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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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Résumé de l'article

For the Aboriginal storyteller, the politics of story and the act of telling involves mediating the relationship between languages and the world views they produce and represent. As Armstrong explains, for Aboriginal storytellers, this process requires an awareness of how non-linear First Language literature has been transformed by the linear imperatives of the English language and White Western scholarship. Dualities present in original language texts are often compromised when translated into English, and must be recovered, if not re-imagined, by the Aboriginal storyteller whose ability to create “the thread which becomes history” can subvert English literary aesthetics and ensure cultural autonomy. First Language writers and scholars must keep in mind the specific challenges faced by Aboriginal storytellers from various historical periods in order to fully understand the real power and aesthetic of those works. N. Scott Momaday’s The Man Made of Words addresses many of these issues, and explains how we might re-imagine and re-story the things that are of us.

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Keynote Address: The Aesthetic Qualities of Aboriginal Writing

Jeannette Armstrong

Good morning, and thank you very much. I am really happy to be here. I haven't been travelling very much over the last few years. It's a pleasure to come here, especially with this collection of scholars and writers present. I am seeing some friends, and some writers and some other people whose works I've been reading, and I am really looking forward to today.

I want to give everyone greetings from the En'owkin Centre, especially from the young writers and artists there who are all wishing they could be here too. I also want to thank the University of Manitoba and Emma and Renate for organizing this conference; it is a dialogue that I have been waiting for and looking forward to. As an Aboriginal writer I am aware that there are few events that give support to the Aboriginal writers in Canada, and this working conference is one. And I say "working," meaning that we are here to create and contribute to an ongoing dialogue between and among Aboriginal writers and scholars.

Having been given the conference title over a year ago, which led in all kinds of directions, I have decided to focus this talk, and the area I am thinking about *first* is original language literatures, particularly because I am a speaker of my first language. Rather than trying to look at Aboriginal writing with too broad a spectrum, pretending to know everything about the great diversity out there, I want to explore my own writing in the Okanagan language, which hasn't even been published. I also thought about my time at the University of Victoria, when I was more or less forced, because I enrolled in the creative writing program, to take a number of courses on literary studies, particularly literary aesthetics. I still don't know what the term aesthetics means, I have no idea what the word actually means, and I've been sorting that one out for about

twenty-five years now. And I'm still sorting it out, so this paper is part of that process.

There are four areas relevant to this talk. These areas may be of interest to other Aboriginal writers and also to scholars concerned with the idea of Aboriginal writing and the notion of aesthetics in Aboriginal writing. The area that I have a particular interest in is First Language literatures, both oral and written. When I say written, I am aware of how many hundreds of languages there are in Canada, in the United States, or for that matter, anywhere in North America. So I realize how small that window is for me as a reader, because other than Okanagan, everything has come to me through the window of translation into English. In other words, how do you scrunch everything up and fit it into that window, so that it can be read on the other side?

I am thinking in particular of aesthetics in approach, style, and format. For a First Language speaker it is critical to understand the aesthetics of oral storytelling. I recognize, from my own Okanagan culture, how different it is from English orality. There seems to be a lack of — maybe I'm just not reading enough — or an absence of scholarly works written by Aboriginal scholars who are storytellers. I haven't run across any, so if you have, tell me about it. First Language literatures are mostly out there to meet the demand from schools where First Languages are taught. This itself presents a problem in terms of aesthetics and First Language literatures; as a result First Language texts, whether they're oral or written, are circulated to a very small audience.

And so, that leads me to look at other things, like policy and support for Original Language literatures. I think there is a future for these literatures. We should look forward to literatures coming into print, and we should help make that happen if we are doing our work properly in our communities to recover language in everyday use.

Language in everyday use requires literature, requires story, and requires writers and storytellers to come together and represent the consciousness of the people. That is not happening, and so our languages are slowly dying. I think literature plays a major role in this rebuilding project; we need to re-examine how we are working within our communities to make language revitalization happen. I myself love reading translations from other cultures of the world, written first in their original language and then translated into English, because of the way they position their

cultures and their aesthetics, and so on. It's *never* the same when it is in English written from that tradition. I think that probably will be true of all Aboriginal languages coming forward and then being translated.

I have been writing in my language. I became literate in Okanagan about five years ago; I can read and write it now. Initially I could just speak it, but I took the time to become literate in the standard writing system of the Okanagan. I'm fully fluent in Okanagan, and I am a trained storyteller. Doing my own translations is very exciting; I often think, "Wow! I could never have thought of writing that in English, I could never have put that together!" But because I wrote it in Okanagan first, it makes such a huge difference. I am very excited about the possibilities of knowing an Aboriginal language, and have been promoting its benefits to the extent that I've been badgering people at a federal level (e.g., The Canada Council for the Arts), about sponsoring a conference on this very topic — and it is finally going to happen. En'owkin is hosting a national discussion by First Language Aboriginal writers in late November of this year. This is just a discussion, a roundtable, and it's by invitation, so unfortunately I can't invite all of you.

At this roundtable, we are going to bring together writers and storytellers of First Language literatures. Our discussions will be focused on aesthetic issues; we will also consider the difficulties of being confined and defined by our unique language knowledge. We will also look at the realities today of getting support from the Canada Council, Canadian Heritage, and other agencies, to produce work that maybe only twenty people or thirty people can read, and so on. And *that* is going to be the essence, I think, of a really important dialogue that will take place. I am sure that the outcome of that discussion will be shared broadly with others. I am really looking forward to it and excited about what I am going to hear, so I am not going to try and provide any definition of First Nations or tribal aesthetics until after that.

At the same time, I am particularly interested in First Language speakers. What happens when their words are translated into English, into a second language — how does an English literary aesthetic shape the end product? For me the idea of auto-translation is an important one. I want to look at two examples of auto-translation from Okanagan into English. I use those examples because I am an Okanagan speaker. I also know the two writers I am talking about. In particular, how does the use of language, the rhythm in the words, the imagery that is drawn on,

the form and the structure of the words stream forward from the First Language when presented in translation? So far there has not been very much scholarly writing in that area.

For me, "auto-translation" from Okanagan to English means the following: that I speak the language, I think in the language, then I translate my thinking from my first language into English, and finally I write it in English. That's my definition, in case someone has another meaning. In particular I have been thinking about the works I have been coming across from Okanagan women writers, whether they are known or unknown, or published as a result of a research project that I have undertaken with Dr. Lally Grauer on the history of the Okanagan. We started this project about three years ago now, when we were both on the steering committee for developing the Indigenous Studies degree program at the Okanagan University College. We realized then that one of the things that was missing was a history told from the point of view of women of the Okanagan, both Aboriginal women and pioneer women. And so we thought, "Oh, what a good idea, let's pull something like that together," and started doing some research.

Right now, we are still at the stage of compiling texts and getting some ideas of what we want to do with them. My contribution draws on the works of Okanagan women that have been published; I am examining what is being said, how it's being said, and how it's being presented, which for me has become a really important issue. One example I can think of in the early settlement period of the Okanagan, which probably a lot of you are familiar with, is the writing and auto-translation into English of the stories, logs, and autobiographical work of Mourning dove, a prominent Okanagan woman whose writings spanned the period from the late 1800s into the 1930s. In her published writing there was the horrendous kind of interference that just makes you cringe; her editors frequently corrected her grammar and so whitewashed her meaning, sometimes to a point that totally obliterates her auto-translation and her use of language.

I have also read the words of Elder Harold Robinson which were taped and typed by Wendy Wickwire. I have examined those from my own literary view as an Okanagan, realizing that Harry was one of my oral story teachers in Okanagan, not in English, so it's really interesting for me to read his auto-translation, because he spoke to Wendy, and she taped him. The book was the typed version of what he spoke to her in English. And so when looking at Harry's stories with my fluency in Okanagan

and knowledge of the oral story style of my people, I realize that I read these words from a privileged view that few others can access. I think for that reason my critique of those words might be important beyond the framework of English that is provided to others who are not Okanagan. And so, I will share just a little bit of my response to Robinson's texts, as recorded by Wickwire, with you.

I read in these words the style of the deeply understated humour that is practised in the Okanagan, in terms of nuance and meaning, which is present in our story style, and really hard to pick up by other people. And even harder to pick up in English. But I read Harry, for instance, and just laugh, because I know he is being cynical and nobody else reading it knows it but me. And that's so wonderful. I read in those words the rhythm, the imagery which is uniquely reflective of Okanagan settings. The way we see the world, the way we cherish it and appreciate how the world works, comes through in those texts, both in Mourning Dove's narratives and in Harry's stories.

I've examined other writers; there are books of poetry and short stories by a man named Benny Able, only published privately in limited numbers. So I have a collection of his works, and smaller collections of other people's works like that, which I have been reading and sending to people who are interested in these issues. Able's poetry is written from an Okanagan language view, not an English language view. So, in terms of that, I look at his use of rhythm and imagery, and pay special attention to his use of subtle juxtapositions, which are part of a subtext accessible only to those initiated in the Okanagan sacred text. This other layer of access is really clear to me both in Harry's works and Mourning Dove's works, especially the Okanagan tales. And I think in her letters Mourning Dove mentions this strategy. It is really clear to me what Mourning Dove is saying between the lines — to me as an Okanagan, but not necessarily to me as an Okanagan initiated into the ceremonies, into their meanings in the texts arising from all our origin stories in the sacred texts. That stuff is exciting to me, that kind of writing and that kind of mastery of juxtapositions; we need to spend more time as Aboriginal speakers and writers, thinking about how we might bring that forward. I think here also of the wonder such works provide, leading to all manner of side roads, cul-de-sacs, dead ends, and then leaping right back to the original path to continue the story. That kind of non-linearity for me, in terms of the writing style, feels familiar. It feels so absolutely familiar to me as an Okanagan person, in terms of how

it resonates with community. It's kind of like sitting around the table at home and having my grandmother, my aunt, and my uncle sitting right there, all conversing and talking, and everybody throwing in different little memories, stories, and side jokes here and there. We all know what that's about, added pieces to the main conversation, and just flowing through, rather than trying to figure out, "Well, what's he talking about? Why is he bringing that in at this time?" Or just going with it, because of the voice being there, adding that substance of community.

So, some of the works I read that way and find that familiarity, find that depth of community that isn't there in English, or rarely there in English, because of the English text's confinement to a kind of linearity that's expected by publishers and readers. I think of how oral literatures themselves, regardless of whether in First Language or English, subvert organization on the page. How oral literatures themselves actually have taken a direction that I have seen, at least in terms of moving Aboriginal literatures away from the kind of organized little area on a page to a much more non-linear process of writing and deconstructing the linearity of organization on the page. I think that's an important development in the aesthetic of presenting oral literatures as written literatures. Also important is how the written text itself asks for, or demands, more than the linearity that's available. Finding that orality on the written page creates a new aesthetic: that is for me an extremely exciting aspect of literary aesthetics, of reading those literatures and looking at the writing, and trying to find those areas that I can talk about — that are concerned with the telling, *the telling* of the story, but must do it in terms of writing.

So the challenge in writing is to find a way to organize it as a piece of writing and to show how that telling invites all the things that are present in orality, but of course for obvious reasons cannot be present on the written page. For example, the dramatic gesture and the vocalization of expression that is present in orality, that somehow gets silenced on the page, and the emphasis, and where the emphasis might be, in terms of dramatic gesture are difficult to express. The rhythmic flow and pacing that is so easy to do and present orally is very difficult to organize on the page. All of those things I look at in my reading of those works and wonder, "How did they do that? How did they manage to make it oral, like they were just standing there telling the story to me?" It is difficult to do on the page and achieve the same dramatic emphasis as with an oral delivery.

My point is that First Language writers themselves must begin to examine such works from various historical periods up to the present, to give us a view of the real power and aesthetic of those works, rather than to focus on how they might withstand the rigours of scholarly criticisms concerned largely with cohesions and grammar, that is within the Western notions of grammatical structure and the linearity of those texts. I am hoping that in the next ten, twelve years or so, there will be new ground broken in those areas.

Another topic I want to explore is the difficulty of portraying dualities that are present in original language texts when they are translated into English. I am thinking not only of archetypes, which typically have to do with the duality of the sacred and the profane, but most significantly of the use of metaphoric imagery containing the profane juxtaposed with the sacred. In particular, I want to consider the depth of the use of the profane in our Aboriginal language stories. I am not talking about profanity. I am talking about the use of the profane in our original language texts and their meaning, although profanity does play a big role, especially when juxtaposed with a sacred text and its sacred meanings. I draw, for example, on our Okanagan coyote stories, which are similar to other coyote stories from other cultures. I know that, and I have read some of them, but that's not for me to talk about; it's for people from those cultures and those languages to talk about. I know that, for the Okanagan, mostly sanitized versions of our stories exist in English, whether through auto-translation or not. I happen to know the Okanagan stories in their original form. I happened to have learned them, and to have embodied them, and to understand them. And they would knock your socks off right now, if I told you one of them.

Mourning dove, who was my great-aunt, was a courageous woman in terms of the ground that she was breaking in her time. Even writing, and writing in English, and writing some of our stories. But even she barely touched on coyote stories in her texts. Yet, like her and all Okanagan fluent speakers, I have heard the stories from childhood upward, and my mind hasn't rotted in my skull yet. In fact, the opposite has occurred. I enjoy a world view that is unhampered by the long shadow of sexual repression cast by Western notions of morality. In English, the coyote stories sound profane, even to myself — and it may have to do with the English language, rather than the original language, and it may have to do with the presentation of those kinds of moralities.

In English, coyote stories sound profane, but in Okanagan, in my language, and in my appreciation of them, they are humour-centred and without blemish in terms of their purity. Okanagan people create the imagery and create powerful juxtapositions with the sacred in a way that we appreciate deeply and understand. Like the clowns of our dances, we have — I will call them short-house dances, because we don't have longhouses, we don't have long timber in the Okanagan, we don't have the West Coast cedars. We do have dances in the winter, which are similar to the big house dances on the West Coast, and I grew up in that culture. My mother was a longhouse leader, or short-house leader as they call them in the Okanagan, and I am an interpreter. I have been an interpreter since I was eleven or twelve years old of the sacred text of those dances, so I interpret — in the Okanagan they say "at the pole," and what that means is that I speak the high language of the Okanagan, and interpret the medicine people when they are speaking in sacred text, because it is kind of like academic language and its differences from the English spoken on the street. There are lots of meanings that are contained in short form, that are spoken, and fly over the heads of those people that are not initiated, and I try to give them some context.

In those instances, the clowns, the people that are jokers — we don't call them clowns in our society, we call them jokers — and the people that are jokers who come to our dances play that role of the joker. They play that role not just to make people laugh, although that is an important aspect of it. In terms of the text, they symbolize the juxtaposition between what is sacred and what is humorous. Any of you who are speakers and who have experienced that kind of juxtaposition of humour and the sacred will understand what I am speaking of. I think we need more work to talk about that, because it emerges in those literatures, it emerges in Aboriginal literatures even in English, and I think we need to talk more about it, dialogue more about it, think more about it in terms of what that aesthetic is, what it does, and where we might find it in the works of people that are writing.

I think about those jokers in our dances — who make laughter, who make laughter specifically *because* what is being presented is serious. They specifically bring things that are sacred forward into the human realm as if on a platter to us, so that we as humans have a way to be able to make contact with those things. Not enough texts in English use this aesthetic to reach a level of purity. I think here of writers like Louise Halfe, Maria

Campbell, and others who masterfully incorporate this aesthetic into their works. Emma, I remember being absolutely thrilled and excited by that work you did so many years ago, and looking at it because of the humour in it, and looking at it because of the way you did that in your writing. I realized even then when I read it, this person is a speaker, this person is speaking from her language. The thinking, the juxtaposition of the cynicism and the humour, and in some ways the profane, for me, was incredible. We need to consider how we might read that, how we might work to change some views in terms of morality and writing and in doing so provide the Aboriginal writers with more freedom. In terms of their own works, my point is that Aboriginal writers break new ground in literature by drawing on original story in this way.

The last point I wanted to make has to do less with the aesthetic of Aboriginal literature and situating it in relation to other literatures, and more to do with the ways in which recording and auto-translation can remold the teller and alter the relationship of telling within the community. And here I am on shaky ground, and really I am asking a question more than making a claim. I am exploring the role of the teller, and even that word "role" for me isn't adequate — role is not the right word that I am groping for, trying to find to explain to you what I am touching on here. Maybe I haven't explored it enough to find the right word, but I will share with you what I am thinking anyway. I am thinking about the role of the teller, subsequently the writer, the Aboriginal writer, from the perspectives that I have been speaking about.

And here is where, as I said, I am groping for the right words to talk about of Aboriginal tellers as creators of an aesthetics of culture; their ability to create what I call, in one of my works, the thread that becomes history. There is a meditative process to that dialogue, that our stories and our literatures bring to our community, as well as to other communities — the other, which surrounds us continuously; here I am mindful of the comments made by N. Scott Momaday in his book *The Man Made of Words*. That, for me, is an important book. It was a turning point for me, in terms of reading the essay and thinking, "Yah! Yah, exactly!" You know, I sat there and I read it, and I shared it with my students, and I thought "Wow!" You know, the things he said in that essay about how we as Aboriginal people form cultures, how we reach back into history, and how we re-image and re-story the things that are of us. The things that we are, regardless of the migrations and regardless of the assimilations and

regardless of loss, sometimes deep losses in our communities. I think of how we bring memories upward from the mouths of our parents, in the words, in the construct of our words, in the construct of our thinking, of our grandparents, our families, our relatives, our land, our stories, and our sacred people, sacred spiritual aspects of our being that we bring into our consciousness, that we bring into our world, as well as within the closed sacred circles of our ceremonies and goings on.

I think of how I am doing that, transferring that through our literatures. I am not talking particularly about traditional things; I am talking about the stuff that we are in our communities, whatever that might be — the stuff of our lives, as I have phrased it, as I have used it in some of my poems. In transferring that through our literatures, we mediate culture. We, as writers, create cultural artifacts for the future, just as my great-aunt did for me so many years ago, in her autobiographical stories, in her coyote stories, and in her letters.

I think of how what is transferred becomes an influence, how it mediates what from then on is told and what is written about the Okanagan. And here too I think about Aboriginal writers speaking in that way, thinking they are speaking from the margins and in some ways being designated to writing from the margins and the seeming act of much meaningful discourse with that whole audience. I have to reorganize my own understanding because those writings are not marginal. Those writings are a place in our community and must be that. And *that* is so liberating for me; *that* is so inspirational for me. I am getting emotional here a little bit … I originally felt that speaking from the margins meant silencing the diversity, of local Aboriginal culture, local utterance, nuance, style, meaning, and metaphor, subsuming us into Canadian culture, into North American culture, into globalization. And you have heard some of my more passionate speeches, some of you, about that issue, and the railing against it, the cry to focus on the local and preserving it. And I have been rethinking my approach — imagine that! I think of the responsibility we have as authorities in culturalism, and I want to place my words really carefully where that is concerned. Because I *am* saying that we *do* speak from cultural authority — we *do* — whether from the margins, or from deep within our traditional language. And I think we must ever be aware and vigilant of that. And I think in a lot of ways that is what the conference is centred around, and as writers reading to this conference, we must ever be vigilant of that authority within the

diversity of our Aboriginal cultures.

Having said all this, my point is that we have a place in our community, as ones who bring the pieces together, whatever those pieces may be, to make a picture that others can then see, creating new pictures of the pieces left to us of all cultures, the place of one who is healer, historian, medicine maker, and prophet. Therein lies the politics for me of story and telling, as mediator of what survives of a culture, as language, as world view. What stories remain is based on who tells the stories based on what their reasons are, and as such, continuously mediates what survives. Situating the aesthetic of Aboriginal writers places focus in Aboriginal writers and their themes and more broadly in the construction of ourselves within the contemporary. The fact is that it is we who textualize our origins, it is we who textualize our histories, our lives, our dreams, our griefs, and we who move the aesthetic of Aboriginal literatures from the common text of the settler into a new place in our communities. And that gives me great joy and solace, not being placed in their literature. It gives me great joy to be in the margins, knowing that. And I look out at you, and the writers who have been working diligently in staying in the margins, and writing and continuing to move everything forward, and I look out at you and it moves me to know what great magic you are making. And I thank you all.

Work Cited

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