be culturally homeless or supracultural’.

(Honko, 1989: 16-7)²⁰

The statement above proves our own analytical taxonomies of genres to be fallacious, if regarded from a culturally different background, but it does not mean that we should not devote efforts to genre analysis. On the contrary, and despite the acknowledged difficulties in categorising genre, Honko suggests that genre theory has contributed a vital role to folkloristic research:

In actual fact it is rare to come across any researchers with a negative attitude to genre theory. The majority of folklorists analyse their view of reality by accepting the idea of an oral tradition divided into genres and generic systems. This is one of the fundamental paradigms of folkloristics, and one that is constantly providing models for research and the answers to problems.

(ibidem: 14)

According to him, what one must bear in mind is this constant need to reassess “fossilised taxonomy constructed long ago on idealised definitions of genre” and reorganise it “in the light of new empirical finds and observations” (ibidem: 16), because it is the only way to progress. Furthermore, he reinforces the idea of “delineation of an [*sic*] universal genre system”, but calls our attention to the claim that “contrastivity is not the only way to genre description”, due to problems arising from the researcher’s partiality: “... elements of the researcher’s own field of experience and thus of real genres always seep into ideal genre concepts” (ibidem).

In seeking comparisons among different cultures, while examining “the globality of the tripartite division into myth, fairytale and legend” (ibidem: 19), William Bascom was much criticised for his perceived lack of neutrality when he argued that “such analytical concepts as myth and legend have ‘got mixed up’, just as though they were genres actually living in some tradition community” (ibidem: 20). We cannot forget that, as Ben-Amos, quoted by Honko, explains: “... the native categorization of oral literature is particular and does not need to conform to any analytical delineation of folklore genres” (ibidem: 19). The same theory was advocated by Propp, who argues that:

²⁰ This quote is itself a quotation from an earlier article he had written in 1980, entitled “Genre Theory”, and published by R. Bauman *et al* (eds.) in *Current Trends in Narrative Theory. A Report*. Arv, Scandinavian Yearbook of Folklore 36.

The inventory of folklore genres valid for one people cannot be mechanically transferred to the folklore of another people. It is the principles of classification not the material that is international. (...)

American Indian tales [for example] seem to be of an entirely ritual nature, and the wonder tale in our sense of the word is unknown to the aborigines. (...) The indigenous population “knew only legends: they had no concept of either Märchen²¹ or fables. Stories that to us are fantastic fairytales are for them legends like any others” (Neuhauss 1911, 161). Lévy-Bruhl was of the same opinion (1937, 267).

(Propp, 1984: 41; 121)

This issue assumes particular importance because Native Canadian fiction is precisely the core of this dissertation. Given that, a fuller discussion and analysis of some First Nations’ myths/legends will be taken up in the third and fourth chapters. At present, I believe it is best to attempt to define in greater detail the concepts of legend and folktale, first because we have been referring to such terms and then because this general contextual part on the oral heritage would be incomplete without a review of these two genres.

The two terms suffer the same difficulties in conceptualisation as the ones encountered when trying to define myth. As previously noted, pure genres are rare and these two are no exception as they often borrow from each other, even when they seem to display strict observance to specific formulaic structures. The opposition of legend to myth, for instance, lies for the most part in the narratives’ characters, authenticity and purpose. According to Maria Leach (1950: 612), a legend is a simple, easy-to-follow story “told about a person, place, or incident” that tends to be based in historic fact. However, to prove how muddy and controversial this area is, she alerts us to the slipperiness resulting from these closely related genres and presents us with the example of the Hercules stories, which “may be considered to some extent myth (he is semidivine, he made the Pillars of Hercules, etc.) or as legend (Hercules was a lord living at Tiryns)”.

Originally, authenticity was a pre-requisite for a legend to be qualified as such and, therefore, this category applied almost exclusively to narratives focusing on miraculous and/or heroic deeds, or generally speaking, on “a saint’s or martyr’s life” (ibidem). In medieval times, those stories were “read at religious service or at meals”

²¹ Even though this term will only be dealt with in my forthcoming pages, when focusing on the concept of folktale, I believe it is more than appropriate now to anticipate its definition. According to Zipes (1979: 23), “[t]he term *Märchen* stems from the Old High German *mâri*, Gothic *mêrs*, and Middle High German *Märe*, and it originally meant news or gossip. *Märchen* is the diminutive form of *Märe*, and the common term *Volksmärchen* or folk tale (of medieval origins) clearly signifies that the people were the *carriers* of the tales”. Although this German term became associated with fairy tales, it is the result of a widespread misunderstanding, as we shall later see.

(ibidem), aiming at raising admiration, devotion and reliance upon the beliefs that the exemplary role model stood for, and consequently motivating emulation. To further legitimise and promote certain practices, values and behaviours, legends offered a romanticised view of the heroes – they began their lives as ordinary, even unprivileged people who were, then, chosen to fulfil a special mission. As Maurice Saxby (1996: 168) points out, “[s]tories of the saints, martyrs, wise and holy man and women have long been passed down by word of mouth and then enshrined in written literature because of their inspirational quality: holiness backed up by steadfastness of purpose, resolute action and nobility of spirit”.

This particular line of thought is also found in a previous work, by Gove *et al*, where it was observed that legends were associated with narratives “coming down from the past (...), handed down from early times by tradition and popularly regarded as historical although not entirely verifiable” (1961: 1291).

Believing in legends that presented miracles which could not fully be explained, at least at first glance, or “in buried and lost treasures, foundation sacrifices, sunken or lost cities of evil habits, sunken castles or islands, or bottomless lakes, walls or hills made by giants or demons...” (Leach, 1950: 640) implied either dubious sources or an unshakable faith. Leach presents us with a coherent explanation for this, arguing that legends do have a basis in fact, but its kernel of truth has been shaped by the popular feeling and imagination of many generations into a tale that expresses the thoughts, emotions and customs of a people: “... historical fact often underlies these stories (...), but the age-long addition of the marvellous and the obviously anachronistic makes it almost impossible to separate the true from the traditional” (ibidem).

While legends lean on an ostensibly historical tradition – even if, as we have just seen, they are likely to experience creative distortion in the course of its adaptation to a real locality –, folktales, on the other hand, are more poetic and, consequently, less reliable. Many researchers, such as Ben-Amos or de Vries, believe that they are the result of disintegration of original myths caused by the spreading of Christianity (Honko, 1989: 23) and this definition is also shared by Román L. Tamés (1985: 57):

De él, de ellos nace el cuento, bien como degradación del mito fundante, aristocrático y religioso o quizás sea una forma simple, reflejo inmediato de la vida cotidiana y en la que el protagonista, del pueblo nacido, asciende con la suerte, astucia o experiencia por la escala social del éxito.²²

²² My translation: [The folktale is born from it, from them, as if it was the degradation of the origin, aristocratic and religious myth or maybe it is a simple form, immediate reproduction of daily life and in

Because “[c]ertain contentual [*sic*] elements may in the course of history transfer from one category to another” (Honko, 1989: 23), Lauri Honko attempted to solve the problems of genre taxonomy and, inspired by Littleton’s table, divided myth, legend and fairytale²³, as well as some other subgenres, into the following fivefold square:

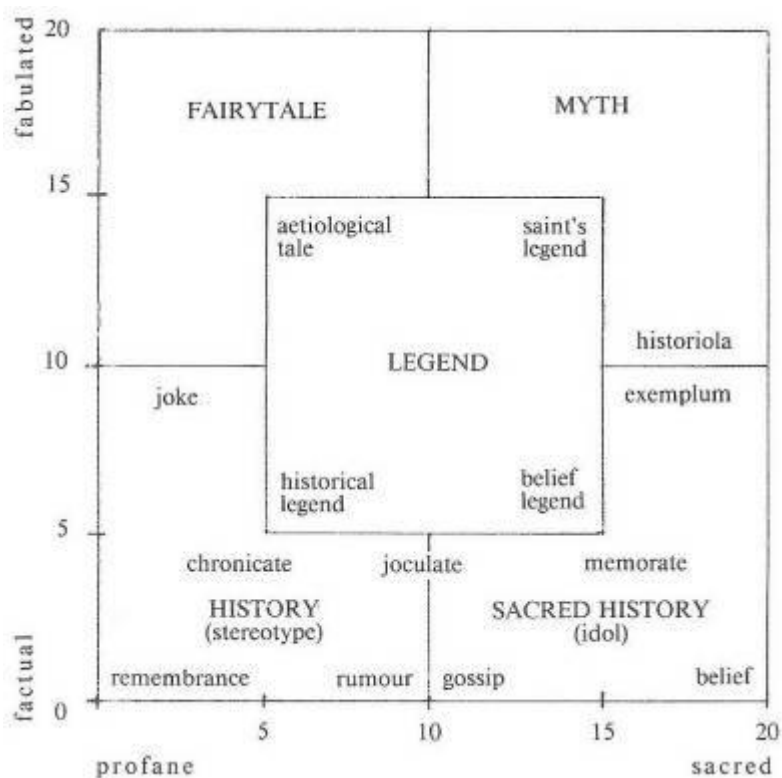


Table 1. The coordination of narrative genres (Honko in Siikala, 1989: 26).

which the protagonist, emerging from the people, climbs the ladder of social success, aided by luck, shrewdness or experience].

²³ Honko, like many other authors, uses the nomenclature fairy tale metonymically to refer to all folktales that include the magical and the marvellous as a feature. The reason why these two terms are often used loosely, if not interchangeably, is for example explained in the entry for “Literary fairy tale”, which the reader finds in Jill P. May’s “Glossary of Literary Terms” (1995: 201): “This tale resembles folk literature in its use of patterns and motifs. Some tales are simple recreations of older oral tales. (...) Some tales appear to be original folk tales because they hold the symbolism and structure of well-known folk tales (...)” But, eventually, May provides us with a clear formulation that makes possible to eliminate any ambiguity: “Literary fairy tales can be traced to a writer who lives in a particular culture; oral folklore can be traced to a body of recorded tales that reflect the values of a culture” (ibidem). Because folktales are included in such a body, I believe it is more accurate to use that word instead of fairy tale. A fairy tale always implies authorship, even if the author’s tales find their roots in oral folklore, as it is the case of Charles Perrault, The Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Andersen, to quote but a few. Furthermore, in this attempt to define the subgenre fairy tale (or wonder/magic tale) within the wider context of the folktale, it is worth noting that while the former is set in a fictional world, where enchantment is taken wholly for granted, the latter presupposes an earthy realism, combined with a nationalistic folk impulse. Further comparative examination of these two terms will be taken up in more detail in the following section – When oral literature gave way to written tradition – because, as we will realise, there was a transitional period during which “... the folk tale as an oral art form has lost its aura and given way to the literary fairy tale and other mass-mediated forms” (Zipes, 1979: 5).

As shown in the table, Lauri Honko places the legend at the centre, among four opposing poles: “fabulated and sacred”, “fabulated and profane”, “factual and profane” and “factual and sacred”. The myth appears on the left upper extremity, classified as both “fabulated and sacred”, which summarises the main threads of the discussion conducted above, at the beginning of this section. As for the folktale – or fairytale as Honko puts it – it is described as “fabulated and profane”, that is, as a fantastic non-religious tale dealing with the early and simple life of common people.

Tamés also claims that “[l]a LEYENDA ocupa un lugar entre el mito y el cuento” (1985: 39)²⁴, but, contrarily to legends, folktales are not bound to real localities or attached to historical heroes; instead, they are thought to be migratory narratives, with a very ancient base, that were constantly renewed in the telling. This assumption of spatial and temporal continuity is corroborated by Ruth B. Bottigheimer, in her “Fairy Tales and Folk-tales”:

... nearly all folk-tales enjoy a truly ancient literary lineage. Some folk-tales appear in the Indian *Panchatantra*²⁵ or in the Bible. Other animal tales derive from classic collections like *Aesop's Tales*, and many burlesques and jokes appear in the text or in the margins of medieval manuscripts. (...)

By the eighteenth century, then, the only folk-tale genre to have survived for children's reading was the fable (...): a single fable might – and did – have different morals attached to it at different times, in different places, and for different readerships.

(1996: 162-3)

Besides issues of similarities/differences, the antiquity and general popularity among folktales across cultures, another fundamental characteristic that is raised by the above quotation is the comprehensiveness of its nomenclature. In fact, subsumed under the category of folktale, there is a great number of subgenres, including “animal tales”, “burlesques”, “jokes” and “fables”. Bottigheimer, on this matter, adds some more, when she writes that “[t]he term ‘folk-tale’ normally embraces a multitude of minor genres, like nonsense tales, aetiologies, jests, burlesques, animal tales and neverending tales, but there is good reason to incorporate a discussion of chapbook romances within a consideration of folk-tales in children's literature” (ibidem: 161). In her view, medieval romances were important in providing the foundation for the prosperity of the

²⁴ My translation: [The legend has its place between the myth and the folktale].

²⁵ For a long time, India was believed to be the world's top source of folktales and the Panchatantra, as well as its many adaptations and translations into various languages, much contributed to this view. However, nowadays, it is well-known that India has not been the only source and that, instead, many oral traditions emerge by polygenesis (Tamés, 1985: 33).

publishing industry for children and the late nineteenth century, in particular, was marked by an unprecedented medieval revival, resulting from the drastic reduction of such texts into chapbook versions that widely circulated among the folk. This proliferation and accessibility of chapbook literature to mainstream audiences turned many stories into folktales, precisely because “[t]he term ‘folk-tale’ suggests an intimate relationship with the folk, and nineteenth-century scholars therefore defined all of these minor genres as belonging peculiarly to unlettered country dwellers” (ibidem: 162).

In fact, folktale as a genre belonged to nobody and, thus, ownership of folktales in an oral culture is an impossibility²⁶. As Mary Medlicott puts it, “... the stories of genuine oral tradition are characteristically the property of no one.” (1996: 541). Rather, most scholars believe that illiterate peasants spontaneously created stories during adult gatherings especially at night, when infants were asleep, because by then the elder generations were more at ease to “take certain liberties with their diction and give free play to their penchant for sexual innuendo or off-color allusions” (Tatar, 2003: 23)²⁷. During storytelling sessions at fireside or in spinning circles the taste for sex, violence and bad language was so common that John Updike, quoted by Maria Tatar (ibidem: xiv), describes the tales as the “television and pornography of their day, the life-lightening trash of preliterate peoples’, and they went a long way toward relieving the tedium of household chores”.

These tales are thought to have entered the bourgeois or intellectual sphere when peasants themselves took positions as servants in the households of wealthy and influential elites. Such is the case of Charles Perrault’s (1628-1703) tales, which are said to have been gathered from the ones that domestic servants used to tell to children put in their care (Tatar, 2003: 106, 110) and that were later adapted for an educated audience in French royal court circles (Zipes, 1979: 23). On this matter, it is worth evoking the frontispiece to Perrault’s first edition of his collection *Histoires ou Contes*

²⁶ Contrary to its subgenre, the fairy tale, as discussed in the footnote on page 34.

²⁷ Jack Zipes, for instance, also noted that “[o]riginally the folk tale was (...) an oral narrative form cultivated by the common people...” (1979: 5), which was later adapted and rewritten “for children so that they would not be harmed by the violence, crudity and fantastic exaggeration of the originals” (ibidem: 15). So violent were the earlier versions that, at the end of the World War II in Germany, the occupation forces “attributed many of the atrocities and crimes committed by the Nazis to the horror and cruelty of the tales” (ibidem, 2001: 99-100).

du Temps Passé, in which the illustration itself features a nursemaid sitting by the fire, spinning and telling stories to three well-dressed children gathered around her²⁸.

The publication of these tales gave way to a long line of retellings, a tendency which became more prominent in the course of the nineteenth century, with the advent of the Romantic Movement, as mentioned previously in this dissertation, on pages 35 and 36.

As Jack Zipes (2001: 101) and John Ellis (1983: 5-6) remind us, this impetus for the study of oral heritage was well evidenced in 1812 and 1815 with the publication of the two-volume *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Children's and Household Tales*²⁹) by the two young German scholars of philology and folklore, Jacob (1785-1863) and Wilhelm

(1786-1859) Grimm. However, contrary to what their title might suggest, I would like to reinforce my previous point that these tales were not intended primarily for children. Instead, they were considered appropriate for all age groups (cf. fig. 65), because till the last quarter of the nineteenth century children were not viewed as different from their elders, but as adults in miniature, with responsibilities and chores, as I will elaborate in my third chapter.

It was at this period, and with even greater vigour in the twentieth century, that much of this soul of the folk was collected, published and interpreted. In 1823, the Grimms' collection was translated into English as *German Popular Stories* (Ray, 1996: 655), because, at a time when nation builders required the existence of a national peasantry with a national repertoire of tales, German publishers fostered the idea that the term *märchen* was actually *volksmärchen* (tales from the folk). Eventually, this collection became known as *Grimms' Tales*, but it is interesting to note that this first translation of the title perfectly concealed the fact that readers were buying stories which, instead of conveying a distinctive German folk spirit, were already circulating in many parts of the world since time immemorial:



Fig. 2. Frontispiece to Perrault's collection *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé* (Tatar, 2003: 108).

²⁸ Cf. fig. 64, which contests the idea of women as storytellers and evidences that women may have held a monopoly on spinning, but not on telling tales (Tatar, 2003: 113).

²⁹ Or, as Maria Tatar (2003) seems to prefer, *Nursery and Household Tales*.

The Grimms recognized this process of narrative transformation carried on by human agents that dates back to ancient times, and they cultivated their own style and perspective to contaminate the tales that fell into their hands. (...) Only through the language and proverbs and subtle references to customs could one tell that the tales were “Germanic,” and even here, they were truly adaptations and transformations of narratives from many different European and Oriental regions that the Grimms artfully contaminated. (...) ... [T]hey honed and polished them, and while they regarded their efforts as a contribution toward establishing the great legacy of the German *Volk*, they constantly insisted on stressing the Indo-Germanic roots of the tales. It is this tension that constitutes the quality of the tales, for the Grimms earnestly sought to keep alive the “mythic” meaning of the tales while appropriating them for their German readers and to establish a heritage for future readers.

(Zipes, 2001: 103-105)

Actually, just like the tales collected by Perrault which were thought to embody the values and wisdom of the French folk, the ones collected by the Brothers Grimm had also been revised and adapted, instead of being simple transcriptions of oral folktales as in the preface to the first volume of the first edition they intended to make us believe (Ellis, 1983: 13): “We have tried to collect these fairy tales as faithfully as possible... (...) No particular has been either added through our own poetic recreation, or improved and altered, because we should have shrunk from augmenting tales that were so rich in themselves by adding passages analogous to or reminiscent of what was already there, they cannot be fabricated”. According to Jobe (1996: 522), this collection, “[t]ogether with Andersen’s fairy tales (in various translations) from Danish (1846), (...) established a greater awareness of the importance of translations in children’s literature” and quickly encouraged the publication of similar national collections of traditional folktales in other European countries, which reached “a ‘golden age’ of translation” “[t]hrough the 1960s and into 1980s (ibidem: 523).

As we are now entering the field of publication, translation and dissemination, I believe the time has come to pause and look back on what has been said so far. We shall pore over this new topic of written literature on the following pages.

In gist, myths, legends and folktales are scholarly terms – which have been developing slowly and controversially – for different genres of traditional oral narratives. Even nowadays, many myths and legends are treated as a variety of folktales, although we know that, from what has been discussed, this last genre, owing little allegiance to geography, history and religion, is generally freer than the former ones and, in many cases, it is the result of their creative distortion and absorption by ordinary people. Seen in this light, it is inaccurate to use the term folktale as an umbrella for all genres of folk narrative and it is more likely that this genre has evolved from the other

two than the other way around. Many stories have even coexisted as sacral narratives, traditional history and traditional fiction, as Propp illustrates (1984: 79): “The example of Oedipus shows (...) that in the course of historical development plots can shift from one form (myth) to another (legend) and from that to a third (wondertale)”.

I would like to conclude this chapter using Sheila Ray’s words, because they perfectly encapsulate the key points discussed, while setting the tone for the section to come:

Every country has its own collection of traditional stories. **Myths** developed as a way of explaining natural phenomena such as the creation of the earth, the changing seasons, day and night, and floods and drought. Hero **legends** grew up around charismatic characters, who frequently acquired supernatural powers as time passed. (...) **Folk- and fairy tales** provided psychological satisfaction through their simplified system of reward and punishment, or as a way of working out relationships and fears in safety. These traditional tales reflect such basic truths that the same stories crop up **all over the world**, the details adapted to local circumstances. Such stories transplant easily and at the end of the twentieth century, many children are acquainted with the traditional stories of countries and **ethnic groups** other than their own. The popularity of this kind of story led, as children’s literature developed in the nineteenth century, to the **writing** of modern fantasy stories.

(Ray, 1996: 654; my emphasis)

Lets us, then, move to the last section of this chapter and embark on a reflection about the implications of the printing industry worldwide, and for the First Nations in particular.

I. 1.3. WHEN ORAL LITERATURE GAVE WAY TO WRITTEN TRADITION...

Native Americans have not tended to write down their stories and their history. Instead, they performed them orally. And often their stories are poetic in form. Performed rather than simply told, listened to at clan gatherings, danced out or re-enacted during ritual celebrations, these stories capture the cultural beliefs and traditions of the various tribes. Because the early white settlers could not understand Native American languages, they viewed these tales as gibberish. And because the Native Americans handed down their tales in oral form, Europeans did not study them. Europeans believed that civilized peoples preserved their histories in written forms, and they defined these Native peoples as “primitive”.

(May, 1995: 77-8)

In the last paragraphs belonging to the previous section, the topic of print and book production was slightly approached, but we need more insight on it, in order to understand the reason why First Nations, just like Native Americans, depended upon oral tradition to preserve their heritage. Furthermore, we also need to assess to what extent the epigraph above is accurate and representative of today’s world: haven’t the Native peoples adopted the practice of preserving their culture through written literature yet? If they have, what are the consequences?

Nonetheless, and in consonance with the previous sections, before delving into the particular context of Native Canadian Literature, it is important to step back, look at the larger framework and address a prerequisite background question: what is written literature? Or else, isn’t it redundant to characterise literature as written?

Taking terminological considerations into account once again, the word literature, which comes from the Latin stem *littera* – meaning letter of the alphabet –, entered the English language in the fourteenth century, to describe knowledge related to the art of writing and reading. It was indissociable from concepts such as grammar, instruction and erudition and, as a result, “a man of **literature**, or of *letters*”, the

litteratus, was someone belonging to a privileged socio-cultural set-up, who was highly-educated in the classics and an expert in penmanship (Williams, 1983: 184; Aguiar e Silva, 1984: 2).

It was not until the eighteenth century that the term literature came to refer in a special sense to written language serving an aesthetic purpose, as acknowledged by Diderot:

... para Diderot *litteratura* é uma arte e é também o conjunto das manifestações dessa arte, isto é, um conjunto de textos que se singulariza pela presença de determinados valores estéticos (*le beau littéraire*).

Este texto de Diderot documenta, pois, dois novos e importantes significados com que o lexema *litteratura* será crescentemente utilizado a partir da segunda metade do século XVIII: específico fenómeno estético, específica forma de produção, de expressão e de comunicação artísticas (...) e *corpus* de objectos – os textos literários – resultante daquela particular actividade de criação estética.³⁰

(Aguiar e Silva, 1984: 6)

This sense of written linguistic expression inherent to the *corpus* of literary texts was only challenged in the middle of the twentieth century, when there was a growing tendency to de-emphasise this conventional form and extend it to include both the written and spoken forms of language³¹, as the following definitions taken from standard linguistic dictionaries illustrate:

- Textual – an adjective applying to the text (actual wording) of anything written or spoken.

(Shaw, 1972: 376);

- On appelle texte l'ensemble des énoncés linguistiques soumis à l'analyse: le texte est donc un échantillon de comportement linguistique qui peut être écrit ou parlé. (Syn.: corpus).³²

(Dubois *et al*, 1973: 486) ;

- A stretch of spoken or written language with a definable communicative function.

(Crystal, 1987: 432)

³⁰ My translation: [For Diderot *litterature* is an art and it is also the collection of displays of that art, that is, an assemblage of texts that distinguishes itself by the presence of certain aesthetic qualities (*le beau littéraire*).

Thus, this text by Diderot takes on two new and important meanings with which the word *litterature* will increasingly be used from the second half of the eighteenth century on: specific aesthetic phenomenon, specific form of production, of expression and of artistic communication (...) and *corpus* of objects – the literary texts – resulting from that particular activity of aesthetic creation].

³¹ According to Williams (1983: 186-7), the word *poetry* was used to describe “the high skills of writing and speaking” since 1586, and *litterature*, “in its C19 sense, repeated this, though excluding speaking”.

³² My translation: [We call text to the assemblage of linguistic enunciations subjected to analysis: the text is thus a prototype of linguistic behaviour that may be written or spoken. (syn.: corpus)].

Meanwhile, in the nineteenth century, despite the emergence of romantic nationalism and the consequent importance acquired by national literature³³ and folklore, the expression oral literature continued to be regarded as self-contradictory: if, on the one hand, linguists regarded writing as less important than speaking, literary scholars, on the other hand, considered the written medium to assume a more relevant role than the spoken one. The apologists of “the primacy of speech” claimed that we communicate more often orally than by writing and, to prove it, we cannot forget that many native societies have never devised writing systems at all. Actually, according to most linguists, this last medium only developed out of practical necessity³⁴, as Bloomfield points out (1984: 21): “Writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks”. Thus, as the Latin aphorism goes *verba volant, scripta manent*³⁵ or, in other words, the written form holds an archival status, enabling us to preserve the spoken word through time and space. But is it its only function?

Even though writing still persists as a privileged medium of literature, nowadays it can no longer be considered the only possibility. The written medium has clearly become more than just a device for recording and representing speech. Literary works may be preserved and/or transmitted via sound-recordings, for example, and I would argue that it not only constitutes a means just as permanent as a written transcription, but it is also much more reliable, because it reproduces one’s voice accurately. If modern technology helps us overcome temporal and spatial limitations of oral communication, why does writing remain the predominant medium of communication for contemporary literature?

In spite of having less practical need to rely on the written form, the truth is that people compose, preserve, transmit and receive literature via that medium, in part due to social and historical circumstances, as Williams lets us know:

Clearly the major shift represented by the modern complex of **literature**, *art*, *aesthetic*, *creative* and *imaginative* is a matter of social and cultural history. **Literature** itself must be seen as a late medieval and Renaissance isolation of the skills of reading and of the qualities of the book; this was much emphasized by the development of printing. (...) Steadily, with the predominance of print, *writing* and *books* became virtually synonymous. (...)

³³ “The idea of a Nationalliteratur developed in Germany from the 1770s” (Williams, 1983: 185).

³⁴ Walter Ong alludes to the same idea, when he writes that Saussure, Edward Sapir, C. Hockett and Leonard Bloomfield take “the view that writing simply represents spoken language in visible form” (2003: 17)

³⁵ [Speech disappears, writing stays].

... **literary** has acquired two unfavourable senses, as belonging to the printed book or to past literature rather than to active contemporary writing and speech...
(Williams, 1983: 186-7)

Seen in this light, I would venture to say that our contemporary notions of literature have developed out of the supremacy of sight over sound, a phenomenon which coincided with the growth of literacy and which, thereafter, is quite recent. This privileging of the printed text as an extension of the eye is justified by Ferdinand de Saussure, in his *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (1980: 46-7): “Chez la plupart des individus les impressions visuelles sont plus nettes et plus durables que les impressions acoustiques; aussi s'attachent-ils de préférence aux premières. L'image graphique finit par s'imposer aux dépens du son”³⁶. We shall note, however, that Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, claimed a special role for oral speech, favouring it over writing: “Still he thought of writing as a kind of complement to oral speech, not as a transformer of verbalization” (Ong, 2003: 5).

Similarly, the same line of thought may be traced in Walter Ong, when he argued that “[o]ral expression can exist and mostly has existed without any writing at all, writing never without orality” (ibidem: 8). Aiming at theorising about the differences between oral and chirographic or typographic cultures, Ong suggested an inventory of characteristics of orally-based thought and expression. He found out that orality, contrary to writing, tends to be “[a]dditive rather than subordinative”, “[a]ggregative rather than analytic”, “[r]edundant or ‘copious’”, “[c]onservative or traditionalist”, “[c]lose to the human lifeworld”, “[a]gonistically toned”³⁷, “[e]mpathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced”³⁸, “[h]omeostatic”³⁹ and

³⁶ My translation: [To most individuals, visual impressions are more appropriate and more enduring than acoustic impressions; likewise they give preference to the former. The graphic image eventually imposes itself upon the sound].

³⁷ As discussed on page 36 of this dissertation, storytelling in popular culture was replete with violence, sexual content and abusive language. Walter Ong considers this to be a recurrent characteristic of oral expression, as he further goes on to explain: “Enthusiastic description of physical violence often marks oral narrative. (...) The common and persistent physical hardships of life in many early societies of course explain in part the high evidence of violence in early verbal art forms. (...) But violence in oral art forms is also connected with the structure of orality itself. When all verbal communication must be by direct word of mouth, involved in the give-and-take dynamics of sound, interpersonal relations are kept high – both attractions and, even more, antagonisms” (Ong, 2003: 44-5).

³⁸ It should be noted that, at the time the book was written (1982), Ong was far from imagining that internet live chatting could turn written communication into a phenomenon where cooperative interchange and simultaneous feedback would be possible. He could, nonetheless, be said to have presaged the effects that the computer would have on transforming chirographic modes of literacy, because he noted the emergence of a post-typographic world that combined both oral and written modes, and that he designated as an age of “secondary orality”: “... the computer, which maximizes commitment

“[s]ituational rather than abstract”⁴⁰. Writing, on the other hand, is described by Ong as a form of external, alien technology, which is completely artificial (2003: 80-1), but this does not make him reluctant to admit that...

...without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials (...). In this sense, orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing. Literacy (...) is absolutely necessary for the development not only of science but also of history, philosophy, explicative understanding of literature and of any art, and indeed for the explanation of language (including oral speech) itself.

(ibidem: 14-5)

All the above conjoined, in particular this emphasis on and importance of literacy (and hence of the eye rather than the ear) resulting from the “technologizing of the word”, provides us with a portrait of the decline of the oral tradition. In effect, to quote Walter Ong again, “[r]eading aloud to family and other small groups was still common in the early twentieth century until electronic culture mobilized such groups around radio and television sets rather than around a present group member” (ibidem: 154). Mary Medlicott (1996: 541) also comments on the impact of writing, print and television, when she remarks:

Literacy and mass publishing were major reasons behind the worldwide decline of the oral tradition. (...)The advance of literacy undermined the traditional tellers, taking away from the respect they were accorded. The coming of television quickened the process. (...)

Changes in social structures furthered the processes of decline. As people moved into cities, they left behind the natural venues for story-telling. As family units became smaller they often no longer included grandmothers and other mainstays of domestic tradition.⁴¹

But are literature and oral folklore really incompatible? What are the effects that the former has had on the latter? What about Native peoples, how do they negotiate a textual space between an oral traditional culture and a literary one?

of the word to space and to (electronic) local motion and optimizes analytic sequentiality by making it virtually instantaneous.

At the same time, with telephone, radio, television and various kinds of sound tape, electronic technology has brought us into the age of ‘secondary orality’” (ibidem: 133).

³⁹ According to this scholar, homeostasis is a characteristic of oral societies in the sense that they “live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium (...) by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance” (ibidem: 46). In other words, orality depends upon the balance maintained between the past, the here-and-now and the yet-to-come, but the present triumphs over the other two.

⁴⁰ Ong (2003) enunciates these characteristics and provides insight into each one on pages from 37 to 57.

⁴¹ It is curious to notice that some literary scholars still regard female raconteurs, and especially grandmothers, as the main responsible agents for passing down oral traditions. This issue deserves further analysis, because, according to Tatar (2003: 111), it is a “false notion” fuelled by the iconography of tale-telling in the nineteenth century. We will come back to it in my fourth chapter.

While I agree in principle with the list designed by Jack Zipes (1979: 11)⁴² to help us understand the sharp differences between folklore and literature, I believe it is important not to neglect the existence of an in-between dimension, which results from a quintessential equilibrium that has been culturally and historically negotiated. The mentioned scholar himself postulates this idea when discussing that the oral and literate worlds have influenced each other's traditions and he illustrates his assertion by referring to the metamorphosis of folk tales into fairy tales:

“... what is most interesting about the historical development of the folk tale is the manner in which it was appropriated in its entirety by the aristocratic and bourgeois writers in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the expansion of publishing to become a new literary genre which one could rightly call the fairy tale...”

(ibidem: 7)

It was, thus, within the context of such oral/literary interaction that the genre of the literary fairy tale is said to have been born. This is consistent with the discussion in the previous section, in which we stated that early anthologists and users of oral folklore material participated in a process of literacy: French literary salons, on the one hand, and the brothers Grimm, on the other, were regarded by many to be largely responsible for the birth of the study of folklore and folk literature.

It is important to remember that, although folklore and literature have shared a long-standing mutual connection, familiarity with delimited bodies of folk knowledge and levels of literacy differed across segments of the population. Reflecting on this, Jack Zipes reiterates:

⁴² According to the endnote, the following list was taken from Joseph J. Arpad, 'Between Folklore and Literature: Popular Culture as Anomaly', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 9 (1975), p. 404.

<i>Folklore</i>	<i>Literature</i>
Oral	Written
Performance	Text
Face-to-face Communication	Indirect Communication
Ephemeral	Permanent
Communal	Individual (Event)
Re-creation	Creation
Variation	Revision
Tradition	Innovation
Unconscious Structure	Conscious Design
Collective Representations	Selective Representations
Public (Ownership)	Private (Ownership)
Diffusion	Distribution
Memory (Recollection)	Re-reading (Recollection)

Clearly, fairy tale refers to the *literary* production of tales *adapted* by bourgeois or aristocratic writers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (...), who wrote for educated audiences, and the nature of the author’s social class (...) added a new dimension to the folk tale as it was transformed into the fairy tale. (...) Since fairies were associated with the supernatural and make-believe and since the upper-class recorders of the tale shifted the emphasis of the stories, the original material basis of the tales became obfuscated, and it appeared that their contents and meaning were derived from bizarre occurrences and irrational minds and not from actual social and political conditions.

(Zipes, 1979: 23)

The assumption that literacy was solely a skill of the urbanised few and that complete illiteracy characterised the fate of almost everyone else led to the decline of folk tales, as they became associated with “low” culture⁴³, in opposition to the fairy tales which acquired the status of “high” culture.

Maria Tatar also discussed the complex nature of fairy tales and called our attention to the differences that exist between literature and folklore, which, to this scholar, result from a separation “... in their genesis, intentions, and structure” (2003: xxxi). But, although she claimed to owe much to Linda Dégh and Alan Dundes, because they made her realise the distinction between these two disciplines, she was well aware of the mutual contamination or the interchange of the two domains and she recalled Stith Thompson, who “reminds us [that] there is no distinct line dividing oral and written traditions” (ibidem: 32). Tatar went further to illustrate this point and designed a graphic containing four quadrants, as shown in fig. 3. Then, making use of some tales from the Grimms’ collection, she came to the conclusion that “[t]he Grimms’ *Nursery and Household Tales* can be said to embrace both folk tales and fairy tales and to run the gamut from folklore to literature” (ibidem: 35).

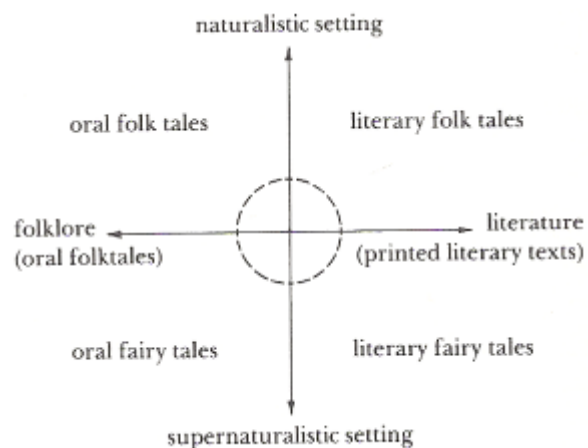


Fig. 3. Mapping out of the contrasting pairs folklore / literature and folk tale / fairy tale in graphic terms (Tatar, 2003: 34).

The theories drawn from the two scholars previously considered above may be seen as a progression or continuation of Vladimir Propp’s line of thought. Actually,

⁴³ Such disinterest and consequent disregard for folk tales, which “began to be regarded with suspicion and (...) labelled inferior art” (Zipes, 1979: 25), contributed to their relegation to the sphere of the household and children, as it will be demonstrated later.

much earlier than Zipes or Tatar, this Russian folklorist had already sought to unveil the fundamental separation of folklore and literature (Propp, 1984: 6). One of the distinctions that he drew between them lied in the premise that the former was authorless and, therefore, prone to changeability. On the contrary, as far as he was concerned, literature presupposed an author and was immutable. Their forms of existence, either oral or written, also had to be taken into account, because instead of being a “purely technical” distinction, the fact that “literature is transmitted through writing and folklore by word of mouth” “captures the innermost difference between the[ir] functioning...” (ibidem: 7).

Walter Ong also pointed to the same differences, namely the fostering of the individual and isolated author, the sense of closure in literary works and of ownership of words, which characterise the typographical system, in contrast with the externalised and more communal structures promoted by orality:

Print was also a major factor in the development of the sense of personal privacy that marks modern society. (...) Print created a new sense of the private ownership of words. Persons in a primary oral culture can entertain some sense of proprietary rights to a poem, but such a sense is rare and ordinarily enfeebled by the common share of lore, formulas, and themes on which everyone draws. With writing, resentment at plagiarism begins to develop. (...)

Print encourages a sense of closure, a sense that what is found in a text has been finalized, has reached a state of completion. (...)

The printed text is supposed to represent the words of an author in definitive or ‘final’ form. For print is comfortable only with finality.

(2003: 128-130)

On the whole, despite the above-acknowledged gulf between these two realities, it is important to reiterate that the binarisms of oral folklore/literature and orality/literacy are not immediate and absolute, because, according to Ong, the former pole of the binary opposition does “not vanish as soon as one used to them [to oral formulaic thought and expression] takes pen in hand” (ibidem: 26).

It is precisely bearing in mind Walter Ong’s assertion that oral cultures do not disappear overnight just because other modes of communication are also used that I would like to turn my attention to the core issue of this dissertation again at this point.

In considering First Nations generally, they are often mistaken as cultures untouched by writing and described as primary oral cultures, to use Ong’s terminology. But as this scholar notes: “Today primary oral culture in the strict sense hardly exists, since every culture knows of writing and has some experience of its effects” (2003: 11). The same is argued by Havelock (1996: 74): “... algunas comunidades tribales que al

parecer ofrecen ejemplos de ‘oralidad primaria’ que aún funcionan emplean de hecho un lenguaje que ha sufrido la influencia de la tradición escrita de culturas adyacentes”⁴⁴. This is the case of most, if not all, Canada’s First Nations peoples, who have suffered the influence of chirographic and typographic languages, although they remain basically oral or word-oriented.

In fact, without prejudice of his own previous claims concerning the power that literate cultures have achieved over primary oral ones, Walter Ong recognises that “... to varying degrees many cultures and subcultures, even in a high-technology ambiance, preserve much of the mind-set of primary orality” (2003: 11). In particular, the primacy that First Nations give to orality and respective practices over literate ones enables us to characterise them as leading a “verbomotor lifestyle”⁴⁵ or, in Ong’s explanation of Jousse’s term *verbomoteur*, as being...

... cultures in which, by contrast with high-technology cultures, courses of action and attitudes toward issues depend significantly more on effective use of words, and thus on human interaction, and significantly less on non-verbal, often largely visual input from the ‘objective’ world of things.

(ibidem: 67)

Nevertheless, while acknowledging the First Nations’ dependence on oral culture, I must corroborate Antonio Alegre Gorri’s assertion that “... oralidad no es sinónimo de primitivismo...”⁴⁶ (Havelock, 1996: 13). It is now more than time to challenge some of the stereotypes that have been built up around Native peoples since the late nineteenth century – such as of the barbarian or of the romanticised image of Rousseau’s noble savage⁴⁷ – based on a hierarchy where, due to the history of European

⁴⁴ My translation: [... some tribal communities that seem to offer examples of ‘primary orality’ still functioning are actually making use of a language that has suffered the influence of the written tradition of contiguous cultures].

⁴⁵ According to Walter Ong, Marcel Jousse was the first to coin the term in 1925 to describe orally-reliant societies, such as the ancient Hebrew and Aramaic. It inspired Ong to be more inclusive and to apply the term to the totality of “cultures that retain enough oral residue to remain significantly word-attentive (...) rather than object-attentive” (Ong, 2003: 67). In this context, the concept is extended to encompass First Nations, as they also rely on a legacy of oral tradition, though the written word is currently and gradually growing among them.

⁴⁶ My translation: [... orality is not synonymous with primitivity...].

⁴⁷ Kateri Damm, in “Says Who: Colonialism, Identity and Defining Indigenous Literature”, presents a list of several other stereotypes and misrepresentations concerning First Nations: “... Indigenous peoples have been characterized and defined as ‘bloodthirsty,’ ‘savages,’ ‘cannibals,’ or ‘noble,’ simple ‘children of nature’ (...) as the Drunken/Lazy/Promiscuous Indian, or the Noble Savage, or the 19th Century Plains Indian as Prototype...” (1993: 13). Likewise, Native writers have been subject to idealised images that most of the times do not conform to reality: “Too often, the image of the Indigenous writer which comes to mind will be one of a ‘storyteller,’ ‘traditional’ in appearance and dress, dark skinned, raven haired, who uses ‘legends’ or ‘myths’ to teach the audience about his or her culture” (ibidem).

literary tradition, the written word is privileged. The valorisation of the written word and the supremacy of those endorsing literacy cannot go uncontested, as Emma LaRocque denounces in her preface to *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada*:

... the written word is advanced as superior to the spoken word. Oral traditions have been dismissed as savage or primitive folklore. Such dismissal has been based on the self-serving colonial cultural myth that Europeans (and descendants thereof) were/are more developed (“civilized”) than Aboriginal peoples (“savage”). So arrogant is this myth and so arrogantly held has this myth been that (...) the colonizers have not bothered to learn Aboriginal languages.

(1993: xvi)

Through this prism, orality is associated with pre-colonialism, whereas literacy is seen as an inseparable attribute of the European civilisation. Such Eurocentrism predisposed the colonisers to believe that colonialism was beneficial for First Nations, since it helped introduce the written word to peoples whom, otherwise, would have remained “savage”.

It is interesting to notice that the “civilized”/“savage” dichotomy inevitably works here to validate and enhance derogatory stereotypes, while increasing the sense of difference between the dominant culture and the subordinate ones. As Stuart Hall, specialist in Cultural Studies, so astutely reminds us: “... [I]dentities (...) emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity...” (Hall, 1996: 4). He further extends this insight in arguing that the spectre of the Other is absolutely necessary to define the boundaries of the Self:

Above all, and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its *constitutive outside* that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term – and thus its ‘identity’ – can be constructed.

(ibidem: 4-5)

Thus, the presumed inferiority of First Nations has been a prerequisite to foster the illusion of a superior dominant white culture. One should be aware, however, that

these hierarchical relations of European superiority and Aboriginal inferiority, which draw on racial conceptions of Self and Other, do not exist in an absolute, objective and immutable way, but rather have been produced in and through representations and discourse. Edward Said, a well-known postcolonial scholar, provides us with an excellent explanation of this kind of imperialist⁴⁸ overtones, stating that: “All cultures tend to make representations of foreign cultures the better to master or in some way to control them” (1993: 100). In this regard, the white peoples embarked on exploratory and colonial expeditions and became invested in an identity based on power and domination, thereby creating an image of themselves totally opposite to First Nations, whom, as stated, were generally believed to be savages in need of their civilising knowledge.

It was within this context of the colonial encounter, the construction of racial difference and subsequent reactionary movement of resistance that postcolonialism emerged. However, postcolonial thought and theories did not flourish without debates and contestations, in part due to difficulties in defining disciplinary boundaries, as Canadian critic Stephen Slemon clarifies:

‘Post-colonialism’, is now used in its various fields, to describe a remarkably heterogeneous set of subject positions, professional fields, and critical enterprises. It has been used as a way of ordering a critique of totalising forms of Western historicism; as a portmanteau term for a retooled notion of ‘class’, as a subset of both postmodernism and post-structuralism (and conversely, as the condition from which those two structures of cultural logic and cultural critique themselves are seen to emerge); as the name for a condition of nativist longing in post-independence national groupings; as a cultural marker of non-residency for a third-world intellectual cadre; as the inevitable underside of a fractured and ambivalent discourse of colonialist power; as an oppositional form of ‘reading practice’; and (...) as the name for a category of ‘literary’ activity which sprang from a new and welcome political energy going on within what used to be called ‘Commonwealth’ literary studies.

(2006: 51)

⁴⁸ The terms “colonialism” and “imperialism” are sometimes used loosely as synonyms, but they have specific meanings. According to Said’s seminal work, *Culture and Imperialism*, this last term “...means the practice, the theory and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory; [while] ‘colonialism,’ which is almost a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory” (1993: 9).

Said’s claim that direct colonialism or the annexation/occupation of the Americas has largely ended in our time, while imperialism still lingers across the globe, has been much contested by First Nations. To these peoples, colonialism is alive and well, and therefore many scholars resist the term post-colonialism. They consider that, in spite of having attained formal independence from the dominant European powers – Britain and France, in Canadian panorama –, former colonies are still grappling with the repressive legacy of their past, in one way or another. Rather than using the term post-colonialism, many scholars believe that it is more accurate to describe settler nations like Canada and Australia as neo-colonial, because land claims and other Aboriginal rights have yet to be settled.

For further reading, cf. for example Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Hellen Tiffin (2006) and Jane Jacobs (1996).

In spite of the wide variety of definitions of such slippery term and its “various fields” of study, we can easily identify a point of convergence among them all, as the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* contend: in gist, “[w]e use the term ‘post-colonial’ (...) to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (Ashcroft *et al*, 1994: 2).

We notice, then, that postcolonial theory lends itself to broad perspectives and applications, since it may fruitfully be applied to an analysis of any culture that endured colonial rule, as Lois Tyson explains:

Because postcolonial criticism defines formerly colonized peoples as any population that has been subjected to the political domination of another population, you may see postcolonial critics draw examples from the literary works of African Americans as well as from, for example, the literature of Australian aboriginal peoples or the formerly colonized population of India. However, the tendency of postcolonial criticism to focus on global issues, on comparisons and contrasts among various peoples, means that it is up to the individual members of specific populations to develop their own body of criticism on the history, traditions, and interpretation of their own literature.

(1999: 364)

It is precisely this hermeneutical approach – historically aware, culturally sensitised and politically astute – that sets postcolonialism and Commonwealth studies apart. Actually, even though these two academic disciplines focus “on the literature of cultures that developed in response to British colonial domination”⁴⁹ (ibidem: 418), they differ largely in style and tone, because postcolonial criticism, contrarily to its predecessor, did not pretend to a kind of political neutrality, but has fiercely criticised and actively opposed colonialism, imperialism and neo-imperialism.

In light of the above, Native literature, often associated with a symbol of resistance against the coloniser’s discourse, has typically been categorised as an area under the broad rubric of postcolonial studies. As Emma LaRocque remarks:

Actually, much of Native writing, whether blunt or subtle, is protest literature in that it speaks to the processes of our colonization: dispossession, objectification, marginalization, and that constant struggle for cultural survival expressed in the movement for structural and psychological self-determination.

(1993: xviii)

⁴⁹ Commonwealth Studies, which constituted itself as a discipline in the 1960s and 70s, are said to have been one of the starting points for the development of Postcolonial theory. Slemon and Tyson, among others, imply just that. Postcolonial Studies, in its turn, emerged as a major force in literary studies only in the 1990s.

Nonetheless, categorising Native literature fundamentally as a voice of resistance is arguable, over-generalised and limiting, because it prevents the reader from fully appreciating First Nations' texts for its numerous culturally specific features and functions, while, at the same time, relegates them to the margins by placing them outside the canon, as the very same Plains Cree Métis scholar makes clear:

...categorizing literature on the basis of ethnicity, gender, or politics raises the spectre of ghettoization. (...)

The lumping of our writing under the category "Native" means that our discussion of issues and ideas that are universally applicable may not reach the general public. For example, an analysis of the Canadian school system by a Native author is rarely placed under "education" or "social issues." (The poetry and poetic prose in much of the writing of the 1970s is rarely, if ever, placed under poetry or literature proper. And what about Native writers who do not write about Native themes? What about Native women writers who do not write specifically or only about women, and so get excluded from "women's writing" shelves?

(LaRocque, 1993: xviii).

The token inclusion of Native literature into the academic field does serve to perpetuate and reinforce the *status quo* of the European cultural hegemony, because texts by Native authors are interpreted and assessed according to Eurocentric norms and standards of criticism, as Blaeser puts it: "Indeed, both traditional and contemporary Native works have often been framed in and read from a western literary perspective. (...) The insistence on reading Native literature by way of Western literary theory clearly violates its integrity and performs a new act of colonization and conquest" (1993: 54-5). Furthermore, we should not forget that subsuming Native literature into the "umbrella term" of postcolonialism is itself dubious and indicative of cultural bias, because it implies that literature by First Nations did not exist prior to European contact. To add to all this, and as evidenced by LaRocque's rhetorical question above, there is the fallacy that Native writers must write about Native themes so that their texts may be considered as authentic. Similar concerns were raised by Thomas King in his introduction to *All My Relations* (1990: xv):

There is, I think, the assumption that contemporary Indians will write about Indians. At the same time, there is danger that if we do not centre our literature on Indians, our work might be seen as inauthentic. Authenticity can be a slippery and limiting term when applied to Native literature for it suggests cultural and political boundaries past which we should not let our writing wander. And, if we wish to stay within these boundaries, we must not only write about Indian people and Indian culture, we must also deal with the concept of 'Indian-ness', a nebulous term that implies a set of expectations that are used to mark out that which is Indian and that which is not.

Of course there is no such standard...

The criterion of authenticity is a social construction, as noted earlier on page 23 of this dissertation and as will be further discussed in the next chapter. The boundaries of what it is to be considered authentic Native literature are defined by the beholder's subjective beliefs and expectations. In other words, the authenticity of representations is unavoidably based upon pre-existent notions of what constitutes Native identity and literature. These hegemonic images of Indianness neglect the shifting signifiers of Native identity and tend to inscribe as authentic only the so-called traditions and customs thought to survive from the past. Obviously, this opens the door to manipulation⁵⁰ and does not allow a contemporary view of Native life to take place, something which must be fought against to assure the perpetuation of First Nations' legacy, while at the same time enable change to occur when necessary.

Actually, as simply put by Julia V. Emberley commenting on the conjunction of continuity and change – or change within continuity –, “[t]he entry of Native oral traditions into print culture (...) represents a mode of braiding dominant technological forms with traditionally performative modes of storytelling” (1993: 93). Used together, oral tradition and the written record result in a mutually-beneficial experience: the former, without literacy, is limited to the listeners' memories and eventually loses itself in shapeless silence; the latter, on its own, is deprived of the nuances of interpersonal communication. The flow of present time demands oral tradition to be transmitted in written form, but that does not compromise the living essence and integrity of stories. On the contrary, as Emberley stresses, “[g]iving ‘voice’ in print culture is one way Native writers empower themselves and claim themselves as agents of their own cultural traditions” (ibidem: 73). Jeannette Armstrong, interviewed by Hartmut Lutz, emphasises the very significant role of written texts, because they serve as a vehicle for preserving and passing on one's oral traditions: “[A]n oral tradition *will* be there. It is remaining and it is intact. But those oral traditions teach a certain number of people in our community, whereas a written piece like a novel can reach further than that” (Lutz, 1991: 15). The importance of the novel form is acknowledged in different literary traditions and Toni Morrison, an acclaimed African-American female novelist, also describes its function as a modern way of preserving communal stories and communicating “new information”:

⁵⁰ A clear example of this is Edward S. Curtis' work, whose photographs sought to convey a particular image of the Aboriginal that suits the interests of the dominant forces. This will be elaborated further in chapter 9.

We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has got to get out, and there are several ways to do it. One is the novel.

(Morrison, 1984: 340)

To conclude this first chapter, in which I introduced and outlined some key concepts concerning the theoretical bases and principles underlying the production of First Nations' texts, I believe it is most appropriate to acknowledge, together with Ruth Finnegan, the inexorable passage of time and, with it, the evolution of literature, in general, and the Native one, in particular, into an integrationist and multidisciplinary model that seeks to incorporate oral features into its written form:

Culture used to be defined in terms of Greek, Latin, or Hebrew models – or, at the least, as comprising the high art written forms. But wider approaches are now taking over, not just in anthropology and folklore but also in philosophy, literature and history (...). In face of changing values and power-shifts, and of the expanding cultural links in a world-wide perspective, it is no longer easy to maintain old boundaries (primitive/civilised, industrial/non-industrial, traditional/modern), or to regard oral or 'traditional' forms as separate items or less worthy of academic attention than those of 'classical' culture. There is also deepening understanding of the interaction of oral and written forms – or, rather, not of the 'interaction' of, as it were, two separate 'things' as of the whole communication process... (...)

Research on oral forms can no longer be presented as mere 'academic' exercises or theorising about the far away and long ago, but as bringing the researcher into complex involvements with the other – equal – inhabitants of the planet.

(1996: 50-1)

With this awareness, the seeds have been sown for conducting a culturally-specific analysis of First Nations' literature, but always informed by the wider context within which it is located and framed. This wider context will be addressed briefly in the following chapter named "Is There a Canadian Literature?"

CHAPTER TWO

IS THERE A CANADIAN LITERATURE?

‘A good deal is being said about Canadian literature, and most of it takes the form of question and answer as to whether a Canadian literature exists. Of course it does not. It will probably be a full generation or two before we can present a body of work of sufficient excellence as measured by the severest standards, and sufficiently marked with local colour, to enable us to call it a Canadian literature’.

(Lampman qtd. by Dietz, 2003: 46)⁵¹

As announced at the end of the previous section, my second chapter will deliberately and necessarily be limited in scope and circumscribed to the context of First Nations’ literature; otherwise, it would be a dissertation in itself. I do not intend to locate a time of pure origins, to provide a comprehensive survey of the literary evolution of Canadian literature or to produce an exhaustive inventory of publications, because my aim here is but to situate Native literary production within the wider framework of Canadian literature.

However, that task cannot be undertaken unless Lampman’s assertion, quoted above, proves to be wrong. Is there a Canadian literature? How, why and when did it originate? What is it that makes Canadian literature characteristically and authentically Canadian? Why is it that Canadian writers who are not of French or English origin have a harder time being recognised? Why is it that certain texts are accepted as part of the Canadian Canon and others, just as worthy, are not? Is Native Canadian literature represented in the Canadian literary Canon? Should it be seen as a subset of Canadian literature or a category of its own? Many are the questions raised concerning such a

⁵¹ This is a double quotation, as it may be originally found in a paper by Archibald Lampman: “Two Canadian Poets: A Lecture”, in A. J. Smith (ed.) (1962). *Masks of Poetry. Canadian Critics on Canadian Verse*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, p. 27.

controversial subject and equally diverse are the answers. Rather than provide ready-made solutions – which, nonetheless, would not generate consensus⁵² –, the final purpose of this chapter is, as mentioned, to open-up possibilities and discussions as a way to introduce Native Canadian literature as a neglected area within the broader study of Canadian literary scene, which is itself a long debated and perennially timely issue. The purpose set forth also prepares the ground for a more topical discussion of Canadian children’s literature, because, as we will notice in the third chapter, the latter is intimately connected to its “parent”⁵³.

For the moment, however, let us return to the question of the existence of a Canadian literature and, for that, I would like to conclude this introductory note with Northrop Frye’s remark, which I entirely subscribe and which is already a prelude to the upcoming discussion:

For well over a century (...) discussions about Canadian literature usually took the form of the shopper’s dialogue: ‘Have you any Canadian literature today?’ ‘Well, we’re expecting something in very shortly.’ But that age is over, and writing this conclusion gives me rather the feeling of driving a last spike, of waking up from the National Neurosis. There is much more to come (...), but Canadian literature is here, perhaps still a minor but certainly no longer a gleam in a paternal critic’s eye.
(1976: 319)

⁵² As Lianne Moyes argued, “[w]hat emerges most forcefully from a reading of the canonized texts of Canadian literature criticism is that neither Canadian literature nor its criticism is unified in relation to itself” (1992: 45). John Melcalf goes even further in his critique of a lack of agreement with regard to Canadian tradition: “Discussion about it has been going on since Confederation but its shape and outline remain vague and tenuous. Different critics seem to describe different traditions... [...]. The pros and cons of a Canadian literature have been dancing the same ritual dance for close to a hundred years... [...]. And none of it, of course, has much to do with literature” (Melcalf, 1988: 9).

⁵³ Sheila Egoff is the one who designates Canadian literature as the “parent” of Canadian children’s literature (1976: 209).

I. 2.1. BEGINNINGS, AUTHENTICITY AND THE QUEST FOR A NATIONAL SPACE

‘Yes, there is a Canadian literature. It does exist.’

(Ballstadt qtd. by Dietz, 2003: 46)

Until recently, these [Native] texts were not really considered part of Canadian “Literature” as defined by English Departments and scholars of the literary mainstream. This attitude began to change dramatically in the Eighties when Native women in Canada, through (Native) small presses, started writing themselves into Canadian letters. (...) ... First Nations literature has truly arrived as a specific “ethnic” literature on the Canadian literary agenda.

(Lutz, 2002: 134)

It is not strange that aspects of Canadian history should attract writers. Canadian history, some popular assumptions to the contrary, is anything but dull. Its great motifs – exploration, endurance, war, pioneering – have a perennial and universal interest.

(Egoff, 1967: 37)

The observation conveyed by Hartmut Lutz, in the second epigraph to this chapter, that “First Nations literature has truly arrived as a specific ‘ethnic’ literature on the Canadian literary agenda”, clearly illustrates the paradoxical tendency to welcome the so-called “ethnic” or minority writing into Canadian literature by making it a supplement⁵⁴, while, at the same time, it portrays the distance and segregation of Native and Canadian literatures, because the writer of the former is still seen as the Other, the outsider, the one who is longing to belong.

Over approximately the last three decades, writers and critics have tried to define Native Canadian literature in many ways, be it culturally, thematically, geographically or politically. An analysis of definitions of Native Canadian literature by various critics

⁵⁴ As Janice Acoose remarks, “... currently there are exciting additions to Canadian literature because more Native people are writing and articulating their own realities” (1993: 30).

brings us to consider it as a body of writing which deals both with the Native and the Canadian cultures. In fact, several Native Canadian writers, namely Thomas King and Tomson Highway, have chosen to be identified by their tribal affiliation in conjunction with their Canadian citizenship⁵⁵, and this because First Nations are part of Canada and contribute greatly to Canadian culture, as Patterson makes clear: "... [Native peoples] are one of the many ethnic groups which together constitute the cultural background of Canadians. (...) Indians, like other ethnic minorities, contribute to Canadian culture their element of the Canadian whole" (1972: 3). Therefore, rather than isolating themselves from the country's history and culture, they must realise that they have been active participants in shaping the past, present and future of Canada. This exhortation for First Nations' individuals to look at themselves as part of a tribal community that is itself embraced by Canada is expressed by Cardinal, who, according to Ronald Haycock, "... wants to see the Indian take his place in the current of Canadian life. Cardinal does not want to tear it down or separate the Indian from it" (Haycock, 1971: 79), but, for that, the First Nations must be allowed to achieve their own self-determination. As Cardinal puts it:

The Canadian mosaic supposedly allows for the growth of different cultural groups as a basis for building a better Canada... The stronger the tiles within the mosaic, the stronger the mosaic as a whole. Before I can be a useful participating and contributing citizen, I must be allowed to develop a sense of pride and confidence in myself as an Indian. I must be allowed to be a red tile in the mosaic, not forced to become an unseen white tile.

(Haycock, 1971: 79)

If, as stated, we cannot separate the First Nations from Canada, it is obvious that their literature does belong to the Canadian literary scene. The time has now come to go back to a broader context and ask the question that gives this chapter its title: Is there a Canadian literature? Or, as Malcom M. Ross has so incisively asked, "Do we [Canadians] indeed have a culture, a literature, our own moment of place in the larger imaginative order?" (1976: 162). If so, when did it begin and what is Canadian literature? What is characteristically and authentically Canadian about this literature?

⁵⁵ John Moss, in his introduction to Tomson Highway's *Comparing Mythologies*, argues that Highway "is not Cree-Canadian or Canadian-Cree", but that "he is Cree *and* he is Canadian" (Highway, 2003: 15-6; italics mine). Likewise, Thomas King, in an interview with Hartmut Lutz, describes himself as "a Native writer *and* a Canadian writer" rather than a "Canadian Native writer", even though he was born in America (Lutz, 1991: 107; italics mine). Patterson summarises the First Nations' desire to be recognised as *both/and* rather than *either/or* in the following excerpt: "The dichotomy of Indian-*versus*-Canadian is not a new invention; in most references to him the Indian is called 'Canadian Indian,' not just Canadian, and this is the way the Indian seems to prefer it" (1972: 4).

It has become a commonplace to assert that there is a nationalistic impetus behind the creation of the literature of any country. According to MacLulich, Canadian literature is no exception:

... nationalism has always been part of the cultural air that Canadian writers and critics have breathed. This desire to identify a distinctively Canadian literature has its origins in the widely prevalent assumption that every self-respecting nation ought to have its own linguistic and cultural identity.

(1987: 19)

Actually, Canadian literature was constructed in the service of a Canadian nation in search of cultural unity and, therefore, it had to reflect the history of the country, its traditions and its soul. It is no coincidence that the rise of Canadian literature is heavily connected to the rise of nationalism in Canada, and this because, as Edward Hartley Dewart pronounced in 1864, in a general anthology⁵⁶ compiled and published three years before Confederation, “A national literature is an es[s]ential element in the formation of national character. It is not merely the record of a country’s mental progress: it is the expression of its intellectual life, the bond of national unity and the guide of national energy” (qtd. by Woodcock, 1984: 1). This well-known statement, which highlights the long-lived romantic notion that literary activity produces a unifying and distinct national identity, must be questioned if one looks at the diversity of cultures that have shaped the Canadian society. Can there be one Canadian literature in a country that claims to embrace multiculturalism? Can there be a homogenizing narrative when a sense of collective memory and common experience cannot be reclaimed? Shouldn’t we expect the experiences of cultural multiplicity and difference to generate disunity and fragmentation, instead of developing a coherent national culture?

I would argue, together with Barbara Godard, that “[s]uch insistence on homogeneity is a discursive strategy by which hegemony is exercised, fixing thus restrictively the thinkable, the sayable” (1992: 13). Clearly, white hegemony in Canada, whether French or English, tended to erase any notion of hybridism and of difference, and to place the imperial power at the centre, making it the norm.

As far as British-Canadian colonial nationalism is concerned, we may say that, unlike what happened in the American colonies, which rebelled against their European

⁵⁶ This comprehensive anthology of poetry, published under the plain title *Selections from the Canadian Poets*, has been designated by many scholars as a founding document of the English-Canadian literary tradition.

counterparts, British-Canadians strongly believed that Canada's future was safeguarded by its close ties to the Empire. Consequently, they sought to protect their interests in the Dominion, a process that excluded French Canadians⁵⁷, First Nations and immigrants⁵⁸ from the nation-building project. Barbara Roberts summarises the construction of the Canadian nation as follows: "Between 1880 and 1920, Canada built a nation. For most, that nation was to be British in outlook as well as in character. The highest level of citizenship was based on love and loyalty to Canada and to the British Empire; the two were inseparable" (1979: 186). And so the nation of Canada was formed, grounded in myths of the superiority of Britain.

The assumption that homogeneity is a prerequisite for nation-building has remained at the heart of many debates in Canada, but this view has recently started to be challenged, mainly because of the growing demands for inclusiveness in such an increasingly diverse society as the Canadian. Jeannette Armstrong, an Okanagan, further elaborates on the growing importance of nationalism(s) and the role of literature(s) as opposing forces to globalisation:

Aboriginal literatures are not only taking exciting unique shapes, but are also in a position to have a qualitative influence on the Canadian literary arts. It is highly likely that this contribution will be transformative for both Aboriginal cultures and Canadian cultures. (...)

At a time when there is a growing apprehension about the impact on 'Canadian culture' of 'global monoculturing,' we can see a multiplicity of healthy cultures in Canada as an essential component in a post-colonial society. The perception of a majority Canadian culture and literature is a construct which does not truthfully reflect the wonderfully pluralistic nature of the peoples who co-exist on a daily basis, and who find wonderful ways to communicate that to each other through their literatures despite great barriers.

(Armstrong, 2005a: 186)

In fact, as declared by this Okanagan writer, "Canadian culture and literature is a construct", as is any culture and literature, I would say. The desire to construct a distinctive Canadian nation and literature has been a pervasive means of securing recognition and prestige. However, as Barbara Godard points out, distinctiveness is a double-edged sword, because it implies two contradictory understandings of Canadian literature, an older national one, based on a unity provided by the cultural hegemony of British imperialism, and a more recent one organised around difference: "Canadian

⁵⁷ The British settlers regarded the presence of the French colony as a continual threat to the dominance of British institutions and values in Canada.

⁵⁸ First Nations and immigrants would pose a further threat to British-Canadian hegemony and, therefore, the response to avoid it was the adoption of a policy of assimilation, which came to increase the numbers and strength of British Canada.

Literature' is a contradiction in terms, for to be acknowledged as *good*, as 'Literature,' Canadians must follow the norms of writing in England. To be recognized as *true*, as authentically 'Canadian,' they must break these norms by writing 'differently'" (1992: 7).

From what has been said so far, we can easily see that Canadian literature found itself in a precarious position, at least until the 1930s, a time when Canadians came to reveal a growing concern with the definition of the country and its people against others, especially Britain and their English-speaking neighbours on the North American continent, as the following excerpt demonstrates:

It was really in the 1920s and 1930s that Canadian literature began to acquire a distinctive identity. (...)

The development of a national literature is dependent on a great many factors, emotional and even material. The modernist movement in poetry and the realist movement in fiction during the 1930s might have been ephemeral if the Second World War had not in many directions increased the Canadian sense of existing as a separate nation, finally detached from the old imperial links with Britain and anxious to defend itself from being absorbed into a continental culture in North America.

(Woodcock, 1984: 2-3)

The involvement of Canada in the two World Wars did result in a growth in Canadian nationalism, which politicians and writers alike attempted to sustain in the post-war years: "The 1960s in Canada were also years marked by a heady Canadian nationalism (cultural and economic) (...). The government launched a long and largely successful campaign to create a literary community in Canada" (Hutcheon, 1990: 74). Such tendency to create an imagined sense of national community or, in other words, to focus on Canada as a whole, began to fade after 1967 with the centennial celebrations.

Actually, in spite of Canada's attempt to imagine itself as a nation (imagiNATION) quintessentially Canadian, the silencing of voices of its diverse peoples into a simple monolithic national culture was but a myth. Policies of multiculturalism became institutionalised in Canada in the 1970s and, thus, issues of cultural plurality, transculture and ethnicity were ushered in as central topics in discussions of/about Canadian literature.⁵⁹

I cannot agree with the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, who postulated that:

⁵⁹ It is worthwhile to quote the 1987 House of Commons Report entitled *Multiculturalism* cited in Errol Mendes' paper: "Multiculturalism is a principle applicable to all Canadians and it seeks to preserve and promote a heterogeneous society in Canada. The principle refutes the idea that all citizens should assimilate to one standard paradigm over time. Multiculturalism is today most fundamentally concerned with ensuring substantial equality for all Canadians regardless of what cultural groups they belong to" (2003: 109).

In Canada, where the model of the 'mosaic' has been an important cultural determinant, Canadian literary theory has, in breaking away from European domination, generally retained a nationalist stance, arguing for the mosaic as characteristically Canadian in contrast to the 'melting-pot' of the USA. [However,] Canadian literature, perceived internally as a mosaic, remains generally monolithic in its assertion of Canadian difference from the canonical Canadian British or the more recently threatening neo-colonialism of American culture.

(Ashcroft *et al*, 1994: 36)

Jeannette Armstrong, in accordance with the authors just mentioned, also agreed that policies of multiculturalism did not lead to, as Ashcroft *et al* put it, "corresponding theories of literary hybridity to replace the nationalist approach" (1994: 36), and centring her attention upon First Nation literatures, she exposed and denounced the Eurocentric biases that are the legacy of colonialism and that have contributed to placing Aboriginal literatures in a position of structural subordination:

... deviations from an 'accepted' Euro-format of content and language usage are critically conventionalized within the standard of Canadian literature, as substandard, 'emergent,' or naive.' Aboriginal literatures are wrongfully disregarded and – worse – discarded as 'literature.' (...) [T]hey are continuously 'culturally constructed' within Eurocentric aesthetic literary expectations. Attempts are being made to define Aboriginal literatures solely within the parameters of the 'accepted' Eurocentric literary conventions as a biased and restrictive practice lacking a coherent critical literary framework. In such a practice, Aboriginal literary format, subject, and genre are easily and erroneously categorized to Euro-literary genres, and deemed as such to be lacking sophistication.

(Armstrong, 2005a: 182-3)

Nonetheless, as previously stated, I do not agree with this view of a monovoice in the Canadian scene, because new voices are currently being authorised as Canadian, as the works of award-winning authors, such as Michael Ondaatje, Tomson Highway, Daphne Marlatt, Rohinton Mistry and M. G. Vassanji, to name but a few⁶⁰, testify. In recent years, critics have been successful in considering all aspects of Canadian national literature(s), instead of merely accepting into the Canon those works that conform to an artificial set of literary standards derived in large part from the literature of Western Europe. Canadian society has become much more tolerant and this has been reflected in its literature, which has become more vigorous, more diverse and, as a result, has achieved a position of international respect.

⁶⁰ We are provided with many other voices – of 'immigrant writing' – on pages 11 and 12 of Metcalf's *What is a Canadian Literature?*.

Jeannette Armstrong is, after all, well aware of the strength that stems from the variety of cultures, in particular the Aboriginal, which give rise to a new understanding of identity organised around diversity within the nation:

The term 'literatures' then, as I use it, can be broadened to include artistic discipline contained in words (...) encompassing all forms of Aboriginal oral tradition as a distinctive genre within Canadian literature. A wider definition of 'literatures' is being revealed, contextualized and exacted as authentic features of an 'oral literary tradition' in contemporary Aboriginal writing, which is making tremendous contributions as a distinctive genre within Canadian literature.

(Armstrong, 2005a: 181)

Actually, extrapolating Armstrong's words into the general context of ethnic writing⁶¹, we may say that difference has now turned into the distinctive feature of the national literature. In other words, while perpetuating the assumption that literature produces a coherent national culture, Canadian literary criticism is faced by the urge to challenge a homogeneous notion of identity, and this, obviously, once again as always, brings with it the long-standing anxiety about identification, which Moyes, quoting Eli Mandel, described as "a form of national schizophrenia" (1992: 28).

This claim that Canada and its literary criticism suffer from an inherent schizophrenia has been advanced by a wide range of scholars and writers and is particularly well illustrated in the "Afterword" to Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, when she writes that "[i]f the national mental illness of the United States is megalomania, that of Canada is paranoid schizophrenia" (1970: 62). It should be noted that this book may be said to be one of the most influential texts in Canadian literature in terms of disseminating the image of Canada as a hostile country that eventually makes its citizens alienated, displaced and disillusioned. As the following extract from the very same page as the last quoted lines suggests, there is an inescapable feeling of displacement:

⁶¹ Canadian ethnic writing is usually seen as the writing produced by those groups, who, by their historical exclusion, have been positioned as different from the so-called Canadian identity and, thus, marginal or even invisible. However, we must be aware that there are scholars who oppose such nomenclature, based on the fact that the problematic of immigrants and of the First Nations differs to a large extent: "Peter Kulchyski criticizes the 'ethnicity' approach for, among other things, assimilating Native people into another colourful fragment of Canada's multicultural fabric, thereby reducing the historical specificity of Native peoples' claims to original occupancy of the land" (Emberley, 1993: 18). Moreover, by definition, every Canadian belongs to some ethnic designation, which means that naming a group after its ethnicity is a way of exoticising its culture and of setting it off from the group that represents the norm.

We are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here: the country is too big for anyone to inhabit completely, and in the parts unknown to us we move in fear, exiles and invaders. This country is something that must be chosen – it is so easy to leave – and if we do choose it we are still choosing a violent duality.

(Atwood, 1970: 62)

Such sentiments of entrapment, isolation, vulnerability, but also of survival and of the reconciliation of oneself to what Northrop Frye termed “the garrison mentality”⁶² became, then, major themes that recur throughout Atwood’s poems and novels, as the passage below exemplifies:

Canada is an unknown territory for the people who live in it... [...] It’s that kind of space in which we find ourselves lost.

What a lost person needs is a map of the territory, with his own position marked on it so he can see where he is in relation to everything else. Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind. Our literature is one such map, if we can learn to read it as *our* literature, as the product of who and where we have been. We need such a map desperately, we need to know about here, because here is where we live. For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive.

(Atwood, 1972:18-9)

Published in 1972, Margaret Atwood’s *Survival* is said to have been one of the last texts that aimed at defining “Canadianness” in Canadian literature. This is consonant with the argument, on page 61 of this dissertation, that Canadian nationalism began to fade after 1967. In this passage, we can still easily identify the idea of “shared knowledge” as a defining principle of nationhood; in the process of identity-seeking, the common possession of a rich legacy of memories becomes “a necessity”, the cornerstone that helps to unify Canadian writing. Besides its function as a connecting element, recollection also becomes a way of legitimising the present, which is particularly useful to Canada and other nation states within the post-colonial New World.

In this attempt to turn Canada into a recognisable territory for the people who live in it, in this attempt not to get lost, to know who and where Canadians have been, literature works as a map that reformulates space into something felt to be their own.

⁶² It was in his “Conclusion” to the *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English* (1976) that Northrop Frye first came upon the idea of associating the concept of a “garrison mentality” to the experiences of those who inhabited the forts and military camps, used to protect trade centres, in Canada’s early period of exploration. From the fear, most of the times irrational, of everything that was outside the fort’s wall came an isolationist and protectionist mentality, a tendency to regard the outside world, both natural and human, as menacing, and to erect barriers against it.

Literature, inseparable from the historic and geographic determinants in which it is produced, indeed turns itself into the expression of its space and time, but, in this process, there is a need to establish a beginning, to go back to look for social memories and to capture a sense of sameness that is sustained by remembrance. Literature, then, acquires the illusion of authenticity, mapping the cartography of Canadian citizenship and nationhood. Survival is dependent on such remapping against a cartography of forgetting, even if it is at the expense of truth.

Canadian literature is predicated on a false sense of origins that, as previously mentioned, was fuelled by an imagined need for a monolithic nationalist history. And so a myth is born:

Most history, when it has been digested by a people, becomes myth. Myth is an arrangement of the past, whether real or imagined, in patterns that resonate with a culture's deepest values and aspirations. Myths create and reinforce archetypes so taken for granted, so seemingly axiomatic, that they go unchallenged. Myths are so fraught with meaning that we live and die by them. They are the maps by which cultures navigate through time.

(Wright, 1992: 5)

Interestingly, just like Margaret Atwood, Ronald Wright uses the metaphor of the map as a guiding device to navigate the labyrinth of knowledge, a knowledge of the self, of one's place in the universe of being, of one's culture. The act of drawing lines in a map and inventing myths about the past is anchored in an understanding of the concept of territory that is itself inseparable from our understanding of the concept of liminality. Literally speaking, this last concept refers to the state of being on the threshold, that is, in a state that is full of potential possibilities, and choosing a direction implies crossing a boundary into a(n un)stabilised state.

It is this attempt to cross boundaries and define a sense of place retained in memory – Atwood's "geography of the mind" – that prompts us to embark on a journey of topographical mysticism, as Barbara Godard asserts:

Borders are read as metaphors in a system of signs, as "rhetoric" of relationship and organization (...) or "mythic patterns" (...), fictions implicated in power relations that exclude and include. Both Angus and New caution against the danger of accepting the boundary rhetoric as language of historical truth and so mythologizing points of origin and transformation that they come to seem natural or axiomatic.

(2003: 72)

The caution given leads us to demystify notions of pure and authentic origins, in particular the myth of the empty land, which has been used to allow a space for the erasure of (Ab)original histories and stresses the European “discovery” of the “New World”⁶³.

Amnesia provided a starting point to begin re-imagining nationhood. It was a willed amnesia that selected out certain knowledge, obscuring the brutal reality of conquest and neglecting the existence of First Nations and other marginalized peoples within the boundaries of the Canadian nation. On the issue of Aboriginal peoples, Barbara Godard comments that “... origin myths of an unsung virginal wilderness emphasizing discontinuity, or myths of decline and fall that stress continuity in an elegiac mode[, a]ll e-raise the Aboriginals with their different and oral mythologies” (1992: 10). Beverley Haun, citing Goldie, also focuses on the same subject, stating that “... the non-Native culture may reject or erase the indigenous culture with the attitude that ‘[t]his country really began with the arrival of the whites’” (2003: 37)

Nevertheless, if we turn for a moment to a consideration of First Nations’ origin myths, we recognise that Native peoples can trace indigenous legacies back to the gods of this world, something which has no parallel in Eurocentric Canadian history, because Euro-Canadians can only go back to a mythic archetype of “discovery”: their dominant narrative of Canadian beginnings starts with heroic pioneers taming uncharted wilderness. This allows us to corroborate Dharan’s words that First Nations’ mythology pre-dates Euro-Canadian culture and that, in spite of being contemporary as a literature, it is rooted in time immemorial⁶⁴:

Being a post-1970 phenomenon, Canadian Native Literature in English is just over three decades old, and, hence, quite young. Nevertheless, it has emerged as a distinct branch of world literature with quite a large readership across countries and cultures. To quote Terry Goldie (...) ‘it is based on very old traditions, (though) as a literature it is quite young.’ (...) That is to say, it is at once old and young.

(Dharan, 2003: 67)

⁶³ My use of the inverted commas around “New World” and “discovered” is intended to convey the problematic nature of these concepts against Todorov’s claim that “[a]t the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Indians of America [and of Canada] are certainly present, but nothing is known about them...” (1999: 4-5). Therefore, it is more accurate to speak of an existing Old World that was inhabited by Aboriginal peoples, who, due to the European conquest (instead of discovery), were dispossessed of their lands and cultures and recoded as immigrants.

⁶⁴ Errol P. Mendes indirectly alludes to the very same idea, when he writes that “Canada is both a very new country, less than 200 years old and also very old since its first inhabitants, the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, have lived here from time immemorial” (2003: 101).

Canadian literature, in opposition to First Nations' literature, reveals the absence of strong foundations for the making of national mythologies, because, as has been reiterated, Euro-Canadians did not possess an ancient common national identity. This experience of absence of origins and the lack of everything that First Nations had (a continuous cultural and literary legacy, indigenous deities and manitous⁶⁵, both living and dead heroes and many other traditions inscribed in a sacred past), propelled Canadian citizens, especially writers, to forge some form of national identity – for instance, shared myths, values and symbols arising out of a common heritage⁶⁶. The problem was that, as Leon Surette⁶⁷ informs us,

critics and imaginative writers of the anglophone community are unanimous in their conviction that the Canadian political entity is too vague in outline and pale in hue to enter into the literary imagination. They complain that [Canada has] had no revolution, no civil war, no Indian massacres, in short, no spilling of blood to stir the imagination and create a *Canadian* story or myth.

Numerous scholars and writers believe that it has not been easy to determine moments in Canada's political history that can be thought of as significant markers of the presence of a literary tradition⁶⁸. Surette does not agree with such critical voices and, without much effort, enumerates a set of “collective acts of violence” that took place on Canadian soil to prove that the country is not “devoid of history, or even blood” (ibidem).

But the real problem of Canada is not that the country has not been able to find a national identity based on violence, but, as Manguel advances, it is perhaps the fact that it “was born out of a negative desire – the desire not to be an independent nation, not to be the United States of America – it has always put forward a shadowy image of itself,

⁶⁵ Manitous are spirits wielding a powerful influence over human events and visiting tribal shamans in prophetic dreams and visions.

⁶⁶ As Rudyard Griffiths asserts in the preface to *Story of a Nation: Defining Moments in Our History*, and as the book itself illustrates through its collection of stories on memorable events in the Canadian past, “... Canada and Canadians are in the middle of a fascinating and perilous project of recrafting the foundations of a common identity. One of the hallmarks of this ongoing search for the basis of a new, robust national identity has been Canadians' sudden and intense interest in things historical” (2001: viii). Furthermore, as Linda Hutcheon points out, many were the white writers who “attempted to take the mythology and history (both past and present) of the native peoples as their subject-matter in their own search for roots” (1990: 77).

⁶⁷ This quotation is part of an article entitled “Here is Us: The Topocentrism of Canadian Literary Criticism”, in *Canadian Poetry*, no. 10 (Spring/Summer 1982), which I accessed online at <http://www.canadianpoetry.ca/cpjr/vol10/surette.htm>.

⁶⁸ Much of the precarious nature of Canadian history, and of the writing of it, has to do with the fact that historians do not agree on the events that have shaped the Canadian nation and they have used different approaches in the way they have told their stories. This, in turn, has caused distinct and separate literatures to emerge within the same country.

vast and imprecise” (2003: 93). Actually, Canada has been immersed in a negative self-image and, as a consequence, the identity crisis of the Canadian nation has become a fixture in the country’s literary and cultural life. It is true that Canada is a country disjointed by geography, language and culture, but one of the hardships associated with overcoming the great problem of Canada has been the difficulty of standing outside of the shadow of self and really seeing from multiple viewpoints. John Metcalf comments on this difficulty, ironising the Canadians’ necessity to agree on what their meta-narrative is:

What is distinctively Canadian in a Canadian literature? Which works should be enshrined in the Canadian canon? Which excluded? Who is a Canadian? Who not? ‘Canadian-ness’.
‘Canadian-ness’ rather than quality has always been the Canadian concern.
(1988: 9)

The idea that negative stances predominate in the search for a Canadian identity is reminiscent of Barbara Godard’s remark that

The focus on metanarratives, the privileging of voice over writing, the figuration of writer and critic as questor or detective in a labyrinth seeking the answer to a puzzle, the strategy of synecdoche whereby the local functions as general unity – all these produce a negative hermeneutics. The search for absent origins paradoxically turns into the origins of absence. Absence, negativity, becomes reified as the essential Canadian.
(1992: 21)

We may say that absence and negativity were incorporated, from the beginning, into the country’s very name, because, if we take Pierre-Francois Xavier de Charlevoix’s words, in the *First Chronicle of the Nouvelle France* (1744), to be true, Canada is a name that was attributed by the first Spanish explorers who, having arrived to the Northern lands where they expected to find treasures, were disheartened to discover that they did not exist after all and “cried out, ‘¡Acá nada!’. ‘Here’s nothing!’...” (Manguel, 2003: 91). But the editors of *Kanata: An Anthology of Canadian Children’s Literature*⁶⁹, besides this myth of Canada as an empty land, also provide us with another explanation for the country’s name, which took into consideration the worldviews and native languages of the First Nations inhabiting the region: thus, “[i]n

⁶⁹ It is interesting to notice that this anthology is divided into three distinct parts: “In the Beginning”, “Voices in the Wilderness” and “Mosaic”. The first one is made up of seven stories and four poems that account for the creation and beginning of the world and is, almost in its entirety, a product of First Nations’ writers, which comes to prove the aforementioned argument that Aboriginal writing is part of the Canadian literary tradition.

1534 Jacques Cartier wrote about his exploration of th[at] country and of the native communities he encountered. He called th[at] new land *Kanata* (Kah-nah-tah), which is an Indian word meaning ‘village’ or ‘community’” (Rubio and Stow, 1976: xi). As far as I am concerned, this last version is much more illuminating and historically accurate. I fully subscribe to the viewpoint that “Canada is not a place where there is nothing; it is [Canadians’] village, [their] community, [their] *kanata*” (ibidem: xii).

In the mid-1970s, as the discourse of national literatures came under attack because of its “reductionism”, the study of Canadian literature deepened its state of crisis which led to “a series of alternative critical practices” (Cameron, 1990: 117). From that period onwards, the assumption that cultural homogeneity was a prerequisite for common citizenship and nation-building was undermined by a shifting focus of attention to postcolonial, postmodern, feminist and multicultural literatures, which challenged conventional representations of Canadian cultural identity. As Catalina Montes envisages:

En el siglo XX 1982 abrió un camino de posibilidades. Ojalá en el siglo XXI, con enormes potencialidades y expectativas para Canada, se consiga afianzar una tradición literaria que abarque todas sus voces, y que entre ellas algunas se alcen al fin en *solos* magníficos con la excelencia universal que aún no ha logrado.
(2003: 126)⁷⁰

It is with this hope in mind that I end this chapter. Before concluding, however, let me now briefly turn my attention to the question that starts this chapter: “Is there a Canadian literature?”. While there is little doubt among academics today that Canadian literature indeed exists, there is still no agreement as to whether the Canadian literary canon has “successfully managed to include cultural, ethnic and racial diversity” or if it “implicitly produc[es], instead, two literary categories, as it were: mainstream Canadian literature, the real one, and multicultural literature, the colourful and folkloric, and therefore the less ‘literary’” (Beutell, 2003: 238).

Obviously, much more could be said about issues of canonisation and nationalism in Canadian literature. Nonetheless, for the present purposes this discussion is sufficient, because the nation remains a site of contestation and contradiction, thereby turning any study of its literature into an unfinished project. Put simply, and quoting

⁷⁰ My translation: [In the 20th century, 1982 opened up a path of possibilities. Let us hope that in the 21st century, with enormous potentialities and expectations for Canada, we can reinforce a literary tradition that embraces all its voices, and that amongst them some may ultimately be elevated to magnificent levels with the universal excellence that they have not enjoyed yet].

Hartmut Lutz's words, which I subscribe to, "[r]egardless of the long debate about canonicity and canonization in Canadian literature (...) I will sidestep parts of the minefield by simply postulating that there is a canon in Canadian Literature in English" (Lutz, 2002: 128).

Up to this point in the dissertation, I have focused on the nationalist impetus behind the creation of Canadian literature and on the inclusion of First Nations' literatures in the pluralistic Canadian Canon. In the following chapter, I intend to stretch the boundaries of the question that frames the current discussion to include the also complex and controversial terrain of Canadian Children's Literature. It is with a "bridging" approach in mind that I aim to find some answers to the question that sets the tone for the third chapter: "How Canadian is Children's Literature?". In other words, if we have just confirmed and reinforced the idea that a Canadian Literature, made up of a tremendous diversity of voices, does exist, time has come to ask if there is such a thing as a Canadian literature for children and young adults.

A nation can be judged by how it enriches its children. (...) Canadians have a national literature for the young that is indeed *literature*, increasingly assured in artistry, increasingly multi-cultural in character, and one that merits and rewards serious scholarly study.

(Hudson, 2003: 1)

There is little doubt that Hudson's position is correct, but we cannot forget that, taking the works of the French sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu into consideration, especially *The Rules of Art*, children's literature in general, and Canadian in particular, may be defined as a subfield on the verge of what he designates as "field of restricted production" (1996: 121), where cultural forms such as literature and "serious" art dominate, and where struggles between agents are based, for the most part, on the pursuit of symbolic profit. Nevertheless, equally important is to bear in mind that children's literature is also situated close to the "field of large-scale production, oriented towards the satisfaction of the demands of a wide audience" (ibidem), and heavily dependent on economic success. The place of children's literature is, thus, difficult to pinpoint, and it is even more problematic to determine it in Canada, a country which, as just shown, has viewed the emergence of its national literature with great suspicion.

Let us find out, in the next chapter, how Canadian literature for children has been shaped in close dialogue with the canonising efforts of its parent literature, in an attempt to obtain recognition and prestige.

CHAPTER THREE

HOW CANADIAN IS CHILDREN'S LITERATURE?

When a discussion about Canadian literature for children and young adults occurs, the response that usually follows is a myriad of questions, such as: Is there any? What is literature for children and young adults? “What literary legacy do our [Canadian] children have to light up their future? What in the past and in the present in Canadian children’s fiction is *literature*?” (Hudson, 2003: 1). “How good is Canadian children’s literature?” (Egoff, 1967: 261).

Up until the mid-1970s, as Judith Saltman puts it, the pattern was to dismiss this literary genre as non-existent or numerically insignificant: “... very few Canadian children’s books were written and published until the 1970s” (2003: 23). However, pejorative attributions towards the newness of the field have been questioned and if, at first, “Canadian children’s literature was seen as immature, insular, and uneven; it was not yet a substantial body of writing nor international in literary quality, (...) it [soon] held the promise of continuing development” (Saltman, 1987: 1).

Significant evolution in this area has indeed occurred in the past four decades and, therefore, in this third chapter, I intend to show how Canadian children’s literature has developed, where it is now and in what direction it is heading. From a period when it was neglected – because British and American writers supplied stories for Canadian children –, to a recent one when diversity and inclusion have become core values tied to expectations of national coherence in an increasingly diverse society, the truth is that, similarly to its parent literature, the legitimate function of this literary genre has been to produce a unified and coherent national identity, while providing young readers with a chance to learn in an amusing and engaging way.

I. 3.1. AN OVERVIEW OF CANADIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE – ITS MAIN FEATURES

The problems of Canadian children's literature have always been those of its parent literature. The two cannot be separated. Whatever has been said about our literature (...) as the product of a colonial, pioneer, frontier mentality, can include children's books. (...) The plots are almost inevitably played out in the great outdoors with casts of animals, Indians, Eskimos, fur-traders, trappers, fishermen, and others battling the environment. (...)

(Egoff, 1976: 209)

I have argued, in my previous chapter, that Canadian literature is made up of both traditional and contemporary English literature, the many and rich legends of First Nations and the emotive writings that stem from pioneer history and immigrant experiences. This diversity enhances and magnifies the defining characteristic of Canadians, which has been the search for a national identity, a concern that has also been shared by Canadian children's literature.

In fact, literature for children and young adults⁷¹ should not be examined without a consideration of the polysystem⁷² within which it exists, because, as Itamar Even-Zohar claims, “[l]iterature for children is not considered a phenomenon *sui generis*, but is related to literature for adults...” (1979, 292). Sheila Egoff concurs: “The most

⁷¹ Literature for children and young adults is a nomenclature that is not devoid of a certain ambiguity, since the roles and social positions assigned to the young have shifted throughout history and, hence, the meanings attached to those categories have also shifted. Chronologically speaking, the age group of the audience specified is not easy to define either, as terms such as childhood, adolescence, youth and young adulthood show considerable variation, depending upon the particular society in question, and are sometimes used interchangeably. I chose the designation young adults over others intentionally, due to its broad-spectrum coverage and also because I share with Irwin and Eyerly the idea that “Young Adult fiction is written BY a serious author, FOR a Young Adult reader, ABOUT the problems, emotions and events that concern adolescents” (1988: 3).

⁷² The term polysystem, first introduced in the early 1970s, may be defined as “a system of various systems, which intersect with each other and partly overlap”, according to Even-Zohar (1979: 290).

important single fact, then, that must be understood about children's literature is that it *is* literature, another branch of the parent stem" (1981: 2). And Jill May further clarifies:

The professors of these courses [that look at the literary aspect of children's stories] maintain that although children's literature has, by the very uniqueness of its intended audience, some stylistic and aesthetic differences from literature as a whole, it has commonalities shared by all literature that affect reader response.
(1995: 7)

If children's literature cannot be separated from the whole literary polysystem, it comes as no surprise that in books for children and young adults authors have attempted to portray the same concerns as "those of its parent literature", to use Egoff's words appearing in the epigraph to this chapter. Earlier, in 1967, this internationally known and respected critic had already noted in *The Republic of Childhood* that...

A study of Canadian children's books (...) can throw some light on the nation itself. (...) They show what Canada and Canadians are like, what values [they] respect, how [they] look at [them]selves today and at [their] past. (...) ... [C]hildren's books in Canada reflect many of the forces in [their] own society; it is a reflection in miniature, of course, but accurate and indicative.
(Egoff, 1967: 3-4)

And later, in 1981, she reiterated the same ideas:

Thus writing for children has tended (...) to be very much a reflection (although in miniature) of the prevailing social concepts and conditions, and it is in the history of society itself that one must look for the roots of children's literature and its role in reflecting changing values.
(Egoff, 1981: 2)

These observations were corroborated by Judith Saltman, who asserted that Canadian children's books "could be instrumental in transmitting the nation's political, social, and imaginative culture, thereby giving children an awareness of Canada's physical and emotional geography and history" (1987: 4-5). In other words, she believed that, through books, Canadian young readers were given the opportunity to understand the geography and people of their diverse country, while developing their own identity and sense of self-respect.

The above quotations, however, raise significant questions about the nature of children's literature, namely its target audience and issues of adaptation, among others. We can no longer agree with Margaret Fee when she argues that "It is (...) difficult to

find a clear line of demarcation between adult and children's fiction" (1976: x). Thus, we need to ask ourselves: Who do children's authors write for? What is it to write children's literature as a reflection of one's society, but in miniature? That way, aren't we conceiving of it as a minor, insignificant genre?

As expressed previously in the second section of the first chapter, there was little or no recognition of children as having particular needs until the end of the seventeenth century, and folktales were then directed towards the adult population. The perception was that children were mini-adults, having similar needs and interests as those of their chronologically more mature contemporaries. Penelope Mortimer develops this idea, claiming that...

The segregation between children and adults began to take place around the end of the seventeenth century – up until then, apart from the necessary period of infancy, children seem to have been regarded as normal people: hard working, capable of reading Ovid and slogging about battlefields, sexy, indistinguishable from men and women except in size. In 1693 John Locke publish (sic) his *Thoughts Concerning Education* and invented the Child.⁷³

(Mortimer, 1980: 102)

Sheila Egoff, relying on Philippe Ariès' account on the absence of children's literary works in the Middle Ages⁷⁴, explains that it was useless to spend time writing for a young audience, since "a high percentage of children were not expected to survive infancy" and those who did "were quickly absorbed into the adult milieu" (1981: 3). Marian Fowler draws on the same problematic of children as miniature models of adults, who were potential farmers in the thinly populated New World: "In colonies like Canada, children were one's wealth; the more hands there were, the better to help with the never-ending round of chores both inside and outside" (1982: 81).

Under these circumstances, and also because of the "relatively small number of children who were then taught to read" (Egoff, 1981: 3), it was completely unnecessary to produce books specifically for young people. What is more, as Egoff further elaborates, except for a very few writings deliberately designed for them that

⁷³ John Locke's writings influenced children's literature in a broad sense, because this philosopher emphasised the value of education, when he introduced the idea that the human mind was a *tabula rasa* at birth, which could be moulded by the external environment and sensory experiences.

⁷⁴ Chris Jenks notes that "Ariès argues from material drawn mostly from French culture, but it is conventionally supposed that his thesis is generalizable in relation to the development of the rest of the modern Western world..." (2005: 55)

aimed at their education and discipline⁷⁵, “those children who did read” in the medieval era were not given any other choice but to amuse themselves with “romances, ballads, fables, and legends that were intended for their elders” (Egoff, 1981: 3).

As it is, how come fairy tales became associated with children’s literature? According to Tolkien’s explanation...

... the association of children and fairy stories is an accident of our domestic history. Fairy stories have in the modern lettered world been relegated to the ‘nursery’, as shabby or old-fashioned furniture is relegated to the playroom, primarily because the adults do not want it, and do not mind if it is misused. It is not the choice of the children which decides this.

(1980: 112)

In addition to the fact that “in the modern lettered world (...) adults do not want it”, in part because of its proliferation and accessibility to mainstream audiences, which turned it into a minor genre as discussed on pages 36 and 37 of this dissertation, the author adds another factor, in an endnote: “Wealthier families employed women to look after their children, and the stories were provided by these nurses, who were sometimes in touch with rustic and traditional lore forgotten by their ‘betters’” (ibidem).

Meanwhile, from the first half of the twentieth century onwards, children’s literature has become a flourishing area of study and it is now widely recognised that young people have their own developmental pace and, consequently, distinct needs, interests and concerns. In spite of recent progress, some are still doubtful as to whether it is possible to distinguish between adult and children’s literature and there are writers who claim that they do not have a well-defined audience in mind when they create their work:

“There is a difference in writing for children, *perhaps*, but it is important to me never to relegate the child to the ghetto of childhood, but rather to see childhood as part of a continuum. (...) ... I write for adults who once were kids and for kids who will one day be adults.

(Wynne-Jones, 2003: 16; italics mine)

Interestingly, Jill May refutes the above argument by noting that “[a]lthough many authors of children’s books will say that they are not aware of their audience’s age as they write, they may be more aware than they are willing to admit” (1995: 39). According to this Professor of children’s literature at Purdue University, those who do

⁷⁵ In Egoff’s words, “[t]here is scarcely a vestige of writing in the medieval era, aside from a few books of manners and instruction, that were designed specifically for children” (1981: 3).

not directly address their stories to a specific audience, do it for their own convenience, because “[a]fter all, children’s books are read by adults and children, so the books do not have one audience”, but “dual (or multiple) audiences”, and, as a result, they “hold more than one meaning” and “may be perceived in different ways” (May, 1995: 55).

As noticed, there seems to exist a certain reluctance among writers themselves to label their stories as specifically for children, a position that was much more radically formulated in Arthur Ransome’s observation in 1937, quoted by Peter Hunt:

I do not know how to write books for children⁷⁶ and have the gravest doubts as to whether anybody should try to do such thing. To write *for* children seems to me to be a sure way of writing what is called a ‘juvenile’, a horrid, artificial thing, a patronising thing, a thing that betrays in every line that author and intended victims are millions of miles apart, and that the author is enjoying not the stuff of his book but a looking-glass picture of himself or herself ‘being so good with children’.
(2008: 191)

A few other writers share this view or simply ignore their audience and just write for themselves and for their own enjoyment⁷⁷, which inevitably leads me to ask the same question Peter Hunt does: “If the majority of writers do not see their role as specific to a child or to education or manipulation, why do they write for children?” (ibidem: 193-4). Is it merely because “children make the best audience”, as Alan Garner, quoted by Hunt (ibidem: 194), argues? Shouldn’t the children’s needs be taken into account when writing for them?

There is a growing number of voices that recognise differences between children’s literature and literature for adults. Sheila Egoff, for instance, was well-aware of the need for adaptation:

... it differs only from adult literature in that its audience imposes the necessity for certain techniques and emphases: the pairing down of characterization, the condensation of plot and incident, a faster pace, minimal description, and a basically straightforward story line – all in all, a less intricate web of plot, character, and style.
(1981: 2)

Peter Hunt also acknowledged the importance of simplification methods, which is not quite the same as “writing down” to children. Many writers do believe that young readers love a good challenge and that they grab every opportunity to play games and

⁷⁶ Ironically, as I discovered after browsing the web on this writer, this English author and journalist is best known for his *Swallows and Amazons* (1930-1947), a series of twelve books for children. (<http://www.arthur-ransome.org/ar/swallows-and-amazons>).

⁷⁷ For further reading, cf. more quotations by various authors in Peter Hunt (2008: 191).

have fun while learning⁷⁸. “What, then, should be changed? Of form and content, the simplification of language might seem to be the less problematic, but here again, authors express great faith in their audience, and a reluctance to bow to simplistic arguments” (Hunt, 2008 :198). Instead of “writing down” to young readers, the strategy should be to write up to them, giving them credit for their ability to enjoy “words that give them a hard time” and that they actually can understand “provided they are in a context that absorbs their attention” (ibidem).

Overall, it is not easy to clearly define the strategies required for young readers to understand and take pleasure in literature. Besides having an aesthetics of its own, the criteria that determine whether children’s literature is amusing and acceptable remain vague and an open issue; so much so that, as Peggy Whalen-Levitt, quoted by Jill May, asserts...

It must be admitted from the onset that, beyond institution, we know very little about the aesthetic communication process as it involves children... As the relationship between child and book generally begins in the lap of an adult reader, we wish we could have introduced you to ethnographies of these story-reading events. Unfortunately, the work in this area is all but nonexistent. Theoretical models exist for the study of socially situated meaning, but to date they have not been applied to the story-reading context.

(1995: 161-2)

In spite of the existence of “unofficial canons published for children’s literature, (...) [which] have helped to define what is good in children’s literature”⁷⁹ (May, 1995: 139), the canon question is far from being resolved. Actually, many critics assume that such canons have privileged a partial, specific and biased cultural experience and have rarely acknowledged minority or divergent voices, hence needing revision.

In a country such as Canada, where diversity can be seen in every sphere of life, children’s literature should reflect Canadian cultural identities, experiences and values. If I have consciously withheld the question of children’s literature in Canada, in order to digress briefly on some preliminary and general observations concerning the subject of literature for children, I shall now turn back to consideration of the pending issue.

⁷⁸ Jill May (1995: 39-40) affirmed that, according to psychologists, “child’s play is a work paradigm”, which basically means that, while playing, the child establishes social roles and interactive rules, “work[ing] out some of his[her] social problems” and developing his/her intelligence, his/her willingness to experiment and to “discover answers to his[her] questions about the world around him[her] by imposing situations similar to those he[she] meets in his[her] day-to-day activities in his[her] play”.

⁷⁹ Jill May provided her readers with the ones she considered to be the most prominent and influential: “the Newbery and Caldecott lists, founded and supported by the American Library Association, and the Touchstones list, founded and supported by the Children’s Literature Association” (1995: 139).

As Samuel Smiles once put it (1958: 341), “[t]he nation comes from the nursery” and, as a consequence, trivial as it may seem, much of the future of the world has been in the hands of writers for children, because the young readers of today will become the adults and leaders of tomorrow. Peter Hunt’s words stress this view:

‘You realise the enormity of the responsibility that you’ve brought children into the world, and if you don’t like life and what you’ve given them is something you don’t like, then it’s a terrible thing. So I think there is a big responsibility that you pass on to the children a sense of faith, that life is good, that it’s an adventure and that it’s something to be chosen over oblivion.’

(2008: 194)

The fear of oblivion and loss of identity was echoed by Claude Aubry, the first bilingual Chief Librarian in the City of Ottawa and a writer and translator of children’s books, a collection of French-Canadian Folk Legends and CBC radio plays. To prevent forgetfulness from erasing Canada’s past, he claimed, at the first Pacific Rim Conference on Children’s Literature, that Canadian writers for children should receive support from government:

This is where our governments should help. There is no other alternative, for there is a price to be paid if we want to keep our own literature for children. And only the governments can help to pay this bill, (...). Well, if the Canadian author for children is not better encouraged, if the publication of children’s books in Canada remains a low priority, our literature for children will die, for it is still in its infancy. Then our children would have nothing of our history, of our geography, of our folklore, of our traditions and of our way of life; they will not have fiction created by Canadian imaginative minds. Our children will then ignore what we are, and what we were, what is Canada, and what made it. And then, they will not feel Canadian any more, and then Canada will have lost its personality, its soul, its identity.

(1979: 200-1)

Frances Frazer, recognising the importance of encouragement and financial support for the development of Canadian literature for children, listed a number of supportive initiatives and organisations that emerged from the mid 1970s onwards that contributed to the bloom of a distinct Canadian voice telling national stories for children:

[A] nationwide network of support systems for children’s authors, artists, and publishers began to develop. In 1975, the National Library instituted a special section for Canadian children’s books. (...) The year 1976 saw the foundation of the children’s Book Centre, a non-profit association with headquarters in Toronto, to promote the development of Canadian children’s books and disseminate information about them across the country. A group of creative people organized themselves in

1977 into CANSCAIP, the Canadian Society of Children's authors, Illustrators and Performers, to encourage the creation of art and literature for Canada's children. ...
(Frazer, 1990: 218)

And the list goes on, as Frazer took note of many other efforts to promote Canadian books for children, including the creation of publishing houses such as Montreal's Tundra Books and Toronto's Annick Press, which "ventured into the European market and achieved some noteworthy successes" (ibidem: 217); the foundation of the Canadian Children's Literature journal, "[a] critical quarterly (...) [that] made its debut in 1975..." and, among other initiatives, the establishment of "[p]rizes and medals for children's authors and illustrators..." (ibidem: 218).

In gist, according to Frances Frazer, all these developments were the result of a movement of nationalist re-affirmations that spread across the country during the centennial celebrations of 1967, and that was still visible by the 1970s, together with a question of economic resources: "The moral support for this new confidence came principally from a wave of nationalism that acquired momentum in Canada's centennial year and surged on through the 1970s. (...) Ultimately it was money that bought the freedoms" (ibidem: 217). Judith Saltman also described the growth and prosperity of the industry of Canadian children's books in similar terms:

Nineteen seventy-five was a watershed year for the writing and publishing of Canadian children's books in English. The conservative, problem-laden years before the early 1970s – years of slow development in a struggling, insecure industry – gave way to the energetic decade (1975 to 1985) of creative and economic growth that led to the distinctive national children's literature of the present day.

(1987: 1)

Nonetheless, as J.P. Wilkinson reminds us, governmental support is essential but not sufficient: "Government subsidies may enable [Canadian publishers] to meet operating expenses but subsidies cannot ensure markets. If Canadians do not read Canadian books, (...) then direct subsidies to Canadian publishers are merely sustaining an artificially adjunct to Canadian society..." (1976: 1).

As discussed earlier in this dissertation, the Canadian nation discovered its independent voice in the late nineteenth century and only then did it free itself from British colonial rule. This position of reliance upon external authority also applied to children's literature, because, prior to the twentieth century, many books for the young in Canada were imported from Europe, particularly Great Britain and France, and even

from Canada's neighbour, the United States of America. Sheila Egoff elaborates on this point, with reference to the year of publication of her critical guide to Canadian children's literature in English: "... Canada is still chiefly a book-importing country and there is the fierce competition for Canadian readership that American and British authors pose to their Canadian counterparts" (1967: 10).

Nevertheless, as the author of *The Republic of Childhood* emphasises, if American books were regarded as a threat to national identity and generated a "strong feeling that some effort should be made to counteract the number of books pouring into Canada from the United States" (ibidem: 11), the feeling towards her erstwhile British parent/mentor was that of a deferential nature and tender affection, precluding stiff competition⁸⁰. Citing Edward Hartley Dewart, Smaro Kambourelli alluded to the difficulties of writing in Canada, intrinsic to the use of literary conventions inherited from the British tradition:

Our colonial position, whatever may be its political advantages, is not favourable to the growth of an indigenous literature. Not only are our mental wants supplied by the brain of the Mother Country, under circumstances that utterly preclude competition, but the majority of persons of taste and education in Canada are migrants from the Old Country, whose tenderest affections cling around the land they have left.

(1991: xiv)

Sheila Egoff estimated that, while Great Britain and the United States published three thousand children's books each *per* year, the Canadian nation annually produced only some scarce thirty or forty between 1952 and 1967, and even fewer the years before that (1967: 10).

Despite Canada's nascent stirrings of political and cultural nationalism in the post-Second World War era, which coincided with Britain's continued loss of imperial sovereignty, we should not forget that, as Sheila Egoff further states,

⁸⁰ On this issue, it is worthwhile to add Elizabeth Waterston's words: "The fact of the political border between Canada and the United States created a complex of friendliness and antagonism between the weaker country and the stronger one. Canadian books for children came to reflect a sense of national identity, often defined in terms of subtle differences between the British and French colonizers and the powerful American neighbor" (1992: 2-3).

It is interesting to note that this antagonistic stance towards the United States was not a new phenomenon by that time; on the contrary, it had been a shared element in British and Canadian history since the eighteenth century. For further reading on the early imperialist connections between Canada and Great Britain and the ways that this was expressed in opposition to the United States, cf. the third chapter – "Your Majesty's Realm" – of Daniel Francis' *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History*.

[t]he first Canadian books are thus almost indistinguishable in manner, mood, and emphasis on morality from English books of the day. There was, however, one significant addition: the Canadian scene. (...) ... [I]f the style was English (...) the setting was Canadian.

(ibidem: 235-6)

Taking it all into account and considering Canada's "open approach to the world [as] one aspect of [their] identity" (ibidem: 11), we may say that, for a long time Canadian children did not have the opportunity to learn much about their people and their immediate surroundings, at least through books specifically designed for them. In fact, as Judith Saltman (2003: 23) reminds us,

In attempting to decipher trends and patterns in Canadian children's literature at the millennium, it is important to remember that Canada is a young country and [its] children's literature, in comparison to more than 300-years-old British children's literature, is also still young.

According to Elizabeth Waterston, "... children's books can be regarded as products of time and place" (1992: 5), which means that they reveal the historically changing nature of all societies as a consequence of social, economic and political conditions. Canada is indeed a young nation still in search of its identity. Metaphorically, it is a child groping towards maturity, but to the claim that "[i]n Canada, (...) a young person has 'no medieval cathedrals with soaring Gothic arches to comfort him with ancestor echo'" (Walsh, 1998: i), we may retort, together with Ann Walsh, that...

... Canadians do not need to walk on ancient Roman roads or touch crumbling castle walls to reach [their] past. [They] hear [their] 'ancestral echoes' in mountain streams, in rustling prairie grasses, in the songs of [their] oceans. [They] hear [their] echoes in the wind.

(ibidem: ii)

As previously stated, viewed through a historiographical lens, Canada is a new country with relatively little recorded history in terms of human events and, as such, with no constructions of ancient architecture. Notwithstanding the lack of evidence of significant landmarks, we may argue that that nation is endowed with a long history, if we take into account its first inhabitants.

According to Ann Walsh, the Canadian landscape alone is sufficient to teach a great deal about Canadian history and society, as it tells us much about the past of Canadian peoples and the way they relate to the world. Generally speaking, nature is, in

many ways, an extension of human beings and a part of culture: the land is a living body, on which individuals breathe, eat, sleep and fulfil daily needs. It speaks to the peoples living on it and tells them the stories of ancestral beings, beliefs and rituals that will never be lost, because these are echoed in nature beyond history and memory.

Many are the cultures that understand the world and all that exists in it as a related whole and, among those, Canada's First Nations in particular often recount in their creation stories how their ancestors were created out of nature by a Great Power Spirit⁸¹. It comes as no surprise, then, that "[s]ince the folk tale is (...), by definition, the product of a primitive, non-literate society, North Americans, other than the Indians and Eskimos, cannot really claim a native folk-tale literature" (Egoff, 1967: 149).

Perhaps for that reason...

Some of the best writing had a sturdy base in Indian and Eskimo myths and legends. (...) With the beginning of 1960s a small but vigorous group of writers demonstrated the skills of selection and interpretation as well as a knowledge of Indian life, and made literature out of a large, unwieldy, diverse mass of oral tradition hitherto locked within the pages of anthropological studies or in the memories of the Indians themselves. (...) But much remains to be done. These stories will have to be written and rewritten until a dozen or so surface as the best and they will have to be told so well that they can enter our *national* consciousness – on the level of 'Cinderella' and 'Jack the Giant Killer' – instead of remaining in a separate cultural stream.

(Egoff, 1976: 205)

"Indian and Eskimo myths and legends", using Egoff's terminology, do trace Aboriginal legacies back to the lands of this world, while the Canadian nation cannot trace any comparable legacy to ancient gods. If we are to get a fuller understanding of Canadian history, that nation needs to encourage indigenous voices and to recognise them as its own. Only then do statements such as the following by Elizabeth Waterston make sense: "Children's literature in Canada is as rich and varied as the history of the country and the dreams and experiences of childhood" (1992: p. vii).

In such a vast country, where nature reigns, there is a solipsistic perception of certain themes – such as the theme of pioneering, settlement, natives, challenge, struggle and, among others, a diverse and wild landscape – as unique to Canadian texts. Although, obviously, these themes have enjoyed universal popularity, they are valorised

⁸¹ The idea that the first human beings were born from nature is not unique to indigenous nations. Actually, this very same view exists in other cultures as well, namely in the Judeo-Christian tradition, where Adam was created from the dirt of the Earth. The difference, though, is that while indigenous nations' belief that people and nature are connected still prevails in their culture, nowadays the Judeo-Christian perception is one of separateness and of domination.

as distinctively Canadian, hence shaping the identity of the nation: “The theme of conflict against the wilderness, though it is one of universal appeal, is very Canadian” (Egoff, 1967: 163).

These themes have fascinated not only adults, but children as well, and so adventures of youths in the forests, in the prairies or even on the seas, struggling against the weather and terrain or hunting wild animals, have been a constant subject. As Elizabeth Waterston remarks, “[s]ince Canada was presumed to consist of forests and barrens, it seemed natural for Canadians to present tales of wild beasts” (1992: 93). She further suggests that the realistic animal story early on became synonymous with professional writing in nineteenth-century Canada, and that it received international recognition as an emblematic Canadian literary contribution: “Realistic animal stories have generally been considered a Canadian specialty. At the end of the nineteenth century Charles G. D. Roberts and Ernest Thompson Seton caught world attention with their stories of ‘the kindred of the wild’” (ibidem)⁸².

Nowadays, due to a considerable increase in the number of Canadian publishing houses, which inevitably generated a similar increase in literature for Canadian children and young adults⁸³, there are many more themes that young readers can choose from. Among them are the ones that deal with Canada as a multicultural society and the resulting complexities of defining a Canadian identity. Given these concerns as to whether there is a Canadian culture and, if so, what exactly this is, Canada’s government has viewed the publishing industry as a way of protecting, promoting and encouraging cultural growth.

Taken together, Canada’s temperament as a young nation growing up and obsessed with the pursuit of knowledge and of facts, as well as with the recording of its history is amply illustrated in children’s books. In Elizabeth Waterston’s words, “Canadians in particular, at a moment when the concept of nationalism is in a volcanic state, turn to the novels and poems written for and about children, from colonial days to this free trade time, as invaluable texts” (1992: 173), and this because, “[f]or the Canadian child, books by Canadian authors, set in Canadian scenes and dealing with

⁸² The two mentioned authors have generally been credited as the originators of Realistic Canadian Animal Tales, but as Waterston tells us “English settlers in Canada [had] brought their fondness for pets with them” (1992: 94). For instance, the books by Catherine Parr Traill, an early Canadian novelist and naturalist, are taken to be classics of early Canadian children’s literature, and they qualify as Animal Stories.

⁸³ Elizabeth Waterston tells us that “... in 1990 some 65 publishing houses rolled out over 450 titles, part of an always increasing mass” (1992: vii).

Canadian facts, problems, and achievements enhance a national sense of identity” (ibidem: 11).

A genre that has emerged out of Canada’s international and domestic struggle to define itself as a nation⁸⁴, and that has also deserved a place in Canadian children’s literature, is the so-called social-problem novel. It deals realistically with themes of parental divorce, of drug abuse, of sexuality, and many more social and individual problems, as described by Judith Saltman:

Devoted to regional and ethnic representation of contemporary Canadian children’s lives, this publishing project shows older children entering their teenage quest for identity against the backdrop of the multicultural mosaic. Foreground issues, such as coping with discrimination, assimilation, divorce, parent-child conflict, and alienation often dominate the plot and dwarf the characters.

(1987: 63)

By the same token, Elizabeth Waterston claims that “[m]ost recently, authors have used books for children as a way to teach them how to cope with increasingly common personal problems...” (1992: 79) and she illustrates her argument with examples drawn from Jean Little’s work, among other references:

Little has explored the problems of children in a long series of admirable novels. The problems range from loneliness (*Look through My Window*, 1970) to physical impairment such as cerebral palsy (*Mine for Keeps*, 1961), and from timidity (*Different Dragons*, 1986) to the death of a parent (*Mama’s Going to Buy You a Mocking Bird*, 1984).

(1992: 88)

But even if the novels by this prolific Canadian writer typify realistic psychological and physical problems in family settings, and are noted for their therapeutic purposes, the truth is that, as Judith Saltman makes clear, “... the foremost representative of this genre is L.M. Montgomery’s unofficial international diplomat: *Anne of Green Gables* (1908)” (1987: 58). Often connotated with “classic realistic, girl’s growing-up novel[s]” (Helbig and Perkins, 1992: 12), *Anne of Green Gables* has been studied from a wide variety of popular and academic perspectives⁸⁵, and has been

⁸⁴ Judith Saltman attributes the beginnings of this genre, which she names social realism, to a “tumultuous wave of new realism that originated in the United States” in the 1960s and 1970s (1987: 62).

⁸⁵ It should be pointed out that although *Anne of Green Gables* was first published in 1908, it did not receive academic credit until the 1970s. Only since then have studies on the book begun to be published, because, before that, literary critics and scholars assumed that best-selling children’s books could not have literary merit and, hence, neglected them. Elizabeth Waterston elaborates on this point, remarking that “[c]ertainly in children’s literature books by and for the female half of the population have not been accorded extensive critical treatment. (...) *Anne of Green Gables* is a case in point: no serious analysis

transformed into some kind of a literary shrine representing an iconic expression of Canadian cultural identity.

From the 1970s onwards, following Lucy Maud Montgomery, many talented Canadian women writers began publishing books that were taken “from the adult shelves” (Waterston, 1992: 122) and embraced by “[g]irls still in the process of reaching adulthood” (ibidem). Margaret Laurence’s *A Bird in the House* (1970) and Alice Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) are but two examples of the effect that L.M. Montgomery’s work had on them.

These noted Canadian women writers also turned to writing deliberately for children: Margaret Atwood, with her *Up in the Tree* (1978), *Anna’s Pet* (1980), *For the Birds* (1990), *Princess Prunella and the Purple Peanut* (1995) and her most recent works *Rude Ramsay and the Roaring Radishes* (2003) and *Bashful Bob and Doleful Dorinda* (2004); as well as Margaret Laurence, with her *Jason’s Quest* (1970), *Six Darn Cows* (1979), *The Olden Days Coat* (1979, rev. 1982) and *A Christmas Birthday Story* (1980), are two paradigms of distinctive female voices that crossed the border from adult to children’s fiction. As Elizabeth Waterston attests,

The mystery of the first encounter with printed language has recently absorbed several of Canada’s major writers. Because gifted writers such as Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood happen to be fascinated by this mystery, they have produced some fine books for beginning readers.

(1992: 45)

Many other Canadian writers for adults have, at some point in their lives, written “at least one children’s book” (Sorfleet, 2003: 223), and was it not for the low priority that this sector has received, Canadian children’s literature would not have been “littered with one-and two-book writers who had abandoned the field” (Saltman, 1987: 3).

Besides the genres mentioned so far, another one deserves consideration: “The picture-book genre is the fastest-growing, most aggressively marketed, and most vital sector of the industry in Canada today” (ibidem: 19). But it has not been always so and,

was accorded this novel from the time of its publication in 1908 until the 1970s” (1992: 111). Similarly, Helen Siourbas commented that because Lucy Maud Montgomery “was viewed as a writer of children’s fiction, [she] fell out of favour with literary critics for almost thirty years after her death, a falling out that even the emergence of Canadian studies in the 1950s could not alleviate; she only re-entered the academic world around the centenary of her birth, thanks in large part to the emergence of studies in Canadian children’s literature” (2003: 133).

therefore, Judith Saltman refers to it as “the Cinderella success story of Canadian children’s literature” (1987: 19).

If nowadays illustrations in picture books attract the readers’ attention and excite their interest while supporting the text and helping convey meaning, in the past these books were poorly produced and had little visual or creative appeal. It was only from 1975 onwards that there was “an explosion in the range of visual style, energy of expression, and diversity of content and format”, in large part due to “the use of Hong Kong colour printing, which was cheaper than that in Canada” (ibidem).

In much the same way, André and Ann Gagnon allude to the “[n]oticeable advances [that] have been made in the quality of literary content and format, especially in the areas of picture books” (1988: foreword), and we may say that this increased productivity and success is due to talented writers and illustrators who have worked together to create a balance between the storytelling ability and artistic skills, something which is much more complex than one might imagine, as there are so many variables. In Egoff’s words,

... the picture book, which appears to be the coziest and most gentle of genres, actually produces the greatest social and aesthetic tensions in the whole field of children’s literature. Add yet another paradox: the genre which seems to be the simplest actually is the most complex, deploying two artforms, the pictorial and the literary, to engage the interest of two audiences (child and adult). Combine these attributes and it is undeniably arguable that the picture book represents the most diverse, the most didactic, and the most debated of all forms of present-day children’s literature.

(Egoff, 1981: 248)

Despite these challenges, Canada has indeed witnessed an artistic flowering of picture books, from the late 1970s onwards, in the form of alphabet books, counting books, nursery rhymes, and even in subgenres of realistic fiction, because, due to its versatility and wide scope, this genre also “... absorbed the messages and social concerns of the problem novels” (ibidem: 15).

Moreover, multicultural picture books have become a trend in Canada, and they have been more widely used as a classroom tool. They are like windows to the world, illustrating the way that different peoples and cultures can be perceived and, thus, shaping young readers’ views and attitudes towards themselves and others. Unfortunately, though, by the end of the 1980s, they were still said to suffer from many literary flaws: “The picture-books presenting new Canadian children adjusting to

contemporary multicultural urban life, although well-meaning, have a strong didactic bent, an overly earnest tone, and scant literary skill” (Saltman, 1987: 41).

In recent years, this area of Canadian publishing has increased in quality; it has “come of age” and “claimed its inheritance, adapting international trends in style and content to the Canadian experience” (ibidem: 49). One example that celebrates the rich and colourful heritage of the Canadian nation is the illustration of folktales drawn from First Nations’ cultures and traditions. In Egoff’s words, “Canadian Indian legends have lent themselves extremely well to illustration and there is as much variation among the illustrators of them as there is in the telling of the tales” (1967: 215).

In spite of the newness of the field as a separate category, much more was to be added on this issue. Given the goals of my dissertation, however, I need to limit the scope of my analysis, and focus, in the following section, on the topic that has just been touched upon in my previous paragraph. A discussion of other themes, such as fantasy with its supernatural and science fiction subsets, historical fiction, and poetry for and by children, among others, may be areas for further research and development, in the future.

Before moving on, I would like to conclude this section highlighting the fact that Canadian children’s literature is a relatively recent phenomenon. Its significant evolution did not occur before the seventies, but its growth in popularity with both young and adult readers, as well as its improvement in quality, are indicative of its coming of age.

In gist, as we have seen, literary activity in general has been influential in shaping a unified national identity: not only have books for Canadian adults contributed to construct a bounded and stable national culture, but the same has happened to its counterpart in children’s literature, because, as John Sorfleet explains

... children and Canadians are concerned with some of the same questions about identity: Who am I? What does it mean to be me? What is my relationship to others around me? What do I want to be? What do I value in ethical terms? Children and Canadians also share some of the same needs: the need for more independence from outside control, the need for self-sufficiency, the need to assert and prove one’s right to respect, the need to develop – and live by – a set of ideals. (...) these are concerns characteristic of Canadian writers for both children and adults, and are reflected in the literary techniques – plot, character, symbolism, structure, fairy-tale elements, etc. – that they employ.

(2003: 223)

Lately, this genre has shown some preoccupation regarding the challenge to address the imperatives of an increasing cultural diversity and to accommodate it within the expectations of national coherence. This has inevitably generated an opposition between the homogeneity implicit in such expectations and the heterogeneity inherent in Canadian society. But, as Sheila Egoff had already argued in 1967, this opposition may be overcome, because

... children's books keep alive a sense of nationality, but they also keep alive a sense of humanity. They describe their native land lovingly, but they also describe faraway lands where unknown brothers live. They understand the essential quality of their own race; but each of them is a messenger that goes beyond mountains and rivers, beyond the seas, to the very ends of the world in search for new friendships.

(1967: 262-3)⁸⁶

Let us, then, embark on this ocean of diversity and inclusion in pursuit of Aboriginal voices speaking to children and young adults.

⁸⁶ This quotation is part of Paul Hazard's *Books, Children and Men*.

CHAPTER FOUR

APPROACHING NATIVE CANADIAN FICTION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS

Native Indian and Inuit life and lore have (...) been important subjects of Canadian children's books.

(Saltman, 1987: 10)

Canadian adolescent literature (...) is a powerful tool for modelling how to actively, consciously choose to coexist in harmony and diversity, creating from that diversity a national vision of cultural plurality.

(Haun, 2003: 43)

In this chapter, I intend to concentrate on the theoretical background of Native Canadian fiction for children and young adults and I shall briefly be looking at ways in which this genre has developed since the 1900s.

First of all, bearing in mind the heated atmosphere created around issues of cultural and voice appropriation, I will attempt to present the several positions held on it within both the dominant and minority cultures. Even if simplistically, I wish to address a number of questions that are of paramount importance to contextualise the Native stories that I will analyse in the second and third parts of this dissertation. Some of these questions, which have been and will continue to be discussed, are clearly outlined by Gary Schmidt and Donald Hettinga in the following quotation:

Must a folktale be connected to its culture? If so, in what ways? May a tale that has universal applications be transplanted from one culture to another without loss? Does a teller from one culture have the ability or the right to tell a tale from another culture? What happens to a tale when it goes from an oral telling and an adult audience to a print version and an audience of children? Is it legitimate for a reteller to create variants to suit an audience of children?

(Schmidt and Hettinga, 1992: xi-xii)

An appropriation of Indigenous texts into dominant discursive frameworks reinforces the hegemonic *status quo*, something which inevitably generates a backlash effect or mere silence, because those texts do not conform to dominant paradigms of literary theory. We need, then, to remove ourselves from the spell of colonialism and break old patterns of thinking and acting, in order to treat Aboriginal peoples and their worldview fairly and honourably. Meanwhile, in this chapter, we will realise that there is a long road ahead before mutual acceptance can occur. For instance, I will account for the marginalisation that the First Nations' peoples have experienced in the publishing industry and then refer to the creation of Native publishing houses that publish and market texts by Aboriginal authors.

I will conclude this chapter explaining the reason why picture books deserve high consideration in the context of early Native Canadian children's literature and I will list some Aboriginal authors and picture books of reference from the 1900s to the present.

I. 4.1. A GLIMPSE OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS BY CANADIAN ABORIGINAL WRITERS – 1900 TO THE PRESENT

Much of what we learn about Indians, we learn as children.
(Francis, 1992: 144)

... I saw my daughter squirming in her seat. (...) [S]he started to cry and told me that the kids were making fun of her and no one wanted to play with her because she was Indian. I remember she said, "Mom, the other kids won't play with me. They think what they read in the book is the way Indians are." She said they were making fun of her, saying, "Oh, she's an Indian, she's gonna scalp us and peel our skin off like the Indians in the book." (...) I remembered reading books like this when I was her age, and I remembered my own pain.
(Seale and Slapin, 2006: 10)

As children, we learn from literature about human nature, ourselves and others, but how far can literature be trusted? Literature, as mentioned on page 5, may function as a mirror or a window onto the society that creates it, or, at least, as a construct of a possible social reality, but we must never forget that the vision it offers is an imaginative one, and thus not real, emerging from the perceptions and beliefs of a writer, as well as from the meaning the reader brings to and gains from a text. In other words, and as Clare Bradford puts it, quoting Ashcroft, "the written text is a social situation. That is to say, (...) meaning is achieved constitutively as a product of the dialogic situation of reading" (2007: 15).

We have seen, in the third chapter, how Canadian literature has been representing Canada to young people and that such representation has been changing over time, just as Canadian ideas, values and interests have. There is a noticeable presence of multicultural themes in the Canadian publishing market for children and young adults, but the truth is that this kind of literature in Canada is still dominated by a

white, middle-class majority, which tends to educate the child reader into adopting the beliefs, behaviours and traditions of the dominant culture, leaving out Canadians of other ethnic backgrounds.

Bearing in mind that large sections of Canadian society, such as the First Nations, feel excluded because they do not subscribe to middle-class values, we may ask, together with Cynthia Leitich Smith, ““Is there any place in children’s books for writing that reflects Native idiosyncrasies? Or rather, if diversity of voice matters at all, does it only apply to diversity that appeals to the mainstream audience?”” (Bradford, 2007: 46). Recently, First Nations’ literature for young readers has grown to be a substantial field, but we must ponder: has it been representing the values of the visible minority being written about, or the ones of Canada’s dominant culture? Which social group is doing the writing? As Doris Seale points out in her introduction to *A Broken Flute*, “[s]ince the 1980s, non-Native authors and illustrators of books for children have turned increasingly to Indian literatures, lives and histories as sources of material for their efforts” (2006: 4), but, according to this Santee Dakota and Cree educator, “the works in question are inaccurate, inauthentic, patronizing, full of lies, and altogether a huge insult to the people out of whose lives so much money is being made” (ibidem).

The process of cultural and voice appropriation is a phenomenon that may easily occur due to cross-cultural interaction. Throughout history, various groups have borrowed from one another’s cultures at different times and, thereby, influenced each other in various ways⁸⁷. In regard to Native peoples, Clare Bradford explains that...

... it would be a mistake to imagine Indigenous peoples as merely passive and powerless objects of colonial rule... (...). Mary Louise Pratt uses *transculturation*, a term borrowed from ethnography, to refer to the interpenetration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures in what she terms “the contact zone,” a social space where “disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination – like colonialism...”
(2007: 19)

Despite mutual influences, issues of appropriation⁸⁸, ownership/custodianship of stories, authenticity, representation and stereotyping have become a heated debate since the late 1980s in Canadian arts and writing circles (Bradford, 2007: 85; Hooks, 1992:

⁸⁷ On this issue, Jeannette Armstrong comments that similarities “run through [Native] literatures because of [their] commonalities of experience in terms of the colonization process, both in Canada and the U.S., and the contact with European cultures and its effect internally on [their] people’s traditions, and from the outside there has been an impact in the Non-Native community...” (Isernhagen, 1999: 136).

⁸⁸ This phenomenon has also been addressed as “theft”, “stealing”, “borrowing” or even “sharing”.

113-4; Keeshing-Tobias, 1992: 97-99; Lutz, 2002: 83-92; Nodelman, 2002: 108-112; Wolf and DePasquale, 2008: 90). But such practice of appropriating the voice and culture of another has existed throughout a fairly lengthy history⁸⁹ and it does not seem to be over yet, as Seale and Slapin noticed in 2006:

Appropriation of our lives and literatures is nothing new. Our bodies and bones continue to be displayed in museums all over the U.S. and Canada. For the last hundred years, many of our traditional stories have been turned into books for children without permission and with little if any respect given to their origins or sacred content.

(Seale and Slapin, 2006: 61)

Besides being epistemic in focus, this debate in form of claims and counter-claims is also ethical in nature. In fact, a growing number of Aboriginal academics and artists argue that those of the dominant culture are stealing from them, by placing themselves within another culture with the implied authority of someone on the inside, even though, most of the times, they are incapable of truthfully representing non-dominant cultural realities, thus silencing the Other and perpetuating stereotypes. On this subject, Janice Williamson, quoting bell hooks, remarks that:

Often this speech about the 'Other' annihilates, erases: 'No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. (...) I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way (...) in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Rewriting you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the centre of my talk.'

(Williamson, 1993: xxi)

Voice and cultural appropriation raise profound questions about authority, boundaries and appropriateness. Such reality must not be perceived or approached simplistically, because many contradictions and paradoxes remain to be dealt with: using the voice, image, sound, artefacts or customs of another may represent either reciprocal learning or silencing; sharing or exploitation, cooperation or unfair gain. According to Seal and Slapin (2006: 69), even if some artists and academics who do not

⁸⁹ Just as the dominant culture found it appealing and challenging to take on the voice and persona of other cultures, the same happened in relation to gender appropriation, as there is evidence of gender masquerades, that is, of the male appropriation of female voices since the earliest theatre performances around the world.

Furthermore, as far as oral literature is concerned, male authors have often adopted the voices of women to tell their stories and Maria Tatar, making use of Ludwig Richter's depiction of a *Spinnstube*, "reminds us that men too counted among peasant raconteurs, just as both adults and children figured in the audience" (2003: 111). Cf. the frontispiece to *Die Spinnstube* and to *German Popular Stories* which are in the appendix section of this dissertation (figs. 64 and 65).

belong to the Aboriginal groups may actually be able to acquire the necessary authority, knowledge and accuracy to represent others⁹⁰, “the voice of an insider still offers a unique perspective that is in many ways a rare gift to young [and adult generations alike]”. To illustrate this point, I would like to invoke the example of Paul Goble, a well-known and award-winning author and illustrator of children’s books, who is perfectly aware of the limitations inherent to racial differences, but who is confident in the success of his immersion in the social and cultural milieu of the Native Americans, when he convincingly argues that...

They have always seemed to accept me, perhaps because I have spent so much time trying to learn about and understand them. One cannot possibly write the stories of a culture without this kind of deep understanding (1992: 6).

I am sure I make mistakes, because I am not an Indian. But there are not too many Indians that feel that I make mistakes. If I got that feeling, I wouldn’t continue.

(ibidem: 11)

In order to avoid “the bland assumption that ‘we’ know what ‘they’ are like, and that ‘they’ are, after all, not very difficult to know”⁹¹ (Bradford, 2007: 226), real immersion into a culture different from one’s own is the best way to understand and experience life as an “Other”.

Nevertheless, a question remains: is it possible for us to free ourselves from our cultural baggage of preconceptions and treat Aboriginal characters and themes respectfully? I am not implying here that Native peoples are the only ones who are objective when writing about themselves. Clearly, the colonial relationship between the dominant culture and Aboriginal peoples is so profoundly institutionalised that the latter have often absorbed the white man’s bias or prejudices, as Clare Bradford points out:

It is not the case that texts by Indigenous writers always produce “better” representations of Indigenous peoples and cultures than those by non-Indigenous writers. For one thing, Indigenous people have frequently internalized colonial ideologies as they have been subjected to socializing practices that promote white superiority, so that texts by Indigenous people are not necessarily free of stereotypes and colonial mythologies.

(2007: 11)

There are many Indigenous writers, however, who have wrestled with racist constructions, based on the coloniser historical and cultural records, and fought the

⁹⁰ In Seale and Slapin’s words, if “the authors outside of a community do their homework” (2006: 69).

⁹¹ It is impossible to “know what ‘they’ are like”, because, despite generalisations, there is no true representation of Aboriginality, since there is not a uniform Native identity.

battle of words by challenging, responding and retaliating against these stereotypes and misrepresentations. Adopting the words of Salman Rushdie in Ashcroft *et al.* (1994: 33), those writers are “... writ[ing] back’ to the imperial ‘centre’”, positioning Native writing as resistance within the postcolonial intellectual tradition. They have been rewriting their own stories, instead of letting them be stolen, falsified/slandered or, ultimately, erased, and this because they realised that Native literature may be the best avenue through which Native humanity may be conveyed.

For non-Native artists and scholars, this clean up of colonial debris and shadows that have both haunted and inspired Aboriginal writing implies the destruction of beliefs, of old presuppositions and paradigms, and a new fresh approach to Canadian treatment of Native peoples. This must obviously include the correction of empirically unbalanced materials and, for that, the Native voice shall be heard and given due attention. Clare Bradford, the professor of literary studies in Australia being quoted so frequently in the current chapter of this dissertation, recognises that the retelling of traditional narratives should accord with practices of authorisation and custodianship of stories, because she believes that these...

... are best retold by those to whom they belong (...). [F]irst, (...) traditional narratives are woven into cultural values and beliefs and are apt to be reduced or distorted when they are treated in isolation from Indigenous traditions; secondly, (...) the history of colonization is littered with instances of appropriation of stories and the time for such practices is now over; and thirdly, (...) Indigenous people are best equipped to determine which of their stories should be retold and by whom, and which versions are authorized by individuals and communities.

(Bradford, 2007: 51)

But this issue of the appropriative process is complex and delicate, due to the various positions that exist within both the dominant and minority cultures: as we know, there are those who do not share Bradford’s view, refute the idea of cultural appropriation and interpret it as an attempt at censorship. They invoke the principle that there are no pure cultures and, consequently, if stories are the result of a fusion of cultures, they should not belong to any in particular; they are universal, crossing boundaries of culture, language and age. Gary D. Schmidt and Donald R. Hettinga succinctly summarise the different points of view:

Some argue that tales can never be taken from a culture, that a reteller from outside the parent culture can never be sure that the tale has been told as one from that culture would have told it. Others argue that tales are tales, that they are available to

a wide audience insofar as they are aesthetically pleasing. Still others contend that tales, in that they speak universally, are not limited to a single culture.
(Schmidt and Hettinga, 1992: xii)

This last position leaves open the tension of the universal and particular, discussed on pages 29 to 31 in this dissertation, and to which we inevitably return. It is true, as we have seen, that in a sense there are themes that connect us all, thus making stories “not limited to a single culture”. But does that mean that all texts should be read and assessed in light of a universal literary theory? Hasn’t the hegemony of the white world been conditioning literary production and reception?

Clare Bradford calls for a critical rethinking of the role of Indigenous texts which do not fit into the mainstream frameworks of history and literature, and she concludes that “[t]here is no reason why Indigenous texts produced within non-Western cultures should accord with the categories of Western literary traditions – why terms such as ‘fantasy,’ ‘realism,’ ‘prose,’ or ‘poetry’ should be regarded as holding universal meanings across cultures” (Bradford, 2007: 50).

Situating Indigenous texts within the Eurocentric frame of reference often proves to be problematic, because those texts need to be placed in culturally specific contexts⁹², which do not fit into dominant paradigms of literary theory.

As previously mentioned, because genres are sets of political, economic and social interactions among the individuals and groups with which they are associated, they control the communicational effect of texts, thus creating some uneasiness or tension when the system of signification is not recognisable to the reader. In other words, all texts contain certain characteristics that enable readers to derive meanings from them and when those formulae or conventions are challenged/transgressed, a text may fail to be perceived as coherent, as we can infer from Egoff’s biased comment below:

Whereas European tradition has trained the reader to expect a tale with a beginning, a middle, and an end, with all parts neatly tied together, the Indian legend is full of loose ends. It is a *mélange* of anecdotes rather than a single unified narrative, patterned after dreams rather than following a conscious development.
(Egoff, 1967: 18)

⁹² I think it is important to emphasise once again that genres are not universal, because they are rooted in the literacy practices of specific communities and times. Though prescriptive and historically based, genres do not exclude change, innovation and adaptation (innovation transforms tradition).

Native Canadian texts have frequently been described as minor, because they lack linearity of plot and blur the boundaries between genres. They have been regarded by the mainstream culture as muddled thinking, a mixture of different intents unconventionally disjointed, and have been read as childish and irrational. It is curious that many Aboriginal stories have been adapted for children, when they are actually much more than mere diversions for young readers, or in Lenore Keeshig-Tobias' words "Not Just Entertainment". On this issue, the Aboriginal writer just mentioned observes that:

... writers think nothing of "adapting" any story – excuse me, myth or legend – and always for children. (...) Well, these "myths and legends" are the stories we live by. Have, and will. You might not have noticed, but the People are dancing again, the People are growing out their hair. Mourning is over. Now we fight back.

(Keeshig-Tobias, 1992: 97)

From the excerpt just cited, we realise that although pre-given genres are inoperative in Indigenous societies, they continue to be the norm; that is, texts on Native peoples, written by Natives or non-Natives, have been forced into genre categorisations which perpetuate the valorisation of traditional aesthetic forms. This is well-explained by James Gellert while focusing on literature for Canadian children, when he remarks that texts are segmented into genre distinctions purely because of the influence of Eurocentric or white-based thinking:

Although literature on natives written by non-natives for Canadian children can be generally subdivided into legends and tales, historical fiction, and pure "realistic" fiction, all three genres draw heavily on the heritage of native myths, legends, songs, and tales. (...) [T]he picture of native life they [non-natives] present is dominated by eurocentric philosophical and artistic tenets.

(1992: 46-7)

And Gellert goes on to urge us to reconsider the importance of breaking away from the domination of Eurocentric constructs, at a time when the non-Native writer continues to maintain control over literary representations of Native life:

If the native reality is to be presented to children in Canada in a meaningful way, what is most essential is that the non-native writer free himself from the domination of European philosophical, religious and artistic influences. It should also be remembered that at present, there are relatively few native Canadians producing books about the natives of Canada; hence, the responsibility of the non-native is a large one.

(Ibidem: 53)

I think that nowadays it is not true anymore that “there are relatively few native Canadians” writing on their culture, because, as Lenore Keeshig-Tobias affirms in the passage above, “[n]ow [they] fight back”, and writing is the weapon⁹³ they use. The truth is perhaps that, as we have noticed, their voices have been silenced by outsiders who assume that they have the right to speak on the Natives’ behalf, believing that these cannot or are not doing so themselves. Furthermore, much of the work produced by writers who do not belong to dominant groups within society has gone without a readership and remains unpublished. This leads to a snowball effect because the absence of an audience has been caused by the fact that “... mainstream publishers have often been slow to publish Indigenous work” (Bradford, 2007: 49).

As a matter of fact, large Canadian publishing houses have been reluctant to publish the works by First Nations’ writers, while books *about* Native peoples written by non-Natives have been given priority. For instance, according to Greg Young-Ing in his article entitled “Aboriginal Peoples’ Estrangement: Marginalization in the Publishing Industry” (1993: 184-5), Lee Maracle, “the most highly published Aboriginal author in Canada today”, had all her books refused by many large presses, and could only publish them through “small independent presses, or the Aboriginal and feminist small presses”. On the other hand, as Young-Ing sees it, a novel that “mocks” Native life on a Reserve, by the recognised non-Native author W. P. Kinsella, was published with no trouble (*ibidem*).

An overwhelming number of Native people have faced considerable challenges to get their works published, produced and distributed in Canada. They have been consistently under-funded by art councils and, most of the times, when they are eligible to get support from non-Natives, they are only so insofar as they conform to the white supremacist mind-set⁹⁴.

Given all these constraints that major Canadian publishers have placed on First Nations’ writers and the recognition that their work is indispensable, there was a need for the creation of Native publishing houses that publish and market texts by Aboriginal authors. Theytus Books Press, established in 1980, was “the first publisher in Canada to

⁹³ Many Native peoples do not like the idea of writing as a weapon and they prefer, instead, to regard it as an instrument/a vehicle for them to continue the traditions of their ancestors. During my conversation with Jeannette Armstrong, she referred to it as a “tool of medicine”, because it helps in the process of healing and recovery that Native peoples are going through.

⁹⁴ In this way, Native writers are appealing to the Eurocentric beliefs of the elites making decisions and, thus, perpetuating stereotypes.

be under First Nation ownership and control” (Young-Ing, 1993: 186).⁹⁵ Unlike Theytus Books, Pemmican Publications, also founded in 1980, is a Métis publishing house which publishes both Native and non-Native authors, as Young-Ing clarifies: “However, Pemmican do publish non-Native writers whose works are related to Native issues” (ibidem: 185).

The creation of Native-controlled institutions has been a positive ray of hope for First Nations’ writers, because it has promoted and encouraged Native literature that is of “... the highest possible level and most authentic expression of the Aboriginal Voice...” (ibidem: 187). Clare Bradford also shares the excitement about the inclusion of Native writers within the publishing industry, which she believes has been crucial to the empowerment of Native people, generally speaking, and to the development of Native literature for children, in particular:

The emergence of publishing houses owned and operated by Indigenous peoples has encouraged Indigenous cultural production, and for many such publishers children’s texts have been a high priority. (...) In Canada, Theytus Books publishes children’s and general texts by First Nations authors, and Pemmican Publications, the only Métis publishing house, specializes in children’s texts, mainly by Métis and First Nations authors.

(Bradford, 2007: 47)

In this scenario, First Nations’ writers have had greater opportunity for expression. This does not mean, however, that writing replaced the oral tradition; rather, the former has been complementing and enabling the expansion of the latter, because a written text can reach further than orality, as previously stated. Furthermore, it should be noted that the style and themes that Native peoples have been exploring are defying the commonly-held mainstream assumptions that Aboriginal works need to remain locked into primitive ways of existence in order to be considered “authentically Indian”. Clare Bradford comments on this strong connectedness between the oral tradition and

⁹⁵ It is worthwhile noting that it is a division of The En’owkin Centre in Penticton, British Columbia, which also runs “the only First Nations writing School in North America” (Young-Ing, 1993: 186) – the En’owkin International School of Writing (EISW), a post-secondary institution for the education of First Nations’ students in the creative arts, founded by Jeannette Armstrong, the School’s director, and affiliated with the University of Victoria.

As I had the opportunity to notice when I was there in January 2008, both the publishing house and the school are entirely staffed by First Nations’ individuals. According to Hartmut Lutz (2002: 115-6), “[t]he establishment of En’Owkin School of International First Nations Writing, in the Okanagan Valley, Penticton, B.C., on September 12, 1989, the first Native directed and taught institution of this kind, marks the determination of Native authors to carry on the traditions of storytelling in our time, while using all available forms of modern literary techniques and word-processing technologies, without losing the referential universe of Native philosophy and tribal traditions...”

contemporary Native writing, specifically embodied in the form of picture books for children. In her own words...

The largest category of texts (...) comprises picture books and illustrated books dealing with contemporary characters and settings. (...)

Texts like these, which represent the identity formation of Indigenous children living in contemporary settings, offer a crucial corrective to the many texts by non-Indigenous authors and illustrators that persist in treating Indigenous cultures locked into ancient and unchanging modes of thought and behaviour, or that depict Indigenous adolescents within the shallow paradigms characteristic of “problem” or “issues” novels.

(Bradford, 2007: 48-9)

Doris Wolf and Paul DePasquale (2008: 89) also recognise the importance of picture books as a significant art form by Native authors for Native children: “As in the broader field of children’s literature, the picture book is the most common form of children’s books by Aboriginal authors.” According to these literary critics, its significance results from the adoption of a poetic tone and the absence of any violent imagery. Unlike adult fiction, which includes the injustice and inequities endured by many First Nations’ communities in contemporary Canada, the native book for children “notably avoids the portrayal of these realities” (ibidem: 91).

Picture books for children (...) notably lack the anger and siege mentality found in adult fiction. (...) In picture books, no matter the age, location, or specific circumstances of the Aboriginal child protagonist, the child’s interactions with both family and setting generally are offered as idyllic.

(Ibidem: 91-2).

Therefore, the darker themes that characterise Native literature for adults contrast harshly with the light and glorious colour that Aboriginal children’s books emanate. This refusal to engage with political issues, particularly those that involve delicate social conundrums and profound ethical dilemmas, is motivated by the fact that the Aboriginal child must grow up holistically – that is, physically, intellectually, emotionally, socially, culturally and spiritually – aided by the elders of his/her community. The anger and siege mentality found in adult fiction gives way to an integrated approach to life achieved only through concepts of family and community; in a word, through the nurturing sense of home⁹⁶.

⁹⁶ By home I mean much more than just the physical structure we label a house; this concept should be taken to include the interconnectedness of the Mother Earth and all its living things. As Wolf and DePasquale put it: “While images of home in mainstream texts often centre on the physical structure in which a child lives and learns lessons about the self, Aboriginal texts de-emphasize the importance of the

Perhaps because of this interconnectedness inherent to the First Nations' philosophy of life, when non-Native peoples write about the Native world, "[t]he trope of the Indigenous environmentalist appears in many children's texts..." (Bradford, 2007: 93).

As a matter of fact, ecological and environmental concerns take a central stage in the life of Native Canadian communities due to their reliance upon the land for social, economic, cultural and political survival, whereas the Non-Natives have no point of reference, as Judith Saltman makes clear: "Except for indigenous native legends, there is no substantial tradition in Canada of the magical and fabulous, no imaginative storehouse of themes and motifs drawn from folklore and mythology" (1987: 11). And she goes on to explain further that "Canadian native Indian lore, with its nature, myths of creation and culture heroes, and archetypal images of world flood or theft of light and fire, is uniquely dramatic and mysterious" (99), and thus appealing to a broad audience of children and adults alike, Native and Non-Native.

Only recently was such appreciation of Native lore translated into children's books, even though in the sixties, as stated⁹⁷, Aboriginal tales had begun to be collected and interpreted by both Native and non-Native writers. Among the latter, Judith Saltman highlights...

Robert Ayre's *Sketco the Raven* (1961), Christie Harris's *Once Upon a Totem* (1963), Kathleen Hill's *Glooscap and His Magic: Legends of the Wabanaki Indians* (1963), Dorothy Reid's *Tales of the Nanabozho* (1963), and Ronald Melzack's *The Day Tuk Became a Hunter and Other Eskimo Stories* (1967).

(1987: 10)

George Clutesi's *Son of Raven, Son of Deer: Fables of the Tse-Shaht People* (1967) is worthy of special notice according to Judith Saltman, because this humorous work is by one of the many First Nations' writers who persisted and managed to publish his traditional and life experience stories, "stressing the continuity and timelessness of native lore and experience" (ibidem).

I would like to emphasise, together with James H. Gellert, that "... it would be wrong to think that native writers were not visible before this (...) generation" (1992:

physical structure to show that the home necessarily includes both land and natural environment. (...) ... Aboriginal children's books posit that the well-being, happiness, and even the very survival of Aboriginal children, their families, and communities are inextricably tied to an access to both land and resources" (2008: 99).

⁹⁷ Cf. page 82 of this dissertation.

54). Using principles of the oral tradition, magic, fantasy and mystery were brought to life on the printed page much earlier, in 1911, the date when Emily Pauline Johnson published her *Legends of Vancouver*, a series of tales and short stories that has become a classic of Canadian children's literature. On this famous Mohawk poet, essayist and orator, also known as the Mohawk Princess or the personification of Pocahontas, the virtuous Native princess, Greg Young-Ing lets us know:

The late Mohawk author Pauline Johnson was the first aboriginal author to be published in Canada. Johnson published three books in the early 1900s and was one of the most prominent poets of her time. (...) However, the "Pauline Johnson phenomenon" was not to be a catalyst that would open up the Canadian publishing industry to Aboriginal literature. (...) After Pauline Johnson's untimely death in 1913, almost six decades were to pass before another Aboriginal author would be published in Canada.

(1993: 182)

McGill literature professor Cyrus Macmillan also deserves consideration in the context of early Native Canadian children's literature, due to his collection of tales which was recorded and edited to conform to a European artistic standard in *Canadian Wonder Tales*, 1918 and *Canadian Fairy Tales*, 1922.

Fortunately, nowadays there is a great number of Native authors, such as Jeannette Armstrong, George Littlechild, Maria Campbell, Thomas King, Tomson Highway and Ruby Slipperjack, to name but a few, who are part of a growing body of First Nations' writers that have not only been adding to the corpus of the Native literatures in general, and the children's genre in particular, but also questioning the entire category altogether. Clare Bradford remarks that...

Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* (1973), which is an autobiography, was a pioneer work, followed in the 1980s by Beatrice Culleton Mosionier's *In Search of April Raintree* (1983), Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash* (1985), and Ruby Slipperjack's *Honour the Sun* (1987), all of which trace the formation of Aboriginal subjects and have attracted both adolescent and adult readers.

(2007: 49)

Besides the works mentioned above, these very same authors wrote others specifically intended for children. Maria Campbell, for instance, wrote *People of the Buffalo* (1976); *Little Badger and the Fire Spirit* (1977) and *Riel's People* (1978). Jeannette Armstrong's *Enwhisteetkwa/Walk in Water* (1982); *Neekna and Chemai* (1984) and *Dancing With The Cranes* (2005) have delighted countless young readers. Thomas King has thrilled children with his well known *A Coyote Columbus Story*

(1992) and, among others, *Coyote Sings to the Moon* (1998), and George Littlechild with, for example, his *This Land Is My Land* (1993). Ruby Slipperkack's *Little Voice* (2001) and Tomson Highway's *Caribou Song* (2001); *Dragonfly Kites* (2002) and *Fox On The Ice* (2003) have also achieved an increasingly significant place in early childhood education⁹⁸. Though in slightly different ways, all these picture books reveal the continuity of ancient oral traditions in a contemporary context, which enables us to label their narrative forms as both old and new at the same time.

From the picture books cited above, I would like to take special note of the ones by Tomson Highway and comment briefly on a point that Clare Bradford makes, based on what Ashcroft calls a strategy of "interpolation"⁹⁹. Those children's books written in English and Cree by Highway are clear examples of interfusional literature, blending orality and the written word, as well as Native and Non-Native languages and elements, and contributing to what Ashcroft designates as "installation of difference" (Bradford, 2007: 55). Such notions of alterity result from linguistic difference "evident in the appearance of the Cree language, with its diacritical marks over individual letters and its syntactic contrasts with English", as well as from the fact that "Cree words enter the English narrative[s] in passages of direct speech", creating some interruptions, some holes in the texts that force the readers to seek "the meanings of unfamiliar words through cues of various kinds" (ibidem), and conveying that language is at the foundation of culture and identity¹⁰⁰.

It is pointless to argue that the dominant culture has had no impact on the literature of First Nations' people, and that over-arching influence can be seen in issues such as the adoption of the English language, as previously observed. However, using the English language may be problematic to Native storytellers, because its framework – that is, its values, principles and formats – may actually be quite different from the Native framework.

⁹⁸ I note these titles in passing because the study of some of them will be included in Part III of the present work. Besides, it is impossible in this short section to go further into a detailed analysis of the books which fall under the category of Native Canadian literature for children; therefore, it has to be limited to a list of some of the works by the Native authors mentioned, just as mere illustration.

⁹⁹ This term that Ashcroft proposed aimed at "signal[ing] the variety of ways through which Indigenous subjects exercise agency in textual production: 'This strategy involves the capacity to interpose, to intervene, to interject a wide range of counter-discursive tactics into the dominant discourse without asserting a unified anti-imperial intention, or a separate oppositional purity'" (Bradford, 2007: 54).

¹⁰⁰ I will come back to Highway's books in Part III to analyse them more thoroughly. Meanwhile, I believe it is important to remark that this Cree author writes in English out of necessity, because English enables him to reach a much wider audience, since many of his readers, Native and Non-Native, do not speak Cree (either because it is not their language or because they do not know their native tongue, as a consequence of the Residential School system, which forbade its use).

The fact that Native peoples have been using the written word and, what is more, in the language of the coloniser, should be perceived as an imposition that has been forced on them; nonetheless, they have been able to promote resistance, survivance, cultural continuance and renewal through it.

Concerning the use of English by Canadian Aboriginal writers, Emma LaRocque writes, 'Colonization works itself out in unpredictable ways. The fact is that English is the new Native language, literally and politically. English is the common language of Aboriginal peoples. It is English that is serving to raise the political consciousness in our community; it is English that is serving to de-colonize and so unite Aboriginal peoples...'

(Bradford, 2007: 54)

To produce literature in the language of the colonisers is obviously an ambiguous and political act. Emma LaRocque elaborates on this issue, arguing that "[l]iterature is political in that its linguistic and ideological transmission is defined by those in power" (1993: xvi). Therefore, the adoption of the English language by Native authors may give the appearance that they have assimilated into the mainstream culture, whereas, in fact, the colonised nations may be writing against it; in other words, it may be seen as a concession/submission and/or, at the same time, as subversion. Beth Brant (1994: 51) suggests even another perspective on its use – as a language of mutual respect and understanding: "Because the language of the enemy was a weapon used to perpetuate racism and hate, I want to forge it in a new way, as a weapon of love".

But the use of the English language may not always be an easy way for First Nations' authors to communicate effectively their ideas and insights, as noted. Taking once again Beth Brant's words as an example, we come to realise her difficulties in expressing her Native view of the world while writing in English, when she remarks: "When I sit in front of my typewriter, there are times I literally cannot find the words that will describe what I want to say. And this is because the words I 'hear', are Mohawk words" (ibidem).

Perhaps due to translation difficulties, since some Native concepts do not have corresponding words in English¹⁰¹, sometimes some First Nations' writers proceed as Jeannette Armstrong does, changing English to reflect their own cultural reality: "I listen to sounds that words make in English and try to find the sounds that will move the

¹⁰¹ Jeannette Armstrong also adds another relevant aspect to this, which is the fact that, even if the words to be translated do exist, cultural realities may not, and often do not, coincide: "In the Okanagan language, perception of the way reality occurs is very different from that solicited by the English language" (1998: 191).

image making, whether in poetry or prose, closer to the Okanagan reality” (1998b: 192). She goes on to describe her relationship with the dominant language by saying that “[her] writing in English is a continuous battle against the rigidity in English, and [that she] revel[s] in the discoveries [she] make[s] in constructing new ways to circumvent such invasive imperialism upon [her] tongue” (ibidem: 194).

Instead of being one-sided and monologic, communication is expected to be dialogic, or, to borrow from Bradford’s words...

... the process of interpolation allows dialogue between languages, concepts, and ideologies in postcolonial texts, [and] the act of reading also involves dialogue between readers and texts. (...) For readers culturally distant from the world of the text, as is the case for many non-Indigenous readers of Indigenous texts, language constructs difference between cultures even as it affords a means of reaching across this distance.

(2007: 54)

Cross-cultural dialogues may undoubtedly help to bring to the fore those differences between cultures and, in turn, challenge “the invasive imperialism” that Jeannette Armstrong refers to above, building bridges of understanding. That is at the core of any definition of Native Literature for Children and Young Adults, because “[a] basic criterion of good children’s literature is that it is free of stereotypes, but stereotypes abound in children’s books about American [and Canadian] Indian peoples” (Seale and Slapin, 2006: 67).

The time has come for opening the way to dialogue between both white and Native communities; otherwise, the latter will continue to be wrapped in stereotypes and expected to remain pre-Columbian. There are clear political and cultural differences between those two groups, but the exaggeration of those differences puts all Native readers, and the youngest in particular, in an untenable position, as Monica’s heartrending real story depicts:

I really don’t like the fake cartoon and illustration in Indian books that are here in the school library. (...) It makes me mad when children make fun of my culture. (...) When the children grow up I don’t want them to think that Indians put feathers in their hair and dance around the fire. We don’t do that. And I don’t think it is right for the kids to look at the silly things they put in those silly books. One day I saw a kid running around with a feather in their hair and putting their hand to their mouths and making weird noises and I cried when that happened. So what I want you to do is put those books away and learn about our real history.

(Seale and Slapin, 2006: 16)

Many books presenting endless layers of stereotypes and prejudices are still easily found on library bookshelves. They portray Aboriginals as befeathered savages or noble savages, a portrayal which disturbs the Natives' cultural integrity, damages their personal self-esteem and cements their isolation and marginalisation. Besides, derogatory stereotypes affect not only Aboriginal children, but they impact negatively on *all* children in general, especially those who have no direct contact with Native people and, thus, further idealise and romanticise that culture.

Generalisations about a uniform Aboriginal identity must be challenged, because in spite of some of their shared cultural attributes and the similarities which resulted from their colonial experience, First Nations' peoples are very different from each other, in terms of lifestyles, world views, political and social organisation, language, art and, among others, the enormous diversity of ceremonies. Doris Seale and Beverly Slapin revisit the past to critically examine how generalisations have affected children's literature:

Historically, children's literature has offered too many "superethnic" Native characters, focusing on what's commonly perceived as different, perhaps "exotic." In doing so, we authors have failed to portray the immense diversity of Native peoples, underestimated young readers, and, at the very least, broken the "magic" of fiction by flattening three-dimensional characters into paper dolls speaking encyclopedia-ese.

(Seale and Slapin, 2006: 19)

In seeking the one voice that speaks for all, we are ignoring the fact that First Nations' peoples have their own distinct voices and identities, which are influenced by different cultural upbringings, and which are not static, because what might have been considered common characteristics of a certain Aboriginal people some years ago may not hold true in the present time¹⁰².

Joe Hayes warns us against this type of generalisations that entrap Native individuals in categories such as the "exotic", and he reminds us of our common humanity, our sharing of a single world.

Of course all stereotypes, positive or negative, hide the truth that people are all individuals, not generalizations. They also prevent us from seeing that we're all alike in our fundamental humanity, which is the great truth that is a worthwhile undertaking. Our enjoyment of tales from other cultures enables us to see how,

¹⁰² This was discussed in my encounter with Jeannette Armstrong at the En'owkin Centre, in Penticton, on January 28, 2008. As we will notice in Part II of this dissertation, she is totally against generalisations about Native peoples and she is eager to mark the difference and to identify herself as Okanagan, rather than Native, emphasising her individuality.

despite the differences, we are like all other people. If we weren't we wouldn't be able to enjoy their stories.

(Hayes, 1992: 125)

All different – all equal: this is the motto with which I would like to conclude this chapter and which I believe should be part of any book for children. Multicultural stories can be a positive and meaningful contribution to society because they prepare young readers for living in a more pluralistic, intertwined international world. Stories simply have that capacity, because they are living and dynamic, as Sanfield claims:

Stories are living things that can have always moved freely from one culture to another. (...) Part of the artist's job is to take the unique and make it universal so that we can break down the barriers that seem to separate us, barriers of race, color, language, class, and religion, showing our children and ourselves that we're all in this together.

(Sanfield, 1992: 73)

Let us, then, **embrace our differences** and similarities through selected Native Canadian fiction for children and young adults, in order to make connections and celebrate the intricate web of life. Before that, in the second part of this dissertation, we need to know Jeannette Armstrong, the author of the children's books that will deserve my greatest attention, because her personal experience as an Okanagan woman surely influences her writings.

CHAPTER FIVE

JEANNETTE ARMSTRONG, A PARADIGM AND VOICE OF THE OKANAGAN COMMUNITY



... I am the dreamer
the choice maker
the word speaker
I speak in a language of words
formed of the actions of the past
words that become the sharing
the collective knowing
the links that become a people
the dreaming that becomes a history
the calling forth of voices
the sending forward of memory
I am the weaver of memory thread
twining past to future
I am the artist
the storyteller
the singer
(...)
(Armstrong, 1998a: 232)

Fig. 4. Jeannette Armstrong (Williamson, 1993: 3).

II. 5.1. BIOBIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Jeannette Armstrong is a grand-niece of Hamishama [Mourning Dove], the first female Native novelist in North America. As a poet, novelist, musician, historian, Native activist and teacher, Armstrong has become one of the most influential indigenous writers in North America.

(Armstrong, 1995, Autumn: 7)

When I conceived my PhD project, I entitled this part of the dissertation “Jeannette Armstrong as a Paradigm and Voice of Pan-Indianism” because, from my readings, I had learned that one of the goals of this Okanagan writer “is to educate young people about Native culture and history” (Witalec and Bruchac, 1995: 35) or, as she herself stated using the young persona of Tom Kelasket in the prologue to *Slash*, a novel written in the form of a fictional autobiography¹⁰³, “... I am an Indian person. As Indian people, we each stand at a pivot point at this time in history. We each have the burden of individually deciding for our descendents how their world shall be affected and what shall be their heritage” (Armstrong, 1996a: 13). So too, I believed, did Armstrong stand as a paradigm to speak on behalf of the First Nations, and I associated this with Pan-Indianism, because, bearing in mind Jill Maynard’s definition of this concept, I could notice in her speech “a sense of shared Indian identity that transcended tribal boundaries” (1996: 346).

However, as soon as I met this Okanagan writer in person, I was made aware of the fallacy in my thought. Jeannette Armstrong, an advocate of the plurality of voices within and outside of her community¹⁰⁴, was peremptory in warning me against

¹⁰³ I will refer to the structure of this novel as a Native *bildungsroman* later on, during its literary analysis that will take place in the following Part. For now, I just mean to underline the idea of the “Indian person” that she refers to, a person that cannot be fully understood without the knowledge of the cultural, historical and philosophical background that it springs from.

¹⁰⁴ As far as diversity of voices within community is concerned, in an article entitled “Sharing One Skin: Okanagan Community”, which was presented by Armstrong in the Sixth Annual Colloquium, “Whole

generalisations, much in the same way as when, after having confessed in an interview with Janice Williamson that she preferred the term Indian to Native¹⁰⁵, she promptly added:

There is no such thing as an Indian person – either you're Okanagan or you're Shuswap, Mohawk, Cree, or whatever. (...) If I were being fully truthful, honest, I would say I'm Okanagan. I'm not Indian. I'm not Native. I'm not whatever you classify me as. I'm Okanagan. That's a political and cultural definition of who I am, a geographical definition, and also a spiritual definition for myself of who I am because that's where my philosophy and my world-view comes from. That would be the most correct way of defining it.

(Williamson, 1993: 11)

Actually, Jeannette Armstrong, born in 1948 on the Okanagan reserve in Penticton, British Columbia, claims her identity as an Okanagan to be at the very core of her foundations as a writer. In the opening paragraph of her essay entitled "Land Speaking", she proposes to "discuss the intensity of [her] experience as an Okanagan who is indigenous to the land [she] lives on and how that experience permeates [her]

System Change: Building Community", sponsored by the California Staff Development Council in cooperation with the California Department of Education, in 1997, there is a whole section under the heading "Honoring Diversity in Community: Including All Voices" (Armstrong, April 1998: 5) that addresses this issue. It is interesting to notice that she wrote and published another article with the same title, though its content differs (cf. Armstrong, 1996b).

Among the many other documents/books which attest to Armstrong's support of a plurality of voices, I would like to emphasize the anthology *Looking at the Words of Our People*, in which, as its editor, she confesses her discomfort with being credited as an authority on First Nations Literature, because she believes that "... First Nations cultures (...) have unique sensibilities which shape the voices coming forward into written English Literature" (1993: 7). Equally important are the quotes that follow: "The program that I initiated at the Enowkin International School of Writing, was developed to find real mechanisms to support diversity of language, diversity of original languages, of different languages..." (Smyth, 2000: 121-2); "[e]very culture is important, every culture has a right to be, and every culture must stand with other cultures to support itself" (ibidem: 127); "Diversity of voice (...) generates what is necessary for creativity to occur, and something new is added to the human story" (Kydd, November 1999: 11) and "... we have a responsibility to diversity, especially in this country. We have a responsibility not only to talk about diversity but to support, to protect, and to ensure ongoing diversity. One of the great lessons of survival in ecosystems is that diversity is essential or collapse is imminent" (Smyth, 2000: 117).

¹⁰⁵ Even though Jeannette Armstrong does not like to be lumped into one such category either, she is aware that "there needs to be some word which describes [them] in a generic sense, and so [she] prefer[s] *Indian*, mainly because (...) [it] com[es] from *in deo*, meaning 'in with God'" (Williamson, 1993: 11). From her point of view, this recognition does not imply the phenomenon of Pan-Indianism, because, as she made clear during our conversation, "I always work to try to dispel the idea of Pan-Indianism. I've worked against it, resisted it, because Pan-Indianism basically is saying that there is no such thing as an Okanagan culture or a Mohawk people's culture or separate cultures..." (see appendix, page 342). Paradoxically, it should be noted that in an interview with Isernhagen (1999: 136-7), she consents to the idea of Pan-Indian aspects to postcontact history in relation to literature, because she recognises that there are striking similarities of literary themes and concerns among indigenous peoples from countries that have been colonised by the English.

writing. It is [her] conviction that [the] Okanagan¹⁰⁶ [language] (...) constitutes the most significant influence on [her] writing in English” (Armstrong, 1998b: 175). It is from this positioning that Jeannette Armstrong is able to draw inspiration and create her works, because she does not really exist without her land, as she explains:

I’m the minerals that make up my body. I’m the food that grows from the land. I’m the water that I drink and the air that I breathe. That’s who I am in a fundamental sense.

If I look at myself inside my skin, what I think of as the “I”, the individual self, really isn’t there. It’s nonexistent. I really am earth. It’s simply that this skin divides me from the air which I am. If you took that air away from me, I would collapse in a second. (...) So in the sense of being present here physically, I am Okanagan. I am my land, the air, the water, everything around me and without that I do not exist.

(Armstrong, April 1998: 2)

The same philosophical view was shared with me when she observed that, from inside her perspective, if she was living in Miami, Florida, she would certainly not be Okanagan – even if she spoke and thought in this language – because “being Okanagan isn’t about the political identity. It’s about the connection to a community and the land [...] [a]nd that connection can’t be transported anywhere...” (extract from my interview; see pages 350-1 in the appendix). This view had also been previously expressed in a dialogue between the Okanagan author and Myron Kellner-Rogers: “Community and land to us is inseparable. We could not be Okanagans in Florida. We’re Okanagans *because* our land is a certain way and because we do things in a certain way” (Sparks, April 1998: 8).

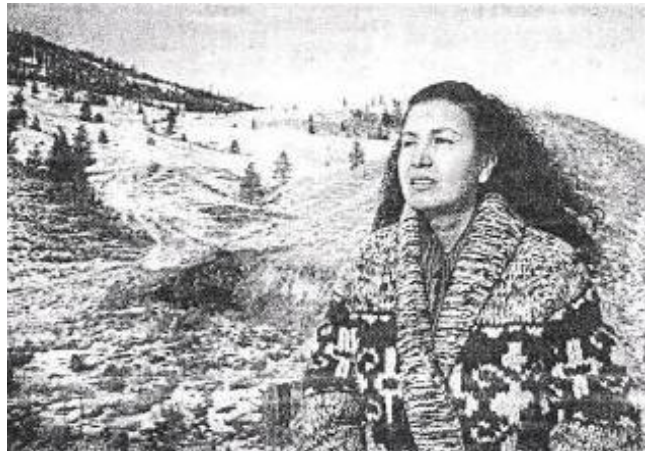


Fig. 5. Jeannette Armstrong in a photo by Lawrence Gus (Thorpe, 1996: 82).

Her enduring connection to her homeland and culture has always been her inspiration as an artist and activist. She continually reiterates her strong faith in the Okanagan traditional values and beliefs, and demonstrates longstanding resistance to the mainstream culture, even if, at some point in the past, she had pondered the possibility of assimilation:

¹⁰⁶ The Okanagan, Armstrong’s original language, is one of the Salishan languages and it is called N’silxchn by the community’s speakers (Armstrong, 1998b: 175).

In the past, I sometimes thought, well maybe it would be better if we all became Canadianized; maybe if we didn't have reservations, people would assimilate into the greater society and there wouldn't be those social problems. Then I began to move around to the cities. I could see that we would remain second-class citizens as long as our skins are brown. (...) I'm a first-class Indian. I am from this land.

(Freeman, 1988: 36-7)

The land, thus, embodies not only ancestral lineage, but also spiritual/healing power, where one can look for rootedness and a sense of belonging. Given the sacredness of the land, Armstrong's opposition to a modern progress that threatens and destroys communities of life is noticeable in her following remark:

When I look at our land I see something different than a commodity to build a house on or to use to cut trees off of or whatever. It's a living reality that's a part of us, and when our land is violated, it's like raping us, in a worse way than physically; it's like emotional, mental, spiritual rape, and it makes Indian people irrational in their actions when that happens.

(Freeman, 1988: 38)

The settlement of Jeannette Armstrong's family in the Okanagan territory took place during her grandmother's early adult years (Armstrong, 2004: 10). Her grandparents are said to have been influential in her personal and professional life, because they enabled her to grow up with the traditions, language, culture and religion of the Okanagan community. She claims to "have been fortunate in having experienced all that which [her] ancestors learned, shared and practised" (Armstrong, 2004: 10-1) and she recalls, in particular, her grandmother, Christine Armstrong, as a great storyteller, to the extent that, even nowadays, whenever Jeannette tells one of her stories, she "see[s] her gestures and hear[s] her voice. [She] can see her body, her face. She's the one talking and [Jeannette is] simply listening and reiterating what she's saying" (Armstrong, 1995, Autumn: 7).

Besides memories of a caring grandmother, Jeannette Armstrong remembers Christine as a vibrant and active force in the development of her identity, because she was the one who forbade her to speak English when she visited her and who refused to go or send her children and grandchildren to residential schools.

... my family is a resistance family and it was because of the severe resistance by my grandmother who in a very militant way defended our right to be who we are as Okanagans and our right to be educated by our own people, by our own Elders – that is not to be taken to residential school. I think that is one of the principal reasons why I am very strong and very clear in terms of defense of culture and the right for people to sustain and regain and recover.

(Webb, October 20, 1995: 10)

So, Jeannette attended the band school in the village, where “[e]ducation was largely informal, knowledge being passed on from the elders through oral history, explanation and counselling” (Webber and the En’owkin Centre, 1990: 80)¹⁰⁷. But if the eldest were the most treasured teachers, all the other relatives also partook in this teaching of children, “[m]others, fathers, older siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents were all seen as teachers, modelling good practice” (Armstrong, September/October 2004: 10).

According to the Okanagan author, she was lucky to have been born and raised in a traditional family, very prominent in the community, who was often called on to host sacred ceremonies. In “Sharing One Skin” (1998: 461), she describes her parents’ background, because it helped to shape her identity: on her mother’s side, she was descended from river Indians, who were “in charge of the fisheries in all of the northern parts of the Columbia River system in [their] territories”, while her father’s people were hunters, known as mountain people. She gives us some more details on her family, when she points out the long line of storytellers, as well as the responsibility of leadership on her maternal side, whereas her father’s side had the authority, “though not in a dictatorial sense”, as keepers of ceremonies, that is, as “medicine people” (Isernhagen, 1999: 163). Even today, in her own words, “[m]y relatives still celebrate the first salmon rites, though, as a child, I saw the last salmon harvests on the Okanagan River in our territory. We still pray for the return of the



Fig. 6. Jeannette Armstrong’s mother, Lilly, shows Jeannette, age 14, and friend, Marlene Squakin, how to slice thin fillets so the fish will dry quickly (Armstrong, 1998c: 186).

¹⁰⁷ Reference to the lack of formal education is also found in her article entitled “Natural Knowing: Schooling and sharing the Okanagan way” (September/October 2004: 10), where she asserts: “In my Okanagan ancestral system, education occurred as a natural part of family and community in everyday living. Unlike today, education was not segregated into institutions of schooling separate from the family”. The same is found in *We Get Our Living Like Milk From the Land*: “The syilx had no schools, ...” (Maracle *et al*, 1993: 16).

salmon, even while the loss to our people creates the deepest possible grief” (Armstrong, 1998c: 182).

We may say, then, that Jeannette’s education, anchored in the community’s knowledge, contrasted markedly with that of the children who were forced to attend residential schools, and greatly influenced her thought process and artistic vision, as she makes clear when she once again emphasises:

My Indigeneity “places” me, in an ecologically particular knowledge or ethos and my “stories” sustain, not only the land, but its people. I argue that Indigeneity and the “literature” arising from an Indigenous “place” must reflect connection to and knowledge of the land and its requirements for the human to exist in health and that “Indigeneity” has to do with “place” in that particular way.

(Armstrong, 2007: 33)

Children attending residential schools became isolated from their “place”, their home village and, consequently, from the teachings of their own relatives, which resulted in great difficulty for them to retain their cultural practices. That is the reason why Jeannette shows pessimism while looking at the future of her young people, but she does not surrender and exhorts them to be warriors in the present day¹⁰⁸, “... promoting the thinking that needs to be promoted and putting some healing back into [their] communities and into [their] lives, as individuals and as Indian Nations¹⁰⁹” (Armstrong, 1989: 10). She argues that everyone is responsible for “what [they] reflect, what [they] are and what [they] stand for”, because they affect the people with whom they come into contact, and in a snowball effect, those people affect others around them (ibidem: 8).

Jeannette Armstrong is aware of that effect that she has had as a speaker, a teacher and writer to reach out to the masses, but, even more than that, she feels the need to write for her own benefit, because, as she confesses, it is therapeutic for her:

The process of writing as a Native person has been a healing one for me because I’ve uncovered the fact that I’m not a savage, not dirty and ugly and not less because I have brown skin, or a Native philosophy. In fact, I’ve found that my philosophy, and my people’s philosophy, of harmony, cooperation, and healing has a lot more relevance today in terms of humanity and the whole world (...) Everyday I wake up and think, ‘God, I’m glad I’m Indian!’

(Williamson, 1993: 10)

¹⁰⁸ That is part of the title of Jeannette Armstrong’s keynote address at the National Aboriginal Youth Conference, convened in Ottawa, on February 11, 1989: “Aboriginal Youth: Warriors in the Present Day”.

¹⁰⁹ I would say that this is illustrative of pan-Indianism, as previously observed.

Although Richard Cooper (1986: 22) tells us that Jeannette's fondness for the written word started at the early age of fifteen, when a local paper published a poem she wrote on John F. Kennedy¹¹⁰, the Okanagan author explains that she "never really tried to be a writer. [She] always thought of [her]self as an artist. Later [she] realized that writing is a powerful tool for [her] as a Native person and a Native woman" (Freeman, March-April 1988: 37).

Actually, in her interview with Hartwig Isernhagen (1999: 165), Jeannette Armstrong describes herself as a visual artist and claims visual arts, such as painting and sculpture, to have been her first love and obsession. However, because they were very much time-consuming, she had to make a choice after leaving university¹¹¹, since she wanted more than that, and writing came to be the alternative, as it was more compatible with other activities, because, as she says, "... it's more transportable. (...) I can pack a notebook with me, and I can create and write on a plane or on a bus or in my hotel room and wherever, while I'm doing all those other things" (ibidem). What is more, her writing in general, and her poetry in particular, may be said to hold that connection with the visual arts, because "she paints pictures with a more manageable medium – words" (Renaud, February 2006: 3).

But, even if writing is compatible with other activities, it can also turn to be extremely absorbing, causing one to lose the social networks and family ties. Jeannette Armstrong experienced such addiction while she was writing *Slash*, a novel that took her four years till its publication in 1985, as she confesses in her conversation with Hartmut Lutz:

... I remember writing, and writing, and writing, and writing. And the guy I was living with at that time was a pretty understanding person but I remember he wanted to take me away out of town (...) to Vancouver. There was this play in Vancouver. (...) That sounded fine to me. But I was writing, and I was writing, and I was writing, and I was writing, and I wrote, and wrote, and wrote, and wrote, and wrote. (...) And there was no way that I was going to leave it... (...) And I'd been writing straight for about 28 hours. I didn't sleep, and I didn't eat. I was a mess.

(Lutz, 1991: 24)

Jeannette Armstrong admits that her total devotion to writing and dedication to the improvement of her community may have contributed to her divorce and still is a

¹¹⁰ Jeannette refers to it as her "first worst piece of poetry in the world" (Williamson, 1993: 22).

¹¹¹ Besides the traditional education she received from her Okanagan community, Jeannette also attended mainstream schooling: she earned a Diploma of Fine Arts from Okanagan College and a degree from the University of Victoria, in 1978 (<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/artistpages/armstrongJeannette.php>).

matter of discussion with her current partner, though nowadays she tries hard to be present to her family. In her words:

I was divorced for a number of years and raised my two children as a single parent for many years. My first husband died, then a few years ago I remarried. And I find that in the context of my work the idea of, maybe it's not just in writing, the idea of artistic voice and the work that is involved in that which takes me away from the home, has been a factor and I think it is a factor for indigenous women. That continues to be there and continues to be an obstacle. I'm not saying I haven't overcome it but it has been a factor that I have had really serious discussions about with my partner.

(Webb, October 20, 1995: 10)

And she reinforces the same idea of time management and of finding creative ways not to have to deprive her family or her own individual life of anything. In order to avoid sacrifices, she has established a pyramid of priorities in which her family is at the peak, together with her work in her community: "I have agreed that my family is my priority and the lifestyle I live in my community is a priority. (...) I do a lot of traveling, but I do a lot of quality living and playing with my family and a lot of quality teaching and maintain my presence in my family" (Webb, October 20, 1995: 12).

Bearing in mind her philosophy of life, which makes her at one with her land, it is easy to understand that she has an extended family¹¹², besides the biological one, composed of her community members, namely her students, whom, metaphorically speaking, are her "grandchildren" listening to the stories of life from a very special and committed teacher:

As busy as she is, Armstrong makes sure she has time for her family. She and her husband of 27 years enjoy spending much of their vacation time with their



Fig. 7. "A recipient of the prestigious Buffett Award for Indigenous Leadership, Jeannette Armstrong teaches Okanagan language classes at the En'owkin Centre" (Renaud, February 2006: 3).

¹¹² On this issue, Jeannette Armstrong states that "I see that in sustainable societies, extended family and community are inseparable.

The Okanagan word we have for *extended family* is translated as 'sharing one skin'. The concept refers to blood ties within community and the instinct to protect our individual selves extended to all who share the same skin" (Armstrong, 1996b: 469).

grandchildren; between them, they have eleven. In a sense, Armstrong is “grandmother” to many more.

(Renaud, February 2006: 3)

Jeannette Armstrong is the founder and executive director of the En’owkin School of International Writing, which, as aforementioned, is an accredited post-secondary centre affiliated with the University of Victoria, but managed and operated exclusively by and for Native individuals. According to its director, the name of this centre comes from the high Okanagan language and it “means something like a group challenge to get the best possible answer” (Williamson, 1993: 7). In other words, it is a principle passed on by the elders of the community, which refers to a consensus-making process¹¹³. To reach consensus, everyone is engaged in a dialogue; it is like a negotiated process where everyone contributes their ideas freely, because the En’owkin process “... presumes we all have minds, that we all have good thinking, that we all have the best intentions but we do not know what everybody else is thinking. If we know [it], that can help us make the best decisions because we care about each other” (Thorpe, 1996: 86).

Such dialogue implies not only mutual cooperation and assistance, in a give-and-take exchange, but it also aims at a transversality of knowledge and skills, where there is integration of different disciplinary approaches, instead of the compartmentalised education that Jeannette Armstrong accuses the dominant society of supporting (Sparks, April 1998: 9). This whole philosophy is developed when she explains:

At En’owkin, (...) we must find ways to integrate academic and practical skills into a curriculum, demonstrating principles of collaboration, sharing, and sustainable land use. It means that we must strive to permeate all learning with opportunities for family and community to create lasting systems. (...) It means that elders, parents and community members are continually engaged in all aspects of programmes and projects.

(Armstrong, September/October 2004: 11)

That is actually being practised successfully on the Okanagan Indian band that I visited in Vernon, B.C., in 2008. Right from the nursery and kindergarten levels, up to primary classes, the elders play a very active role in the children’s education process. They were actually there, at school, telling stories to little boys and girls, entertaining them, teaching them, passing down their wisdom and life’s knowledge to the younger

¹¹³ A literal translation of this concept is “to drop something [an idea, for instance, like a drop of water] through the top of the head into the mind or brain [and absorbing it by osmosis]” (Williamson, 1993: 7).

generations, while, at the same time, feeling useful, instead of being forced into nursing homes, neglected, and considered a burden to both their families and community.

Once again, taking Jeannette's words into consideration, everyone matters; we are all connected and, thus, we all affect one another:

I know that being Okanagan helps me have the capacity to bond with everything and every person I encounter. I try always to personalize everything. I try not to be "objective" about anything. Everything becomes valuable to me in that way. I try where I can to engage others in the same way. I fear those who are unemotional, and I solicit emotional response whenever I can. My community and my family and therefore my land has increased greatly. I do not stand silently by. I stand with you against the disorder.

(Armstrong, 1996b: 470)

Besides teaching, it is through her activism and her writing that Jeannette Armstrong stands with her people against the disorder. She has spoken across Canada and internationally on a number of topics, namely on indigenous, environmental, feminist and literary issues. Among the various international councils and working groups that she has participated in, we may highlight the following ones: "[i]n 1994 she was a member of the envoy sent by the Continental Coordinating Commission of Indigenous Nations and Organizations to Chiapas, Mexico"; she was also "... one of two Canadians appointed to the North American arm of the Council of Listeners" and, in Canada, "... she was one of seven indigenous judges appointed to the First Nations Court of Justice". In 2006, she was "organizing information on a variety of issues, such as the Human Genome Diversity Project", aiming at "find[ing], collect[ing], replicat[ing] and stor[ing] living cells of indigenous peoples, to study their novel genetic features like resistances to cancer in order to create genetic therapy techniques" (Renaud, February 2006: 3).

Jeannette Armstrong has actually had the opportunity to address conferences and assemblies on a wide range of topics, as seen, and those topics are also an indispensable part covered in her books. Author of a quite diverse writing, she has produced three children's books (*Enwhisteetkwa/Walk in Water* in 1982; *Neekna and Chemai* in 1984 and *Dancing with the Cranes* in 2005)¹¹⁴; two novels, *Slash* (1985) and *Whispering in Shadows* (2000); a collection of poetry entitled *Breath Tracks* (1991); a collaboration with Native architect Douglas Cardinal on the book *Native Creative Process* (1991);

¹¹⁴ These books are now part of the curriculum in a number of schools in B.C. *Neekna and Chemai* went on to win the Children's Book Centre "Our Choice" Award (<http://www.ubcic.bc.ca/files/PDF/leon.pdf>).

video scripts and productions of poetry/music collaborations¹¹⁵ and numerous other poems, articles, essays and oratory in books and anthologies across North America.

Jeannette's excellence in art has been recognised through awards, such as the Mungo Martin Award in 1974; the Helen Pitt Memorial Award in 1978 and, among others, "the prestigious \$25,000 Buffet Award for Indigenous Leadership" in 2003, which she used "to help secure the Locatee Lands[, a] remnant of the natural riparian area (...) home to a number of endangered species, some of which are unable to survive in any other habitat" (Renaud, February 2006: 3). Worthy of notice is also the Honorary Doctorate in Letters that she received from St. Thomas University, Fredericton, in 2000.

Many people have contributed to the success of this Okanagan writer. Besides her family and community, in which her grand-aunt, Hum-Ishu-Ma¹¹⁶, is included, Jeannette was exposed to many other influences, such as Pauline Johnson¹¹⁷, George Clutesi¹¹⁸, Harry Robinson¹¹⁹, George Ryga¹²⁰ and Lee Maracle¹²¹, to name but a few. Everyone she encounters in her life's journey touches her heart somehow and it all is reflected in her books, as we shall soon see.

I would like to conclude this section by again stressing the principle that has governed Jeannette's personal and professional actions, the en'owkin, and which she incites us all to pursue. Critical thinking, instead of simply conforming to the *status quo*, is key to any education that is meant to be effective and free of biases or any other type of ideology blinders, because, as she argued in her conversation with Derrick Jensen,

¹¹⁵ Namely, the words for *Till the Bars Break*, which is a collaboration produced on cassette and compact disk that was nominated for a 1991 Juno Music Award.

¹¹⁶ That is Mourning Dove's Native name. She was a reference to Jeannette, even though the latter never got the chance to meet her mother's aunt because Mourning Dove died before Armstrong was born. Her connection to this blood relative was through her mother's stories, and the rest of the family also talked about her. "... [I]ntrigued by her thinking" (Lutz, 1991: 14), Jeannette read her collection of Okanagan Stories and, later, her novel, *Kukidjuwea*.

¹¹⁷ In Jeannette's words, Campbell "... has shown so much endurance, [and] has given [her] the courage to write" (Freeman, March-April 1988: 37).

¹¹⁸ Jeannette feels that this Tseshah writer influenced her "quite a bit" (Armstrong, 1995, Autumn: 7) and, among the public appearances he used to do, she remembers the time when he went to Penticton, her hometown, and talked about some of his stories on the radio.

¹¹⁹ Harry Robinson, an Okanagan storyteller, was one of Jeannette's main teachers, with whom she spent much time. She remembers: "I used to go, on average about once a week, and either sit with him or have him come to my home. I was deeply influenced by Harry" (Armstrong, 1995, Autumn: 7).

¹²⁰ Just like Harry Robinson, George Ryga, a Canadian playwright and novelist, also became one of Jeannette's friends with whom she came into close contact, because "there were many opportunities to go to his house in Summerland" (Armstrong, 1995, Autumn: 7). She met him when she was about 17 or 18 in one of his regular visits to Jeannette's reserve, during the salmon feast.

¹²¹ Jeannette says on this author's book, *Bobbi Lee, Indian Rebel* (1975), "it was an influence in terms of my own thinking. And it had an effect and impact on me!" (Lutz, 1991: 25).

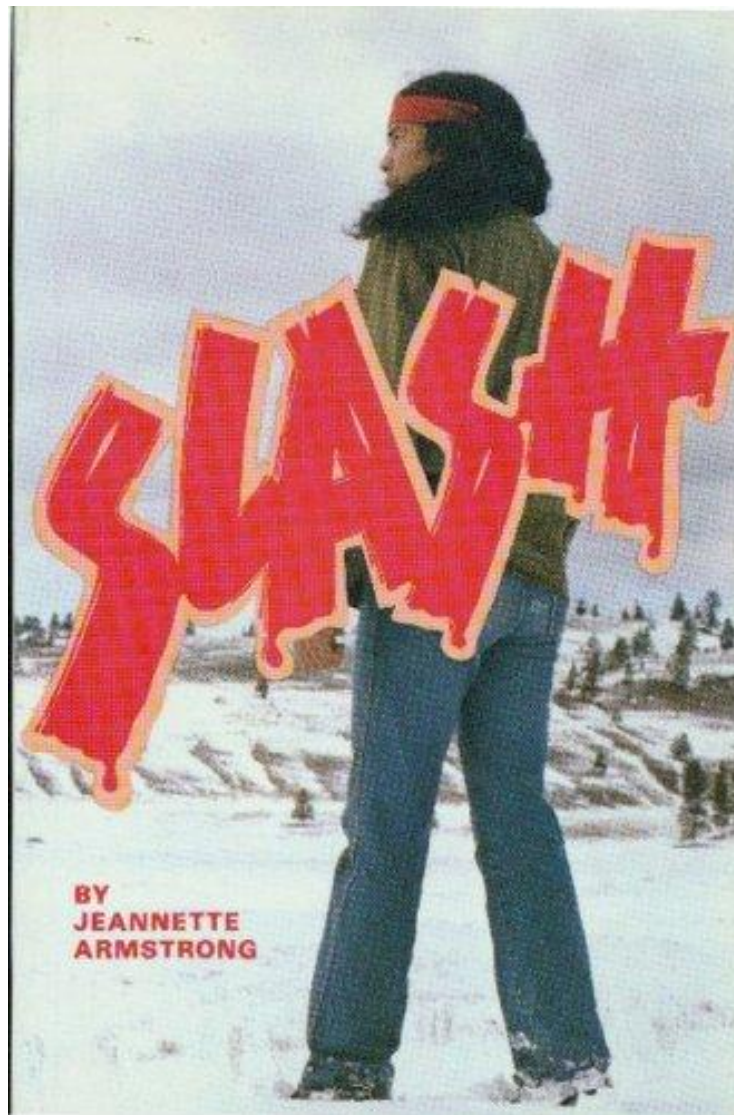
One of the most important things in decolonizing is to challenge the givens of society, the things you take for granted. We all have cultural, learned behavior systems that have become embedded in our subconscious. These systems act as filters for the way we see the world. They affect our behaviors, our speech patterns and gestures, the words we use, and also the way we gather our thinking. We have to find ways to challenge that continuously. To see things from a different perspective is one of the most difficult things we have to do.

(Jensen, 1995: 297-8)

It is indeed difficult, but not impossible, as the following analysis intends to demonstrate. The Okanagan writer just introduced claims that “[a] way [we] can help is to create space for [their] voice, advocate for it, add that voice in whatever ways are open to [us]” (ibidem: 299).

It is with this plea in mind that I shall now turn to examine the way Jeannette Armstrong’s books for children and young adults are raising awareness, promoting critical thinking and empowering Native peoples. Making Cooper’s words my own, “[n]ow that Jeannette Armstrong has been properly introduced, a look at her major work, *Slash*, is in order” (Cooper, 1986: 22).

CHAPTER SIX



***SLASH*, A WELL-CRAFTED NOVEL OF RESISTANCE**

II. 6.1. SETTING THE SCENE: GETTING TO KNOW PLACE, TIME AND CHARACTERS

My real quest was to present a picture of that time for a specific purpose. We were talking about that historical period, trying to determine how best to get that information to Native people, young people in particular. We wanted a tool to use in education...

(...) I wanted to give to my grandchildren what I felt, and what others felt through that time.

(Lutz, 1991: 14)

Slash, said to be “... the first truly Native novel” (Maracle, July 1988: 42) in Canada, was written by an Okanagan woman, “at once ancient and young” (ibidem), as part of a project to present contemporary Native history and its reality for Aboriginal students at school level, from the point of view of a Native person. It is, then, both a historical and a didactic novel “in that it teaches people about what it was like” (Lutz, 1991: 14). However, the educational nature of this novel goes further than “teach[ing] a certain number of people in [the Okanagan] community”; it crosses over from the oral tradition to the written word, attempting to reach as well, in Armstrong’s words, “... those people who colonized [that] country and who continue to make mistakes (...), attempting to assimilate Native people” (ibidem: 15).

Narrated from the point of view of a young Okanagan male character who witnessed and actively participated in the Aboriginal militant period of the American Indian Movement, during the late sixties/early seventies, this novel is framed by a prologue in which the protagonist, Thomas Kelasket, seems to embody exactly the same aims and intentions as those of Jeannette Armstrong.

Right from the beginning, Tommy confesses: “... I must examine how I changed and what caused the changes. I must understand it and, understanding it, I may understand what changes our people went through during those times and what we are

coming up against” (Armstrong, 1996: 13)¹²². Later in the novel, he underscores the same point and extends it, arguing: “My part was that I had to find out what things were left of the old ways in my own Tribe and make it usable in our modern Indian lives” (210).

Using the persona of this Okanagan youngster, which may be said to be the author’s alter ego, Jeannette Armstrong describes the life and political commitment of her character, while he searches for his true identity in contemporary times. For that, Tommy needs to reconcile with himself completely, letting go of the anger that consumes his soul, and finding a sense of belonging in his community, much like in his childhood when life seemed easier:

As I begin to write this story, I think back. I search my background, back to when, as an almost man, things seemed so simple. I look at that child and find him a stranger and yet he is nearer to me, as I am now, than when I became a young man full of a destructive compulsion to make change happen.

(13)

Powering nostalgic feelings and fond memories, in the prologue Tommy seems to have just arrived from a journey of self-discovery and introspection, a circular journey that brought him “back together (...) to wholeness”, because “... as a whole, as a circle, as a continuum (...) [Armstrong] wanted to take him from health and bring him back to health again...” (Lutz, 1991: 19)¹²³.

Afterwards, in an analepsis, the reader is transported into the protagonist’s school days and, from onwards, he/she is allowed to see this character’s spiritual growth to maturity.

From this description, it would be easy to characterise this novel as a *bildungsroman*¹²⁴, as this narrative genre always traces

... le parcours d’un héros parti jeune et destiné à s’élever à mesure qu’il évolue dans le réel. Le douloureux conflit du moi et du monde est la structure fondamentale de l’apprentissage. Toutes les épreuves traversées ne sont que des modalités particulières de cette opposition. Comprendre la nature du monde et y trouver sa

¹²² All further references to *Slash* will appear in the body of the text with nothing but the page number in parentheses.

¹²³ The theme of circularity and the novel’s structure will be analysed in greater detail in the following sections.

¹²⁴ According to Abel, Hirsch, and Langland (1983), this genre first emerged in Germany, in Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795). Susan Fraiman also remarks that “... in both 1870 and 1906 [Dilthey, the theorist to whom the concept’s formulation is attributed,] yoked the *Bildungsroman* firmly to Goethe’s 1795 novel, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*” (1993: 3).

place: lorsque le héros en est enfin capable, c'est qu'il a fait la plus importante découverte – celle de soi.

(Demorand, 1995 : 114)¹²⁵

In showing a protagonist's development of self-consciousness, the *bildungsroman* looks to beginnings or origins as a way to explain the present and, therefore, this genre has often corresponded to articulations of national consciousness. Clearly, in the wake of colonialism, there is a need to reconstruct history, and the *bildungsroman* genre was a valuable tool, being controlled by anger, hatred and an endless desire for violence, for Jeannette Armstrong to link Thomas' development with critical political events in his nation's history¹²⁶.

In light of the *bildungsroman* theory, Jeannette's choice of a male character is not surprising, especially if we bear in mind Susan Fraiman's words that this genre has "define[d] development in emphatically masculine terms" (1993: 5). Nonetheless, in "Is There a Female Bildungsroman?", this critic assents to its existence and argues that this genre came to be used by women writers to "... dramatize female development in contradictory ways," to depict "the 'feminine' as a site of ideological confusion, struggle, and possibility" (ibidem: 31). If female *bildungsromans* do exist¹²⁷, wouldn't it make much more sense for Jeannette, a feminist, to write this fictional autobiography through a feminine lens? On this issue, she reveals:

I really wanted to write it from a female point of view, but one thing that was really clear to me was that it was the young Native male who was at the forefront of that movement. There were young women involved, strong women like Anna Mae Aquash, and some played leadership roles, but they were very unique personalities, whereas with the men there were enough of them that I could generalize and do a composite.

(Freeman, March-April 1988: 36)

Thomas Kelasket, or Slash as he came to be nicknamed by Mardi after a knife fight, is not an individual hero, typical of traditional *bildungsromans*; instead, he takes a

¹²⁵ My translation: [... the journey of a hero who departs as a young man and is destined to rise through his process of developing into reality. The painful conflict between the self and the world constitutes the fundamental structure of apprenticeship. All the obstacles overcome are no more than specific modalities of this opposition. Understanding the nature of the world and his place in it: the hero is eventually capable when he made the most important discovery – that of his own self.]

¹²⁶ Barbara Godard tells us that "*Slash* re-accentuates the plot of growth and development characteristic of both the *bilgungsroman* of the cultural hero and the histories of new nations..." (1990: 219).

¹²⁷ Laura Sue Fuderer, among others, also contributed to prove that this genre does exist, because in her *The Female Bildungsroman in English: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism*, she lists one hundred and thirty-three critical studies of "a new or at least revised genre, the female *bildungsroman*, the novel of the development of a female protagonist" (1990:1).

backseat to the evolution of the community as a whole. We may even wonder if he is a hero at all, because, rather than an autonomous individual who is “superior to the community” (Al-Issa, 2003: 152), Tommy appears as a composite character by the end of the novel, shaped by a variety of influences and a myriad of voices of all those whose lives have touched his.

The protagonist is, as Jeannette Armstrong points out, made up of various generalised fragments, but I would venture to say, together with Sabiha Al-Issa, that those pieces ultimately culminate into one grand picture of a role model¹²⁸, “a contemporary warrior” who lives in harmony with the Earth and with his own community, in touch with his past, present and future, and who “... shows the light to thousands of Native youths who are bogged down in the mire of assimilation with its repercussions, or confrontation with its violent consequences” (ibidem: 158).

Furthermore, in consonance with the author’s views of the Self in communion with the Land and its People, as reflected in the previous chapter – the biobibliographical notes –, she could not have done it any other way. As she puts it...

... in terms of the characters and the character development of Slash as a character in the novel, in the writing process I couldn’t isolate the character and keep the character in isolation from the development of the events in the community, and the whole of the people. (...) The character development of the people around him, the pieces of character that come in and out, are all part of *his* character development, or his being...

(Lutz, 1991: 16)

If the protagonist’s development is anchored on his connection with his People, and if he is representative of an entire community, that the novel is framed by a prologue and an epilogue where his voice enjoys a privileged position, while the main body of the narrative presents a variety of competing discourses¹²⁹, seems to me a contradiction. I can only explain it, because, by that time, the protagonist was already a composite individual, whose experiences were to be shared with future generations, embodied in his infant son, Marlon¹³⁰.

¹²⁸ The protagonist himself refers to this idea of a role model, when he declares: “It was clear then that the only way I could work to help that change come about was to set up a model or an example of myself. I had to be a teacher in that sense” (218).

¹²⁹ This variety of discourses will be subject to analysis further on.

¹³⁰ Out of curiosity, in the epilogue (253), Thomas Kelasket expresses a similar concern as the Okanagan author with regards to his story’s recipients, when he states: “... I decide to tell my story for my son and those like him because I must” (cf. Jeannette’s conversation with Hartmut Lutz, transcribed in this dissertation as an opening quote to this section).

Similarly to Jeannette's speech, in which she exhorts "The Youth Warriors in the Present Day" (1989), Slash also addresses his child, telling him:

You are our hope. You are an Indian of a special generation. Your world will be hard but you will grow proud to be Indian. (...) [Y]ou will be the generation to help them white men change because you won't be filled with hate. That's why the prophesies say yours is a special generation. (...) You are the part of me that extends in a line up towards the future.

(250)

Slash, personifying the author's view, keeps faith in the idea of embracing Aboriginal ways to bring about change "... not only for their survival but for the survival of what is human in an inhuman world" (251). Simply put, it is only in **embracing one's difference**, in practising and sharing it within a larger context, that our world will become a more tolerant and communal place.

Even though there are striking resemblances between the author and the protagonist in terms of aims and philosophical worldviews, Jeannette makes her narrator inform us, in the prologue, that "[t]he characters in this novel are fictitious. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, is coincidental. The events are based on actual events but are not meant to be portrayed as historically accurate" (13). So, instead of seeking to disguise its fictitiousness, the first-person narrator in *Slash* openly distances the creating author from the created one and his representation from the true events that inspired it. As a result, historical fact and the imaginary intersect to tell Slash's "personal (hi)story that is representative of his tribal history" (Godard, 1990: 203). This required intensive research, as Jeannette states:

The research took two years. (...) I did what is called a literature search. (...) And I read everything by Native people, and I read everything by non-Native people. I read the press and everything else. I did a lot of research, written research. I had piles of stuff in the back there. I read every Indian newsletter, newspaper, anything that was written by magazines, that I could get my hands on, that I knew of, that gave a point of view about that, or by Indian people being interviewed. (...) I did interviews. I talked to as many people who were involved in the [American Indian] movement, on both sides of the border, as possible.

(Lutz, 1991: 20-1)

Despite Jeannette's research and the fact that she even "documented a chronology of events and put together a profile of the thinking of the period" (Williamson, 1993: 18), the Okanagan Indian Curriculum Project was "looking for writers who could look at contemporary history and write something that students could

connect and relate to other than just a dry history of dates” (ibidem: 16). Therefore, Jeannette Armstrong became “... less concerned with writing “authentically,” (...) but in taking up a third position both within and without to create a new cultural community. She [was] not preoccupied with “Truth,” but with good storytelling, with producing the tale to be told over and over” (Godard, 1990: 205).

In spite of these observations about Jeannette Armstrong’s creative process, summarised in the concept of historical and authorial detachment, the reader recurrently gets to know “important events” that actually took place during that militancy period, such as “... the Okanagan tribe’s hard-won moratorium on uranium mining ([...], Armstrong 235) or the confrontation at Wounded Knee (Armstrong, 111-18, [...])” (Godard, 1990: 202), because the novel’s genesis spawned from the need to produce pedagogical materials reflective of “a span of very important history” (Lutz, 1991: 14), as previously stated.

From the first pages of her novel, the Okanagan writer transports us to a historical context amid the turbulent sixties and seventies, a time of unprecedented social anxiety, when dissident voices began to emerge from a marginal socio-economic position towards an inclusive centre. It was a period in which idealism and global responsibility were much in the news, but this was accompanied by contradictory and competing discourses, as the violent collisions between Native traditionalists and modernists portrayed in *Slash* testify¹³¹.

Tommy Kelasket, at the time in his fourteens, further provides us with a more comprehensive understanding of the complex reality surrounding those tumultuous decades:

That was the year John Kennedy got killed, and all them black people were burning cities all over the United States. (...)
Lots of stuff was on the radio about nuclear war and bomb tests. (...) My Dad and other people talked a lot about it all the time, especially the Negro Civil Rights fight. Uncle Billy said, “Some day, all the dark races will fight together against the white people for all what they do. (...)” (...) I wondered if Indian people would be joining together. I hoped not. It sounded ugly. I had seen pictures of dead Negroes.
Sometimes though, I knew what it felt like to want to do something, when white kids sneered at me. Sometimes, I used to lie awake at night, wishing in the morning I would wake up and all the white people would have vanished so nobody would have to do anything about it.

(31)¹³²

¹³¹ Some examples will be analysed throughout the following chapter.

¹³² In this excerpt, the last paragraph belonging to the first chapter (entitled “The Awakening”), the reader senses Tommy’s psychological state of disruption caused by *his awakening* to the presence of the Other: the Whites. As to the Black people, they were allies.

Used to his close-knit Okanagan community “outa town in the hills” (16), in British Columbia, where he leads a happy life along with a great number of relatives¹³³, Tommy is forced to abandon his safe and harmonious world to attend a public school downtown, “... because the Indian agent wants all the Indian kids to go to town school” (23)¹³⁴.

It is worth noting that, just like the author’s parents, so did the protagonist’s father regard the residential school with much suspicion, not allowing his children to attend this kind of educational system: “Anybody who went to school after [Grade Six] went to residential school (...). Dad never let Danny go. I knew I wouldn’t go, either. Dad said we would just learn how to steal and lie at that school” (16). Further details about the harsh discipline imposed by the missionaries or the pain and discomfort that children were subjected to are described by the first-person narrator, when he recalls the stories told by Joe, his older cousin, concerning the difficult times he had to face at the boarding school (17).

Certainly in a different way than Joe’s experience, Tommy’s attendance of town school is also remembered as negative, because there he discovers racial discrimination, as well as a great deal of prejudice and injustice that First Nations suffered from white people (24), and that they “were too ashamed to even tell” (35). Although his father had warned him and his siblings about the humiliating and prejudicial practices that could be inflicted upon them¹³⁵, Tommy could not help but to internalise a language of oppression that instilled in him a false impression of whom he was, of his true Self, of his Native identity. He could not make sense of his new tough world and integrate it with what he had learned on the reserve: “I really felt confused. I agreed with the young

¹³³ Just like the author herself, who claims to have been born and raised in a traditional extended-family atmosphere, Tommy also had daily contact with a great number of relatives actively involved in the family: “I walked toward the house. (...) Inside I saw my Grandpa, my Uncle Billy, my Dad and Pra-cwa all sitting at the table. My Mom, my Aunt Shu-li and my older sister Josie were all walking around the stove” (17).

¹³⁴ As we are told by Peter Carstens (1991: 257-8), reserve schools were established by the Department of Indian Affairs after the turn of the twentieth century, but “[t]he extension of Canadian education to the Okanagan in 1962 increasingly involved both students and the whole community with white society and culture”.

¹³⁵ Tommy’s father warning: “You are going to have to go to school with white kids. It’s going to be hard, because **you’re different**. They will probably treat you mean and make fun of how you talk and how you dress and how you look. (...) Be proud that you’re Indian. Don’t worry about your clothes or your looks or how you talk. (...) You know who you are” (23; my emphasis).

man [from Vancouver, who represented cultural assimilation,] but I also agreed with Pra-cwa [, my grandfather who embodied traditional wisdom and values]” (43).

The two worlds were totally different, not only in terms of human interrelationships, but also as far as the environment is concerned. In contrasting the two schools, that of the reserve and the one downtown, Jeannette Armstrong describes the idyllic freedom of the aboriginal world where “grade sixers” were by the window and could “look up at the trees and hills and at the sun setting” (16), whereas the white territory is represented by a malodorous, closed atmosphere:

The schools stank something awful, too. I hated the smells of some of the other kids too. They used all kinds of strong smelling junk. I sometimes felt dizzy by lunch time. I wish sometimes I were outside with the horses or cows. They sure smelled better. I would sometimes think of walking high up near Flint Mountain where the fir and pine smells mixed with the sage; soft wind darting and dancing through the yellow grass and far away the “heap” “heap” “heap” sound of the blue grouse. Then the teacher would yell at me, “Thomas Kelasket! Quit day dreaming and get to work.”

(38)

As a consequence of his “deterritorialisation”, the protagonist undergoes an outward shift in social adaptation to the dominant culture, though inwardly he resists erasure of his memories, beliefs and cultural traditions.

Then, as the title of the second chapter, “Trying It On”, envisions, Tommy follows the example of his Native friends and abandons his classes to go to “other places where Indians were, like Omak, Spokane, Vancouver and Seattle” (53), places where he **tries everything on**, from drugs, to alcohol, meetings, demonstrations and women:

I was sixteen then, in Grade Eleven.
Somehow after that, I let everything slip away that I used to like. None of it seemed important or good anymore. School was definitely the last place I wanted to be, after a long night getting high and talking about protesting against the establishment. After a few hassles with some teachers (...), I quit. (51-2)

During them times, there was always booze, weed and girls; “chicks” as everybody called them. (55)

Tommy’s “Awakening” to social, political and economic issues facing his people leads him to a labyrinthine quest for answers and, as he finds none, he becomes involved with alcohol and substance abuse. In fact, the reality of being raised cross-culturally makes him live on the margins of both the Okanagan community and

mainstream Canadian society, and this lends credence to the prevailing stereotype of the Native Canadian who does not fit any of the worlds he inhabits and needs to seek refuge in alcohol, drugs and other self-destructive behaviours to escape the sense of alienation and rootlessness.

Alcoholism and drug addiction among First Nations are said to have arisen from, or been exacerbated by, the loss of their cultural identity, as a result of colonisation practices. Several academics have invoked the dilemma of straddling two cultures, and feeling as though they belong in neither, as a risk factor for substance abuse. E.D. Edwards and M. Egbert-Edwards (1990: 288) explain that:

Many Indian youth have experienced discrimination, particularly in towns bordering their Indian lands; others display uncertainty regarding questions such as “What is an Indian?” and “How does an Indian behave?” Indian youth often respond to these developmental issues by participating in substance use.

Together with substance abuse, problems of self-esteem and issues of identity become important factors contributing to high suicide rates among Native adolescents in Canada, as Navarro *et al.* point out: “In addition to alcohol and drug use, other presumed outcomes of low self-esteem among Native American youth are high rates of depression, suicide and interpersonal violence” (1997: 4)¹³⁶.

All these are experienced by Tommy Kelasket, who eventually is caught after a violent incident, while he was “in the process of a delivery” of “[p]retty rough joint” (57). Before being put in jail for eighteen months, charged for assault and resisting arrest, he spends some time in the hospital, due to a knife wound into his hand and shoulder. Because of this injury, together with Tommy’s rage on the night of the incident¹³⁷, Mardi, a Native girl from the Friendship Center who had witnessed it all and who starts visiting him on a regular basis, names him Slash.

In spite of being raised in an urban environment, Mardi becomes a dedicated counsellor/teacher, guiding Tommy through resistance to colonisation and the reaffirmation of his Okanagan culture. This young activist, in the letters she addresses

¹³⁶ For further reading on the epidemic of suicide among aboriginal youth, cf. Marlyn Bennett and Cindy Blackstock (2002) or a larger study on the subject by Laurence J. Kirmayer *et al.* (2007).

¹³⁷ Tommy tried to resist two individuals who started a fight to get his pack, and even after being stabbed he continued “slashing around and yelling, “I’ll slash the nuts off anybody that tries that again!” (59).

her eighteen year old beloved¹³⁸ during his jail sentence, tries to reconnect him back with his community and informs him about the existence of a third alternative, other than assimilation or defeat:

There is nothing wrong with our ways. Just because our people hate to be grabby, just because they don't knock themselves out like robots at nine-to-five jobs, and they don't get too excited about fancy stuff or what I call luxuries, they are looked down on and treated as outcasts and called lazy. Pretty soon, they believe it and they think of themselves that way. That's when they give up and drown in drink. Or else they get like us. They get angry inside and fight back somehow. Usually they end up dead, in prison or drunk. All of these lead to genocide of our people. You see they only give us two choices. Assimilate or get lost. (...) We need to make a third choice. That's what Red Patrol is about.

(69-70)

Tommy's inspirational power is described as "extra deluxe. Tough with hard eyes and long black hair that hung below her hips. (...) [S]he knew her way around" (59). Mardi is, undoubtedly, the strength that encourages Tommy to see the brighter side in the never-ending darkness that he had created for himself. She advances Native social and political movements as a way to foreground the voices of the oppressed: the third choice is then presented as a struggle for self-determination, or in Noel Elizabeth Currie's words, as "direct political action to change the conditions of oppression" (1990: 143).

But if Mardi, together with the Red Patrol, attempts to "... set up an example of pride and power in being Indian" and "tr[ies] to educate people about their rights" (70), on the other hand she is not able to fully provide Slash with the spiritual dimension that he needs, because she herself lacks in rootedness to a traditional Aboriginal community¹³⁹, and she looks to undo her incompleteness through Tommy's stories about his "home life, about Uncle Joe, and how it used to be on the farm" (61). As Currie explains...

Mardi's understanding is incomplete in Slash's eyes because it arises out of her experience (...). Having proved her strength by saving her own life, she looks

¹³⁸ Mardi and Slash fall in love with each other (62), but they are soon separated by his imprisonment (64-74) and, afterwards, by their political engagement: Mardi leaves to Alcatraz Island, California (77), while Slash remained in Canada.

¹³⁹ Let us not forget that Mardi left reservation with her family at a tender age to be raised in settler society, after her father's return from the Second World War. However, her father's ambition of better living conditions did not come true, because "... he started drinking a lot" (60), and her mother followed his steps, which eventually led to her death, when Mardi was thirteen. Thereafter, Mardi married a violent old man, from whom she had "two kids that welfare got" (61). Then, her divorce, prostitution and addictions further deepened her self-destruction, which was only avoided by the help she found in an Aboriginal rehabilitation centre.

beyond herself to the larger community and commits herself to ““what’s really going on in the Indian world”” (S 61) and to changing the personal and systemic oppression they all face, until she is “eliminated,” like many other low-profile leaders, by the FBI (S 121).

(1990: 143-4)

Mardi helps Slash, as well as the reader, to understand that full recovery and holistic prosperity can only be achieved through his reconnection with his cultural/spiritual roots. Her instruction is fundamental to the educational principles that Armstrong wanted to convey, when she decided to write this pedagogical tool. So, Lee Maracle’s assertion that *Slash* is a guidebook for the Aboriginal youngsters “that would need something to hang on to” (July 1988: 42) is complemented by Margery Fee’s remark that just like the novel under study, “[m]ore recent works are not so much aimed at educating white audiences as at strengthening Native readers’ sense that there must be a better way to think about themselves than that presented by the dominant discourse” (1990: 169). In other words, through creative literature, decolonisation is achieved and political education is promoted.

It is precisely in the solitude of his prison cell that the main character is able to experience his spiritual rebirth: “need[ing] something to hang on to”, Slash discovers that the revitalisation of his cultural identity is key to his sanity, his well-being and his sense of belonging:

I felt tears, warm and real, wet my cheeks and I heard someone singing Uncle Joe’s dance song. All at once I heard my cellmate ask softly, “You okay, Tom?” and I realized it was me singing that song.
(...) I shouted and I knew that everybody in the cell block heard it and felt it. (...) I felt okay for the first time in about three or four years.

(68)

Ironically, this awakening to spirituality does not last long; it functions merely as a trampoline that prevents Slash from free-falling to his lowest point and helps him endure the pain of his prison life.

Freed eighteen months later, in the spring time, when “the leaves just [unfold] and the air [is] damp and sweet” (74), Slash cannot find his life blossoming out in joy and hope. Instead of returning home, the protagonist wanders without aim, in his own autumn, feeling “really lost” (ibidem) and “drinking real lots just to keep [his] balance about [himself]” (75). Before he completely drowns in alcohol and ends up back in jail,

Slash is rescued by Lenny, an “Okanagan, north of [him]”, working at the Red Power Center, who redirects him to his spiritual path.

Slash’s return home is synonym of his own acceptance, which brings forth a feeling of harmony and relaxation with his social and natural surroundings: “The next whole month I relaxed at home and went hunting and fishing and worked in the fields with Pops” (79). The idyllic environment of his reserve opposes the urban world, associated with the whites and often with negative connotations: the place “where everybody was **different** and that was what made [him] confused and dissatisfied” (80; my emphasis). On the other hand, everything positive reminds him of his Land, as the similes evoked to describe his lover, Mardi, make clear: “She smelled fresh like sage and cedar and her skin was even brown and smooth like those hills in the Okanagan” (62) or “Her eyes were soft like a deer’s when she looked at me” (106)¹⁴⁰.

The idea that the whites are to blame for the drunken Natives’ sorry condition is recurrently touted as a way to avoid responsibility for failure. For instance, Slash’s mother laments what happened to some of her children, but Slash’s inner voice immediately excuses himself and his siblings, accusing their urban experience. We learn that...

“Danny just drinks now since he’s been trying to follow the rodeos. He’s not interested in the ranch. (...) Josie split up with Clyde over him drinking and running off to rodeos, too.

She lives on welfare, now, with her kids. She don’t want to come home, even though we got everything they need here. My grandkids don’t even know me hardly. They don’t even talk Indian.”

(80)¹⁴¹

Even if it is true that people living in “contact zones” are caught in situations of turmoil, Jeannette Armstrong is aware that those feelings of victimisation confirming the drunken Indian stereotype and dependence on social welfare systems do not lead to change, but to self-pity and self-destruction¹⁴². Hence, the rediscovery of essential

¹⁴⁰ In this association of Mother Earth and women, we can notice the importance given to these last ones, as they are the shelter, sustainability and solace that mankind depends on for existence.

¹⁴¹ Many other references to the white settlers’ fault are made throughout the novel, such as the following ones: “I saw from the reserves we visited that conditions were really bad with open prejudice by the whites everywhere. (...) A lot of drinking and fighting went on everywhere” (91) and, among others, “So you got people suffering because they won’t change them values. Lots of those who are belittled and despised and aren’t strong in their thinking about being Indian get hurting inside. Bad things happen to them: drinking, suicide, crime and all that” (98).

¹⁴² Jeannette Armstrong alerts the readers about it, when she states that Native peoples are: “Too dependent on D.I.A., welfare, social assistance, government programs of all kinds”. (...) [First Nations P]eople had learned a system of dependency. (...) [I]t had become a normal accepted way of thinking, not

truths, such as the one that Slash gets to know in a meeting when going from Kamloops over to Alberta on his way down to the United States of America, must be initiated so that healing takes place: “He told us how our young people were dying off from liquor and how we had to get back to our old ways before that would stop” (89).

Actually, acknowledging that a person is responsible for recreating one’s own world, Slash decides to leave his Okanagan community, striving to promote a third way for his people, another way besides that of assimilation or alcoholism leading to death. With that intent in mind, he joins the Red Patrol and, for a long period of time, moves from demonstration to demonstration throughout Canada and the U.S.A., in order to find himself each time more and more disappointed, alienated, depressed and addicted to drugs, as the following passage clearly demonstrates: “I guess it was the hate in me. It was strong and big and ugly. (...) Them times I had to get up and find something to mellow out with. If it wasn’t a chick then it was dope. I smoked a lot of dope and drank too, when there wasn’t any dope or chicks” (122).

We notice then that, metaphorically speaking, Tommy becomes a victim of the Windigo, a terrifying supernatural creature that lives by over-consuming, showing “an insatiable appetite for human flesh” (Maynard, 1996: 227)¹⁴³. This grotesque and enormous figure that is absorbed by material self-interests represents the dangers of human excess, greed, self-destruction, oppression and exploitation, and thus needs to be defeated so that harmony and coexistence may be restored. Through this prism, the Windigo is not only embodied in capitalist discourses and practices, such as the ones observed, for instance, in Tommy’s friend Jimmy, but it is also evidenced in what the Mohawk writer Beth Brant designates as “colonization through addiction” (1994: 18). Simply put “alcoholism, drug addiction, disrespect for women, incest, suicide,

to be self-sufficient. It had deteriorated our health to such a degree that it had become a bigger obstacle for us to overcome than any obstacle outside. (...) [A]n internal change was more important than changing anything on the outside” (218).

¹⁴³ The name of this mythological figure derives from the Algonkian root word Witiku, meaning ‘cannibal’ / ‘evil spirit’. Therefore, the Aboriginal concept of the Windigo is shared by various groups of Algonkian-speaking peoples, but due to the variation in its name’s pronunciation from tribe to tribe, this insatiable being has also been called Weetigo, Wendigo, Windago, Wetiko, among many other ways of addressing it.

It is interesting to point out that this entity has been used by many traditional-minded people to refer to those Native individuals that have gone through the process of acculturation into the mainstream culture. For further reading, cf. Jack Forbes in his *Columbus and Other Cannibals: The Wetiko Disease of Exploitation, Imperialism, and Terrorism* (1992) and Beth Brant in her *Writing as Witness: Essay and Talk* (1994).

homophobia (...) are the result of the self-loathing that imperialism has forced into [Native] minds” (Brant, 1994: 68-9).

Alienated from his cultural values, Tommy does become infected by Windigo sickness: he destroys himself by overconsuming drugs and alcohol; by disrespecting women and by letting anger, hatred and an endless desire for violence take control of him, as he recurrently admits:

My anger came out in great gobs when I talked. (...) I wanted to shout “DO SOMETHING!! Don’t die begging and crawling!!! Die on your feet. Now is the time. (120)

I wanted violence. I wanted things to break and people to get crazy, but we were constantly told that this was a peaceful occupation to emphasize certain points being made. (126)

Because of the activism that Mardi had bequeathed to her disciple, Tommy’s toughness and his impetus for action become reinforced, but, as stated earlier in this chapter, the spiritual dimension that he needs is overlooked, as he recognises when he states: “I always felt there was something missing, like there was something wrong about the way that things were approached” (160). From the moment he had joined the AIM activists, he had sensed that “something important was missing. They put a whole lot of emphasis on violence and very little on spirituality” (108). Nevertheless, Tommy’s acknowledgement that violence is never the best way to resolve a conflict does not prevent him from “feeling the frustration (...) and the gut wrenching hate whenever [he] would start to talk about it” (160) and this further leads him to his own doom.

Having identified the Windigo impulse¹⁴⁴ that takes over the protagonist’s life, one of his mates at the AIM decides to call his grandfather, because “[a]t least he can tell if [he is] gonna die” (129). Bob’s Grandpa, aware of Tommy’s need to calm down, get rid of drugs and renew his links to his culture, simply advises him to go back to his reserve.

Tommy’s return to his community is accompanied by a plethora of feelings, such as the warmth of his Land that, just like a woman’s womb, is a safe and nurturing haven, allowing (spiritual) growth and protection; the nostalgia directed towards the

¹⁴⁴ It is interesting to notice that, though it is an aberrant entity, the Windigo may function as a didactic symbol as well, because it is useful in preventing inappropriate behaviour and in promoting adequate living within one’s community.

mountains, which may be said to be breasts, symbols of fertility; and the happiness brought by the “brown earth hills of the Okanagan”, which the narrator himself compares to a “woman’s skin”, conferring validity to my interpretation of the female attributes of his territory:

God, I felt good to be home. I mean in the Okanagan. Those prairies did something to me, I thought. Like I always felt vulnerable, without any protection around me. Maybe it was the mountains I missed. Port Alberni was okay but there was too much green covering the hills. To me the brown earth hills of the Okanagan are like a woman’s skin: brown and rich, needing nothing more to be beautiful.

(130)

In the quotation above, besides the implicit recognition of the important role of women in Native tradition as harbours of refuge offering shelter and strength, it is also of significant interest to compare the narrator’s words about Port Alberni, which is merely “okay”, with the author’s comment that her people “could not be Okanagans in Florida. [They]’re Okanagans *because* [their] land is a certain way and because [they] do things in a certain way” (Sparks, April 1998: 8)¹⁴⁵. So does Tommy need to be in the Okanagan region to truly find himself.

The major problem is that as soon as the protagonist starts his healing process and becomes better, he once again embarks on a roller-coaster ride of deception until a new awakening:

The thing I realized then was that I would have to spend some time searching for what I really was, as an Indian. I didn’t know anything when it came down to that. I didn’t know a lot about really Indian things. Before that, when I came nearer to looking at it, I got very uncomfortable and tried not to think much about it. I had spent a lot of time convincing myself that we were the same as non-Indians in every way, except that we were oppressed and were angry (180).

But those moments of epiphany are rare and ephemeral, taking place only when he finds there is no alternative left. He describes his suffering at those times, making the reader aware that the path he had been following was taking him out of his proper course:

¹⁴⁵ Canadian liberal political philosopher Will Kymlicka elaborates on the same argument, stating that “[p]eople *are* bound, in an important way, to their own cultural community. We can’t just transplant people from one culture to another (...). Someone’s upbringing isn’t something that can just be erased; it is, and will remain, a constitutive part of who that person is. Cultural membership affects our very sense of personal identity and capacity” (1991: 175; emphasis in original). Therefore, he goes on to add, “[t]he sense of belonging to a cultural structure and history is often cited as a source of emotional security and personal strength” (ibidem), without which most individuals feel powerless, lost, and lonely.

Something about the city was just like a slow rot inside my brain. I guess what I felt was close to total defeat, almost suicidal. (...) I sank farther and farther into that shadow world of drink and drugs; a world where things can be made to vanish like magic; a world where there is little feeling and less caring.

(196)

... I was sick as a dog. (197)

The city is again regarded by Tommy as a symbol of oppression, a container for potentially destructive forces that robs people from their human interconnectedness. Only escape from the Windigo sickness, which abounds in cities, can restore humans to their healthy status and their rightful place in society. That is precisely the message that Joe, an Ojibway from Ontario (198), and then the medicine man who goes to the camp (200) conveys to the protagonist: the only way to save Native people is to actually be in Aboriginal territory to learn and transmit their traditions and their culture.

It is then, after so many devastating and difficult situations, that Tommy seems to finally see the light at the end of the tunnel: “What happened to me was the single most profound experience in my life. (...) It was like suddenly waking up, like what those people say about being born again” (200-1).

Inspired by an overwhelming desire to share this powerful experience with all the Okanagans, Slash returns to his reserve (206) in order to finally remain there, study the traditional worldview and make a contribution to his community, because he “learned that, being an Indian, [he] could never be a person only to [him]self. [He] was part of all the rest of the people. (...) [He] was important as one person but more important as part of everything else” (203).

In fact, just like Jeannette Armstrong herself¹⁴⁶, her protagonist also notices that, in Okanagan culture, an individual’s identity is not so much one of the Self, but one of belonging, while assuming a specific place and role within one’s social group and community. Tommy realises that the survival of his community depends on him accepting his responsibilities and personal obligations that go beyond the realm of the individual-self to the very heart of his Okanagan counterparts. That is the reason why he refuses to leave the ones that need him in the Okanagan, not even to accompany his

¹⁴⁶ As mentioned in the previous chapter, Jeannette Armstrong believes that all our actions somehow affect others; hence, each one of us individually is powerful and has in his/her hands the responsibility to make things change for the better.

wife, Maegdaline¹⁴⁷. In his words, “I can’t go along with supporting anything that will compromise what I know to be at the center of all that I believe in” (244); “My place is here. Here is where the real fight will be” (250).

Tommy’s convictions ultimately keep him from turning his back on his extended family, as he used to do. He is not ashamed of whom he or his relatives are anymore, even if they are **different** from white people. Actually, he comes to recognise that he had previously sought comfort in sameness, in an acute desire to belong to mainstream culture, but this frantic search could only emphasise his **difference** and, thereby, open way to feelings of alienation, marginalisation, misunderstanding and intolerance.

Difference between Native and white peoples will always be there, as it is ingrained in the supposed incompatibility of cultural traditions – be they political, linguistic, religious, among others – through time and across social spaces or, when that is not enough, in irrefutable biological differences, as Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd make clear:

The colonialist stresses those things that keep him separate rather than emphasizing that which might contribute to the foundation of a joint community. In those **differences**, the colonized is always degraded and the colonialist finds justification for rejecting his subjectivity. But perhaps the most important thing is that once the behavioral feature of historical or geographical factor which characterizes the colonialist and contrasts him with the colonized has been isolated, this gap must be kept from being filled. The colonialist removes the factor from history, time and therefore becomes labeled as being biological or preferably metaphysical. It is attached to the colonized’s basic nature. Immediately the colonial relationship between colonized and colonizer, founded on the essential outlook of the two protagonists, becomes a definitive category. It is what it is because they are what they are, and neither one nor the other, will ever change.

(1990: 71-2; my emphasis)

Taking this into consideration, sameness/togetherness for Tommy can only be found within his Okanagan community, because this social network had been built on a common faith, where members have shared the same physical space (community of place), maintained cohesive relations with one another (community of friendship) and a

¹⁴⁷ Maeg, a traditional Okanagan woman who is committed to preserving the Aboriginal rights by having them built into the Canadian Constitution, becomes Tommy’s wife and the mother of his son (229-31). According to Tommy, she is not pretty, but surely “something to look at” (224): her soft intense eyes “didn’t miss a thing”; “[h]er hair was thick, brown and wavy (...) past her shoulders and her skin was smooth and light brown”. As to her outfit, Maeg “hadn’t worn any choker of beads or braids” and “her clothes were just plain” (225). She helps her husband integrate land, community, healing, traditional spirituality and political activism into his life, as she concentrates her activist efforts on environmental concerns (they first get to know each other in a meeting on the uranium mining explorations in a sacred site) and on child welfare issues, besides the above mentioned interest in entrenching Aboriginal rights in the Canadian Constitution of 1981-2.

common belief system that has shaped their values, attitudes and purposes (community of mind/spirit). That is, as he says, what culture is after all:

I understood then that the practice of things separated us from other peoples. I realized then that's what culture is. The things I had seen about my people which were **different** came from the way things were approached. (...) The ones who were strong and confident in their ways were **different**. The way they looked at the world and how they fit into it was **different**.

(211; my emphasis)

Culture is, as previously noted, a human-made reality that gives meaning to life, because it provides the framework upon which individuals construct their understanding of themselves and of the world. As a consequence, culture – the beliefs, traditions, rituals, conventions, norms, myths, languages and other legacies and artefacts of human life – is the cement that binds community together¹⁴⁸. This means, as Tommy realises and as defined by Howard Adams,

being a member of particular racial/ethnic group that is culturally **different** and **unique** from the dominant group. (...) It means (...) look[ing] inward to their own private world of indigenous customs, rituals, symbols and language (...) [aiming at] a reconstruction of authentic Aboriginal history and heritage, and at the same time, a rejection of the stereotypical images of white supremacy.

(1995: 131-2; my emphasis)

And there lies the core notion of Aboriginal cultural nationalism, which “generates from a desire to reverse an intolerable situation, and to challenge the legitimacy of the dominant system. It is a desire for freedom from both domination and contempt...” (ibidem). It is the third choice that the AIM and other social and political movements advocate, and which Tommy from then on pursues, because, as he optimistically puts it, “maybe its [sic] not too late after all. Maybe the seed is starting to sprout finally. Maybe it will grow” (249).

Eventually, Tommy is healed, because he now understands that he had already “plant[ed] the seed[, Marlon,] which can make revolutionary changes in the future” (Currie, 1990: 149) and he now battles a more balanced revolution: one that looks at life as a commitment, a gift to be respected, cherished, protected and passed on to his son and, as he points out in the epilogue, to “those like him” (253), namely the readers.

¹⁴⁸ In emphasising the idea of identity categories and community boundaries, culture is also inextricably linked to power; it is a site of struggle or of distinction, used to mark Otherness, as Foucault points out: “The dialectical sovereignty of similarity consists in permitting differences to exist, but always under the rule of the negative, as an instance of non-being. They may appear as the successful subversion of the Other, but contradiction secretly assists in the salvation of identities” (1977: 185).

These are, just like Marlon, “Little Chief[s]” (250), warriors that “will grow to be strong and straight for [their] people” and that will “help them white men change because [they are members of a special generation that] won’t be filled with hate” (ibidem).

In this context, foregrounding the first person narrator’s experience, Jeannette Armstrong skilfully combines the novel form with a didactic and ideological message that subtly instructs without the appearance of wanting to enlighten.

Clearly, together with its propensity to harangue and guide its readers into correct beliefs and behaviour, the novel by this Okanagan author and teacher also offers extraordinarily rich and fluid potential for teaching about contemporary socio-political situations facing Indigenous peoples, as she had first intended to do. I would even say that, because this novel had been “determined by a specific end, which exists ‘before’ and ‘above’ the story” (Suleiman, 1983: 54), it is, in a sense, a *roman à thèse*¹⁴⁹. Armstrong evidences this when, as seen in the previous chapter, she refers to the book conception as having been born out of the need to create a “tool to use in education, to give not just the historical documentation of that time but, beyond that, the feeling of what happened just prior to the American Indian Movement, and what happened during that militancy period...” (Lutz, 1991: 14).

Actually, from its beginning, the book had been prepared and written with a specific intent: the committee on the Okanagan Indian Curriculum Project had determined that it should be developed “into a novel or a story in which one character experiences some of these feelings first-hand and shows the effects on his family or friends or his people. In that way, when a person reads, they could experience the process as if they were going through it” (Williamson, 1993: 19).

This literary device that aims at promoting an affective identification of the reader with the protagonist is described by Susan Robin Suleiman as prolific in shaping one’s outlook in life:

The persuasive effect of a story of apprenticeship “with a thesis” results from a virtual identification of the reader with the protagonist. If the protagonist evolves toward a euphoric position, the reader is incited to follow him in the right direction: the protagonist’s happiness is both a proof and a guarantee of the values he affirms. If the protagonist’s story “ends badly,” his failure also serves as a lesson or proof,

¹⁴⁹ This genre is said to be a novel that literally has a thesis which puts forward a didactic purpose: either a problem in morality, philosophy or politics, or the solution to such a problem. As Susan Suleiman explains it: “a *roman à thèse* is a novel written in the realistic mode (that is, based on an aesthetic of verisimilitude and representation), which signals itself to the reader as primarily didactic in intent, seeking to demonstrate the validity of a political, philosophical, or religious doctrine” (Suleiman, 1983: 7).

but this time *a contrario*: the protagonist's fate allows the reader to perceive the wrong road [, the Windigo,] without following it.

(1983: 73)

Jeannette Armstrong engages the reader in the protagonist's quest for meaning: in this process, Tommy displays a range of emotions including anger, frustration, indecisiveness, loss of control, but also nostalgia, regret, hope, affection and a capacity to nurture and to heal. Tommy is able to grow over time and change, as he increasingly moves towards self-knowledge and to an awareness of his own power, acquired through the voices, the stories, songs and teachings of those who support him in times of need. Those lessons come, for the most part, from his own parents, Uncle Joe, Joe from the detoxification centre, his cousin Chuck and Pra-cwa, all of them, except for the latter, devoid of characterisation, because they "are all parts of [a] whole" (Lutz, 1991: 16). In fact, there is only a minimum of information provided about the characters, most of which is inferred by their words or conduct. The characters are only important insofar as they relate to and impact Tommy's life directly. For instance, as far as Uncle Joe is concerned, Jeannette Armstrong tells us that "[t]he part of him that is important for the story is his spiritual leadership and knowledge" (Lutz, 1991: 16). Uncle Joe guides the protagonist throughout the novel and bestows upon him the knowledge of Okanagan traditions, as the following passage illustrates: "Like when Uncle Joe and me talked about the hills and all the animals and plants, their names and the legend stories about them" (26). He is also the voice that encourages Tommy to rethink his stance on social ethics and that rescues him from his own destructive impulses:

We are Indians, Tommy. Them spirits are crying out to the people, the young people, because the land is in pitiful shape and with it, our people. Just don't let the drink and drugs and the hate win you over. You got to get yourself together. Its [sic] good you come home for now. You needed to.

(133)

... there was a voice in your head that sounded like Uncle Joe and it asked, "What the hell are you doing?" When it said, "You so-called Warrior, you're just a weak chicken-shit good for nothing." I did sober up, after about a week.

(154)

Just like Uncle Joe, who does not judge or scold Tommy, but instead suggests hope, choice and change, so does Joe, "an Ojibway from Ontario" (198) who works at the detoxification centre, help him out, guiding him to sweat lodge purification

ceremonies¹⁵⁰. This character is described in terms of his personality, but we get to know him a little bit better than his Uncle only because he is a driving force whose attitude influences Tommy:

Joe was quiet and talked easily with anyone. He somehow made you feel good, just by being around him. I felt that he was deeply religious in the Indian way. He had a gentle strength and a peaceful way, that other people seemed to lack. (...) You felt his caring (...). I wanted to be like Joe. I wanted to feel again, to care, to love.

(199)

One of Tommy's older cousins, Chuck, "from the reserve next to [his and] brought up in the same way [he] was, with a real heavy emphasis on Indian values" (139) also teaches Tommy to resist negative feelings. Unlike the two characters described above, though, Chuck shows "contempt in his eyes", making his cousin "feel really uncomfortable" (*ibidem*). The message that he preaches, though essential to Tommy's healing, is accompanied by a sarcastic look:

"I know how easy is to blame everything on Whitey. There are times when I get the anger boiling inside me and I do hate them. There are the times I drink or go on a rampage of partying just to let it cool inside of me. At home though, I always have a steady reminder from my family what a shitty and weak way that is. (...) ... [w]e must do it without violence for violence sake."

(139-40)

"I just don't think its [sic] a good idea to feed anger and hate."

(141)

Chuck's words come as a surprise to his cousin, who "kind of thought of him as brainwashed", because, as a child, he "was always very quiet, always listening" (140). Tommy associates Chuck's point of view and assertiveness with the fact that he had "had a pretty good education" (*ibidem*).

A completely opposite philosophy of life and an attitude that shows internal racism is found in Tommy's friend, Jimmy. He is the one that is brainwashed, as he refers to traditional people on the reserve as "stupid and old-fashioned" (26). Jimmy totally surrenders to a desire for assimilation and acceptance into the mainstream, as we notice when he claims:

¹⁵⁰ These ceremonies are of vital importance to Tommy's transformation, because the sweat lodge is the metaphor for a female's womb and, thus, one's rebirth, as Dennis McPherson and Douglas Rabb note: "The sweat lodge itself, that low dome-shaped structure, dark, hot, and moist inside is associated with the womb. To emerge from a Sweat, at least when it is a healing ceremony, is to be reborn, transformed spiritually" (1998-99: 97).

I feel good when white friends of mine talk and joke with me as if I were like them. They only do that if I wear smart pants and shoes and have money to play pool with. I don't like them to think I'm like the rest of the Indians. I wish our people were like them. (...) I hate being an Indian. I hate Indian ways.

(44)

I'm gonna go to school and **be different**¹⁵¹. I'm gonna move to town when I finish and get a real good job and get everything I want and be just like the people on T.V.

(46; my emphasis)

Jimmy is one of the many “Uncle Tomahawks” (90) that admire the white world so much that they want to fit in at all costs, while, in turn, they harbour prejudice and self-hate against their own people. He, therefore, feeds the Windigo in himself with an absolute rejection of Aboriginal tradition and values and with a capitalist/consumerist impulse: “My Dad and them [white people] are smart. They are up-to-date. We are gonna get a T.V., too. My Dad is working at the sawmill now. He's gonna buy me a bike, too” (26).

Tommy's parents, unlike Jimmy's – who live downtown –, live up on the reserve according to Native customs and beliefs. If only had Tommy accepted their example, he would not have had to go through his search for healing and balance, because these were there all the time, in his home community. Dad, or Pops, and Ma, as they are called, are introduced to us through Tommy's words:

... I feel ashamed when I go to town with Dad and Ma and they get stared at. I know they ain't dumb and dirty. They're smart and kind and treat everybody good, even the ones that treat them ugly. (...) My Pops and them live good. They're happy. None of them cares about clothes and fancy stuff.

(44)

We never get to know their names or physical features, because it is actually their psychological mindset that matters. They are protective of their children¹⁵², to whom, as Tommy claims, “[t]hey had tried to give (...) the best background in raising [them] as they had” (163). They are also ever-present till the day when, having felt that

¹⁵¹ Here we realise that Jimmy believes that the concept of difference is culturally-based and not naturally endowed. Even if, according to Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd (see page 138 of this dissertation), his appearance will always denounce him, Jimmy is sure that following the Whites' social practices will erase biological differences.

¹⁵² And of their grandchildren, as well: “Mom was just like an old hen around [Josie's three kids]” (168).

they had failed after Danny's death¹⁵³, they feel hopeless and unable to deal with everyday life, as Josie warns her brother: "... you'll find things with Mom and Pops different. They can't seem to get themselves together so they get busy doing a whole bunch of stuff they never were into before. Mom plays bingo all the time and now even Pops is going. They are never home anymore" (163) and, as a consequence, "[t]he house got neglected, and Pops put off stuff that needed to be done around the ranch" (168).

It is only after Pops's heart attack that there is a turning point for the whole family, because Tommy brings Indian medicine onto his reserve: "Those times were good for the whole family. People came to the house (...), while ceremonies and sweats were held. (...) [I]t was a time of healing for the whole family, not just my father" (208).

As to Tommy's grandfather Pra-cwa, the reader is able to visualise his image in his/her mind. Besides aspects such as his wisdom and storytelling ability, we are informed about some of his physical traits: "His long moustache drooped and his thick grey hair stuck out every which way. Every time he laughed, all his wrinkles shook" (19). "He sure was old. He was blind and his hair was snow white, and he had a hard time hearing (...), but none of that stopped his mind" (208).

Pra-cwa, the headman of the Okanagan, who could only speak in Native language, surely embodies all those Indigenous traditional Elders who have ensured cultural survival through oral tradition, and who have provided directions for others to follow. In addition to his collective importance, he is an example, a highly-respected repository of cultural knowledge for future generations and, thus, as Armstrong tells us, "[t]he character Pracwa is a person who played a part in which people related to him as an individual, and as a person, because of the strength of his leadership" (Lutz, 1991: 17). Pra-cwa's individuality is highlighted, because the Okanagan author posits his "I" as an individual among individuals. His Self as a character stands out, because his personality and physical traits make him a natural leader within his community: "He was like a Chief even though he hadn't been voted on" (19)¹⁵⁴.

¹⁵³ Danny is the concrete representation of where Tommy's life is headed unless he stops drinking, taking drugs, and embarks on a healing journey. We learn that Danny "was drinking lots at the end there. One night he just walked out on the highway and got hit" (161).

¹⁵⁴ Douglas R. Hudson elaborates on this issue, making us understand that this was a common practice among the Okanagan: "The chief, usually a man, derived his power from his status as a 'worthy' man from a high status family, his knowledge of village affairs, and his ability to gain the respect of others. (...) To be a chief, one had to meet the moral and social requirements of the community and to be an exemplar of the values and standards of conduct of the community" (1990: 70-1). In this respect, we may conclude that Pra-cwa was a natural leader.

We may say, then, that except for some rare cases, the reader gets to know the characters beyond individual characteristics: he/she sees them “as part of a generation”, “as precious members of a threatened group” (Fee, 1990: 172), who need each other in order to accomplish a common shared goal: to help Tommy – and the many Tommys who are lost – find his way back to himself and to his community¹⁵⁵.

Given all this, and the fact that, as stated, Armstrong wanted to provide her readers with a historical account of Native Canadian life and struggle in the sixties and seventies from the perspective of an insider, recurrent references to chronological and topographical data come as no surprise. These serve to illuminate “the ‘distorted truth’ of official histories (...) [that] is still endowed initially with a privileged narrative of ‘truth’ over the historical ‘fictions’ produced by resistance writings” (Emberley, 1993: 22). In its attempt to be “valued as a corrective to the distorted truth of the ‘West,’” (ibidem: 23) we join, together with the AIM and the protagonist, in caravans and demonstrations in both Canada and the United States, because territorial frontiers do not necessarily mean different political ideologies, as the president of the National Indian Brotherhood explains: “... Indians from Canada were no different and there was really no border that was recognized by Indians. He said that we had the same objectives as U.S. Indians” (92). Tommy also recognises the same degrading social reality that makes Native peoples “brothers in affliction”:

I got to see a lot of the same kinds of things all across this country on the reservations that I seen in the States. There was severe poverty and all kinds of “social problems,” especially heavy drinking everywhere, almost as if that were a normal way to be on the reservation.

(119)

There were many of them (...) that admitted people were dying violently left and right anyways, from alcohol related deaths and suicides. Many were in prison.

(120)

In a mobilization that united bands across the American continent in the early seventies, we all travel together from Oklahoma to Washington DC in what “was to be called the ‘Trail of Broken Treaties Caravan’” (93), as a comment on the 1838

¹⁵⁵ Many are the authors who argue that the Self is developed in connectedness, not separation. For further reading, cf., for instance, Krupat’s *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon*, whose excerpt on the issue is worth quoting: “The self most typically is not constituted by the achievement of a distinctive, special voice that separates it from others, but, rather, by the achievement of a particular placement in relation to the many voices without which it could not exist” (1989: 133).

relocation march known as “Trail of Tears”. On this pedagogical trip¹⁵⁶, we are led through several “historic sites where large massacres of Indian people occurred” (93).

Many other historical/political events are remembered throughout the novel, such as the seizure of Alcatraz (77; 92); an execution “in Minnesota where thirty-eight Sioux were hanged for trying to protect their people” (98) and the 1974 armed takeover in Kenora (143-154), to list but a few more, besides the ones mentioned in this dissertation on page 127.

In gist, we realise that this novel is a blending together of pedagogy, politics, traditional thought and literature. Now, that its conjuncture and characters have been identified, it is time for us to focus on some of its thematic content.

¹⁵⁶ Jeannette Armstrong’s specific pedagogical purpose is unveiled at this point, when, after a brief explanation about what the “Trail of Tears” is, she makes her narrator argue: “I hadn’t even heard of it, but then I guess that was the point of this whole trip: to educate” (95). Later, while talking with a Native American girl named Elise, Tommy tells her the reason why Native Canadians did not have a similar route: they were decimated through sickness, and, as a result, “[t]hose left were so weak and confused the colonizers were almost able to do just as they pleased. Only a very small resistance group have continued up to now to try to keep people’s minds straight about being Indian and free. That’s why I’m here, I guess. To learn and maybe somehow start something at home” (96). The reader is learning, just like Tommy, and in a sense he/she is incited to follow him in his attempt to make a difference for his/her people.

II. 6.2. DELINEATING THE THEMES:

RESISTING OPPRESSION AND THE SILENCING OF VOICES

In her novel, *Slash*, (...) Jeannette deals with the problems facing Native youths. She parallels the traditional Native community life with the life offered by urban white society and illustrates the spiritual and physical danger facing Native youths who try to reject their own culture and history. (Wall, 1990: 8)

“It makes me real mad inside that our people seem to be looked on as if we were less instead of just **different**.”
(86; my emphasis)

In the previous section, while situating Jeannette Armstrong’s novel within its socio-historical milieu, we realised that all its themes hinged on the growth of Native youths’ cultural consciousness and their ability to find their own solutions. In one way or another, everything revolves around it and, hence, around the acknowledgement of the many **differences** that either set the Native peoples apart from the others or that turn them into the same¹⁵⁷. There is indeed a myriad of differences highlighted in the novel: the different roles performed by men and women within the reserve; educational differences; the different positions held between traditionalists and modernists; alienation as a transformative ontology of difference; spirituality as a primary site of difference and resistance; and, among others¹⁵⁸, the home motif, which implies a difference between the Land and urban life. If I briefly touched upon them in the previous chapter, now they shall be examined in some detail.

¹⁵⁷ I am referring to practices of assimilation here. In this process of trying to make others into the same, in the name of a triumphalist politics of unity, many indigenous cultures have been destroyed.

¹⁵⁸ Many other references could be added, namely language differences. These will be subject of attention in the following chapter.

I would like to open my analysis by developing a little further the theme of **difference**, which is, as stated, the critical focus behind my dissertation research and also what binds all these chapters together as a whole.

The concept of difference is seen with suspicion by many academics¹⁵⁹, because it surely is multifaceted and interlaced with contradictions, but, on the other hand, it raises interesting questions and possibilities for social change and equity in our contemporary world. Jean Baker-Miller's words express this fear with which the term has been regarded, because of the value judgement attached to it:

... our society and other societies are unable to encompass difference, indeed, to value and cherish difference as the source of hope and growth for all of us. Difference comes to mean "better" and "worse". (...) We all have a long history of learning to fear difference. Difference has been made to be the source of power for some and the source of destruction for others. Further, particular characteristics such as those based on class, race, gender, or even an individual ability (such as an ability which may allow access to a profession), have been used to define the total person. This fear of difference springs from the dominant – subordinate tradition in which difference means deficiency – and deficiency is the organizing principle. As subordinates we are told that we are deficient – a falsity. Then, the alleged deficiencies are used against us. Meanwhile, dominants uphold the pretense that they do not have deficiencies – another falsity. Everyone becomes terrified of difference because it means deficiency.

(Baker-Miller, 1986: 136-7)

Actually, difference can be viewed as negative and exclusionary, but also as something positive and empowering. Several postcolonial scholars, such as Homi Bhabha (1994)¹⁶⁰ and Stuart Hall (1996), employ the term in a political sense, avoiding its pejorative tone. A great deal of similarity exists amid the differences and, thus, instead of regarding them with fear, as just problems, threats or insurmountable barriers, they should be recognised as challenges/opportunities for sharing and learning and

¹⁵⁹ On May, 28 2008 I participated in a Graduate Student Symposium at the University Paul Valéry, in Montpellier, France, where some academics expressed feelings of discomfort regarding the word difference in the title of my dissertation and suggested that diversity should be used instead. The term difference, from my point of view, is more inclusive of all the dimensions that I want to discuss here. Furthermore, as Bhabha argues, it is the concept of difference, and not of diversity, that is the basis for postcolonial critique (2006: 155), because it is a discursive construct, resulting from relations of power that produce deep social anxieties and impacts. If we do not confuse it with the concept of deviance/deficit/inferiority, it may perfectly lose its negative connotation. Being different does mean to be distinct, dissimilar, or unlike someone else, but the recognition of such difference(s) should help us to understand what is within the alien Others in a positive way.

¹⁶⁰ Bhabha believes that, in a world where diversity and pluralism are felt so acutely, "... it is actually very difficult, even impossible and counterproductive, to try and fit together different forms of culture and to pretend that they can easily coexist" (1994: 209). Therefore, he continues, "... we really do need the notion of a politics which is based on unequal, uneven, multiple and potentially antagonist, political identities (ibidem: 208). The underlying tensions surrounding those differences are smoothed – and sometimes resolved – in what he terms a "third space", where cultural hybridity is constructed through negotiation, enabling other positions to emerge.

these, in turn, should lead to social transformation, where social inequalities would be eliminated in favour of equally empowered groups that would actively be involved in the formulation of public policy and the management of state. This is, in effect, required, because, as Eber Hampton argues, the mere acquisition of knowledge about each other's culture is not sufficient to enable understanding, since there are generally too many differences at stake. If we take the Native and white world realities, these differences are on at least three levels, according to Hampton's perspective: personal, historical and cultural. As he puts it...

At the cultural level, Native and non-Native conceive of their meeting in different terms and do not understand the other's actions, thoughts, or purpose. Their sense of time of space, of energy, of humanity are all different. Truth, beauty, and justice are all marked and evaluated differently. Epistemology, ontology, and cosmology are all different. (...) The list goes on and there is at once the richness of opportunity and the difficulty of communication.

At the historical level, [they] look at the world from opposed positions. Not only must they contend with personal differences in viewpoint, language, and experiences; not only must they contend with cultural differences in value, understandings of human relationships, and modes of communication; but they must contend with the world-shattering difference between the conquered and the conqueror, the exploited and the exploiter, the racist and the victim of racism. It is this historical difference of perspective that demands more than "learning about each other's cultures". It demands that we change the world.

(1995: 41)

Within the realm of social action and social change, postmodernists/structuralists advocate that we must first recognise that there are multiple axes of difference¹⁶¹ that shape everyday life across all social, cultural, economic and political boundaries, such as the ones based upon race, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, religious beliefs, language and dis/ability. Only then can we all unite in order to struggle for common interests, because it is this recognition of difference and the practice of differentiation that form the basis of solidarity.

That is also the message that Jeannette Armstrong lives by and that tries to relay to her audience. As a torch that lights our eyes and directs them towards the recognition and appreciation of the cultural authenticities that are often hidden behind ourselves and the others, her philosophy of life, and consequently her fiction, embraces the urgent need to learn to live with difference:

¹⁶¹ The concept of difference became prominent in practical politics and in theory-building in the second half of the twentieth century, a time when other concepts such as deconstruction, anti-racism, multiculturalism, new social movements, and critical theory were also considered.

I have always thought of my larger community as those who choose a way of life which protects and treasures the splendor of **difference**, as a way to carry health in a non-adversarial approach to being human. I hear in the voices of indigenous peoples, people of color, women, and those standing for a healthy earth, a significant familiarity of purpose, which I have found here in my cherished Okanagan community.

(Armstrong, 1997: 498; my emphasis)

Jeannette Armstrong embraces the new imperatives of difference locally, within her Okanagan boundaries, but also within national expectations and even globally. Written from an ethically responsible insider position, her novel *Slash* perfectly illustrates this holistic approach, which is reflected in the insistence upon intercultural exchanges and even the possibility of an international collaboration, as Tommy makes clear:

At home in the Okanagan, there was a great deal of controversy over the municipality's applications proposing to dump 2-4D into the lakes to help control the weeds that were starting to take over the lakes. Indian people joined with other people who were concerned about the environment in protesting this proposal.

(214)

The whole thing finally reached a head when approval was given to use the chemical. There was a big flurry of demonstrations and rallies when Greenpeace people were called in to help with the protest. (...) Sure enough they dumped the stuff sometime late during one night or early morning. It had hurt when we heard that. I knew that a lot of white people felt it, too. I knew that some of them were beginning to become real North Americans and they felt that vast unexplainable sadness whenever something like that happened. I realized that they had begun to feel some of the things Indians felt through their ties to the land or the "Mother Earth" as some called it.

(216)

Besides these passages, which bring a political focus on Native issues to the international arena, there are some other excerpts that show signs of mutual respect and understanding among peoples of different backgrounds: Native peoples, Whites and Blacks. For instance, cooperation between Native and White peoples is also evident in the alliance between the Okanagan author and George Ryga¹⁶², who wrote the novel's "Foreword" and whose play, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, is positively alluded to in a metaliterary comment: "Around that same time a play came out about Indians in the

¹⁶² Ryga is, as noted in the section entitled "Biobibliographical Notes", a white Canadian playwright and novelist who befriended Jeannette Armstrong when she was in her late teens. Since then, he has always supported her, as we realise when they worked together in meetings on the Okanagan Indian Curriculum Project. As we are told, he sided with her in regard to her demand to see the project developed by Native people: "George got up and walked out with me and the other Native writers saying, 'I totally agree with Jeannette. It's Native people who should be doing this and I'll help them do it, if I'm the only one.'" (Williamson, 1993: 17-8).

city. (...) This was different. It was a play, sure, but it was like real, too, by what it does show. It talked about what happens to Indians like us. It kind of looked inside us, I guess” (54). Interestingly, Armstrong seems to be suspicious of this new wave of interest that white people suddenly show about the Aboriginal world, and she remarks: “Few of them were as honest as that play” (ibidem).

African Americans are, as previously noted, allies in the same plight, as they are also seen as the Other (31; 35), just like Native peoples. They are all marginalized groups, because their cultural behaviour or physical appearance is different from what has been defined as the norm¹⁶³. But in the sixties and seventies, Black people, and in particular the Black Panthers, fought for rights of citizenship and inspired similar civil rights movements, such as the American Indian Movement (40; 54). Stories of brotherhood between these groups demonstrate that it is possible to bridge cultures.

Bridging, and a sentiment of pan-Indianism I would add, is witnessed during Tommy’s long journeys with caravans, in which he meets Natives from several other cultural groups in Canada and the USA, and learns from them their worldviews, experiences and struggles, sharing his and identifying points of convergence: a history of suffering, exploitation and death that the colonisers inflicted upon the Indigenous populations of both countries. Despite this similarity, and their march for a common cause¹⁶⁴, we are told that Native peoples are “fragmented in [their] approaches with all the different political Indian organizations” (234), and unless they join together, they will not be able to solve their problems. Tommy refutes this idea, because it implies univocality, in contrast to a fundamental plurivocality: the various Indigenous nations should be granted inalienable right to be different and think differently. As he points out:

We are talking about different nations here, not just one large conglomerate group called Indians, the way the government would prefer it and is trying to force on us. We can each deal separately according to each nation’s preference. What may be acceptable to some may not be acceptable to others. (...) The government weakens us by making us fight each other to take one position, as each one wants their position to win out. Each position is important and each has the right to try for it.
(235)

¹⁶³ If the norm is white, Anglo-Saxon, then all the other groups are to be measured against this frame of reference.

¹⁶⁴ Their main objectives are the preservation of Indigenous cultures and traditions, the sovereignty of their lands and peoples and enforcement of all treaties. On the issue of the entrenchment of Native rights into the Canadian constitution, Tommy tells us, at the end of the book, that it is a mistake: “We don’t need anybody’s constitution, what we have is our own already. We hold rights to the land and to nationhood. We just need to have it recognized” (241). It is the moment when he realises that his fight will go on, but the tactics would change: his work would now take place within his community.

As we can see, equality here is rejected in favour of differentiation. In this specific context, difference requires to be recognised and taken account of. It is not regarded as a negative concept; on the contrary, difference is equated with political identity and, as a consequence, it should be accepted as natural and essential.

Generally speaking, this equality/difference dichotomy has been under constant critical scrutiny in Canada, because of the country's impasse around competing paths to unity that take the form of symmetry *versus* asymmetry and uniformity/universality *versus* multiple forms of belonging. The logic of identity and of nation in Canada opens discussion as to whether and how unity is to be attained¹⁶⁵. Paradoxically, the only area of common ground to the problem of a united and coherent national identity seems to be Canada's perpetual efforts at resolving its citizen's differences. In other words, difference is at once a continual menace to unity and a path to achieve it. Therefore, attempts to reach this long-wished national coherence must operate through difference, not against it. A dynamic interplay of equality and difference needs to be promoted: unity **in** difference is, thus, transformed into unity **as** difference in Canada.

Despite this multicultural gaze – or rather, as a result of it¹⁶⁶ – the fact is that sharp disagreements still persist as to whether the Canadian State should be sensitive to the differences among its citizens, and keep this policy of recognising and supporting multiple forms of differentiated citizenship, or, on the other hand, if it should promote an un-hyphenated identity where everyone would be treated in the same manner, without distinction of any kind.

This problematic is of significant importance to the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, for instance. Since the mid 1960s, a general consensus has been reached that the oppressive and paternalistic policies that prevail at the administration of First Nations since before the time of Confederation need to be carefully re-evaluated and replaced. Nevertheless, there has been little agreement on the nature of future changes:

¹⁶⁵ Canada differs from the United States in that Canadian citizens are “different and equal” at the same time, while America solves the challenge imposed by its diversity through the integration of newcomers into a “melting pot”, that is, into an already existing national identity. For this reason, while the latter “had a brilliant solution for the inherent fragility, the inherent combustibility, of a multiethnic society: the creation of a brand-new national identity by individuals who, in forsaking old loyalties and joining to make new lives, melted away ethnic differences” (Schlesinger, 1998: 17), the former is adept of a “multicultural mosaic” or a “kaleidoscope”. This brings binary opposites to the political scene: either Canadians are treated equally or they receive differentiated treatment, because “[dichotomies] are especially problematic in that they posit exclusionary constructs, not complementary or interdependent ones that could shade into one another or function as ‘mixed modes’ rather than absolutes. (...) Continuity between the terms is a logical impossibility” (Code, 1991: 29).

¹⁶⁶ By looking at Canada as a multicultural country, we automatically assume that there are different categories and taxonomic processes: it differentiates the mainstream from the margins of society.

in the late sixties and seventies, much of the dispute revolved around the role of historical treaties in maintaining a relationship of mutual understanding between Native communities and the larger Canadian society, as well as on the relevance, or otherwise, of the Department of Northern and Indian Affairs and of other institutions of Aboriginal governance, such as the *Indian Act*. First Nations' assimilation or differentiation was obviously inherent in the quarrel, as the Hawthorn Report (1967)¹⁶⁷ and the White Paper (1969)¹⁶⁸ show. The latter was a shock to Aboriginal leaders whom considered it to be assimilative and even genocidal¹⁶⁹. As a result, they rejected it and embraced the other document that proposed recommendations for differentiated citizenship.

Inevitably, this choice has conditioned, to a large extent, the way that First Nations have regarded themselves and have been regarded by others. The dilemmas that Native peoples experience in terms of the tensions and contradictions created by colonisation have caused negotiations to drag on. Current attempts at dialogue are still marked by the First Nations' warranted distrust of the Canadian State.

Such suspicion and critique of colonialism are evident in Tommy's words, when he tells his friend Jimmy :

Its [sic] clear what we are suffering from is the effects of colonization. One of the effects of it is the way people see themselves in relation to those who are doing the colonizing. Everything that the colonizers do, tells the Indians they are inferior, that their lifestyle, their language, their religion, their values and even what food they eat, is somehow not as good. (...) We are all affected by colonization.

(221-2)

Tommy goes on referring to tremendous feelings of shame, guilt, betrayal or ambivalence that touch the Natives' soul and that are just a few of the various damaging

¹⁶⁷ This government document defended that Native peoples should be given the status of "citizens plus", due to their historic treaty rights. Obviously, the notion of "plus" implies special treatment, based on the assumption that First Nations are incapable of pursuing their own needs. For further info cf. Hawthorn and Tremblay's *A Survey of Contemporary Indians of Canada* (1966).

¹⁶⁸ This document, presented by Jean Chretien, the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (1968-1974), was in favour of equal citizenship, and thus insisted that all forms of differentiation – including the *Indian Act* and treaty rights – should be eliminated.

For further reading, cf. *Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy* (1969) at <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ai/arp/ls/pubs/cp1969/cp1969-eng.pdf>.

¹⁶⁹ Armstrong's novel, *Slash*, makes direct reference to this 1969 controversy. There is even one song, which "clearly says, 'We don't need your Constitution, B.C. is all Indian land...'" (241). The issue of assimilation became an unavoidable concern, at a time when the White Paper legislation was launched, aiming at eradicating First Nations' rights and all their reserves. As Maeg explains to both Slash and the reader, "Slash, I think it's important we do get some rights into the constitution. (...) We can't survive assimilation (...) if we are forced to be treated equally with the rest of Canada. (...) That's what we will face if we don't try to secure some aboriginal rights. Extinction, ethnocide, genocide; it is a reality now" (243).

effects of colonisation¹⁷⁰. He comes to perceive that many of his own people, namely Native leaders, are betrayed by the comforts of assimilation that depend on the erasure of difference: “Some of us over-compensate by heaping ego-building roles on ourselves to prove we aren’t the ‘average’ Indian and that we are worthy of praise by the white man. You usually find people like that in some political role” (222)¹⁷¹.

Additionally, the reader realises the traditionalist/modernist schisms which are made audible in the voice of the Elders, especially in Pra-cwa’s:

... that is how I think and a few others of us, but you know our people are two now. There is us and there is them that want to try all kinds of new stuff and be more like white people. They don’t even think like us anymore. (...) I like to see them like long time ago; working and happy, strong and healthy, not selfish, lazy and weak. (...) They don’t understand, we kept arguing against new stuff and we kept losing because more people wanted to forget our ways... (...) Our people are two now... (42)

These two antithetical positions between Native traditionalists and modernists have contributed to the political deadlock. While the traditionalists have aimed at recovering and maintaining the lost values and authenticity of the past, the modernists have sought progress and have tried to differentiate themselves from those whom they characterise as “second class people stuck on reservations, living in the dark ages” (43). They consider Native traditionalists as ignorant because, in their attempt to preserve their languages, they have failed to keep pace with the demands of the modern world. We listen to intense discussions between these two conflicting views during the first Band meeting: while some claim that “this is modern times. We can’t argue in courts about the supposed promises that the old Indians talk about [because] they couldn’t even understand English” (135), others refuse to start “moving ahead with the younger generation” (ibidem), as the Elders are the voice of wisdom and experience.

It is amid this controversy, where a series of counter-discourses inhabit, that Tommy begins the reconstruction of his identity. As Margery Fee puts it, he feels the need to reject the dominant discourses of progress and act as a means of self-empowerment, because “[h]e realizes that he has to articulate that difference for

¹⁷⁰ Julian Burger, in his *The Gaia Atlas of First Peoples* (1990: 82), demonstrates the effects of colonialism on Indigenous peoples, as well as the vicious cycle that prevents them from achieving progress (cf. figure 66).

¹⁷¹ Tommy had acknowledged this reality previously, when focusing on the corruption that plagues tribal band councils: “In D.C., I had met some of the people (...) that were pretty bitter about the kind of corruption that was widespread down there. (...) I thought that was crazy. How in hell could Indians back up the B.I.A. against their own people?” (109).

himself, that culture consists not of rights and definitions and laws on paper, but of practices” (Fee, 1990: 171). More than being “ready to ‘talk action’” and do nothing (107), more than being “an actor, acting without really being part of the scene” (179), Tommy decides to connect with tradition, recalling his father’s wise advice that “[i]f you learn good things and think good, no paper laws are needed...” (21). He then moves from words to action, renewed with the spirit of making a difference. He somehow becomes an evangelist that spreads a message of hope in the Aboriginal ways, of tolerance and of support to his people: “We had to tell them that it’s okay to dress and talk **different** and especially that it’s okay to practise caring for each other in our customs. Saying all that was necessary” (147; my emphasis). Tommy himself had learned it from “the elders, the traditionalists, and, in Slash’s own generation, the women. These are the people who open his eyes politically and whose words and example lead him to the insights which help him to integrate spirituality and politics”, as Noel Elizabeth Currie points out (1990: 149).

Native women are, actually, instilled with the role of teachers; they are insurers of the future generations, which means that a brief discussion of gender issues is particularly relevant to this work.

Slash has been read with suspicion by white Canadian feminists, because, as Betsy Warland remarks, “it is narrated from the point of view of a young Indian man” (Armstrong and Warland, March 1989: 45)¹⁷². However, Jeannette Armstrong, in her interview with Janice Williamson, makes us understand that, in an Aboriginal contextual framework, male and female come to signify **different equals** in terms of power relations. In Native languages, there is no gender distinction and, thus, no hierarchies placing the female term subordinate to the male. In her own words,

... if we refer to a person as a woman, it’s always in terms of that woman’s connection or relationship to us or to another person or to the work that’s being done. There’s no way of connecting that to gender. The culture doesn’t separate by gender – though it recognizes that certain things are attached to male and female out of necessity – but in terms of who we are, what we do, and how we think and feel, and gender doesn’t have anything to do with how well we do things or how as human beings we connect to one another.

(Williamson, 1993: 14)

¹⁷² On this issue, Julia V. Emberley informs us that in June 1988, at the Third Annual Feminist Book Fair conference, held in Montreal, “Jeannette Armstrong came under attack from colonial white feminists over her use of a Native man, rather than a Native woman, as her central character” (1993: 148). In her defence, the Okanagan writer asserts: “I’ve been called by feminist groups for making the central character male, and I’m saying that’s the exact reason I did it [to allow changes/healing in the male role]” (Williamson, 1993: 15).

Therefore, contrarily to Native languages, which tend to regard the individual as a balanced whole, that is, first and foremost as a Human Being, in Western languages – and English, in this particular case – practices of gendering are the norm¹⁷³: the category of gender is installed in language and it is very difficult to hide it, unless one tries to avoid the use of pronouns, which is altogether something very difficult to do¹⁷⁴. From the moment of one's birth, and even earlier while in the mother's womb, there is the compulsive need to immediately identify a baby as a boy or a girl, because we come to our personhood by and through language. It is in the act of naming someone/something that we bring her/him/it into conceptual existence and make meaning in the world.

By assuming a male perspective in her novel, Jeannette Armstrong did not intend to legitimise and reinforce patriarchal power; rather, as pointed out earlier in this dissertation, she argues that her choice was inextricably linked to “the politics at that time” (Williamson, 1993: 14), a time when machismo and the European notion of leadership ruled the day¹⁷⁵. She further advances a philosophical reason: she wanted Native peoples to reconcile themselves with their traditional worldview, one which regarded masculinity and femininity not as opposites, but as synergistic; their relationship should be one of balance, reciprocity, complementarity and responsibility:

Healing needs to take place between male and female, and the males need to reconcile their own female power, compassion, love, and caring. Their need to feel and be sensitive can only be learned from the Native females, or through the long process that the character Slash had to go through.

(ibidem: 15)

Taking it all into consideration, then, we may say together with the Okanagan author that, despite criticism, her novel...

¹⁷³ Norms are implicated in the exercise of power, that is, in the action on the Other's action(s). In other words, subjection takes place through norms: the “I” becomes no more than a subject of the society where I live in. In terms of gender ideology, we are expected to display behaviours and attributes that enable others to recognise us as appropriately “feminine” or “masculine”.

¹⁷⁴ Even when we use the masculine generic (man, mankind), which intends to function androgynously representing both the male and the female, we are empowering man, because we understand the male gender to be universal. Christine A. Smith *et al* elaborate on this problematic: “Grammar books have traditionally advised writers to choose “he” when the gender of the individual is unknown. This (and the use of ‘man’ or ‘mankind’ to describe people in general) is known as the ‘masculine generic.’ Feminists argued that the masculine generic omits women from the conversation; indicates that men are the ‘standard’ and women are the ‘other’ (...). Psycholinguistic research indicates that the masculine generic shapes the thoughts of those who hear and read it, sometimes below the level of awareness” (2010: 363).

¹⁷⁵ This reality is well depicted in *Slash*: female activists were seen as pathetic, because an AIM member was supposed to show “a mean look (...). A mean image” (152). According to the protagonist, it is only when “young chicks” adopt a more masculine appearance that they become less ridiculous: “They kind of looked silly for the first few days until they got the hang of how to loosen their hair and wear jeans and old army jackets” (ibidem).

... is a very feminist book, and it really works with, and talks about, female thinking and the empowerment of people through love, and compassion, and spirituality. And whether you want to call it female power, that's beside the point, but that's currently what it's being called. I think it's human at its best.

(Lutz, 1991: 18)

Instead of following a traditional liberal feminism that focuses exclusively on the struggle between male and female and ignores the social relations among women of different races, cultures and classes, Armstrong has chosen to develop a feminism of decolonisation¹⁷⁶, because, as Emberley states...

[f]eminism is about women, their structural and social relations between and among each other and between women and men. It is about how the gendered and racially inscribed character of those relations is imagined, violated, transformed, reproduced, negated, survived, lived, and reasoned.

(1993: 86)

Feminism then shall not be “abstracted into a universal category to meet the needs of a select few women” (ibidem); it must be seen and understood as an ideology of gender relations in the context of specific social, economic and historical circumstances. In other words, the analysis of gender relations in a Native society must necessarily be different from the one which takes into account women from other races or classes. For instance, we cannot integrate the experience of Native women as part of the universal oppression of women¹⁷⁷, because we need to take into consideration the effects of colonisation and its associated ideology.

Jeannette Armstrong provides us with one of the most intelligible and lucid commentaries on the colonisation process, in which she reminds us that, as colonisation progressed, it forced Aboriginal peoples in general, and women in particular, to adapt themselves to the presence of the larger dominant society. One example of this adaptation is the formation of a hierarchy, leading to relationships of domination and subordination, namely in the structure of male and female power.

We are all very much aware of the history of the colonization process, which has systematically achieved, through various well-known measures, a breakdown in the structures upon which the well-being and health of our peoples depended. (...)

¹⁷⁶ Julia Emberley advances this idea in her *Thresholds of Difference* to refer to the need of a different notion of gender formation within traditional Aboriginal societies (1993: 4).

¹⁷⁷ By way of illustration, it should be noted that the Aboriginal women's movement, instead of employing a discourse of “them” versus “us” when referring to First Nations' men, claim that their own healing and/or empowerment requires the same of the Aboriginal collective; that is, men, women, youth and elders must work to the same end. Women's healing is not a separate process; rather, it must be a concerted effort by both sexes.

What is not well known is that the influences of a patriarchal and imperialistic culture upon a people whose systems were fundamentally co-operative units has been not only devastating, but also dehumanising to a degree that is unimaginable. (...) I speak in specific of the severe and irreversible effects on Aboriginal women, and the resultant effect on our nations.

The role of Aboriginal women in the health of family systems from one generation to the next was one of immense power. The immensity of the responsibility of bearer of life and nourisher of all generations is just becoming clear in its relationship to all societal functioning.

In traditional Aboriginal society, it was woman who shaped the thinking of all its members in a loving, nurturing atmosphere within the base family unit. (...)

(Armstrong, 1996c: ix)

As the Okanagan writer puts it, Aboriginal societies were egalitarian in nature¹⁷⁸, but colonisation indelibly affected Aboriginal women's roles and responsibilities¹⁷⁹. Traditionally, there was a holistic approach to life, and balance reigned as previously noted, because communal efforts were recognised as beneficial to all Aboriginal communities' development.

Prior to the colonising influences, being an Aboriginal woman meant a connection with the spirit of the Creator: thus, the image of the Aboriginal woman as lifegiver, caretaker and nurturer. One of the traditional roles of Aboriginal women was actually to maintain tribal identity for their future generations and, as a result, they were seen as the real leaders of their communities.

¹⁷⁸ Even though Jeannette Armstrong may seem to be embracing and promoting a binary view of the relationship between men and women in the excerpt above, the truth is that she is arguing in favour of the different, but reciprocal and complementary roles that they performed.

¹⁷⁹ As Carol Devens points out, "the friction between men and women is in fact the bitter fruit of colonization" (1992: 5), because, as we are told, "[a]s men grew more receptive to introduced practices and values that they hoped would allow them to deal successfully with the whites, women stood only to lose status and autonomy. Thus, whereas many men favored accommodation, women tended to stress 'traditional' ways. As a consequence, asymmetrical, even antagonistic relations between the sexes eventually prevailed in many communities" (ibidem: 4).

Taking the novel under study into consideration, if any doubt is left about the importance of women to Native cultures, that should surely be dispelled at the point when Tommy comments that “[i]t’s really the women who keep things going smooth. All Indian men know that. We learned early from our mothers and grandmothers that it is women who are the strength of the people” (153). But this acknowledgment, however, does not imply that men treat women as they should be. On the contrary, at the beginning of the novel we are informed that “... none of the Indian girls ever got asked to dance at the sock-hops because us guys wouldn’t dance with them because the white guys didn’t” (35). Additionally, as Tommy confesses, colonial distorted perceptions on the Aboriginal women as easy and dirty squaws¹⁸⁰ were transferred to Aboriginal men, whom objectified women as sexually servile and treated them as commodities to be used and abused: “We learned the drum songs and learned how to dress to look the part. (...) A lot of chicks were impressed with it. Enough of them that we got pretty arrogant in the way we treated them. We were the bad guys nobody should mess with” (122).

INDIAN WOMAN	
I am a squaw a heathen a savage basically a mammal	I am an Indian woman where I walk beauty surrounds me (...)
I am female only in the ability to breed and bear papooses to be carried quaintly on a board or lost to welfare	I am the keeper of generations (...) I am the strength of nations
I have no feelings	(...)
The sinuous planes of my brown body carries no hint of the need to be caressed desired loved its only use to be raped beaten and bludgeoned in some B grade Western	I am the giver of life to whole tribes I carry the seeds (...) give them life (...) watch them grow battered and crippled under all the lies I teach them the songs I help them to hear I give them truth
I have no beauty (...) I have no emotions (...) something is wrong here someone is lying	I am a sacred trust I am Indian woman

(Armstrong, 1998a: 229-30)

¹⁸⁰ As Emma LaRocque remarks, even though this word sounds like a mispronunciation of the Algonquian word “squoh”, which means woman, generally speaking the white man’s use of the former has no direct correlation with the latter (Lutz, 1991: 191-2; 201-2). In literature, Aboriginal women are usually defined in binary terms as either Princesses or Squaws. As Gordon Johnston explains it, “most common Indian figures in such [Native] stories clearly represent the masculine projections of their authors and societies. ‘Princesses’ such as Pocahontas and Minnehaha are idealized, self-sacrificing soul mates; ‘squaws’ are perfect drudges and sexual conveniences” (1987: 54).

Native women's adaptations and reactions to colonialism have varied: while some have been hindered or overcome by the continuous barriers that were placed in front of their traditional lifestyles, others have developed survival strategies, maintaining and passing on their traditions and customs to their future generations¹⁸¹. Tommy's mother, for instance, represents all Aboriginal women who are strong-willed, powerful and assertive, providing their children with advice and guidance. She claims that changing the negative and stereotypical perceptions/constructions of Native peoples is of utmost importance, and that this change requires a holistic connection to one's family and community, instead of following the white man's path:

“Then why don't you quit your drinking and doping? I ain't dumb, I can see what you're doing to your body and head. Tommy, you and so many others just can't seem to see that the answers are right under your noses. (...) We want you to be able to help our people by using your smartness that was given to you for that. (...) You and young people like you are our hope. You ain't brainwashed and you got a good education. Now you acting the same as those who ain't got parents teaching them any better. (...) How you gonna change the world? How you gonna fight, as you say, for your people, if you do the very stuff that you are fighting against?”

(165-6)

With the introduction of the European educational system, Native women's role as guardians and carriers of culture gradually start losing its significance, because children are taken away from their families and communities. Aboriginal children are expected to spend so many hours in school that the school's teacher soon becomes one of the main influences in their learning. Tommy tells us that “[s]ometimes, the days were so long before [they] went home (...) [that i]t was already dark when [they] got [there]” (16).

Besides, we get to know that Aboriginal education is very different from European schooling. Whereas in the former, Aboriginal children have many teachers who bestow life knowledge upon them, because the whole community is involved in an engaged education process, the teacher at the town school teaches them basic reading,

¹⁸¹ Mardi, Elise and Maeg, on one hand, and Tommy's mother, on the other, are all symbols of resistance. The first ones embody Aboriginal women whom, just like the historical character Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, were female warriors in the American Indian Movement, while the latter resisted assimilation and reclaimed traditional responsibilities of nurturer, caregiver and educator. It is interesting to notice that Mardi in particular is often thought to represent the Micmac militant martyr, because just like the historical character, her death was also rife with suspicion. For further reading, cf. Lutz (1991: 17-8) and Williamson (1993: 19).

writing and arithmetic¹⁸². Tommy is good at them all, but, as he himself admits, he feels the need to fail at times, just to conform to stereotypes, and please his teacher:

Sometimes, I think the teachers really got mad at me because I always knew all the answers. Sometimes I knew it was because they didn't like an Indian to do better than some of their favourite white kids. Most of the time, when I got into a new class the teacher would automatically think I was dumb. (...) Like one teacher, who explained what she wanted in slow Hollywood talk. (...) ... I had to work to keep good marks because some teachers liked to find stuff wrong. (...) Sometimes I put half wrong answers just to keep everybody happy.

(38-9)

In fact, "... there [i]s 'passive discrimination' against [Native] kids in school"¹⁸³ (85), because white teachers' expectations of students are determined by race. They view Aboriginal children as academically inferior and embrace racist attitudes when addressing them. One clear example of that, besides the fact that teachers respond less positively to them than to their white counterparts, is the Principal's speech, which, instead of making them feel welcome, is more like a threat: "'You Indians are lucky to be here. We'll get along just fine as long as you don't steal from the other kids'" (23).

If schools fail to facilitate an understanding of difference, obviously white children also find it very difficult to respect and appreciate the Other's culture. In *Slash* we notice that, as a result of the prevailing prejudice, Tommy's colleagues indiscriminately use derogatory adjectives and phrases against their Native peers: "'You frigging Injuns are nothing but thieves, full of lice, everybody knows that!'" (24).

Tommy discovers that discrimination pervades the entire educational system: First Nations' students are demoralised, despised, disparaged and ostracised by white students and staff. In this context, while Tommy and many other Aboriginal youngsters become disinterested and dissatisfied with school and eventually drop out¹⁸⁴, others, like

¹⁸² Reluctantly, Aboriginal parents allowed their children to go to this type of schools because they believed that they would need a formal education, along with a traditional one, in order to live and survive in this changing modern world. Eber Hampton, for instance, citing Bradley's work, affirms that "[m]ost Indian parents want their children to be taught those things needed for success in both the white and the Native worlds" (1995: 7), because as he suggests "[w]e need educational leaders who can confidently deal with all aspects of modern society" (ibidem).

However, it should be stressed that if Native children were allowed to attend town school, the same did not apply with regard to residential schooling. On this issue, the reader is informed that Tommy's "school only went as far as Grade Six. Anybody who went to school after that went to residential school. Dad never let Danny go. I knew I wouldn't go, either" (16).

¹⁸³ I would even go one step further to agree with George Ryga in his "Foreword" to *Slash*, and advance that Native peoples were subjected to "more than passive discrimination. It is an[...] insult to a whole race of people thousands of generations old" (9).

¹⁸⁴ The narrator in *Slash* informs us that when he abandoned school he "was sixteen then, in Grade Eleven" (51). With few exceptions, quitting school at the age of sixteen was the trend among Aboriginal

Jimmy¹⁸⁵, try to fit into the system and, thus, start “acting white”. They believe that they need to be immersed into the white society’s norms and practices in order to survive and, consequently, they give up on their culture and language, because they think that these act as obstructions to the educational process. Pra-cwa, on this issue, contends that this type of reasoning is contrary to the very fundamental Aboriginal philosophy of life:

Ever since those young people went to school away from home, they are changed. They don’t like our ways. Maybe it’s because they only know English. They are ashamed of everything Indian. (...) They got no pride. Everything was given to them at that school and they got to liking to live like white people in white painted rooms with electric lights and shitters inside their houses.

(25-6)

Sooner or later, this process of assimilation alienates Aboriginal students from their past, weakens their present and cuts off their future. Inevitably, they start losing their faith in themselves and in their societies; they lose their cultures and their self-sustaining lifestyles¹⁸⁶.

Based on the evidence of an educational system that is *a priori* hostile to Native peoples and that reflects the worldview, the voices, the history and epistemology of the dominant discourse, Tommy concludes:

I understood then that most Indian people have knowledge of different ways and values and that’s what comes into conflict with some of the values that are taught to them in schools and by society as a whole. I realized that schools are meant to teach

students, as Bock describes: “there are a number of factors that produce negative feelings among older students, which results in their leaving school as soon as they reach the age of 16. These include real or imagined slights from teachers, the authoritarian structure of the school, and the separation of standardized curriculum from daily life. There is growing feeling that, due to discrimination and general unemployment, real opportunities may not be increased despite further education” (1966: 39).

¹⁸⁵ Ironically, but as advanced by Bock (cf. above), we get to know that despite Jimmy’s school achievement, his academic credentials do not translate into the easy attainment of his career goals: “He had gotten the education he had wanted. He had a degree or something in Business Administration. The strange thing was that none of the Indian Band Councils hired him” (219). Jimmy acknowledges intragroup racism, when he comments that his best chance is to be given relatively unskilled jobs, which are incommensurate with his qualifications: “I got my diploma, but shit, nobody will hire me. (...) they hire white people in the positions I’m looking for. Just because I’m Indian they seem to think automatically I’m incompetent. Our own people are like that. Sure they will hire me for puny jobs, but they hire some ex-D.I.A. goat for the cream jobs” (220-1). At the end of the novel, however, we learn that Jimmy’s effort is rewarded: “He really got involved with the whole issue around the constitution. He was then working as manager for one of the Bands” (234).

¹⁸⁶ Our culture is, as previously noted, what gives us our sense of security and familiarity; it is our home, a place where we naturally belong and which stamps us with our identity. If we become alienated from our Selves, we follow an extremely self-destructive path, because alienation is often compounded by other disconnections, such as victimisation, a lack of human connection which leads to isolation, hostility, violence and ultimately death. Danny is a clear example of someone who, having become alienated from his tribal identity, cannot escape self-destruction, and Tommy himself realises that he is heading to the same end: “... I felt I could easily slip into oblivion like my brother Danny” (180).

the young of the middle class the best way to survive their society and to maintain its system. They are not meant to instruct those who do not have the values of that society. So confusion arises inside each of the Indian kids who begin to question which value system they must live by.

(212)

It is undeniable that much of the traditional curriculum is Eurocentric in nature and that it ignores the culturally diverse experiences of students. Eber Hampton tells us that “Western education is hostile in its structure, its curriculum, its context, and its personnel” (1995: 37), since it aims, in particular, at erasing Indigenous traditions and cultures and assimilating children, and consequently following generations, into the dominant society. Marie Battiste clearly explains the objectives and the tremendous outcomes of this educational system, when she denounces:

For a century or more¹⁸⁷, DIAND attempted to destroy the diversity of Aboriginal world-views, cultures, and languages. It defined education as transforming the mind of Aboriginal youth rather than educating it. Through ill-conceived government policies and plans, Aboriginal youths were subjected to a combination of powerful but profoundly distracting forces of cognitive imperialism and colonization. Various boarding schools, industrial schools, day schools, and Eurocentric educational practices ignored or rejected the world-views, languages and values of Aboriginal parents in the education of their children. The outcome was the gradual loss of the world-views, languages, and cultures and the creation of widespread social and psychological upheaval in Aboriginal communities.

(1995: viii)

Indeed, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development assumed control over the education of Native children across Canada in 1867 and, a century after that, the outcome could only be negative not only because of the devastating effects caused to Native peoples, but also because we come to know that education was in a critical condition: it had become a political issue among non-Native people for control of funding. The non-Natives’ greed and lack of commitment to the Native cause is criticised in *Slash*:

The Chiefs said that a large percent of the dollars allocated by Treasury Board for services to the Indians under the Indian Act was used up by the D.I.A. staff, who knew little or nothing about the real situations on all the reserves.

¹⁸⁷ To be accurate, it happened since the Indian Act was passed in 1876, giving exclusive authority to the Parliament of Canada to legislate with respect to Aboriginal peoples. Additionally, as if it was not enough, federal control over Native education was strengthened even further by the 1951 revision of the Indian Act, which, as Henderson puts it, legally “terminated the chief’s and band council’s authority to frame rules and regulations for education, leaving the minister of Indian affairs with the exclusive authority” (1995: 253).

They said that our Band offices were terribly underfunded to carry out the tasks for the members. Such things as shortages of funds for education and housing had been identified as common problems on all the reserves.

Some of us got together and counted up the members of people employed to service us, and counted the number of staff cars they had and their salary range as civil servants, and the figure had been appalling.

(172)

This scenario led First Nations to start demanding their right to “carry out the jobs that were done by the D.I.A. staff” (ibidem), because they would do it better than any non-Native, as they “would have a better insight into most of the[ir] problems” (ibidem)¹⁸⁸. As a result, in 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood produced its first policy statement known as “Indian Control of Indian Education”, which brought First Nations and the federal government together in a meaningful discussion that culminated in the First Nations’ jurisdiction over First Nations’ education. Nonetheless, as Marie Ann Battiste asserts, such jurisdiction was limited, “because the federal government had merely envisioned Indian control as the administrative control of programs” (1995: xi), whereas the redefinition or restructuring of Aboriginal education should have been the primary focus.

Eber Hampton, just like Marie Ann Battiste, also highlights that in reality not much has changed and even current white educational systems and procedures still do not meet the needs of the First Nations of Canada: “Indian children face a daily struggle against attacks on their identity, their intelligence, their way of life, their essential worth. They must continually struggle to find self-worth, dignity and freedom in being who they are” (1995: 35).

Coping successfully with the challenges imposed by an educational system that often devalues, excludes or transforms the very essence of a being into an Other depends on a combination of inner strength, together with community and spiritual support. That is the message that Jeannette Armstrong relays when she makes Tommy’s Dad observe:

I am proud of what I am. (...) ... I didn’t go to school like you and many others. I think it’s what hurts you. You got mixed up inside. Not strong and steady like you need to be. Lots of young people are like that. You got to find a way back, to be

¹⁸⁸ These demands became widespread within Native reserves and concerned several fields of action, as Tommy goes on to note: “Many different reserves talked about Indian control over this and over that. Indian control of education was a big topic. Indian control over our laws for hunting and fishing was another important thing that was discussed everywhere. A new determination grew among all the people with a new kind of awareness and a search for deeper understanding of our culture” (212).

strong inside again. It's what you're looking for. Maybe that's what a lot of young people are looking for. That's why there is all them protests and angry demands.
(86-7)

This strength that Tommy is advised to look for is inside himself; it has always been there: only he could not understand it. Had only Tommy retained his core community and spiritual values in the face of colonial oppression, he would not have had to go through such an ordeal. A spiritual vacuum is at the heart of Tommy's malaise and it is when he understands it and fully embraces the ancestral spiritual beliefs and practices that his authentic sense of identity, purpose and direction is restored.

Interestingly, the fact that Tommy moves away further and further from his spirituality does not stem from his encounter with the Catholic Church. On the contrary, the reserve priest is sympathetic to him and to the Native peoples in general. Instead of being like the old one, who "looked almost not a person, especially with the black suit he wore all the time" (28), the new priest's style is decidedly different from the image of someone who is "mean with the little kids", "boring" (*ibidem*) and who lacked pedagogy. As Tommy remarks, "I met the new priest there [at a party put on by the white community]. I didn't even know he was a priest. He talked and laughed and played with the little kids. They really liked him. I did, too" (29)¹⁸⁹.

According to Tommy, more than tolerance, the new priest does show an attitude of deep religious faith. For him, it does not matter what a person's faith system is, because the priest, just like Native peoples, believes that it is the relationship to every thing around us that is important to our spiritual well-being and development. He does not even try to convert Tommy to Catholicism, because he recognises that the protagonist, at that time, is one and whole with the Creator. His words are full of wisdom, encouragement, depth and understanding, when he states:

"Tommy, don't ever change your way. You know, you are my good friend and you can visit me anytime at my home, if you need to talk or ask questions about school or about anything. Now, about church, some people really do need it because they don't see things the way you do. They need to feel good and clean sometimes and they feel they can only do that in a place like the church."
(37)

¹⁸⁹ Taking the specific case of the Okanagan peoples into consideration, we may say, together with Duane Thomson, that generally speaking the attitude of Native peoples towards white priests has been favourable, but "[t]hat is not to say that Indians abandoned traditional beliefs completely; clearly they did not, for numerous Indian people to this day engage in traditional religious practices" (1990: 139).

Tommy believes that he does not need to go to church to be cleansed as a child, because he follows a traditional way of life and he knows “that the Creator [i]s all over. You could talk to Him anywhere but mostly in your heart” (30). The Land is, according to Native peoples, a gift given to them by the Creator and, thus, everything on and under it is alive with spirit beings¹⁹⁰. The Land provides food sustenance, as well as spiritual nourishment; hence, it is considered to be sacred. In addition to the material and spiritual nourishment that it provides, the Land is also important because, as discussed in the previous chapter, living on ancestral grounds enables individuals to maintain a link with the past. In other words, and bearing in mind Tommy’s experience, landscape features such as the mountains and rivers represent links through which he remains connected with his memories and his home community. Richardson refers to this connectedness/interrelatedness of all things as a different dimension to Canadian life, one which derives from the belief that Human Beings are part of a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts:

I knew what Indians meant when they said that they felt really at home only on their own environment. I knew that out here they were the masters, and that in the cities, even in villages, they were diminished. From that moment, I knew there was a different dimension to Canadian life than anything I had understood before, and that it was something of inestimable value. Until I met Aboriginals, I had never thought of human beings as participants in a natural system that is endlessly recycled, with every element dependent on every other element.

(1993: 13)

It is this balance in one’s life that Jeannette Armstrong wants her readers to capture and live by. She wants to convey that the circle of learning is continuous and holistic, and so it must necessarily be associated with one’s spiritual, emotional, physical and academic growth.

Throughout this chapter, I argued that the Native and the white world’s values, characteristics and expectations differ sharply from one another, because “[p]eople attempt to structure the outside world by matching external stimuli against internal conceptual patterns” (Zapf, 1989: 244). In this sense, perception is formed through internalisation and negotiation of our taken-for-granted shared assumptions and, thus, it

¹⁹⁰ Conrad George comments on this, by stating that “[w]hen the Creator made the universe he placed his hand on the whole thing, so everything is spiritual. All has to effect all other things” (1990: 192). Julian Burger further develops it, arguing that “First peoples see existence as a living blend of spirits, nature, and people. All are one, inseparable and interdependent – a holistic vision shared with mystics throughout the ages. (...) For many indigenous peoples spirits permeate matter – they animate it. (...) Natural phenomena – hills, birds, animals, plants, trees, rivers – embody spirits” (1990: 64).

differs from culture to culture. Bearing this in mind, I tried to cover some of the most significant differences in *Slash*, such as gender differences; differences between traditionalists and modernists; difference and consequent alienation of one's identity; educational differences, and spiritual and Land-oriented beliefs as a different and holistic approach to life. I am aware that some others, such as the differences listed by Julia V. Emberley in the table below, could have been discussed but the ones on which I focused my attention were judged to be best suited to my purposes.

All these differences create conflicts and misunderstandings, and as the English-speaking anthropologist Wendy Wickwire suggests, “[t]he only way we can come together is to make the connections. Or understand the disconnections” (Schorcht, 2003: 140). So does Jeannette Armstrong appeal to our common humanity, which greatly outweighs our differences and knits everyone and everything together. As she puts it, it is time to make room for alliances across racial and cultural divides:

Metaphors/ Concepts of:	Dominant White Culture	Native Culture
food	store-bought (29, 39) 'sliced bread and bologna'	'baked biscuits' 'fried deer meat' (17, 27)
health	vitamins (15) hygiene (38)	plant and animal medicines (22)
politics	'white man's leader' (18) Diefenbaker	chiefs/elders (18, 22) Old Pra-cwa
law	'paper laws' (21)	'real' law (21) (law of the 'good')
play	alcohol (20)	hunting (21)
language	English (17)	'talking Indian' (17, 18, 26)
education	residential schools (17)	the ranch or bush
social value	commodification: houses/ TVs/electricity 'shitters inside their houses' (25, 26)	ritualization: drumming, dancing, sweats (27, 37)
economy	charity/capitalism (private property, 25)	exchange/gift-giving (31, 29)
knowledge	as truth/fiction (the Sasquatch episode, 35)	'storytelling' (16, 17, 19, 20)
religion	church/Catholicism/ priests (30)	Creator/spirituality (30)
gender	white women: 'Hightuned Polly' (19)/teacher, Mrs Hosfah (15) the male 'sissy' who reads (16)	the Mother/gatherer (17); the male 'sissy' who cannot skin a deer (16)

Table 2. “[A] set of signals that identify a coded idiom of Native difference from the dominant Euro-Canadian culture” (Emberley, 1993: 133).

... what we need to talk about and what we need to look at is our humaneness, our compassion, and our love, and how we need to rebuild that! How we need to put that back together, so we can come back to a wholeness and health! So we can be what we were meant to be as a healthy human population. (...) And it's here that Native people's words, and their thinking, and their process, and their system, their philosophy, worldview or whatever, need to be understood, and looked at, and assimilated by other people (...) because we all deserve (...) the happiness, and the joy, and the cleanness, and the purity. We all deserve that! (...) That's what I see as important between us from other countries of the world, the basic love of each other and all things around us, being the most important thing that we need to talk about.

(Lutz, 1990: 32)

That is the main reason why Jeannette Armstrong writes: she wants her voice to be heard/read and passed down from generation to generation, so that the circle remains

unbroken. Words are sacred and they need to be represented on paper to nourish the future generations. I shall pore over the convergence of orality and written word on the following pages, while analysing the formal structure of *Slash*.

II. 6.3. THE CONVERGENCE OF ORALITY AND WRITTEN WORD:

THE FORMAL STRUCTURE OF *SLASH*

Words are memory
a window in the present
a coming to terms with meaning
history made into now
a surge in reclaiming
the enormity of the past
a piece in the collective experience of time
(...) a fertile ground
from which generations spring...
(Armstrong, 1998b: 181-2)

As expressed at the end of the previous chapter and in Jeannette Armstrong's poem above, words are powerful, because they convey thoughts, beliefs and values which link the past to the present and influence a community, a nation and the whole world. Thereby, they are sacred acts, for they are repositories of cultural knowledge used to interpret present-day realities.

Just like Armstrong, who conceives of words as "a window in the present", the anthropologist Edward Bruner outlines a similar argument, noting that stories are interpretative devices which "... give meaning to the present and enable us to see that present as part of a set of relationships involving a constituted past and a future" (Bruner, 1986: 153). However, as he goes on to warn us, "... narratives change, all stories are partial, all meanings incomplete. There is no fixed meaning in the past, for with each new telling the context varies, the audience differs, the story is modified (...). We continually discover new meanings" (ibidem).

In fact, a narrative is always a presentation of what we assume to be or have been real at a certain moment, rather than a transparent statement of historical facts¹⁹¹.

¹⁹¹ Agnès Grant, on this issue, states that "[t]hrough often the story is based on some factual occurrence they do not have their origin in reality but rather in the writer's imagination. Traditionally oral narrative

Such presentation is necessarily always partial, because it depends on the knowledge or the information that we choose to re-tell and on the way it is perceived by the ones who receive it. Julie Cruikshank, among others, subscribes to the same views expressed above, by stating that “[w]hat appears to be the ‘same’ story, even in the repertoire of one individual, has multiple meanings depending on location, circumstance, audience, and stage of life of narrator and listener” (1998: 44). In her *Reading Voices*, this very same Professor and anthropologist advances that, “[b]ecause oral traditions are never fixed or static, historical events are often woven into existing stories. (...) The ability to create, in words, a situation for a listener who might have to experience it sometime in the future is important”, but she reminds us that “[i]t is never simple to interpret ideas across cultural boundaries” and from the distance of time, which means that “[i]t’s important to get the words right” (1991: 18).

Native peoples have, for some decades now, started reclaiming their voices, in order to provide another lens, another point of view, which, as Cruikshank remarks, “... subvert[s] official orthodoxies and (...) challenge[s] conventional ways of thinking”

When I speak
 I choose the words gently
 asking the whys
 dangerous words
 in the language of the newcomers
 words releasing unspeakable grief
 for all that is lost
 dispelling lies in the retelling
 I choose threads of truth
 that in its telling cannot be hidden
 and brings forward
 old words that heal
 moving to a place
 where a new song begins
 a new ceremony
 through medicine eyes I glimpse a world
 that cannot be stolen or lost
 only shared
 shaped by new words
 joining precisely to form old patterns
 a song of stars
 glittering against an endless silence
 (Armstrong, 1998b: 186-7)

(1998: xiii). These narratives of Native resistance and, in turn, the narratives that non-Native people construct in response to them, must be understood as “... transformations of each other; they are retellings of a narrative derived from the discursive practice of our historical era (...), instances of never-ceasing reflexivity” (Bruner, 1986: 149)¹⁹². They are, in a word, a reaction to imperial hegemony, but, as we have seen before, they

and poetry were used to transmit spiritual beliefs, the values of the society or to record history. Every effort was made to be as accurate as possible. (...) Fiction, with purely imaginary characters doing imaginary things, was viewed as untruth, hence to be avoided...” (1992: 211). Actually, narratives have a mimetic function – or rather as Genette, quoted by Hawthorn (1998: 49), comments: “the *illusion of mimesis*” – as they mirror individuals and societies: they have the potential to show us where we have come from, where we are and where we might head to.

¹⁹² Beth Brant comments on this practice and claims that it tends to be monologic rather than discursive, because, in her words, “white publishers (as a rule) do not want to open themselves to the stories that are not full of pathos and victimization. (...) This would mean they’d have to give up their historical amnesia when it comes to us [Native peoples] and our way. They like to see us as ‘plight’ rather than the dedicated survivors we are” (1994: 39).

are more than that: they cannot be reduced or simplified as a response to colonial domination¹⁹³, because that would annihilate their culturally specific features and functions.

Jeannette Armstrong refers to this dual approach to Native literatures, when she argues that there are lies which need to be dispelled and, for this reason, Native writers have had the tremendous responsibility of...

telling (...) what really happened until everyone (...) understands that this condition did not happen through choice or some cultural defect on [the First Nations'] part (...). Equally important is the affirmation of the true beauty of [her] people whose fundamental co-operative values resonated pacifism and predisposed [Native] cultures as vulnerable to the reprehensible value systems which promote domination and aggression.

(1990: 144)

More precisely, she believes in the power of words as both an act of resistance and an agent of healing and reconciliation within Native communities. She wishes her words to reach as many people as possible, both Native and non-Native, because she wants them all to understand the damage done by racial stereotypes.

Speaking on behalf of others is a responsibility that is deeply engrained in oral tradition, but the flow of present times has required oral wisdom to be moved to paper, as previously stated. Contemporary Native writers are now continuing this ongoing and vital tradition through the written form.

The process of putting Native words into writing implies that the voices of First Nations' writers are located on their own terms, in their own literary space, transcending genre boundaries. Jeannette Armstrong cautions us that writing "... must serve the purpose of your voice, rather than you serving the purpose of th[e] genre" (Isernhagen, 1999: 174) and she shows her excitement in realising that En'owkin "students are pushing the limits of that and consciously thinking about genres as not being confined to the Western idea" (ibidem: 175). In essence, rather than a mere imitation/reproduction of mainstream literary styles, Native peoples are re-creating old

¹⁹³ Beth Brant remarks: "Our writing is, and always has been, an attempt to beat back colonization and the stereotyping of our nations. But the writing is *not* a reaction to colonialism, it is an active and new way to tell the stories we have always told. (...) At this time, we write, but we also tell. (...) This is what makes the writing harmonious and circular. We write, we speak, we write. It all belongs together, for our oral ways are not lost or forgotten. Some of us write longhand, some use typewriters, some use computers, none of *this* is important, because the idea of story has not changed" (1994: 40). Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird also make reference to the same fact that in spite of European contact and influence, First Nations' ways of perceiving the world has remained quite intact: "What has survived in spite of the disruption of native language is a particular way of perceiving the world" (1997: 24).

stories in original ways, blending oral and written, connecting old and new, Native and non-Native, in a specific form of discourse that is a genre in its own.

This Native genre is composite or dialogic in nature, because of its many layers of stories weaved into one, its narrative voice(s), and the nature of language itself. Specifically, Julia Emberley, in her analysis of the novel under study, uses the term “‘intratextual’ to draw attention to the layering of storytelling that appears in *Slash*, where not only is there the larger story written in a realistic style, but also mini-stories, as it were (...) contained within Armstrong’s larger text” (1993: 137).

This larger text is itself framed by two poems: one, entitled “For Tony”, is a dedication to a man who resembles Slash in his struggle to make sense of his identity and whose stories “will be told around the tables of your people/ And we will be rich with weapons”, for words, as noted, are powerful tools that can hurt or heal, injure or inspire; the other, an untitled concluding poem, is both a tribute to ancient peoples who have provided “footprints in the grass” and a plea for us to blossom and spread out the seeds of renewal.

Additionally, a Prologue and an Epilogue also suggest a circular and historically grounded narrative structure and serve to pull the whole story together. They provide the *mise en scène* for the protagonist’s narrative of memory in his search for his personal and collective identity and, what is more, just like in a storytelling environment, they engage the readers, while alerting them to some rhetorical strategies¹⁹⁴.

Slash is, obviously, a written narrative that resonates with the oral, because it implies the same vitality, dialogic fluidity and intimacy that the oral tellings do, to such an extent that Lee Maracle remarks: “This book was not written, it was spoken” (July 1988: 42). It is not simple, though, because it “... is immersed in the dogged rhythm of [the Natives’] ancients, full of poetic pause. (...) It is Native literature from beginning to end” (ibidem), and, as such, it is both performative and interactive.

Actually, the silences in *Slash* to which Maracle alludes “punctuate(...) the stories (...) and allow(...) the hearer the time to reflect the truth unfolding” (ibidem). As a skilful poet, Jeannette Armstrong values these spaces between words, because she is aware that silence – meditative as it is – is itself creative and thought-provoking.

¹⁹⁴ For instance, the purpose and verisimilitude of the story are directly commented on in the Prologue.

The reader is, in effect, led to think and to participate in the novel. This instance does exist in the narrator's imagination and he/she is constantly and directly addressed through the repetitive colloquial usage of "Boy" and "Man" at the beginning of sentences, as the following examples clearly illustrate: "Boy, Jimmy was mad at me" (26); "Boy, were the kids happy!" (29); "Man, the whole thing stank!" (124) and "Man, that made me bitter" (139), to cite but a few.

Additionally, there are several moments in which the first-person narrator implicates the reader as more than a spectator: he draws him/her into the performance, by making him/her experience certain events:

You could say a lot of things about prison (...). One real thing is that you ain't free. You don't make many decisions for yourself, even ones you usually take for granted.

The time it really hits you is when you go through them gates, when they shut behind you and you see all them armed pigs up on the towers. (...)

(64)

In the process of reading *Slash*, the reader becomes part of a storied world. He/she is someone to whom the narrator confesses his thoughts, fears and suspicions and, inversely, someone whose thoughts can be anticipated, as we notice in the following passages, where a confessional tone enhances an emotional bond between narrator and reader: "I'll tell you it was something, that caravan" (95); "I'll tell you one thing" (108) and "You would have thought I insulted everybody, the way I was heckled" (128).

Jeannette Armstrong's choice of narrative voice is inextricably linked with a confessional and conversational style, so typical of oral tradition. Written as a retrospective first-person narrative, *Slash* begins with an extradiegetic narrator¹⁹⁵ decided to pursue a journalistic objectivity in order to "examine how [he] changed and what caused the changes" (13). This extradiegetic focalisation present in the Prologue and Epilogue gives way to an intradiegetic narration from chapter one to four, "... a convention [that Jeannette Armstrong is] familiar with from [her] own tradition in terms

¹⁹⁵ The extradiegetic narrator is the higher or primary narratorial authority in relation to the story that he/she narrates, while the intradiegetic narrator is a secondary entity who intervenes to recount parts of the story. According to Jeremy Hawthorn's clarification, an extradiegetic narrator "... is a narrator who (...) exists on a different narrative level from the level of the events narrated or the story, whilst an intradiegetic narrator is one who is presented as existing on the same level of reality as the characters in the story he or she tells" (1998: 50).

of oral storytelling. The narrative voice is always the convention that's used in oral story, and the storyteller becomes the character" (Beeler, 1996: 145).

However, far from being a literary device used only by Native peoples, the narrative theorist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, in her *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, explains how to build a coherent literary universe in composite/dialogic narratives: "Narration is always at a higher narrative level than the story it narrates. Thus the diegetic level is narrated by an extradiegetic narrator, the hypodiegetic¹⁹⁶ level by a diegetic (intradiegetic) one" (2002: 93).

In *Slash*, both the extradiegetic and intradiegetic narrators are also homodiegetic¹⁹⁷, or, even more accurately, autodiegetic, in that they are the subject, as well as the tellers of the narrative events¹⁹⁸. According to Gérard Genette, this first-person narrator "is – by the very fact of his oneness with the hero – more 'naturally' authorized to speak in his own name than is the narrator of a 'third-person' narrative" (1980: 199). In this regard, and bearing in mind *Slash*, Margery Fee comments that...

The use of the first-person narrator (...) is a primary tactic used against the dominant discourse. In providing the illusion of a coherent and unproblematic subject this form of narration has traditionally worked to 'suppress the role of language in the construction of the subject, and to present the individual as a free, unified, autonomous subjectivity'...

(Fee, 1990: 171)

As Sabiha Al-Issa reminds us, "[i]f the typical Western self sees himself as 'I-am-I', the typical Native stance is 'I-am-We'" (2003: 152-3), because the narrator-protagonist is, as noted, an integral part of the community. Therefore, at the end of the novel, he acts as a supersystem, as he is self-composed of a myriad of voices.

This polyphony inherent in the "I-am-We" stance also contributes significantly to disrupt the dominant literary culture, because it means an interpenetration of voices rather than the imposition of a single one. Moreover, it is crucial in order to convey a dialogic sense of truth, which, otherwise, would be compromised¹⁹⁹. Some clear examples of this narrative strategy are Mardi, Elise, Maeg, Chuck, Uncle Joe and Pra-

¹⁹⁶ As Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan notes, the hypodiegetic – or metadiegetic – level corresponds to "a second degree narrative" (2002: 93); it is that part of the diegesis that is embedded in another one.

¹⁹⁷ Rimmon-Kenan, using Gérard Genette's terminology, argues that a homodiegetic narrator takes part in the story, "at least in some manifestation of his 'self'" (2002: 96).

¹⁹⁸ Rimmon-Kenan goes on to explain that an autodiegetic narrator is one who takes part in the story that s/he narrates, playing a central role in it (2002: 97).

¹⁹⁹ Rimmon-Kenan asserts that "[t]he main sources of unreliability are the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme" (2002: 101). A plurality of other voices within *Slash*, other than the intradiegetic autodiegetic narrator, confers reliability to the novel.

cwa's direct speech²⁰⁰. Interestingly, there are also many situations in which, rather than being reproduced, their discourse is merely referenced, especially Uncle Joe and Pra-cwa's, as the following passages illustrate:

Pra-cwa was still sitting at the table. (...) Every time he laughed, all his wrinkles shook. I knew they had stayed up all night talking. The good stories came out towards morning. I sometimes stayed up to listen.

(19)

My special Uncle Joe came to stay with us and help. I went with him everywhere and he told me a lot of stories of old times. He told me about a long time ago, how our people used to live. He sure made it sound like fun. Especially the part about when young boys were allowed to go on long hunting trips for weeks way up in the mountains. We only went hunting one day at a time.

(21)

I went out in the mountains quite a bit with Uncle Joe. He sure was fun to be with. He told me some pretty good stories about old timers. I thought he was probably the smartest man in the whole world. He taught me what he called "Indian medicine ways".

(39)

This mere allusion to stories, rather than their reproduction, not only speeds up the narrative time, but it may also signify the difficulty of transferring oral literature to the printed page. Julia Emberley reads this indirect marking of the stories in two different ways: "first[, as just indicated,] as the impossibility of re-presenting the oral in a written form, and hence preserving the purity of the forms; and/or the re-presentation of the written as supplementary to the oral..." (1993: 143). Either way, the truth is that, according to the same critic, the protagonist's relationship to the written word in *Slash* is not one of conflict, for Tommy likes to read and write, nor is it seen as fundamental, because what really matters to the Kelasket family is to lead a traditional lifeway, or as Tommy's father puts it, to "know how to do right things, like skinning a deer..." (16).

An ambivalent relationship to the English language is noticed in *Slash*: if, on the one hand, English transforms young people, because they become "ashamed of everything Indian" (25), reading and writing in the language of the coloniser is a necessary evil, for it is acknowledged to be an essential requirement for survival. As far as the traditionalist Native peoples come to understand, English is the official language of communication in legal and administrative spheres within Canada, which means that

²⁰⁰ Mardi's letters further contribute an important voice to inform both the protagonist and the readers about "... the things going on in the Indian world" (69) and, hence, add verisimilitude to the narrative. She writes about her personal experience when she "... was involved pretty heavy in Vancouver in a thing called the Beothuck Patrol" (ibidem), and her words lend realism and detail to the story.

it must be mastered if the Native identity of the colonised is to be kept and their rights are to be protected. Thus, as we notice in *Slash* on page 18, Tommy is praised for knowing English and asked to read a government document, which aimed at granting the Native people who chose to be assimilated into the larger society – abdicating their Native rights – the opportunity to “go to the town and vote for who was going to be the white man’s leader”.

English often symbolises the social distance between coloniser and the colonised and, what is more, it also becomes an instrument that creates new social stratifications among the latter in post-colonial societies. As Terdiman remarks, “*Language presupposes difference*. It exists only in a ‘differential’ world, a world of conflicts and oppositions. Otherness, difference, the heterological, are thus essential attributes of the realm of words, signs, and discourses” (1985: 15, original emphasis).

Caught between two cultures, some colonised individuals show linguistic anxiety/insecurity, also known as schizoglossia. Tommy tells us that “[m]ost of the Indian kids talked English different (...). That was hard on [them]. [They] got mostly E’s in Grammar and everything else that [they] used English in, which was just about everything” (25), except for P.E. and Woodwork.

It is clear that, as Jeannette Armstrong points out, “... the colonization process, the assimilation process is achieved through language” (Isernhagen, 1999: 143). In an educational system where standard English is the norm, those who do not master it tend to have greater difficulties in life. So, in order not to disempower Native peoples, she claims: “... if we are going to change some of the conditions socially (...) we have to change it through language, we have to change the education system (...) [by using] the language of communication as language of instruction” (ibidem), which may well be a Native language or a local dialect of English.



Fig. 9. Problems in school achievement due to the use of Red/Rez English (Burnaby, 1982: 22).

This local dialect, or Red/Rez English as it is often named, is said to “display the sound and syntax patterns of the indigenous language of [a determined] area and subsequently the sounds that the landscape speaks” (1998b: 193). Additionally, “through its altered syntax, [it also displays] semantic differences reflecting the view of reality embedded in the culture” (ibidem).

That is precisely what the Okanagan writer does, when she writes: while expressing a Native worldview using the English language, she attempts to “construct bridges between the two realities” (1998b: 192). But, as Jeannette Armstrong likes to remind us, because English lacks musical coherence, she tries to make it resemble a bit more like her own Native language:

In the use of English words, I attempt to construct a similar sense of movement and rhythm through sound patterns. I listen to sounds that the words make in English and try to find the sounds that will move the image making (...) closer to the Okanagan reality. I try (...) to create the fluid movement of sounds together with images in a fashion that to me resembles closely the sounds of the Okanagan.

(ibidem: 192)

Actually, Jeannette Armstrong informs us about her struggles when using English²⁰¹ and she contrasts it with her Okanagan language, which, as she reiterates, has a “music-based sensitivity in the creation of meaning” (ibidem: 188). English, on the other hand, “... is deaf to music and only chances on it through the diligent work of writers” (ibidem: 189).

An example of such diligent work which abounds in musical imagery is the magical dream-like moment when Maeg announces that she is pregnant:

She came and knelt in front of me. She took my hands and spoke my Okanagan name softly. I had a strange feeling like I did when I heard the dance songs inside my head. I felt like I was made of mist or something and I melted into the scene around me. She said in our language: “We are now more than one. We have become three, Your son will be born in the springtime when the saskatoon flowers bloom. He will be named to your side of the family.”

I couldn't speak. All I could do was reach out and pull her to me and rock her while the feeling washed over us. I know she felt it. Somewhere in my head I saw us from another point of view, just a little above us, like through clear glass. I saw us kneeling and moving with the rhythm that flowed around us in shimmering waves, then we grew smaller and smaller until we were just a speck on top of that mountain and our land was vast and spread out around us, like a multicoloured star quilt.

(231)

The passage above perfectly depicts the harmony and interconnectedness that exists between love, language and nature. When Tommy, emotional and unable to speak, hugs Maeg, the reader almost hears the beat of their hearts, senses the rhythm that flows around the characters and the immensity of the universe that lies before them. The reader becomes part of the experience, because language, rather than just a

²⁰¹ “My writing in English is a continuous battle against the rigidity in English...” (Armstrong, 1998b: 194).

signifying discourse, is intimately connected with the material world and, thus, has the power to take us to the imaginary place and time of the narrative and bring us back out to the real world.

Jeannette Armstrong explains that words are complex and the possibilities of interpretation myriad and changeable. Their use is social and, consequently, constructed and political, indicating a malleable reality. In the specific case of “Okanagan language, (...) [r]eality is very much like a story (...). It is experienced as an always malleable reality within which [the reader is] like an attendant at a vast symphony surrounding [him/her], a symphony in which, at times, [he/she is] the conductor” (1998b: 191).

Through this symphony of words, the reader is, at times, the conductor and, at other times, conducted on a journey that touches on the human experience and on the meaning of life itself. As in a lively storytelling session, he/she seems to be hearing – rather than reading – and participating in the whole process, as already mentioned. Everything in this written narrative resonates with rhythmic power, a rhythm that is dictated by the protagonist’s mood, his emotions and his subconscious trains of reasoning.

Though educated, the protagonist is depicted as a young man who abandons his studies to go on the Red Power trip, where he “picked up a lot of jargon from them [Native activists]” (54). This, together with the use of African-American expressions, such as “honkey” (63) and “Uncle Tomahawks” (90), and of short additive sentences, as well as an inconsistent grammar where “them” is used instead of “those”²⁰², are all strategies which are effective in transforming the written into an informal spoken style:

Armstrong weaves back and forth between “standard” English and Indian oral English (...) establish[ing] a distinctive narrative voice immediately. Oral syntax is overlaid onto traditional written sentence structure. The result is that the reader experiences written language in a more direct, sometimes unsettling way.

(Armstrong and Warland, March 1989: 46)

Surprisingly, on certain occasions, the narrator-protagonist adopts an incoherent position, which contradicts his basic conduct described above: for instance, Tommy, on page 56, explains the oppression of Aboriginal peoples by adopting a Marxist terminology, something which opposes his daily language, as his uncle comes to notice:

²⁰² In “Slash/Review”, we read that “[o]ne of Armstrong’s methods of breaking down the oppressive aspects of written English is her repeated use of grammatically incorrect key pronouns (...) [, such as] her use of ‘them’ instead of ‘those.’ As with ‘this’ and ‘that,’ ‘them’ is a more inclusive, intimate pronoun: it lessens the sense of objectification” (Armstrong and Warland, March 1989: 46).

“Tommy, I don’t really know who or what you are talking about and where you picked up them words, like ‘middle-class’”. Eventually, Tommy recognises that he himself feels uncomfortable with his own assertions: “I knew he [Uncle Joe] didn’t understand what I had talked about. I wasn’t sure I even did, so I didn’t say anymore” (56).

Similarly, when Tommy describes the effects of colonisation to his friend Jimmy, we realise that, all of a sudden, Tommy’s speech flows from page 221 to 224 in standard English, with no grammatical flaws. At this stage, the reader feels puzzled by this description which sounds as if it does not come from the main character: one wonders if Tommy learnt it by heart, or if he decided to abandon his Rez English for good. Some pages later, however, the reader notices that Tommy continues to follow his traditional linguistic pattern.

From this standpoint, we may say that this narrative is presented as a translation into English from Okanagan, a language that, as stated, cannot be separated from its oral culture. If this novel has been criticised for its lack of character development, for its lack of structure and for its incoherencies and ambiguities, the truth is that, as Margery Fee warns us...

... the influence of standard English on indigenous writers may be far from central and we, as literary critics, cannot rely on our knowledge of our own discourse conventions to see us through an interpretation of their work. (...)

In ignorance of such conventions, we may read literary texts imperialistically by assimilating them to our conventions of literary discourse. In all innocence, that is to say ignorance, we may intend to praise books by showing how they fit our most cherished and admired fictional and theoretical conventions; in doing so, however, we may well assimilate them to a convention against which they are fighting.

(Fee, 1996: 45-6)

Instead of imposing Western European literary conventions on Indigenous oral traditions, the non-Native reader should open up his/her mind to the possibility that the text that he/she is reading comes from other literary conventions that he/she may not understand or even recognise. This same sensibility is required as to understanding the motivation behind the Natives’ writing. Rather than just judging negatively the didacticism inherent in First Nations’ works, the reader should be aware that these writers may actually intend to teach through literature, as Barbara Godard wisely remarks, while referring to Jeannette Armstrong and Beth Cuthand to illustrate her point:

Armstrong insisted she was writing to teach values while Cuthand emphasized the value of using the English language to communicate her tribal traditions with other

native groups whose languages she could not speak. Such didactic intentions are at odds with the currently prevailing post-modernist theories of a literature of process and play. Such divergence is largely responsible for the devaluation of this native literature. As we can see, these intentions stem from differing aesthetic traditions and notions of the communicative event.

(Godard, 1985: 16)

This is in keeping with Betsy Warland's comment on the instructive and political tone that we can find throughout *Slash*, which should not be read as a stylistic flaw:

This [the fact that the wellspring of Native writing is oral and political] is one of the aspects white readers may have the most difficulty with: to white ears oratory can sound like preaching. Cultural associations need to be dislodged in order to read and hear the eloquence and emotion in the oratory which springs from Indian culture.

(Armstrong and Warland, March 1989: 45)

So is the circularity of time – the weaving back and forth between past, present and future – integral to the functioning of *Slash*. Even if the novel starts with the present tense in the Prologue, the reader is informed precisely in that part of the narrative that the pages to come are a glimpse into the past as a way for envisioning the future. Throughout the novel's four chapters, Jeannette Armstrong uses the past tense extensively and the present only appears in cases of direct speech, as expected. In the Epilogue, both the reader and protagonist return to the point where everything started, but they are richer now, due to the knowledge they have gained through the latter's experience.

As Jeannette Armstrong reminds us "... stories that are used for teaching must be inclusive of the past, present, and future, as well as the current or contemporary moment and the story reality... (...) There must be no doubt that the story is about the present and the future and the past..." (ibidem: 194), as in a perfect circle.

The fact that the novel is composed of four chapters is obviously of great significance: the four chapter headings – "The Awakening"; "Trying It On"; "Mixing It Up" and "We Are A People" – correspond to the four stages that the protagonist undergoes: childhood; youth and alienation; adulthood and political engagement and, finally, a matured stage that leads to wisdom, healing and reconciliation with himself and his people²⁰³. The fourth chapter, corresponding to the fourth stage, implies the

²⁰³ This circular development of the self and the whole group as inherent to Aboriginal literature is commented on by Hartmut Lutz in his conversation with Armstrong (1991: 19).

protagonist's return to wholeness, because the number four represents perfection to Indigenous peoples and many other cultures around the world.

Bearing in mind the symbolism of numbers, the number four – also known as the quaternity – is actually associated with perfection because many natural phenomena/elements are comprised of this number: seasons, directions, sacred plants (tobacco, sweetgrass, cedar and sage, which reflect the qualities of the physical, mental,

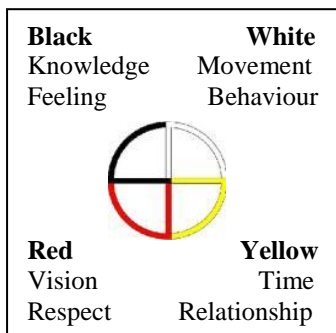


Fig. 10. The Medicine Wheel (Dumont, 1993: 53).

spiritual and emotional, respectively) and, among others, sacred colours (black, white, red and yellow). The important role of the quaternity is symbolised in the circle imagery – the Medicine Wheel, the Wheel of Life or the Sacred Hoop – and this is, in turn, a

primary figure of orientation for many First Nations. In *Slash*, the protagonist-narrator summarises this philosophy of life when, after Danny's death, he recalls a song where "[o]ne of the parts had asked, 'Why have you broken the circle, why have you taken my reason, my life?'" (162; original emphasis).

"You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. In the old days when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation, and so long as the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished. The flowering tree was the living center of the hoop, and the circle of the four quarters nourished it. The east gave peace and light, the south gave warmth, the west gave rain, and the north with its cold and mighty wind gave strength and endurance. (...) Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle."

(Neihardt, 2000: 150)

In conclusion, *Slash* takes its symbols, structure and literary expression from the oral tradition and, then, its Okanagan author blends them all skilfully and perfectly with the possibilities contained in a foreign language and in the written medium, into a vital and heterogeneous unity. In doing so, Jeannette Armstrong is not only passing down traditional stories and myths, but she is also reinventing them within today's contact zone, in order to reclaim Native identity and power, which have been lost through colonialism.

In this context, instead of coming to *Slash*, or any other Native text, with pre-established reading practices, the reader should try to approach it on its own terms. The solution possibly lies in Paula Gunn Allen's observation: "Perhaps the best course is to begin anew, to examine the literary output of American [and Canadian] writers of whatever stripe and derive critical principles based on what is actually being rendered by the true experts, the writers themselves" (Allen, 1998: 171).

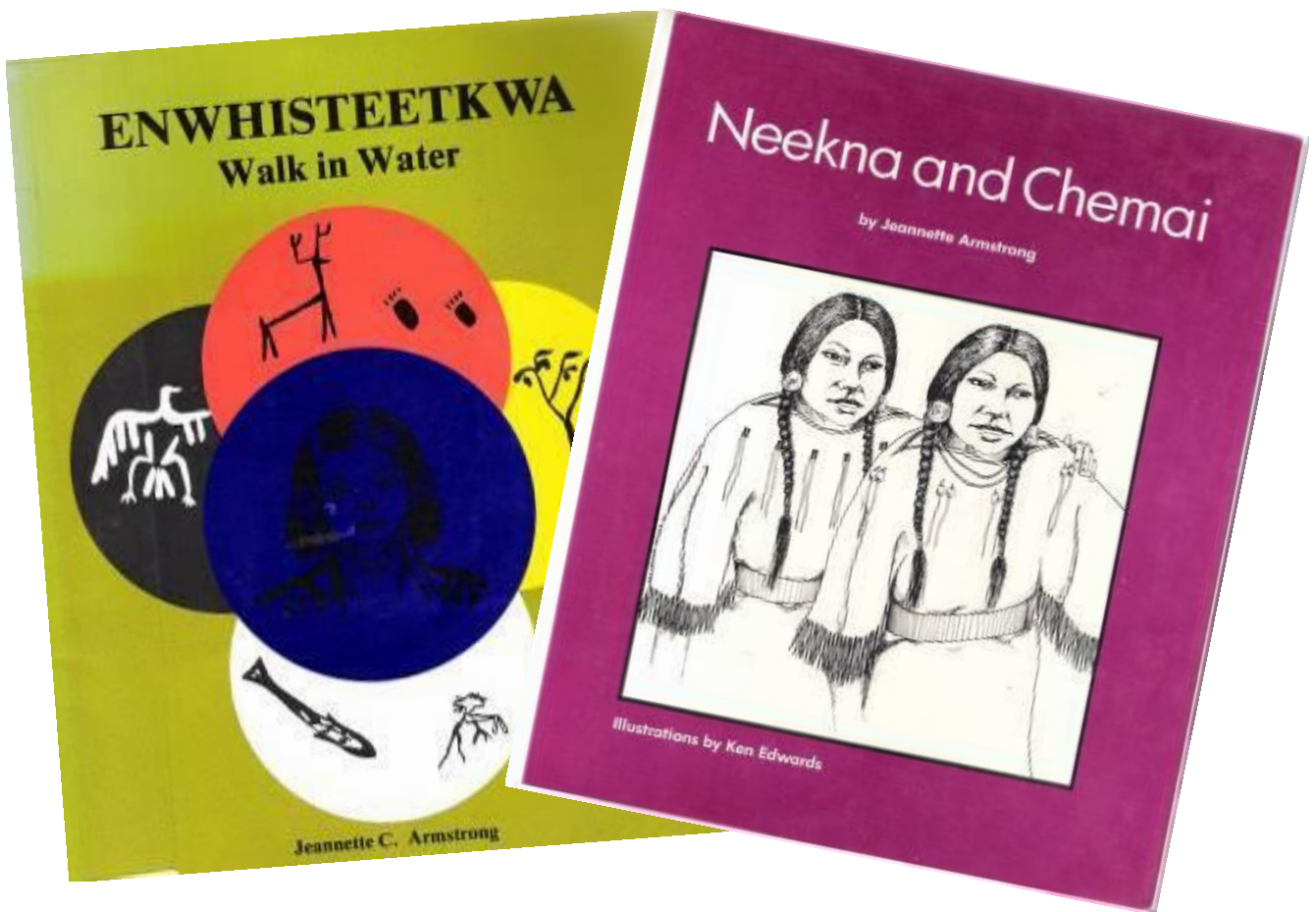
A close reading of the works themselves is the model that many Native scholars have been calling for. Kateri Damm's words, at the end of her essay "Dispelling and Telling", summarises the First Nations' appeal in a poetic and persuasive way and, so, I believe that the best way to finish this chapter is by giving voice to such claim:

Writing, for Armstrong, for Campbell, for Culleton, for Maracle, for Raintree, for Crosby... is empowering. It is a means of recognizing and acknowledging the strength, the beauty, the value and the contributions of Native peoples. It is a means of affirming the cultures, of clarifying lies, of speaking truth, of resisting oppression, of asserting identity, of self-empowerment, of survival, of moving beyond survival. As readers, it is our responsibility to join this circle humbly, to listen actively, to accept responsibility, to become more informed, to recognize our complacency, to face our pasts, to remember, to confront the vestiges of imperialist thought which still cling to the edges of our minds, and to create new opportunities for telling and dispelling through our audience. In words, the healing continues.

So, the story goes...

(1993: 113)

CHAPTER SEVEN



*NEEKNA AND CHEMAI AND ENWHISTEETKWA/WALK IN WATER,
A GLIMPSE OF NATIVE CANADIAN LIFE FOR THE CHILD'S EYE VIEW*

II. 7.1. THE LAND I CALL HOME: THE IMPACT OF MOTHER EARTH IN THESE TWO STORIES

Jeannette, in her two children's books, *Enwhisteetkwa* (1982) and *Neekna and Chemai* (1984), uses a written form of the Native oral tradition of storytelling to teach Native children about their history and culture. She believes that it is essential for Native children to read books which tell their history from their point of view in order for them to develop a positive image of their people – one which will allow them a firm foundation from which they can determine their own identity.
(Wall, 1990: 8)

Just like *Slash*, the picture books *Enwhisteetkwa* and *Neekna and Chemai* were created out of necessity to fill a gap: while developing a curriculum for children in her community, Jeannette Armstrong realised that there were simply no resources available on Okanagan life before contact with the Europeans. There was then this perception that the Okanagan perspective on Canadian history was of utmost importance to help children, in general, become more aware of the First Nations Peoples, while, at the same time, making the Okanagan younger generations feel part of their country's history.

Embracing respect and inclusiveness is, after all, the objective that the Okanagan Curriculum Project has aimed for: it “was designed to ‘create a better understanding between the Native and non-Native community’” (Slapin and Seale, 1992: 200). Actually, “... as studies have pointed out, children who see themselves and other ethnic groups in books tend to develop more positive attitudes to differences, their own and others (Wham, Barnhart, and Cook)” (Wolf and DePasquale, 2008: 103). The problem, however, is that, most of the times, Native literature is loaded with stereotypes and negative images, such as the ones that Mary Gloyne Byler describes:

There are too many books featuring painted, whooping, befeathered Indians closing in on too many forts, maliciously attacking “peaceful” settlers or simply leering menacingly from the background; too many books in which white benevolence is

the only thing that saves the day for the incompetent, childlike Indian; too many stories setting forth what is “best” for American Indians. There are too many stories for very young children about little boys running around in feathers and headbands, wearing fringed buckskin clothing, moccasins and (especially) carrying little bows and arrows.

(Byler, 1995: 250)

Many alphabet and counting books, as well as other simple books for school beginners perpetuate numerous falsehoods (cf. figs. 12, 13 and 14), which need to be eradicated. Native peoples are not heathen savages always carrying tomahawks, bows and arrows, nor are they objects to be counted along with apples and balls²⁰⁴.



Fig. 12. *Alligator's All Around: An Alphabet* by Sendak (Slapin and Seale, 1992: 243).

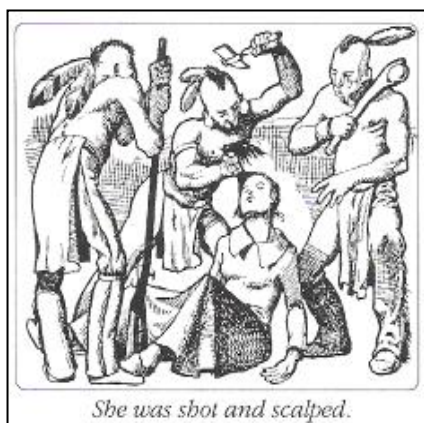


Fig. 13. Native peoples portrayed as savages, primitive craftspeople or simple tribal people (Slapin and Seale, 1992: 244).

Scrutinising reading materials is crucial to ensure that books

accurately reflect Aboriginal values and worldviews, instead of promoting ignorant myths that contribute to biased perceptions of ourselves and of Others.

Lists of recommended books based on criteria to select appropriate, accurate and authentic materials about Native peoples have been created and are now available to parents, teachers and librarians, because, as J. P. Wilkinson points out, they have the responsibility to guide what children read, especially in their formative years:

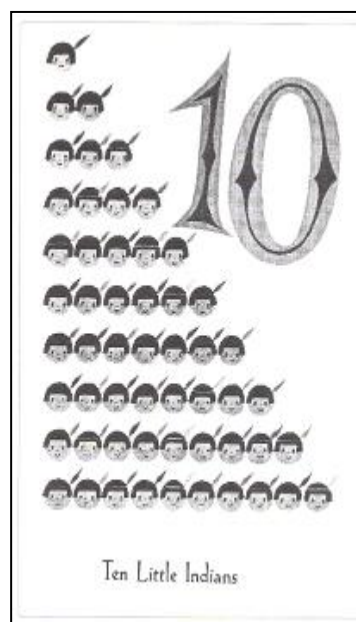


Fig. 14. Native peoples objectified in counting books (Slapin and Seale, 1992: 242).

²⁰⁴ June Sark Heinrich suggests other short “i” words to be used instead of “Indian” in one’s alphabet teaching (1981: 39). Besides, it is important to note that, by using the “Indian” imagery under the number 10, we are not only objectifying Native peoples, but also romanticising their genocidal destruction from the time of Columbus arrival in the Americas: “Ten little, nine little, eight little Indians...”. Inspired by this rhyme, others have emerged, namely the German youth reciting “Ten little, nine little, eight little Jews...” at the time of the Holocaust (Moore and Hirschfelder, 1981: 19).

Parents and relatives select the earliest books for the child and they, churches, schools, and libraries select and furnish the books he[*/she*] reads in the next few years. There is a three-or four-year hiatus in the early teens when other forms of communication and activity leave little time for book reading; however, by the mid-teens a new and much more mature awareness of book develops.

(Wilkinson, 1976: 3)

The guidance a child receives during his/her first years will certainly affect his/her intellectual, emotional and social well-being throughout life. In this context, it is essential to guide children, as early as possible, to new sensitivities and concerns in terms of cultural diversity and avoid misnomers and false ideas that accentuate intolerance and disrespect for the Other's history and heritage.

Children's books written by Native peoples – namely the ones by Jeannette Armstrong – represent conscious efforts on the part of their authors to correct the above-illustrated stereotypes and to present counter-images to such received distorted perceptions, because they provide Native and non-Native peoples with authentic and clearer representations of the First Nations of Canada. However, as Spielmann cautions us,

[one] can easily fall into the trap of [*misreading/*] failing to really listen to what one is being told and thus miss the wealth and richness of native cultures, languages, and traditions. A people's stories and texts may be approached as cultural settings, and the concept of culture itself offers one of a kind of 'living document' which describes culture-specific ways of thinking and doing things.

(1998: 24)

Bearing in mind that, as noted, cultures are learnt, rather than genetically encoded, understanding other cultures depends on our willingness to walk in the Other's moccasins. We can learn about other forms of life by truly listening to their oral and written words, because these are powerful vehicles for bridging communities across ethnic, cultural, social and economic barriers, as it has been argued.

Words have tremendous power; they bear the power of life within them, as we are told in Genesis vv. 1:3: God's word alone was enough to create light, and everything else came into being upon His utterance of the word "Be!" Additionally, the gospel according to St. John reports that it was through the word that God and creation made connection and it also refers to the embodiment of the form in the persona of Christ: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (...) And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (vv. 1:1; 1:14).

The fact that words have the power to affect life so deeply should inspire us to put all our efforts into improving our world. However, our Western civilisation has put itself at the centre of all things and, even after over two millennia, we still believe that we are islands and forget that our actions have an impact on the rest of creation. Just like the Cheyenne story in which the Great Beaver gnaws through the pole that supports the earth whenever he is displeased²⁰⁵, or like an enormous spider web in which wherever we touch, the whole thing starts trembling, humanity must also show signs of kinship and cooperation. In this increasingly multicultural and interrelated world, we must do our utmost to understand and learn from one another. As a consequence, and according to Raimon Panikkar, the solution could be as simple as pursuing an...

... [e]cumenical ecumenism[, because it] would be the way for the religions of the world to enter into a multivoiced dialogue. (...) No religion, ideology, culture, or tradition can reasonably claim to exhaust the universal range of human experience or even the total manifestation of the Sacred. Thus *pluralism*, as distinct from the mere coexistence of a *plurality* of worldviews, becomes today the paramount human and religious imperative. (...) Pluralism does not call for a superideology or a supersystem. It implies an almost mythical confidence that other perspectives are also plausible or, more correctly, a mystical respect for the other that authenticates one's own religious experience. (...) Thus, encounter and dialogue between these ways of life become imperative.

(Panikkar, 1999: 105-7)

In an attempt to reach dialogue and understand First Nations' experience, we will now move beside them so as to hear their stories. Specifically, we will analyse Armstrong's commitment to opening horizons and promoting cross-cultural understanding through literature, because, as commented on by Heather Glebe, in *Cross Canada Writers' Magazine* (1990: 6), this Okanagan writer is aware of the importance of words as transformative tools:

When Jeannette Armstrong was a little girl, she listened to her grandmother's stories late, late into the night. Jeannette learned early the power of words. Today this Okanagan Indian artist, poet, author and educator brings the oral tradition of her people into all aspects of her work. She believes in the power of the individual voice and is committed to promoting cross-cultural understanding through literature...

²⁰⁵ This story will be looked upon in greater detail further on, in chapter nine, when analysing C.J. Taylor's books for children.

Jeannette Armstrong's books for children do provide a better understanding of Native life. They invite the mainstream audience, at large, and the Native communities, in particular, to have a positive image on the First Nations peoples.

To be more concrete, if picture books such as *How Food Was Given*, *How Names Were Given* and *How Turtle Set the Animals Free*²⁰⁶ are traditional stories that provide the reader "with a kind of cultural scaffolding, the broad framework [one needs] to learn" (Cruikshank, 1998: 27) to understand the Other, *Enwhisteetkwa* and "... *Neekna and Chemai*, [are], in a sense, the context in which to place [those traditional stories], a way of showing how the lives of the People are lived according to the beliefs embodied in the stories" (Slapin and Seale, 1992: 199).

Set in a distant, indeterminate past, *Neekna and Chemai* gives the reader a glimpse of what it was like to be a Native girl child in pre-colonial Canada. *Enwhisteetkwa/Walk in Water* also depicts what life might have been like in the Okanagan Valley, but it goes further to document precisely the time of the White man's arrival into the region and the impact of his presence upon Aboriginal communities. This book shows that external social interaction with the Other plays a significant role in how Aboriginal peoples have reframed their cultural identity.

Differing perceptions and attitudes towards land ownership and utilization are tied into understanding oral histories and the history of Native/non-Native relations. The physical, economic and, most importantly, spiritual relationship to the land is at the heart of Native cultures and, therefore, it is necessarily depicted in children's books, as Doris Wolf and Paul DePasquale make clear:

... the interconnectedness of land and people common to Aboriginal worldviews, at work in most picture books, as in real life, are two very different sets of operating principles regarding land ownership. While traditional Aboriginal relationships with the land were communal and conservationist, Euro-Canadians were motivated primarily by private commercial interests. (...)
... then one of the most important contributions of Aboriginal authors is the possibility their books offer readers to explore issues currently in the political arena, such as Aboriginal rights, land claims, and self-determination.

(Wolf and DePasquale, 2008: 99)

²⁰⁶ These three traditional stories, together with *Neekna and Chemai*, have been produced by the Okanagan Tribal Council, as part of the Okanagan Curriculum Project. They integrate the *Kou-skelowh* (We Are the People) series.

This is not to say that Land is irrelevant to the European worldview. Actually, it has also been central, but in a different way, because it has been regarded as a commodity to be used in a capitalist base system. Land has indeed been so crucial to European newcomers since contact with Native peoples that their relationship with each other has been shaped by the former's need to control it, an attitude that Aboriginal peoples cannot understand, as the following quote by Sealth, a Duwamish chief, shows: "How can you buy or sell the land – the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. We do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water. How can you buy them from us?" (Burger, 1990: 20).



Fig. 15. Difference between Native and White peoples' principles regarding land ownership (Burnaby, 1982: 36).

Clearly, the patterns of European ownership and utilisation of Land are very different from those recognised by First Nations, and this difference in worldview permeates the history and, inevitably, the stories of Aboriginal peoples, as stated. Doris Wolf and Paul DePasquale tell us that "[t]he non-competitive relationship between humans and the land, animals, and plants is one of the most striking characteristics of the children's fiction..." (2008: 90), and Elizabeth Waterston, in her *Children's Literature in Canada*, also refers to this non-antagonistic interaction and holistic perception of life, when she observes that...

Indian and Inuit legends encode a different way of viewing time, animals, material possessions, and male/female responsibilities. Native people believe they live in a world shared with all other natural and supernatural beings, in a land that belongs to everyone, not to any one in particular. Powerful spirits reside in men and women, in animals, and in all other natural forms; animals, even when pursued and hunted are to be respected.

(Waterston, 1992: 30)

All the above characteristics are found in both *Neekna and Chemai* and *Enwhisteetkwa/Walk in Water*. These two children's books, narrated through the voice of young Okanagan girls – Neekna in the former and En-whis-teet-kwa in the latter – perfectly depict the Okanagan belief system, which is based on the connection between the human spirit and all of nature: the Land is considered sacred, human beings are dependent on nature for survival and all species are interconnected with each other in a web of relationships that is characterised by human subordination and dependence upon natural entities, rather than by a hierarchical dominance of individuals over nature.

For instance, if we take into consideration the first book mentioned, right from the beginning we notice the idea of the interconnectedness of all living creatures in the following narratorial comment: "... animal relatives (...) must have visited [them, Neekna and Chemai,] early and became tired of waiting" (1984: 5)²⁰⁷. Worthy of note is also the animism²⁰⁸ present in this quote and throughout the whole story. Animals, plants, even rocks and sacred objects take on a human form at will and become alive, as they are endowed with the qualities of sentience and consciousness. It is not surprising, then, that flowers respond to the girls' stimulus²⁰⁹, that the Falls sing²¹⁰ and rocks assume female form²¹¹, that animals, such as chipmunks, do chatter and get mad at humans²¹², and food gets the status of Chiefs²¹³. The same happens in *Enwhisteetkwa*,

²⁰⁷ All further references to *Neekna and Chemai* will appear in the body of the text with nothing but the year of publication, followed by the page number. The same will be applied to *Enwhisteetkwa*.

²⁰⁸ Animism, one of the basic characteristics of primitive religions, may be defined as the belief that natural phenomena and objects possess a mind or spirit. According to Edward Tylor, quoted in Marvin Harris, animism is "... the belief that inside ordinary, visible, tangible bodies there is normally invisible, normally intangible being: the soul" (Harris, 1991: 284).

For further reading on animism, cf. Marvin Harris, whose definition of the term I would like to quote here: "... the basis of all that is distinctly religious in human thought is animism, the belief that humans share the world with a population of extraordinary, extracorporeal, and mostly invisible beings, ranging from souls and ghosts to saints and fairies, angels, and cherubim, demons, jinni, devils, and gods" (1989: 399). At first glance, it would seem that this ancient way of explaining nature and the position of the human being in it is currently obsolete, but the truth is that even nowadays it is practiced by many Aboriginal peoples, to some degree.

²⁰⁹ "We talked to the butter[c]ups and they smiled up at us. (...) The buttercups just smiled and smiled" (1984: 17).

²¹⁰ "It is singing about the fish hat will come soon. It is singing about all the people who will gather to catch the salmon. It is happy" (1984: 33).

²¹¹ According to Neekna's grandmother, Rock Woman suffered a metamorphic process that led to her placement onto a bank. In her words, this metamorphosis dates back to mythological origins: "Many years ago, when only animal people were here, you were changed to a rock to watch over this valley, the Okanagan (...). We honour you today, you are much older than we will ever be, you have seen many things. (...) You will be here many snows from now to see my great-great-grandchildren. Watch over them kindly, as you have watched over us. The Great Spirit who made you must have found you so lovely he placed you here, for many to see and honour" (1984: 37).

²¹² "... chipmunks ran around chattering at us. We laughed. (...) They're mad at us, they think it's their house now..." (1984: 39).

where, as the narrator tells us: “We could hear the coyotes and wolves singing and talking to each other. Sometimes they laughed. Maybe the old legend coyote was up to some tricks again. Owls called to each other asking, ‘Who are the visitors? Who are the bad little ones?’” (1982: 13). Many other examples of animism could be quoted, such as when the meadow lark tells Enwhisteetkwa and Sa-sas, “Hurry up girls, I’ll spank you” and then flies away “laughing and singing” (ibidem: 22).

In general, the Aboriginal oral tradition – and, in particular, oral creation stories – is filled with mythic beings, not clearly human or animal, that are said to have lived before the existence of humans and that created the world as it is today. Coyote, Chipmunk, Bear, Muskrat, Crow and Owl are central figures, but the first one stands out from the others due to his/her²¹⁴ dual nature: this ambiguous character is both a trickster and a culture hero. His/her selfish and foolish behaviour are to be avoided; so s/he is regarded as a negative role model not to be followed. S/he is somehow the ethics police that teaches how not to behave, as the following excerpt from *Enwhisteetkwa* explicitly states: “We sat and worked with our hands while the old people told legend stor[i]es about coyote. He was so crazy, but he did a lot of good too. He showed our people what was good to do and what wasn’t good to do, by example. He always seemed to be doing funny things” (1982: 16). As a result, s/he is often seen as a particular manifestation of the Trickster²¹⁵.

The Land abounds with natural spirits, which means that respect for the ecosystem is imperative and the key to survival; otherwise, those spirits become offended and retaliate, as Tupa²¹⁶ warns Neekna and Chemai: “Everything will die and diseases eat up all living things if we do not live according to the plan of the Great Spirit” (1984: 13). The same message of obedience, orderliness and discipline is then relayed through “a teeny-weeny story” (ibidem), in which a little boy is punished by the North Wind “for being disrespectful” (15). Stories such as this one have the power to establish social and moral order, as they demonstrate one’s possibilities and limitations.

²¹³ “We will thank the four food Chiefs who gave their bodies up to feed us. First, there will be Chief Bitterroot, Then Chief Saskatoon Berry, then Chief Salmon, and then Chief Bear” (Armstrong, 1984: 41).

²¹⁴ Even though Coyote is usually male in oral traditions, the fact is that a discussion on his/her gender fails to generate consensus. Thomas King, for instance, in an interview on Coyote’s sexual ambiguity, remarks: “Coyote within oral literature doesn’t particularly have a determined sex. It is true that many of the oral stories list Coyote as “he,” but those are translations, and translations by non-Natives, so who knows?” (Davis, 1996: 52).

²¹⁵ The Trickster is a very important archetype in Native mythology, because s/he is the personification of human ambiguity: this clownish figure embodies several contradictory attributes, such as cleverness and stupidity, honesty and trickery, kindness and maliciousness, altruism and arrogance, among many others.

²¹⁶ As the reader is informed on page 11, in Okanagan “Tupa means great-grandparent”.

Douglas R. Hudson, on this issue, tells us that “[f]olktales conveyed messages about the importance of proper conduct towards other humans and towards the natural world” (1990: 80). Songs also fulfilled the same purpose, and as Agnès Grant points out,

Songs were part of everyday life; every tribe member composed and sang songs. Most of the songs had spiritual significance (...).

The role or function these songs played in traditional cultures was much greater than the role songs and poetry play today. It can, perhaps, be compared to the position prayer holds today, but much of it did not appeal to a divine power for help. Rather, it was directed at the invisible forces all around. It was believed that proper songs and rituals would harness the power of the forces of nature which would then help tribal members survive. The songs and rituals would keep the forces around them positive; to forget to show proper respect or to neglect to perform a ritual could mean unleashing negative forces which would lead to danger and hardship. It was believed that by singing about favourable events it would help them come to pass.

(1992: 77-8)

It is precisely with the reference to a “soft” song²¹⁷ about “Ska-Loo-La, the wicked owl woman waiting to catch bad little girls” (1982: 7), that *Enwhisteetkwa* opens its first chapter. Just like the other stories mentioned, this song also aims at teaching good behaviour and self control²¹⁸, while explaining the consequences of crossing boundaries²¹⁹. The recurrent use of the subordinating conjunction “unless” and of the modal verb “might”, together with the multiple imperatives and repetitions, as well as a symmetrical pattern that places, on one side, information concerning Ska-Loo-La, and, on the other, references to a “girl-child” soon to be a “girl-woman”, successfully produce this antagonistic effect, which is corrective at the same time: either *Enwhisteetkwa* behaves properly and guarantees her survival and the future of her

²¹⁷ This song, sung by *Enwhisteetkwa*’s grandmother, is based upon a mythological story of an owl woman who was said to snatch up those boys and girls who used to wander too far from the reserve or to stay out too late. Then, Ska-Loo-La would take them in her big basket into the mountains and no one would ever see them again, because she would make the tracks disappear and would tie up the children at night, after making them work hard all day long. The most negative version of the story tells that Ska-Loo-La would eventually eat the young prisoners: “Remember Ska-Loo-La eats you little by little” (1982: 8). As the myth goes, one day the Creator sent Coyote on a mission to transform evil, cruel or dishonest creatures into animals, so that they would not harm innocent beings again. Coyote, thus, made use of his magic to turn the wicked woman into a night bird that would be so small that carrying off children would be out of reach. As a consequence, Ska-Loo-La tried to redeem herself from the pain caused to people and became their friend, flying around any time there is imminent danger looming. Although this part of the myth dispels the terrifying impact of this creature in some way, *Enwhisteetkwa* only gets to know the first part, and, as a result, to her “Ska-Loo-La was so scary (...) [that she] made up [her] mind to be nice and work hard so Ska-Loo-La wouldn’t grab [her]” (ibidem: 9).

²¹⁸ “... listen to the old ones/ (...) [be] kind to all living things/ (...) [be] helpful in every way/ (...) swim every morning/ (...) wrap your hair, clean and shining/ (...) pray for a good mind/ (...) [k]eep your body pure/ [w]ork hard and think clean/ [l]earn the skills of women/ (...) [f]ind the fountain called trial/ [c]limb nimbly through a special valley opening...” and pass the song down to your children (1982: 8).

²¹⁹ Ska-Loo-La “[m]ight see you/ [m]ight grab you/ [m]ight eat you/ (...) [m]ight follow you across hill and valley/ [m]ight hunt you everywhere/ [m]ight find you in darkest night...” (1982: 8).

generations to come, or she will embark on a deviant path and lose herself for ever. In brief, we may say that this song serves as a protection prayer to keep young ones away from temptation and to preserve Okanagan ways and worldviews. The performative value of this song is measured by the efficacy with which Enwhisteetkwa changes her behaviour, after having attentively listened to her grandmother, and this, in turn, leads us to reflect upon the power/sacredness of words, a topic to focus on in the following chapter.

References to natural and supernatural beings that have the power to inflict punishment on those who are disrespectful, greedy or display an inappropriate behaviour, in some way, are countless: on page 14, for instance, the reader and Enwhisteetkwa learn that “[i]f [one] sleep[s] late, Grandfather Sun will be offended”. Additionally, on page 16, Enwhisteetkwa’s grandmother warns her grandchild not to “offend the northwind spirit by going out walking unprepared for his tricks”, just as Neekna’s Tupa had cautioned in her “teeny-weeny story”.

Similarly, disrespect towards animals and plants would result in punishment, for example in the form of starvation. To avoid this, specific ceremonies marked the beginning of activities such as the harvest, fishing or hunting.

Actually, winter was considered the preparation season²²⁰, a time when ritualised ceremonies took place. These were religious in nature, though always linked with non-religious events, namely feasts, as described by the first-person narrators Neekna and Enwhisteetkwa. Such feasts and ceremonies lasted for several days and aimed at taming the supernatural spirits that threatened the cosmos, but also at asking for “... the seeds and things to grow in the next season” (1982: 14) and at the cleansing “of grouch-thoughts and bad feelings” (ibidem: 15)²²¹. Tupa, the wise woman in *Neekna and Chemai*, elaborates on the combination of the sacred with the profane, when she explains that everyone

pray[s] at these dances. They pray for the health and well-being of every one of their relatives in the coming season. They pray for lots of food to grow in the seasons of gathering. They dance and dance. They ask for lots of snow, so there will be lots of good moisture for the plants to grow in the spring and summer. The animals and plants will have plenty of food and so will we.

(1984: 13)

²²⁰ In Tupa’s words, “[i]t is time to get things ready for the coming seasons” (1984: 11).

²²¹ Peter Carstens adds that, besides “... prepar[ing] people for the next cycle of life” (1991: 10), “each dance reinforced ties of both kinship and friendship [and] drew attention to the realities of life with its changes and chances...” (ibidem).

The winter dances and ceremonies – also known as potlatches²²² – are expressions of the Okanagans’ deep spirituality. They may be understood as a reaffirmation of the bond between humans and the spirit world. Curiously, the success in communicating with this spirit world depends on the skill of the dancers; so, singing and dancing, generally accompanied by musical instruments, are integral parts of these prayerful rites. The scenery of a Winter Dance is very well depicted in *Enwhisteetkwa*, and the reader is given a chance to enter and witness it, in the following detailed description:

We (...) listened to the sounds from the big lodge (...). The sounds were strange, they made me feel like crying and laughing at the same time. The old ones were singing, and we could hear rattles and the sound of many feet stamping. (...) I knew that at these dances, people prayed for their relatives and friends health and also for abundance in the coming seasons. My grandmother said this was a season to get ready for the coming seasons. (...)

Today we would visit and work together all day. (...) We would all work together preparing baskets, bags, mats, hemp twine and making new clothing and moccasins for the coming seasons. The men and boys would be busy making new bows, arrow, spears and knives. They would repair all fish nets, animal traps, snow shoes and ropes. This season of preparing was a nice time²²³.

(1982: 13; 15-6)

Everyone is engaged in the feast’s preparation. While the elderly, women and their children are left with seasonal gatherings and household chores, men go out fishing or hunting. Douglas Hudson tells us that “[m]en and women worked together in economic endeavours in a complementary way. In general terms, men built the fish weirs and hunted, while women processed resources and gathered plant and root foods” (1990: 64)²²⁴.

²²² These big feasts and celebrations are known by some as potlatches, but Jeannette Armstrong never uses this term in her children’s books, probably due to the fact that “[f]ew accounts of specific Okanagan potlatches exist, partly because it appears to have been a borrowed term...” (Hudson, 1990: 84).

As Douglas R. Hudson puts it, “[t]he term *potlatch* comes from a trade language, Chinook jargon, and means ‘to give’. (...) Carried out mainly among the Similkameen, Okanagan and northern Okanagan, potlatches involved a gathering of a substantial amount of goods and food, the invitation by the host community of a number of neighboring villages, the distribution of goods, food and horses and the enjoyment of a variety of social activities” (ibidem: 83-4). If we take Carstens’s definition of potlatches (1991: 25), we come to the conclusion that these “do not seem to have been common” (ibidem: 10), because the Okanagan people “... avoided the ostentatious excesses of inter-tribal ceremonies for political reasons” (ibidem: 25). In the books under analysis, the festivities that are fully described are always designated as the Winter Dance.

²²³ Though less detailed, in *Neekna and Chemai* reference to participation in shared activities also occurs: “[i]t is during the moons of winter that [Native peoples] make clothing, tools, baskets and weapons for the next season” (1984: 11).

²²⁴ Further discussion on the gendered division of labour among the Okanagan people will be found in chapter 7.2.

What is important to retain here is the Okanagans' close connection and reliance on the Land for survival, as summed up by Carstens: "Okanagan domestic life was (...) closely tied to the annual round of fishing, hunting, and food-gathering activities, which followed a cycle beginning in spring 'with the reappearance of migrating birds and hibernating mammals'" (1991: 8).

The whole livelihood of the Okanagans depended on the above-mentioned cycle, which means that the places they inhabited had a flexible structure. The fluidity of territorial boundaries is evident in their nomadic habits: in Jeannette Armstrong's books for children, the reader follows the characters as they leave the camp and wander looking for food.

To be precise, in *Neekna and Chemai*, we find the whole community busy, on page 31, getting ready to move to the Falls to search for subsistence, and four pages later we are told that they were then beginning to head back to their winter camp, because "[t]he days were a lot shorter[,] (...) the nights were crispy cool (...) [and they already] had [gathered] so much food of all kinds" (1984: 35). The same nomadic traditional mode of life is witnessed in *Enwhisteetkwa*: on page 19, we are informed that, as "[t]he days were getting longer and longer[, the narrator's community started] putting winter things away and getting the things ready for [their] summer travelling", from Penticton (1982: 31), reaching Okanagan Falls (22), then Osoyoos and Inkameep (24), and eventually White Lake (26). Afterwards, "[n]ear the end of the big salmon moon" (39), the way back to their camp in Penticton would be the primary aim, because "[s]oon winter season would be upon [them] again" (44).

Prejudiced and biased as it is²²⁵, Daniel William Harmon's *A Journal of Voyages and Travels in the Interior of North America* (1922) contains an observation regarding the Carrier people's view of the Land that may as well be applied to the Okanagan: he tells us that, contrarily to Aboriginal claims against land tenure, territorial boundaries were not that flexible and undetermined, which, in turn, indicates a proprietary attitude towards areas that they had defined as theirs:

The people of every village have a certain extent of country, which they consider their own, and in which they may hunt and fish; but they may not transcend these

²²⁵ Some of Daniel William Harmon's assertions are not based on facts but rather on something that "appears" to be true, as the following quote shows: "They [the Carrier people] appear to have only a very confused and limited idea of the existence of a Supreme Being, the maker and governour [*sic*] of the world, or the devil or any evil spirit; and they, therefore, neither worship the former nor fear the latter" (Harmon, 1922: 255). Just because their religious beliefs do not conform to his, he remarks: "[t]he Carriers are the most ignorant people among whom I have ever been" (*ibidem*).

bounds without purchasing the privilege of those who claim the land. Mountains and rivers serve them as boundaries, and they are not often broken over.

(Harmon, 1922: 255)

Douglas R. Hudson further elaborates on this issue²²⁶ and clarifies that...

Fishing, gathering and hunting locations provided focal points for group identity and territoriality. Each Okanagan group, or band had resource-use sites which were considered part of the group's holdings. But, given the extensive social network which covered the Okanagan region, one was usually able to gain access to some other group's location through a relative or friend in the neighbouring village.

(1990: 64)

In effect, all the areas mentioned above are neighbouring territories in the Okanagan region²²⁷. Even so, when Neekna and Enwhisteetkwa's communities arrive there, they feel the need to "stop to visit or talk or share things with the people whose homeland they were guests in" (Armstrong, 1982: 24), a behaviour that the *Semas* (non-Natives) do not follow, thus being considered rude (*ibidem*) and "awfully disrespectful" (*ibidem*: 26).

Reciprocal practices towards the inhabitants of a determined region, embedded in particular forms of ritualised gift exchange, had much significance for Indigenous peoples²²⁸.

²²⁶ For further reading on the Okanagan territory and their attitude to land ownership, cf. Peter Carstens, who states that "Okanagan territory in the traditional sense might be defined in terms of four components: the location of permanent and less permanent villages, the terrain used for hunting, fishing, gathering, and similar activities, their own perception of their territory, and the perception that other people had of Okanagan territory. (...) Okanagan villages were residential bases from which to set out on hunts, berry-picking excursions, fishing trips, wars, trade, and so forth. The Okanagan were thus never casual occupiers of land..." (1991: 6). Moreover, he goes on to add that "... in their seasonal movements they relied entirely on the understanding that they were the sole owners of their land. (...) [T]heir attachment to land and their jealous concern for territory were manifest in their boundary disputes with their Shuswap neighbours" (*ibidem*: 54). Cf. Map 1 in the appendix section for a clearer image of the Okanagan's neighbours before 1800.

²²⁷ When told that they would walk, instead of riding, on their way to the Falls, Chemai assents: "Oh, it's not very far to the Falls anyway, it will be fun" (Armstrong, 1984: 31). Earlier, however, on page 23, Neekna tells us that "Chemai was tired, [they] all were. (...) It seemed to be a long way from White Lake" to Great Bluff, a place near the Inkameep camps. Their ride to the high country, on the contrary, "did not take long, or maybe it just seemed faster because the horses did all the walking" (*ibidem*: 29).

I visited all the regions mentioned above, except for White Lake, and learned that approximately 20 kilometres separate Penticton from Okanagan Falls, and my way back from Osoyoos to Penticton took me a bit more than an hour's drive, because it was about 58 kilometres of snow-covered trails in early February. Map 2, at the end of this dissertation, shows Okanagan reserves in the 90s and helps us have an idea about the distance between the places mentioned.

²²⁸ In *Enwhisteetkwa*, we realise the care and diligence involved in the preparation of every detail to cause good impression upon their visitors: "We each had our own [rush mats] but our visitors would need clean new ones. (...) We cleaned and straightened up. (...) My, we had some good things to eat. Our visitors would be happy" (1982: 11). Before departing to their home in Okanagan Falls, the hosts are offered a gift, in appreciation of their dedication and friendship.

Similarly, the need to consciously engage in reciprocal and respectful interactions with Nature is observed in the First Nations' attitude of always giving back to the Land, as they take from it. Specifically, we notice this strong commitment to reciprocal action when they supply Mother Earth with material gifts, such as tobacco, and when they lead their thanksgiving celebrations, as depicted by Jeannette Armstrong in her *Neekna and Chemai*:

'My people, today we have a feast. Today we give thanks to Chief Saskatoon Berry for giving his body as food. He is Chief of all things that grow above ground. Let us always remember to thank the Great Spirit who made it so'.

(1984: 25)

'Chief Bear (...) gave up his body so we would have meat of all kinds to eat. A special song of honour is sung each time a black bear is killed. This song is sung all day until sundown. This is done in thanks to the greatest of all the food Chiefs...'

(ibidem: 41)

'We will all pray together in thanks for the foods that come into our bodies and become us. That is how the plants, the fish and the animals are a part of us. That is why we respect them. They are part of the Big Circle that makes up everything. We are a part of it, too...'

(ibidem: 41-3)

The Okanagan people perceived plants and animals to be active agents in subsistence living, as noted. Thus, hunting, fishing and gathering were pursued out of survival motivations and not for pleasure. What is more, they believed that these gave themselves up willingly to serve as food for them to eat, as the quotations above and the story of Chief Bitterroot²²⁹, in *Neekna and Chemai* (1984: 22), bear witness²³⁰.

The ecological "gifts" from Mother Earth should always be respected and, as a consequence, the hunt was subject to numerous strictly observed rituals, as James Baker points out: "... the hunt (...) always began with the participants being ritually purified and the leader singing his power song. (...) Hunters would sing in their lodges the preceding evening for the appropriate conditions" (1990: 38-9)²³¹. Similar rituals were performed before fishing took place, as narrated by Enwhisteetkwa:

²²⁹ Roots were a major component of the Okanagans' diet, and bitterroot, in particular, was the most important economically, being labelled the king of all roots (Baker, 1990: 43) or, in Enwhisteetkwa's words, "the chief of the root people" (1982: 26-7).

²³⁰ Several Native narratives focus on this reciprocal relationship between humans and animals. Among them, there is an Ojibwa story that I believe is worth reading – an excerpt is provided in the appendix section, page 341 – because it perfectly sums it all up: the way that animal remains shall be treated; animals admonishing/instructing humans, and the consequences of arrogance, and lack of respect and of gratitude.

²³¹ Jeannette Armstrong refers to these rituals in *Enwhisteetkwa*, on pages 13 and 15.

This man [who was not chief, but who was like one because he talked with the spirit people] would direct the salmon feast. The men he chose would sweat bath to cleanse themselves before they entered the water so the clean water spirit and the chief salmon spirit would not be offended. Nobody would want dirty people in the water anyway.

(1982: 39)

These and other “ceremonially protected customs which imbedded respect for their source of life” (1998: 181) are discussed by Jeannette Armstrong in her article entitled “Unclean Tides: An Essay on Salmon and Relations”. But, besides the rituals performed and the gift exchanges, there was also the crucial aspect of the proper handling of the remains of plants and animals. Fish remains, for example, were returned to the river, and other leftovers were usually burnt as an offering for the life taken²³².

First Nations, in general, believed that the waste of floral and faunal resources was a sacrilege²³³. Therefore, these peoples never threw away their unwanted parts, because they did not want other animals to get them or people to stumble on them. On this issue, Enwhisteetkwa tells us: “The bones and leftovers were gathered to be put away. These were never left laying around. It would be very disrespectful to step on a chief’s bones, I think” (1982: 39).

From the time that the Okanagan people came into contact with the white man, these rites and ceremonial performances, which could only flourish in an environment of profound belief, were severely shaken: they were laughed at by the white settlers, who introduced a whole new world to Native peoples, a world that clashed sharply with their old customs. Younger generations were the first to embrace a scepticism that quickly grew into a disbelief in their ancestors’ faith and lore.

As a consequence of the white supremacist attitudes and of a loss of respect for the Natives’ worldviews, the traditional economy of First Nations in general, and of the Okanagans in particular, suffered a substantial change and started disappearing. In fact, with the advance of white settlement in the Okanagan, Nature started losing its spiritual

²³² This piece of information was supplied by Kevin Ned, Education Manager for the Okanagan Indian Band, during my fieldwork on the Vernon reserve. Cf. fig. 67 in the appendix.

²³³ James Baker explains how, when a deer was killed, almost all its parts served the community, in one way or another. For example, bones “were (...) used for making awls, needles, points, knives and a variety of other objects” (1990: 39). On page 41, he reiterates that “... very little of what was taken was not used in some way”.

value to be regarded as a capitalist commodity. James Baker, quoting Lyn White, Jr. (1967), explains: “By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects” (Baker, 1990: 45).

As a consequence, game became scarce and, more significantly, government regulations started limiting all Native peoples’ access to natural resources. They were forced to dwell in a single settlement, instead of living in scattered villages and roaming the mountains for harvesting, hunting and fishing, whenever they wanted.

Even under such circumstances, “[t]he Okanagan never fought a full-scale war against whites for intruding into their territory but they came very close to serious conflict on a number of occasions” (Carstens, 1991: 22), as we will see in the following chapter. There, specifically, I intend to analyse how the Okanagans’ social structure and external relations are depicted in Armstrong’s books for children, because changes in customs and in interpersonal interactions are evident if one compares *Neekna and Chemai*, set long before the arrival of the white man, with *Enwhisteetkwa*, set in 1860. As Shirley Louis explains it, “In so far as the question of lands and culture changed over the years, the social and family life of the Okanagan also changed” (2002: 12). Let us, then, focus on the kinship system of the Okanagans and attempt to determine the effects caused by contact with white civilisation.

Before that, however, I would like to conclude the present discussion by recalling Doris Wolf and Paul DePasquale’s words, which aptly capture the First Nations’ identity attitude towards Land, as depicted in children’s books:

Indeed, the home evoked in Aboriginal children’s literature is rarely limited to the physical structure in which the characters live. Instead, Aboriginal children’s books posit that the well-being, happiness, and even the very survival of Aboriginal children, their families, and communities are inextricably tied to an access to both land and resources.

(Wolf and DePasquale, 2008: 99)

This connection of identity with a relationship to the Land or to one’s surroundings is universally recognised and accepted. Obviously, the construction of a person’s identity does not take place in isolation; it implies multiple levels of interaction with one’s surroundings, including the natural world, as we have seen. Therefore, human beings should be made aware, from a tender age, of both our individual identity

and uniqueness, and also our co-extensive being with the rest of the ecosystem. That is a lesson that may well be learnt from Native Canadian literature for children.

Elizabeth Waterston makes this point when she claims that Native stories adequately develop in modern children an ecological consciousness that is required for humanity to move towards greater holism and start making significant changes in the world:

New ecological consciousness makes us see native stories as a valuable way to transmit to children a sense that humans need not be antagonists or victims of nature. For modern children, Indian folktales offer a welcome alternative to the traditional tales brought to Canada from Europe.

(1992: 35)

Not only Canadian children, but children of all nationalities can profit from looking to the future with a new and fresh outlook, as that of the First Nations. That is the reason why Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale argue that “[t]hese stories are the gift of the Okanagan People to a world in sore need of what they have to offer” (1992: 200). What will we give back in return?

II. 7.2. EXPLORING SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS IN THE SOCIETY OF THE TIME

Family life is still central to the preservation of Okanagan culture. The People established a well structured existence of matrilineal family life that included immediate and extended family, distant relatives and close associations. These ties to one another, and to their Nation, created a strong sense of family and community identity.

(Louis, 2002: 10)

Prior to their contact with Europeans, the Okanagans' livelihood depended entirely on the primary activities of hunting, fishing and gathering, as discussed in the previous chapter, and on secondary activities, such as manufacturing and trading. Even afterwards, with the arrival of European influences, their traditional economy based on primary activities remained prominent and exclusive to their people. Inevitably, however, due to external pressures emanating from various sources, gradual changes started occurring and the traditional lifestyle of the Okanagans was progressively swept away.

Despite having never come to close quarters with the whites, as claimed by Peter Carstens (1991: 22), the Okanagan people's "... transition from the old hunting and gathering economy was not without conflict" (Hudson, 1990: 67). Thus, in the current section, I will explore those human interactions as depicted in *Enwhisteetkwa* and in *Neekna and Chemai*, specifically focused on understanding the Okanagans' social structure and the impact of their opening to the world.

First and foremost, attention shall be paid to the quotation that starts this chapter and which alludes to the significance of family in the construction of Okanagan identity. For the Okanagan people, the importance of family life becomes readily apparent in the large number of relatives and close associations that lived together, or assembled for first-product ceremonies.

In *Enwhisteetkwa*, in particular, we realise that an extended group characterises the social structure of the Okanagans, when the protagonist comments on the changes required to accommodate the visitors expected from a nearby camp:

... my sister-cousin Sa-sas (...) would sleep (...) with me in the play-lodge. Usually, I slept in the underground house with my older sister. My mother, father, grandma, grandpa, three brothers, my oldest brother, his wife and baby Neekna, also stayed in the underground house. Now, because of the many visitors, all the little girls would sleep in their play-lodge and all the little boys would sleep in theirs. The young men would build a temporary lodge where they would sleep and tell stories to each other about hunting and other things. Of course the young unmarried women would be kept close to aunts and grandmothers for special talks and teaching.

(1982: 10)

Actually, the family, considered the primary production unit, could only function as part of a larger unit, the band. According to Peter Carstens, “[t]hese bands were linked to each other through cross-cutting ties of kinship and bonds of friendship and association, and they often joined forces for communal hunts, warfare, and on ritual occasions” (1991: 5). This implied a very complex socio-political organisation, because band membership was not fixed, as “... some families would winter with one band and summer with another” (ibidem: 12-3). There is evidence of these seasonal gatherings in *Enwhisteetkwa*: “Sa-sas and her family said they would stay for the rest of the season until butter-cup time. (...) I know Sa-sas and her family would soon be returning to their home. (...) They would return to her father’s people at Okanagan Falls to travel to his band of people” (1982: 16; 21). As we learn from the protagonist’s words, more often than not these visits would last “two to four seasons” (ibidem: 21), which means that Sa-sas and her family’s camping at Enwhisteetkwa’s was considered exceptionally short.

Enwhisteetkwa’s community, as well as Neekna’s, is made up of young and old people who communicate across their differences; they are made of extended matrilineal families who have a shared place, a shared history and shared experiences of everyday life; they constitute a kin group that maintains boundaries and builds relationships across those boundaries. The reader, then, is led to actively engage with

these Okanagan communities, to learn about them and about the choices that they make in their daily life, and how these are conditioned by their own and other societies.

When we say, together with Shirley Louis, that the Okanagans “established a well structured existence of matrilineal family life”, we mean that the extension of the nuclear family²³⁴ was organised according to the prevailing rule of matrilineal residence. Consequently, given that “... the family usually resided with the mother’s family, their children experienced strong maternal ties” (Louis, 2002: 10).

In fact, the Okanagans’ system was one of matrilineal consanguinity and descent; therefore one in which the group claimed blood descent from a single common ancestress. But even though it was matrilineal, it does not mean that it was matriarchal²³⁵: within this matrilineal system, both men and women contributed to fulfilling the needs of the family and village. When I asked Jeannette Armstrong about the division of labour within the Okanagan culture, she simply put it this way:

They didn’t share all the tasks. They shared what’s reasonable to share. (...) I mean, just logically, think about, as a woman, if you’ve got a little child that you’re breastfeeding or that you’re carrying inside your womb, you’re not gonna climb up the mountains or down into the river to fish. So, obviously, the work would fall on people who was most capable, but it wasn’t divided so that you couldn’t do this or you wouldn’t do that work. When work had to be done, everyone took part in (...) and equally participated in [it]...

(extract from my interview, see page 345 of this dissertation)

This very same idea that all family members worked side by side, depending on their capability, had been discussed earlier, in 1993, when Jeannette Armstrong recalled her own experience:

Ownership of property and work was always shared with the Okanagan people. I don’t remember a time when work wasn’t shared by members of our family, depending on how physically able they were. (...) We worked out there with the men, and there was no difference in the division of labour.

(Williamson, 1993: 12)

²³⁴ The nuclear family is composed of a domestic unit that includes a woman, her husband and their unmarried children.

²³⁵ Matriliney and matriarchy should be distinguished: while the former accords considerable importance to women as the reproducers of the lineage, the latter implies rule/authority by women.

We notice, then, that even if the Okanagans claim to be an egalitarian society, the truth is that the assignment of different tasks to men and women does exist and it is explained by biological differences²³⁶, according to Jeannette Armstrong.

In examining the gendered division of labour among the Okanagans, we realise that women were reproducers as well as producers; therefore, they concentrated on activities such as harvesting²³⁷, food preparation, household chores and childcare, while men focused on tasks that required physical strength, especially the ones outside the home, as hunting and fishing, and those related to the manufacturing of implements, tools and structures.



Fig. 16. Ink drawing by Francis Baptiste (Sis-hu-Ik), depicting young and old women harvesting (Walsh, 2005: 57).



Fig. 17. Lithographic reproduction by Francis Baptiste (Sis-hu-Ik), entitled *The Hunter* (Walsh, 2005: 61).

For example, regarding the fishing habits

of the Okanagan people, Douglas Hudson tells us that “[m]en built the weir, often to the accompaniment of special songs to ensure success, but the processing of fish fell to the women” (1990: 59), because it was a task that

required time, more than physical strength. We may say, then, that their work was complementary, since men manufactured a variety of commodities, fished and hunted game animals, while women converted the resources that men brought home into food, shelter and clothing.

In *Neekna and Chemai*, Jeannette Armstrong provides us with a clear picture of the different tasks performed by men and their sons, by women and their daughters and, because the division of labour was based upon practical needs and specific abilities, as noted, we also get to know how the elders actively contributed, even when they could no longer engage in the same activities as the other members of the group:

My father said, “Today my sons will track rabbits and make snares. I will show them where to put them. (...)”

²³⁶ Other theories interpret this concentration of men and women in different occupations as a result of socio-cultural expectations of appropriate masculine and feminine behaviours, but that does not seem to be the case with respect to the Okanagans.

²³⁷ Food-gathering was carried out mainly by women and children, even though it was a family occupation engaged in by men and women.

My mother nodded and said, "Today my mother and daughters will work in the big house. We will finish weaving the mats and bags that we need for the hop-dance." My grandpa said, "Today I will continue my teaching of the older boys. We will make more spears and arrow tips. It is hard work, but we will need many for hunting this summer."

(1984: 7)

Besides grandpa's teaching of the older boys, intergenerational influence is also easily perceptible in Tupa's importance: when this old woman, said to be over a hundred years old²³⁸, arrives in the big earth house where women and girls had been working, "[e]veryone jumped up to greet her" (9) as a sign of respect, but also because, as Neekna claims, "[s]he was [their] favourite person" (*ibidem*). As a result, she is offered the best seat next to the fire, then covered up with fur robes and given hot tea.

Contrarily to non-Native societies, where the elderly are devalued and granted minimal social significance, the First Nations have regarded the phenomenon of aging as a natural process, accompanied by the acquisition of a valued status: the Native aged ones have been considered substantial contributors to the community, as they are experienced and valuable sources of information and wisdom²³⁹. Neekna tells us: "My grandma seemed to know everything. I wondered how she got to know all that" (1984: 19) and, by the end of the book, she comes to the following conclusion: "I knew now how my Tupa, my grandma and my mother knew so much. They were told by their old ones, just like I was being told. Someday, I would tell my grandchildren the very same things and they would tell their grandchildren" (*ibidem*: 43)²⁴⁰. We notice, then, that the

²³⁸ "Some said Tupa had seen over a hundred snows!" (Armstrong, 1984: 11).

²³⁹ In an interview I conducted with Jeannette Armstrong, she discussed the importance of the elderly (cf. fig. 68, and the transcription of the interview on page 345) and explained that the aged ones, especially grandparents, have played a major role in child rearing in Native societies. Instead of being relegated to old age homes, Native elders have been actively implicated in the education of the younger generations, whose parents have generally been occupied with the provision of daily subsistence. According to Maracle *et al*, "[t]here was never a need for babysitters and leaving the children with strangers [because w]ithin the family unit, the grandparents watched over children between the ages four to eleven. Their role was to educate and discipline the little children in a patient loving way. The children grew up to be happy gentle people. It was good for the grandparents and the children and the parents" (1993: 13-4). However, there was a period in time when the importance of elders began to break down. In fact, with the arrival of Christian missionaries and compulsory education, many of the Aboriginal practices and teachings were forbidden in Canada and, with it, the elders' prestige also almost disappeared, as Shirley Louis points out: "The family unit became fragile when the English took over from the French and the paternal system came into use. Children were then sent to residential schools and the adults confined to reserves" (2002: 11).

Nowadays, attempts are being made to rebuild the traditional role of the elders, and, for instance, at the Children's Day Care Centre on the Okanagan Indian Band, in Vernon, I found Virginia Gregoire, an elder who drove the reserve bus for 29 years and who now went there to help with the babies and to teach them the Okanagan language (cf. fig. 69).

²⁴⁰ This quotation will be discussed further in the following section, when focusing on the story's structure and its cycle/circle imagery.

elders are the repositories of knowledge and of fundamental cultural information and that they have the responsibility of passing it down to their grandchildren, in order to guarantee survival and cultural continuation, as Shawn Wilson makes clear:

It is... important that an elder have a good knowledge of the culture and traditions of his[her] people... an elder is one who is willing to share this knowledge by passing it on to the younger generations through the teaching and modelling of correct behaviour... Elders must convey a spiritual continuity of the past, present and future. It is the special ability to apply this knowledge, wisdom, and spirituality to the well-being of the community that makes the elder such an important and unique individual. It is the elders' responsibility to interpret the events of today into the cultural framework of the traditions of the people.

(1996: 47-8)

The relationship between the elders and youngsters is one of deference and respect, as seen in Tupa's welcoming, and in *Enwhisteetkwa*, when the young narrator describes the children's behaviour: "We children sat quietly, while the older people ate, never talking or moving about. It was very disrespectful to do so, especially with visiting old ones. Finally, we got to eat after all the older ones were through" (1982: 13).

Respect is always tempered with feelings of warm affection. Grandparents in both *Enwhisteetkwa* and in *Neekna and Chemai* are characterised as affectionate, caring and patient relatives:

Papa was a big man with heavy eyebrows and thick hair. He was always quiet, just sitting and watching his sons work. Occasionally showing them when a mistake was made. He was so gentle and kind with me and my sister. He always patted my hair and said "whist, whist," which was not really a word, but meant something words couldn't say.

(1982: 17)²⁴¹

My other grandmother was so glad to see us when we got there. She held me on her knee for a long time and patted my hair saying "Whist, whist, my Enwhisteetkwa."

(ibidem: 24)

My grandma sure was nice. It was good just to lean against her and chew a piece of dried meat.

(1984: 23)

Many more are the references made about Neekna's great-grandmother, Tupa, because she had the gift of making people laugh. Her warm-hearted and good-humoured spirit is very much appreciated, as the narrator tells us: "She knew how to be so very

²⁴¹ "Whist" is part of the glossary, at the beginning of the book, and it is said to be an "[e]xpression of affection" (1982: 6).

funny. She made us laugh and feel happy every time we saw her” (9), an attitude which she maintains throughout the narrative, and which she uses to compensate for her lack of physical dexterity:

Although they couldn't climb very high, even the old ones were out.
(...) Great-grandma leaned on her cane and laughed.
“Oh, I can run all the way to the top. I did, just a while ago when you weren't looking but now I'm tired.”

(19)

Some horses carried the old, old ones like Tupa. Tupa called down to us, “Look at me, I feel like a bird way up here.” She flapped her arms around and said, ‘Caw-caw,’ like a crow. We laughed and walked alongside her horse.

(21)

Humour and laughter permeate every aspect of the Okanagan lives. They are a vital expression and extension of living stories and teachings, and they also constitute a way of overcoming difficult situations or hard times. In *Enwhisteetkwa*, we get to know the sound and echoes of people laughing in various social environments, namely while they are working²⁴², celebrating²⁴³ or simply socialising²⁴⁴. Humour and laughter do contribute to community cohesion, as depicted in Armstrong's books for children.

Instead of competition, the sense of community cohesion, cooperation, commitment and belonging is emphasised in this egalitarian culture, as discussed above. Gender integrated tasks, rather than tasks assigned exclusively either to men or to women, characterise the Okanagan society, even if, at times, the reader gets the idea that gender segregation exists. To be precise, on page 9 of *Neekna and Chemai*, the reader enters the exclusive world of Okanagan women, as s/he is dragged into the big earth house and witnesses the work done by grandma and by other female counterparts: “Chemai said, ‘Look at this big tule mat my grandma is weaving. It will be a new covering for our summer tipi.’ (...) Other women were tanning hides (...). One of my aunts was busy making some new clothing and moccasins”. Later, on page 21,



Fig. 18. Lithographic reproduction (1942) by Francis Baptiste (Sis-hu-Ik), depicting a woman tanning hides (Walsh, 2005: 57).

²⁴² “They were all talking and laughing as they worked” (1982: 9); “We climbed banks and shouted and laughed in the warm sun”, while looking for special green shoots (ibidem: 21).

²⁴³ “Soon everyone was inside the lodges, laughing and joking...” (ibidem: 12); “This was the first foods feast, to celebrate the harvesting of roots (...) There was a lot of laughter and story-telling” (ibidem: 27).

²⁴⁴ “These nights were warm and filled with laughter and singing and drumming. This is probably the best time of the whole year”, when people from many camps gather in summer time (ibidem: 34).

the subordinating conjunction “while” gains the reader’s attention because, once again, strict lines of gender roles are implied: “While our fathers and brothers put up the mat tipis, our mothers made fires and cooked”.

Even though, as noted, these lines of division were not necessarily rigid, but based on practical needs, at the fishery site there was a considerable number of taboos on women: they cooked and processed fish, but they were not allowed in the water and could have nothing to do with fish traps, especially if they were having their menstrual period²⁴⁵. On this subject, Peter Carstens directs us to Thomson’s analysis of the Okanagan society, in which he demonstrates that “... hunting and fishing [were] carried out almost entirely by men, and draws attention to the menstrual taboos that prevented women from participating in these activities, especially those disallowing contact with fish traps and the hunt...” (1991: 8). Douglas Hudson adds a set of prohibitions regarding salmon fishing: “[s]wimming was banned upriver from the weir, and menstruating women and recent widows and widowers could not come near the weir, nor partake in the consumption of salmon” (1990: 59).

This strict division in terms of fishery work is apparent in Jeannette Armstrong’s books for children, especially in *Enwhisteetkwa*, where all references made to this activity exclude women:

The men were spending time fishing. (1982: 34)

“Look at the big fish jumping.” (...) How would the men catch them? (ibidem: 37)

All day, salmon were brought in to be cleaned and cooked by other men. (...) On this first day, only the men ate. (...) After that day, (...) [t]he women were happy to be allowed to cook and eat again. (...) The women cut and dried and smoked the salmon all they long.

(ibidem: 39)

In opposition to what is expected, in *Enwhisteetkwa* the withdrawal of women from fishery-related activities is not based upon menstrual taboos that diminish the

²⁴⁵ George Kehewin explains that the menstrual period precludes women from participating in ceremonies, because their condition provided them with a phenomenal amount of power. In his words, “Women (...) are like Mother Earth, who once a year in the spring, washes herself down the river to the ocean. (...) Same thing with a woman, except it’s every month. It’s the power you have” (Meili, 1991: 15). Victoria D. Patterson also alludes to this very same phenomenon as a “... form of extraordinary power [that] gave women a certain secular power in the sense of controlling the group’s activities. If a number of women were menstruating simultaneously, there could be literally no hunting, fishing, ceremonial dancing, gambling or war” (1995: 140). However, upon contact with European settlers, this recognition of the power associated with menstruation gave way to the interpretation that it was a monthly disease: it became something evil or negative, a symbol of female oppression.

efficacy of the ritual, but it is explained, through storytelling, as punishment for selfishness. The pragmatic, utilitarian function of punishment is thus revealed in the following passage:

The women were asked not to go near the traps and weirs until after the ceremony. My grandmother said this was because a long time ago in the stories, it was some women way in the south of our homeland who protected the salmon weirs, but they were selfish and would not share with the other people up the river. Coyote fixed them. He stole their weir and ran away from way down south to here, leaving the salmon to people who would give him a wife. Penticton people gave him a wife, but while he went to Vernon where he was refused, she married someone else. So coyote stopped the salmon at Okanagan falls where he built the falls so they could not get past. From then on, women were not allowed to work with the weirs and traps because they might get selfish with the salmon again.

(1982: 39)

Interestingly, restrictions and all kinds of practices are described in detail to bring verisimilitude to the stories. For example, practices such as the processing of roots and berries are explained in depth: these were skinned and spread on rocks or mats, or placed in tule sacks to dry in the hot sun. Afterwards, they were stored to be used as an important winter food, as the narrator anticipates:

I knew that for many days now, we would dig roots of all kinds and dry them on mats.

(1982: 27)

I knew we would pick saskatoons for many days now. We would clean all the twigs and leaves out and spread them on tule mats to dry. We would have lots of sweet berries dried for winter.

(1984: 25)

Some other times, roots and berries were partially cooked and made into cakes, then dried and stored for winter usage; or they were dried first and cooked after, for immediate consumption, as the following few quotations, among the so many present in the texts, give evidence:

The cherries were put in bags, pounded when dry, pits and all, to make sweet nutty cakes.

(1982: 11)

That summer we spent picking all kinds of berries and digging roots as they were ready. (...) We picked lots and lots of saskatoons and dried it all. The other berries we picked in the next moon were chokecherries and blackberries. These were also dried out and then pounded into cakes.

(ibidem: 34)

More than fiction, these two books for children are accounts of what happened in real life; they bring to light historical ethnographic data that is consistent with that recorded by Peter Carstens in his *The Queen's People*:

In summer (...) men concentrated more and more on hunting while the women gathered all kinds of berries and wild fruit for immediate consumption. The women also dried and stored part of the berry and root crop while they were cooking and drying fish and meat for use in the winter.

(1991: 8)

Moreover, the daily practices of the characters in *Enwhisteetkwa* and in *Neekna and Chemai* are also consistent with the ones described by the Okanagans interviewed for *N'ca'qn S'ookanaqinx: I am Okanagan*²⁴⁶. In this video, we find personal accounts such as Louise Isaac's, who, in spite of her advanced age, still remembers that her mother "used to tan hides (...), make buckskin and sewed gloves [to] take them to town and sell them" (Okanagan Indian Band, 2004). Similarly, *Enwhisteetkwa*'s mother is also said to have frequently engaged in trade, exchanging deerskin or moccasins for "la farine" (1982: 11) or "le sucre"²⁴⁷ (ibidem: 24).

Trade occurred between Okanagan families, between neighbouring bands and interregionally, with Native tribes bordering their territory, or with the newcomers, described as "... people with hairy faces and pink skin..." (Armstrong, 1982: 11), whose "... mouths smiled but their eyes didn't" (ibidem: 40)²⁴⁸. The flexibility and complementary nature of Okanagan gender roles allowed women to participate in this activity, even though it was usually assigned to their male peers. "According to history [and as noted], Okanagan women were kind, strong individuals who worked along with their male counterparts" (Louis, 2002: 10-1), and thus they often acted as traders as well. Some even became intermediaries between the European trading companies and their tribes, as Sylvia Van Kirk asserts: "... the Indian woman played an important role

²⁴⁶ This video claims to "take a contemporary look at who [Okanagan] people are today, how far [they] have come and [to tell] positive stories illustrating successes, pride, strength and the culture of [their] people" (Okanagan Indian Band, 2004: DVD back cover).

²⁴⁷ According to Carol Abernathy Mellows, "... French, the predominant language of the fur-traders, became the first 'second' language of many Okanagans until as recently as forty years ago. Some French words, particularly those naming the new European technology, became incorporated into the Okanagan tongue" (1990: 112). "[L]a farine" and "le sucre" are but two examples.

²⁴⁸ Reference to the white man's appearance is recurrent: for instance, in J. R. Miller's *Sweet Promises* the newcomers are described as "strange – some thought ugly – people" (1991: ix), but their attributes did not prevent Native peoples from establishing commercial relationships with them, because "they did have wonderful products that could be obtained by exchanging relatively worthless animal skins. (...) Indians were able to obtain iron products, firearms (in some cases), and even valuable recreational aids such as distilled alcohol products" (ibidem).

as a liaison between the two cultures. (...) The men of the Montreal-based Northwest Company (...) had always appreciated the economic advantages to be gained by forming alliances with Indian women” (1991: 180).

These alliances were said to have been more than partnerships, because fur-traders and Okanagan women were often united in bonds of marriage. Widespread inter-marriage has been well-documented: Carol Abernathy Mellows, for instance, argues that Alexander Ross²⁴⁹, a Scottish fur trader and author, married an Okanagan woman “as early as 1814 as did others stationed at Fort Okanagan”, and she goes as far as to comment on the current situation regarding family affiliations, when she claims that “[e]ven the family names of the present Okanagan families proclaim their early relationship to fur-traders” (1990: 112).

In *Enwhisteetkwa*, Jeannette Armstrong makes the reader aware of the Okanagan version of the history of the encounter between Aboriginals and settlers. We, thus, learn that Therese, “... the niece of Soorimpt, [their] chief[,] (...) walked with a hairy faced one as if she were his wife” (1982: 32). As the narrator tells us, Therese “... said she lived with the man named Cyprienne Laurence²⁵⁰” (ibidem), and, as just observed, other Okanagan women also formed families with white traders, a reality that the Euro-Canadians preferred to omit, according to Douglas Hudson:

The Euro-Canadian settlers and their descendants created their own version of Okanagan history, one which talks about the material exchanges, but sets aside the early social and marriage relations between Indians and non-Indians. The result has been a certain fabrication of social distance between two groups...

(Hudson, 1990: 66)

This leads us to ask if the newcomers’ attitude ever resulted in suspicion and mistrust among the Okanagan people. Inter-marriages were common, as seen, but does that mean that the Okanagans’ attitude towards the intruding traders was always one of tolerance and understanding? Citing Carol Abernathy Mellows’ words, “[w]as there no physical resistance or expression of resentment on the part of the Okanagans against the foreign interlopers?” (1990: 111)

²⁴⁹ Peter Carstens tells us that Alexander Ross “sums up the importance of the domestic family when he draws attention to the position of wives: ‘Each family [was] ruled by a joint will or authority of the husband and wife, but more particularly by the latter’” (1991: 24).

²⁵⁰ It is interesting to notice that, just like in *Slash*, Jeannette Armstrong bases some of her characters on historical individuals. Shirley Louis, in *Q’sapi: A History of Okanagan People as Told by Okanagan Families*, tells us that “Theresa, the Flathead wife of Cyprian Lawrence, found it necessary to plead with her uncle to allow the priests to settle” (2002: 19). This plea will be discussed further when analysing the corresponding narrative action.

Even though the fur trade was never of great importance in the Okanagan²⁵¹, the presence of the fur traders had a significant impact on its people. On this issue, Peter Carstens remarks that the new relationships that formed as a result of the fur trade, the gold rush and the arrival of Christian missionaries “were nearly always asymmetrical and skewed by potential white hegemony and power in favour of the newcomers...” (1991: 31). As to the fur trade in particular, he contends that it “... did in fact radically alter both the internal nature of Okanagan society as well as Okanagan relations with the outside world” (ibidem: 30) and he adds some of its devastating effects:

Not only did it wipe out most fur-bearing animals in the area and deplete the supply of salmon, but it altered the nature of Okanagan chiefship and leadership, fostered the growth of factionalism, and undermined many facets of Okanagan culture and values to the extent to which they could never recover.

(ibidem: 31)

Contact with the white settlers was a mixed blessing²⁵² and, thus, an ambivalent attitude on the part of the Okanagans can be traced: if, on the one hand, there are those who were considered to be very ill-disposed towards the traders, frequently harassing

²⁵¹ Peter Carstens tells us that “[t]he fur trade in the Okanagan Valley and southwards to the confluence of the Okanagan and Columbia rivers was relatively short lived, lasting less than forty years from 1811 to about 1847...” (1991: 31). He attributes its short duration to the fact that the Okanagan territory was semi-arid and not rich in pelts and to the Okanagans’ early disinterest in trading goods. In his words, “[b]y the early years of the fur trade the Okanagan had no great need for trade goods, a reality that often irritated the officials of the Hudson’s Bay Company. This annoyance was exacerbated by the fact that the territory occupied by the Okanagan, especially in the north, never produced furs in great quantities (...). Both the North West and Hudson’s Bay companies report relatively small returns from the Okanagan people...” (ibidem: 33). Likewise, Carol A. Mellows points to the same circumstances described by Carstens: “The Okanagans’ dependence on [the newcomers’] goods never became as great as the fur traders might have wished. (...) [Additionally,] the dry semi-desert of the Okanagan and its adjoining valleys does not support a large number of fur-bearing animals. It seems likely that over-trapping depleted the stocks of beaver in the Okanagan territory. Paucity of returns have led some historians to conclude that the Okanagans participated but little in fur trade” (1990: 100-1).

²⁵² The newcomers introduced new consumer products to the Okanagan people, namely steel axes, European clothing, tobacco, tea, sugar and flour for which the latter acquired a taste. They are also said to have acquired a market for their horses and to have been introduced to horticulture and cattle raising. Carol A. Mellows, on this issue, disagrees with other scholars and argues that those practices started “at least twenty years earlier, and possibly much sooner than that. Some Okanagan individuals had already built herds of cattle as well as horses by the 1850s” (1990: 110). She advances that the Okanagans welcomed the fur traders, believing that they would then be better able “to feed and clothe their families”, as well as to “play the part of warriors again” (ibidem: 97) against their well-armed neighbours, the Piegans and Blackfeet, but reality turned out to be quite different, as the same scholar makes clear: “During the fur trade period, it is a matter of record that there were recurring periods of famine in the Okanagan...” (ibidem: 105). Moreover, according to Peter Carstens, “[g]uns and other trade goods, for example, passed from group to group from both the south and east, disrupting the balance of indigenous trade; certain features of European religious beliefs, not to mention European diseases such as smallpox, followed similar routes; and ‘stories of strange ships and men some trade goods filtered to them from the coast’” (1991: 29).

company servants and engaging in occasional horse thieving²⁵³, on the other hand, others were certainly less antagonistic and, according to David Thompson, were said “to be courteous, friendly and generous”²⁵⁴ (Mellows, 1990: 95), as well as “both peace-loving and scrupulously honest” (ibidem).

In *Enwhisteetkwa*, the reader finds these two attitudes: an initial hesitancy, or even reluctance, on the part of the Okanagan people to willingly accept the white men’s institutions, followed by a position of tolerance and support towards European advancement. The extract below perfectly depicts the Okanagans’ initial inhospitable reaction caused by fear that the black robed men²⁵⁵ would destroy their traditional ways of livelihood.

One day during the sunflower seed moon, my father gathered our family together. He seemed very troubled. He said that we were going back to Penticton, our winter living place. I wondered why. We never went there until fall after we fished at Okanagan Falls. He said that some men who came into camp that day had news from our chief. He said that we must hurry to Penticton because of a big talk there. (...) [S]emas were on their way to Penticton. I knew that they had often gone through there to the trade place in the north from stories I had heard. I wondered why this was different.

(...)

Our chief Soorimpt spoke to all. (...) He said “A group of semas are coming through here. They are not just traders. Some of them want to build a place in our homeland to teach us different ways. These people wear long black robes. They are not respectful to the things made for us. These black robed men came to tell us the things made for us are bad, that we are bad and that we will go to a place where people grow horns and hoofs and burn in hot fire if we do not learn new ways.” The chief said, “We do not need to change, we are good people, we are respectful to everything the Great Spirit Creator gave us.” He said, “The black-robed ones will not come and live here without our invitation. We will stop them and make them go back.”

(1982: 31)

At first sight, Chief Soorimpt seems determined to preclude the missionaries from successfully prosecuting their mission and, as a result, the following morning “[g]uns, bows, knives and spears were made ready from the youngest to the oldest”

²⁵³ For further details, see the recorded instances of conflict in Mellows’ study (1990: 111), where she transcribes some passages of letters written by fur traders in 1814 and in 1823.

²⁵⁴ David Thompson, a fur trader who recorded some observations on the Okanagans he met during his trip down the Columbia, stated that when he left the Methow, a sub-group of Okanagans, it was with gifts (1990: 95). This practice of offering gifts as a symbol of friendship and peace was discussed on pages 196 and 197.

²⁵⁵ According to Shirley Louis, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate were the only missionary order that aimed at the wholesale conversion of the Okanagans to Christianity, even though “they were not the first Roman Catholic Order to establish a mission among the Okanagan” (2002: 19). They arrived there in 1859 with well-established goals and a deliberate policy of forcing social and religious change among the Okanagan people: “... the Oblates sought to civilize and convert the Okanagan, learn their language and supervise their would-be flock until they became loyal and devout Christians” (ibidem).

(ibidem). However, the tolerant nature of the Okanagans is soon emphasised and, instead of fighting and killing, we get to know that, at noon, Natives and non-Natives are riding together towards the Okanagans' camp. Even if "[t]hat night there was angry talk for a long time" (32), among the two groups, and many days of discussion followed, the truth is that understanding is eventually achieved, when Therese intercedes with her uncle on behalf of the white men.

As Enwhisteetkwa narrates, not only does Soorimpt allow European advancement, but he also allows the Okanagans to change and adapt to the newcomers' conditions, borrowing their products and ideas, if they want to:

... after Therese talked and talked to her uncle about how these people could help us learn ways which might be easier, he let them go. He told the people "I have decided to let them go. They can build their place. Those who care to change have that right. Maybe Therese is right. She seems happy and well treated. Look at the fine thing she wears." She did wear fine things. Her dress looked so shiny it sparkled and glistened like ice shimmers. We couldn't make buckskin look like that. So the semas were allowed to pass and they went north past Penticton to build their place.

(1982: 32)

Carol A. Mellows recalls that instances of conflict were indeed scarce²⁵⁶, not only due to the Okanagans' non-violent nature, but also because the white men infiltrated the Okanagan communities and, consequently, first generations of mixed blood children began to emerge (1990: 111). As she concludes,

With so many early connections between the Okanagans and the newcomers, it is small wonder that this period was a peaceful one. The Okanagan culture places a very high value on the family²⁵⁷; to go to war against one's son-in-law, brother-in-law, nephew or grandson would be unthinkable.

(Mellows, 1990: 112)

To sum up, just like *Slash*, these two children's books also portray the Okanagans' holistic spirituality, one which looks at life as integrative and inclusive, rather than stressing a dualistic worldview that sees things as irreconcilable opposites. Even though this concern for wholeness is apparent in *Neekna and Chemai*, it is even

²⁵⁶ In her own words, violent incidents such as horse thieving and the harassment of company servants, as described on pages 212 and 213, "seem to have been isolated cases, rather than a general pattern" (1990: 111).

²⁵⁷ This is also true nowadays, despite the shifting nature of family relationships: "[f]amily life is still central to the preservation of Okanagan culture" (Louis, 2002: 10).

more prominent in *Enwhisteetkwa*, because of its syncretism²⁵⁸: in the present, there is the past and future; in modernity, we find tradition; in reconciling contrary beliefs, we find coexistence and mutual influence. Chief Soorimpt symbolises the openness towards the Other, and shows both children and adults that a balanced approach is the only way to face the challenge of relating positively to the world.

This integration of polarised worldviews, as defended by Jeannette Armstrong, is not only inevitable, but also desirable for the development of a sustainable future. She contends that “Native people, as a result of contact, are making extraordinarily important discoveries in their on-going survival through the continuous search to retain and apply the principles of cooperation inherent in the Native creative process” (Cardinal and Armstrong, 1991: 26).

Therefore, rather than being dangerous and false, a healthy syncretism is necessary and imperative for the well-being of humankind. Open one’s heart and mind to others, respect them and listen actively to their words is the attitude to follow, instead of defending ourselves against the loss of uniqueness and purity, for...

... we are brothers and sisters, natural people who seek to participate in the ways of creation. (...) This is the first duty of the people, that they show an appreciation and high regard for one another; to express that it is the duty of each person to care for and take care of one another and seek to resolve conflicts among the people so that the process of life will not be interrupted.

(...)

Through the story the people share one mind and one life. The more relations, the richer your being for their power and life flows into you.

(George, 1990: 193)

Stories, as put by Conrad George and as reiterated throughout this dissertation, do convey a sense of closeness, creating ties to one another and to the wider world. Let us, in the following section, look at how Jeannette Armstrong used the power of the word to trace the Okanagan identity.

²⁵⁸ Syncretism shall be distinguished from assimilation. The aim is not annihilation, but a fruitful dialogue and interchange between cultures. It is an encounter between people(s), where openness, dialogue and pluralism are the key towards renewal and transformation of one’s culture from within. Jeannette Armstrong cautions against division and praises co-operation among all peoples, when she asserts: “Be clear that change to those systems will be promoted by people who can perceive intelligent and non-threatening alternatives. Understand that these alternatives will be presented only through discourse and dialogue flowing outward from us (...). I believe in the strength and rightness in the values of my people and know that those principles of peace and co-operation, in practise, are natural and survival drive mechanisms which transcend violence and aggression” (Armstrong, 1990: 145-6).

II. 7.3. THE POWER OF THE WORD TO TRACE ONE'S IDENTITY

There is indeed a canon of literature that is there, that has always been there, and will continue to be there. It is central and integral to our survival as a people. (...)

Using our literatures to reestablish health (...). We see our literatures, our voice, as a mechanism of healing ourselves, as medicine to the societies, bringing the possibility of a better future, not only for our children, but also the children of other peoples in the world.

We are instruments. We, as thinking beings, are instruments of transformation. We are the transformers of societies. (...) We can transform the sickness in this world through **the power of our words**, through the power of our stories, through the power that comes from the basis of our societies. Societies founded in the spiritual values that are contained in the principles of cooperation that our people consistently display in our communities here in North America, and in other indigenous communities world over.

(Armstrong, 1996d: 33; my emphasis)

In the previous section, we came to the conclusion that *Neekna and Chemai* and *Enwhisteetkwa/Walk in Water* display the importance of negotiation and inclusion, rather than depicting values of domination and exclusion. The Native peoples' ability to recognise the interrelatedness of all things, their ability to see three hundred and sixty degrees in opposition to the tangible and linear type of vision that is said to characterise the white society, is a gift that is shared with both Natives and non-Natives through storytelling.

The notion that all life moves within a circular pattern is well captured by the two books under analysis, as their chapters are based on the seasons, conveying the natural and predictable rhythm of natural life. In other words, Nature is always in motion – “[e]ven the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were” (Neihardt, 2000: 150) – and, just like it, so does the “[n]arrative form in traditional tales reflect (...) a native sense of time as circular and

flowing; stories take a traditional form and include the use of archaic words and phrases not understood in ordinary conversation” (Waterston, 1992: 30).

As outlined in an earlier section, a narrative is a complex process, because we continually discover new meanings with each telling (Bruner, 1986: 153; Cruikshank, 1998: 44); it is an interpretive art form that depends on the interconnectedness of the story/text with the storyteller/narrator, of the latter with the audience/reader and, in turn, of this last entity with the story/text, in an active and circular exchange. In this process, these interdependent elements are all subject to various transformations, as previously seen and as Bernard Hirsch highlights in his analysis of Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller*:

Successive narrative episodes cast long shadows both forward and back, lending different or complementary shades of meaning to those preceding them and offering perspectives from which to consider those that follow. Such perspectives are then themselves often expanded or in some way altered as the new material reflects back upon them. This kind of learning process is part of the dynamic of oral tradition.

(1988: 3)

Those “archaic words and phrases not understood in ordinary conversation” are clarified within this dynamic process of storytelling, because, as Peter Brooks reminds us, knowledge is often achieved through the circling or spiralling strategy, which involves transference, transformation and the gradual accretion of meaning: put simply, and making use of the title of a paper by Freud, a narrative is, after all, “Remembering, Repeating and Working Through” (Brooks, 1984: 98), rather than a static recounting of a set of happenings²⁵⁹. It consists of building the present by rethinking the past, in a “forward and backward movement” (ibidem: 100).

This is exactly what Jeannette Armstrong compels her readers to do in her children’s books, due to the use of Okanagan words, whose translation into English is found earlier in the text²⁶⁰ or afterwards²⁶¹; due to the links between characters and

²⁵⁹ In Peter Brooks’s words, “... repetition is so basic to our experience of literary texts that one is simultaneously tempted to say all and to say nothing on the subject. To state the matter baldly: rhyme, alliteration, assonance, meter, refrain, all the mnemonic elements of literature and indeed most of its tropes are in some manner repetitions that take us back in the text, that allow the ear, the eye, the mind to make connections, conscious or unconscious, between different textual moments, to see past and present as related and as establishing a future that will be noticeable as some variation in the pattern” (1984: 99).

²⁶⁰ In *Enwhisteetkwa*, Okanagan terms are translated in a glossary at the beginning of the book. This is evidence that Armstrong writes having both Native and white audiences in mind: she wants the latter to feel included, but she simultaneously creates a sense of otherness and difference through her code-switching, which deliberately alienates non-Okanagans.

figures from history²⁶², as seen; or to the incorporation of a diversity of voices and discourses within the narrative.

This plurality of voices and discourses is harmonised by the centrality of the first-person narrators, the speaking *personae* that allow the narratives to be written as if they are being told. The girls' monologues indeed simulate oral performances in that they resemble the storyteller's voice or, even better, a playwright's comments and his/her stage directions describing and explaining the actions of the actors. These children's books are like drama texts, action-oriented; they are performed rather than just inscribed in written form. The reader is able to visualise clearly what is happening in the story, living it, rather than viewing the events at a distance. Several aspects contribute to this visualisation: the emotional point of view²⁶³ of the narrators that help set the atmosphere or tone of both stories; the use of short sentences and of verbs emphasising activity; attention to detail and, among others, the illustrations that work as pictorial interpretations of the text, as we will notice later on in this analysis.

Starting both books in the winter season²⁶⁴ and moving progressively through the cycle to reach the fourth and last chapter in the fall, Jeannette Armstrong presents us

²⁶¹ For example, in *Neekna and Chemai*, the reader gets to know the translation of the Okanagan word "Tupa" early in the text, as a cataphoric reference: "'Hi Tupa, are you visiting all morning?' In our language, Tupa means great-grandparent" (1984: 11).

²⁶² Some of the characters, namely Therese and Cyprienne Laurence in *Enwhisteetkwa*, need to be taken outside the text and compared with their exophoric references – Theresa and Cyprian Lawrence –, so that their full meaning may be grasped.

²⁶³ *Enwhisteetkwa*, for example, allows the reader into her subjective, inner thoughts and feelings from the beginning, as revealed in the following similes: "The song (...) reminded me of wind through pine trees. (...) [M]y grandmother's fingers flying in and out of the hemp and tulle bag she was weaving (...) were like little brown birds" (1982: 7). Those similes help the reader to imagine how things might have been like; they turn words into vivid illustrations in the reader's mind. Moreover, exclamations and the expression of personal reflections also add to the whole picture, creating a bond between the storyteller/narrator and audience/reader: "How pretty they [the tiny picking baskets and the tulle and hemp bags] were! (...) I would like to see that place and those people!" (11); "Everything was just delicious!" (13); "I hoped it [Native lifeways] would never change" (44). The same happens in *Neekna and Chemai*: Tupa "was our favourite person. (...) She made us laugh and feel happy..." (1884: 9); "There was so much work and excitement" (19).

²⁶⁴ The symbolism of winter is linked to the recurring annual cycle of the seasons, which indicate the passage of time. According to the First Nations' worldview, this is a period of purification and renewal, and, since this season is just prior to spring – associated with fertility – it is a time for preparation indoors. When compared to the rest of the year, winter is characterised by a relative inactivity and relaxation, because the severe weather limits the tasks that can be accomplished outdoors. Anyway, it is essential, just like all the other seasons, to complete the cycle: in winter time, the seeds lie protected in the earth;

two circular stories that combine the natural rhythm of seasons with that of the Okanagan community's daily life. The young girls' detailed narration of traditional life gives the impression that these stories are more than fiction: they seem to be accounts of actual memories and happenings, which are evoked as a response to the threat of cultural misunderstanding and to the need to ensure Aboriginal affirmation and/or celebration.

Even though *Enwhisteetkwa* and *Neekna and Chemai* are works of fiction, they do resemble autobiographies, since much of what the first-person narrators vividly describe is based on the author's childhood life and environment, a strategy that Sylvia O'Meara and Douglas A. West point out as customary among storytellers, particularly among those telling everyday stories:

The meaning of legend, myth, story or narrative is bound up in the cultural way of life of the storyteller, and serves to show how some event has a particular meaning. Traditionally, in the transmission of the oral tradition, the storyteller shapes the narrative with elements of their own cultural knowledge. Usually the audience shared the same cultural backgrounds, so the storyteller did not need to analyse each element or component of the story. The stories enhanced both the utilitarian and spiritual wisdom of a particular way of life. (...)

Everyday stories include the human accomplishments, their relationships to each other, and their relationships to other bands or nations, including the European (...). Everyday stories included the strategies for life and group survival skills...

(1996: 123-4)

In light of the above, and given the previously noted allusion to historical figures and to the fact that "Armstrong first wrote children's books for the curriculum project" (Glebe, 1990: 6) "to educate young people about Native culture and history" (Witalec and Bruchac, 1995: 35), we may argue that, through the power of written words, Okanagan oral tradition has been sustained.

Just like Walter Ong, so does Jeannette Armstrong believe that "writing (...) did not reduce orality but enhanced it" (Ong, 2003: 9), because "[w]ritten texts all have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield their meanings" (ibidem: 8). She claims her writings to have emerged from a strong oral tradition, as she has made use of myths, rituals, tropes, circular plot structures and other quasi-oral techniques as the basis for creating socially relevant texts, because, as an educator, Armstrong knows that a...

then, in spring they sprout; they grow in summer and, finally, they produce the harvest that is collected in fall.

Narrative can (...) serve as an interpretive lens for reflecting the storied nature of human lives, for understanding the moral complexities of the human condition, and for enabling classrooms to expand their borders as interpretive communities. A good story engages the moral imagination, illuminating possibilities for human thought, feeling, and action in ways that can bridge the gulf between different times, places, cultures, and beliefs.

(Witherell, 1995: 40)

Undoubtedly, besides exercising our imagination, narratives work as a re-imagining of realities that have existed in the past, that exist in present and that may occur in the future. Additionally, they are powerful tools in modelling our understanding and acceptance of our own and the Other's humaneness²⁶⁵, which means that their use in the classroom has been found to have many positive effects, due to their educational value. Jeannette Armstrong is well-aware of all that, but this does not mean that her children's books cannot be read by an adult audience. On the contrary, even though she first designed them as part of the En'owkin curriculum project, she expects to have her books read by young and old alike, by Native and non-Native peoples, in any part of the world and in any walk of life. In her words,

I'm a trained storyteller in the Okanagan tradition, which means that I should be able to relay a story orally which not only captivates, interests, entertains, and gives information to children but also at the same time is able to keep an adult audience interested and entertained. That's the difficulty of oral story, because oral story was delivered to families; it wasn't just for children. So the stories I've selected to do as children's books should work at two levels.

(Beeler, 1996: 145)

Doris Wolf and Paul DePasquale also alert us to the fact that "children are not necessarily the sole intended audience for traditional stories" (2008: 88) and they illustrate this by referring to the fact that "Theytus Books (...) lists its legends under two categories, children's stories and oral traditions, indicating that adults, too, might well and do indeed read these books for their own pleasure and knowledge" (ibidem).

Jeannette Armstrong's picture books delight the young and older reader in their ability to recapture the tone and quality of life in pre-colonial Canada through a child's eye view, Neekna in *Neekna and Chemai*, and Enwhisteetkwa in the book by the same name. Presented as idyllic, the Okanagan traditional lifeways are described by these two

²⁶⁵ As Bob Barton and David Booth point out, narratives, in particular personal storytelling, create bonds; they build common experiences that bind people together, establishing trust and fellowship: "The oral tradition – stories told aloud – goes right back to the tribe and its communal life. When children become a community of listeners, they lay aside their own egocentricity [and ethnocentricity], and become a tribe" (Barton and Booth, 1990: 31).

young girl narrators in an effort to recreate the texture and appearance of things as experienced in the author's familiar world. However, Armstrong's political vision goes beyond these attempts to "mirror" events in the narrow sense of the word, and in *Enwhisteetkwa*, in particular, we come to the realisation of ethnocentrism and stereotyping in the following excerpt:

One story was about a group of young men who rode down to the south part of our homelands. They were part of a big fight with some people they called *Sema*. I understood this might be the hairy-faced ones. I was not really sure but it sounded like some of these *Semas* were very rude. (...) [O]ne of the things talked about quite often was the big fight near a place called Tonasket. (...) [T]hey pointed those things called guns, at people. (...) That's when the people fought with them. It sounded scary. I hoped they wouldn't come to our living places. I hoped they stayed at the trade places, because I could hear the hushed words and knew the old ones were greatly troubled.

(24-6)

Here, instead of the stereotypical representation of Native peoples as the dangerous savages who are the enemy, we are thrilled by the deliberate and striking inversion of the common European perspective, because the white peoples are presented as the warriors with whom the poor First Nations fight, just in their own defence. Furthermore, the act of naming, which is imminently political, is made significant when the Okanagans identify the white newcomers as "*Semas*" and the missionaries as "black robed men" (31). These biases, as pointed out, decline at the end of the narrative to give way to harmony and synergistic partnership.

We may say, then, that the choice of young girl narrators heightens, rather diminishes, the insights gained into the fictional world. Neekna and *Enwhisteetkwa*'s eye views are not childlike²⁶⁶, but are clear visions through which the author finds ways to speak of the uniqueness of Okanagan experience and worldviews, defying eurocentric mainstream notions of history and literary art, and leading to what Howard Adams terms "cultural decolonization":

Cultural decolonization means perceiving knowledge in terms of a specific place and time as a principle of intellectual inquiry. For Métis, Indians and Inuit the place is Canada, and the time is imperial capitalism. The place provides a perimeter for historical and cultural analysis. It allows our historians and authors to use a critical analysis of British and French colonialism. One of the first tasks of cultural

²⁶⁶ The author's conscious manipulation of narrative, point of view and tone is a major feature in the organisation of these stories: even though, as stated, they are narrated from the perspective of two young girls, and, thus, events are described in simple, almost naïve-like language, and seem to be limited to the way the narrators perceive them to have occurred, and to be restricted to their knowledge and to their experience, it does not mean that the worldviews and the message relayed are childlike.

decolonization is to analyze and interpret our history and culture from an aboriginal perspective. This is the one of the important steps in our re-awakening. It is the key to transforming the colonizer's society that continues to dominate us. Aboriginal centric history – the interpretation of Indian/Métis history from an aboriginal perspective has no European heroes.

(Adams, 1993, Fall: 251-2)

In Armstrong's two books for children, we notice the absence of non-Aboriginal heroes, or, if we want, their exclusion in favour of Aboriginal-centric approaches. This Okanagan writer, together with Howard Adams and other Native authors and scholars²⁶⁷ truly believe that only with a view "from below" (ibidem: 254), "with an authentic aboriginal consciousness and sense of nationhood" (ibidem: 252) will Native peoples be empowered, because they will eventually be able to perceive of their culture and history as valuable, rather than inferior.

The young girl narrators in the books being analysed are gifted with this ability to perceive the invisible essence of being Aboriginal²⁶⁸ and, in particular, Okanagan: nurturing communal life; being whole, or as Enwhisteetkwa puts it, feeling "*something* as a being, big, warm and strong and all around me. Around my whole family. It was a real living thing that could be summoned. (...) I like that something, I hope it will stay with us always" (1982: 17).

For the most part, the narrators' language is simple, informal, light, almost naïve-like, as mentioned, but, nonetheless, very effective in making the reader "hear" the words on the page. The short sentences and simple syntax reinforce this aural dimension, and the rhythm of the narratives is never disturbed, not even by the introduction of embedded songs, poems or myths. Figures of speech do not abound in any of the texts, except for the animism already discussed, but attention to detail provides the reader with clear pictures of the scenes described. In their review of *How Food Was Given*, a traditional story that is also part of the Okanagan Curriculum Project, Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale assert: "Simply written, simply illustrated, with

²⁶⁷ A shift in the perspective from which to analyse Native writing has been argued for by many Native writers and scholars, namely by Paula Gunn Allen who ironically claims: "Yes, Indians do novels. And nowadays some of us write them. Writing them in the phonetic alphabet is the new part, that and the name. The rest of it, however, is as old as the hills" (1989: 4)

²⁶⁸ Just like these narrators – or perhaps as a result of their influence on contemporary readers –, more and more Native girls/women are acquiring this facility to really see to the true centre from/through their position on the society's peripheries. They are the best representatives of this "view from below" that Howard Adams refers to: not only are they on the margins due to the fact that they are Native, but also because of being women.

line drawings more full of light and beauty than seems possible, this is a heart-shaking story” (1992: 199). The same can be said of these two children’s books.

Generally speaking, Native Canadian fiction for children is characterised by simplicity in style, directness of language, as well as by its innocence, its pastoral, idyllic tone, which contrasts with the darker, tenacious one associated with the persistent theme of protest/resistance in fiction for adults. Doris Wolf and Paul DePasquale elaborate on this matter:

Perhaps the one striking difference between adult and children’s fiction by Aboriginal authors lies in tone. (...) Picture books for children (...) notably lack the anger and siege mentality found in adult fiction. In fact, unlike adult fiction, which tends to foreground such issues as poverty, poor health, substance abuse, lack of educational or employment opportunities, and other inequities still all too prevalent in many Aboriginal communities in contemporary Canada, children’s fiction notably avoids the portrayal of these realities. Although some Young Adult novels by Aboriginal authors (...) do engage with political issues, past and present, and sometimes even with anger²⁶⁹, fictional picture books almost without exception do not. In picture books, no matter the age, location, or specific circumstances of the Aboriginal child protagonist, the child’s interactions with both family and setting generally are offered as idyllic.

(Wolf and DePasquale, 2008: 91).

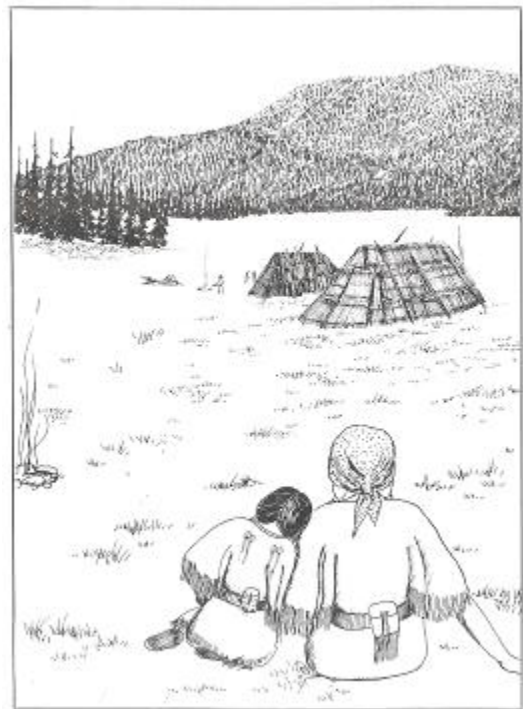
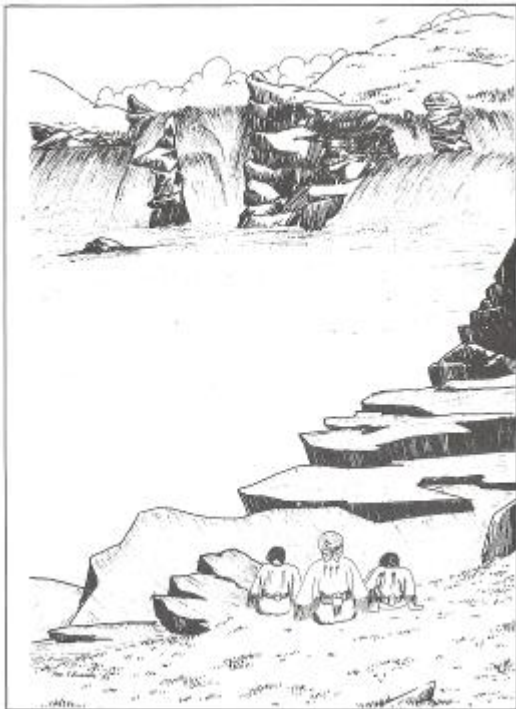
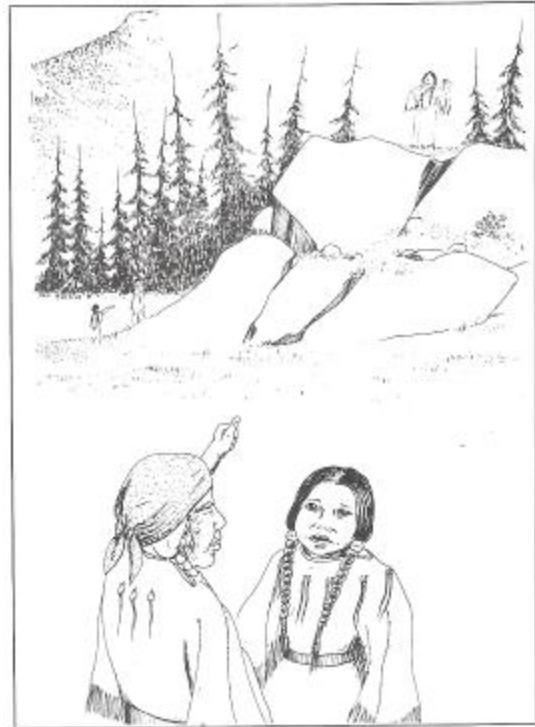
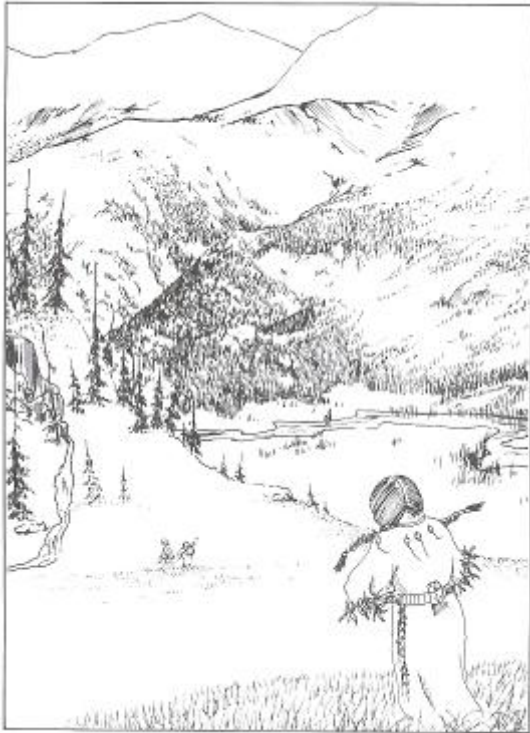
Illustrations are usually used very effectively to add beauty and harmony to such books, romanticising the scenes and contributing to the stories’ texture and depth. The coexistence of a written text and of a pictorial one highlights the link between text and extratext, while simultaneously working as illustration to an audience that might not be acquainted with the environments and/or the actions described. Besides, as Sheila Egoff notes, “[c]hildren, with their limited reading ability, value pictures highly and with little or no knowledge of authors and titles often select books for their pictorial appeal” (Egoff, 1967: 209).

Rather than working as mere decoration for the text, illustrations have often the capacity to promote literary and aesthetic interpretations. The collaborative effort of the writer and the artist, in their attempt to conjoin text, paratext²⁷⁰ and extratext, correspond to the exigencies of the oral traditions of Native peoples, in that everything communicates with everything else and, hence, the written text is transformed into an aural experience. The readers take a step back from the text to see it holistically.

²⁶⁹ Jeannette Armstrong’s *Slash* is a good example of this reality, as we have seen.

²⁷⁰ Genette defines paratext as “a title, a subtitle, intertitles; prefaces, postfaces, notices, forewords, etc.; marginal, infrapaginal, terminal notes; epigraphs; illustrations; blurbs, book covers, dust jackets, and many other kinds of secondary signals...” (1997: 3)

In both *Enwhisteetkwa* and *Neekna and Chemai*, nearly every page is accompanied by an illustration: texts and pictures complement each other. However, instead of colourful pictorial books, they present black and white line drawings that are penetrated by light, creating the effect of the already mentioned dreamlike, peaceful, idyllic world.



Figs. 19, 20, 21 and 22. Illustrations by Ken Edwards in Armstrong's *Neekna and Chemai* (1984: 16; 18; 32 and 42).

On this subject, Sheila Egoff reminds us that...

Even in this day of lavish colour illustration, a great many pictures and drawings for children are reproduced in black and white, and not only for the sake of economy. In the hands of a skilled artist who is working joyfully in the medium he has chosen, black and white illustrations (...) are far more effective than all but the best illustrations in colour.

(Egoff, 1967: 211)

Besides these black and white line drawings that depict the First Nations' harmonic interactions with both Nature and community, it is also interesting to notice that the written text is printed in black ink over a white background, a previously blank page, which highlights the complementary nature of the written and oral means of communication. The tone of similitude and difference, and the harmonising of both, is further enhanced by the fact that the books under analysis have two chapter titles: there is a typographic juxtaposition of a title that includes the chapter number, in a European temporal order, and another that simply consists of a season, evoking an Aboriginal temporal notion. Curiously, if in *Enwhisteetkwa* the "season title" appears first and is followed by the numeric reference, in *Neekna and Chemai* the order is reversed. The desire to emphasise the Aboriginal worldview is, nonetheless, apparent in the whole capitalisation of the "season titles".

Texts and drawings are paired to form a whole picture about the young Okanagan girls' daily experiences and I would say that, in both cases, the illustrations work as a synecdoche, more than as metaphors for the texts. In other words, pictures serve as interpretive or heuristic mimesis of the texts, bringing reality closer to the reader, so that the worlds evoked and created in discourse become clearer and less diffuse. Thus, rather than "creating another reality" (Beeler, 1996: 146), in Armstrong's picture books, illustrations encapsulate faithfully, statically and simply what is being told. The fact that they are black and white line drawings further emphasises this idea that the readers are implicated in the whole process: they are the ones to colour the pictures in their minds and to add to them.

If Armstrong's books for children do enclose visual aids, because the Okanagan writer knows that there is a superior processing of meaning generally associated with

pictorial presentations²⁷¹, *Slash*, her novel for young adults, does not include illustrations, since she believes that...

... imagery should be conjured in the mind of the reader, and it should be transferable to the reader's situation so that the reader (...) transfers that character [and situation] in and transposes [them] into their own reality (...). [I]f you do photographs or illustrations you destroy that, because you're creating another reality. (...) In a sense, when you're writing stories, you're allowing the reader to construct the backdrops and the imagery, making it come alive and making it the reader's own. In good storytelling from the Okanagan point of view, you give enough to inspire and excite the readers or listeners to create those images in their own minds.
(Beeler, 1996: 146)

What is more, as Jeannette Armstrong points out, her texts *per se* are enough to create memorable imagery and to induce the readers' response. She claims to employ words and literary devices as effectively as if she was making use of brushes, paints and a palette, because her blank pages are canvasses of pure possibility. On the potential of words to evoke images, Armstrong explains:

Visual art for me is using the language of colour to create meaning and to solicit different kinds of responses from the viewer, and so with poetry and poetic prose or prose poetry, basically I'm doing the same exercise, only I'm using words and sounds and rhythm and metaphor and similes, of course. I'm creating imagery...
(Beeler, 1996: 144)

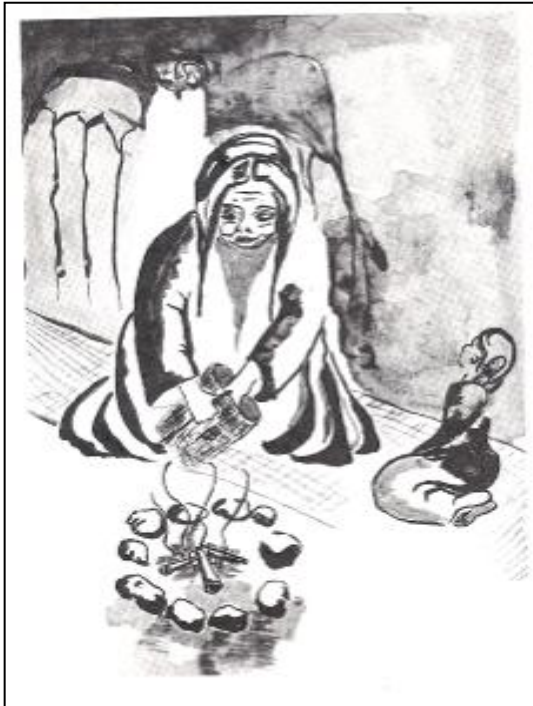
In this context, the illustrators in *Enwhisteetkwa* and in *Neekna and Chemai* limit their artwork to visual illustrations of proxemics²⁷² and kinesthetic²⁷³ elements, which have the same value as scenic indications in theatre; hence, illustrations there must be regarded as additional aids contributing to maximum efficiency in inspiring and

²⁷¹ The finding that pictures are remembered more easily than words was defined by Paivio (1971) as the picture-superiority effect. Pictures access meaningful information more readily than do words, because they yield both semantic/conceptual as well as visual codes in memory and when conjoined –when words are heard/read and pictures seen– the doors to memory become unlocked, as there are multiple retrieval paths.

²⁷² Proxemics is a measure of space; it “studies the organization of human space: types of space, distances observed between people, organization of the habitat, organization of space in a building or room” (Pavis, 1998: 290). According to Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, there are two aspects of proxemics to consider: “The first is use of space between people, that is, how close or far people stand from one another while interacting. The second is environmental influences: that is, the effects of such things as architecture and location of furniture on interaction” (1989: 105).

²⁷³ “Kinesthetics: From the Greek *kinesi* and *aisthesis*, sensation of movement” (Pavis, 1998: 193). Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz further elaborates on the term kinesics and defines it as “everything we do with our bodies, from posture to facial expressions, to where we look with our eyes” (1989: 105), in order to achieve a specific ultimate objective, which is to communicate, to provide information about one's personality traits, attitudes and/or emotions.

stimulating (mainly) young readers, guiding them in their own reading and making them remember the stories, because, as discussed, tradition implies remembering/memory.



Figs. 23 and 24. Grandmother singing Ska-Loo-La, while weaving (on the left), and the process of cutting salmon up (on the right); illustrations by Jeannette Armstrong in her *Enwhisteetkwa* (1982: 7; 38).

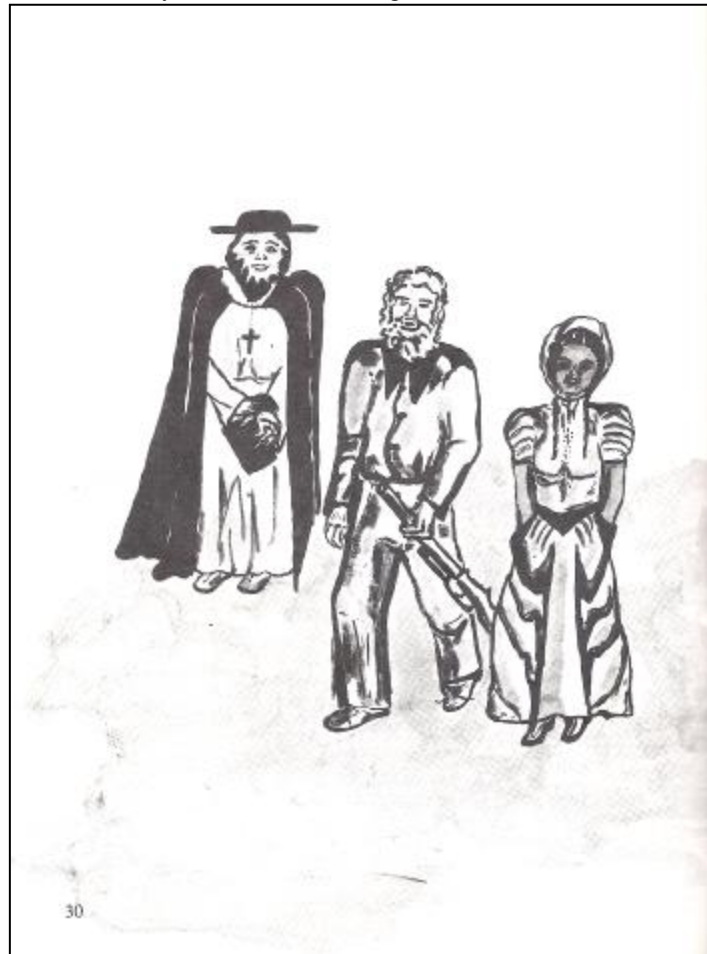


Fig. 25. A black-robed man, Cyprienne Laurence and Therese, an illustration by Jeannette Armstrong in her *Enwhisteetkwa* (1982: 30).

But, even if limited to visual illustrations of proxemics and kinesthetic elements, how will illustrations guide the readers in their own reading, if, in creating visual art, the illustrator is him/herself interpreting the stories²⁷⁴?

In fact, in the process, the illustrator becomes the quilter's needle, weaving the outside world into media and combining the parts into a whole fabric. S/he selects some moments of the story and fixes them in time forever; omits others and relies on his/her judgement, trying to make sense of what s/he had read in the context of his/her life. But as Maurice Sendak reminds us, this must be done discreetly and skilfully, for "[t]he artist must override the story, but he must also override his own ego for the sake of the story" (Lorraine, 1980: 328).

Illustrations, then, become different entrances into the stories, which the readers can explore, reflect upon or critique, pondering their meaning in relationship to their own experiences²⁷⁵. They are unique opportunities for one to develop literacy, because the readers' desire to understand pictorial elements makes them want to read to know more and participate further in the life of that story, perhaps writing their own versions or even acting them out. Like puzzles, in children's picture books, there are messages in form, shape, colour and perspective that await to be discovered. There are layers of meaning in the characters' facial expressions, gestures and clothes, to name but a few, and, as such, there are nuances waiting for the eye to release the clues; there are adventures to pursue, trails to follow, worlds to be revealed, for "visual symbols convey ideas and express [meaningful] emotions, qualities, and feelings" (Chalmers, 1981: 6).

An example of this is the fact that Armstrong's *Enwhisteetkwa* is, as discussed, all printed in black and white, except for its cover, where a black, a white, a red and a yellow circle – representing the sacred colours – overlap and in-between them a blue one stands out, because the girl represented there "is never isolated from any of those overlapping areas", as the Okanagan writer and artist explains (Beeler, 1996: 149). In her discussion of the importance of the five circles in the cover of the book in relation to

²⁷⁴The illustrator and writer Maurice Sendak refuses to see himself as "a mere echo of the author" (Lorraine, 1980: 326). He believes an illustration to be the artist's version of a given text, his/her interpretation: "To be an illustrator is to be a participant, someone who has something equally important to say as the writer of the book..." (ibidem).

²⁷⁵ Art has the special function of enabling the reader/viewer to make connections between the artist's recreated experiences and his/her own. S/he fills in gaps with personal meaning, because visual imagery is metaphorical and evocative, designed to call forth imaginative faculties. Given that, and as Duvoisin argues, "... illustrations as done by the superior artists are related to the text in a free, loose, subtle way; they leave the reader free to interpret the writing with complete freedom. And he has the added pleasure of doing the same with the illustrations" (1980: 312).

the story, Jeannette Armstrong clarifies: “They were just sketches that I was thinking about in relation to the topic: one year in this girl’s life” (Beeler, 1996: 149). But these sketches leave many hidden meanings for the reader to explore, namely the interrelatedness of all living things; the First Nations’ reliance upon the main spirit characters and foods; the circularity of life/the seasonal cycle of activities; the colour symbolism²⁷⁶; the representation of the eleven-year-old Okanagan girl, among many others. Thus, the marriage of visual and verbal art forms in this book brings readers from diverse backgrounds into – or, at least, closer to – the story being told and eventually gives birth to a successful “message beyond the portrayal of customs and culture as being exotic or strange” (Lazú, 2004: 200). Instead of emphasising alterity as threatening, Armstrong’s picture books transport the readers into the Okanagan society, enabling them to experience and valorise the Native worldview and to understand otherness as something that inhabits sameness²⁷⁷. This immersion into the story-world and the acknowledgement that literature “can transform this society as a unit, as a group, together, in solidarity” (Armstrong, 1996d: 33), regardless of race, colour, creed, age or sex, brings me to Toni Morrison’s claim that...

[w]e are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experience of those with whom we have come in contact. We are not, in fact, “other.” We are choices. And to read imaginative literature by and about us is to choose to examine centers of the self and to have the opportunity to compare these centers with the “raceless” one with which we are, all of us, most familiar.

(Morrison, 1989: 9)

The assertion above is true for all literatures of whatever time and space. Literatures give us the opportunity to develop and retain one’s identity, but they also enable us to understand and appreciate other ethnic and cultural groups. Consequently, using multicultural texts in and outside of school allows individuals to realise that they are only a part of a pluralistic society. Darby and Catterall, while focusing on the advantages of using multicultural literature in the classroom, underscore that the arts, in

²⁷⁶ For further reading on the symbolism of colours, cf. Penny J. Olson’s “Colors that Heal” (1996). Particularly interesting to my analysis of *Enwhistekwa* is the fact that the mentioned overlapping circles in the front cover of the book are enveloped by a tapestry of green and “[g]reen is a very important color because it is a healing color and the symbol for the Mother Earth. It is also a symbol of balance and listening” (Olson, 1996: 100).

²⁷⁷ Or, if the reader is already part of the cultural world being depicted, s/he will experience self-validation, because, as Joseph Bruchac reminds us, First Nations’ “literature can play a major role in presenting positive images and alternatives for young Native people – usually often denied such positive models by their schools and the stereotyped images of ‘Indians’ in movies and TV” (1996: xv).

general, are “ways to provide authentic multicultural voices, validate students’ cultural heritage and promote cross-cultural understanding” (1994: 299). The Ontario Arts Council also recognises the strength that the arts possess in the students’ learning process: “Students taught through the arts (...) tend to be more motivated and have a more positive attitude toward learning” (1997: 14). Thereby, whether it is through the visual arts, drama, writing or music²⁷⁸, the truth is that the arts provide academic achievement – important meta-cognitive skills are fostered –, while contributing to positive self-esteem and to desegregation, as discussed.

Harold Littlebird, a Laguna/Santo Domingo Pueblo writer, speaks on behalf of music, which, together with other creative art forms, contributes to a sense of well-being and wholeness, because...

To feel the interconnectedness with all things doesn’t just come from word. It comes from that further place of thought, where we take thought and put it into language. In that process we begin to understand what is that our people have held onto, with language, with their ceremonies, with their prayers and their meditations, and the songs, and the dances, and the rituals.

(Littlebird, 1996: 15)²⁷⁹

Music exerts profound effects on human beings. It works as creative expression, as an agent for promoting social change, as a force of unification and, among others, as a source of healing. Jeannette Armstrong, in her interview with Karin Beeler, reflects on this last aspect, but she is aware of the power of music – and songs in particular – in several different scenarios. In her words,

... song has all of the ingredients and qualities that we require to rebalance our emotion and intellect and even our bodies. (...) We say that songs in the Okanagan are very healing, and they’re healing on a much deeper level than just the sounds themselves. They have an impact on our subconscious mind, creating harmony because of the way rhythms are produced. As Okanagan people, we use them in praying, in healing, in calming and in grieving; we use them in many different situations.

(Beeler, 1996: 147)

Songs do have a spiritual undertone²⁸⁰ and can be used as a therapeutic agent, as aforementioned and as Jeannette Armstrong is never tired of emphasising throughout

²⁷⁸ Or even those artful ways other than the fine arts just mentioned, such as pottery, cooking, quilting and carpentry, to name but a few.

²⁷⁹ The same idea had been advocated by Jung, much earlier, in 1950, when he stated that “[m]usic certainly has to do with the collective unconscious (...). [It] expresses in sounds what fantasies and visions express in visual images (...). [It] represents the movement, development, and transformation of motifs of the collective unconscious (...).” (Kittelton, 1996: 83).

her children's books. In *Enwhisteetkwa*, for example, the reader, led by the protagonist's hand, recurrently gets the opportunity to listen to songs and dance-prayers and to experience the characters' feelings of purity, cleanliness and well-being. The quotations below give clear evidence of the emotions evoked by music and by the chanting of prayers during ceremonial acts:

All the girls and women were gathered around the sweat-house fire. Some old women were already inside steam-bathing and praying. We could hear the songs. (...) We prayed to be cleansed of grouchy-thoughts and bad feelings. I always felt so clean and tingly after this, like songs with wee voices were dancing up and down my back and arms. With a feeling like this, how could one be grouchy or talk bad. (...) The dance-prayers would begin again, and all the good guardian-spirit people would come. They would carry messages to the great one. I guessed that they came because the songs were so beautiful.

(1982: 15-6)

Everyone sang the bear song all day until the Grandfather Sun had fallen over the mountain. Then the older ones gathered for a special smoke and feast for thanks to the chief of all the animal people for giving his body to us for food. My grandmother said this was done everytime a bear was killed out of respect to the great animal chief.

(42)

Music was always included in large festivities, adding a religious/spiritual as well as an entertainment component to such occasions. But if music was inherent to ritual life as seen, its role in daily life cannot be ignored. In *Neekna and Chemai*, evidence of songs as part of daily labour activities is also made apparent every time the eldest member of the community, Tupa, starts singing: "Tupa laughed and made a humming sound and began to sing. (...) [H]er song was pretty. She sang and all the women sang with her. We knew they were all happy to be at the root digging camp and thankful that the roots were plentiful" (1984: 21)

Songs were actually sung as part of community get-togethers, especially during day-to-day gatherings of women who socialised while sewing, harvesting and child-rearing; during celebrations of the arrival of visitors; or merely as a recreational pastime, such as during migration journeys, as the following passage illustrates: "Tupa sang lots of songs as we walked beside her horse" (1984: 31), while heading to the Falls to wait for the salmon.

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that songs permeated much of the daily and ritual life of Okanagan people, reinforcing kinship ties, emphasising social mores,

²⁸⁰ Reference to the sense of order and spiritual equilibrium brought by songs was discussed previously in this dissertation, on page 192.

wiping out social evils, expressing regrets and fears, and also serving as repositories of information, due to their didactic content. In brief, songs had the same characteristics as tales did in oral based communities; they were musical stories and, as such, Steve Sanfield's words below may as well be applied to them:

... I believe that from the beginning, stories have been used to do so many things – to delight and entertain, to educate and enlighten, to explain the world around us, to instill and record a sense of history and tradition. They have been used to preserve the wisdom of the past, to pass on what is good and decent in the world, to celebrate the lives of ordinary people, and to show us we are not alone in the world, but rather that, no matter what our origins or backgrounds, we all share these same dreams and dreads, these same feelings, these same hopes for ourselves and our loved ones.

(Sanfield, 1992: 69)

The power of the word, be it in oral or written form, through songs, prayers, poems or stories, is of paramount importance to trace one's identity. As aforementioned, stories are intrinsic to human nature and cultural survival, as they connect the past to the future, not only in terms of their content, but also in the process of storytelling itself, because grandparents – the bridge to the past – and grandchildren – the bridge to the future – have the opportunity to develop bonds of friendship, mutual respect and shared interests, so necessary for the circle of life to continue²⁸¹.

Many are the instances when Jeannette Armstrong, in her books, refers to the real connection between different generations and even within different communities: for example, in *Enwhisteetkwa*, the autodiegetic narrator observes, upon arrival at her grandmother's camp: “[h]er people were very good to us, and we heard many stories. One story was about a group of young men who rode down to the south part of our homelands” (24). The same happens on page 27, when “... men from the other camps came and smoked with the men in [Enwhisteetkwa's] camp. There was a lot of laughter and story-telling”. The reference to moments when they “all feasted and told many stories of things [they] had seen and heard”, as the protagonist puts it on page 44, is extensively illustrated throughout this book, as well as in *Neekna and Chemai*.

In remembering the stories told by the elders, everything – namely the people, the Land and the past – is bound up within them, because the act of remembrance binds

²⁸¹ When great-grandparents were still alive, they also shared their wisdom with their great-grandchildren, thus cementing their relationship, as previously demonstrated and as the following quotation from *Neekna and Chemai* proves: “Our great-grandma then finally did tell us a teeny-weeny story (...) about the time a little boy went out with his dog to look for squirrel food caches” (1984: 13).

those ancient times with the present ones and carries them into the future, contributing to a culture's continuance and renewal.

The bridge between past and future is well articulated in the relationship between the younger and the older generations in these two children's books, but *Dancing with the Cranes*, with its insight into the cycle of birth and death, helps us understand and valorise better than any other "the past before us" and the future to come. Before analysing this third, and more recent, children's book by Jeannette Armstrong, I would like to conclude this chapter with some food for thought: a simple, yet profound, assertion by the Nez Percé linguist and historian Dennis Runnels:

Europeans believe in progress. You say you leave the past behind, you see the future and you move on into the future. In our understanding that's a fallacy. The past is not behind! The past is right before us, right under us. We stand on the bones of our ancestors, on the dead bodies of plants and animals that went before. Even the buildings we see right in front of us are from the past. Everything we see is from the past. It's right there in front of us. But: the future? The future is behind our backs, unseen. So, we don't believe the past is behind us, and the future before us. Quite to the contrary, the past is right before us. Everything, all the history, is in the land.
(Lutz, 2004: 180)

Runnels' words, cited by Hartmut Lutz, do make us think and question several issues, namely the First Nations' sense of place and their notions about the spatiality of time; the role of ancestors as the pillars that sustain the self, communities and the world, in general; and, among others, the idea that life entails a journey of discovery of one's physical-spiritual world. All these issues will be addressed and discussed in the upcoming chapter, "*Dancing with the Cranes, Birth and Death as Part of the Cycle of Life*".

Dancing with the Cranes



by Jeannette Armstrong / illustrated by Ron Hall

CHAPTER EIGHT

DANCING WITH THE CRANES, BIRTH AND DEATH AS PART OF THE CYCLE OF LIFE

I'll be around she said
soon after death lunges forward
out of the rabble
I will stand on a hilltop
a black dot against blazing red
and my shadow will stretch
long and narrow over the earth curve
to seep into the little shadows
even now
skipping behind you

(Armstrong, 1998a: 236)

Life and death are closely, yet uneasily, linked. Death is an undisputable component of the cycle of life on earth²⁸², but, generally speaking, humans do not cope well with their mortality or with the loss of their beloved ones²⁸³.

From the beginning, theology strived to address issues surrounding death and the possibility of immortality. In Genesis, we learn that Adam was formed from the clay of the earth by God²⁸⁴, the divine entity responsible for having breathed the breath of life into clay form²⁸⁵, and that to earth he would return²⁸⁶ as a consequence of sin. In fact,

²⁸² The truism stating that “without death, there can be no life” is very true, for our existence depends upon the killing of animals or the harvesting of crops. In turn, we ourselves are an integral part of the food chain, because our dead bodies become fertiliser for other animals and plants to survive. The corollary of life, bearing in mind this cyclical existence, is death.

²⁸³ Several scholars refer to death as a universal problem, as Ernest Becker documents in his Pulitzer prize winning book, *The Denial of Death* (1973). Of the numerous authors that Becker quotes, William James’ comment that death is “the worm at the core” of man’s pretensions to happiness (ibidem: 15) is representative of the anxiety associated with that phenomenon. On page 66, Becker himself asserts that “the irony of man’s condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself that awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive” (ibidem: 66).

²⁸⁴ Eve’s creation out of Adam’s rib implies that she is made of clay as well.

²⁸⁵ “... from the clay of the ground the Lord God formed man, breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and made man a living soul...” (Gen. 2: 7).

the Eden myth conceives of mortality as the result of the first act of human disobedience, a punishment for Adam and Eve's original sin – the fact that they reached out and ate from the Tree of Life led to humankind's eviction from Paradise, a continuous struggle for survival and, ultimately, the sentence of mortality (Gen 2: 15ff.). Humankind's fall and death, then, came to be seen in the Hebrew scripture and the Christian testament²⁸⁷ as an inevitable curse to which the human being, not God, condemned him/herself²⁸⁸.

But the Hebrew and Christian documents and faiths have not been the only ones to address the questions of life and death; rather, all the faith traditions of the world have attempted to respond to problems of creation, existence and death, and many have been the viewpoints²⁸⁹. It would be interesting to add here a personal appreciation which could be applied to most mythical or religious interpretations of the problem. Birth and death are not a result of myth; instead, myth is the result of humankind's attempt to interpret or explain some actually existing facts. Reality comes first, myth afterwards, which allows us to conclude that the Eden Myth is not the "beginning", it is the result.

Despite differences in their systems of belief, myths of the first man – sometimes the first woman – being moulded from dust or clay are worldwide. First Nations' legends, to use their terminology, are no exception, and even though several Native communities believe that their ancestors descended from animals²⁹⁰, the truth is that, as C. J. Taylor claims, "[t]here are probably as many different stories of how the earth was formed and how humankind came to inhabit it as there are Native peoples in North America. (...) Each legend stands on its own" (1994: 5). Among them, there are those that account for the first man as having been "... formed from the dust of the earth" (ibidem), such as the Chuckchee's "Big Raven Creates the World" (ibidem: 13-

²⁸⁶ "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3: 19).

²⁸⁷ Christianity traces its roots back to the Hebrew worldview, from which it arose.

²⁸⁸ Other interpretations pose a positive spin on death, as it comes to represent the end of sin and the consolation of a continued life, be it in heaven or in hell, due to the notion of the soul's immortality. Furthermore, the idea of resurrection of the body at the end of time, as proclaimed by the New Testament, has also contributed to ease the pain brought by the humans' awareness as finite creatures: "The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus becomes the new model of reality for believers, heralding the possibility of eternal life for everyone" (DeSpelder, 1983: 385).

²⁸⁹ It happens even within individual churches: for example, within the Christian church, with its sects or denominations, there are broad and varied viewpoints on life and death issues.

²⁹⁰ As seen on page 190 of this dissertation, animal people were the first inhabitants of the world, according to the Okanagans. This conception of the origin of the earth and humankind is shared by other Indigenous nations, as we shall see in the following chapter, in the analysis of C. J. Taylor's books.

16). This approach, though similar to the creative motif presented in Genesis in terms of the formation of the living being²⁹¹, differs from it in everything else, mainly in its view of the commonness of creation, a view that does not comply with a domineering attitude towards nature, as the one that was articulated in the Hebrew creation myth.

Actually, the anthropocentric bias that declares human “dominion over all the earth (...) and every living thing...” (Gen 1:26-28) is contrary to Native philosophy, which “see[s] the earth as a gift given us, prepared for us ahead of our arrival (...) [and that] recognize[s] the interdependence of all life on our planet and the obligation to protect it” (Taylor, 1994: 5). In other words, instead of predicating human superiority over the natural world, First Nations feel they are intimately and continuously connected to the Land²⁹²; they are a part of it, because all human beings consist of earthy elements and, after death, they return to the land.

Jeannette Armstrong stresses this interconnectedness of body and earth and very clearly elucidates: “As Earth pieces, we are an old life-form. As an old life-form, we each travel a short journey through time, in which we briefly occupy a space as a part of an old human presence on the land” (Armstrong, 1995: 324). Put simply, our selves are spatially and temporarily confined, as they are limited to a

GRANDMOTHERS

In the part of me that was always there
 grandmothers
 are speaking to me
 the grandmothers in whose voices
 I nestle
 and draw nourishment from
 voices speaking to me
 in early morning light
 glinting off water
 speaking to me in fragile green
 pushing upward
 groping sun and warmth
 pulling earth’s breath
 down and in
 to join with porous stone
 speaking to me
 out of thick forest
 (...)
 I lift my eyes
 and know I am seed
 and shooting green
 and words
 in this hollow
 (...)
 I am this moment
 earth mind
 I can be nothing else
 the joining of breath to sand
 (...)
 and yet
 I am small
 a mote of dust
 hardly here
 unbearably without anything
 to hold me
 but the voices
 of grandmothers

(Armstrong, 1998b: 176-8)

²⁹¹ “We men were created from the dust that arose when the sky and ground met” (Taylor, 1994: 13).

²⁹² Other world religions, namely Buddhism and Hinduism, to cite but a couple, share the First Nations’ love and respect for the natural world, as the following extracts attest: “Having taken root in the West, Buddhism is following its classical migratory mode – forming a circle with the nature-based wisdom of indigenous cultures. (...) While Native American cosmology is generally centered around harmony, its history is fraught with war. Buddhism helps Native Americans find their path to peace while Native Americans vivify the living Earth for Buddhists. Both traditions share the notion that nature is an active partner in all thought” (Badiner, 1990: xv); “The principle of the sanctity of life is clearly ingrained in the Hindu religion. Only God has absolute sovereignty over all creatures, thus, human beings have no dominion over their own lives or nonhuman life” (Dwivedi, 1998: 298).

body and to a marked beginning and end; we all are bound by birth and by death. Our short journeys do leave their marks on the landscape which, like a palimpsest, records the continuity of life through layers of history. That is the reason why “[i]t is said in Okanagan that the land constantly speaks. It is constantly communicating” (1998b: 176), bringing together the voices of all those who came before, “the voices of grandmothers” as Armstrong affirms in her poem, above. Native peoples believe that their knowledge and unique ways of seeing the world is rooted in the ground, beneath their feet, precisely because the earth is infused with the spirit of the Creator and of their loving ancestors. Even if death is physically final, Native peoples strongly support the idea of a continuing spiritual existence beyond the physical realm, as Jeannette Armstrong, once again, explains:

All my elders say that it is land that holds all knowledge of life and death and is a constant teacher. (...)
 Voices that move within as my experience of existence do not awaken as words. Instead they move within as the colors, patterns, and movements of a beautiful, kind Okanagan landscape. They are the Grandmother voices, which speak. (...) The English term *grandmother* as a human experience is closest in meaning to the term *Tmixw* in Okanagan, meaning something like loving-ancestor-land-spirit.
 (Armstrong, 1998b: 176)

The natural world is then, as previously discussed and as put by Knudtson and Suzuki, “... sacred and quivering with life. It is inscribed with meaning regarding the origins and unity of all life, rather than as mere property...” (2006: 13)²⁹³.

In this train of thought, if “Native wisdom sees spirit (...) as dispersed throughout the cosmos” (ibidem), it is not surprising that respect and a profound reverence for all creation, as well a recognition of the life-death continuum are ever-present in First Nations’ lives.

earth love

I said that I would
 give my flesh back
 but instead my flesh
 will offer me up
 and feed the earth
 and she will
 love me.
 (Armstrong, 2004: 296)

In fact, instead of the Christian approach that regards life and death as mutually exclusive opposites²⁹⁴, as something caused by the original sin, as discussed, First

²⁹³ Recent scholarship has begun to draw into question the First Nations’ image as spiritual ecologists that live in nature without disturbing its harmonies. According to anthropologist Shepard Krech III, “... in recent years, Indian people have had a mixed relationship to the environment” (1999: 216).

²⁹⁴ Death as the enemy of life: the former representing negation, while the latter symbolizes affirmation; death is evil, while life is good. As a consequence, nature also comes to embody both an idea of beauty and contentment and, on the other hand, the cruelty of death: “... one very frequent mythical formulation of this attitude to nature is an earth-mother, from whom everything returns at death [...]. As the womb of

Nations look at these two concepts not dualistically, in an either/or approach, but as complementary facets of an underlying process of rebirth.

Death is an integral part of life that gives meaning to human existence. It is necessary for the renewal and the continuation of life; hence, being regarded in a (w)holistic both/and worldview. It is only through this re-focusing, through this awareness of death as a transitional phase or as a step in the life cycle – rather than as final loss – that we can truly understand Webb’s words in the poem on the right, “Death”, in which the lyrical voice explicitly states that “Death is not dying/(...) Death is believing / then moving on” into a stage of transformation “back to the beginning”.

Even though “[d]eath brought an obvious end to a person’s direct participation in Okanagan society...”, as Douglas Hudson observes in his study titled “The Okanagan Indians of British Columbia” (1990: 81), the fact is that the First Nations, in general, have demonstrated deep faith in the possibility of existence outside the tangible realm. In other words, they solve the threat of meaninglessness inherent in perpetual perishing by firmly holding to the belief that nothing is lost that occurs within finitude; rather, everything is transformed²⁹⁵.

The living walk to the future in the footprints of their ancestors or, as some say, they stand on the bones of their beloved ones. Ancestors, in turn, whisper in shadows²⁹⁶

DEATH

Death: (deth), n. i. the act of dying; the end of life

Death is singing
Her gentle voice calls
me back to the beginning
(...)

Death is singing
I hear her love
I understand her purpose
I believe her song
she is coming
I fear not
my energies are focused

I will live on
with Grandmothers
and Grandfathers
Ancestors await my coming
watching me
guiding my footsteps.

Death is not dying
those are just words
Death is believing
then moving on.

(Webb, 1996: 104-5)

all forms of life, she has a cherishing and nourishing aspect; as the tomb of all forms of life, she has a menacing and sinister aspect (Frye, 1981: 68).

²⁹⁵ In a way, this is consistent with the law of conservation of mass or matter that Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier proposed in the eighteenth century, after carrying several experiments. David Bodanis, reflecting upon this French nobleman and scientist’s work, writes: “... was it not true that everything balances? If you seem to destroy something in one place, it’s not really destroyed. It just appears somewhere else” (Bodanis, 2000: 34); and, later, in an explicative note, he concludes: “[Lavoisier]... was the man who first showed... a single connected whole...” (ibidem: 242; bracketed text in original).

²⁹⁶ *Whispering in Shadows* is the title of the second novel written by Jeannette Armstrong (2000), which the Okanagan writer classified as “for adult readers”, in our conversation in 2008. It provides a glimpse into the life experiences of Penny, a young Okanagan woman, living on a contemporary reserve, but travelling around the world in support of Native causes. The reader follows her in her journey of discovery towards the voices of her ancestors, which transcend time and whisper in shadows. These voices guide her towards an understanding of her true self, and herself in relation to her Okanagan society

awaiting the moment in which the younger generations will join them; they watch them and guide their footsteps, to use Webb's words. Similarly to the solar cycle, in which a new dawn promises a new day²⁹⁷, they believe in "a world view in which the past was merged with the present in a common sphere" (Webber and the En'owkin Centre, 1990: 81-2) and, as such, the (memories of the) deceased continue to affect the living in significant ways.

From what has been said so far, we can easily conclude that the perception of natural existence as moving beyond physical boundaries inevitably leads to a conscious recognition of human spirituality. M. Cochise Anderson reminds us that "[t]he concept of give and take is inherent in the circle way of life. Recognizing our own mortality and yet acknowledging our enduring spirit, [enables] a strength in that spirit [to be] passed on to the next generation" (1996: 53). Douglas Cardinal further elaborates on this issue, emphasising notions of reciprocity and the fluid line that exists between life and death:

The Native rituals teach that death is a part of nature. It teaches that mortality is necessary so that others may experience life. Death is a transition from one life to another life. Life is therefore precious in the scheme of things. In that way lives given to you are precious. It is when you do create something, when you do make a contribution, that you come to a realization of the immortality in that. At that moment you realize you are in a dance with chaos.

(Cardinal and Armstrong, 1991: 80)

The experience of giving birth to our children – not only our actual physical descendents, but also our creative projects²⁹⁸ – is the closest we can get to dancing with chaos. It constitutes the major metaphor for creation; it is our contribution to humankind that eternalises us and gives us the feeling of belonging to a community of memory.

According to Native peoples, in order for this immortality to happen, in order for us to bear fruit and give life, in order for the tomb to become a womb, a sense of balance and harmony is required: we must be whole within ourselves and show a positive attitude towards all other beings, because nothing exists in isolation, but always in relation to other entities. That is the path that leads to one's transcendence: there must be an openness outwards, as well as to the future, for without such spiritual

and the world at large. *Whispering in Shadows* provides the reader with insights into the complex life of this college student, environmental activist, artist, single mother of three, and warrior against cancer and, amongst the many messages it whispers, it eventually engenders hope in the future, even in contentious times, because, in Penny's words: "The night will reach its darkest soon and it will be long. But it is always darkest just before first dawn's light. And then the bright shafts of light will break over the crisp blue edges of the mountains towering to the east, and the world will be new" (2004: 287).

²⁹⁷ Cf. the quotation above, which alludes to the metaphor of dawn following dusk.

²⁹⁸ For example, the act of writing can be synonymous with the act of giving birth.

transformation, we will keep wrestling with the tomb, unable to allow it to transform from a grave to a birthing chamber.

The womb is the primal vessel of re-generation, in which death is turned into rebirth²⁹⁹. The problem, however, is that coping with the hole that is left by the loss of someone dear makes it sometimes difficult for us to see beyond our pain and move forward. That is precisely what happens to Chi', a young Native girl whose mother is about to give birth, an event that is not welcome, because the child is still bereaved by her grandmother's recent death³⁰⁰. The memories of her beloved Temma are overwhelming and, as such, Chi' feels trapped in the past, resisting the fearful experience of letting go. She was deeply connected to her and now she feels no one can occupy the space left behind by the person who had transmitted to her so many teachings³⁰¹. Chi's emotional anguish is easily understood in any society, but it may acquire a much deeper meaning if, after reading the passage that follows, one recalls the importance of extended families within First Nations:

The family is the most significant component of the environment of the young child. It is the members of his[/her] family that create, control, and are a part of his[/her] environment. Most of the sense sensations that a young child experiences are related to, or have been modified by, members of his[/her] family. (...) While families serve the above functions for children in every culture, the native family may fulfil them to a greater degree.

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 1975: 11)

As John Bowlby has discussed in his writings on attachment theory³⁰², and as we witness in Chi's behaviour, the breaking of affective bonds may cause feelings of anxiety, anguish, denial, vulnerability and, among others, carelessness. David Mellor develops this argument when he explains that any individual, in response to serious loss,

²⁹⁹ J. C. Cooper tells us, in her entry on the "Womb", that it is "the Great Mother, the Earth Mother, hence 'the womb of the earth', with the cave as its chief symbol, and Dying Gods being born in a cave as emerging from the womb of the earth" (2009: 194).

³⁰⁰ In *Loss and Change*, Peter Marris remarks that "[b]ereavement presents unambiguously one aspect of social changes – the irretrievable loss of the familiar" (1975: 26). Whether it is the departure/death of a family member, marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, or any other major development in an individual's life, the fact is that these events bring change and force us to re-examine the self in relation to our roots; they throw into question issues of identity.

³⁰¹ Ester Shapiro, focusing on the emotional investment that we place in our significant other, comments that death in Western societies "... abandons family survivors of a loved one's death to a crisis of loss and a crisis of personal meaning (...) forc[ing] us to dissolve and re-create the deepest human bonds that form us" (1994: 4).

³⁰² "Attachment theory is a way of conceptualizing the propensity of human beings to make strong affectional bonds to particular others and of explaining the many forms of emotional distress and personality disturbance, including anxiety, anger, depression, and emotional detachment, to which unwilling separation and loss give rise" (Bowlby, 1979: 127).

goes through the “shattering of a sense of ontological security” (1993: 12). This ontological security, as he clarifies, quoting Anthony Giddens, refers to the individuals’ “... sense of order and continuity in relation to the events in which they participate, and the experience they have, in their day-to-day lives” (ibidem). That is the reason why Chi’, upon her Temma’s death, questions “the meaningfulness and reality of the social frameworks in which [she] participate[s]” (ibidem: 13) and seems not to accept the arrival of a sibling:

“‘Momma, I don’t want a sister or brother. I just want to be with you. Send it away.’
‘Chi’, it’s a blessing for us to have a new person come to be part of our family,’ her
momma said.”

(Armstrong, 2005b: 1)³⁰³

Even though it is spring, a time for rebirth, the fact is that Chi’ is not willing to awake from her deep slumber, because that would mean having to face reality. Chi’ is in denial and probably wishes never to wake up again, because she, as a tormented child who suffered the trauma of loss, is not yet able to understand the circle of life that encompasses us all. She finds herself in an untenable situation whereby her life is thrown off-balance and now she must learn to mourn³⁰⁴ her grandmother effectively before being able to accept new relationships – in her particular case a sibling – as John Bowlby makes clear, when he affirms³⁰⁵:

All who have discussed *the nature of the processes engaged in healthy mourning* are agreed that amongst other things they effect, in some degree at least, a withdrawal of emotional investment in the lost person and that they may prepare for making a relationship with a new one.

(1980: 25; italics in original)

³⁰³ *Dancing with the Cranes* is not paginated, but I added page numbers for easier reference. All subsequent quotations from this story are indicated by page number alone, within this chapter.

³⁰⁴ Krueger and several other experts on grief in children (Furman, 1974; Shapiro, 1994; Webb, 2002 and Moorey, 1995, among others) consider the process of mourning as necessary for one to begin the awareness, acknowledgement and comprehension of death: “... a mourning process is initiated by the perception of loss as well as an acceptance of its permanence and irreversibility. One factor precluding mourning is the maintenance of the fantasy of the retrievability of the loss” (Krueger, October 1983, 590).

³⁰⁵ Bowlby’s work is a revision of Freud’s essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917). Sigmund Freud, a supporter of the positivist modern view on grief resolution, is said to have been the first to address bereavement as a mental health issue. He viewed the process of mourning as a way to relinquish ties with the deceased in order to form new attachments. Ironically, however, upon hearing about the death of Ludwig Binswanger’s son, he sent his friend a letter in which we may notice a personal expression of his own experience of grieving – on what would have been his daughter’s 36th birthday, ten years after her death – which opposed his published position about bereavement: “Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be completely filled, it nevertheless remains something else. And actually that is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish” (quoted in Freeman and Streat, 1987: 72).

While this withdrawal does not take place, Chi' will remain in a state of liminality, an in-between state that precedes a moment of transition or, as described by the social anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, that "... accompan[ies] a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another" (1960: 11).

Trapped in a static world shadowed by her Temma's death, the young Native girl is aching inside and that pain seems to paralyse her entire body. A heavy, dull inertia holds her still and a fear of the future runs thick in her veins. "Chi' took a long time getting out of bed" (1) and "... dressed slowly without looking at her momma" (4). She is devastated and wants the world to stop. She does not want "the sun (...) to rise before [her, or] (...) the spring weather [to bring] some swans back" (1), because that will make her remember the good times that Temma and her had spent together, moments that will not return. She does not want "the curtains to let the morning light come in" (1), because that will be contrary to the darkness that envelops her soul.



Fig. 27. Chi' lying in bed, an illustration by Ron Hall in Armstrong's *Dancing with the Cranes* (2).

Ron Hall skilfully depicts Chi', caught between the past and the future, in an atmosphere that is stopped in time and that denies the effects of the currents of daily life. The dark shadowy colours of the girl lying in bed contrast with the earthy colours of the background, setting the dramatic tone. The light coming from the open window announces the

beginning of a new day and the promise of what is yet to come. It anticipates the possibility that Chi' might overcome her liminal state and finally move on with her life.

If, on the one hand, light can be seen at the end of the tunnel, on the other hand, it seems impossible for Chi' to reach it: nature ignores her; it is as if she is not there; it is as if she is dead. In fact, when she decides to go down "to the lake to wash up for breakfast" (4), she comes to find an idyllic environment, which, nonetheless, turns to be inhospitable and unsupportive:

[Chi'] felt like talking, so she said out loud, 'Hi, bird friends. It's good to see you again.' (...) They did not seem to notice Chi'. 'Come, come close to me!' She tried

to make her voice sound like them. ‘Honk, honk!’ she shouted, and they turned their long necks to look back at her.

She thought of last year. How she and her Temma had come here to watch the birds and how the geese had come close as they sat very still. (...) Now, they just floated away faster, with their necks bent back toward her. (...)

None of them paid any attention to her. She felt sad.

(4-5)

Chi’s grief cannot be understood by those close to her, because she does not allow anyone to enter her inner world. The young girl is constantly revisiting the past;



Fig. 28. Chi’s recollection of the time she had spent by the lake with her grandmother, the year before, an illustration by Ron Hall in Armstrong’s *Dancing with the Cranes* (6).

she is stuck in her memories of the times she had spent with her grandmother and does not share them with anyone, for she fears they might fade away or, even worse, she fears to acknowledge the emotions of loss. Nature cannot provide answers either, because, in it, Chi’ is but searching for the elusive fantasies of immortality,

fantasies which, instead, she must confront with the hard reality of Temma’s physical finitude.

Kathleen Woodward, in her analysis of Freud’s work “Mourning and Melancholia”, alludes to these difficult and time-consuming confrontations, or “tests”, which take place between the harsh reality of the loss and what she calls “a dizzying phantasmagoria of memory”. In her interpretation of Freud’s understanding of mourning, she writes:

It is psychic work which has a precise purpose and goal: to “free” us from the emotional bonds which have tied us to the person we loved so that we may “invest” that energy elsewhere, to “detach” us so that we may be “uninhibited.” Mourning is “necessary.” It denotes a process which takes place over a long period of time. It is slow, infinitesimally so, as we simultaneously psychically cling to what has been lost and “test” reality only to discover that the person we loved is no longer there. By “reality” Freud means primarily that we compare our *memories* with what exists in actuality now. He portrays the process of mourning as a passionate or hyperremembering of all the memories bound up with the person we have lost. Mourning is a dizzying phantasmagoria of memory. *Every* memory must be tested. But not only the past is at stake (...) [, a]nd *each* of those phantasies [*sic*] of the future must be remembered as well.

(1991: 115; italics in original)

The lake acts as the catalyst for the girl's recollections of her grandmother, but, if we bear in mind that water is a symbol of the unconscious in Jungian psychology³⁰⁶, it may as well signify her insentient need to wash away her emotional turmoil. Actually, the omniscient narrator comes to confirm this assumption, when s/he tells us that Chi' "felt like talking" (4), which means that she needed to open her heart and free herself from grief. The still, silent waters of the lake would just listen to Chi's feelings and they would provide her with enough calmness, so necessary for her meditation and rebirth.

Jean C. Cooper, in her book *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*, explores the various possible meanings associated with water, as illustrated below:

All waters are symbolic of the Great Mother and associated with birth, the feminine principle, the universal womb, the *prima materia*, the waters of fertility and refreshment and the fountain of life (...). The waters are also equated with the continual flux of the manifest world, with unconsciousness, forgetfulness; they always dissolve, abolish, purify, "wash away," and regenerate...

(Cooper, 2009: 188; italics in original)

Seen in this way, the lake would be Chi's confident, was it not for the geese, the ducks, the swans, the gulls and a speckled loon that, in their indifference towards her, make her feel lonely and stuck in the waters of memory. Believing that she has nowhere else to look for comfort and joy, she reaches out to her past as the only source of real happiness and refuses to accept that life continues to follow its natural course, as the daily routines of birds exemplify:

[The] geese (...) with wings stretched out and forward, (...) landed with a great swoosh, then tucked their wings under and floated silently forward. (...) Green headed ducks quacked noisily as they waddled ashore and disappeared into the long grass. Overhead, two black and white ducks flapped short pointed wings, quickly, before hitting the water with a splash and scattering smaller black mud ducks paddling back and forth in the reeds sticking up out of the lake near the edge. (...) [T]wo bid white swans drifted towards a long, glittering reflection of the rising sun. Gulls wheeled and landed on the lake, screeching at each other before flying up again. Out towards the middle, a speckled loon called out before diving, leaving a long dark line under the surface of the lake.

(4-8)

At this point, Chi' is but a witness of the world's perfectibility even in imperfect times. She realises that the world does not cease to revolve, but she is afraid to

³⁰⁶ According to C. G. Jung, "Water is the commonest symbol for the unconscious. The lake in the valley is the unconscious, which lies, as it were, underneath consciousness, so that it is often referred to as the 'subconscious,' usually with the pejorative connotation of an inferior consciousness" (1990: 18).

participate in the flux and rhythm of life; she is afraid to be a part of the stream of life. The image of the loon calling out before diving represents this awareness, this lucid dreaming: it reflects Chi's acknowledgement of her own denial state, because the bird's eerie cry is "haunting and touches the soul in a primal way" (Andrews, 2004: 163), awakening her to her misery and loneliness, as the narrator lets us know: "The sound of the loon made Chi' feel like crying. It made her feel very lonely" (8). But, according to Ted Andrews, "[t]he loon can lead [us] back to [our] greatest dreams and imaginings" (2004: 164) and that is precisely what happens to the young Native girl. Entrapped within the walls of memory, Chi' becomes a desperate prisoner of the past, and, once again, she dives into a nostalgic world, where the arrival of the cranes become sweet illusions from which she is able to launch some hope:

She watched the sky in the direction of the big blue hill, waiting. She thought of last year, standing here, holding her Temma's warm hand. (...) The hard lump seemed to grow and grow in her chest. She watched and watched the sky until she heard her momma calling from their house above the lake. (...) As Chi' stopped to open the door, she turned one last time to look at the bright blue sky.

(8-9)

While the cranes are evocative of a pre-established order and harmony which Chi' wishes to see restored, the sky is the field of all possibilities. The water of the lake, like a mirror, reflects the sky, and this, in turn, kisses the earth, blending everything together in the far-distant horizon. The sky becomes both the source of separation and of restitution; it represents Chi's aspirations and, as such, the girl "watched and watched the sky" (8) and "looked and looked for [the cranes,] wish[ing] they would come" (9). "She and her Temma had watched them circle and circle..." (14) in the previous year, before "land[ing] on the far side of the lake" (ibidem). The repetition of the verbs "to watch", "look" and "circle" is noteworthy here, not only because it adds intensity to Chi's feelings, emphasising her need to recapture her lost balance, but also because such reduplication conveys itself a certain continuity, a certain circularity, and, thereby, the anticipation of the restoration of the old order.

The choice of the cranes as "the main ones" among all birds (9) was not fortuitous either. They are "[t]he ones that fly in big circles before they land" (ibidem), further strengthening this view of the world as a concentric set of circular relationships. What is more, the migratory patterns of these birds, as explained by Chi's mother, reaffirm the same view of the circularity of time. She reassures her daughter:

‘Don’t worry. They will be here. It is just like a big circle. Each year, in the spring they come here from the warm South where they have nested and made new babies. They stop here at this lake to rest and eat. Then they fly far up to the North where they live for the summer to make more baby cranes. Then, in the fall, they stop here again, on their way South before winter. They have been doing that since the beginning of this land’.

(ibidem)

It is at this moment that Chi’, unable to conceal her emotions any longer, suddenly bursts into tears and, drawing an analogy between the cranes’ seasonal migration and her grandmother’s departure, she questions: “‘Momma, what if they don’t ever come back[?] What if they leave forever, like my Temma did?’” (...) “‘I miss Temma. Why did she have to die? Why can’t she come back like the cranes do? Why does anybody have to die?’” (11).



Fig. 29. Chi’s mother comforting her daughter, an illustration by Ron Hall in Armstrong’s *Dancing with the Cranes* (12).

Even though Chi’s mother is aware that these are all but rhetorical questions in which her daughter aims, more than anything else, at expressing her repressed feelings, she nonetheless urges to comfort and soothe her and, making use of the same analogy mentioned above, she demonstrates that, within the cycle of birth and death, everything that exists has a beginning and an end:

‘All people must die sometime because new people always come.’ (...) “‘Even though it looks like the same bunch of cranes come every year, they don’t. You see, every year, new cranes are added and every year some cranes die. (...) It is the same for people, and even though it is the saddest thing when someone dies, it is also the happiest thing when a new person is added.’

(11)

Interestingly, this moment of solace is illustrated by a full colour picture in shades of yellow and red, giving it a warm, cosy ambiance³⁰⁷ (cf. fig. 29). The

³⁰⁷ John F. Carlson clarifies that “[p]sychologically we associate actual thermal warmth with the fire colors, yellow and red. We therefore feel these as warm colors, including hues and tints partaking largely of one or both of these primaries. (...) Likewise, and for identical reasons, we associate thermal cold with the ice colors, white and blue (and all their approximates)” (1973: 92). The purple outfit worn by Chi’s

salamander stove, behind mother and child, and the hot oatmeal topped with saskatoon berries further highlight this warmth and caring. Once again, a window from where the morning sun peeps, lends the picture a sense of hopefulness about the future. It suggests that Chi' must abandon her inner grief and replace it with the pulsating life of the outer world, because, as William Stewart argues, "[t]he principal symbolism of the window is separating inside from outside. (...) A lighted window is symbolic of hope" (2005: 31).

Despite all signs pointing towards potential healing, Chi's inner world is still haunted by the memories of her grandmother and by the fear that nothing will ever be the same again. Thus, when the girl's mother offers to go with her daughter to the lake and wait for the cranes, "Chi' thought that [it] just wouldn't be the same without her Temma. It would just be sad and she wasn't sure she wanted to" (14). Going to the lake with her mother would force Chi' to face the fact that Temma would not return and that she would have to let other people occupy the place previously held by her beloved grandmother.

The illustration on the left is representative of the interconnectedness and



Fig. 30. Chi' goes to the lake with her mother and they wait for the cranes, an activity which she used to do with Temma; an illustration by Ron Hall in Armstrong's *Dancing with the Cranes* (13).

circularity of all things and, thereby, of the balance that Chi' is provided with by her mother's guidance, on their way to the lake: the past merges with the present and even with the future³⁰⁸; memories and dreams merge with reality; the cold colours in the background make the warm ones in the first plan-view stand out; the three generations hold hands; a spiral

on the gown worn by Chi's mother draws the reader's attention to the character's

mother joins these two extremes, red and blue, producing a semi-warm colour. Purple, for First Nations, "is the color of ceremony, ritual, spiritual insight, idealism, and love of humanity. (...) Purple is a color of wisdom, but it can be used in either positive or negative ways. Having purple around you will inspire you, bring you spiritual insights, increase your love of ceremony, and make you examine how you are using your power" (Bear, Wind and Mulligan, 1991: 204). The robe worn by the mother, then, represents calmness and implies that the person who is wearing it is full of deep understanding, hence providing others with spiritual fulfillment.

³⁰⁸ The past is represented by the memories of Temma, the present by Chi' walking towards the lake with her mother, and the future by the girl's sibling in his/her mother's womb.

womb, the place where life is being nurtured³⁰⁹; and the cranes act as links, joining the various elements together.

Actually, cranes are said to carry on their large wings the symbolism of longevity, immortality and hope, because, as Adele Nozedar informs us, “[t]here is evidence that the crane has been present on the planet for 10 million years and as well as this, the bird has a long lifespan up to 50 years...”³¹⁰ (2008: 312). They are also believed to lead the souls of the deceased up to Paradise and to carry the living individuals to higher levels of spiritual awareness, conducive to their well-being³¹¹. As Ted Andrews remarks, “[i]f the crane has shown up in your life as a totem, it could very well reflect that you are about to recover what had almost become extinct within you” (2004: 129).

Chi’ is, undoubtedly, recovering her Native spirituality and wholeness, when she allows her mother to help her deal with her fears and anxieties. As they walk down to the lake, she learns that her father is about to arrive, any minute, and that he will stay with her for the whole summer, before going back to the South, where he works³¹². Gradually, the world seems to start smiling at her again. No longer do the swans ignore her, but instead they now float towards mother and child, as if they are greeting them

³⁰⁹ The spiral is an old symbol that conveys more than a sense of cyclicity: it portrays the continuity of life experiences, the integration of everything into a whole, as Theresa King states in her *The Spiral Path: Explorations in Women’s Spirituality*: “It is a symbol of change as well as integration in chaos, of unity as well as diversity, of dynamic movement as well as stability. It pulls together all the world’s spiritual quests as well as all its daily struggles into a meaningful journey carrying us back to the source of our being. (...) The spiral is also one of the most ancient symbols of eternity because it both comes from and returns to its point of origin. (...) Our whole existence is intricately involved in nature’s spirals. We experience in our bodies the rhythms of life and growth and death in a vast spiral dance” (1992: 9), a dance that we perform together with the cranes, which are themselves a link between earth and heaven, as it will be pointed out. The illustration above is, then, the realization that nothing is lost and, as far as I am concerned, the point of transition and of release.

³¹⁰ According to oriental legends, and as Maurice Burton and Robert Burton tell us in their *International Wildlife Encyclopedia*, cranes have a fabled life span of a thousand years: “[i]n Japan cranes are symbols of longevity and in folklore they were reputed to live for up to 1,000 years” (2002: 587).

³¹¹ J. C. Cooper says that the crane is “[a] messenger of the gods; (...) [it has] the ability to enter into higher states of consciousness. (...) [According to the Chinese, it is] an intermediary between heaven and earth; carries souls to the Western Paradise...” (2009: 44).

Cranes carry significant symbolism in cultures throughout the world, as Hope B. Werness notes: “The Egyptian double-headed crane symbolized prosperity (...). The Greeks linked the crane, the herald of spring, with Apollo (...). In India, Hindus regard cranes as the most deceitful of birds. (...) The Chinese call the crane a messenger of the gods, and the bird served as a[n] (...) intermediary between heaven and earth... (...) Cranes are symbols of wisdom, longevity, and immortality, connotations emphasized by depictions in which the crane carries a sprig of fungus in its beak. (...) Cranes were also associated with DANCE and music (...). The crane was believed to have perfect pitch (...). The Japanese or Manchurian crane (...) was (...) a Japanese symbol of longevity (...) standing for 1,000 years (...). In Christian art the crane symbolizes vigilance, loyalty, goodness, and the orderliness of monastic life. (...) In Africa the crane was linked not only with immortality, but also the gift of speech, indeed, it was able to communicate with the gods” (Werness, 2006: 113-5).

³¹² Her father’s routine resembles the cranes’ migratory pattern.

and welcoming the latter's transition into full life. Chi' is changing and rediscovering herself and the world around her; she is undergoing a process of transformation and adaptation to new realities that results from an inner spiritual awakening. That is precisely what spirituality is all about, as Theresa King lets us know:

Spirituality is always about transformation. It is concerned with transforming our narrowness into full awareness, our social struggles into community, our fears and self-loathing into vitality and power. It does not so much make the mundane sacred as it lets us realize that the mundane is sacred and that the sacred is often very familiar. It teaches us that we are and what we do is holy. It lets us see the many known and unknown parts of ourselves as a hologram, each part necessary to the multidimensional whole, each part reflecting the wholeness hidden in every other. At its core, spirituality is love. It is love of self and love of others, love lived now and love searched for, love as being and as becoming, love as person and as the universe's all-encompassing power.

Our spiritual quest (...) gradually liberates us from the fears of life and death and gives us increasing intimations of immortality.

(King, 1992: 15)

Chi' is liberated from her rootedness in the immediate present, and begins to conceive of life as timeless and limitless, as a whole, a continuous action and reaction that occurs between organisms and their surroundings. Therefore, Temma is not dead; she is alive in Chi's memories; she is carried on the cranes' large wings; she is part of nature.

The Native girl notices that the cranes are arriving, even before seeing them. The sharp call of the cranes fills the air from all directions. As the narrator points out, "[i]t sounded like the high voices of children playing far away" (15). The same simile of children "calling, laughing and shouting to each other" to express the birds' loud, screeching calls occurs earlier, on page 8. Afterwards, on page 14, the omniscient narrator gives us another simile for us to picture in our minds the power and sprightliness of the cranes' noise:



"They sounded like hundreds of people at the summer powwow, singing and talking at the same time" (14).

Fig. 31. The cranes swirling in circles, an illustration by Ron Hall in Armstrong's *Dancing with the Cranes* (16).

The powerful trumpeting of cranes may be heard for quite extraordinary distances, as mentioned, and it grows in intensity as the birds work out their cycle of life on the lands bordering the lake. As depicted in Fig. 31 and as described in the excerpt below, the same happens to the cranes in this narrative, as they wheel in circles over the surface of the water, right over Chi' and her mother:

The sounds grew louder and louder, and the grey smudge grew and grew into thousands of black dots as they came directly overhead. Then her momma began to sing the same wonderful song her Temma had sung and the cranes began to circle right over them.

(15)³¹³

Ted Andrews highlights that “[o]ne of the most remarkable aspects of this bird is its loud whooping sound. Its haunting tone is reminiscent of a primal celebration over birth” (2004: 129). The cranes’ passionate, graceful dance is also evocative of joy, community attachment and renewal, and it is so contagious that human beings around the world have imitated these birds’ elaborate movements, as John Eastman asserts: “Cranes have inspired numerous folk tales and tribal myths because of their size, calls, and ritualistic dancing behaviours. The crane courtship dance has been mimicked in the rites of many tribal cultures” (1999: 121). Maurice Burton and Robert Burton go further to illustrate how a specific species in Australia has influenced its Aboriginal peoples:

The dancing of cranes is one of the most spectacular performances in the bird world. (...) A dancing flock of cranes is especially spectacular. The brolga of Australia (...) dances in troops lined up in rows of 20 to 30. Th[eir] dance (...) is the basis for some of the dances at aboriginal *corroborees* (traditional gatherings).

(Burton and Burton, 2002: 587)

The arrival of Chi’s father, their round dance and singing together³¹⁴ mark the final movement of the girl’s liminal stage. “It was just like at the powwow, right there at the lake’s edge. They danced while the wonderful cranes landed around them with big leaping bounds” (18). Much like at a powwow, where people gather together and

³¹³ The repetition of the adjective “loud” and of the verb “to grow” emphasise the fact that the cranes are approaching. As mentioned on page 246, it is also worth noting that such reduplication establishes a certain continuity and circularity, anticipating Chi’s return to the lost order. The song of the cranes, now sung by her mother, helps Chi’ in her healing process, because it is “like a prayer for good things”, as Temma had observed (14). See the importance of songs as conveying a sense of order and spiritual equilibrium on pages 192 and 230-2, in this dissertation.

³¹⁴ If their round dance is inspired by the cranes’ contagious swirling in circles, their singing also seems to be unavoidable and all-encompassing, as the following passage implies: “... momma hugged them both and kept singing the song Temma had sung. (...) Her daddy began to sing, too. Then Chi’ felt so happy she couldn’t help but sing too” (18).

remember their tribal traditions letting the heartbeat of the drum renew their spirits, that moment of reunion with her family makes Chi' feel happy and whole again. The child even feels the presence of Temma, when she closes her eyes and sings: “[S]he felt her Temma right there, singing with them. She could see her Temma’s smile and even hear her voice in the song of the cranes” (18).

As Temma had once told her granddaughter, “if [the cranes] ever circle(...) and land(...) all around you then it [is] a special blessing just like the summer powwows and winter dances [are] blessings because they ma[ke] you happy” (14). At this moment, the



Fig. 32. The gathering and interconnectedness of all things, an illustration by Ron Hall in Armstrong’s *Dancing with the Cranes* (20).

conjunction of all the above factors makes Chi’ indeed happy and blessed. To add to these blessings, Chi’s father learns that his wife is pregnant and that the arrival of the cranes in the fall will coincide with the coming of their baby. Chi’s mother announces: “Our circle will be full again when we greet [the cranes]” (19), but, as far as I am concerned, their circle is already

in existence; it is complete, because Chi’s sibling is already there, dancing and playing in his/her mommy’s tummy. When the child is born the circle will be ritually reaffirmed, but we may say that it is already clearly defined, by now.

The way that the text is displayed on page 19, in a circular frame which itself encloses an illustration of cranes swirling in circles, proves my assertion above. If this page layout is unique in that the text is disposed in the same shape as the illustration, the interplay of written and pictorial elements is evident throughout the whole book. In fact, besides the full-page illustrations that accompany each page of text,



Fig. 33. Circles within circles: the marriage of text and illustration, in Armstrong’s *Dancing with the Cranes* (20).

a “cut-out” on almost each of the text pages brings further the continuity, unity and wholeness of all things.

On page 21, the narrator tells us that Chi finally acknowledges that her mourning over her grandmother is ended and turned into joy, because she realises that “[h]er Temma would always be inside of her. Like the song of the cranes. Every time she sang or she danced at the pow wow or at the winter dance, she would have her Temma inside her”. As a result, instead of a

shadowy, blurry silhouette, Chi’s grandmother is now pictured as a graceful and radiant figure, who is dancing with the cranes, in what I assume is heaven or, more generally, a spiritual world. She is dressed in white, because of the association



of this colour with “purity and a fresh start (...). ... [A]s death

Fig. 34. Temma dancing with the cranes, in Armstrong’s *Dancing with the Cranes* (22).

precedes birth, the white here has an optimistic meaning, since in this instance, white symbolizes rebirth” (Nozedar, 1999: 57-8).

If one bears in mind that, as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples highlights, “[c]hildren have a special place in Aboriginal cultures [and that] they are gifts from the spirit world and must be treated well or they will return to that realm” (National Council of Welfare Reports, 2007, Fall: 7), then this baby to come may be considered a gift that Temma is sending Chi’ and her family. Upon such realisation, no longer does Chi’ find her brother or sister to be an intruder: she is now anxious to welcome him/her, as the last lines of the book clearly reveal: “She thought of her new brother or sister and there was such a good feeling inside of her she thought she would burst”. The circle is complete, as these lines suggest. Chi’ is aware that everything becomes a part of everything and that there is no permanent death, only change and renewing. She feels grateful for the blessings bestowed upon her; she is healed.

Joseph Bruchac reminds us in a simple way that...

... humans and animals have souls and (...) those souls survive the death of the body.
Because of this understanding, death may not be as fearful a thing as it is for people

in the Western world. The imbalance that comes from neglecting to be thankful and respectful may be more frightening than death.

(Caduto and Bruchac, 1992: 30-1)

That is the message that Jeannette Armstrong wants to convey in this book for very young children, aged 3-5 according to the back cover. As part of the “Caring for Me” series, this narrative can and should be viewed in its cathartic role, that is, helping the youngest work through feelings of grief, fear, sorrow, anxiety, and alienation. Just like McGillis wrote of E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Webb*, this one,

[I]like nearly all children’s books, contains comfort for the reader. Even in the presence of change and death, comfort is possible. This is one of the lessons of the book. ... [It] is an excellent book for young readers because it introduces them in a careful way to the interdependence of style and theme. The prose acts as a teaching device.

(Lesnik-Oberstein qtd. by Lesnik-Oberstein, 2004: 8)

Its colourful acrylic paintings add to it, as I have demonstrated. They make the book memorable and quite instructive. In fact, the illustrations themselves tell the story visually and they enable (preschool) readers/viewers to participate in the reading experience in a more active way, making personal connections to the pictures or merely interpreting them.

It should be noted that despite being stylised, the illustrations almost never lose their link with reality and, when they do, it is always intentional, aiming at depicting Chi’s inner thoughts or the spiritual world. The fact that the characters are faceless, with no distinctive features, forces the reader/viewer to use his/her imagination to fill in what is not seen. That way, it enhances the personal connections, as mentioned above. The characters, then, become just who the reader/viewer wants them to be and they take on a persona that is distinctly his/her own³¹⁵.

³¹⁵ It is worth noting that the characters’ lack of discernible features calls into mind the traditional dolls that First Nations have crafted from corn husks, for religious purposes and as toys. In M. K. Brooks’ fictional narrative “*He Kills Me!*” “*He Kills Me Not!*”, we learn that “Corn plants are much more than just a source of food. [Aboriginal peoples] use the whole plant. The husks are used for children’s dolls, but unlike [our] dolls [their] dolls are faceless. The Iroquois believed if a doll had a face it could turn into a real person” (2007: 166).

Marie Miczak’s book *Nature’s Weeds, Native Medicine* has an entry on “Corn” and among the many traditional uses associated with this crop, the author highlights that “no part of the corn plant went to waste. In the summer, the dried corn husks from the previous fall were woven into airy moccasins, faceless dolls, mats and ceremonial masks” (1999: 21). J. C. Cooper also refers to the symbolism of the corn “Doll/Dolly”, even though she does not mention that it is faceless: “The Corn Dolly or Maiden represents the seed, the child of the future growth and harvests and is also an image of the Corn Goddess, Mother or Maid. (...) It is made from the last sheaf at harvest-time and it is carried ceremoniously back to

In gist, *Dancing with the Cranes* speaks directly to our hearts, individually and collectively at the same time. It helps us realise that we are part of a great whole and that our individual being is not complete in itself. It helps us find comfort, support and healing in times of struggle, transition and transformation. Most of all, it reminds us that, as Edward Benton-Banai puts it,

... together, we can begin [a] journey (...) to rediscover a way of life that is centered on the respect for all living things. It will be a journey to find the center of ourselves so that we can know the peace that comes from living in harmony with the powers of the universe.

(1988: 2)

Dancing with the Cranes, as any other book by Jeannette Armstrong, is a wonderful way for us to begin such a journey. It is certainly a source of inspiration for everyone, not just for children, because the universal nature of its themes surpasses all boundaries; it is a celebration of life and a plea for its continuance; it is a lively dance of identification, spiralling upwards on the large wings of the cranes, to help us reach deeper levels of understanding, which involve embracing wholeness.

I entirely subscribe to Benton-Banai's words, when he claims that "I do not believe in isolating myself in the memories of the past. I do believe that with the teachings of yesterday we can better prepare ourselves for the uncertainties of tomorrow" (1988: 2). These words could as well have been those of Chi' at the end of the narrative, and they are also whispered to us by alterNATIVE works, which deserve to be discussed in Part III, even if only briefly.

the farm" (2009: 53). For further info, cf. Adele Nozedar's *The Element Encyclopedia of Secret Signs and Symbols*, which has an entry on "Corn Dolly", on pages 60-1.

CHAPTER NINE

CHASING ALTERNATIVE TRACKS WITHIN NATIVE TERRITORY

This third and last part preceding the conclusion aims at tying the whole dissertation together, giving it a unity, while at the same time taking a broader, but simple and selective, look at other Native (alterNATIVE) texts, in particular those of Tomson Highway, Thomas King, George Littlechild and Carrie-Jo Taylor. This approach is motivated by the need to find out if the themes and literary techniques woven into Armstrong's books for children can be traced in the works of other significant contemporary Native Canadian writers. I intend to analyse, even if briefly, if what I have argued for in previous parts holds true for the selected Aboriginal narratives written by the above-mentioned writers, or if there are geographic-specific differences³¹⁶. I must confess, however, that the choice of the texts that I will be dealing with in the following chapter was limited, due to the lack of available resources³¹⁷ and to the fact that I only wanted to provide a glimpse of the richness which might lie hidden by the umbrella "Native Canadian fiction for children and young adults". Therefore, even though I am fully aware of the implications of such a simplistic analysis, I believe that it adds to my work, because it does serve to extend my knowledge and to illustrate some similarities and/or differences within the First Nations' cultures in all their diversity.

³¹⁶ C. J. Taylor (1952) is of Mohawk heritage and the only artist woman in this group. Tomson Highway (1951) is a full-blooded Cree from the Manitoba; George Littlechild (1958) is Plains Cree, born in Alberta, and Thomas King (1943) is of Cherokee and Greek descent.

³¹⁷ Some books by these writers are extremely difficult to find and expensive to acquire.

III. 9.1. SPEEDING -UP TO HIGHWAY, CROSSING LITTLECHILD AND KING, LEADING UP TO TAYLOR

Many of the virtues the legends extol are universal: kindness to men and animals, courage and strength in the face of adversity, loyalty to family and tribe, unfailing devotion even unto death. (Egoff, 1967: 32)

Even though the assertion above holds true in respect to Armstrong's books analysed so far, does it mean that all First Nations' authors of narratives for young readers must necessarily share assumptions about how the world operates and the way it should be presented? Are there differences in themes and style among First Nations' writers or, on the contrary, is there a sense of purpose, cohesiveness and direction that encompasses Native Canadian literary expression?

In the current chapter, I will be reviewing selected children's books by four contemporary Native writers and artists, all of them male, except for C. J. Taylor. The sample, far from ideal, will be representative of the views of a much larger and diverse group. A much more detailed comparative study is a project to pursue in the future, but at the moment, given the limitations of time and space, I find it necessary to restrict my analysis to general observations that can be deduced from the information available.

Tomson Highway, a renowned Woodlands Cree³¹⁸ novelist, playwright, producer, director, pianist, professor and social worker, has written three books for children that deserve special note: *Caribou Song/Atihko Nikamon* (2001), *Dragonfly*

³¹⁸ Highway may also receive the designation of Rock/y Cree, because this is "a Manitoba name for Woodlands Cree" (Wurm *et al.*, 1996: 1122). The Rock Cree group "includes the communities of Brochet[, where Highway's home reserve is located], Nelson House, Pukatawagan, and South Indian Lake, Manitoba" (Brown and Brightman, 2004: 108).

Kites/Pimihakanisa (2002) and *Fox on the Ice/Mahkesis Miskwamihk E-cipatapit* (2003)³¹⁹.

All these picture books, written in English and followed by a translation in Cree syllabics on the same page, borrow extensively from the author's own childhood memories in the 1950s, as Beverly Slapin puts it in her review of the trilogy (Seale and Slapin, 2006: 305-6). Thus, in a symbiotic relationship between literature and life, Tomson Highway introduces us to two young Cree brothers, Joe and Cody, who, just like the main characters of *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998)³²⁰, resemble the author and his

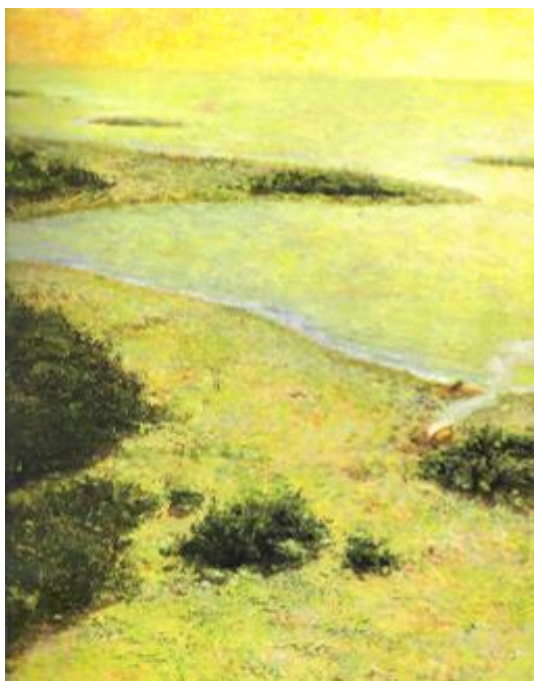


Fig. 35. The lakes in northern Manitoba, as depicted by Brian Deines in Highway's *Dragonfly Kites* (2002: 2).

brother's alter ego, before being forced to leave their homeland to attend residential school. Their lives in the far north of Manitoba seem idyllic at this time, just like that of Neekna, Chemai and Enwhistee kwa, in Armstrong's books. Similarly to these female characters, the two boys and their parents led a nomadic life and "[t]heir summer home [which] was a tent near a lake" (Highway, 2002: 1)³²¹, was always erected in different places: "There are hundreds of lakes in northern Manitoba, so they never stayed on the same one twice" (ibidem). The vastness of the territory and

the low density of the population is well depicted by Deines' wonderful illustration above and by Highway's description, as follows: "The lakes had beautiful islands and forests and beaches and clear water. But no people" (ibidem). This description is coherent with the First Nations' belief that they had been the original inhabitants of those lands and, as Doris Wolf and Paul DePasquale remark, it "make[s] explicit the traditional reliance of many Aboriginal peoples on a large homeland for their sustenance" (2008: 99).

³¹⁹ The first story in the trilogy titled "Songs of the North Wind" was "voted one of the top ten children's books by *The Globe* and *Mail*. *Dragonfly Kites* was also cited in several 'best of' lists for 2002, including those of *The Globe* and *Mail*, *Maclean's* and *Amazon.ca*, and was nominated for a *Governor General's Award* for Illustration and the *Ruth Schwartz Award*" (Highway, 2003: dust jacket).

³²⁰ The Okimasis brothers, Champion and Ooneemeetoo, or as they came to be named by the Christian missionaries upon their entrance to residential school, Jeremiah and Gabriel.

³²¹ Just like *Dancing with the Cranes*, this trilogy is not paginated either, but I added page numbers for easier reference.

Brian Deines' use of soft, natural tones, in the full-page oil on canvas paintings, works in tandem with the spirit of the stories: this artist's luminous palette creates an atmosphere of contentment that evokes the good old days. The reference to "... Cody's little dog, Ootsie, who was almost a person" (Highway, 2002: 4) is consonant with such an atmosphere, as it reminds us of the mythical time when animals were thought to be human and, therefore, able to talk. Ootsie, in the picture below, seems to be looking directly at us, readers, as if trying to communicate.

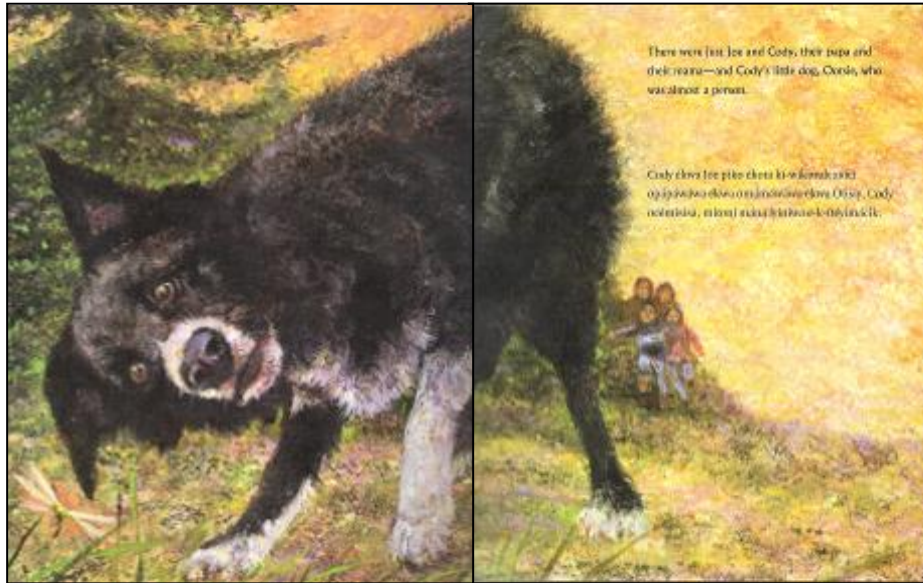


Fig. 36. Ootsie, as depicted by Brian Deines in Highway's *Dragonfly Kites* (2002: 3-4).

The wealth of detail makes the illustrations seem real, life-like, while, at the same time, it helps the readers feel the majesty of Canada and its prairie vistas. It is as if we are actually there, watching Joe and Cody playing “games with made-up toys” (ibidem: 5), which are but sticks and stones that they name and with “whom” they talk, sing, dance, sleep and they even “make them breakfast” (ibidem: 7; cf. fig. 70). They do the same with birds, squirrels, rabbits, chipmunks and ants. “But the dragonflies were their favourite pets” (ibidem: 16), because the young brothers flew them like magic kites “... until the sun began to set. Then they let go of the strings and waved goodbye to the drangonflies” (ibidem: 21; cf. fig. 71), which shows their respect for nature in general.

If the outdoors is the boys' playground during the day, at night their adventures continue in their dreams: “Joe and Cody dreamed they jumped so high that they didn't come down. Off they flew with their dragonfly kites into the gold and pink of the northern sunset, laughing and laughing. Until it was time to wake up” (Highway, 2002:

27). Interestingly, this “Until it was time to wake up” may be read in two ways: as conveying a circular notion of time, in that the scene will repeat itself day after day, because this is part of the boys’ daily routine; or metaphorically, if we connect it with Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, in which Champion and Ooneemeetoo, in their innocence, compare the airplane that would separate them from their family with dragonflies “drifting in the wind” (1998: 47). If, at first, these make them envious because of “their wings, their ability to become airborne” (ibidem), they soon “wake up” to find out that their experience at the Catholic residential school will not be dream-like, but a nightmare. Thus, as Doris Wof and Paul DePasquale observe,

[w]hile younger audiences need not understand the metaphoric significance of Joe and Cody in the children’s book catching and transforming dragonflies into kites in order to appreciate the story, the reference to dragonflies forms one of the book’s colonial subtexts that could help introduce younger audiences to some of the author’s political concerns.

(2008: 103)

The connection between Highway’s *Kiss of Fur Queen* and *Dragonfly Kites* is “explicit and deliberate” (ibidem), in the words of the two critics quoted above, but I would argue that the similarities are even more obvious when we look at *Caribou Song*, the first of the trilogy. In this one, we learn that Joe, just like Champion, “played the accordion, the kitoochigan” (Highway, 2001: 5) all day long, while his brother Cody danced, just like Ooneemeetoo (cf. fig. 72). The moment when the boys’ parents are “sitting near the fire, drinking tea” (ibidem: 15; cf. fig. 73), after their lunch of whitefish and bannock in “a meadow surrounded by forest” (ibidem: 10), and hear the sound of a herd of caribou thundering out is evocative of the scene when Mariesis notices “[a] low rumble well[ing] up beneath the children’s voices” (1998: 43) and asks herself: “‘Thunder? In May?’” (ibidem)³²². What happens afterwards is basically the same in both narratives, only the approach differs: *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is clearly more detailed and complex than *Caribou Song*, but the two are largely identical in content, as the older boys in each story are able to make their way “through the snorting, steaming bodies, until [they] reach (...) [their younger] brother[s]” (2001: 19) and, under the spell

³²² In *Caribou Song*, Mama expresses her surprise, using exactly the same words. The difference is that she tells them out loud, instead of just wondering to herself: “‘Thunder?’ Mama asked Papa. ‘In May?’ ‘Can’t be,’ said Papa. ‘Not until summer.’ ‘Then what can it –’ But Mama never finished her question” (2001: 15).

of magic and supernatural forces, “they seem (...) to float right through the herd. The next thing they knew they were perched on the big rock...” (Highway, 2001: 22).

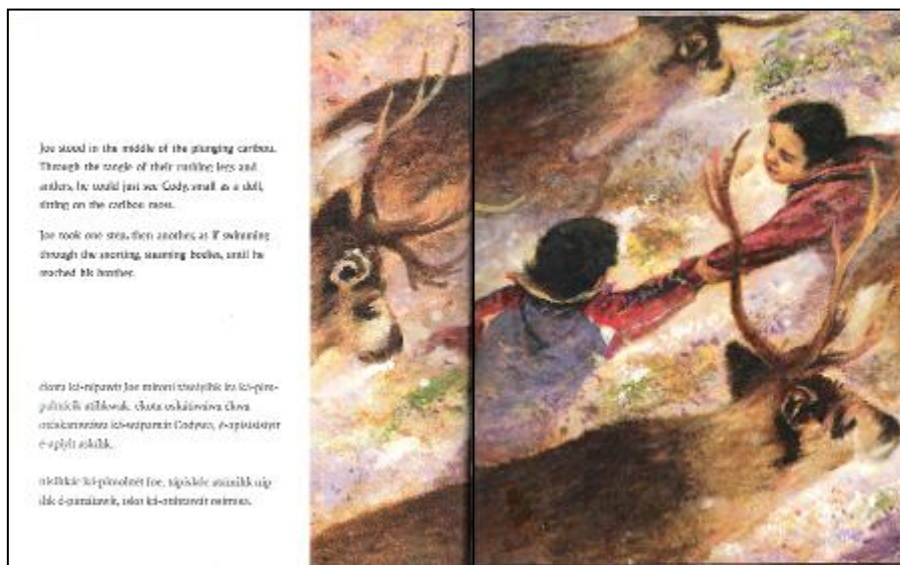


Fig. 37. Joe rescuing Cody, as depicted by Brian Deines in Highway’s *Caribou Song* (2001: 19-20).

Similarly to the world of dreams in *Dragonfly Kites*, where everything becomes possible, in these two narratives magic is also blended with reality, reaching further to include the spiritual realm, so important for the First Nations, as we have seen. In both narratives, the children welcome the “spirit” (2001: 24), as the narrator in the first story of the series “Songs of the North Wind” simply names it. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, the narrator seems to have some more difficulties in defining “the blur without end [which] took on form” (1998: 46). Before referring to it as an “immense field of energy” (Highway, 1998: 46), the narrator seems uncertain of what it is: “Dancers? Spirits? Whirlpools of light and air and shadow?” (ibidem).

This mystical experience makes perfect sense and it is easily understood by children and grown-ups within its proper context, whereas it may be seen as a little awkward for the non-Native reader. This is actually a strategy of interpolation³²³, as Clare Bradford (2007: 56) points out:

In this textual moment, Western conventions rub up against Cree traditions: whereas in Western narratives distinctions between realism and fantasy are commonly incorporated into distinctions between genres of writing, Highway’s narrative[s] combine (...) the realistic with the magical. The Cree scholar Neal McLeod notes that ‘there are discursive differences between the colonized and colonizer as they are embedded within different interpretative vantage points,’ and in *Caribou Song: Atihko Níkamon*, events are interpreted according to a view of the world where what is real includes spiritual, mystical, and magical experiences.

³²³ Cf. footnote 99.

This children's book concludes with Papa's "smile as bright as the sun" (Highway, 2001: 25; cf. fig. 74) and, just like *Dragonfly Kites*, with the laughter of the two young boys: "For there, atop the large rock, sat Joe and Cody, laughing and laughing and laughing" (ibidem: 26; cf. fig. 75).

Laughter is a significant part of Native Canadian culture. In fact, humour has been used as a way of affirming Native community³²⁴, and it can be healing as well; it can be a therapeutic means that reconciles order and chaos. In this context, as Beth Brant argues, "[e]ven in [their] grief, [Native peoples] find laughter. Laughter at [their] human failings, laughter with [their] Tricksters, laughter at the stereotypes presented about [them]" (1997: 181). They do laugh a lot because that is a positive force, a source of strength, a way of relieving uncomfortable feelings. For example, Native peoples explain differences between peoples, such as the colonised and the coloniser, in humorous tales in order to release interracial conflicts and intercultural misunderstandings, as we notice in the Cree story below:

When Great One made mankind, he first made an earth oven. Then he modelled a man of clay and put him in to bake. He was not baked enough and came out white. Great One tried again, but this time he baked the man too long. He came out black. The third time Great One baked the man just the correct time, and he came out red. That is why different races have different colours.

(Egoff, 1967: 33)³²⁵

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that humour also permeates Highway's trilogy. The boys' laughter, with which all his narratives end, aims at easing tense and serious situations, such as the dangerous event described in *Caribou Song*. It may as well be a way of signalling pleasure and shared understanding, and of building and strengthening relationships.

Looking, in particular, at *Fox on the Ice*, the companion book to the others of the same series, we realise that, just like the other two, this one also delights us with its balance between danger and comedy, with the simple traditional life that it depicts and with its closeness to a harmonious nature. However, instead of initiating us into hunting rituals and practices – and their implicit cosmology –, or of inviting us to join the boys' ventures in their interaction with the land and the creatures living on it, this time we are led to a hilarious winter afternoon of ice fishing. "It was the perfect day to fish", as the

³²⁴ Native people laughing together may be seen as an affirmation of their shared norms, attitudes and assumptions.

³²⁵ This tale is part of Katherine B. Judson's *Myths and Legends of British North America*.

narrator tells us on the first page, and the sun, kissing the snow and making it “sparkle like diamonds” (ibidem), allowed for a traditional picnic lunch.

Far from imagining the adventure ahead of them, the eight huskies take a nap in the sun and Joe, half-asleep, rests “cuddled by his mother in the sled” (2003: 3), while his brother and Ootsie play together on the snow and Papa makes holes in the ice and sets the nets (ibidem: 5; cf. figs.76 and 77). This peaceful atmosphere is disrupted when the sled dogs notice the arrival of a fox (cf. fig. 78) and promptly chase after it, leaving no choice to Mama and Joe but to go along in the sled, as shown below.

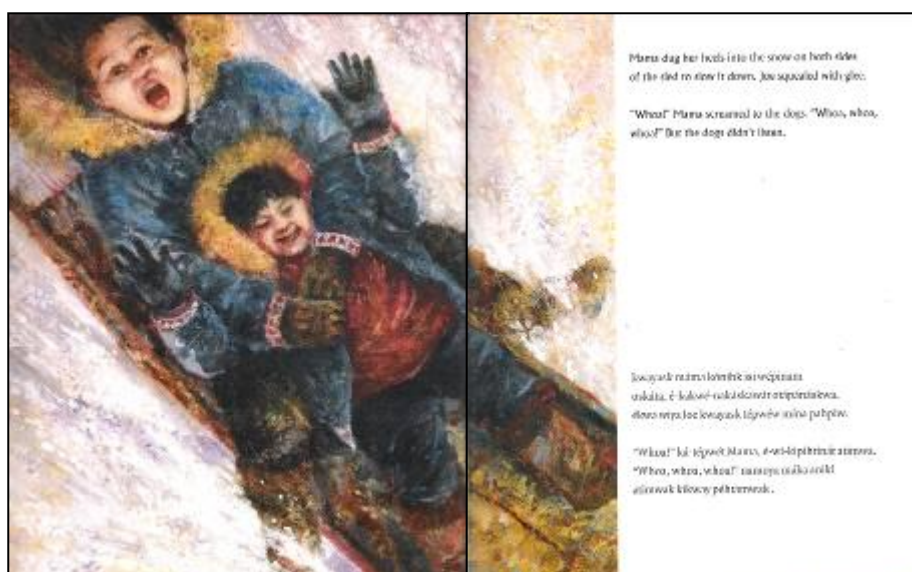


Fig. 38. Mama and Joe being dragged along in the huskies’ chase after a fox, as depicted by Brian Deines in Highway’s *Caribou Song* (2003: 17-8).

The imagination of a child is limitless, even in the most hazardous trial: Cody, at this time, seems to be invigorated by the spiritual world. To him, “the sled looked like a faraway angel taking off on wings of rainbow snow [and m]ama’s shouts and the dogs’ barks sounded like crystal chimes” (ibidem: 19). It is up to Papa to solve the situation and, after quick reflection on the dilemma he found himself in³²⁶, he decides to run after the sled to make it come to a stop. Fortunately, Ootsie is more than just a dog³²⁷ and he saves the day: “The dog was dancing with joy (...). His teeth were clamped on the net” (Highway, 2003: 27; cf. fig.79). Laughter, once again, is inevitable!

Overall, Highway’s trilogy puts away generalisations and stereotypes and, drawing on the author’s own memories, brings forward some of the best adventures of two young Cree brothers and their nuclear family.

³²⁶ Whether to scoop the jigger out of the hole to prevent it from moving under the ice, thus disappearing together with his net, or to “wait(...) for the jigger (...) [and] lose Mama and Joe” (Highway, 2003: 21).

³²⁷ As noticed on page 259 of this dissertation, this dog “was almost a person” (Highway, 2002: 4).

Just like Tomson Highway, George Littlechild is also a member of the Cree Nation, but he is of the Plains area – the Ermineskin Reserve in Hobbema, Alberta, to be precise. Son of a Plains Cree mother and a white father³²⁸, Littlechild was raised apart from his ancestral community, “because both [his] parents died violent deaths on skid row” (Littlechild, 1993: 12). Having grown up in foster homes, it was only when he was seventeen that he found out that he was mixed-blood³²⁹. In his late teens, then, he started a quest for his Native background, trying to learn everything he could about his mother’s people and, hence, about himself. It was a long, difficult struggle for him, but worth the effort, because Littlechild is now proud of who he is, as he clarifies in the passage below:

When I was a boy, people knew I was Indian (...) because I had the features of my Indian mother. As I got older, people weren’t sure anymore. “You sure are exotic looking,” they told me. “Are you Spanish? Italian? Portuguese?” I was looking more like my white father. But since both my parents were dead and I was living with my Dutch foster family, I was very confused about who I was. No one ever told me then that I was mixed-blood. (...) It took me many years to accept my features. Then one day I decided that I had to love myself just the way I am. I’m a rainbow man, with a half of this and a quarter of that, and a dash of a mixture of everything!”

(Rohmer, 1997: 12)

This quest resulted in a book, entitled *This Land is My Land*, which conjoins brief biographical texts with colourful pictures that express the author’s feelings and create a link to his culture. Actually, Littlechild’s book is a journey into the author’s personal and historical memories, beliefs, points of view and desires. It leads the readers to discover the dramatic past and struggles of Native peoples, most often in a humorous vein. That is his “way of healing the pain of the past and helping the next generation of Indian people”, as he puts it in the book’s inside cover, because laughter is therapeutic, as discussed; it is an incredible medicine, as he claims on page 28: “... sometimes it’s good not to be so serious. It’s good medicine to laugh”. Ultimately, as he goes on to state in the book’s inside cover, his “goal is to heighten awareness of the history and experiences of Native Peoples of the Americas and to promote understanding among all peoples”.

³²⁸ In his collection of autobiographical short stories entitled *This Land is My Land*, George Littlechild fully describes his parents’ roots: “Our mother, Rachel Littlechild was Plains Cree. Our father, James E. Price, was Scottish, French, English, Micmac Indian, Welsh, and Dutch” (Littlechild, 1993: 12). I will make a brief examination of this book below.

³²⁹ In an article entitled “Contemporary Plains Indian Painting: Sixteen Portraits”, John A. Warner observes: “In fact, it was not until he ran into one of his siblings by chance when he was seventeen that he learned that his father was a white man” (1999: 90).

It is interesting to notice that, in these two quotations, George Littlechild seems to lump all Aboriginal peoples together in a single mass, and the book's title further contributes to this view, because it refers to "Indian land" in general. However, just like Jeannette Armstrong, who has always recognised the First Nations' common colonial history and resistance, but who has struggled to be seen as an Okanagan, rejecting the label of "pan-Indianist" writer, so does Littlechild focus specifically on the Plains Cree people in his brief texts³³⁰. In simple language, this artist provides us with intense and unforgettable accounts about his ancestors and family members, from the birth of his great-great-grandfather Louis Natuasis in 1858 to the nineties, when this picture book was published. For that matter, he made use of "family photographs, several of them grainy and

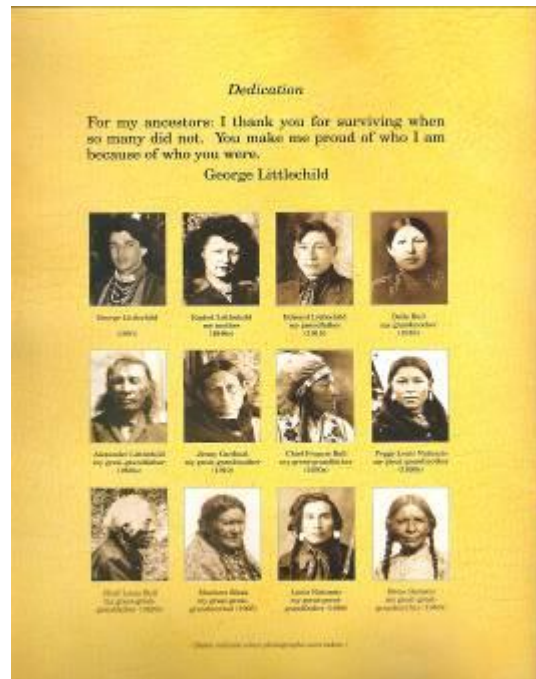


Fig. 39. Frontispiece of small photo portraits of Littlechild's Cree ancestors, in his *This Land Is My Land* (1993: 2).

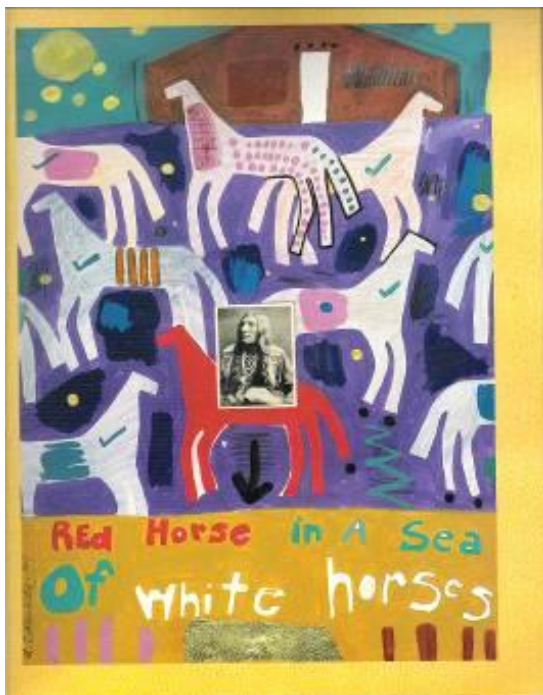


Fig. 40. "Red Horse in a Sea of White Horses", in Littlechild's *This Land Is My Land* (1993: 21).

indistinct, [which] contradict stereotypes of the homogenized Indian by reclaiming personal and communal histories" (Bradford, 2007: 21). These photographs are signifiers of colonial resistance, because, according to Clare Bradford, they "demonstrate the persistence and durability of Indian cultures and the consequences of the past in the present" (ibidem). They are, simultaneously, Littlechild's way of paying tribute to his ancestors, as the dedication and the small photo portraits of his Cree relatives shown above illustrate (cf. fig. 39).

³³⁰ Whether, or not, his sentiment of unity among the different First Nations should be viewed as Pan-Indianism, that is a totally different question, as I will discuss later.

Besides family photographs, another one deserves a mention: that of “an Indian warrior [who] sits atop a red horse” (Littlechild, 1993: 20), in the painting “Red Horse in a Sea of White Horses” (cf. fig. 40). That picture is one of the most remarkable portraits which Edward S. Curtis took to include in his famous studies on the North American Indian. This photographer believed that the Native peoples were doomed to extinction in the beginnings of the twentieth century and that the only possibility of survival would be through words and pictures. Inspired by the turn-of-the-century perception of the Native individual as the “Noble Savage”, “... he sought to capture the ‘traditional’ Indian. His stated intention was to form ‘a comprehensive and permanent record of all the important tribes ... that still retain to a considerable degree their primitive conditions and traditions’” (Kennedy, 2001: 3). The problem, as Daniel Francis tells us, is that...

If the camera never lies, neither does it tell the whole truth. (...) ... [T]he photographs were carefully posed renderings designed to convey a particular view of the Indian. Curtis equipped his subjects with props (...) and doctored the photographs to eliminate evidence of White culture. He was trying to present Indians as they existed before the White Man came; or, more accurately, as he thought they existed before the White Man came. (...) His photographs were tiny time machines intended to take the viewer back before history began into a romantic world of a technologically primitive people. (...) Only in his photographs might one find the real Indian, which is to say, the Imaginary Indian.

(1992: 41)

George Littlechild plays with this romantic and stereotypical image of the “real” Native Canadian and, making use of the emblematic photograph of a Piegan Indian whom Curtis had identified as Double Runner, he subverts it. In effect, the Cree artist challenges conventional views that regard Double Runner as a type³³¹ and transports him into the twenty-first century, implying that the “Indian” has survived, in spite of being surrounded by assimilationist Whites, who make him feel that he is “[n]ot at home in his own territory” (Littlechild, 1993: 20). The Indian warrior’s facial expression, then, is not one of “melancholic regret”, as colonial representations would suggest (Bradford, 2007: 23), but comes to represent his feelings of alienation and impotence in a world where “he is always wrong and whites are always right. That is why check marks appear on the white horses” (Littlechild, 1993: 20).

³³¹ As Clare Bradford notes, Curtis describes this warrior as “an excellent type of the Piegan physiognomy, as well as the ideal North American Indian as pictured by the average person” (2007: 21-3).

Several are the instances wherein the image of the horse is used. On page 22, for example, the reader gets to know that Littlechild's "great-grandfather, Chief Francis Bull, had a great love and respect for horses, and these animals also loved and respected him". This simple and extremely brief text, entitled "Horse Dance", is bolstered by a colourful picture (cf. fig 41) where a pinkish horse stands with both forelegs raised, as if dancing to the sound of the feathered Indian's music.

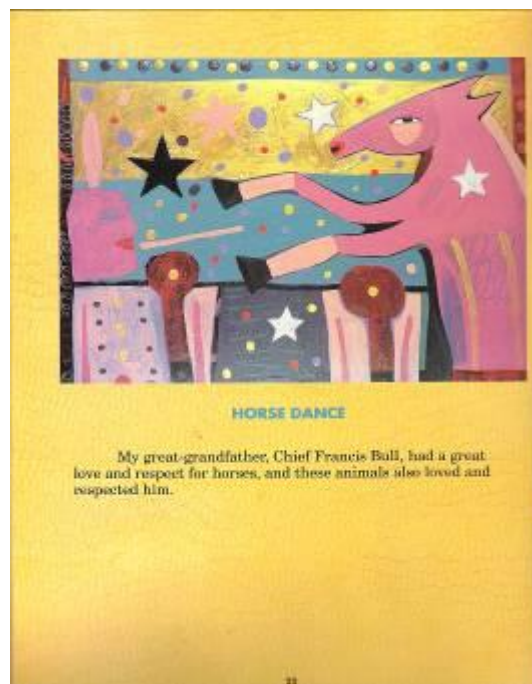


Fig. 41. "Horse Dance" in Littlechild's *This Land Is My Land* (Littlechild, 1993: 22).

A direct reference to the horse as a symbol appears earlier as well, on page 18, in "Red Horse Boarding School". This is the longest text in the book, which is

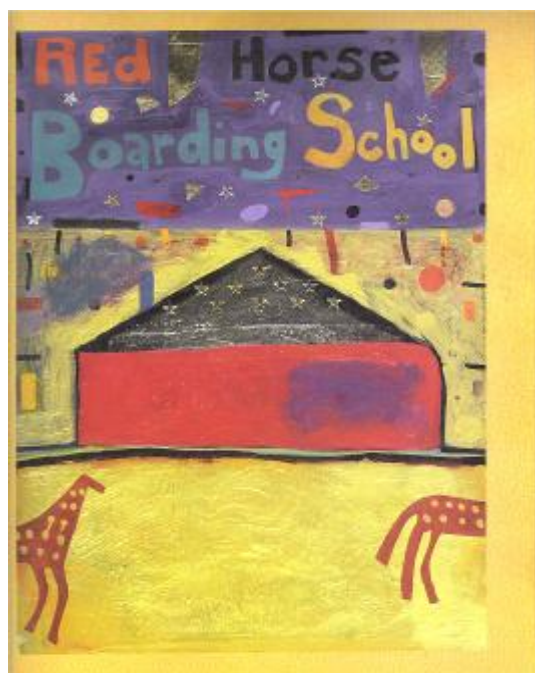


Fig. 42. "Red Horse Boarding School" in Littlechild's *This Land Is My Land* (Littlechild, 1993: 19).

motivated by the author's wish to denounce the harsh reality that his grandparents, parents, uncles and aunts had to face at such Christian educational institutions. At the same time, it serves as an excuse and justification for his mother's inability to raise her children and for her alcoholism. Just as his relatives had been "torn away from their culture, their language, their traditional ways, and their families", so is the red horse that heads to school "torn in half" in the picture on page 19 (cf. fig. 42).

Accordingly, its symbolic significance is massive and varied" (2008: 279). For the Plains Cree peoples, the horse is a powerful animal that is associated with agriculture, hunting, war and travel, but also with the spiritual world, as it raises humans

Adele Nozedar tells us that "[f]or millennia the horse has enjoyed a spiritual, symbolic, and mythical significance that arguably surpasses that of any other living

above the mundane, and acts as a channel between the earthly and heavenly realms, transmitting messages from the spiritual world or guiding the deceased on the journey to the afterlife, just like the cranes in Armstrong's *Dancing with the Cranes*.

In a chapter of *Legends of Our Times: Native Cowboy Life*, Morgan Baillargeon and Leslie Tepper focus on the importance of the horse in the development of a Plains culture, and discuss George Littlechild's use of horse imagery, in particular. According to these critics,

The image he uses most prominently is the horse, which he perceives as highly spiritual. (...) Littlechild had already spent several years incorporating horse imagery into his work before discovering that in Nehiyaw culture the horse is the carrier of visions and messages from the spirit world to this world. (...) He believes that the horse is the mystical link to the spirit world, a spirit helper who protects people from circumstances and is the channel for ancient memories.

(1998: 32)

Littlechild himself refers to the sacredness of this animal in the text accompanying a "painting of a horse spirit [that] honors the Sioux warriors who died at the Battle of Little Big Horn" (Littlechild, 1993: 14). In his words,

The horse is a sacred animal for us. In this picture, Horse's clothing moves as if he wants to dance. Bright happy colors of the rainbow adorn him. (...) The little pink and purple horses in the background come from the toy store. Do you know those bags of plastic cowboys and Indians on horses you can buy? These are those same horses.

(ibidem)

Once again, George Littlechild conjoins his interest in conveying the traditional worldview of the Plains Cree with his need to share a contemporary outlook on it, thus establishing a "dialogue between colonial representations and their reworking in a postcolonial text" (Bradford, 2007: 23). By implicating the reader through direct address, rhetorical questions, and touches of humour, the Cree artist creates a relationship of complicity with him/her, while creating a counter-discourse that can reach a fairly broad audience of both children and adults of all ages



Fig. 43. "In Memory of the Sioux Warriors" in Littlechild's *This Land Is My Land* (Littlechild, 1993: 15).

and races.

Other horses can be seen in Littlechild's paintings on pages 8, 13 and 27, all of them a metamorphosis of the Cree author, representing his passing to a higher level of consciousness and, simultaneously, a very personal interpretation of traditional Cree symbols. Of these paintings, it is important to highlight the one that goes together with the text entitled "Indian Artist Visits New York, New York" (cf. fig. 44). In it, we find Littlechild's alter ego as a pink horse that cannot help but express a red thick-brushed "wow" at the wonders he finds in the New World's greatest metropolis: "I loved the tall buildings, the crowds of people, the huge stores, the fancy restaurants. And the art! It was amazing" (Littlechild, 1993: 26). However, this was an exception, as he clarifies earlier in "Urban Indian Pain Dance". Generally speaking, for him, "[l]iving in the cities was like being in prison because we had lost control of our lives" (ibidem: 12). Cities, which were expected to be havens of hope after the Second World War, turned out to be the beginning of the end for those who "got caught up in drugs, alcohol, and prostitution" (ibidem).

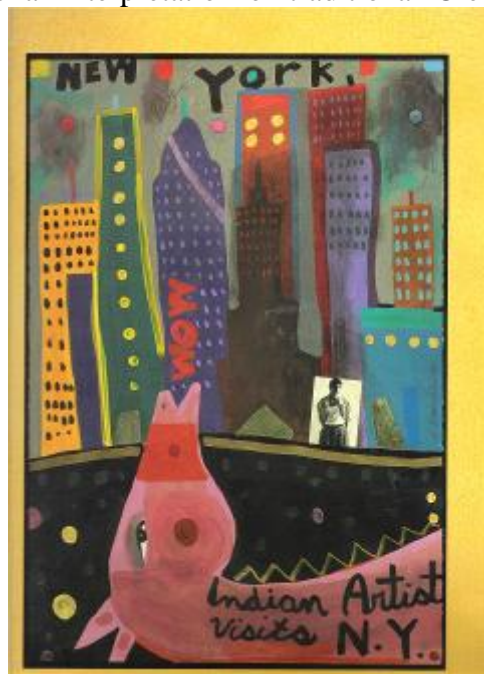


Fig. 44. "Indian Artist Visits New York, New York" in Littlechild's *This Land Is My Land* (Littlechild, 1993: 27).

The city immortalised by Frank Sinatra's song "New York, New York" was different, though, and it also made Littlechild look at the world differently: "In ten days my world had changed" (ibidem: 26). There, George Littlechild found a source of inspiration for his own paintings, which, as he explains, "became multi-layered, with beads, feathers, and photographs" (ibidem). A black and white photo of the artist himself, dressed in casual clothes, contrasts with the depiction of the Native Canadian wearing an eagle headdress³³² and walking over the stars³³³, claiming "This Land Is My

³³² As Littlechild points out on page 4, the "eagle headdress [is] the highest symbol in [Plains Cree] culture".

³³³ The stars, just like the horse, beads, feathers and photographs, show up in almost every page of this picture book. The stars, in the night sky, lead the artist to the dream world or are "a doorway into the other world, the Spirit World" (Littlechild, 1993: 4). They may also represent the morning star, which "slowly fades away at the break of dawn, welcoming the beginning of a new day" (ibidem: 14) or may also be associated with Littlechild's school experience, because, as he tells us, "My teachers would grade

Land”, as seen on page 17 (cf. fig. 45). This is the painting that Littlechild chose for the



Fig. 45. “This Land Is My Land” in the book with this same title (Littlechild, 1993: 17).

front cover of this moving collection of short narratives, because it condenses and illuminates several central symbols not only of the Plains Cree, but, in his words, of “Indian Country” (Littlechild, 1993: 30), in general³³⁴. Thus, moving back and forth between his own experiences and those of other Native peoples, as well as between historical and contemporary contexts, this Plains Cree artist creates spaces for critique and, most importantly, for healing.

The title of Littlechild’s picture book was inspired by Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land, This Land is My Land”, a song that is grounded in the Great Depression of the

thirties and that was written as an ironic response to Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America”. Even though George Littlechild found it “very strange to be singing about the ownership of the land”, he identified with this composition, because in it Guthrie sang of the beauty and vastness of America, but he did not obliterate the darkest side of the American dream³³⁵. Consequently, as Clare Bradford makes clear,

Through his intertextual reference to Woody Guthrie’s song, Littlechild acknowledges traditions of resistance in white culture, even as he draws attention to the effects of colonization upon Native Americans. In this way, resistance is freed from the binary us/them, good/bad scheme and inserted into a dialogical relationship with other forms and instances of dissent.

(2007: 21)

us by using stars. The gold stars were for the best students. The lowest stars were red, which meant failure. Those are the stars I remember getting most” (ibidem: 18).

³³⁴ Once again, a unity among different First Nations is explicit here, which leads us to conclude that, although Native authors often argue against Pan-Indianism, the truth is that they do promote it. We have seen in Armstrong’s *Slash* that, during Tommy’s long journeys with caravans in both Canada and the United States, a sentiment of pan-Indianism was noticeable, in spite of the author’s best efforts to the contrary. The same occurs here: through literature, Native peoples have shared a desire for cooperation and for an exchange of ideas, because they have awakened to the reality that, as the saying goes, unity is strength. Pan-Indianism is therefore inevitable, and that does not make Native artists/writers less fond of their specific nation.

³³⁵ For further information on this song, cf. Joe Klein’s *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (1998).

Resistance is achieved here by combining dialogic techniques and their comic or sarcastic potential³³⁶, but despite the use of irony, humour and critique, the book ends hopefully, because, according to Littlechild, “[i]n Indian Country we are closing the circle by healing ourselves. We are reviving our culture and traditions. We are very hopeful and the future looks promising” (Littlechild, 1993: 30). This future, nonetheless, is anchored in the past and it, in turn, provides a path in the present, because past, present and future constitute the whole of one’s existence; they are a continuum symbolised by the circle imagery, as previously discussed.

Littlechild’s “young traditional warrior on his way to a pow wow”, then, resembles that of Armstrong’s exhortation in “Aboriginal Youth: Warriors in the Present Day” (1989); he is one of the many Slash[es] who ultimately

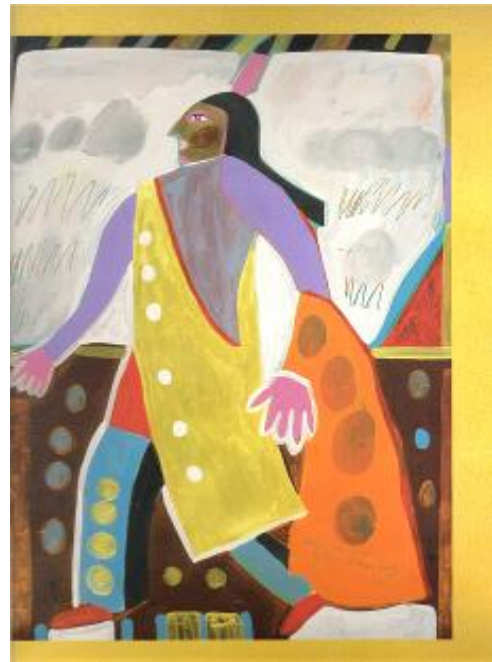


Fig. 46. “This Warrior Goes Dancing” in Littlechild’s *This Land Is My Land* (Littlechild, 1993: 31).

raise their heads proudly to heaven and march towards the future in the footprints of their ancestors. This warrior dancing to the heartbeat of the drum may as well be Enwhisteetkwa, Neekna, Chi’ or any other youngster who is willing to embrace life to its fullest, because, in Littlechild’s words, “[t]o dance is to celebrate life” (ibidem); it is to gather “all together in a large circle” (ibidem) and to take part in the energy flow of the universe, in the most primal way. “The circle”, as this Plains Cree also affirms³³⁷, “is a very important symbol to all Indians because the circle represents strength and unity” (ibidem).

Thomas King, just like all the other Native authors mentioned, also insists on the power of drumming, singing and dancing as means of communication with the divine.

³³⁶ I would say that Littlechild’s choice of the title *This Land is My Land* results from his sympathy for and, in a sense, his identification with Guthrie, the bard of the dispossessed and marginalised in their search for self-respect, as mentioned, but also from a contemptuous and even sarcastic rejection of colonial, territorial greed. If the land belonged to anyone, it would be to “First Nations or First Peoples, because [that] was [their] homeland first”. As such, figure 45 “reminds [Native peoples] that all [that] land was once Indian land” (Littlechild, 1993: 16).

³³⁷ Not only does Littlechild affirm the value of the circle, but he shows it, by decorating the outfit and the surroundings of the warrior with circular patterns.

Every time Coyote³³⁸ “... sang a song and she danced a dance and she thought hard” (1992: 3)³³⁹, she created something. This ability to give birth is precisely what makes King refer to Coyote as a female being, but, unlike the paternalistic male God in Judeo-Christianism, this one is far from being the most excellent of all beings, nor is she omnipotent and omniscient. Rather, Coyote is conceived as an imperfect and flawed creature that succeeds in many enterprises but fails in many others, as the narrator in *A Coyote Columbus Story* confesses:

It was Coyote who fixed this world, you know. She is the one who did it. She made rainbows and flowers and clouds and rivers. And she made prune juice and afternoon naps and toe-nail polish and television commercials. Some of these things were pretty good, and some of these things were foolish.

(1992: 1)

The third-person narrator addresses the reader in a tone of intimacy and complicity, as if seeking his/her active participation. The short sentences, repetitions³⁴⁰, the use of direct speech, of colloquial expressions and of “grammatical shifts and slips”³⁴¹ – to use Jean Paine Mendonza’s words (2006: 199) – create the illusion that this story is being heard rather than read.

The illustrations by William Kent Monkman further amplify the text through exaggeration, caricature and contradictions/nonsense that easily evoke laughter. Right from the beginning, we get to know a female Coyote, dressed in shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt, who seems to be resting and admiring her creations (cf. fig. 47). This image could, in a sense, allude to Genesis 2: 2-3, specifically to that moment which states that on the seventh day God completed His creations and rested from all His work. The difference here, besides that of gender and of the former’s flawed nature that resembles

³³⁸ As noted on page 191 of this dissertation, coyote is a mythical trickster-figure that is central to many Native American and First Nations’ cultures. His/her gender fails to generate consensus and, as such, coyote appears in several oral creation stories as an ambivalent and paradoxical character that takes the place of the Creator, but, unlike the male God of Judeo-Christianism, creates the world and almost everything in it by accident. This figure will further analysed in C. J. Taylor’s creation stories.

³³⁹ Just like Armstrong’s *Dancing with the Cranes*, Highway’s trilogy and Littlechild’s *This Land is My Land*, this book by Thomas King is also unpaginated and, thus, I added page numbers for easier reference.

³⁴⁰ In the quotation above, we notice the constant repetition of the coordinating conjunction “and”, but there are several others, of which the following quotation is an example: “She played *ball* all day and all night. She would throw the *ball* and she would hit the *ball* and she would run and catch the *ball*. But playing *ball* by herself was boring...” (3; my italics).

³⁴¹ One such example is noticeable in the way that the verb “to say” is conjugated, as in “... says those beavers” (King, 1992: 4); “... says those moose” (5); “... says those turtles” (ibidem). The Rez/Red English continues throughout the narrative, immersing the reader in an oral atmosphere, while, at the same time, giving the whole scene a comic effect.

that of humankind, is that Coyote is tired, not because of the creative process, but because “[s]he played ball all day and all night” (King, 1992: 3).



Fig. 47. Coyote resting, an illustration by William Kent Monkman in King’s *A Coyote Columbus Story* (1992: 1-2).

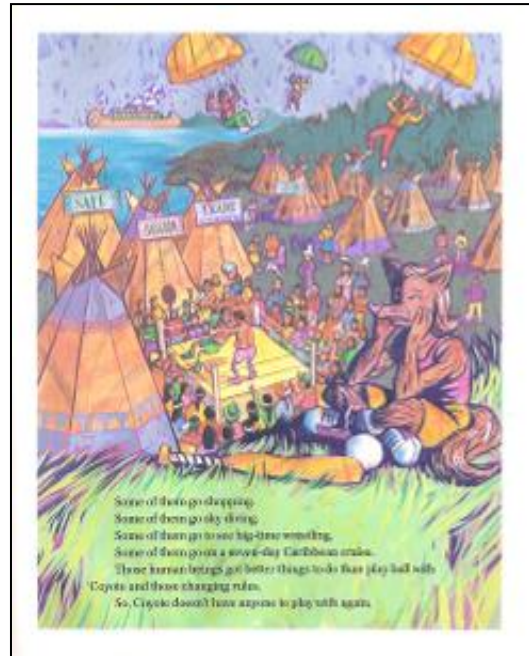
If the picture above is a representation of mythical times³⁴², it is not surprising to see Coyote as described earlier; a beaver talking with a bird; or a turtle lying, sunning herself, but we would not properly expect to find cars, electric devices, canned juice, sun block or sunglasses, nor commercials to these products, to state but a few of the items that are “against time”. The whole narrative is actually organised around the concept of anachronism, that is, historical misplacement, as this brief analysis will show.

After creating beavers, moose and turtles that refuse to play baseball with her, Coyote creates human beings, but they decide not to play either, because they realise that she makes up the rules and changes them as she pleases, in order to win all the time. “So,” as the narrator tells us, “after a while, human beings find better things to do” (9) and Coyote, once again, does not have anyone to play with, because, as we learn on page 10,

³⁴² As discussed on pages 190 and 191, in mythical times animism was common and so inanimate objects that have life and personality or animals that could reason, talk and behave like human beings have been featured in many Aboriginal stories.

Some of [the human beings] go shopping.
 Some of them go sky diving.
 Some of them go to see big-time wrestling.
 Some of them go on a seven-day Caribbean cruise.

Text and picture (cf. fig. 48) function as a unit, projecting contemporary attitudes and experiences onto a former time, causing surprise and comic effect, while, simultaneously, demanding reflection and analysis of the stereotypes that are continually perpetuated about Native peoples. Despite being the first to inhabit the land, these human beings are not primitive and savage, but they appear as totally civilised, enjoying leisure activities brought by this modern consumerist world.



Furthermore, they are depicted realistically, in contemporary casual dress, but, as Michaela Moura-Koçoğlu observes, romanticised representations of Aboriginal peoples wearing buckskins, feathers, plaits and other clichés often associated with First Nations, are also made apparent:

Fig. 48. Leisure activities of Native peoples, an illustration by William Kent Monkman in King's *A Coyote Columbus Story* (1992: 10).

The images contain elements that are customarily employed for stereotypical portrayals of American Indians, such as feathers as hair ornament, men wearing plaits, and babies carried in traditional papoose on their mothers' back. These clichés correlate with seemingly paradoxical modern items and gadgets the 'natives' take on their escape to Penticton, including radio-recorders, toaster, lampshades, toothbrushes, and surfboards. By reversing imposed stereotypes, the illustrator succeeds in deconstructing and subverting pristine notions of tradition, foregrounding the cultural blend characteristic of today's indigenous reality.

(2009: 317)

If, on the one hand, Native peoples are depicted realistically, despite the mentioned *mélange* of historical periods and the omission, or amalgamation, of specific tribal affiliation³⁴³, on the other hand, the Europeans created by Coyote dress in "silly",

³⁴³ Thomas King differs from the other writers studied in that this Native Canadian of Cherokee and Greek descent treats Native peoples as "the human beings", in general, and does not refer to any specific group. His aim is to make the readers question the validity of the history that has been written by

“funny-looking clothes” (King, 1992: 11), “have no manners [and t]hey act as if they’ve got no relations” (ibidem: 14).

By placing the Native creator figure as the centre of origin, Thomas King shifts the imperialistic assumption that Europeans brought civilization to a savage American continent and that they are intrinsically superior to Native peoples in all things. Monkman’s visual representations add to the humour of this outrageous counter-discursive tale: instead of an intelligent, courageous explorer, Christopher Columbus is depicted as a tiny man, a clownish figure who cannot be taken seriously, not only due to his sinister – but comic – appearance and outfit, but also because he holds a parchment upside down (cf. fig. 49). Columbus’ crew is similarly



Fig. 49. The arrival of Christopher Columbus and his crew in the New World, an illustration by William Kent Monkman in King’s *A Coyote Columbus Story* (1992: 12).

portrayed satirically, in cartoon style, as Jean Paine Mendonza describes:

Monkman’s illustrations manage to make the Europeans menacing and ridiculous at the same time. Their skin tones are blue, green and purple, in contrast to Coyote’s human beings, who are shades of brown. Columbus and crew dress in ensembles that include gym shoes, fishnet stockings, berets, neckties, pince-nez glasses, as well as thoroughly patched 15th-Century court attire. There’s even an Elvis impersonator in pink high-heel pumps, while Columbus, with orange hair and purple face, looks like a really nasty clown.

(2006: 199)³⁴⁴

All these explorers care about is how to get to India to become rich and famous and, as such, an imperialistic drive for power and domination compromises the

Eurocentric scholars and that has denied Native peoples as a whole a true and accurate account of their past and cultures. King’s generalisation of Native peoples is also motivated by the need to present Columbus’ perception of the “Indian”, a collective term that this sailor coined in error and that remained in general use through the seventies. However, it should be noted that there is a counter-discourse that challenges this perception, which is prompted by the Native peoples’ plurality of choices when they get tired of being fooled by Coyote. The fact that they engage in several different leisure activities proves the point that they are all different and that their difference should be accepted and even fostered.

³⁴⁴ I would say that Thomas King reverses Edward S. Curtis’ look upon Native peoples, because in this picture book the Cree author implies that they too look at the white men and find them funny-looking.

missionary zeal to Christianise and civilise the New World³⁴⁵. Arrogance, greed, selfishness and ignorance are the very antithesis of faith, but they are precisely the behaviours that Thomas King wishes to reinforce on the part of Europeans, in order to deconstruct pristine notions of right and duty, of justice and virtue.

With this intention in mind, we are told that, as soon as the explorers find the pond with Coyote's animal creations, they immediately envision them as profitable items of commerce:

I see a four-dollar beaver, says one.
 I see a fifteen-dollar moose, says another.
 I see a two-dollar turtle, says a third.
 Those things aren't worth poop, says Christopher Columbus. We can't sell those things in Spain. Look harder.

(King, 1992: 16)

The attitude described above contrasts with the position of respect granted to animals by the Native worldview, as discussed earlier. Animals do not serve as commodities to be exploited by Coyote. On the contrary, when her creations show no interest in playing with her, Coyote accepts their choice and does not push them to do

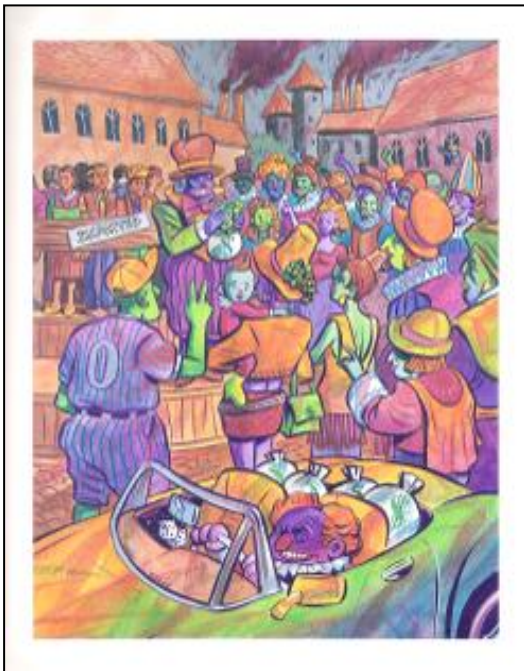


Fig. 50. Native peoples being sold in Spain, an illustration by William Kent Monkman in King's *A Coyote Columbus Story* (1992: 24).

something they do not want to³⁴⁶.

European peoples are the ones who impose their will at all costs, even at the expense of the truth. Thirsty for power and wealth, and because “[s]omebody has to pay for th[e] trip (...) [which] isn't cheap” (ibidem: 21), Columbus fancies a way of overcoming his problems and declares his conquest accomplished: “I'll bet this is India. (...) I'll bet these are Indians. (...) I'll bet we can sell these Indians” (ibidem: 18). Treating Native peoples as merchandise, “Columbus grabs a big bunch of men and women and

³⁴⁵ Never, at any moment, does this picture book refer to a missionary enterprise. If in *Enwhisteeekwa* we get to know that some black-robed men, aiming at the wholesale conversion of the Okanagans to Christianity, accompanied the traders, in *A Coyote Columbus Story* the missionary ardour is completely absent, implying that it never existed at all.

³⁴⁶ That is precisely the *leitmotiv* of her successive creations, ensuring a respect for difference and diversity.

children and locks them up in his ships” (ibidem: 20) so that the sailors may sell them as soon as they go back to Spain, in order to achieve their own greedy and narcissistic ends: the purchase of material commodities, such as “a big bag of licorice jelly beans and a used Mercedes” (ibidem: 23) for individual consumption (cf. fig. 50) Once again, the desire for materialistic possessions based on hedonism is in sharp contrast with the Aboriginal worldview, where spirituality and community work together in a (w)holistic manner, as the books discussed so far claim.

It is when Coyote sees the Native peoples’ abduction that we come to see her good heart and kindly nature. This ambiguous character is capable of both good and evil and, hence, when she realises that her actions have harmed her friends³⁴⁷, she acknowledges her mistake and, remorseful, she promptly decides to rectify the situation: “Everything is okay, says Coyote. I made a little mistake but I’ll take it back. I’ll take Christopher Columbus back. You’ll see, everything will be balanced again” (ibidem: 26).

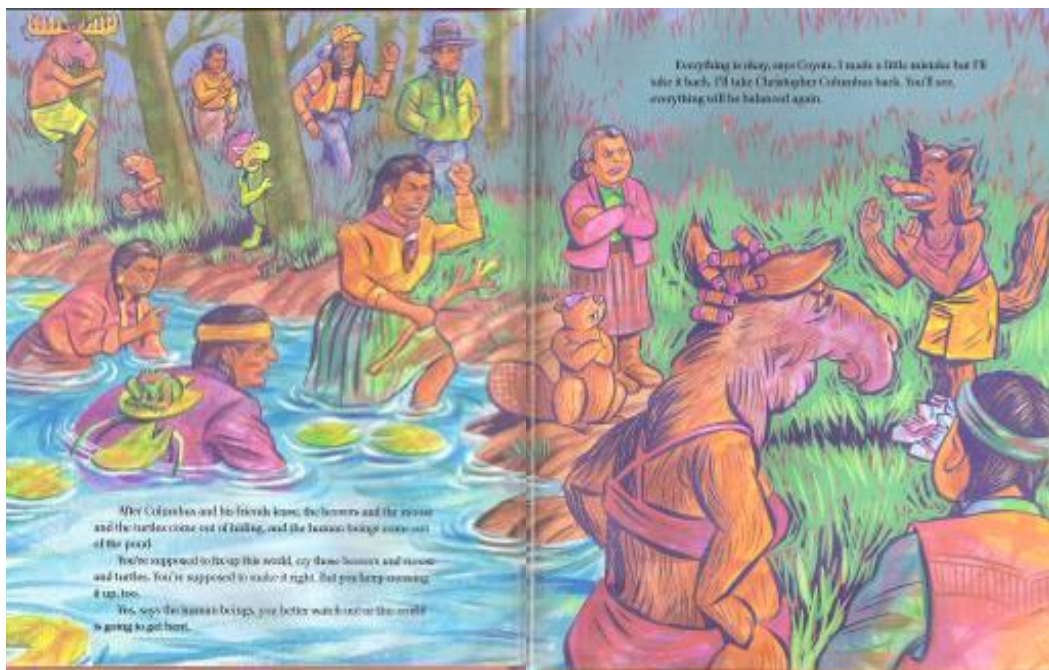


Fig. 51. Coyote promises to rectify her mistakes, an illustration by William Kent Monkman in King’s *A Coyote Columbus Story* (1992: 25-6).

The problem, however, is that in her attempts to fix it all, Coyote conjures up another problematic solution, Jacques Cartier. As argued by the Native peoples who hid

³⁴⁷ We are told, on page 7, that “... Coyote and those human beings [that is, Native peoples] become very good friends”, and later, on page 23, Coyote shows concern about them and asks the European explorers to set them free: “Wait a minute, says Coyote. What about my friends you have locked up in your ships? You got to let them go”.

in the pond claiming to be animals as a way to escape Columbus' greed, Coyote is "supposed to make it right. But [she] keep[s] messing it up, too" (ibidem: 25). After performing her creation rituals, "another bunch of funny-looking people" (ibidem: 27) come up declaring that they are looking for India. Even though the crew led by this French explorer and the one commanded by Columbus look very much alike in terms of their strange and weird appearance as well as in the intentions behind their expedition, Coyote refuses to acknowledge the similarities and decides to give the newcomers a chance. Believing in the good nature of humankind, she invites these sailors to play ball and assures the "beavers and moose and turtles and human beings" that "[e]verything is under control" (ibidem: 28). These, however, are determined not to be colonised and, aware that "Coyote's done it again (...)[,] they catch the first train to Penticton" (ibidem)³⁴⁸ to avoid being kidnapped, as we can see in the illustration

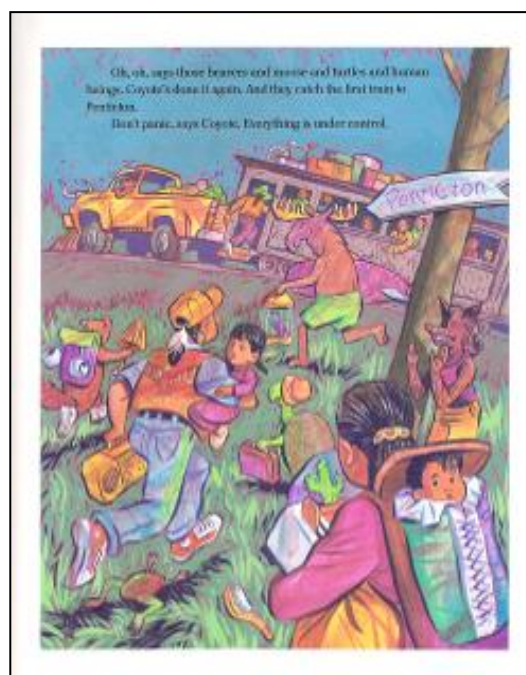


Fig. 52. Heading to Penticton, an illustration by William Kent Monkman in King's *A Coyote Columbus Story* (1992: 28).

on the right. This flight replicates the historical displacement of the First Nations, who were forced to move westwards, but William Kent Monkman adds a comic touch to this otherwise dramatic scene, as Jean Paine Mendonza points out: "the reader should note the skilful juxtaposition of humour and pathos here" (2006: 199).

Similarly to this Coyote story, King's *Coyote Sings to the Moon* (1998) also offers a humorous – though less poignant – perspective on the negative impact of the normative forces that operate to produce and reproduce a certain level of cultural homogeneity in the world. In fact, in this cautionary story, Thomas King celebrates diversity and pluralism rather than uniformity, by introducing us to a mythological

³⁴⁸ As already noted, Penticton is home to the pioneering Native Canadian press Theytus Books, and a well-known enclave for First Nations' artists and writers, due to the En'owkin International School of Writing.

world where balance, harmony, order and unity prevail³⁴⁹, only to be overthrown by an arrogant and vain Coyote who, unable to bear rejection, starts insulting Moon: ““That silly Moon is so bright, I can hardly sleep. Why, I wouldn’t sing with you if you begged me”” (ibidem: 6). Moon, in turn, feels hurt, “packs her bags, slides out of the sky, and dives down into the pond” (ibidem: 7), leaving everyone in darkness. But Coyote is too proud to apologise; so, high and mighty, he³⁵⁰ asserts: “... at least now I can get some sleep” (ibidem). While Old Woman and all the animals develop a plan to re-establish the lost equilibrium³⁵¹, the presumptuous Coyote insists he is self-sufficient and may dispense with society, which obviously proves to be a

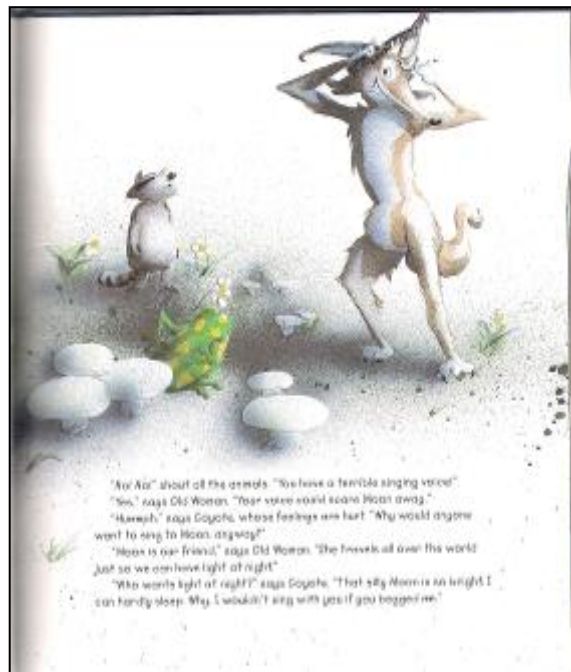


Fig. 53. Coyote acts self-important and conceited, an illustration by Johnny Wales in King’s *Coyote Sings to the Moon* (1998: 6).

fallacy, since he “... keeps crashing into trees and rocks and wet moss and has an unpleasant encounter with a skunk he didn’t see because, well, it was too dark”, as Doris Seale ironically and succinctly puts it (Seale and Slapin, 2006: 177).

This eventually leads to Coyote’s accidental fall “right into the pond” (King, 1998: 14)³⁵², where he finds Moon playing chess with a sunfish and spending a good

³⁴⁹ We learn that, at a time when animals still talked to the humans, all the beings lived in perfect harmony, each respecting the other’s difference and contributing to the whole, as the following excerpt suggests:

“One evening, all the animals in the woods came down to the pond just to hear Old Woman sing to the moon.
 ‘What a beautiful voice,’ say the moose.
 ‘Yes,’ say the ducks, ‘but we need a livelier beat.’
 ‘And a little cool percussion,’ say the beavers, ba-dopity-bop-bopping their tails on the water.
 ‘Doo-wop, doo-wop,’ say the turtles and the frogs. ‘Don’t forget the harmony.’
 So, one by one, all the animals join in with Old Woman and sing to the moon.”

(King, 1998: 3-4)

It should be noted that, just like most of the books analysed previously, *Coyote Sings to the Moon* is also unpaginated; hence, page numbers were added to facilitate quick reference.

³⁵⁰ In this children’s book Coyote is gendered as male, as evidenced in the illustrations and as encoded in personal deixis throughout the text.

³⁵¹ ““We have to find Moon and get her to go back into the sky,’ says Old Woman, ‘or this world is going to be messed up”” (ibidem: 9).

³⁵² It is worth noting the repetitions of the verbs “to run” and “to fall” on that page, and of the verb “to look” on page 16, which impart a sense of movement and visualisation of the scene, enabling the

time. The fact that Thomas King's characters indulge in playing games, whether it is baseball or chess, may be seen as an indirect commentary on the nature and social life of Native peoples. According to Steve Craig's *Sports and Games of the Ancients* (2002: 176), First Nations' social gatherings and ritual contexts usually involved some form of sport or game. In fact, these, together with gambling, were a central part of indigenous cultures long before contact with Europeans, as Armstrong's *Enwhisteetkwa/Walk in Water* makes clear in the following passage:

There were all kinds of things happening. Sa-sas, Palwitsiya and I, spent lots of time watching games among the men and among the women. The men played a ring and spear game. The women played a bone dice game. They bet lots of things in these games. Sometimes bone games were played by both men and women with teams from different camps. Drums and songs were used in these games. Sometimes the games lasted all night and many things were won and lost on bets. These nights were warm and filled with laughter and singing and drumming. This is probably the best time of the whole year.

(1982: 34)

This fictional account of early Okanagan life is truthful to history as we have seen, and, thus, the depiction of Native peoples gambling on the outcome of most games intends to reflect the traditional cultural values and practices of that particular community. We notice, then, that, contrary to what many assume, this activity is not a ruinous element brought by capitalism; rather, it is rooted in most First Nations' cultures, as it was, and is still today, a very popular pastime.

Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash* alludes to gaming and gambling among First Nations in the twentieth century, subtly calling the reader's attention to the detrimental effects of such activities on the gambler's social and family life, as this extract illustrates: "Mom went to the bingos every night. Pops went to go see some 'friends'. They ended up snapping at each other more and more. The house got neglected, and Pops put off stuff that needed to be done around the ranch" (1996a: 168).

Many other books about and/or by Native peoples include references to sports and games³⁵³, but rather than dice or guessing games, foot races, or lacrosse, among other traditional activities, they challenge conventional expectations and blend

listener/reader to participate fully in the story. Repetition of words and structures, followed by a considerable amount of coordination, as well as the use of interjections and onomatopoeic expressions underline the forcefulness of the message, but, more than that, they convey a sense of oral storytelling.

³⁵³ Although not intended for children or young adults, Tomson Highway's plays *The Rez Sisters* (1988) and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989) are two examples of books that focus on women and the game of bingo and on men and the game of hockey, respectively, as a way to explore the contemporary Native Canadian and her/his place in the mainstream society.

traditional and contemporary Native lifeways into meaningful lifestyles. That is precisely the reason why Thomas King’s characters play baseball and chess in his picture books. Actually, as Rayna Green and Melanie Fernandez remind us, “[a]lthough Native peoples still play traditional sports and games, many also play mainstream sports they have learnt at school, such as basketball and American football” (1999: 72).

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising to find Moon delighted in a battle of intellect and foresight against Sunfish. She does not want to stop playing, not even when she loses. Therefore, noticing Coyote’s awful smell, she manages to find a way to make the trickster leave her “game arena”, by mockingly enquiring whether he had already realized that he was underwater:

“Go away,” says Moon. “I’ve almost won this game.”
 “Checkmate!” says Sunfish, taking Moon’s knight with his bishop. (...)
 “Let’s play again,” says Moon, wrinkling her nose. “Phew, what stinks?”
 “Never mind,” says Coyote. “You have to get back up in the sky.”
 “I like it here,” says Moon. “But you have to get back up in the sky,” says Coyote.
 “Have you noticed that you’re underwater?” says Moon.
 “‘Oh boy.’ Coyote thinks to himself. ‘I better get some help. I better get some air!’”
 (ibidem: 17)

It is the first time we hear Coyote thinking about asking for help, but as soon as he reaches the surface, his vanity and desire to dominate over his fellow animals emerge again, and he acts as if he is the hero who had been able to find the “holy grail”:
 “‘Relax,’ says Coyote. ‘I’ve found Moon. She’s at the bottom of the pond’. (...) ‘This is a fine mess you’ve made,’ Old Woman tells Coyote” (ibidem: 19-20).



Fig. 54. Coyote announces his discovery of Moon, an illustration by Johnny Wales in King’s *Coyote Sings to the Moon* (1998: 19-20).

After an unsuccessful attempt of Old Woman and the animal population to take Moon up from the depths of the pond, Coyote is ultimately made part of the solution and asked to sing, which he does, “as loud as he can” (ibidem: 27). The curious moon tries to escape from Coyote’s terrible voice and hides away, high up into the sky, so high that she disappears. To prevent Coyote from singing, Old Woman wraps his tongue around his mouth, as shown in fig. 55. This is, I would say, the most conspicuous illustration of the entire book, which together with Coyote’s plea, is extremely effective in provoking laughter: “‘Wouya pwease umwapp ma tongue,’ says Coyote, with his tongue wrapped around his mouth” (ibidem: 29).



Fig. 55. Coyote’s mouth all wrapped up, an illustration by Johnny Wales in King’s *Coyote Sings to the Moon* (1998: 30).

This illustration contrasts starkly with the others, which are gloomy, lacking the cheery pastels and vivid tones of many children’s books. In fact, muddy browns, blacks, greys and ochres abound, and Coyote – almost always carrying his comb as a symbol of his narcissistic personality – is portrayed from a simplistic perspective as a mere conniving fool, a depiction that does not accurately reflect the multiple and paradoxical nature of this trickster-figure, as Beverly Slapin argues: “This is a hilarious story by a brilliant writer who knows and understands Coyote. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the illustrator. The drawings are too dark, and Coyote looks like a buffoon, which is, of course, only part of who he is” (Seale and Slapin, 2006: 177-8).

The book ends with Coyote singing everytime Moon tries to sneak back to the pond; thereby explaining why coyotes howl at night. Needless to say that this is fiction, but as Beverly Slapin promptly warns: “In case anyone thinks this is one of those ‘how-it-came-to-be legends,’ it’s not. Not even close. Tom King made it up” (ibidem: 177).

For those “... who [just like King’s children] think Coyote’s singing got a bum rap”, this story may be evidence that it is only fair to give everyone a chance, because some good may emerge from it. It also proves that arrogance and pretension blind one to truth and breed contempt. Thus, we may conclude that King’s *Coyote Sings to the*

Moon and *A Coyote Columbus Story* counter the primacy given to singularising, hegemonic perspectives, while celebrating alternative discourses.

If the story just analysed is not “one of those ‘how-it-came-to-be legends’”, the ones by C. J. Taylor are specifically devoted to explaining the origin of human life, as well as that of animals and of non-animate beings, from the perspective of a variety of Native American groups in Canada and in the United States of America.

In fact, this artist of Mohawk heritage created single-tale picture books, but she also worked to anthologise and retell Native legends for children, following the steps of Native writers such as George Clutesi, who, in the sixties, “cleared a path for other aboriginal writers (...) to preserve their cultural heritage and sustain the oral tradition, reshaping tales in an authentic aboriginal voice, often from elders’ memories” (Saltman, 2003: 26). Carrie Taylor’s *How Two-Feather Was Saved From Loneliness* (1990) is but an example of a single-tale of an Abenaki legend, while *How We Saw the World* (1993) and *Bones in the Basket* (1994) provide the readers with a variety of accounts collected from different sources³⁵⁴.

In these three books³⁵⁵, C. J. Taylor combines the verbal text with large paintings on facing pages, in rather expressionistic/surrealistic style (cf. figs. 80, 81 and 82). Taylor’s illustrations enfold magic realist overtones that create the illusion of actual experience, but one that carries the reader beyond the boundaries of time and space into the realms of the supernatural. Paradoxically³⁵⁶, these supernatural experiences are incorporated into the context of a natural, ordinary world made marvellous. In other words, Carrie Taylor’s highly realistic dream-like images blend elements derived from both the actual and the imaginary, from Native and Western mythologies, from oral and written traditions and various genres, in a hybrid mode. Magic realist techniques facilitate this smooth intersection of different and, in many aspects conflicting, cultural codes. As María Ruth N. Sánchez (2002: 191-2) tells us,

[a]uthors from different cultures use magic realist strategies in order to reflect the mysticism of their native traditions, the collision of world views and the cultural enrichment that emerges from transformation, hybridisation and synthesis. In magic realism, they find a narrative mode that has freed them from the constraints of realism, since it allows them to combine the factual and verifiable features of realism with the magical aspects we associate with myth and folklore.

³⁵⁴ The last page, in both books, describes the various Native groups which are the source of the tales on which Taylor relies.

³⁵⁵ C. J. Taylor has written and illustrated many more children’s books, but in my dissertation I will only focus on these three.

³⁵⁶ For a non-Native reader this is awkward, as mentioned on page 261.

In C. J. Taylor's first picture book, *How Two-Feather was Saved from Loneliness*, we clearly find magical aspects as contiguous with ordinary life: a lonely man, living "[l]ong ago [when] the earth was a cold and lonely place" (Taylor, 1990: 1)³⁵⁷, meets "a strange figure above him" (ibidem: 7), the figure of a mystical woman, who turns out to be a Corn Goddess. She teaches him how to start a fire by rubbing two sticks together and how to plant corn. This, in turn, enables him to survive and to be "saved from loneliness", because "[a]s the corn grew tall and ripened, people found their way to it" (ibidem: 19). Therefore, this legend also explains how



Fig. 56. Two-Feather learns how to make fire, an illustration by Carrie J. Taylor in her *How Two-Feather was Saved from Loneliness* (1990: 16).

communal living became a common part of Aboriginal daily life. A very informative endnote provides historical context and clarifies that, by that time, "[p]lowing was not yet known, and one of the few ways the Indians could clear the land for planting was by burning the vegetation. And only when farming was possible could they switch from the nomadic life of the hunter and gatherer to settle into communities" (ibidem: 21).

How We Saw the World presents nine stories, each from a different Native group, which, similarly to the single-tale picture book mentioned above, also tell of a variety of origins/creations. Despite their differences and the fact that "[e]ach legend stands on its own, the Mohawk artist warns us in her introduction to her 1994 anthology, *Bones in the Basket*, that "a common thread runs through them. All see the earth as a gift given us, prepared for us ahead of our arrival. All recognize the interdependence of all life on our planet and the obligation to protect it" (1994: 5).

In light of the above, and making use of a straightforward simplicity and exquisite paintings evocative of the mythical/primeval times, we get to know how certain geographical features, such as the Niagara Falls (1993: 6-7) or the islands of the

³⁵⁷ As this book is not paged either, I inserted the page numbers for easier reference.

Pacific Coast³⁵⁸ (ibidem: 10-2), were created, according to the Algonquin and the Bella Coola, respectively. We learn about the reasons behind some animals' physical characteristics or their attitudes: for instance, the Tohono O'Odhan (Papago) legend explains the colours of butterflies and their inability to sing (ibidem: 8-9); the Blackfoot story describes the arrival of the first horses into the world as a gift from Water Spirit³⁵⁹ (ibidem: 16-20); the one by the Oneida focuses on the dog's loyalty to man (ibidem: 21-3); and appearance of rabbits and owls is explained through a Mohawk legend (ibidem: 27-9) entitled "Why Rabbits and Owls Look the Way They Do". This story tells us that the Great Creator, while busy shaping animals according to their wishes, is disturbed by Owl, "who was [impatiently] waiting next in line to be made" (ibidem: 27). The Great Creator, who is depicted in Taylor's illustration as a Native deity wearing two feathers tied to his hair and minimal clothing, drops Rabbit, the creation on which he was working and, grabbing Owl, creates this creature in straight opposition to the bird's wishes. Humorously, but at the same time with an underlying moral purpose, we witness Owl being punished for being greedy and unable to respect limits:



Fig. 57. Illustration by C. J. Taylor of the Mohawk legend "Why Rabbits and Owls Look the Way They Do" (Taylor, 1993: 29).

"You want colourful feathers? Yours will be gray and brown." And he rubbed Owl in the mud. "You want a graceful neck? You will not have a neck." And he pushed Owl's head into his body. "You want beautiful eyes? You will have big eyes that only see in the night. You want to sing the nicest songs? You will hoot the rest of your days." And so, the Great Creator made Owl one of the strangest looking birds in the world.

(ibidem: 28)

³⁵⁸ This legend, which explains that the islands of the Pacific Coast were formed from the bodies of cruel, selfish people who "did not love and care for each other" (ibidem: 12), may be classified as moralistic in tone.

³⁵⁹ Stone Cloud, the orphan boy who wanted to help his people find food, clothing and shelter, is given an "old mallard and its ducklings" (ibidem: 17). When the sun rose on the following day, the boy notices that his gift had been metamorphosed into horses, or as the Blackfoot people saw them, into "elk-dogs" (ibidem: 20).

Afraid of the whole situation, Rabbit was left incomplete, because “he ran off to hide” (ibidem). This explains his short front legs and his nervous nature³⁶⁰, according to this First Nation.

Natural phenomena related to the seasons, as told by the Micmac (ibidem: 13-5), or to the first tornado, as explained by the Kiowa (ibidem: 24-6), are also part of this picture book. Interestingly, in this last one, the idea of creation of a large-winged horse out of red clay and the fact that a Medicine Man “blew into its nostrils until the first sign of life appeared” (ibidem: 24), seem, to a certain extent, similar to the creative motif presented in Genesis in terms of the formation of the living being. The Native peoples’ kinship with the natural world, the idea of survival depending on communal efforts³⁶¹, and the recurring image of the circle³⁶² are, unarguably, distinguishable perspectives of the First Nations.

Finally, the Cheyenne outlook on “How the World Will End” closes this anthology and explains the reason “why all creatures, especially people, must keep the earth in balance[, s]o as not to anger Great Beaver” (ibidem: 30), who gnaws through the pole that supports the earth whenever he is displeased, as seen in figure 58. This is a warning that if we want a safe and healthy world to pass on to our children, it is about time for us to start being responsible towards our physical environment, instead of believing that we are divinely authorised to exploit the natural world for our own self benefit. This is a reminder that intends to



Fig. 58. Illustration by C. J. Taylor of the Cheyenne legend “How the World Will End” (Taylor, 1993: 31).

make us think about our lives, our relationships and our choices, and turn us into better people.

Similarly to this anthology, which, as seen, is filled with warnings, informative messages, humorous and inspirational stories from nine different traditions, *Bones in the*

³⁶⁰ The rabbit’s nose constantly twitches.

³⁶¹ The Medicine Man “asked everyone to help him. As they all blew together, the horse grew larger and larger” (ibidem: 24).

³⁶² “The horse flew up and around in a circle overhead, faster and faster” (ibidem).

Basket (1994) also centres on creation legends, but this time they are commendably brief versions of the way the Zuñi, Mandan, Cree, Chuckchee, Osage, Mohawk and Modoc peoples conceive of the beginning of the world and the settlement of humankind. This book is, thus, a continuation of the collection above, with the same principles and view of the world, and with the same aims in mind: "... open[ing our] eyes to the wonders around us" (Taylor, 1994: 5) that we are sometimes too busy or self-absorbed to notice.

We learn through the first legend, taken from the Zuñi, that the world was thoroughly designed and organized in detail to prepare the ground for the arrival of humankind: "But before the first child could be born, the earth had to be prepared for its arrival" (*ibidem*: 6). The Creator, described as "the One that is everything", is said not to have left anything to chance and, "... creat[ing] life from his own being", he gave birth to all existence (*ibidem*). In figure 59, C. J. Taylor provides us with an absolutely breathtaking painting that condenses the scene described in "Before All Things Began", with great art. We get to know Father Sky and Mother Earth, who were separated and given "... the form of a man and a woman" (*ibidem*), and, yet, remained

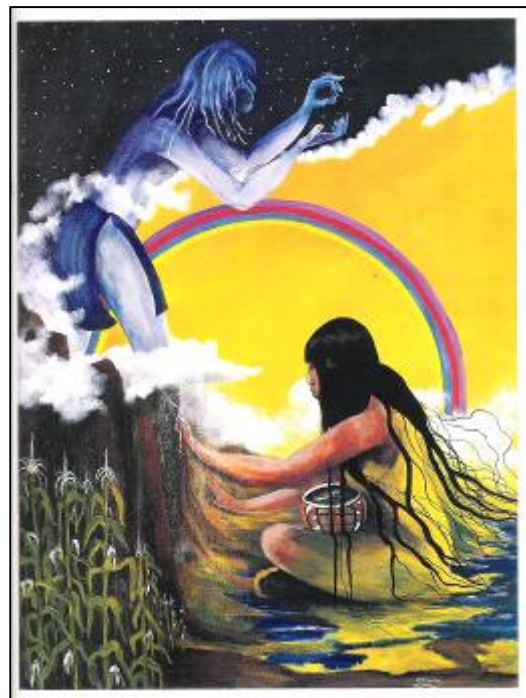


Fig. 59. Illustration by C. J. Taylor of the Zuñi legend "Before all things began" (Taylor, 1994: 7).

one through spiritual bonding. They represent the lively incarnation of divinity, the physical embodiment of the spiritual form, which means that the whole universe is sacred.

Equally dealing with the creation of both the world and of its inhabitants is the legend from the Osage, "A Place to have Children" (*ibidem*: 17-9). The spirits wander across the heavens in search of bodies so that they may have their offsprings, and, ultimately, Grandfather Sun, "the mightiest and wisest of heavenly beings" (*ibidem*: 18) consents to their wishes, but only after preparing the earth to receive them, "an earth that provided for all their needs" (*ibidem*).

The Mohawk legend “Creation” (ibidem: 20-8), the longest in this anthology, follows the same pattern and tells of the origins of the world and how it became peopled. The story’s beginning presents striking resemblances with the Christian myth of creation, as there is also a “Tree of Life” and a man who is tempted by his wife, Sky Woman, to “dig at the roots of the tree” (ibidem: 20) to let her have its forbidden fruit³⁶³, the only that would stop the craving that had awaken inside her, due to her pregnancy.

As a result of her insatiable appetites, Sky Woman falls in darkness through the hole her husband had dug, but she is caught in the wings of large birds and carried safely downwards, “where all was water” (ibidem). Placed on the back of a giant turtle, she witnesses the growth of earth, brought by Muskrat, as well as that of Gust of Wind, her baby girl.

Once, the latter, now a beautiful young woman, is visited by the Dream Spirit, and soon she learns that she is pregnant with twins. The two boys “fought and argued continuously” (ibidem: 22) in their mother’s womb to the point of even killing her during delivery, because Flint simply decided that he would “leave [his] mother through her side” (ibidem), rather than the proper way. Burying her daughter in the earth under her feet, Sky Woman grieves for her loss and promises to raise her grandchildren, Flint and Young Tree, to love and respect their mother, whom she named Mother Earth from then on.

However, the rebellious nature of Flint continued to prevent peace from reigning and, when their grandmother dies, “the boys even argue (...) over what to do with her” (ibidem: 23). While Young Tree decides to bury her in the earth, where her daughter was placed, Flint suggests “[k]ick[ing] her off the edge of the world” (ibidem). In their fight, grandmother’s head comes off and flies up into the sky, leading the good-natured boy to name her “Grandmother Moon”.

Tired of his brother’s tricks³⁶⁴, Young Tree challenges Flint to a fight: the winner would rule the world, whereas the loser would live in darkness. And so it

³⁶³ Corn is the fruit of the “Tree of Life”, as shown in the first picture (cf. fig. 83) that accompanies the story. According to Claire Hope Cummings, “... corn is sacred. It’s regarded as a regenerative life-giving force, constantly reconnecting people to their land and community as well as the cycles of life, death, and rebirth” (2008: 176). The man in this Mohawk legend reminds his wife precisely of that: “the tree is sacred. It must not be disturbed” (Taylor, 1994: 20). Due to the sacredness of this staple crop, corn is often regarded as a goddess in Native stories, such as in Taylor’s *How Two-Feather was Saved from Loneliness* (1990), as observed.

³⁶⁴ Flint confesses that he hid all the animals his brother had created, because, in his words; “I plan on changing them” (ibidem: 26).

happens: even though the weapon used by Young Tree is the antler of a deer, he manages to defeat Flint who had “made himself a spear from a branch and a stone” (ibidem: 26), as seen in figure 60. As a consequence, the evil-natured brother is banished to the underworld, allowing Young Tree to continue his creations.

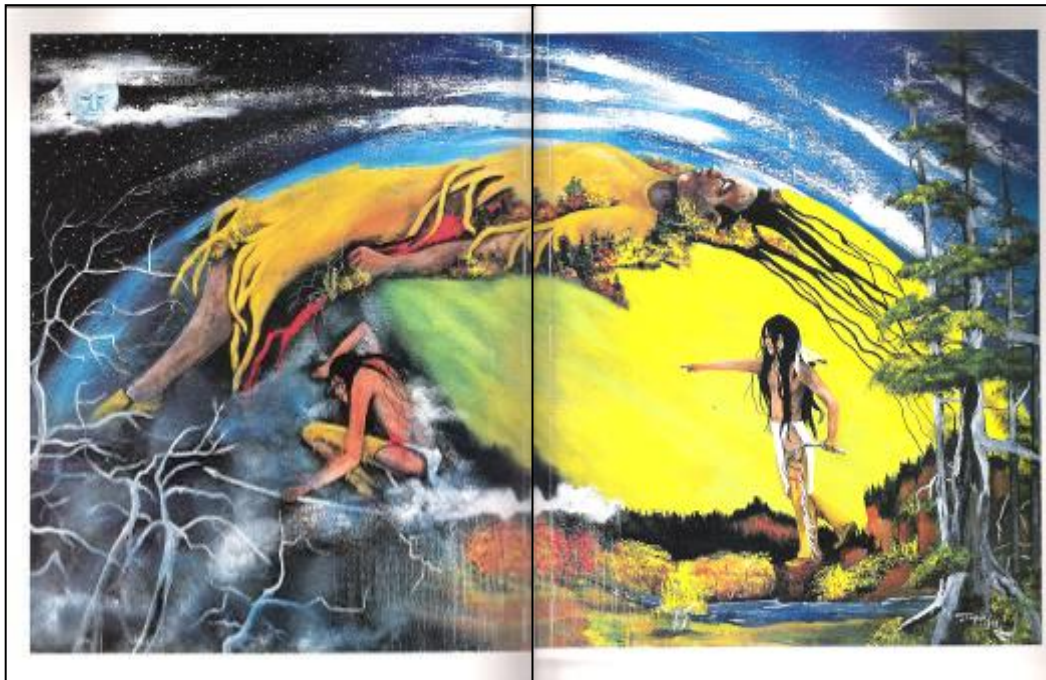


Fig. 60. Second illustration in C. J. Taylor’s retelling of the Mohawk legend “Creation” (Taylor, 1994: 24-5).

When a stranger approaches claiming dominion over the world, Young Tree puts himself to test again: ““You think you are the creator? (...) Whoever can make the mountains move shall rule the world. The loser shall serve mankind”” (ibidem), he proposes. Victorious, Young Tree commands the stranger to go into the woods, carve is image into the trees and “serve mankind by curing sickness” (ibidem: 28). “False Face”, as the stranger was known thereafter, would “... give the people medicine”” (ibidem).

Finally, believing the earth was prepared to receive the first humans, Young Tree, god-like, goes to the “water’s edge, t[akes] some red clay and mold[s] it into the

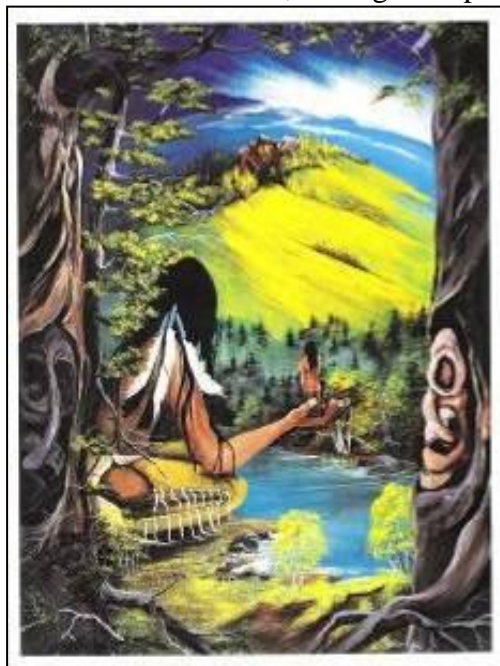


Fig. 61. Illustration by C. J. Taylor of the Zuñi legend “Before all things began” (Taylor, 1994: 7).

shape of a human being” (ibidem). He creates him/her in his image and likeness and breathes him/her to life. After giving “Mother Earth to the people to care for[, h]e then returned to the home of his grandmother in the heavens, from where he could look down on his creation” (ibidem).

“Big Raven Creates the World” (ibidem: 13-6), a Chuckchee legend, is also a creation story, as its title indicates. Here, Big Raven claims to be the creator, although Maria Antonina Czaplicka argues that

‘Creator’ is really a misnomer, for this being did not exercise any truly creative function: he was sent by the Supreme Being to carry out certain reforms in the already organized universe, and was therefore, so to speak, a reorganizer and the first man. He is also a supernatural being and a powerful shaman...”

(1914/2007: 124)

In this legend, the world is not in existence when Big Raven makes up his mind to create it: there is the sky and ground, as well as mankind, who had been “created from the dust that arose when the sky and ground met” (Taylor, 1994: 13), but, as a man explains, they are “stuck in this in-between place with nowhere to go” (ibidem), because all there is below is “an empty space” (ibidem: 14). It is actually Big Raven that forms continents and creates rivers, mountains and trees, just by pulling out some feathers and dropping them. The same process, but this time with chips of wood, enables him to satisfy the man’s wishes, and create animals. However, even if men now had “caribou, bear and fox”, “seals, walrus and fish”, as well as birds (ibidem), the truth is that they felt the need for female companionship, “[s]omeone who can give birth to others to continue living [t]here after [they] have gone. Someone to share the work and care for the new people” (ibidem: 16).



Fig. 62. Illustration by C. J. Taylor of the Chuckchee legend “Big Raven Creates the World” (Taylor, 1994: 15).

Unable to accede to their last request, Spider Woman, the weaver of fate and constant helper of people in trouble, “spin[s] a web and the first woman appear[s]” (ibidem), followed by others.

Unlike these four creation stories, the Mandan legend, “From Darkness to Light” (ibidem: 8-9), places the emphasis on the discovery of the world, rather than on its origins. It is, in a sense, similar to the legend of the Modoc people, “Bones in the Basket” (ibidem: 29-31), the title story, in that both give an account of a long journey from the darkness of the underworld to the light of sunshine on the earth. The main

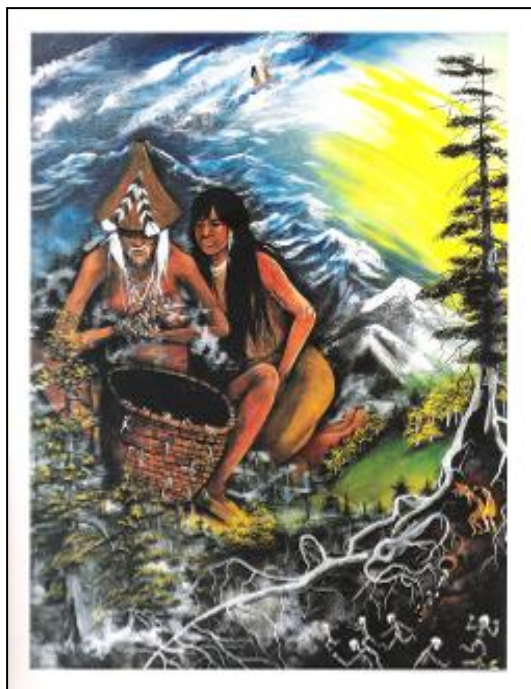


Fig. 63. Illustration by C. J. Taylor of the Modoc legend “Bones in the Basket” (Taylor, 1994: 31).

difference here is that in the former legend “[t]he people of that [under]world were not happy [and t]hey wished to have light and warmth” (ibidem: 8), while the Modoc legend tells us of the three attempts³⁶⁵ by Creator and his daughter to take the spirits of people, in the form of dry bones, up to the upperworld: everytime the basket in which they were being carried fell, “[t]he bones spilled out and ran scared back down the path to the dark world below” (ibidem: 29). It is only after being brought to reason and reflection that the spirits agree to be taken upwards, where they are thrown “toward the four directions” (ibidem: 30)³⁶⁶ of the earth.

In the legend from the Cree tradition, a flood story entitled “The Raft” (ibidem: 10-2), the world is already in existence, just as in the Mandan and Modoc’s, and the two creators’ dispute is over whether it should be covered by water or by land³⁶⁷.

In gist, with C. J. Taylor’s books for children we are made aware that, even though cultural overlaps may exist, First Nations’ peoples, worldviews and traditions are all different and unique: each Nation believes the world and its inhabitants to have been created in a specific way, which implies that generalisations about them are

³⁶⁵ It is interesting to notice that the intersection of Native and non-Native elements/symbols is made apparent in this story: Creator is successful in taking the bones up the third time, which leads us to the symbolism of the number three, a number that denotes perfection and culmination according to the Christian faith.

³⁶⁶ We should not forget the significance of the number four among Native peoples as it is associated with completeness, wholeness and with the belief in an orderly universe.

³⁶⁷ Giant Beaver, the creator that wanted water, and Wisagatcak, the one who wanted land, fight over their choices, putting the already existing animals and surrounding environment at risk. Eventually, “[t]hey decided to make peace so that the creatures who lived in water and those who lived on land could exist together” (Taylor, 1994: 12).

reductive, at best. Carrie J. Taylor herself tells us that she has been working in order to dispel any easy assumptions about the uniformity of Native peoples:

‘When I’m researching a story I have to make sure that the environment is authentic, that the style of dress the natives wear is authentic and the type of spirituality I’m portraying is authentic. This is important because I want to dispel the stereotypes about natives’.

(The Canadian Children’s Book Centre, 1999: 130)

Just like this artist, and all the other Native writers mentioned throughout this dissertation, we should adopt an attitude of caution or scepticism in reading Native texts from a single, hegemonic or dominant ideology. We should question assertions that fail to recognise differences or that, even when acknowledging them, tend to generalise other aspects, as we notice in Sheila Egoff’s claim that “Canadian Indian legends have lent themselves extremely well to illustration and there is as much variation among the illustrators of them as there is in the telling of the tales. Again, these illustrations are in black and white” (1967: 215).

The major concern in illustrations in Native Canadian children’s books is genuineness and accuracy, whether books are coloured or not. If some Native artists have vehemently rejected the use of colour³⁶⁸, some others have relied heavily upon it³⁶⁹ or upon collages, photos or other techniques, to produce a counter-discursive effect. When that happens, accuracy gives way to humour, as we have seen, achieved through a stylised exaggeration that satirically exposes the stereotypes and prejudices that operate in an alleged democratic and equality-supportive society, as ours.

I would like to conclude this chapter with a quotation by Elizabeth Waterston, because I believe it is a good summary of what has been discussed over the preceding pages, and that enables us to see the richness of Native Canadian literature³⁷⁰, a literature that has relied on ancestral knowledge, or, in other words, on the past to inform our understanding of the present:

³⁶⁸ Generally speaking, some illustrators’ use of black and white was motivated by “... the economic recession of the 1970s[, which] has resulted, in many instances, in simpler art styles...” (Egoff, 1981: 256), or simply by a desire for truthfulness, freed from the passionate use of colour. As Sheila Egoff argues, the outcome is that both illustrators and writers are forced “to be more ingenious within narrower limits” and this, in turn, “may result in books of more childlike simplicity” (ibidem), as evidenced in some of Armstrong’s books for children (1982; 1984).

³⁶⁹ Colour has sometimes been used in an eccentric way, as we noticed in Littlechild and King’s books for children.

³⁷⁰ Or Native Canadian literatures, to be more accurate.

Native peoples, Indian and Inuit, treasured a heritage of stories and legends, tales of such heroes as Raven and Nanabhozo, and fables that explained how natural things came to be (...). These tales differ in detail from region to region, from east to west, from lake land to Arctic. Nevertheless, some common patterns and motifs marked the unique native response to the realities of this northern half of the continent.

(Waterston, 1992: 30)

These common “patterns and motifs” have been made explicit within this chapter, but we will return to them in the conclusion, allowing a structured systematisation of ideas.

SYNTHESIS AND REFLECTIONS

There are birds of many colors – red, blue, green, yellow – yet it is all one bird. There are horses of many colors – brown, black, yellow, white – yet it is all one horse. So cattle, so all living things – animals, flowers, trees. So men: in this land where once were only Indians are now men of every color – white, black, yellow, red – yet all one people.

(Lutz, 2002: 197)

At the end of this dissertation, it is clear to me that any talk of “a conclusion” seems misplaced. Conclusions usually imply a closing argument, a summary statement, a last word. This cannot be the case: I am sure that the research carried out so far is just one step in a much longer journey. This adventure has been more like the middle of a long sentence whose period is not yet in clear view. For this simple reason, instead of presenting conclusions and offering grandiose theoretical claims, I’d rather pause and reflect upon the distance already travelled, trying to envision the directions to take in future research.

I began this dissertation by examining the meaning and importance of culture, as well as of race, heritage, tradition, memory and folklore, noting how these concepts have been considered by social scientists. I felt the need to trace a conceptual framework around these keywords, because they are an essential starting point to any analysis of literature, even more so of that based on oral foundations. Actually, studying literature is more than just analysing aesthetic objects complete in themselves. According to Ross Murfin and Supriya M. Ray, quoted by Bijay Kumar Das, it is to “... analyze the social contexts in which a given text was [told or] written, and under what conditions it was – and is – produced, disseminated, and [heard or] read” (2007: 127).

The outline of the above mentioned constructs is especially important when we are analysing the literature(s) of Others, enabling us to realise that cultural, racial,

geopolitical, linguistic, gender, sexual, class and religious differences exist³⁷¹ and that we are heavily biased by the dominant discourses of our own culture. Thus, the questioning of those constructs as well as of terms such as authenticity, authority, reliability and validity has inspired much discussion, but no easy answers have been provided. In our modern world, where rapid social change has become characteristic of all domains in society, these constructs are constantly in a state of flux: changing, adapting and subverting, which means that the focus then should be on an integrationist and multidisciplinary model that promotes resilience, recognition and respect for the differences among people and cultures, because as Jonathan Rutherford reminds us...

... a cultural politics that can address difference offers a way of breaking (...) hierarchies and dismantling [a] language of polarity and its material structures of inequality and discrimination.

We can use the word difference as a motif for that uprooting of certainty. It represents an experience of change, transformation and hybridity, in vogue because it acts as focus for all those complementary fears, anxieties, confusions and arguments that accompany change. (...) [I]t can be a jumping off point for assembling new practices and languages, pulling together a diversity of theories, politics, cultural experiences and identities into new alliances and movements. Such a politics wouldn't need to subsume identities into an underlying totality that assumes their ultimate homogeneous nature. Rather it is a critique of essentialism and mono-culturalism, asserting the unfixed and 'overdetermined' character of identities. The cultural politics of difference recognises both the interdependent and relational nature of identities, their elements of incommensurability and their political right of autonomy.

(1990: 10)

After an analysis of literatures about and by First Nations³⁷², it has become clear that the concept of difference is a central concern, but **differences can and should be embraced**, rather than ignored or felt as a burden. One way of embracing them is through fiction for children and young adults, as Michaela Moura-Koçoğlu contends:

³⁷¹ As we have seen, difference marks identity. Rutherford emphasizes: "It is within (...) polarities of white/black, masculine/feminine, hetero/homosexual, where one term is always dominant and the other subordinate, that our identities are formed. Difference in this case is always perceived as the effect of the other" (1990: 10).

³⁷² Obviously, such analysis focused especially on the Okanagan nation, but the last chapter contributed to a broader view, even if the comparative data selected is restricted to a limited geographical sampling. It is important to note that I omitted the preposition 'for' deliberately, because I do not think that literatures by and about First Nations are for Native peoples only. From what I could notice, during my research, books by Aboriginal peoples do have Aboriginal audiences in mind, but they also have clear messages for non-Aboriginal peoples. All the Native authors studied in this dissertation have written books which aim at exposing the distortion, dehumanisation, falsification and infantilisation of Native peoples, as well as of their cultures and histories. Their efforts to write for both Native and non-Native audiences is an attempt to reconcile conflicting interests and, thus, to improve the former's living conditions.

In acknowledging children's literature as a useful means by which we "come to grips with our ideas about ourselves and what we are," I would like to argue that children's fiction by and for indigenous peoples not only evokes a sense of identification with one's cultural background, but at the same time provides a platform to counter dominant stereotypes on culture, tradition and history.

(Moura-Koçoğlu, 2009: 310)

In other words, besides enhancing the young readers' general proficiency – and literacy skills, in particular – literature for children can have a positive contribution in modifying misconceptions and stereotypes. It may replace feelings such as fear and uneasiness with acceptance and respect; it may create a liminal space where imagination may easily overcome adversity, in Marita Wenzel's words:

This "imaginative space" enables a dialogue between people, their cultures, histories, and societies, and above all, often enables objective solutions to social problems. The imagination, then, not only represents a crutch for survival but also suggests "other ways of living"...

(2009: 133-4)

Literature for young readers may in effect bring about change and open up new spaces; so it is up to us, whether parents or other family members, teachers, writers or other adults, to ensure the promotion of tolerance and respect for human dignity in our modern multicultural society. This may not always be easy, as I came to notice: throughout this process, I tried hard to avoid ethnocentrism and to understand the beliefs and behaviours of others from their perspectives, but I am aware that I may sometimes have viewed First Nations' cultures through the lens of my own cultural experience, and, some other times, I may have fallen into an affective response and identified with the subject of analysis, which may also be negative, as Deborah Britzman, using Balint, explains: "The move to take in what is outside, however necessary, is insufficient and flawed, because identificatory thinking is the ego's means to console itself, to defend itself against its own anxiety" (1998: 31).

A neutral stance, which is the attitude any researcher is exhorted to adopt, is difficult to be pursued, as we are all products of the social and cultural systems in which we live and work, and, as a consequence, I entirely subscribe to Egoff's words, and make them my own, when she argues: "Total objectivity is, of course, unattainable in any field, and in children's literature, where so much recent work has caused impassioned controversy, my biases must really show" (Egoff, 1981: xiv).

Whenever possible, I tried to support my positions with theoretical and empirical evidence. I have provided a necessary background on genre theory, which I believed useful in my discussion of the First Nations' oral and written traditions. I have contested sources which claim lack of accurateness in the Native taxonomy of oral literature, and I have agreed with those who claim that "... the genre system of [Native] culture[s] does not fit neatly into our terminology" (Honko, 1989: 16-7), nor does it need to: "... the native categorization of oral literature is particular and does not need to conform to any analytical delineation of folklore genres" (ibidem: 19).

Additionally, I have looked at the problems involved in the definition of oral and written literatures, especially according to Walter J. Ong and Marshall McLuhan, and demonstrated how these two categories flow into each other. I have realised that in today's world Native peoples surrendered to the printing industry, but continue to rely on the oral tradition to maintain group vitality and identity. Native Canadian literature, then, may be said to be a hybrid creation, characterised by the interplay of oral and written forms, as well as of Native and non-Native languages and practices, even though many continue to view it as the product of a primitive, non-literate society. George L. Cornell criticises such vision:

Clearly, evolving definitions of western literature have been, and continue to be, imposed on Indigenous oral traditions (...). The complicated cultural complex of indigenous ideas, socio-political thought and action, celebration, and spirituality is consequently subordinated to formalist treatment. Who and what Native peoples were, and are, becomes a secondary consideration. If this trend continues, indigenous peoples are seriously threatened with the loss of their collective voice and their respective histories.

In all likelihood, indigenous peoples of the Americas never considered themselves poets as many scholars consider them. Rather, they were effective communicators, and their words had specific purposes. A song was not a poem; likewise, a prayer was not a poem or a bit of prose (...). Most certainly, these activities were not undertaken to be in accord with modern poetic theory...

(1987: 178-9)

Jeannette Armstrong also elaborated on this aspect in an interview with Kim Anderson, and claimed that Western analytical taxonomies of genres are fallacious, when regarded from a culturally different background:

When you're looking at oral story, the traditional format that non-Native people like to call legend telling, or origin stories, or myth – in relation to my culture, for instance, they're not legend, they're not myth. I know them not to fit into those categories, although on the surface that's what they look like.

I know them to be story which engages the listener in terms of the past and the present – and projects into the future. So there's a sliding in and out with the audience in terms of what some of the concerns and underlying messages of the

story are about in the present. It is resigned in terms of the mythological path that this story is constructed in, and then [it involves] a projection into the future.
(Anderson, 1997: 56; bracketed text in original)

After having questioned definitions and taxonomies of genre imposed top-down from authoritative systems, and delineated the evolution from First Nations' *orature* to literature, I decided to look at the wider context within which it is located and framed, in a chapter entitled "Is there a Canadian Literature: Beginnings, Authenticity and the Quest for a National Space", because, after all, as Wagamese, quoted by Hartmut Luz, affirms:

... Canada is not a nation first. It is people. It is the feeling of the land. And it's the feeling of the people on the land *for* the land. That's what defines this country: The feeling of the people for the land. Not only those of us who were here first, who are natives to it, but everyone.

(2004: 182)

That is precisely what links all Canadians: the feeling for the land, a land where cultural diversity and other differences abound, but where a common thread may be discerned, as Cole Harris points out: "English-speaking Canadians tend to explain themselves in terms of land and location. (...) Canadian historians, along with some Canadian novelists, have most frequently turned to the land to explain the character of Canada" (Harris, 1966: 27). At this point, I believe I can argue that Canadians, having nothing else to hold up to³⁷³, turned to the wilderness and vastness of their country, trying to figure out a sense of belonging in it³⁷⁴. Northrop Frye's metaphysical questions "Where is here?"³⁷⁵ or "Who am I?" became, then, paradigmatic of Canadian culture and literature; they became a national riddle that is still very much up to date, as it "continues to haunt literary criticism in Canada", in Justin D. Edwards' words (2005: xxii).

If proving the existence of "a Canadian literature" was difficult due to its elusive and much contested nature, trying to find out "How Canadian is Children's Literature?" was even harder to accomplish. Canadian Children's Literature, until recently a neglected and controversial field within another no less problematic either, as seen,

³⁷³ As previously noted, except for Native peoples, Canadians have no ancient history or traditions.

³⁷⁴ Figuring out a sense of belonging in a country where immigration and multiculturalism are a reality has been no easy task: difference, thus, has become the distinctive feature of Canada.

³⁷⁵ As Russell Morton Brown reminds us (2009: 288), this question was the working title for Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, and "What, Where, and Why is Here?" was her opening chapter of *Survival*.

reflects the same dilemma and anxieties of its parent literature. Therefore, the image of Canada as a young, adolescent nation is also amply illustrated in children's books. Stephen Gennaro explains this metaphor in the following terms:

Canada can be viewed as an adolescent country since it experiences the same anxieties, stresses, changes, and quest for identity as adolescents. Much like adolescents, Canada has always struggled with its in-between identity: not quite British dependent but not quite independent; not quite American yet not distinctly Canadian. Provincially, Quebec is not wholly French, but certainly not English. Globally, Canada is an "in-between" nation as well; not a powerful country in world politics, but still a "first world" country. Every year the United Nations ranks Canada one of the best places to live in the world and yet Canadians flock at the opportunity to move south of the 49th parallel. (...) Being "in-between" in so many different ways, Canada itself appears to house a multiphrenic identity.
(2008: 106)

As a result of Canada's domestic and international struggle to define itself as a nation, the so-called social-problem novel emerged and deserved a place in Canadian children's literature. Picture books, dealing especially with multicultural issues or portraying the beauty and richness of the territory, have also acquired a firm place amongst Canadian youngsters. They have become a significant art form by Native authors, as well, as we had the opportunity to see. It would have been interesting to go further into the discussion of these categories and analyse the similarities and differences in approach that emerge between Native and non-Native writers, but that is beyond the scope of the present dissertation and may be a project to pursue in the future.

Afterwards, I concentrated on the theoretical background of Native Canadian fiction for children and young adults and I looked, even if briefly, at the ways in which this genre has developed since the 1900s, never obliterating issues of cultural and voice appropriation.

Before presenting my close readings of selected fiction in the light of some theoretical parameters outlined in the initial chapters, I felt the need to introduce Jeannette Armstrong, and I realised, as Hartmut Lutz succinctly describes below, that...

In Canada, of all contemporary authors, the Okanagan novelist, poet, teacher, administrator and ecological activist Jeannette Armstrong has addressed the interconnectedness of land, history, language and body most forcefully and most convincingly in her theoretical essays and interviews as well as in her creative works.
(2004: 179)

I started by analysing her creative work for young adults, *Slash*, a well-crafted fictional novel of resistance that is recognised as the first to have been published by a Native woman in Canada. It was born out of the Native peoples' necessity to reform Canadian educational curricula, in an attempt to help First Nations' youngsters in general become more aware of their history and traditions, while, at the same time, making the Okanagan generations feel part of their country's history. It has successfully reached its aims, as we get to know the Native North American protest movement as seen through the eyes and expressed through the voice of Thomas Kelasket, an Okanagan young man, who grows to become the storyteller of his own and other Native peoples' lives, thereby moving them from the margin to the centre of concern. We may say, then, that this *roman à thèse* offers a powerful counter-discourse to official history, retrieving muted dissenting voices. This message is clear throughout the narrative, but if any doubt about it still lingers, Jeannette Armstrong's words, in an interview with Kim Anderson, completely dissipate it:

There are some Native writers who write for that [Canadian] audience. I decided in *Slash* to write from that perspective; to break down stereotypes, and make clear comments about some of the politics related to colonialism. Those comments are directed towards the Canadian audience as well as internally within my own community.

But a large part of my book is written for my community.

(1997: 51)

A large part of *Slash* is indeed for and about her Okanagan community; a community that defines every aspect of her existence and within which she feels whole. Slash also finds himself complete and in harmony with his surroundings and with his mission, when he is eventually able to understand that Marlon, his Little Chief, is “the part of [him] that extends in a line up towards the future” (Armstrong, 1996a: 250). His son is expected to make the difference, by **embracing difference** and turning it into a positive force of empowerment, instead of a matter of incompatible claims: “... you will be the generation to help them white men change because you won't be filled with hate” (ibidem). But despite the hopeful and didactic tone of the ending, the very last page and the epilogue do not hide the hardships experienced by those to whom “defeat is a stranger and pain an everyday reality” (ibidem: 253). Throughout the narrative, we learn or are reminded that Native peoples and their leaders “have shuddered and fallen” (ibidem), they have “g[o]t up” (ibidem: 251) time after time, but they also feel “tired”

(ibidem), because they are no different from non-Native peoples; they are all human beings.

On the whole, what is worth emphasising is that, in spite of accounting for the great challenges that First Nations have faced, this book is not one of criticism and condemnation; rather, we are left with a message of optimism, courage, strength and reconciliation.

The same is true in regard to *Enwhisteetkwa/Walk in Water*, Armstrong's first children's book, in which an Okanagan child describes her peoples' routines, values and worldviews, at a time when the first White men entered the Okanagan territory. As we have seen, this first-person narrative portrays the difficult times and the changes that came along with the arrival of the newcomers: these were rude and behaved in a strange way, and what is worse is that they intended to change the Okanagans' lifestyle. The missionaries wanted to build a place in their homeland to teach them new ways, which left the elders greatly troubled. Despite initial suspicion and resistance, eventually we notice a position of tolerance and support towards European advancement: the newcomers were allowed to pass through and settle north of Penticton and the Okanagans were given the chance to change and adapt to the former's conditions, borrowing their products and ideas, if they wanted to.

Tolerance, respect and community-building are themes addressed in *Neekna and Chemai* as well. Life is looked upon by the Okanagans as divine and filled with integrative forces. Young and old people alike, men and women, all are important and interdependent; all engage in complementary activities, depending upon practical needs and specific abilities, because, as we were able to see in all books analysed and as Douglas Cardinal sums it up,

Here is the wisdom of our elders. As an individual you are both male and female. Men and women are very powerful working together. As a man, if you allow yourself to be sourced by women, to be coached, to learn from them, to take the contribution that they are, then partnership is very powerful. As an individual if you don't allow the female to emerge in you then you can go only so far. If you have soft power, you do care, you do have compassion, love, then you can do anything.

(Cardinal and Armstrong, 1991: 100)

Synergism and collective unity are necessary and imperative for the well-being of humankind, not only locally, but also regionally, nationally, and globally. That is why the messages that Jeannette Armstrong conveys in her books transcend temporal, geographical and cultural differences: they are universal. If we look at her *Dancing with*

the Cranes, this universality becomes even more noticeable. Though specifically Okanagan in perspective, this narrative is universal in scope, as it deals with the realities of life and death, of human anguish and the quest for meaning, of faith, duty and acceptance³⁷⁶. This children's book, just like the others already mentioned, is culture-bound, but it looks to the future through the innocent eyes of a young girl, Chi', whose mourning over her beloved grandmother's death is similar to that of any other child grieving the same loss. In other words, universal themes are used with specific cultural information as a backdrop for incorporating individual uniqueness. This is the optimal approach, as it is multidimensional in nature, stressing the influences that shape worldviews as being more holistic. In the light of such approach, stereotypical images of Native peoples stuck in the past, or already extinct, may be wiped out and **differences may finally be embraced** and harmonised.

Writers as different as Jeannette Armstrong, Tomson Highway, George Littlechild, Thomas King and C. J. Taylor are living proof that First Nations are alive, vibrant and whole, and that they are not a single voice. Each Native author writes differently, using their own different background, different techniques and approaches, but as Joseph Bruchac reminds us, they also "have much in common. (...) Although each Native writer is an individual with a special and unique voice, virtually all of these writers are alike in their overall worldview and face similar problems" (1996: xv). Their stories are not told as in ancient times, in a circle around the firelight, because they have adopted the European format of printed page and language(s) other than their own, but we may say that, even that way, the elemental remains. What is it then that links them? What are the common worldviews and problems? What is Native Canadian Literature?

Foregrounding the difficulties in defining Native literature in his introduction to *An Anthology of Canadian Native Fiction*, Thomas King (...) sets out a number of its most prominent characteristics: an assiduous avoidance of the historical past, especially the nineteenth century, as setting; the attempt to bridge oral tribal literature and contemporary written literature by depicting an egalitarian relationship between humans and other living things, including the land; and the creation of resourceful, vibrant, and tenacious characters who act as counterpoints to the stereotypes of Native peoples as an unsophisticated and dying race.

(Wolf and DePasquale, 2008: 90)

Many Native writers are now venturing outside of their comfort zone, and the historical past – the nineteenth century in particular – is not being avoided anymore. As

³⁷⁶ Acceptance of painful loss, but also of inclusion of others, represented in the imminent birth of Chi's sibling.

we have noticed, for example in *A Coyote Columbus Story*, it is actually being addressed and parodied, because humour and parody allow a second plane, they show through it, creating a counter-discourse – one that is not independent from, but that offers fundamental challenges to, the hegemonic discourse.

Illustrations add to the narrative effect and, therefore, as we have seen, the role of illustrators is extremely important. Similarly to writers, illustrators must also be fond of the written word. Additionally, they need a special gift to interpret it pictorially; to give visual form to often abstract concepts and to make the story illuminating, entertaining, appealing and challenging, all at the same time. Hence, as Daniel Jaczminski succinctly puts it, they must opt for one of the positions below:

Like authors who produce re-writes, illustrators have to decide if, how far, and in which way they should follow or deny their textual referent. While some reproduce the text faithfully, others tend to paraphrase it freely or to dismiss it completely. Such a decision can be based on aesthetic, political, historical or cultural criteria and certainly also reflects epistemic changes.

(2009: 7)

To assess if such decisions or interpretations result in accurate, non-stereotypical representations, there are some sets of criteria listed as guidelines, such as the one by Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale, in *Through Indian Eyes: The Native Experience in Books for Children* (1992: 240-64). These guidelines should be taken in consideration by those dealing with children and children's literature. It is time for us to revise our terms of reference and our certainties in our cultural assumptions, and to point out new paths to explore and pitfalls to avoid. It is time for us to start questioning...

... the 'classical' canon of children's literature [that] often evokes and serves to reinvigorate an ideology of subalternity or a power dialectic in which identity is constructed either in ignorance of, or in relation to, a cultural 'Other,' and "usually to the diminishment of that Other".

(Moura-Koçoğlu, 2009: 321)

In retrospect, this dissertation resembles a patchwork quilt, a syncretic weaving together of multiple, different theoretical and methodological threads: historical, anthropological, ethnographic, literary and pedagogic, because syncretism itself became the study's method and purpose.

I would like to conclude my dissertation reinforcing the idea that I may be closing/completing the circle, but, just like on an endless wheel, there is really no beginning and no end to this work. Future projects will surely spiral, because of the

recent boom in Native literature. After all, nowadays, First Nations refuse to remain silent and they proudly display their difference(s) in this multicultural world: **“We’d rather be ‘red’ than dead”**.

NO WORD FOR GOODBYE

Sokoya, I said, looking through
the net of wrinkles into
wise black pools
of her eyes.

What do you say in Athabascan
when you leave each other?
What is the word
for goodbye?

A shade of feeling rippled
the wind-tanned skin.
Ah, nothing, she said,
watching the river flash.

She looked at me close.
We just say, Tlaa, That means,
See you.
We never leave each other.
When does your mouth
say goodbye to your heart?

She touched me light
as a bluebell.
You forget when you leave us;
You're so small then.
We don't use that word.
We always think you're coming back,
but if you don't,
we'll see you someplace else.
You understand.
There is no word for goodbye.

- *Mary TallMountain* (Koyukon)

Sokoya: aunt (mother's sister)

Tlaa: see you

(Seale and Slapin, 2006: 435)

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