

# The Grandmother Language: Writing Community Process in Jeannette Armstrong's whispering in shadows

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Article abstract

In *whispering in shadows*, Jeannette Armstrong deftly employs non-standard English phraseology to convey Okanagan perceptions of the world. The author enacts a decolonizing process in her writing, exploring ways to evoke a proximate (but ultimately limited) experience of an Okanagan orality and world view in English. Penny Jackson's sensibilities, which synthesize perceptions of sound, colour, and linguistic images as organically interrelated, are the primary manifestation of this process. The author's symbiosis of land, language, and community produces a creative well-spring, which encourages community-centered creative practices in keeping with the metaphoric implications of En'owkin, an Okanagan conception rooted in the belief that nurturing voluntary cooperation is essential for everyday living.

# The Grandmother Language: Writing Community Process in Jeannette Armstrong's *whispering in shadows*

JANE HALADAY

IN THE OPENING PARAGRAPH OF HER ESSAY “Land Speaking,” Jeannette C. Armstrong gets straight to the point about her foundations as a writer: “It is my conviction that Okanagan, my original language, the language of my people, constitutes the most significant influence on my writing in English.” Indivisible from Okanagan language, Armstrong continues, is her “experience of the land,” which “sources and arises in my poetry and prose, and . . . the Okanagan language shapes that connection” (175). The process of being shaped by language and land so fundamental to Armstrong’s writing is inherent in the coherence of Okanagan community, a process Armstrong has articulated in her essays “Sharing One Skin: Okanagan Community” and “Let Us Begin with Courage.” The Okanagan word *En’owkin*, which is also the name of the aboriginal writing centre of which Armstrong is currently executive director, “is a conceptual metaphor” that, according to the En’owkin Centre’s website, embodies the Okanagan ideal of coming to consensus through collaborative group process. “The word *En’owkin*,” Armstrong explains, “comes from the high language of the Okanagan people and has its origin in a philosophy to nurture voluntary cooperation, an essential foundation for everyday living” (“Let Us Begin”). The Okanagan principle of process is essential to creativity, and Armstrong believes that “the essence of being human is to be creative” (Beeler 154). Individual creativity, in turn, involves larger community obligations. Armstrong emphasizes,

what you are gifted with, and what you have been given in terms of skills, doesn’t only belong to you. It belongs to the community, and it is there for the benefit of the community, to benefit the community in some way. And the responsibility of the artist is to ensure that,

however much the artist is elevated, the community alongside must be elevated as well and must benefit as well. (*Momaday* 162)

Armstrong's written productions strive to articulate her experience of the symbiosis of land, language, and community, and in doing so simultaneously generate and perpetuate a creative process that benefits more than a single person.

As the integrated expression of Okanagan language and land gives rise to Okanagan community, *whispering in shadows*, Armstrong's second novel, vividly illustrates the guiding influence of "N'silxchn, the Okanagan land language, [her] first language, [her] Earth Mother language" upon Armstrong's literary production ("Land" 180). Similar to a basket weaver, Armstrong structures the novel by interweaving multiple genres, including poetry, prose, and personal letters, to gradually shape the pattern of the novel as a whole. Not only does the woven structure of language reflect the *En'owkin* philosophy in *whispering in shadows*, but character relationships and Armstrong's thematic concerns around the safeguarding and continuance of indigenous languages, ecologies, and world views accrue and deepen within the unfolding life story of protagonist Penny Jackson. Through writing in English a fictionalized model that is itself shaped by Okanagan language and land, Armstrong's novel "both theorize[s] and enact[s] a Native aesthetic of literature and culture" (Blaeser 266). Specifically, *whispering in shadows* enacts through text the Okanagan philosophy of *En'owkin* by illuminating the inextricable links forged between characters' intersecting lives. Within this cultural literary paradigm, powerful characters influence Penny's developing sense of herself as an Okanagan woman.

Of the many significant characters in *whispering in shadows*, Penny's great-grandmother, Tupa, figures most prominently. Although she has passed on prior to the opening events of the novel, Penny's Tupa informs all of Penny's adult experiences through living memory. Armstrong intersperses Penny's memories of Tupa throughout the novel, especially in Penny's times of crisis. Named after her great-great-grandmother, Penny's Okanagan name honours the powerful Copper Woman of Okanagan traditional stories "who shone so bright people thought she was like the sun" (*whispering in shadows* 280).<sup>1</sup> Penny's name thus signals her link to her immediate female forbears at the same time it reminds her of her place within the timeless mythic story of Okanagan community life. Because of the impact of Tupa's early teachings, which take place within and are

inextricable from Okanagan language and lands, the maturing Penny is able to deeply cultivate her Okanagan values, knowledge, and relationships as she negotiates her place within a complex, global society.

Early in the novel, Penny is a young artist concerned with the difficult process of translating the colours and images she experiences in the visible world into the language of substance on canvas. To Penny, colours are animate, speaking persons whose language she might give voice to in her creations if she could only render it accurately. *“How can I ever get it to look like that?”* Penny asks herself in the novel’s opening, as she views the wintery panorama outside her room:

*The clean sparkle. It looks so buttery and warm, yet it sparkles. What do I want to get it like that for anyway? Why? It’s talking to me that’s why. It’s singing. It sounds like an under-the-breath Indian song.... It wants to sing on my paperboard. It wants to move, from there on the snowbank, to my paperboard.* (8)

Armstrong quickly establishes the link between colour, motion, land, language, and song, whose intertwined roots have been first cultivated for Penny by her beloved Tupa. Penny remembers:

lying on her back looking up through her Tupa’s silk shawl. Tupa had tied the corners to four sticks to make a shade for her. The colours were beautiful.... Blue, red, orange, yellow and gold splash over sand. She moved her hand up toward the thin silk and the colours covered her arms and hands. She was all colours and the sand was too.... Her heart was beating fast and she sang to the coloured faces in the sand.

Tupa’s voice, by the water, sang along with her ....

Tupa’s voice, talking in the language, somehow sounded like the ducks, the water, the bees buzzing and the song, all at the same time. (45)

This grandmother language is alive with the natural world’s relationships: ducks, bees, water, and song commingled. When Tupa approaches Penny and sees her, radiant in shawl-colours, she tells her great-granddaughter, “You and the colours can talk, I see. They tell you things. Listen to them. They never lie.” Tupa and Penny then walk down to the lake to greet a turtle swimming to shore. “It comes from the dark, down deep,” Tupa explains to the little girl. “It comes up into the light and the colours. It swims the song you were just singing. Let’s sing the *Turtles Landing Song*

before we go. Come, the lake was kind to us today” (46).

For Penny as for Tupa, there is no sharp edge at which swimming ends and singing begins; such borders are artificial and restrictive to spiritual and environmental connectedness. Like Turtle, Penny and Tupa travel easily, fluidly, and simultaneously in the mixed media of darkness, colour, water, light, and song. Scholar and poet Kimberly Blaeser remarks upon the way in which “Native stories are seldom about separate parallel existences but about intricately linked relationships and intersections,” as is Tupa and Penny’s relationship with each other, and with their other relatives of earth, sky, water, and air. Blaeser continues:

The spatial, temporal, and spiritual realities of Native people reflect a fluidity that disallows complete segregation between experiences of life and death, physical and spiritual, past and present, human and nonhuman. Thus, they are reflected in cycles that involve return, reconnection, and relationship. (268)

The visual nature of Armstrong’s text, with its painter protagonist as the most prominent embodiment of response to visual patterning, imagery, and colour, allows for Armstrong’s act of multiple translations through Okanagan understandings that eschew narrow Western categories urging separations. The dynamic synthesis of Penny’s experiences that inform her worldview has its roots in Okanagan language. Armstrong states,

In the Okanagan language, perception of the way reality occurs is very different from that solicited by the English language. Reality is very much like a story: it is easily changeable and transformative with each speaker. Reality in that way becomes very potent with animation and life. (“Land” 191)

Armstrong’s language patterns in *whispering in shadows* also serve to perpetuate her people’s ongoing stories. Armstrong understands Okanagan language as an ongoing storytelling process in which she is “being spoken to ... and is not the one speaking. The words are coming from many tongues and mouths of Okanagan people and the land around them.” Through Okanagan language, Armstrong continues,

I understand I am a listener to the language’s stories, and when my words form I am merely retelling the same stories in different patterns. I have known this about my language since learning English as a second language. (“Land ” 181)

In similar fashion, Penny listens to the stories told by the colours, light,

and shadows of the land and of her paint box, and she attempts to retell their stories in two dimensions. The foundation for Penny's sensitivity and ability to respond to these interrelationships rests, in large part, in the Okanagan language-based world view she experienced as a child with her Tupa and other female relatives.

All of Penny's memories of her Tupa are of times spent within Okanagan ancestral lands. Tupa speaks to Penny only in "the language," through which Armstrong accentuates the Okanagan epistemology of the inseparability of language and land, and the grandmother voice through which the home places speak. "She sat sideways, her legs hanging over the side of her Tupa's bony dark skirted lap," Penny recalls from when she was very young:

Tupa's thin gravelly voice was sing song talking. Naming her. "Paen-aye." Saying her English name in the sounds of their language. Speaking it. "My own Tupa, myyyyyy Tupaaaaa." Claiming her.... Tupa's voice carried on, rolling over sounds and words she could not keep up with. (69)

Armstrong's word choice ("gravelly") and imagery ("Tupa's voice carried on, rolling over sounds and words") invoke the music and motion of stream bed and river flow, qualities of Tupa's language that once more connect her to features of earth. To be claimed by her grandmother is to be claimed by Okanagan language and land, a dual possession that is Penny's guiding life force as they are Armstrong's. Armstrong has described feeling "embraced" by N'silxchn just as Penny is physically embraced by her Tupa, "claimed" by language and land in a manner that requires reciprocity. Armstrong asserts that:

It is this N'silxchn which embraces me and permeates my experience of the Okanagan land and is a constant voice within me that yearns for human speech. I am claimed and owned by this land, this Okanagan. Voices that move within as my experience of existence do not awaken as words. Instead they move within as the colours, 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. ("Land" 176)

Penny's relationship with Tupa supports the dynamic connections between movement, colour, language, land, patterning, and grandmother voice.

These connections also surface in Armstrong's poem "Grandmothers," originally written in N'silxchn "and interpreted into English." In this poem, Armstrong writes, grandmothers are "the part of me that was always there," and she "nestle[s]/ and draw[s] nourishment from" the grandmother voices who speak to her "in early morning light / glinting off water / speaking to me in fragile green" ("Land" 176-77).

Armstrong works consistently in *whispering in shadows* to bend English words to the sense of Okanagan perceptions of the world, "listen[ing] to sounds that words make in English and [trying] to find the sounds that will move the image making, whether in poetry or prose, closer to the Okanagan reality." In her impulse "to find or construct bridges between the two realities" of English and Okanagan language, Armstrong continues to emphasize the role of patterns, outlining her desire to create in language a "sense of movement and rhythm through sound patterns" ("Land" 192). Penny's Okanagan sensibilities synthesize perceptions of sound, colour, and linguistic images as organically interrelated, and are a complex fictional manifestation of Armstrong's ongoing effort to represent in English an Okanagan way of seeing and being in the world. Her effort strives to underscore "the significance that original Native languages and their connection to our lands have in compelling the reinvention of the enemy's language for our perspective as indigenous writers" ("Land" 175).

As the example from "Grandmothers" illustrates, the type of fluid image making that deconstructs Western artistic divisions permeates Armstrong's poetry as well as her fiction. In describing Armstrong's boundary-busting poetic imagery, one interviewer has used the English term "synesthesia" (Beeler 153), a literary technique that "applie[s] to descriptions of one kind of sensation in terms of another" for poetic effect (Abrams 315). Yet Armstrong's construction of images that meld what might be considered incongruous elements in a pragmatic European or Euro-Canadian world view based upon English language (for example, colours that speak, or a song that a turtle swims) are not attempts at artistic ornamentation, as the term "synesthesia" suggests, and have no comparable Euro-literary descriptor. Rather, Armstrong's imagings are another feature of her work to transform a particular cultural perspective into English. In an Okanagan world view, grounded in Okanagan language, turtles *do* swim songs, and colours *do* speak. This philosophy is explicitly articulated by another significant Tupa in one of Armstrong's three children's books, *Neekna and Chemai*. Here, Neekna's Tupa explains

to her great-granddaughters that winter:

“is time to get things ready for the coming seasons. It is the same with those things we cannot see, but which are there just the same. Can you see a song? Can you see the wind? No, but when a person sings, you can see his smile. When the wind blows, you can see the flowers nod their heads.”

Tupa said, “The things we prepare at winter dances are things you cannot see, but what it brings, you can see.” (Chapter 1, n. pag.)

This Okanagan philosophy of trans-species, trans-phenomena inter-relationship — cause and effect on the most vast and most intimate levels concurrently — underpins Penny’s artistry, and her entire comprehension of the world’s workings. Although others may not hear the voices of the colours as Penny does, Penny’s paintings make what is personally audible publicly visible: the colours speak to Penny who, in sensory translation, paints what she hears so that others may see colours’ voices. In consistently honouring the unseen and its symbiosis with the visible, as Neekna’s Tupa explains above, Penny perpetuates the traditional ways of her people in contemporary contexts.

Armstrong has discussed the problematic Western concept of “boundaries” between “types” of experiences as categorized within the rigidity of English language specifically, and through colonial world views generally. She expresses her difficulty in perceiving and rendering such precise divisions in her artistic production, because they contradict her own experience of the creative process:

I have trouble separating the disciplines [of poetry and music], because the creative process that I use doesn’t differentiate[;] ... 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 the water, trees, birds and people and talks about response, feelings and interactions, all of those things that make us human. (Beeler 147)

In her writing’s resistance to fixed categories within Western European constructs that classify modes of artistic expression, Armstrong asserts a form of Okanagan literary self-determination that privileges indigenous thoughtways. She makes it clear that her central concern is to write for and from the perspective of her own Okanagan culture, not as a spokesperson for all Okanagan people, but as an individual whose identity has developed



through Okanagan community process. External theoretical categories of literary analysis may be neither appropriate nor expansive enough to encompass the multi-layered content of Armstrong's culturally specific writing. The decolonizing process she strives to effect in her writing explores ways to evoke a proximate experience of Okanagan orality and world view in printed English language. Armstrong understands that:

In Okanagan storytelling, the ability to move the audience back and forth between the present reality and the story reality relies heavily on the fluidity of time sense that the language offers. In particular, 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. ("Land" 194)

Armstrong conceives of "print as a literary process" (Beeler 145) that, much like the En'owkin process, involves collaborative decision-making, great patience, and integrated thought across multiple dimensions of time.

Constructing distinct categories of separation, whether between registers of time (past cannot be future), art forms (songs cannot be paintings), life forms (trees cannot be humans), and/or what is viewed by some as "normal" and "abnormal," is represented as destructive in *whispering in shadows*. Raised by Tupa and the rest of her family to view interconnections between life forms as both natural and rational, Penny's continued exposure to the fracturing partitions constructed by colonial culture along lines of race, class, gender, and ecology are so toxic to Penny that at one point she herself splits apart through mental breakdown (204-06). Rigid categorizations enforce systems of human, environmental, and cultural oppression, and lead to the erosion of "all of those things that make us human" (Beeler 147). Outside the reserve, Penny discovers that her Okanagan world view is considered alien and marginal by Euro-Canadian mass culture. Yet because of the strength of Tupa's teachings, Penny consistently critiques the destructive illogic of colonial North American consumer practices and political values, even as she sometimes questions the legitimacy of her own perceptions.

Though when she was young Penny certainly would have been told stories by Tupa, Armstrong's text is not marked by specific storytelling moments between grandmother and granddaughter. Armstrong instead represents Penny's traditional knowledge through the references to Coyote presence that spiral through Penny's adult life, and to practices such as

digging for bitterroot, singing the old songs, praying in “the language,” and picking saskatoon and huckleberries. Thus, Tupa remains with Penny embodied as living memory, defying another rigid categorization, that of life as presence, in opposition to death as absence. Just as Armstrong’s great-aunt Mourning Dove wrote of the powerful influence upon her of her community’s traditional storytellers,<sup>2</sup> Armstrong outlines the specific ways in which her own storytelling elders have helped to shape her, particularly in the integrated creative process of language and thought:

As a young person, as a child, one of the largest influences on my life, as relates to my writing, one of the things that influenced me greatly was the access to storytellers, to the people who were the teachers in my community and philosophers in my community. Through their storytelling, they have provided their philosophy and provided the teaching and provided the way that my mind works in *my* language, in the Okanagan language. And that has influenced my thought process, to a degree which I know makes me an artist. (*Momaday* 163)

Near the end of the novel, Fox and Coyote appear in a series of inter-related scenes that connect Penny’s adult crisis at her diagnosis of cancer with her childhood crisis at Tupa’s death. Undergirding this sequence of episodes (230-247) are the themes of environmental imbalance caused by human negligence, the necessary balance of life and death, and Penny’s recognition of the relationship between traditional Okanagan community knowledge and contemporary events. The spectre of Penny’s death is prefigured in this sequence (Penny’s dinner conversation with her partner David about the global deterioration of health and nutrition, followed by Penny’s revelation to her friend Tannis of her cancer diagnosis, followed by Fox and Coyote discovering masses of animated shit) by Penny’s viewing Tupa in death. The effect of this sequencing to some extent prepares readers for the devastating news of Penny’s cancer diagnosis by reminding us of the inevitability of death. Even more significantly, this arrangement frames Penny’s disillusioned conversation with David and her despair at her diagnosis by two scenes grounded in Okanagan traditions, indicating the extent of community support that exists during the major physical and spiritual passages of dying and death. The first scene demonstrates Penny’s community’s response to her Tupa’s death, which is honoured by the elders’ singing and other activities; the second scene provides a Coyote story that will not let us forget that the world is always changing, and that change is often upsetting and stinks.<sup>3</sup> In the adult Penny’s memory

of Tupa's death, the child Penny stands looking on, hurt and confused, "at the green, green boughs under the long pine box" in which her departed Tupa rests. The girl feels a heaviness overcome her physical body and either cannot understand what she is seeing or refuses to see it yet: "*Tupa! My Tupa. Where did you go? Why can't you get better now? Get up! Get up! The sun is coming up! It's a new day! I'm scared! Why do you have to go away? I'm scared, Tupa!*" (230).

Even in her frightened bewilderment, however, young Penny substantiates the values her Tupa has earlier instilled in her, making clear that Penny will continue the ways of her Okanagan forebears into the future. Penny's internal words to the body of her Tupa, unmoving in the pinewood box, are "*It's a new day!*", harking back to Tupa's words to Penny from the novel's first major scene between them (17-20). Penny commands her Tupa to "Get up!" to greet the sunrise, that perpetual moment of daily cyclical renewal, in language that echoes Tupa's call in the novel's earlier scene to sleeping family members camping in the mountains to "Wake up" (19). There, in the ancestral berrying grounds of the mountain camp, Tupa talks to Penny about the importance of greeting and giving thanks to each new day. She tells the child:

"Look! There! The red fire[']s edge. It breaks over now! It is a new day! I give thanks for letting me see one more day. I give thanks for being here on this huckleberry mountain, to taste the sweet food of this place. I give thanks to sit here with my great grand-daughter. I give thanks for our safe night and ask for a safe day for the hunters and berry pickers. We come only to honour life. Paen-aye, the one whose real name is my mother's, sits with me, to greet the great sun, who gives us light and life. Give her its warmth to light a path ahead of her. I greet and honour this day." (18)

While on the traumatic occasion of her beloved relative's death Penny may not consciously remember Tupa's long-ago prayer for her, she has clearly internalized it. Penny now invokes the prayer's power to reinvigorate the very woman through whom the prayer — the language and the meaning — was given to her. Further, the style and essence of Tupa's prayer will be repeated later by Penny and her sister Lena, when they return together to the same campground as older women. Although Penny's mother reminds the grieving little girl that Tupa had told Penny she was "too old to be here" anymore, the child Penny longs to be with her Tupa: "I always go with her where she goes. She lets me. Let me go with her. Let me go,

Momma. Let me go!” (230). But Penny’s gramma tells her, “in her sweet, sweet voice,” not to be scared: “Your Tupa told you to let her go. You come with me now.... You let me wash the shadows away” (231-32).

Now, as an older woman receiving the news of her cancer diagnosis, Penny is much closer to being granted her child’s wish of joining her beloved Tupa; now, however, she has a mature understanding of life’s seasons and does not want to leave life so quickly. At the advent of this new trauma, Okanagan stories again illustrate their powers of healing and guidance for Penny. Paralleling the coming of Europeans to the Americas — few at first but growing exponentially, spreading disease and destruction before and behind them — the cancer cells in Penny’s body are ultimately unstoppable once lodged in the terrain of her flesh. Like other colonizers, they must be faced and reckoned with, neither surrendered to nor denied. In this, Armstrong represents cancer as one of the devouring monsters of Okanagan origin stories, a parallel that, when she makes this connection through talking with her friend Tannis, reveals the philosophy that helps Penny make sense of her disease. Tannis asks Penny, “What do your people say about cancer? What do they say it is?” (246). Penny considers before responding:

“I don’t think they have a word for it. At least not any I have ever heard, and I speak the language. One thing though, I was thinking about coming over here. I was thinking about our Coyote stories about the flesh-eating monsters during the transformation of the world into this one. That’s what came to mind. I’m being eaten away by something which I can’t see .... Those stories tell of how the world had to be rid of the flesh-eaters so we could survive. How they con-jured themselves and how they shape-shift and change their form continuously. They were banished but only if we kept the balance which was established. The balance is the natural order in this world. Now everything is out of balance. We are causing another transformation. Our old people say they’re back. In all kinds of different forms. Not just cancer, but aids [*sic*], mad cow disease, superbacteria, mutant viruses and so on. It makes sense to me, literally and metaphorically.” (247)

Here, Penny outlines not only the Okanagan theory of the flesh-eating monsters’ ability to shape-shift, but the theory of how the old stories have consistently reworked themselves into relevant contemporary circumstances as the people and land have transformed over time. Without balance being maintained through dedicated vigilance and respect for the

earth and her inhabitants, the natural world becomes vulnerable once again to the destructive powers of monsters who will literally eat us alive. This is no parable: this is physical, social, environmental, medical, and cultural reality. When the land is neglected and sickens, people sicken as well, not only physically, but psychically and spiritually.

Human disease is explicitly entwined with environmental degradation in *whispering in shadows*, and resisting both becomes Penny's life work. Armstrong unites the ability to restore and maintain healthy lands and peoples with the knowledge of Okanagan language and cultural practices, and she constantly asserts the power of traditional stories as dynamic truth-telling entities. They are integral parts of her larger activist project of literary decolonization, of countering through written expression inaccurate outsider histories of indigenous peoples by presenting Aboriginal peoples' own words and world views to describe their own experiences. Armstrong elaborates this vital point in an interview with Kim Anderson:

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 56; bracketed text in original)

This form of reader/listener participation and response, the continuum of “the mythological path” of oral traditional stories as they follow “a projection into the future,” aptly describes Tupa's presence in Penny's memory throughout *whispering in shadows*. As she nears her own death in the novel's closing pages, Penny understands more profoundly what the shadows have been whispering to her for so many years, and she returns to the source of convergence among the land's and Tupa's speaking. As Penny and her family clean up after dinner in their mountain camp, the same grounds Penny had come to so many times as a little girl with Tupa, “the pines are whispering” and “shadows are gathering under them” (285). Penny leaves the group to sit on the overlook where she will spend

the night in “*The place where the sun will come up in the morning.*” Penny realizes in a powerful moment of physical and spiritual return that, “*This is the spot where Tupa sat, right under this tree*” (284). Now, a bear’s bones rest on the very same spot, its skull “lying facing the direction of the blue mountains” (284).

In Armstrong’s *Neekna and Chemai*, Neekna’s Tupa reminds us that Bear is the most powerful of the four Okanagan food Chiefs, “because he laid his life down first to make all the other Chiefs become food” (Chapter 4, n. pag.). Penny sits with “Old Tupa Bear” throughout the night, symbolically and literally filling the space her human Tupa once occupied as a grandmother and community leader. As Penny now rests her own aging body in this ancient earth place, the meaning of the novel’s title is clarified through her understanding of the roles of whispering, shadows, and Tupa, all three commingled in memory, language, and time for as long as she has been alive. Penny addresses the grandmother bear bones beside her:

Tupa Bear. I came here to sit tonight to think and I find you here. Lying in the place my own Tupa sat to tell me about the taking [of] the sun of each new day and wrapping it around because the shadows of the night follow our footsteps even in the bright of the sun. I come here with shadows following close behind. When Tupa left, the shadows moved inside. It was Tupa who made the world right. She left a hole inside of me that I could find no way to fill. I let the shadows in. They whispered to me about all the things which shadows bring and I listened. I spent my time searching for light in the colours of the rainbow and tried to pull it toward me when they spoke to me. Too many shadows walk the earth and they took me away. Away from the light of each day’s rising. I come here tonight to wait for the sun in the morning. I will wrap it around me and carry it home to warm me in the days to come. I have tried in my way to come to the light. Help me to lift this shadow from inside me. Fill my spirit with the wisdom I need to be at peace with each new day. (285-86)

Penny makes her final prayer in the novel in this sacred, powerful place. It is the place where, at the beginning of her life, she had formed a bond with her Tupa that has never been broken; it is in this same place that she now, near the end of her life, understands her cancer as part of the shadow inside that clouded her being once Tupa passed on. Penny prays in her language, N’silxchn, her Tupa’s language, which Armstrong allows non-N’silxchn speakers to share through printed English text. Penny’s language is the voice of the land itself, as Armstrong affirms:

As I understand it from my Okanagan ancestors, language was given to us by the land we live within.... All my elders say that it is land that holds all knowledge of life and death and is a constant teacher. It is said in Okanagan that the land constantly speaks. It is constantly communicating. Not to learn its language is to die. We survived and thrived by listening intently to its teachings — to its language — and then inventing human words to retell its stories to our succeeding generations. It is the land that speaks N'silxchn, the old land/mother spirit of the Okanagan People, which surrounds me in its primal, wordless state. ("Land" 175-76)

This philosophy reveals that Penny is not alone as she makes her prayer on the mountain. The land whispers to her its teachings, generations of knowledge Penny recalls in the stories of her forebears and hands down to her younger relatives in turn. Land speaks through Penny as the voices of colour speak through her artwork. Penny is surrounded fully by the community of her family, sleeping in the camp nearby, in the home place where her ancestors have hunted animals and gathered camas, huckleberries, and saskatoons for countless generations. Here, Tupa's presence fills and embraces Penny, and after speaking to the bones of Old Tupa Bear and "singing all the songs she knows" (286) throughout the long night, Penny drifts off to sleep and dreams: "The bear is moving . . . Its eyes are stars. The bear has long silvery hair swaying in the wind and she looks like Tupa now" (286). The bear transforms throughout Penny's dream, shifting shape now into "the Aztec man from Mexico," now into the star constellation of "The Great Bear," now into "Indians and non-Indians . . . from all over the earth. Laughing and talking, as coyotes shrill their songs around them" (287). The only time in the novel that Penny speaks directly to Coyote is during this dream, as she reminds the powerful trickster of the inevitable events of the old story he has been part of so many times before. Coyote needs no reminding, however, and instructs Penny about the necessity of repeating the stories so that the details of contemporary changes might be folded into them:

"Shining Woman of Copper. You know it's in the story. Every story. It's just the same old monsters again I'll take care of them bastards, though. Piss on them. It's gotta be. Just keep on shining 'till the sun sets. You're free to ride the clouds. I am the greatest chief down around here and I give you that." (287)

Coyote gives Penny permission to leave this world, when the time comes,

content in the knowledge that he and future generations of allies, among them Penny's Okanagan descendents, will keep up the fight against "the same old monsters," in whatever new shapes they might appear.

Through dream, the bear becomes Tupa, and Tupa becomes the stars; Coyote arises in the star story and speaks to Penny, as the stars speak to her, as the bear speaks to her; as Tupa did and continues speaking to her. All of these powerful forces are one whole: they are, as Armstrong has titled one major essay, land speaking. Penny's Tupa is the mountain called Copper Woman and also the woman who tells Copper Woman's story to Penny; she is the one who, like Copper Woman herself, "had a vast love for humans." "Copper is what Tupa always left buried beneath the ground when she wanted medicine" (294), Penny recalls in the novel's final pages, this reciprocity a spiritual and material transaction with the Okanagan land that has given the Okanagan people their existence. Soon Penny (whose name is also a form of currency, a manifestation of copper whose worth is valued on a different scale in the colonial marketplace), will herself be physically returned to the body of earth to be minted anew within the continuing cycle of elemental exchange and transformation.

In the same way that traditional stories accrue meaning over time and upon listener reflection, Tupa, as the embodiment of the values and practices of Okanagan cultural collaboration, continues to instruct Penny long after she has departed her human form. Penny realizes through Tupa that one person alone cannot contain the vastness of land, language, and culture, and that Okanagan cultural survival requires a conscious community process that includes nurturing healthy relationships with language and land. Through Tupa, Armstrong emphasizes the symbiosis of Okanagan language and land, and how ancestral stories are place-specific teachings infused with a feminine presence — "the old land/mother spirit of the Okanagan People" ("Land" 175-76) — that shifts with changes in the land just as humans shift through the seasons of their lives. The land must be listened to, its messages spoken in its own language to maintain life itself. Armstrong observes in "Let Us Begin with Courage" that:

To the Okanagan People, as to all peoples practicing bio-regionally self-sufficient economies, the knowledge that the total community must be engaged in order to attain sustainability is the result of a natural process of survival. The practical aspects of willing teamwork within a whole-community system clearly emerged from experience



delineated by necessity.

Through the influence of her Tupa and other significant relatives and friends, Penny immerses herself in this “whole-community system” to resist the social and political injustices that she witnesses destroying environments, families, indigenous cultures, and healthy human lives. In this way, Tupa and Penny function within the novel in the spirit of *En’owkin* as parts of “an organizational process, one profoundly deliberate in ensuring an outcome that results in a community strengthened by the dynamics of deep collaboration — that is, collaboration at all levels over generations,” as Armstrong clarifies in “Let Us Begin with Courage.” The collaborative process of *En’owkin* that Armstrong writes into the novel through Penny’s relationships with Tupa, with Okanagan language, and with the land illustrates the ideal of healthy community while asserting Okanagan cultural sovereignty through printed English-language literature. In representing community interrelationship and process, *whispering in shadows* enacts one form of Okanagan holistic interconnectedness, in which language is a primary feature that might transform the world into a place where people and the land continue singing in harmony with the coming generations.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All subsequent quotations from the novel are indicated by page number within this essay. All italicized quotations are italicized in Armstrong’s novel, and indicate the character’s interior monologue.

<sup>2</sup> See Mourning Dove’s “Preface” in *Coyote Stories*, ed. Guie.

<sup>3</sup> In this story, “Fox took off running” from “a bunch of stinking turds all over the place” that have come to life. Coyote, annoyed that he “just nap[ped] for a few minutes and they start stirring up shit again,” decides to take action. Armstrong does not clarify here who “they” are, but leaves readers to make connections to contemporary entities that are stirring up shit through destructive environmental policies and practices.

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