

## Listening to Silences in Ruby Slipperjack's *Silent Words*

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# Listening to Silences in Ruby Slipperjack's *Silent Words*

DEE HORNE

In time I learned how to listen to those stories, how to see beyond their casual appearance. To say that they contained lessons would be wrong; instead, they crystallized various scenarios within which some choices would clearly be wise and others inappropriate. The ultimate choice, however, would always be mine. From Charlie, then, I learned how to listen, for he never gave up hope that my blunt westerner's mind might slow down and be alert to nuance.

Rupert Ross, *Dancing With A Ghost* xviii-xix

**I** *SILENT WORDS* (1992), Ruby Slipperjack describes a fictional Ojibway community in Northern Ontario. Danny Lynx — alienated from his family and community — runs away from home, and by forming relationships with diverse First Nations people during his travels, is able to validate his Ojibway culture. When he later returns to his community he discovers that relatives and friends have helped him throughout his journey. Although the narrative is in the first person, it does not just convey Danny's point of view. Instead, the focus is on the group (Danny's Ojibway community) rather than on the individual. Like many First Nations oral stories, the narrative does not offer readers any clear-cut resolution, but leaves the story open-ended. It concludes with Danny's accidental shooting of his father and his realization that the silent words of memories will always be with him.

Within this First Nations context, Slipperjack conveys the multiple meanings of silences. She alludes to the ways in which colonizers have silenced First Nations. Danny's silences signal not only his loss of his language but also his loss for words. The narrative illustrates some of the ways in which colonizers have attempted to silence and eradicate First Nations and their cultures. Danny lives between two worlds — that of his Ojibway community and that of the dominant society. While the narrative alludes to the impact of colonization, the focus is on the daily activities of Ojib-

way and other First Nations people. In this way, it affirms First Nations and offers readers an alternative discourse and a pedagogy of silences.

The author employs a hybrid strategy in which she writes in English to critique the written as well as the spoken English of colonizers, yet uses *implicature* to convey Ojibway pedagogy. I am using *implicature* here to refer to the implied meanings, the unspoken words and feelings between the lines of print. Moreover, I am drawing on Adam Jaworski's definition in which he writes that *implicature* is the "unsaid elements of the utterance" (79). What Danny and others leave unsaid is often just as important as what they say. While Slipperjack is careful not to describe sacred rituals and ceremonies, she alludes to unspoken, but implied, Ojibway traditions. Rather than participating in binary oppositions between oral and written traditions, Slipperjack uses *implicature* to convey Ojibway traditions not only through but also between the silent words of print. This strategy draws attention to the gap between cultures, but also addresses a central paradox: the author writes what apparently cannot be written. In her discussion of her first novel *Honour the Sun* (1987), Slipperjack expresses some things "like a shrug of the shoulder, that can mean so much" by attempting to "parallel" them, "use English words" and "devise situations where the English language would fit, still keeping the Native content intact" (qtd. in Lutz 206). In attempting to "get the flavour" of what she would "say in the Native language," her main concern is to ensure that "the feeling comes across" in English (qtd. in Lutz 206).

This parallelism strategy, also evident in *Silent Words*, initially appears to exemplify colonial mimicry; the writer rethinks her experience in English rather than altering the language so that English speaking readers rethink their experience. What prevents Slipperjack's writing from falling into the trap of colonial mimicry is her determination to convey "the feeling between the sentences":

As long as I can see the feeling, then I can still understand it, because it is not just words. If the feeling is not there, then it is worthless. In the stories I have to have that feeling between the sentences. If it is not there, then I have lost something. (qtd. in Lutz 210)

In this way, Slipperjack interrogates the colonial violence that First Nations, and specifically this fictional Ojibway community, have experienced.

She calls into question the language of the colonizers, thereby eluding the problem of colonial mimicry. She endeavors to re-form the English language. Specifically, she uses regional dialect, colloquial language and silences to affirm Ojibway variants of English and convey a First Nations

experience. The author reconfigures colonial language and discourse and re-presents it so that the language works for her; it expresses the silent words of this Ojibway community.

Danny Lynx has been doubly silenced. Settler society refuses to acknowledge his presence as a subject with agency. Settlers often perceive Danny as an object that is relegated to a position of alterity and inferiority. For instance, Tom, Danny's friend, resorts to stereotypical name-calling to disempower Danny: "Why should I shut up? I don't need a stupid Injun telling me to shut up!" (9). Moreover, Danny's family also silences him by denying abuse. Initially, his father neglects and silences him. His father is unable and unwilling to listen when Danny attempts to tell him about Sarah's, his stepmother's, abuse. His father, for example, refuses to hear when Danny attempts to tell him the truth about his stepmother's abusive actions and duplicitous words. When Danny tells his father about the times that Sarah has hit him, his father "believed her" and "yelled" at him "never to tell stories about her again" (5). According to Danny, "that really hurt. Dad picked her side" (5).

It is important to note here that Danny's father suffers from his partner's deception as well as the colonization of First Nations by settler society. For Danny's father, Billy, and other members of this Ojibway community, town represents the settler society and the negative effects of its assimilation process. For example, Danny's father was healthy when he was trapping, but becomes unhealthy when he moves into town. Billy does paperwork in town because he can no longer make a living trapping. Danny's father, Billy, and others in this community have been dispossessed and have experienced social and personal alienation as well as spiritual impoverishment.

In attempting to emulate settler society, as represented by the move from their trapline to town, Danny and his family adopt the lifestyle and language of colonizers. When colonized subjects attempt to mimic colonizers, they are disavowed and relegated to the status of colonized objects. The colonized receive the message that they are "almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha 89). Thus, colonial mimicry warps subject formation because it creates what Gregory Bateson terms a "double bind." Danny is caught in a double bind as he tries to negotiate conflicting cultural frames.<sup>1</sup> He and his family, in their efforts to assimilate, abandon their Ojibway language and culture. Moreover, the violence and abuse that Danny experiences are indicative of the alienation and unhealthiness that arise from assimilation. He and his father experience the dispossession and fragmentation of the warped subject formation that is a product of

colonial mimicry.

Danny learns that how a listener interprets a speaker's words largely depends on whom a listener perceives to be legitimate as well as what the listener wants to hear. For instance, his father validates Sarah's version of events. Later, a vendor on a train insists that Danny pay for candy that a fellow passenger has already paid for and given to him. Although the vendor knows Danny does not owe him money, he discredits the boy (22). The vendor's abuse of his position of power reveals his racism, his colonial assumptions of superiority.

Equally destructive, and central to the book, is the implied silence that is the loss of First Nations languages. Slipperjack writes in English, not Ojibway, and Danny frequently speaks in English. Although he can speak Ojibway, he rarely does. For example, when other First Nations children ask him why he does not speak Ojibway, he replies: "Yeah, I just haven't had much practice talking it, but I can understand pretty good!" (30). He then asks them: "Why don't you speak English?" Clearly, Danny exemplifies a generation of young First Nations people who have lost much of their language and much of their culture. When his new acquaintances just shrug, Danny realizes that he does not "have an answer for that" and he tells them his name in Ojibway. Only then do they "relax" and listen to him (30).

Danny's dilemma with his father and his dilemma as an Ojibway contending with settler society further point to a central problem that the narrative introduces: how do you speak to those who do not want to listen? The narrative addresses this question by subverting the silence/violence of colonialism through Danny and his telling of his story. In the course of his journey, Danny works through the destructive silencing that he experienced earlier.

Slipperjack subverts this loss of language by making the silence — the absence of Ojibway language — speak. Other aspects of Ojibway culture must fill this gap. One of these is pedagogy. Danny undergoes a learning process in which he acquires experiential knowledge and realizes the value of sharing and community. He begins to understand the First Nations expression "all my relations," and his father later reminds him that his Ojibway community is "like one big family" (244).<sup>2</sup>

Danny's Ojibway experience and the re-visioning that he learns are distinct from the binary thinking embedded in colonial stereotypes. Silent words facilitate the cultivation of awareness that is necessary for a holotropic vision<sup>3</sup> and harmonious balance with oneself and one's environment. According to Ol' Jim, many First Nations have lost the "level

of thought and knowledge to be able to see and talk” (97) with the Memegwesiwag. More specifically, they have become alienated from their spirituality because they have lost this awareness (97). For Ol’ Jim, what is crucial is paying attention to ourselves, our fellow human beings, and our environment. We must pay attention with our entire being, not just by listening to what is spoken, if we hope to achieve a more balanced state of awareness.

Slipperjack challenges Eurocentric notions of “progress” and of First Nations cultures as “less advanced” and suggests, to borrow Dennis Tedlock’s words, that “we have lost sight of one whole dimension” (Tedlock xx). For many Ojibway people, there are “two different realities” that are “concurrent and simultaneous as well as impinging upon one another constantly”: “The kind of vision we are talking about is indeed a ‘total way of seeing’ which encompasses the essential elements of ordinary reality and seeks out the all-important manifestations of non-ordinary reality” (Dumont 79). From Ol’ Jim and others, Danny learns that he has the ability to transform himself by re-memorating and practicing his culture.<sup>4</sup> He acquires a holotropic, rather than a linear, vision wherein he relies on all of his senses — his entire being — and participates in both “ordinary” and “non-ordinary” reality. He attains this vision through silence, not words. The more he learns to pay attention with his whole being, the less important words become.<sup>5</sup>

As the old Indian woman tells him, Mr. Old Man Indian believes that Danny talks too much and she advises him to develop a new kind of vision: “Use your eyes an feel inside you wat da udder is feelin. Dat way, dere is no need for words. Your ears are for ‘earin all da udder tings ‘round you” (60). The next day, Danny observes: “No one said a word, but we said a lot. I was learning” (61).

Interactions between Danny and those he meets are frequently structured through silence and heighten his dependence on his other senses; talk becomes secondary. As part of the continuum of speech, silence is a form of communication that is subject to ambiguity. While it allows for ambiguity and points to the slippage between language and meaning, silence is part of the continuum of speech. It communicates despite the ambiguity while articulating the gaps between settlers and First Nations, language and meaning, feelings and words, and between the world and our apprehension of it. Multifaceted, silence can signify many meanings. Slipperjack uses it in several contexts to signify a wide range of emotions and experiences. Given the many facets and the ambiguity of silence, the question arises: how can individuals decipher meaning when silence is

subject to such diverse interpretations?

The answer lies in context rather than text. Drawing on artistic principles of foregrounding, nuance, spatial placement, perspective, hue, and tone, Slipperjack avoids didacticism and signals the importance of context. Even the cover is designed to illustrate the importance of learning how to decode visual stimuli. For example, the title and Slipperjack's painting on the cover of her novel frame the silent words and inform how we read the text.<sup>6</sup> The picture in turn is framed by a blue border with red right angles. Next to a placid lake, there is an unpopulated sandy beach with Jack pines, birch, and other trees in the background. The painting is realistic and resembles a photograph. What is immediately apparent is the tranquillity and solitude — the silence — of this wilderness scene. As a representational picture, this depiction of Nature is evocative, requiring the viewer to draw on his/her feelings and memories. At a first glance the picture appears to convey stillness, but upon closer inspection movement is apparent. The wind is side shore, as is evident from the ripples perpendicular to the shore. The sand shows evidence of tracks (like traces of language), but there are no human footprints. How much or how little viewers see is dependent on how aware they are and whether they know enough about their environment/Nature to decipher its language — cloud formations, ripples, and reflections in the water, tracks in the sand, and the movement and direction of bending trees. The curve along the beach highlights the border between land and water. By placing it slightly off-centre, Slipperjack draws readers into the picture so that they, too, can see how environment offers a language of silence. Slipperjack explains: "Everything is tied with nature.... They may be just rocks to you, but .. these are things that we know the land by.... The land, rocks, trees are part of our history, a part of us" (qtd. in Lutz 207).

Ol' Jim, for example, demonstrates the inadequacy of spoken and written words, and suggests that we need to learn how to listen — to pay attention to the world around us and to our inner feelings, thoughts, and memories. From him, Danny learns that words can become a source of meaningless distraction — white noise. Ol' Jim teaches Danny how to cultivate his senses and feelings to raise his level of awareness. When they reach a clearing, he asks Danny to "tell me what you see" (123). Still wearing cultural blinders, Danny interprets the word "see" literally and relies on visual clues instead of using all of his senses and faculties to decipher the signs. Danny is unable to make deductions from his observations because he is only partially aware; his vision is limited. Ol' Jim is silent, but "rolled his eyes in exasperation" (123). This gesture encourages Danny to

heighten his awareness and to deduce signs of former human habitation. Ol' Jim later draws Danny's attention to the fact that he relies too much on visual stimuli: "You are getting better at noticing things, but let your eyes tell you all of what they see" (143).

Through non-verbal communication, Ol' Jim encourages Danny to cultivate his awareness. Unlike verbal language, the language of silence is non-intrusive, non-directive, and non-authoritarian. He often does not tell Danny how to interpret these lessons, but allows him to discover their meaning for himself. Impatience impedes awareness, and both awareness and memory are essential to survival:

You [Danny] rush too much, you know that? ... You should take time to look around and remember how things are, son. Would you remember how we got here if you had to do the trip all over again without me? (129)

First Nations languages, oral traditions, and histories are passed from one generation to the next through social and individual memories. As Ol' Jim explains, Elders play a pedagogical role because they educate the young through their stories, lives, and actions; thus, this process of re-memoration contributes to the survival of First Nations (143-44).

Throughout the text, Slipperjack illustrates the complex web between memory, history, and land. As she points out to Lutz, land is central to First Nations subject formation because it is their history (Lutz 207); land is an integral part of their stories, lifestyle, traditions, and culture(s) generally.

Memory also plays an integral role in subject formation. The past influences and shapes the present and the present modifies how the individual interprets the past. In the concluding passage of the novel, Slipperjack employs silence as a metaphor for a language of feelings and memories that document Danny's history: "You can't escape the silent words of your memory. They grow on you, layer after layer, year after year, documenting you from beginning to end, from the core to the surface. I built my cabin with silent words" (250). The author who chooses to write silence often falls into the trap of writing about silence; the writer tells, instead of showing it. Slipperjack, however, circumvents this didacticism by using metaphor and imagery. Silence as a state can be concep-

tualized metaphorically as a container, whereas an act(ivity) of silence can be conceptualized metaphorically as a substance (Lakoff and Johnson 30). It is useful to consider the example of the difference between a play



and pantomime. In a play, silence is conceptualized as an activity and can be treated as a substance, whereas in pantomime, silence is “a state in which their performance takes place,” and thus is “a *container* that provides a wider frame for the viewing of a show” (Jaworski 146-47). In Slipper-jack’s novel, silent words are concrete, non-analytical events,<sup>7</sup> but they also convey unspoken words, psychological and spiritual states. For instance, Danny learns to listen to the voices of ancestors at the sandcliff when Ol’ Jim does not answer him; instead, Ol’ Jim’s silence allows him to experience fear and respect for the dead (172-73).

Just as Ol’ Jim is a pedagogical influence for Danny so is Old Man Indian. He teaches Danny the importance of the land — the importance of not showing disrespect for Nature by poisoning the environment (56). In explaining the importance of respecting and listening to Nature, Old Man Indian informs Danny that people who do not hear or see this are “stone deaf an bline” (56). He criticizes those that “’ab gibin up da hon-our dat was gibin to you by da Creator!” and says: “It is da people you ’ab spat on an pitied who will stan up an show you da way. We ’ab not for-godden!” (57). Old Man Indian teaches Danny that all human beings are part of the web of creation and, like “da leaf,” follow the natural cycle from birth to death (59). Here, and throughout the text, dialect validates Ojibway variants and offers an alternative discourse, one that writes over colonial language and foregrounds Danny’s Ojibway culture.

Slipperjack’s use of Ojibway variants also points to the conflicting frames of reference of the speaker and listener. We all have frames of reference that influence how and what we see.<sup>8</sup> In the course of his travels, Danny’s frame of reference changes. While he initially views the world through assimilated eyes, he later has a heightened awareness and sees it from the First Nations perspectives that Mr. Old Man Indian, Ol’ Jim, and others have taught him.

They each use silences to indicate the gap between cultures and to teach Danny how his settler ways are out of place. In several situations, silence indicates a taboo, or inappropriate behaviour or action. For example, when he resorts to English and asks Bobby why he does not just buy a spoon instead of carving one, he is met with “a deep silence as if they were waiting to see what Bobby would do” (32). Danny is operating here from the assumptions and perceptions of an assimilated person who has become reliant on store-bought goods, whereas Bobby’s frame of reference is that of the unassimilated, self-reliant person who validates his First Nations culture by practicing it. Bobby communicates this to Danny through his non-verbal body language and actions. Danny observes how “Bobby

just glanced at me, shrugged, and resumed his careful work" (32).

In another instance, Danny asks Ol' Jim what the wolf had been waiting for, but Ol' Jim does not answer immediately. Danny fears that Ol' Jim has not "heard." His silence signals the cultural gaps between the two speakers. Ol' Jim finally explains that the wolf "probably knows you from somewhere and waited to see if you knew. You obviously did not" (118). Danny still does not understand that the wolf is his protector because he has not yet learned to validate spirituality. His vision is limited; his assimilated eyes can only see the wolf as a potential predator. Ol' Jim refuses to elaborate and remains so "very quiet" that Danny "wondered if I had offended him or something. I decided to keep my mouth shut and make myself useful" (118). When Danny later overhears the men talking about how the wolves are Danny's protectors, he begins to understand (222). While the narrative offers numerous examples of cultural reframing, it also articulates cultural differences. In order to understand some of these differences readers have to pay attention to context.<sup>9</sup>

Silence can also be interpreted in light of ever-shifting contexts. For instance, consider Ol' Jim's story of the beaten dog that was shot after it killed its abusive master. Danny interprets this story in light of his present and past experience. He thinks Ol' Jim is just rambling off in his memory world again. Ol' Jim's story also reminds him of his past encounter with the wolf pup on the beach (114-15). Readers interpret this story in light of this particular situation, and in relation to the whole narrative. This tale reinforces the story of settler oppression of First Nations and of the abuse that Danny experienced at home. It also foreshadows the end of the text when Danny, still scarred and scared, misinterprets the situation and accidentally shoots his father.

While silence can lead to misinterpretation it is also a pedagogical tool that allows the sender of the message the freedom to deliver it in a non-directive, non-didactic way. Non-verbal gestures can create a safety net that allows the recipient of the message to save face. When Danny is staying with Charlie's family, for instance, he learns to recognize the inappropriateness of his words and the judgmental and accusatory tone underlying his English words. The situation is defused when Billy's mother "smiled and shrugged at me" (45). Danny can pay attention to the reprimand without losing face because he is still made to feel welcome and accepted. Consequently, he does not respond with anger or denial; instead, he accepts Billy's reprimand and modifies his behavior: "Well, I guess I have to watch what I say from now on. And I guess she's right, I can't act like I'm at home in someone else's home" (45).

In addition, silence allows the recipient of the message to interpret it in his/her own way and in his/her own time. In this respect, silence is a valued pedagogical tool for Danny's Ojibway community. It enables those he meets to teach him about his culture without being didactic. For instance, when Danny asks Ol' Jim why Henry will not talk to him, Ol' Jim advises him to be patient and then "said no more" (201). Danny perceives this silence as Ol' Jim's closure of this conversation and shifted attention: "He seemed deep in thought about something" (201). While Ol' Jim has closed the conversation with his silence, the implied message is that Danny must digest the information in his own time and deal with the situation in his own way.

In depicting Danny's journey, Slipperjack offers readers pedagogical alternatives to patriarchal, directive pedagogy. Her dilemma is that she needs to illustrate pedagogy — Danny's experiential learning — through the medium of a written text. To do this, she resorts to a descriptive, allusive style in which she conveys much non-verbal communication through situational contexts and by playing on the ambiguity and multi-faceted nature of silence. In the earlier situation with the vendor, Danny interprets the vendor's words accurately because he understands the racist context in which they are spoken. With Mrs. Old Woman Indian, on the other hand, Danny repeatedly misinterprets her silences because he has yet to understand the context. Alienated from his culture and unable to decipher the cultural contextual codes, Danny frequently misconstrues silence as an indication of dismissal; he fears he is being ignored or has not been heard. When Danny first meets Mrs. Old Woman Indian he interprets her silence as a refusal to acknowledge him:

She just ignored me. She wouldn't even look at me....

She continued walking for another long while before she glanced at me again. This time she had no expression. It was as if I wasn't even there.... She wasn't even listening. (48)

Danny does not know how to deal with her lack of expression, and is still looking for guidance and direction. His responses to her non-verbal gestures reflect more about him than about Mrs. Old Woman Indian. Danny fears he has not been heard. Consequently, he recalls the way in which his family and settler society have marginalized him in the past. Similarly, Danny interprets Mr. Old Man Indian's silence as an indication that he has not been heard, "The old man never said very much.... I tried talking to him once but he didn't answer me. Maybe he didn't hear me" (53). Danny's interpretation of Mr. Old Man Indian's silence is a face saving strategy. He assumes that he has not been heard instead

of considering the possibility that he has not learned how to listen to silence. His interpretations and misinterpretations of words and gestures reflect his colonial frame of reference; he has not yet remembered how to decipher Ojibway cultural codes and contextual cues.<sup>10</sup> In most instances, however, the listener has heard and his/her silence signifies a response, which Danny is not always immediately able to interpret. Relating the story through Danny's words, the narrative draws attention to how his interpretations and misinterpretations of words and gestures reflect his perceptions, psychological state, and frame of reference; in this way, the narrative suggests that communication is not just what and how something is said or communicated, but relies on the perceptions and receptivity of the listener. Danny is not always accurately decoding the message that is communicated.<sup>11</sup> Instead of telling the reader and Danny how to decipher the message, Slipperjack, like many First Nations oral storytellers, configures contextual situations in which Danny and readers are allowed to arrive at their own conclusions.

Whereas Danny earlier equated words with deception, oppression, and prejudice when he was silenced at home, he discovers in the course of his journey how to speak through silence; he voices the colonial violence/silencing he endured and communicates in silent words. Silence becomes a form of communication that aids and reflects his new cultivation of awareness and enables him to heal.

From his interaction with Mr. Old Man and Mrs. Old Woman Indian, Danny begins to learn how to communicate without using words: "I shrugged hopelessly and she [Mrs. Old Woman Indian] smiled and looked away. I just did it! I mean talking not in words but by actions" (60). His experience with Ol' Jim also plays a central role in his subject formation and reintegration with his Ojibway culture. Ol' Jim teaches Danny the importance of sharing and community: "Boy, when you come home, you don't just find yourself, you already got yourself! What you find are all the people who love you!" When he returns to visit Mr. Old Man and Mrs. Old Woman Indian, Danny realizes that the non-verbal communication of "silent words" of warmth and love are "the little things I had almost forgotten" (193).

Danny begins to learn the significance of self-reliance, of not wasting words and of speaking with words only when necessary: "I knew by now not to ask stupid questions because he [Ol' Jim] just pretended he didn't hear me anyway" (97). Ol' Jim often communicates to Danny through silence, and Danny is now better able to decipher non-verbal communication.

Through silence, Ol' Jim often encourages Danny to modify his assimilated behavior. For instance, when Danny speaks to him in English, Ol' Jim pretends not to hear and Danny switches to Ojibway (116). Ol' Jim embodies "silent words" both by his actions and by his frequent slips into his "memory world" (117). Even though he does not direct his speeches to Danny, the boy still listens and learns.

Ol' Jim usually has a non-directive, experiential pedagogical approach, but even on those occasions when he does direct Danny he discretely tempers the lesson with humour. Witness his response to Danny's attempt to set his first rabbit snare: "That is kind of a hard decision to ask a rabbit to make. To stretch or duck under. I think I would decide to duck under if I was a rabbit" (136). By taking the point of view of the rabbit, he also teaches Danny to visualize his prey in order to trap it. Likewise, Ol' Jim does not chastise Danny for his prank on Hog, but merely comments: "I think that snake borrowed two legs from somewhere" (170). He subtly communicates that he knows Danny is responsible for the prank while at the same time remaining non-judgmental; moreover, he communicates his acceptance that Danny has reasons for taking the actions that he did.

Silence often is a motivational trigger for Danny that reminds him to pay attention and take responsibility for his actions. For instance, Danny hears a noise behind him and sees Ol' Jim walking back to camp. Danny briefly wonders why Ol' Jim doesn't say anything, but then takes the initiative and decides to check his snares (140). He begins to incorporate the knowledge and skills Ol' Jim has given him and to recognize when he has made a mistake without any cues from Ol' Jim. By cultivating awareness, Danny has begun to expand his language.

When talking to Danny about birds, Ol' Jim explains: "Well, when you don't understand the language, all the voices sound the same, don't they?" (159). Within the context of the situation, Ol' Jim's words refer to the need for individuals to cultivate awareness. As Danny has learned, each sound contains information if the individual is paying enough attention to decipher the codes (139). For Danny, words have acquired an expanded meaning; they are no longer solely equated with speech and writing, but refer to audible and silent signs throughout the natural world.

Ol' Jim's comment about language also has particular resonance for settler readers. Those settlers who do not understand the language — lack a cultivated awareness — may make the mistake of thinking that all First Nations voices sound the same. In reading about Danny's journey, however, settlers can learn to cultivate awareness and to be attuned to cultural

differences.

Jeannette Armstrong, an Okanagan writer, has described how difficult it is to write across a cultural gap precisely because it is an open space — an absence that is also a negation, an abyss into which much of the situational context of her culture and language disappears (*Telling It* 27). Slipperjack addresses this challenge by using *implicature* and by advocating a reading strategy wherein readers start “reading and understanding between the lines” (qtd. in Lutz 205). Understandably, the contextual knowledge of Ojibway readers familiar with northern Ontario will be richer than that of readers unfamiliar with the region, its cultural codes, and frames of reference:

There are sometimes words that mean something specific to that region. So, when you are writing something, the Native person from this region that you are from will read this passage and they will understand exactly what you are trying to say because they have understood the implied meaning, and all of a sudden, they are just cracking up laughing, because you would have to be from that region before you could understand what the big joke is! (Slipperjack qtd. in Lutz 206-07)

While readers may misinterpret and fail to decipher the cultural contexts, Slipperjack delineates nuances of situational contexts and implied meanings to facilitate our process of cultivating awareness of cultural differences.

Focusing on “the gap between the words” and feelings, *implicature* enables readers to pay attention not only to what is said but also to what is left unsaid.<sup>12</sup> Readers may not know how to interpret many of the non-verbal gestures of communication, or may misinterpret them because they lack familiarity with the cultural codes and contexts. *Implicature* effectively displaces readers and encourages them to figure meaning from situational contexts. Specifically, it defamiliarizes readers so that they may gain insight into the displacement that diverse First Nations people experience. Confronted by their own cultural gap (their cultural differences and their unfamiliarity with Danny’s Ojibway culture), settlers negotiate meaning, confront their assumptions, and deconstruct their reading strategies. Reliant on the text, readers have to derive the implied meaning from the context of the words as well as from the situational context. First Nations readers familiar with the region can also rely on their cultural codes, social memory, and personal experience. They can derive meaning not only from the situational context but also from their own unique cultural contexts. By using *implicature* to reconfigure and expand the contextual meanings

of silent words, Slipperjack also eludes the danger that writing in English may pose — namely, colonial mimicry.

Slipperjack writes in English without becoming entrapped in the language of the colonizer. Through a strategy of erasure, she draws attention to some of the ways that colonizers have used silence to oppress, marginalize, and delegitimize First Nations. Further, the narrative offers an alternative discourse that writes over the language of colonizers and foregrounds Danny's Ojibway culture. In working through the destructive silencing that he initially experienced, Danny learns other forms of constructive silence that heal him and enable him to experience personal, familial, and cultural reintegration. Learning from the examples of Mr. Old Man Indian, Ol' Jim, and others, Danny affirms experiential knowledge, realizes the value of sharing and community, and begins to understand the First Nations expression "all my relations"; his Ojibway community is "like one big family" (244). As Danny later discovers, he has never really been lost. He has always been a part of his Ojibway community, and his community has supported him throughout his journey. He has learned that listen is an anagram for silent. Having learned how to listen, he is capable of decoding the silent words in the environment and the silence spaces between spoken words. Ultimately, in crossing cultural gaps, *Silent Words* voices the gap between words and seeing and writes over colonial violence/silence to speak.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> One way Danny can deal with conflicting cultural frames of reference and the discrepancy between "stated and perceived frames" is either "directly by metacommunication, or indirectly, by counter-reframing" (Tannen, *Perspectives* 75). As I will discuss later, the narrative offers an alternative discourse in which silence is often a tool for "counter-reframing."

<sup>2</sup> The phrase "all my relations" alludes to the importance of relatives and of relationships. In Thomas King's introduction to *All My Relations*, an anthology he edited, he explains:

'All my relations' is at first a reminder of who we are and of our relationship with both our family and our relatives. It also reminds us of the ex-

tended relationship we share with all human beings. But the relationships that Native people see go further, the web of kinship extending to the animals, to the birds, to the fish, to the plants, to all the animate and inanimate forms that can be seen or imagined. More than that, 'all my relations' is an encouragement for us to accept the responsibilities we have within this universal family by living our lives in a harmonious and moral manner (a common admonishment is to say of someone that they act as if they have no relations). (ix)

<sup>3</sup> I am using holotropic to refer, as the word suggests, to holistic.

<sup>4</sup> Here, I am using re-memoration to describe commemoration from a position of having been silenced. Toni Morrison coined the term “re-memoration” and Homi Bhabha elaborates on it (198). For further information see Morrison.

<sup>5</sup> Philips discusses how visual stimuli can interfere: “when interaction is structured through silence, for example, in a dance or a football game, dependence on the visual channel is so great that any talk that *accompanies* the interaction (but does not turn away from it) is secondary to the co-occurring visual stimuli and physical activities” (qtd. in Jaworski 50). Similarly, Lord discovered, and Ong reiterates: “Learning to read and write disables the oral poet” because it “introduces into his mind the concept of a text as controlling the narrative and thereby interferes with the oral composing processes, which have nothing to do with texts but are ‘the remembrance of songs sung’” (Ong 59).

<sup>6</sup> I am referring to the cover, which Slipperjack illustrated, on the 1992 paperback edition of *Silent Words*. In my analysis of frames of reference, I am indebted to the work of Gregory Bateson and Erving Goffman on frame analysis. Gregory Bateson first used the term, frame, in 1955 “to explain how individuals exchange signals that allow them to agree upon the level of abstraction at which any message is intended” (Tannen, “What’s” 141).

<sup>7</sup> Walter Ong argues that for oral cultures, words are closely tied in with the event and words themselves are events, whereas in typographic cultures, there is a distancing between the word and the event, phenomena, condition, or activity, that it signifies:

The fact that oral peoples commonly and in all likelihood universally consider words to have magical potency is clearly tied in, at least unconsciously, with their sense of the word as necessarily spoken, sounded, and hence power-driven. Deeply typographic folk forget to think of words as primarily oral, *as events, and hence as necessarily powered: for them, words tend rather to be assimilated* to things, ‘out there’ on a flat surface. (Ong 32-33; emphasis added)

<sup>8</sup> A non-Native reader’s frame of reference will be different from that of a First Nations reader. Since First Nations are diverse, not all First Nations readers will share frames of reference.

<sup>9</sup> According to Sperber and Wilson, “the greater contextual effects, the greater the relevance” (119).

<sup>10</sup> As mentioned earlier, silence often also serves as a cue for Danny to speak in Ojibway (48).

<sup>11</sup> Not all types of silence are communicative and “the actual interpretation of someone’s silence takes place only when the communication process is expected or perceived to be taking place” (Jaworski 34).

<sup>12</sup> Adam Jaworski explains how *implicature* affects the way we interpret: “The interpretation of the message may equally depend on the understanding of both the said and the unsaid elements of the utterance (*implicature*)” (79).



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