

Image, Music, Text: An Interview with Jeannette Armstrong

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Article abstract

Jeannette Armstrong speaks about the challenges that her different forms of discourse (the novel, poetry, visual art, music) present. Each work has a separate set of responsibilities, but she has trouble separating the disciplines because the creative process does not differentiate. Across all of her works, she finds ways to deliver information or to create a point of view which requires an emotional response as well as an intellectual response.

IMAGE, MUSIC, TEXT: AN INTERVIEW WITH JEANNETTE ARMSTRONG

SCL/ÉLC Interview by Karin Beeler

*Jeannette Armstrong is Okanagan. She was born in 1948 on the Penticton Indian Reserve in British Columbia. Armstrong is a writer, teacher, artist, sculptor, and activist. She speaks both Okanagan and English; she received a traditional education from Okanagan elders and her family and has raised her two children on the Penticton Indian reserve as well. In 1978, she obtained a BFA from the University of Victoria. In 1986 Armstrong became the director of the En'owkin Centre (a First Nations Centre of Learning) in Penticton. She is also the first director of the En'owkin International School of Writing in Penticton, a creative-writing school organized by and for Native people which grants diplomas through the University of Victoria. Armstrong has published a novel, *Slash* (Theytus 1985), a collection of poetry, *Breath Tracks* (Theytus 1991), children's literature, stories, and essays as well as a collaborative work with architect Douglas Cardinal and photographer Greg Young-Ing called *The Native Creative Process: A Collaborative Discourse* (Theytus 1991). She also continues to make visual art and teaches creative writing and performance. The importance of music and poetry is reflected in the recent production of her poem/song "Grandmothers" on the compact disk *Word Up* (Virgin/EMI Music 1995). She has been invited to speak to numerous international audiences on Native issues including Native education and indigenous rights.*

This interview was held in the En'owkin Centre, Penticton, British Columbia in June of 1996.

KB As a writer, teacher, and activist, you've written quite a range of texts. Some of these works include a novel (*Slash*), a collection of poetry (*Breath Tracks*), children's literature, film scripts, as well as discussions of Native writing and education. What kinds of challenges have these different forms of discourse presented?

JA Probably, clarity of purpose. Not just in terms of subject, but also process. I think that with the fiction, I have in a creative sense decided that I am not the expert, but I design a story and find through that process an understanding of myself in relation to a number of issues that are running as threads throughout the large fiction pieces. So I find that as a creative exercise very time-consuming. I don't think that I will write very many novels, because of the tremendous amount of effort that I put into that kind of work. I think that with poetry and some other forms that I use that are close to poetry (poetic prose or prose poetry), the challenge there is much closer to the visual arts. 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, and I already have an idea of what I'm trying to solicit in the listener or in the reader of poetry.

In the articles or in my oral delivery of speeches, one of the interesting challenges for me is that the spoken word is a creative act as well. So when I'm creating non-fiction, one of the challenges is to find a way to do the same things that I do in fiction and poetry, not only to create meaning, but to solicit response. That's the challenge—finding ways to deliver my information or to create a point or to give a point of view which requires an emotional response and an intellectual response. The challenge for me is a much bigger one than the fiction writing and the poetry. I think a lot of people don't pay enough mind to creating good non-fiction, so you end up with stuff that people won't read. They'll skim over material that's very dry or not readable. I think everything that's written should be enjoyed, whether it's academic in terms of content or whether it's subjective in relation to the point of view; it doesn't matter. I think that when something gets written it's meant to be read. So I reach for that even in my short pieces or when I speak on different subjects.

KB And how do you adjust your writing for the genre of children's literature?

JA I haven't written much children's literature, and I can't say that I'm successful at writing children's literature although

the works that I did contribute to were selected for the Children's Book Centre "Our Choice" Award. I'm very aware that when children choose books it's because the books are working for them. I teach writing for children. We offer a course about every second year here at the En'owkin Centre. 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 that I've elected to do as children's books should work at two levels.

KB I'm interested in your novel *Slash*, because it does generate a message for a younger audience as well as for adults. It's part of the curriculum of many Canadian literature courses. I'd like to talk about how you deal with the convention or construction of the narrative voice in the prologue of *Slash*. The male speaking voice mentions that "the 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."

Why did you decide to begin the novel with a character talking about the fictitious nature of his story?

JA Well that's pretty straightforward. I decided to choose that narrative voice because it's a convention that I'm familiar with from my own tradition in terms of oral storytelling. The narrative voice is always the convention that's used in oral story, and the storyteller becomes the character. For example, if I'm talking about coyote, I become the character and I'm telling that story. And so it's not Jeannette Armstrong that's telling the story; it's this character who is the narrator. I chose the narrative voice for another reason. I wanted to see that convention in print; I wanted to see how it would work in print as a literary process, and I was interested in seeing how I could carry it through because in previous exercises that I had tried, it was very difficult to sustain.

I'm very much interested in looking at literary devices and seeing how they work and trying them out and almost creating a studio out of different methods which I know aren't there in the

English conventions. So one of the things that I wanted to do was to see how the narrative would work with the transfer of orality into a written form. And I wanted to be able to try the narrative voice at various levels to create a character who would grow through twenty years so that the narrative voice would change. In other words, you start out with a fourteen-year-old boy and the narrative voice uses the language and the imagery and the perspectives of a fourteen-year-old, and at the end you have an adult whose languaging and perspectives and concepts have changed over the time span of the novel. Just seeing that happen was a real exercise for me; it was a literary exercise to be able to create that continuity throughout so that at no point could you say well this is when he became an adult, this is when he changed. I spent a lot of time working on the mechanics of that, and a lot of people who have written essays have never picked up on that or never talked about it from that point of view.

KB Since you are also a visual artist, were you tempted to include illustrations or artwork in *Slash*?

JA No, I wasn't actually. The editorial committee that was looking at the book suggested that I include some illustrations or photographs, but I said no. I really wanted to protect the novel from that, because I thought the imagery should be conjured in the mind of the reader, and it should be transferable to the reader's situation so that the reader, especially my audience, the native audience wherever they might be, transfers that character in and transposes the character into their own reality so that there's not a huge separation between their reality and *Slash*'s reality. There's a meshing, and it becomes familiar and recognizable to the reader, and if you do photographs or illustrations you destroy that, because you're creating another reality. And so, I wouldn't agree to that. 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.

KB One of the many moving moments in the story occurs when *Slash* or Tommy is in prison and pictures Winter Dance time at home. He hears someone singing and then realizes that he

has been singing Uncle Joe's dance song. Can you talk about the cathartic or therapeutic possibilities of song?

JA Well, for the Okanagan, and again I'm not speaking about other indigenous groups, I know that song has all of the ingredients and qualities that we require to rebalance our emotion and intellect and even our bodies. Certain sounds in our songs that we create are intended to relax and calm and create the kind of thought wave pattern to rebalance the person's emotions. 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. They're very important, and so for a person like Slash, the ability to rebalance and the ability to heal and to put things back together on an emotional and a spiritual level are not possible without the songs. In terms of thought and in terms of the storyline, song was a really important device for me to use, so that I could achieve that catharsis and that moment.

KB You've worked with some other First Nations poets and musicians on tapes and CDs. One of your poems, "Mary Old Owl," is included in an audiotape called *Poetry is Not a Luxury: A Collection of Black and Native Poetry Set to Classical Guitar, Reggae, Dub, and African Drums* (Maya: CAPAC, 1987). Your musical collaboration "Indian Woman" on *Till the Bars Break* (Cargo Records) was nominated for a Juno award. How do you manage the crossover between poetry and music?

JA I have trouble separating the disciplines, because the creative process that I use doesn't differentiate. So to answer your question really simply, poetry is music to me. It's rhythm, and it's sound and it's imagery and it's metaphor, except that poetry can be written. And poetry is another word for what I understand when I sing and when I create and compose music which talks about water, trees, birds and people and talks about response, feelings and interactions, all of those things that make us human. I can create music that more explicitly talks about those things. I'm not talking about lyrics, I'm talking specifically about music and how it solicits re-

sponse and creates imagery and creates soundscapes, so that's where poetry comes in.

KB I've listened to your piece called "Grandmothers" on the compact disk *Word Up* which highlights new poetry by various artists. "Grandmothers" includes spoken words, singing and drumming. Do you perform all three parts of the performance?

JA I do. Originally that poem was an Okanagan poem. I find that in the Okanagan, I don't have to use as many words, so in the English version of "Grandmothers," the creation of the words for the sounds that I wanted and the imagery that I wanted was a great literary exercise.

KB How does this kind of musical creation compare with a performance presented in your community setting?

JA It's very different. I compose Okanagan song and poetry, and I use mostly song in the community in a social setting. I create images with words and with the enunciation of words, because ours is an oral-based language. You can do a lot more with an oral-based language, since you already have that legacy of how sounds work. They work much differently than English, which has been a written language. I think that at some point earlier, before the language was written, the sounds may have been quite different in the language, but I think the sounds changed once they were written. This may have affected the brevity and clarity of the language and changed it considerably.

KB In addition to writing and creating songs, you also paint and sculpt. How do you approach these media?

JA Actually I'm not an accomplished painter or sculptor although I've won awards at some major shows. All of my works, I have felt, have been studio works. What I mean by studio works is that I haven't got to a point where I felt ready enough in the medium to make a statement. What I have been doing has been learning the medium, learning the tools and how they work and finding all different kinds of ways to do studies which give me pleasure and which inform me and give me skills. You know, when you have the tools and you know what they can accomplish, and you have something to say with them—I haven't got to that point. Yet I know

what I want to do, and I know that there are things that I want to say with the visual art. I have been writing for about fifteen years, and just two years ago I started getting back into the visual arts. Last summer I had a show of sculpture, and I felt I was beginning to make some statements. As I said, it's hard for me to differentiate between disciplines, because there are some things that you can say in sculpture that you can't do in poetry or in prose or music.

KB There are quite a few paintings in the En'owkin Centre Resource Library. Are any of these yours?

JA Sure. That painting there in grey with the tree, I did when I was either fourteen or fifteen years old, and it came back to the centre. A collector bought it when I was in my teens, and it came back to the centre as a legacy after the elderly lady who owned it decided to sell her possessions before retiring to a home.

KB Your children's book *Enwhisteetkwa: Walk in Water* (Okanagan Indian Curriculum Project, 1982) includes artwork or illustrations. The cover of the book shows five circles that overlap. Can you discuss the importance of these circular images in relation to the story?

JA Sure. They were just sketches that I was thinking about in relation to the topic: one year in this girl's life. I wanted to talk about the main spirit characters and foods like the salmon and the bitterroot and the saskatoon berry and deer and bear and the eagle, of course. The bear is actually one of the main chiefs, and the saskatoon berry and the bitterroot and the salmon are the main chiefs of the different food groups that we rely on that give us a source of life and that form the basis of our whole economy, our ceremonies, our arts and our religion. They are fundamental to everything. The spirit force that all of that is connected to is a part of this person here. This person is never isolated from any of those overlapping areas.

KB I'm struck by how you have attempted to integrate different forms such as drawings, photographs, song, music and poetry into much of your creative work. *Slash* includes poetry and stories from oral tradition, *Enwhisteetkwa* also contains a poem or song. However, one of the best illustrations of artistic collaboration is *The Native Creative Process*, a book that you worked on with

architect Douglas Cardinal and writer/photographer Greg Young-Ing. What was the philosophy behind this book?

JA I think that one of the things that I was struck by when I first met Douglas Cardinal was the depth of understanding that he had about creativity, its reinterpretation as spirituality, where it comes from and what gives it power. It was really exciting to meet someone I could understand and who had the kind of thinking that inquired and asked about that process and didn't just accept creativity according to the Western model. We had originally met because I was interested in his architecture, and we were thinking at that time about building a facility for the En'owkin Centre. After meeting him, I said to the director of the Centre, "look at all the things that he has said," and he said "maybe you should think about doing a book with him about this." I was really excited by that and I phoned Doug and said "What do you think?" And he said, "Let's do it." So over the course of the next few years, I went wherever he was on site and interviewed him. And I sifted through all those interviews and tried to get to the meat of what we were talking about, then excerpted those pieces that I thought could work. We wanted to publish a book that would encapsulate some of our thinking.

KB How did you go about selecting photographs for this project? Did Greg Young-Ing read your discourse first and then choose appropriate photographs?

JA We looked at a number of Native photographers. We didn't want a photographer who would illustrate what we were saying. We wanted a photographer that could key into the imagery and the metaphors that we were reaching for in the discourse, and we wanted the photographer to dialogue with us, not to illustrate what we were talking about, but to add to the discourse in a visual sense. We were both excited by Greg's photographs; he pulled together a large collection of photographs that he had as a body of work. He had already published photographs and had a couple of shows. We decided to give him the text and have him select a series of photographs, and then we would go through them and create the piece altogether. In the end it was almost a mutual kind of selection because it came down to maybe three or four we weren't totally in agreement with, and he had

the last say, since it was his discourse. But we were very happy with the ones that he selected.

KB *The Native Creative Process* really is a kind of multi-media presentation. In this book, Douglas Cardinal says that "technologically advanced cultures dismiss the contributions of the Aboriginal peoples." However, he also talks about taking technology and creating something positive. How has technology affected your own artistic and teaching practices?

JA I would say that only in the sense that I now use a computer. I had a very difficult time reconciling myself to the use of the computer, but I found that it gave me some freedom in terms of time and portability. Those were things that were pluses for me because of the amount of writing I've been doing in the last five years. I haven't yet crossed over to technology in terms of working in electronic media other than in music. I have a music residency this summer to compose music poetry.

KB Where will that be?

JA At Banff. So I'll be taking some musicians with me, and we'll be working with good state of the art equipment to create the compositions that I want for this poem; it'll be music poetry. The project that I submitted involves experimenting with a video-poem, and I need to do the soundscape and the music, and I want to work from the music and the soundscape to create the visual background. We'll see how that works. I'm really excited about it.

KB During a public reading in Prince George, British Columbia, you read a wonderful poem called "Trickster Time" about trickster, computer technology and an airport experience. It has been published in *Voices: Being Native in Canada*, edited by Linda Jaine and Drew Hayden Taylor (Extension Division, U of Saskatchewan P, 1992). What are the origins of this piece?

JA That actually came out of an experience when I was going to New Zealand. We were six writers on our way to do a writers' tour. We were all indigenous writers. I swear there was a glitch in every computer we went to. It was just crazy. We couldn't believe how many times it happened that day. And we missed four flights. The last instance involved one of the guys who was Mohawk. It was

December of 1990—the summer of 1990 was the Oka crisis on Mohawk territory—and one of the things that happened was that he got pulled over by immigration. It took about an hour to go through all this red tape. So all of that time added up to the fact that this thing happened, and we had time for it to happen, and we still ended up all flying together and going to New Zealand. And so we all could only attribute it to this trickster spirit.

KB So an incident that initially seemed negative had some positive value after all?

JA That was the intent of the poem. We think about reality in a different way as turning anything that could be harmful or negative or confrontational into a positive force and when we don't do that, *that's when things fall apart; that's when things go wrong.*

KB Native songwriter and artist Buffy Sainte-Marie has her own home-page on the World Wide Web which displays her cyber-art: artwork which she creates on her Macintosh computer. Are you interested in creating computer generated or mediated painting?

JA I'm much too intimidated by the technology to even think about it. My brother would be, though.

KB Have you seen Buffy Sainte-Marie's cyberpainting of trickster? She's interested in combining painting with photographs, and she calls that piece the only known photograph of the trickster.

JA Yeah, she's great. She's talked about it, and she's actually invited me to come down to her studios at some point to learn first-hand how it works or to come up here to give us some instruction. So I think we're going to take her up on that; we're really excited about the idea, and we really would like her to come here to at least demonstrate that.

KB First Nations people are increasing their presence on the Internet, and I was wondering whether you had plans for the En'owkin Centre to create a site on the World Wide Web in order to reach more First Nations students.

JA Definitely. We have talked about it. And I know that all of our faculty members are using the Internet, so we have an e-

mail address. We send and receive lots of information, and we've talked with our Director of the Centre about that idea, so one of the things that he has asked us to do is to get all the information together and explain to him how it would assist the centre to justify the equipment and the cost, because we don't have the equipment right now.

KB I suppose you also have to achieve a balance between the technology and the sense of community that you can get in a face-to-face interaction. Some would argue that you can create new communities through cyberspace, but there's still the feeling that it can be a very alienating experience.

JA Yes, that's the other part of the discussion. I'm involved in a think tank that is criticizing and analyzing the invasion of computers into our personal lives and into our subconscious, so I'm very much aware that there are physical dangers from too much contact with the computer—dangers to the neurons in your brain structure. So for me, the less you have to use a technology that could be dangerous to your health, the better it is. If we create technology that solicits more and more use, then we're actually moving onto dangerous ground in terms of our physical health.

KB This focus on health is an integral part of so much of your writing. I'd like to end by having you comment on an extract from "World Renewal Song" (*Breath Tracks*). The poem makes beautiful use of what literary critics call synaesthesia or "the description of one kind of sensation in terms of another." The final passage reads:

I sit by talking grasses now
with nothing more
to make a good world of
than thought paint
and dance talk in lines,
but song colours
pour over my world
and my good time
still goes on.

Here dance is associated with talk and song is linked to colours. How does this combination of images reflect your world view as an artist?

JA I think that it's central to my world view as an artist. That poem is actually one of my most revealing pieces and one of the most important pieces to my psyche as an artist. It's a self-portrait, and I think that the last part really describes how I approach creativity and how I approach my being: the essence of being human is to be creative.

NOTE

This interview is part of my current research project on Canadian writing and other media, which includes a bio-bibliographical hypertext resource on Jeannette Armstrong, Joy Kogawa, and Aritha van Herk. I would like to thank the University of Northern British Columbia for funding this research. — KB