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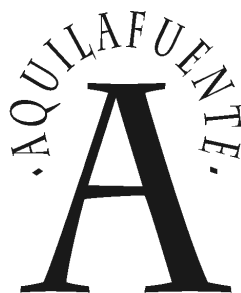
RESEARCH CHALLENGES FOR ANGLOPHONE STUDIES IN THE 21st CENTURY



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Jeannette Armstrong and her Feminism of Decolonisation

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Jeannette Armstrong, an Okanagan from Canada, is both a teacher and a writer. Her novel, *Slash*, has been much criticised by feminists, because of its male protagonist. By assuming a male perspective in her novel, this Native Canadian did not intend to legitimise and reinforce patriarchal power; rather, she argues that her choice was inextricably linked to a time when machismo and the European notion of leadership ruled the day. 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. Taking *Slash* into consideration, then, I intend to prove, together with the Okanagan author that, despite criticism, her novel is feminist and empowering, though not in a conventional sense: a different kind of feminism is here at stake—a feminism of decolonisation.

Key words: feminism; decolonisation; First Nations' literature.

Feminism 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

Julia V. Emberley, *Thresholds of Difference* (1993: 86)

The choice of the quotation that starts this paper has not been casual. In fact, in the next few minutes, I intend to reflect upon feminism, but not on the individualistic kind of “I am Woman, Hear me Roar” feminism which has developed in the West. Instead, this paper is devoted to a discussion of what Julia Emberley named “*a feminism of decolonization*” in her *Thresholds of Difference* to refer to the need of a different notion of gender formation within traditional Aboriginal societies in relation to dominant capitalist societies (Emberley 1993: 4). As this critic suggests, Native women need to understand themselves first on Native terms, that is, within their Native communities, and then they will be able to confront the role they must play in the dominant capitalist society.

Why is that so? Why can't we simply place Native women's struggle within the larger movement of feminism?

As the very same critic quoted above claims, feminism shall not be "abstracted into a universal category to meet the needs of a select few women" (Emberley 1993: 86); 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 women,¹ because we need to take into consideration the effects of colonisation and its associated ideology, and only as such may the process of decolonisation² begin.

Jeannette Armstrong, an Okanagan who was born on the Penticton Indian Reserve in British Columbia, is one of the many cultural critics who chose to develop a feminism of decolonisation, rather than follow 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. Actually, 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. [...]

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.

¹ 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.

² The process of decolonisation must be distinguished from a postcolonial critical practice. This latter, according to Thomas King, quoted by Kit Dobson, "'will not do to describe Native literature'" (Dobson 2009: 125); it "is inappropriate for discussing" it, since the term postcolonial "reduces all Native literatures to ones that deal with the colonial encounter and that assumes a temporal progress beyond colonialism" (Dobson 2009: 124). Decolonisation, on the other hand, is a multi-dimensional process that implies the interrogation of the relationship between knowledge construction, representation and ideology, and it eventually aims at liberating and healing Native peoples.

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 1996a: ix)

As the Okanagan writer puts it, Aboriginal societies were egalitarian in nature,³ but colonisation indelibly affected Aboriginal women's roles and responsibilities.⁴ 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.

However, with the introduction of the European educational system, Native women's role as guardians and carriers of culture gradually started losing its significance, because children were taken away from their families and communities. Aboriginal children were expected to spend so many hours in school that the school's teacher soon became one of the main influences in their learning. In *Slash*, Tommy, the protagonist, tells us that "[s]ometimes, the days were so long before [children] went home [...] [that i]t was already dark when [they] got [there]" (Armstrong 1996b: 16).

It is not surprising that this compulsory rupture with traditional ways of life resulted in metaphysical questions regarding personal identity and culture. Bearing this in mind and using the persona of the above mentioned Okanagan youngster, which may be said to be the author's alter ego,⁵ Jeannette Armstrong describes the life and political commitment of her character in the Aboriginal militant period of the American Indian Movement, during the late sixties/early seventies, 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. (Armstrong 1996b: 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

³ 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.

⁴ As Carol Devens points out, "the friction between men and women is in fact the bitter fruit of colonization" (Devens 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" (Devens 1992: 4).

⁵ This novel is framed by a prologue in which the protagonist seems to embody exactly the same aims and intentions as those of Jeannette Armstrong.

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). Afterwards, in an analepsis, the reader is transported into the protagonist’s school days and, from onwards, s/he 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*. In light of such theory, Jeannette’s choice of a male character comes as natural, especially if we remember Susan Fraiman’s words that this genre has “define[d] development in emphatically masculine terms” (Fraiman 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” (Fraiman 1993: 31). If female *bildungsromans* do exist,⁶ 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 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 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 model, “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” (Al-Issa 2003: 158). 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” (Armstrong 1996b: 218).

⁶ 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” (Fuderer 1990: 1).

Furthermore, in consonance with the author's views of the Self in communion with the Land and its People, she could not have done it any other way. As Armstrong 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 discourses, 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, Marlon.⁷

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 prophecies say yours is a special generation. [...] You are the part of me that extends in a line up towards the future. (Armstrong 1996b: 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" (Armstrong 1996b: 251). Simply put, it is only in embracing one's difference, in practising and sharing it within a larger context, regardless of gender or other characteristics, that our world will become a more tolerant and communal place.

Despite these explanations, *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 1989: 45). 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" (Emberley 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).

⁷ Out of curiosity, in the epilogue, 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" (Armstrong 1996b: 253).

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)

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 norm:⁸ 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 do. 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”. (Smith et al. 2010: 363)

The fact is that 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, 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 day, a time when female activists were seen as pathetic, because an AIM member was supposed to show “a mean look [...]. A mean image” (Armstrong 1996b: 152). According to the

⁸ 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”.

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” (Armstrong 1996b: 152). And, as if this argument was not enough, Armstrong 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. (Williamson 1993: 15)

The importance of women to Native cultures is well documented in Armstrong’s *Slash*, especially at the point when the protagonist 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” (Armstrong 1996b: 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” (Armstrong 1996b: 35). Additionally, as Tommy confesses, colonial distorted perceptions on the Aboriginal women as easy and dirty squaws⁹ 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” (Armstrong 1996b: 122).

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 generations. 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:

⁹ 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” (Johnston 1987: 54).

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?" (Armstrong 1996b: 165-6)

Mardi will be even more important to Tommy; she will be his inspirational power,¹⁰ the strength that encourages him to see the brighter side in the never-ending darkness that he had created for himself. Mardi 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" (Currie 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" (Armstrong 1996b: 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 community,¹¹ 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" (Armstrong 1996b: 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 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). (Currie 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" (Maracle 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

¹⁰ Mardi is described as "extra deluxe. Tough with hard eyes and long black hair that hung below her hips. [...] [S]he knew her way around" (Armstrong 1996b: 59).

¹¹ 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" (Armstrong 1996b: 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" (Armstrong 1996b: 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.

discourse” (Fee 1990: 169). In other words, through creative literature, decolonisation is achieved and political education is promoted.

Decolonisation is indeed achieved through a different approach to feminism and through the resulting polyphony inherent in the “I-am-We” stance, as it contributes significantly to disrupt the dominant literary culture; it means an interpenetration of (masculine and feminine) voices rather than the imposition of a single one, 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’” (Al-Issa 2003: 152-3), because the narrator-protagonist becomes, 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.

In fact, just like Jeannette Armstrong herself, 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 wife, Maegdaline.¹² 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” (Armstrong 1996b: 244); “My place is here. Here is where the real fight will be” (Armstrong 1996b: 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

¹² 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 (Armstrong 1996b: 229-31). According to Tommy, she is not pretty, but surely “something to look at” (Armstrong 1996b: 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” (Armstrong 1996b: 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.

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. (JanMohamed and Lloyd 1990: 71-2) [my italics]

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 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*. (Armstrong 1996b: 211) [my italics]

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 together.¹³ 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. (Adams 1995: 131-2) [my italics]

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 [...]” (Adams 1995: 132). 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” (Armstrong 1996b: 249).

¹³ 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” (Foucault 1977: 185).

Eventually, Tommy is healed, because he 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” (Armstrong 1996b: 253), namely the readers. These are, just like Marlon, “Little Chief[s]” (Armstrong 1996b: 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” (Armstrong 1996b: 250).

Taking it all into consideration, then, we may say together with the Okanagan author that, despite criticism, her novel:

[...] 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)

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