

## Jeannette Armstrong: “what I intended was to connect ... and it’s happened”

Janice Williamson

**“ce que je voulais c’était d’établir un rapport avec ...  
et ça marchait ...”<sup>1</sup>**

L’entretien se passe dans le bureau de Jeannette Armstrong au Centre En’owkin où elle est administratrice et instructrice, un centre attaché au programme de Création Littéraire de l’Université Victoria et au Collège Okanagan. Le dialogue s’oriente d’abord à la collaboration d’Armstrong avec Douglas Cardinal pour un biographie de l’architecte, une collaboration facilitée par leur adhésion mutuelle à une esthétique autochtone, ce que Cardinal appelle “le pouvoir doux,” la réconciliation des contraires pour en faire un être entier, surtout la nécessité de reconnaître et de travailler avec une pensée féminine. En tant que féministe, Armstrong appuie cette approche qui ne pense pas en termes du mâle ou de la femelle, mais en termes du masculin et du féminin. Dans son oeuvre, elle montre comment une approche féminine peut guérir tout le monde y compris les hommes. Les écrivaines autochtones doivent combattre des stéréotypes du “squaw” tel qu’elle essaie dans un poème “Indian Woman,” écrit avec deux marges. À gauche, il y a des mots de misère et de dégradation, la représentation dominante des femmes autochtones à tous les niveaux de la société canadienne. À droite, il y a une image de puissance féminine, la perspective d’Armstrong de sa mère et ses grand’ mères, l’héritage qu’elle doit léguer à ses filles et ses petites-filles. Le poème englobe les deux perspectives enchevêtrées: le regard des autres, l’auto-regard. Cette représentation en parallèle de la femme abusée et de la femme assertive se trouve aussi dans *In Search of April Raintree* de Béatrice Culleton. Il y a en effet des affinités chez les écrivaines autochtones qu’elles découvrent lorsqu’elles se réunissent comme à la Foire Féministe du Livre à Montréal. Il y a beaucoup de femmes qui assument des rôles importants dans la culture autochtone en ce moment parce que les femmes sont l’épine dorsale de la famille. Nécessairement ainsi, elles se chargent de leur propre guérison et ensuite celle de la communauté. Le processus d’écriture a aidé

*Armstrong à se guérir, car elle se trouve en réfléchissant, ni sauvage, ni sâle, tel qu'on lui enseignait à l'école. Au contraire, la philosophie de son peuple, qu'elle partage d'ailleurs, fondé sur la coopération et la guérison, a plus à offrir au monde actuel dont l'individualisme produit une société en chaos. Cette découverte la guérit: elle se réveille contente d'être amérindienne. Dans la vie traditionnelle Okanagan, les responsabilités sont partagés également par les femmes et les hommes. D'ailleurs, il n'y a pas de pronoms pour "il" et "elle" dans leur langue, ni des mots de référence générale pour des personnes. Il faut toujours situer une personne en relation avec une autre ou avec leur travail comme: "la-personne-qui-s'occupe-d'une-certaine-tâche." Cependant, ces valeurs ne sont pas toujours reconnues aujourd'hui. Armstrong a écrit son roman *Slash* en partie pour changer le sexisme des hommes autochtones, mais aussi pour raconter l'histoire de l'American Indian Movement des années soixante, un projet développé dans le cadre de sa collaboration avec le projet du curriculum des Okanagans. Dans cet entretien, il y a aussi des échanges au sujet de l'institution littéraire et de la question de l'accès des écrivaines d'autochtones au marché littéraire face à l' récupération de leurs histoires par la société dominante. Les écrivaines ont une responsabilité pour expliquer d'où ils parlent et leur angle de vision sur le monde. Chaque fois que l'espace est occupé dans le monde de l'édition par le discours dominant, un(e) autochtone n'est pas entendu par les lecteurs. Cela produit un effet: l'image du monde est déformée. Les femmes de n'importe quelle race font toutes face à ces contraintes car le monde de l'édition est dominé par des hommes. Pour les écrivaines autochtones il y a aussi la lutte pour écrire en anglais et produire des genres canoniques pour des lecteurs Canadiens. Le Centre En'owkin est une réponse à ce problème. Aussi parle-t-elle de ses recherches sur l'art oratoire orale traditionnel d'où elle puise des images, des techniques surtout la nécessité de relier le corps, la voix avec la pensée. Ce qu'elle cherche dans son oeuvre est d'établir un rapport avec des personnes qui fait un pont par où se rejoindre dans leurs différences.*

*Janice:* We're sitting in your office in the En'owkin Centre where you administer and teach. Could you tell me a little bit about the Centre – first of all, what does the name mean?

*Jeannette:* Well, En'owkin Centre is an Okanagan word and comes from the high language in Okanagan. The word, if you are to interpret it, means something like a group challenge to get the best possible answer. So it's partly referring to a consensus process and partly referring to the

ability to challenge one another's thinking, to come to the best possible conclusion of any problem. Loosely interpreted that is what En'owkin means. Literally translated it means to drop something through the top of the head into the mind or brain.

*Janice:* Several courses presented through the En'owkin Centre will be credited through the University of Victoria.

*Jeannette:* There are now eight courses delivered from the University of Victoria through the En'owkin International School of Writing including creative writing workshops for poetry and fiction as well as a publishing workshop. There are also Okanagan College base courses, an introductory English course that has the open learning institute format, and a basic creative writing course.

*Janice:* Your own writing is quite diverse. You write poetry. You've written a novel, children's stories, and you're also collaborating on a biography with Douglas Cardinal.

*Jeannette:* I wouldn't actually say it's a biography, although it's biographical in nature. The collaboration is really a look at the architect as a Native person and how the Native perspective has influenced not only his creativity but his lifestyle, thinking and philosophy within his architectural work and his life. I guess you could say it's biographical because it's about Doug Cardinal and his creative process but we're really focusing on the Native world view and philosophy as it connects to the creative process.

*Janice:* When you're discussing this book with him, does your particular insight as a woman writer connect with his perspective? Are there different creative processes for female and male Native writers?

*Jeannette:* It's difficult to answer that question but I think that Doug selected me to work with him on this particular aspect of his thinking and philosophy first because I am a Native writer, and second, because I have a traditional perspective compatible with his understanding and creative process. As a Native person and Native writer, I can key into, understand and articulate those things in relation to his thoughts. So that makes it a collaboration, rather than an editorial relationship or whatever. We're not talking about architecture in this book. That should be clear.

*Janice:* What about the question of gender and the Native creative process?

*Jeannette:* That is interesting. Doug is one of the people I greatly admire because he understands the necessity of reconciling the two sides

of ourselves in becoming a whole person. He has had to reconcile and work with the feminine aspect of power. He calls it the “soft power” which has empowered his thinking and philosophy. For *me* as a Native woman and as a writer this process is very interesting. He’s working in the place where feminist thinking comes from. He has said very clearly that if males would allow themselves to be sourced by feminine thought and the processes engendered in that, the power they could have in terms of potential change in the world would be much greater than it is at this time. As a female and also as a feminist, my interest is in looking at and understanding people who are thinking not about male or female, but in terms of feminine gender and thinking. It’s critical to my thinking and philosophy to understand how this feminine process can work in healing both the world and individuals in the world, including males.

*Janice:* Your poem, “Indian Woman,” is printed as a double poem. On the left-hand side is a poem of pain and suffering, of deprivation and the degradation of naming the Indian woman “squaw”; on the right-hand side, there’s a very powerful invocation of Indian women’s strength. How did you arrive at this double narrative form?

*Jeannette:* Well, that wasn’t very hard because the first portrayal is a common, stereotypical understanding that the majority unfortunately has of Native Indian women. The visual images are over-dramatized in terms of their presentation, but basically that’s how people look at Indian women in Canada and I’m talking about all levels of people, from professional all the way down to the people at street-level. For Native women, this becomes an image of themselves, an image that they take on and help to perpetuate, sometimes in frustration and anger and hostility. But at some point the other image of Native women that is really what being woman and in particular what being Native woman is needs to be given to Native people. This is our perspective. I want to be sure that the other Native women have an understanding of the perspective I have of myself so that they can look at themselves in a different way. Juxtaposing the two perspectives together is a technical thing: this is how other people see you, but over here is how you really are. This is what *we* as Native women must portray, understand and pass on to our daughters and granddaughters.

*Janice:* In Beatrice Culleton’s *In Search of April Raintree*, there’s a twinning of two women, one who suffers from abuse and prostitution and another more affirmative woman who retrieves herself. This double representation repeats your own twinning in the poem. Are you in close

contact with other Native women writers and do you share a vision of the world with them?

*Jeannette:* In the last five years one of the things that's happened is a synchronicity with other Native women writers. It's eerie in that it seems to be happening in a synchronous way for all of us. We've been in contact with one another and have tried at various times to get together and talk. When we *do* do that, we find amazing parallels. Many Native women are emerging at this point, as writers, performers, artists or people working in political arenas. Because the women are the central backbone of the family and of the next generation, a healing in terms of ourselves, first needs to be understood by Native women and carried out before healing in the family and outward to the rest of the community can take place. Many Native women are emerging out of necessity and taking a real leadership role, and this was really apparent at the Second International Feminist Book Fair in Montréal where all the top Native women writers came together. It was a wonderful experience to realize that we weren't alone in our separate corners working.

*Janice:* At the Feminist Book Fair, you talked about the power of healing and the voice of Native women. How does writing and finding your voice heal you and heal the reader?

*Jeannette:* The reader is secondary to the person writing. It's opposite to the reader's point of view. I can only speak for myself as a writer, not for other writers in the world. It's a whole process of uncovering layers of mythology about what society and people should be about forced onto me by other people's thinking and philosophy of discovering through those layers the Native principles that I've been given through my teachers, of looking at these principles truthfully and honestly in terms of how they equate with the negative myths. The process of writing as a Native person has been a healing one for me because I've uncovered the fact that I'm not a savage, not dirty and ugly and not *less* because I have brown skin, or a Native philosophy. In fact, I've found that *my* philosophy and my people's philosophy of harmony, co-operation and healing, has a lot more relevance today in terms of humanity and the whole world where individualism is causing social chaos and extending into the outer world where people are killing the environment out of individual selfish need, out of not thinking about their fellow man or even the next generation. In uncovering my own philosophy as a Native person, I've come to realize that my people and my self are beautiful and necessary in this world where there is sickness, discordance, chaos,

hatred and violence. That discovery continues to be a healing process. Everyday I wake up and think, "God, I'm glad I'm Indian!" People out there who are Indian who don't know that need to understand. The suicide rates and problems our people are having are a result of being told you're stupid, ignorant, a drunk, you'll never amount to anything – just because you're Indian. To me, that's the biggest lie of all that needs to be dispelled. It's my vocation or commitment to do that and whatever happens for non-Native people in that process is a bi-product.

*Janice:* You use the word "Indian" to describe yourself and I use the word "Native." Can you talk about the difference in language?

*Jeannette:* Sure. I like to use "Indian" mainly because the word itself is not a word which is derogatory but generic. There is no such thing as an Indian person – either you're Okanagan or you're Shuswap, Mohawk, Cree or whatever. That's what we are. If I were being fully truthful, honest, I would say I'm Okanagan. I'm not Indian. I'm not Native. I'm not whatever you classify me as. I'm Okanagan. That's a political and cultural definition of who I am, a geographical definition, and also a spiritual definition for myself of who I am because that's where my philosophy and my world view comes from. That would be the most correct way of defining it. But because there are categories of people in North America, there needs to be some word which describes us in a generic sense, and so I prefer "Indian," mainly because it is a word that was used in some of Columbus' writings to describe who we were, Indian coming from in *deo*, meaning "in with God." That was how he described us. I understand that this description wasn't because of confusion with India, because historically at that time, it wasn't called "India," but "Hindi," or "Hindustani," or whatever. We would have been called "Hindians," I guess, if that's where the confusion was. But my understanding is that he referred to those people he came in contact with as being "in with God" because of their innocence, purity, harmony and co-operation with one another. And so I prefer this word of course because I feel that we are in with God.

*Janice:* When you talk about the pre-conquest Okanagan culture you point to the empowerment of women within it. Could you elaborate on the power of women in Okanagan culture?

*Jeannette:* I had always known as a child that I was female and different in physical terms from men. That's something that's always there and has to be recognized because we're basically mammals and have basic instincts. My grandmother, my aunts and my mother explained

this to me. It was very clear when I was becoming a teenager and it is a reality that you accept. I got a clear message from my grandmother that no person has a right to coerce or own another person or act in a way which determines by force that the person doesn't have a choice. No person has that right over another person. It's not dependent on gender or authority or whatever. We are born free and are free people but we understand the kinds of things that make up families, the customs of people. We understand the accepted relationships between people whether they're male or female and what their places are as either the mother or the father. Those things were explained to me by my grandmother, a very powerful woman who influenced me to a great degree. My aunt influenced me as well. I always knew as a child working with them that I owned myself, that I would always own myself. I was always the choice-maker and what I accepted to be done to me, I accepted to be done to me. You can talk about love relationships and all of those things from that point of view. In terms of family stability, I was told that as a woman I would bear the children. I had the prime responsibility to be sure that I was in control enough of my own life to be able to provide for them. We don't just see the husband as being responsible for those children. We see both sides of the whole family – aunts and uncles and grandparents and brothers and sisters – are all equally responsible. In my family, I am as responsible for my nieces and nephews and so on from both sides as their parents are. Ownership of property and work was always shared with the Okanagan people. I don't remember a time when work wasn't shared by members of our family depending on how physically able they were. I went out on berry-picking camps with my grandmother and my aunts and my brothers and sisters, my uncles, my father and so on – we would go out and camp for a week or two weeks at a time and all the work was shared. Men went out there and dug roots or picked berries, and they also went out on hunting expeditions. Women went with them and they still do in my family. We're a traditional family. My understanding is that that's always the way it was. I worked out in the fields when I was a child, along with my sisters, and my aunts. We used to have to do hay by hand – not cut it, but shock the hay, pile it up and bring it in. We worked out there with the men and there was no difference in the division in labour. Same as in the household – the work was divided equally, and I grew up *expecting* that people, if they were physically and mentally able, would take part in the work. It was the same way with the thinking process. The responsibility for the thinking

in the family was shared equally. Every family has a process. In fact, my mother, aunt, and grandmother were the strongest people in terms of the thinking, the choice-making, the decision-making. My grandmother was law; she was a matriarch and what she said went. The same thing passed to my aunt who was the law. What she said in the family – and it wasn't just out of the top of her head – it was as a result of knowing what everybody's thinking was, what everybody's reasons were. She was able to bring that back to everybody who knew she was right of course. So she had great power in the family and I grew up with and understood that kind of thinking. I knew who the powerful people were in my family and they were female. I understood that it had always been that way with the Okanagan people – and I don't mean that it's matriarchal. I mean that it's shared equally. There are families where male figures are dominant and do the thinking. But it's not because they're male, it's because they're the best people for that job. In the same way, in those families with dominant females as the powerful part of the family, they're the best people for that!

*Janice:* There are no Okanagan pronouns for “he” and “she.” Does your language encode this egalitarian reciprocity?

*Jeannette:* Absolutely. Glen Douglas, a researcher and Native elder here who is fully versed in the language and philosophy of our people, has done research with me. I'm not prepared at this time to publish anything, but I'm documenting it so eventually something will come out about it. In looking at the stories and legends of the Okanagan people, I've found the Coyote stories in particular don't dwell on female or male roles. There is differentiation between male and female but what is focused on is the character that it symbolizes or personifies and the process that's used to develop that character. When you look at the language in connection with that, there's no way that we can refer to a person in a general sense in our language. We have to identify *how* we relate to that person before we can talk about that person. I would have to say “my aunt” or “my grandmother” or “the person who has done this kind of thing” or “the person who is in charge of this or that,” if I'm going to refer to a person – or I have to say a name directly. If I don't know the name, I would say the person who has been involved in connection with this. I can't say “he,” “she.” A person is always connected or related to something and we must always refer to that connection or that relationship. So 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 but 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.

*Janice:* For a feminist outside your culture, this Okanagan language logic appears utopian. But in your novel *Slash*, you take a hard look at the everyday politics of Native life through a fictional re-creation of activities in the '70s. How did you come to write *Slash*?

*Jeannette:* There wasn't *one* decision that I took to write that story. Oddly enough, it is the question of the breakdown in our society in relation to the male role that prompted me to write about and use a male character as a focus to write from. I don't know if my working with that was fair in terms of the male role. One of the practical reasons that I chose a male character was the politics at that time – the Native male was at the forefront and engendered the thought of the American Indian movement. There were a lot of things wrong with this including the male ego and a displaced philosophy regarding what role the Native woman played. I raged against that at the time as did many Native women because we knew it was wrong and false and that any movement forward for Native people, any healing, and any of our power needed to reconcile this. For the historical sense of the novel, it was appropriate to have a male figure at the forefront, but there's also a philosophical reason. I needed to uncover for myself what my own hang-ups were in terms of the male role in Native society. I needed to know how they affected the progress of the movement in the positive and negative sense, to understand and then present an alternative. I wanted to be able to say, well, this is what could be, or what should be, or what can happen. If you look at the shaping and progress of that character from the beginning to the philosophy he develops at the end, he is a lot closer to the philosophy which allows changes in the male role. That's where the concentration of work has to be done. 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. At the end, *Slash* is able to be what he needs to be and have the strength he needs. That is a message I wanted to pass to my brothers so they will be able to see and understand. Native

men who have read *Slash* come to me and say things that I need to hear. There hasn't been one Native male who has come to me and said "bullshit." They say either "that's where I've come to" or "that's where I need to go to."

*Janice*: When you were writing *Slash*, did you imagine yourself writing towards a particular audience? Did you intend to address Native men?

*Jeanette*: Primarily I wrote because I was so damned frustrated with the egos out there that were so big and interfering and acting as obstacles to any kind of real powerful work that could go on. And I was angry! I was angry. I was saying – I want to swear. You're doing all kinds of shit that has nothing to do with reality; it has more to do with your arrogance that has been handed to you by this paternalistic European society. It's full of shit. That's not being Indian. A lot of things, a lot of potential things that could have been really powerful ended or were disfigured or corrupted because of that arrogance and it continues. I'm not saying only Native males are doing that – there are Native women that go along and push and promote and support it. I was talking to them as well. I don't want to be seen as someone who's negative and tears people down. I would rather be someone who's positive. I would rather say, look at this easier and better way of doing things. 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. You can spend your life cutting down and putting down men, but what the hell are you doing to change them? What the hell are you doing to teach differently? Sexism – whether you're male or female – is against doing it differently.

*Janice*: Does the systemic oppression of Native peoples give you a greater sense of solidarity with Native men in spite of the differences that might exist between some of you?

*Jeanette*: Yes it absolutely does. A number of Native people who were involved in the movement talked to me and said "I never was able to articulate it, or even see it in terms of the questions that you pose" – and that's what they really are, questions which make things clearer. Had a lot of people known, or questioned some of these things at that time, it might have been different for us. I know that when I travel, Native people come to the readings, lectures and workshops and want to talk with me. The most frightening thing about writing for me is that these are the people I'm writing to and about and for and they are going to tell me whether I did wrong or right. So far I haven't had any negative criticism,

and I've really made contact with a lot of the people who do read. I don't know about the people who don't read but I've been amazed because some of those who have read *Slash* are not novel-readers. But they've picked up this book and said, it's the first book I've read. And I thought "holy".

*Janice:* You actually began writing *Slash* on a dare, as resistance to there not being enough fiction books by Native writers available.

*Jeannette:* You shouldn't confuse the dare with *Slash* because at that time it was a concept that didn't have *Slash* attached to it in terms of the character and the novel. I developed the concept of filling a gap in the contemporary history of Native thought over the past twenty-five years. The curriculum project here was looking for writers who could look at contemporary history and write something that students could connect and relate to other than just a dry history of dates. The Okanagan Indian Curriculum Project began in 1979 and by 1981 or 1982 I was working as a researcher and involved in bringing together materials and selecting which periods of history we'd be focusing on. I knew basically what we wanted although it could have resulted in a film, or a series of short stories, or whatever. Anyway, the whole thing went off-key, though it wasn't really a confrontation. We sat down in a planning session and one of the consultants who was concerned that we get the best materials written for the project said OK, you get hold of the Native writers, and I'll get hold of the non-Native writers. We can bring them together, sort through them and figure out what can be done. At that point I told him that there's enough Native writers and you're coordinating this so here are some names, addresses and phone numbers so you can get hold of them. On my own I contacted a couple of people. We had a huge meeting and it turned out that his point of view was that there was no use getting hold of these Native writers since none of them was well known. He did try with a couple of them but didn't get a response because basically he said, who are you, what did you write, what did you publish, and so on. Anyway, he had some pretty well-known non-Native writers lined up who said, yeah, we'd like to get involved, we'd like to help out. One of them was George Ryga who is a good friend of mine. We got together in this meeting with other people I won't mention but who are prominent non-Native names in Canadian literature. Not only were they willing to do the work, but they were basically dripping at the mouth. And there were publishers who were prompting them, saying, yeah, get in on that because these things sell. I was in a real disadvantaged position at the

meeting and I felt pretty angry because I had three Native writers who were willing to work with the researchers. They were unpublished but I knew they could do the writing. I got angry and just got up and said, "I can't go along with this." I told the guy who was my director, "if this is your idea of turning this project into something that non-Native people are going to benefit from, then I wash my hands of it. And I'm going to make sure from this point on that this project doesn't go because I'm not going to have my culture and the Okanagan people exploited this way. There have been too many exploitations." The consultant said the Native writers weren't invited to this meeting while the well-known white writers were invited and we need to get down to business and decide now, tonight, who's going to be writing what. I got up and said, "Well I'm walking out of this meeting. As far as I'm concerned, this project is dead because I'm going to the Tribal Council tomorrow. If you guys don't think I won't, try me." Jeff Smith, the director, knew that I meant what I said. None of the other people understood the power that I had with the Tribal Council at that particular time; they would have shut the project down and Jeff knew it. So the consultant said, "Well, OK, then I quit. If you want to get these things written, then you can god damn well write it yourself." So I said "Sure. No problem with that." I didn't know what I was talking about at the time, but I was angry enough to say anything. George got up and walked out with me and the other Native writers saying, "I totally agree with Jeannette. It's Native people who should be doing this and I'll help them do it, if I'm the only one." The other writers didn't know what was going on, and didn't know what to do or say. It wasn't their fault at all. The next day I came back in and Jeff said, "The consultant is off the project and so are all those other non-Native people. Let's sit down and re-group and decide what we're going to do." Two films and two books came out of that meeting as well as writing which was never published for trade but was used in the curriculum.

*Janice:* The process of writing a novel is very demanding. Did you know what you were getting into?

*Jeannette:* I had no idea when I made that statement that it was going to be a novel. My concept was that I could interview people and recreate the historical situation. I had in mind an historical account or a series of short stories for the classroom situation. But when we sat down to discuss the whole idea, we decided it would be best to produce for each grade level, so we distributed the work in terms of grade. Howard Green was given the grade 10; Glen James was given the grade 8; films were

done for grades 7 and 9; and I worked on grade 11, which was contemporary history. My process was to look first of all at all of the historical material from 1960 to the present. I sat down and tried to cover everything that happened in Indian country during that time in the States and Canada. I looked at it in terms of what influenced the thinking of the people and how it affected the Indian lifestyle, communities and individuals. Growing up through that time I knew some of it, and particularly during the seventies I knew some of the feeling as well. So once I amassed the research the first year, I did massive interviews with people at all levels of the community, not with the intention of using their words but of finding out myself what their thinking and feeling was, and where the people were in terms of their hopes, their dreams, their hearts, their rage. I documented a chronology of events and put together a profile of the thinking of the period. I submitted a six-page outline of the events to the Curriculum Department and asked them how they wanted me to proceed. The committee looked at it and said the best way would be to develop this into a novel or a story in which one character experiences some of these feelings first-hand and shows the effects on his family or friends or his people. In that way, when a person reads, they could experience the process as if they were going through it. Yeah, I thought, good idea, OK. At that point I still didn't realize what it would take to put that in place. I had never written anything as comprehensive of that nature. So I sat down and said, oh, OK, fine, but whose story? It couldn't be one person's story because no one person could have experienced all those things. One of the balances I had to create was whether that character was a non-traditional person or a traditional person who goes through a metamorphosis. I decided on the traditional because that was what I was most comfortable with myself. I did do a character sketch around the non-traditional character, Slash's friend, as a focus, but I just didn't understand enough about his thinking, philosophy, hopes, dreams and motivation. On the surface I could, but I couldn't reconcile his feelings with the person I am. I understood that a lot of yourself is tied up in a first novel, so I accepted that I would work with a traditional character. Even at that point, I hadn't decided on male or female. I could have had powerful female characters, but female leaders in the American Indian movement were very few and unique in terms of personality and development. I didn't want to be untruthful and emulate one of those very rare and beautiful individuals like Anna-Mae Aquash and other women who are still alive at this time. But I didn't want to be dishonest and create a

general female because I know the powerful role those unique females played and I didn't want to mess with that. They or someone who knew them very well will tell their story. For practical reasons I decided the male character would be best in my storytelling so I looked at everything I was angry and frustrated at in the Native male who was torn between role and ego. In the end, through his metamorphosis into a personality, this character reconciled himself to his feminine qualities. By "feminine," I mean the capacity for compassion, love, sensitivity, and understanding that's required by the soft non-aggressive approach. We call it "feminine" or feminist thought, but really it is the reconciliation of both male and female and the wholeness and healthiness of who we are as human beings that I wanted to move this character toward.

*Janice:* If you see your novel as a teaching story particularly for male Native readers, is your poetry writing different?

*Jeannette:* It's a very different process. The creative process for writing story-telling, fiction or non-fiction, is a recognition and a putting together of information, a recounting of things external so that it makes coherent sense in re-telling what may have happened. That's where my dividing line is between prose and poetry. Poetry is the opposite creative process. It's an identification of the landscape inside me, my own internal sensibility, reactions and understanding of all that affects me as a person. Poetry is a process in which I attempt to put into words internal things that rise up out of the subconscious, out of my spirituality and my intellect. I try to make sense of them in terms of what makes me human, what makes me Jeannette Armstrong, what makes me Native, what makes me woman. So it's an identification of the internal things that I am and their coherence with the external.

*Janice:* You criticize an evaluative system that would dictate what is "good" Native writing in terms of a white tradition. You oppose this ethnocentric notion of the "literary" with Native oratory. Can you elaborate on this difference?

*Jeannette:* It's one of the things that I'm exploring. If we were to say prose is over there, oratory lies in the middle. Some of the political oratory of Native people and my own oratory attempts to bridge two separate cultures and world views. We're bridging a gap into another culture for their understanding of the internal humanness in how people relate to a world. In Native oratory, you're trying to draw in symbols, metaphors, and images to help the understanding of your presentation of internal philosophy. This is how some of the most beautiful pieces of

oratory happen. If you look at the contemporary oratory of Dan George and James Cosnell, traditional oratory shows through because we're searching for metaphors, symbols and archetypes submerged in our culture. We're attempting to put it into English terminology and English words and to relate to the underlying givens of European culture that we just take for granted in terms of structures. In oratory, poetry happens in a prose situation. You have to draw on poetic tools when you're trying to tell a history or a political or social reality. Some of the most beautiful writing falls into this category but is often discarded as invalid because it is "political" or "sociological".

*Janice:* Ezra Pound called poetry "the dance of the intellect". The dance of Native oratory is very different from Pound's, but how do you think about the body in your writing tradition?

*Jeannette:* Well that's the question that we'll be looking at in the oral tradition. Written literature hasn't been in place for European peoples for a heck of a long time. You came from an oral tradition like I did. Over generations learning has been passed on in speech or oral images. How was that done? How was that transfer made through folk stories, legends, and mythology? This is connected to how one person's physical being transferred it to another person's physical being without that gap in between which is paper or a stone tablet. I'm exploring how the oral tradition connects to the body, the voice, our thinking and our internal processes. In political oratory, a person makes certain points and depends on the rise and fall of voice, the emotion in the tone of their speech, the rhythm and sound of the words, and also the animation, the posturing of the body. In my culture, language depends on gestures, body gesture. In storytelling where you're getting the ideas across in oral form, body gesture is an integral part. We hear sound and physically sound becomes something else for us, something we interpret as understanding. When you remove the body and put a piece of paper in its place, what happens? How do you compensate for that loss of the body? In our writing school, we'll be exploring and looking at how you replace the body in writing.

*Janice:* This is thinking through the body in a different way, and it returns us to your discussion of the origins of *Slash*. How do you feel about non-Native writers like Anne Cameron or W.P. Kinsella writing from a Native perspective and using Native mythology?

*Jeannette:* I have real problems with it because they're putting themselves in a position which they have no knowledge of really. They can't

be Native in a microerspective because it takes more than reading the mythology or knowing Indian people. It takes being Indian, living that culture and understanding which you acquire almost through osmosis. You can't transplant yourself as a European or whatever into my thought processes or subconscious and the symbols and archetypes I draw on. A person can live within a Native culture and absorb or glimpse some of the culture. I don't have a problem with people writing about whatever they want to write about but our people have been stereotyped, misunderstood and misrepresented in many ways. This has been damaging and exploitative. People need to tell their own stories, whatever culture they're from in order to relate to one another in a more truthful sense. We need to understand one another if we're going to survive as different peoples in this world and start combatting things like racism and classism and sexism. We writers have the responsibility to clarify for the world who we are, what we are, where we fit in and what our perspective is. I don't have any business clarifying for someone else out there. This is a free world and I'll speak out and say that whenever I'm asked, not pointing a finger particularly at any one person. People have to make up their own minds, but every time a space is taken up in the publishing world and the reading community, it means that a Native person isn't being heard and that has great impact.

*Janice:* Liberals would say that since writing is an imaginative act, a good writer will be able to imagine what it is to have the complex experience of a Native person. But that argument doesn't take up the practical issue of who is being published.

*Jeannette:* Exactly. And that's the proof of the pudding right there. I hold people responsible. I can't do anything to stop them but they on the other hand can't stop me from saying well, unless you're Native, you don't have a Native perspective no matter *what* kind of an imagination you have.

*Janice:* How did you come to imagine yourself a writer? Did it happen when you were a young girl?

*Jeannette:* I never imagined myself as a writer and I still have some difficulty with that. I didn't strive to be a writer; I was a writer. In retrospect, I know now that I had the makings when I was a child. I was writing very early. My first worst piece of poetry in the world was published when I was fifteen. I was writing in school and I was writing for myself at home. I was just writing because I liked it. I liked putting things down, saying things, and using the language. I was a compulsive reader and I

just liked the sound of words; it was like magic for me. I never really understood that all of that works out to being a writer. For me, it was just a pure act of something that I enjoyed. Other than visual arts, nothing else could do that for me. Answering that question is difficult because even at this point in time I don't see myself as a writer who wants to be a writer. Writing is what I have to do. Writing is what I do. I have piles and piles of stuff that's not going to be published. But I have to write because I need to map out my thinking and understanding. In practical ways I use my writing in my everyday life. It makes the world make sense and brings a sensibility, a coherence to the world around me which would otherwise be chaotic. I find that I get hung up on issues and ideas unless I can sit down and write to put them together. It's that process rather than the finished product that is important so I guess if you call that being a writer, that's what I am.

*Janice:* Are you going to participate in the writing school?

*Jeannette:* Yes, I will be co-ordinating the writers who will be coming to do the lectures, readings and workshops with the students, and I will be acting as instructor in between those writers.

*Janice:* Will you do the performance work about the body in storytelling you were speaking about earlier?

*Jeannette:* Yes, that's one of the main focuses of both fiction and non-fiction, poetry and prose. We'll be looking at how the oral tradition works with performance—music, sound, and dance, and speech rhythm. We have some exciting people lined up including Inuit storyteller Minnie Freeman; Wilfred Peltier, a storyteller and an elder from back east; story teller and writer Maria Campbell; Margo Kane, a performance artist; and West Coast writer Lee Maracle. And we're looking at a number of people from the States as well, Native writers like poet and Native literature professor Joy Harjo, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Roberta Hill Whiteman, James Welch, Lucy Tapaphonse and others. We're looking at traditional storytellers, those who have published, like Ellen White from Nanaimo, as well as the non-published storytellers including local people who are very good.

*Janice:* You publish with Theytus Books here in Penticton which has been housed in the same building as En'owkin School since 1980. Is the writing school going to have links to the Native press?

*Jeannette:* We will in an indirect sense. Our publishing workshop is not concerned with the technical aspects of production but with the critical thinking that needs to be done around Native literature. What is Native

literature? What is *good* in Native literature? What is the focus? How will the layout and design of the book make a format for the book? Who is the audience and how do you reach it? Theytus Press will play a part in that they've agreed to come to do some workshops. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, an editor for *The Wicazo SA Review*, a Native review journal at Eastern Washington University, will work with the students on the form used for reviewing Native literature.

*Janice:* And who are the students?

*Jeannette:* Students have applied to us from different parts of Canada. Students have various levels of expertise and have been working in different areas, such as journalistic or creative writing. We're going to be really careful in selecting the first-year students so we may end up with a relatively small group, anywhere from 10 to 20 people, likely about a dozen or less students.

*Janice:* You've just recorded one of your oratories on a tape. How did you come to work with dub poets?

*Jeannette:* Patrick Andrate is a Jamaican person living in Canada who was really fascinated with the rhythms in Native oratory and poetry. He suggested we put together Native poetry with reggae and made the tape "Poetry is Not a Luxury." My music in that piece was not set to reggae. I collaborated with Selwyn Rediro, a classical guitarist. It wasn't actually dub poetry. In the second tape, "Theft of Paradise," I read poetry with reggae music. The latest exercise is political oratory and doesn't have reggae music. I was invited to deliver a key-note address to a gathering of national Native youth in Ottawa. I wrote a speech which had actually been printed up and distributed in the conference kit. But in listening to the presentations prior to mine, I realized that everyone making presentations talked down and preached to the youth, saying, you gotta do this, you gotta change this, you're seriously delinquent and so on. What they really need at this time is somebody to lift them up, to encourage and tell them, you're needed, you're useful, you're valuable. You're the next generation. You have everything in you; all you need to do is work with it. So I thought, well, the hell with the speech that I had written; I'm gonna go up there and talk to these people. So I said, well, if you wanna read my written speech, look in the kit because I'm just gonna talk to you. I talked to them in oratory style. My music group was doing the sound and they taped the speech called "We are Valuable."

*Janice:* You've worked with the artists in different cultural communities. What is your relationship to women of colour who are immigrants to Canada over the last several generations or to white women who are

recent immigrants?

*Jeannette:* To be honest I haven't given that a lot of thought. We all face practical problems in terms of not being able to find a publisher interested in the writing of ethnic minority groups. We struggle. First of all, we have to speak and produce in English and fit into comfortable genres for the Canadian reading public. Female writers of any colour face the same thing because the publishing world is dominated by male thinking and male words. That's a reality for all of us. Commercial publishing is restrictive. There's a lot of good information that should be state-supported because that information is necessary but we're all dependent on free enterprise and shouldn't be. In literature, we get a corrupt picture of the world because of that.

*Janice:* In the process of our conversation I found tears welling up in my eyes because your oratory here has been very powerful. You have an ability to move people with your conviction and that's a very wonderful skill, gift and talent.

*Jeannette:* I feel good about that. That's one of the things that tells me we're connecting on an honest level. In the last five years that I've been travelling to workshops, lectures, and readings, I've been surprised that European peoples have a fear of feeling and being exposed. But if I am honest and truthful and open up and touch those parts of the person where there is feeling and sensitivity about issues, it sometimes comes as a surprise to them to react really emotionally and not know what to do about it. Sometimes they even apologize for it. I say no, that's what being human is about. If we can connect at that level between people, between individuals, between sexes, races or classes, that's what's gonna make the difference and bring about the healing we human beings have to have to bring us closer, to work together, and live together, care for and love one another, and look at change passing onto the next generation. It's not gonna be politics that will connect people. To touch and understand one another is to bridge our differences and that makes me feel really good, happy and clean in knowing that I've connected. I don't feel embarrassed or bad for the person. Sometimes people do feel bad but I try to reassure them and say no, it's good if we can connect this way, it's good, it's good. What I intended was to connect that way, was to get something across, and it's happened.

1. This interview will appear in Janice Williamson, *Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers*. Toronto: U of T Press, 1992.