

JEANNETTE ARMSTRONG & THE COLONIAL LEGACY

Noel Elizabeth Currie

THE VOICES OF THE UNHEARD cannot help but be of value," states Lee Maracle on the first page of *I Am Woman*: reality is more accurately perceived from the bottom of a hierarchical society than it is from the top. Long unheard, often brutally silenced, and more often than not spoken for by white Canadians, Canadian Native women are increasingly correcting the misdefinitions and defining themselves, writing their own stories, "in which pain [does not have to be] our way of life" (Maracle, *IAW* 4). In doing so, they provide an indication of potential directions towards a world in which oppression on the basis of sex, race, or class (to mention only a few) does not have to be a given. However, Native women writers in Canada can only provide these indications of hope for the future from a particular place in time and understanding; as Lee Maracle puts it, "once we understand what kind of world they have created then we can figure out what kind of world we can re-create" (*IAW* 116). This place is near the end, or the beginning of the end, of an examination of the forces of oppression. And, as Native women writers locate the roots of their oppression on the basis of race, sex, and class in Canada's colonial history, they also begin to find the means of changing the system which perpetuates that oppression.

Some of the consequences of sexism, racism, and classism for Native women in Canadian society are documented in such books as Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* and Beatrice Culleton's *April Raintree*, which illustrate the truth of Maracle's assertion that, like sexism, "[r]acism is for us, not an ideology in the abstract, but a very real and practical part of our lives" (*IAW* 2). However, in *Slash*, Jeannette Armstrong (an Okanagan writer) provides a more thorough and complex description and analysis of racism, sexism, and classism as the by-products of colonialism. In addition, Armstrong identifies decolonization as the solution to the systemic oppression and as the means to defuse specific issues such as Native land claims, which are easier to deal with from a position of self-sufficiency. However, decolonization cannot be achieved, or even contemplated for that matter, without an

examination of the ways in which these oppressions affect individuals and groups. As one woman in *Slash* puts it,

‘The only way that we can really regain control is for us to really change. It means that we’re going to have to rebuild ourselves; rebuild our health, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. We’re a long way from being totally in control over our lives. In fact we can’t even talk about it, except we know that it is possible and that it is what we are moving toward.’ (*Slash* 218)

Slash is the story of one Indian man’s search for “a way out of this living death [caused by colonialism and the resulting oppressions] by way of prison, spiritual confirmation, and active political struggle” (Ryga 9).

“It’s clear what we are suffering from is the effects of colonization,” states *Slash*, the title character in the novel of that name; “‘One of the effects of it is the way people see themselves in relation to those who are doing the colonizing’” (221). Of course, the reverse is also true: the colonizers see themselves, as well as the colonized, in the light of the fundamentally unequal power relationships characteristic of the colonial situation. As Albert Memmi notes in *The Coloniser and the Colonised*, this situation is controlled by the colonizer so as to render the colonized inadequate, which, increasingly, provides the justification for controlling the situation further (95). Racism is therefore a material given in the lives of Native peoples in Canada, exacerbated by sexism in the lives of Native women, as a direct consequence of European colonialism.

While the causal relationship between colonialism and racism has become a truism (Europeans constructed the different ‘races’ they encountered in their colonialist and imperialist ventures as ‘inferior’ and ‘savage’ in order to exploit them economically; racism provided a justification, after the fact, for that exploitation [Memmi xxiii]), the relationship of colonialism to sexism, particularly patriarchy as institutionalized sexism, has not been as thoroughly explored. As Anita Valerio notes, it is difficult to discern whether sexism or patriarchy were part of pre-contact Native cultures or rather the result of conquest and colonization, since the period of colonization has been so long: “you can’t always trust people’s interpretations as their minds have been colored by Catholicism — t.v. etc.” (41). However, since the motive of colonialism is always profit, Lee Maracle identifies sexism, like racism and classism, as a necessary by-product of colonialism (*IAW* 20). And in *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, Paula Gunn Allen makes the connection between colonialism and sexism and Native societies, and the consequences of this connection, explicit:

The physical and cultural genocide of American Indian tribes was and is mostly about patriarchal fear of gynocracy [woman-centred social systems]. The Puritans particularly, but also the Catholic, Quaker and other Christian missionaries, like their secular counterparts, could not tolerate peoples who allowed women to occupy prominent positions and decision-making capacity at every level of society.

The colonisers saw (and rightly) that as long as women held unquestioned power of such magnitude, attempts at total conquest of the continent were bound to fail.
(3)

In addition, Gunn Allen argues, the attempts at cultural genocide of gynocratic tribal peoples were and are in part attempts to destroy gynocracy: racism and sexism are inseparable in the initial and continuing European assumptions about Native peoples.

It may be impossible to determine whether pre-conquest Native cultures were gynocratic, matriarchal, or patriarchal.¹ However, it is (unfortunately) all too possible to state unequivocally that the well-established European system of patriarchy became dominant as the colonizers imposed their religion(s), laws, and economies on Natives and the patriarchal denigration of women as fundamentally evil and a source of sin permeated the systems in their new-world manifestations. Therefore sexism, in addition to racism, became part of the material circumstances of Native peoples as the Americas were colonized, influencing the lives of Native men as well as women.

Of course the role of education and the Church — for over a century indistinguishable forces in the lives of Native people — cannot be underestimated in any discussion of the imposition of European ideologies and traditions on Natives.² Internalized oppression, the result of the indoctrination of the colonized in their deficiencies as defined by the colonizers — such as “laziness,” “savagery,” or “drunkenness,” for example — which allow the colonizers to justify and maintain their superior position (Memmi 79), can be more damaging than material forms of oppression. Education is a vital tool by which the colonizers put their definitions of the colonized (“homogenized into a collective ‘they’” [Pratt 139]) into the heads of the colonized. The result is that everyone ‘recognises’ the inadequacy of the colonized relative to the colonizers; the educational system, like the political and economic systems, is structured to maintain that inadequacy.

COLONIALISM, THE RESULTING OPPRESSIONS, and their effects on Native people provide the background for Jeannette Armstrong’s *Slash*: they are the material givens of reality on *Slash*’s reserve in the Okanagan area of British Columbia and in the surrounding white communities. Although the result of oppression may be similar for individuals or groups, there are a multitude of ways to attempt to deal with that reality, and the novel explores several of them: “*Slash* comes from that inevitable fork in the road that every Native youth faces” (Maracle, “Fork” 42). Chapter One, “The Awakening,” sets the stage for what is to come: young Tommy Kelasket (later nicknamed *Slash*) describes his understanding of the differing perceptions of his family, other Natives on the reserve,

and the white “experts” who make “hard decisions for our Indians” (*S* 176) and the resulting discrimination, both active and passive. What emerges most clearly from his descriptions are the essential differences between the worldviews of his family and those of the white community.

From his family Tommy learns the history of the Okanagan and the values and traditions of his people: these lessons are designed to help him to grow into a productive member of the society and to understand how he fits into it. At the newly ‘integrated’ town school, however, the most deeply ingrained lesson for the Native students is that power is relative. Tommy explains:

there were some things we were too ashamed to tell. Like all of the white girls laughing at Tony when he asked one of them to dance at the sock-hop. He quit school after that. Also how none of the Indian girls ever got asked to dance at the sock-hops because us guys wouldn’t dance with them because the white guys didn’t. (*S* 35)

Although looked down upon as stupid and dirty Indians (according to Hollywood stereotypes) by the white administrators, teachers, and students, the Native boys learn to take advantage of the privilege offered them as males by a sexist society. Unfortunately, the girls are not so lucky; there is no more privilege attached to being female in a sexist society than there is to being Native in a racist one, and even less to being both.

The intersection of material forms of oppression (like racism and sexism) and internalized oppression due to colonialism is central to the novel. Indeed, they are so interrelated that it is almost impossible to separate them and their effects, not only in relations between Natives and whites, but also in those among Natives. “[A]s an almost man” (*S* 13), Tommy sees the divisions between those, like his family, who find strength and pride in the traditional ways and those who “want to try all kinds of new stuff and be more like white people” (*S* 42). More importantly, he sees that there are no easy solutions to the divisions. Those who feel that the traditions are useless in the twentieth century, that “development” will bring “equality,” and who use rhetoric like “We must learn to use new ideas and open up our lands to development” (*S* 43) fail to see (or choose not to see) that proposed or implemented solutions which do not account for tradition and history generally seem to benefit the development of the surrounding white community at the expense of the reserve. The issue of Indian access to alcohol provides a case in point. The assimilationist or “progressive” argument claims that giving Indians equality of access to something that white society takes for granted will “increase” their rights. However, as old Pra-cwa and Tommy’s parents know, the issue at stake is really the ability of Indians to control their own destinies, and the result of the new “rights,” as much as the old lack of them, is often assimilation or extinction.

Even though he recognizes that something very important is missing from the rhetoric, and in fact that something is terribly wrong with it, Tommy still feels its power and begins to wonder which system of values he should live by: as he

says to his friend Jimmy, “‘I don’t know who is right anymore’” (S 43). In his attempts to clear up some of the confusion, he leaves his family and reserve for the city, where his confusion only increases but where he is forced to learn some hard truths the hard way — by experience. In hospital, about to be sentenced to jail, he meets a woman named Mardi from the Indian Friendship Centre whose words change his life.

‘You see, they only give us two choices. Assimilate or get lost. A lot of us are lost. We need to make a third choice. That’s what Red Patrol is about.

‘We work in shifts on skid row. We pick up people from the streets and help them out anyway we can. We keep the pigs and others from harassing them. We help out even when there is violence. And we talk to them and we tell them to leave that place. But most of all we provide an example of pride and power in being Indian.’
(S 70)

It is Mardi who gives Tommy the nickname ‘Slash’ and, correspondingly, whose political awareness (and resulting actions) form his: she starts him on his search for the all-important third choice against assimilation or extermination.

Although never one for assimilation himself, Slash has had a constant example of such a position in his childhood friend, Jimmy. Unlike Tommy, who was raised with “a real heavy emphasis on Indian values” (S 139), Jimmy has always tried to disassociate himself from the inadequacy he has been made to feel as an Indian. As a teenager, Jimmy wanted more than anything to fit into white society as a fully participating member, even though doing so meant that he had to negate his own family and culture.

He said, ‘All I know is, I like to feel good. I feel good when white friends of mine talk and joke with me as if I were like them. They only do that if I wear smart pants and shoes and have money to play pool with. I don’t like them to think I’m like the rest of the Indians. I wish our people were like them. . . . I hate being an Indian. I hate Indian ways.’ (S 44)

So Jimmy, who defines white people and Native people according to the terms of white society — which invariably finds Native people inadequate at best and hardly human at worst — finds his own people inadequate. To escape being tainted with that feeling of inadequacy, he tries to ‘pass’ and to succeed according to the terms of white society by becoming as much like a white man as he can: “all he talked about was how much money he had saved up to buy a really classy car. He said he was going in for accounting so he could get a good, clean job. He was going with this white girl, too” (S 83).

According to the terms set out in the novel, what distinguishes Jimmy from the other Indians is his concentration on material appearances as opposed to what lies beneath them, which is defined as a characteristic of the white middle class. Jimmy’s obsession with appearances is largely an attempt to disassociate himself from the stereotype of the “drunken Indian,” in which he believes with a passion; his assimi-

lation is evident in the way he needs to feel superior to feel successful (especially since his own escape from the inferiority he associates with being Native is a narrow one). Accordingly, he only drinks in the white businessmen's bars rather than the bar on the reserve in order to "'prove,'" as he says, that "'all of us ain't drunks'" (S 222).

However, as might be expected, very little works out as Jimmy plans: the white society he wants so much to be a part of refuses to let him in. Although he gets a degree in Business Administration, he experiences discrimination from both sides and is unable to find a job. White businesses will not hire him, assuming that he is "another lazy Indian"; at the same time, Indian organizations, made up of people who suffer from internalized oppression as much as Jimmy himself, hire "'some ex-DIA goat for the cream jobs'" (S 221). Although his own attempts to "pass" are based on his belief (which is a reflection of that of the so-called dominant society) in the "inferiority" of Indians, Jimmy is shocked and confused when these opinions are used to evaluate him, in Native as well as white communities. Slash tries to explain why:

'Everything that the colonizers do, tells the Indians they are inferior, that their lifestyle, their language, their religion, their values and even what food they eat, is somehow not as good. . . . it gets transferred in subtle ways by our own people. . . . They attempt to become the same as the colonizers in as many ways as they can, to escape being inferior, or being tainted by it. They don't want to hurt inside, you see.' (S 221)

Assimilation is an all-too-common attempt to avoid the pain of self-hatred by denying or negating that which is defined as inferior — which, paradoxically, only causes more pain: "'[y]ou never know why you feel so shitty inside and why you feel so much contempt for Indians yourself'" (S 222). Of course, as Slash notes, the biggest problem with thinking that even the stupidest white man is somehow intrinsically superior to the most intelligent and educated Indian is that it is simply not true. However, internalized oppression (whispering "'you're just a weak chicken-shit good for nothing'" [S 154]) is, by its very nature, difficult to combat and, in a colonial society, can probably never be escaped completely.

ONE WAY TO ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE the internalized oppression, of course, is to revolt against the material oppression. This method is Mardi's working definition of the necessary third choice: direct political action to change the conditions of oppression. Although her definition, which allows Slash to name the oppression he has always recognized, becomes his, as do her revolutionary vocabulary and concepts, Slash sees complexities that Mardi does not, and is therefore unsatisfied with merely material answers. Mardi's understanding is incomplete in

Slash's eyes because it arises out of her experience: "raised in settler society, divorced from [her] past and alienated from [her] history" (*IAW* 51), she has had no examples of Indians who are neither assimilated nor lost. Violence, suffering, addictions, and deprivation are the story of this Indian woman's life, so much so that the simple fact that she has survived is a victory for Mardi. Having proved her strength by saving her own life, she looks beyond herself to the larger community and commits herself to "'what's really going on in the Indian world'" (*S* 61) and to changing the personal and systemic oppression they all face, until she is "eliminated," like many other low-profile leaders, by the FBI (*S* 121).

Although Mardi's way of working for change is lacking in the spirit and understanding which are ultimately necessary to bring about that change, her importance in the novel cannot be underestimated. Not only is she the instigator of Slash's political awareness and commitment, giving him some of the intellectual tools to shake if not crack the foundations of the existing system and to begin to build a new one which does not have to be based on oppression, she also teaches him that (as Maracle writes) "[i]t is the truth of our lives that moves us to look again" (*IAW* 158) in the face of massive rationalization, not to mention cultural support, for the system of oppression. By her example, more than her words, Mardi demonstrates that Indians are the best — and only — experts on their own realities and the ways in which those realities may be changed, improved. Everything she does comes out of her knowledge of her own personal power; correspondingly, Mardi assumes that each and every Indian has the personal and communal power to make a difference. Political activism is therefore the means for overcoming internalized as well as material oppression in Mardi's experience: like the "'so-called militant Indian tribes,'" she demands respect for herself and only gives respect to those who respect her, as an Indian and as a woman (*S* 140). And, even though "[s]exism, racism's younger brother, was inherent in the character of the American Indian movement" (*IAW* 137), Mardi's value (like Maeg's) as a woman, a teacher, a leader, a friend, and a lover is an unquestionable premise of the novel and a truth so self-evident that it never needs to be stated.

Her death makes obvious the danger and necessity of political action, but also the futility: Slash knows that something very important is missing. As long as Slash continues to operate on Mardi's premises — which do not include the traditions and values of his upbringing — he is unable to see any possibilities beyond assimilation, extinction, or violent revolution. Fuelled by hate and a "destructive compulsion to make things happen" (*S* 13), Slash is quite comfortable with AIM (American Indian Movement) statements such as "'We fight for survival, we fight to stop genocide. Our war is real but our enemies are like shadows'" (*S* 184). When boiling over with bitterness and hatred, however, he tends to forget the basic premise that "AIM is a spiritual movement. . . . in order to achieve anything, we had

to do it the Indian way" (*S* 120). Slash soon assumes the correct revolutionary positions; he becomes one of "the bad guys nobody should mess with" (*S* 122).

Part of this tough-guy image of the (male) leaders involves the use, and abuse, of such indicators of status (in the mover-and-shaker white male world) as booze, drugs, and "chicks"; indeed, it seems that part of the attraction to the Movement is the access to such commodities that it offers the "Bros." There are always "chicks around to help with making food and things" (*S* 77) and while they are on the move, the "Bros" can be sure of a place to stay, of food to eat, and of "ending up with one of the chicks for company" (*S* 108). As described, the Movement itself, and indeed the whole political arena, is largely constructed as male as much as it is non-Native. The women and the "traditionalists" (as opposed to the revolutionaries and assimilationists, who are occasionally difficult to tell apart) who become involved are assigned to the periphery by the self-styled leaders. Lee Maracle is more explicit: "[c]ulturally, the worst dominant, white male traits were emphasized. Machismo and the boss mentality were the basis for choosing leaders. The idea of leadership was essentially a European one promulgated by power mongers" (*IAW* 126). Significantly, Slash is never completely accepted by these leaders because he sees that something is missing and he asks too many questions about it. Instead, clothed in "radical Indian" garb (*S* 225), he thinks of himself as a modern-day warrior and feels "'We should be treated with respect because we were ready to die, God damn it, 'for the people'" (*S* 122).

Such a highly self-conscious display of the warrior, in full battle regalia, has several purposes: to "put the scare on the honkies" (*S* 189), to keep in touch with a Native identity, and to court the attention of the "chicks," whose political action (with the exception of Mardi and Maeg) seems as a general rule to be limited to a subsidiary role: taking care of the men.³ According to Slash, there is a general recognition of the traditional and practical power of women, who "had some kind of pecking order among themselves that had to be strictly respected by all. If that pecking order gets messed up by the guys and their struggle for leadership then all hell breaks loose" (*S* 153). However, the general picture is one of men on the move who are committed to ending the oppression on the grounds of race and class that they face as Natives but are at the same time willing to take the perks offered them as males by a sexist society. Of course it would be impossible for them to be unaffected by the sexism of society, but, like Jimmy, they reveal some of the self-hatred that is the result of internalized oppression in the need to be superior to somebody else.

Unfortunately, revolutionary fervour, although initially liberating, is unproductive and destructive for Slash: not only is he unable to envision how the necessary changes can possibly be brought about without violence, but he is also so full of anger and hatred that he begins to hope for the violence and bloodshed which would politicize the people like nothing else seems to be able to do. His hatred for the

colonizers who used, and continue to use, “the disadvantaged conditions as a means of control” (S 96) is, ultimately, more debilitating than helpful.

It was big and strong and ugly. Sometimes at night I felt it twisting inside my gut, making my stomach burn and turn sour. Them times I had to get up and find something to mellow out with. If it wasn't a chick then it was dope. I smoked a lot of dope and drank too, when there wasn't any dope or chicks. (S 121-22)

Slash's recognition of the injustices and oppression fuels his desire to make changes, but also his hatred, which ultimately renders him less capable of bringing those changes about. And, his feelings of bitterness and frustration due to the apparent failure to “accomplish” anything politically only reinforce the internalized oppression that tells him he is a no-account, “bad-ass Injun” (Armstrong, “Mary Old Owl”); it is only after his political ‘failures’ that he falls into binges of drugs and alcohol (and cynicism), although he knows that the partying is self-destructive.

Even when he feels strong and confident in the knowledge that the solution to both the material and internalized oppression is to be found in the traditional ways, hatred and frustration make him susceptible to self-destruction. Even in his last binge, Slash protests what white society has to say about and offer to him: he is not on the skids because he is weak and unable to kick the habits, nor because he is the product of Welfare dependence, or any of the other cultural stereotypes. Instead, he fails to see what more attractive alternatives the dominant society has to offer. He responds to the message “assimilate or get lost” by refusing to comply with either demand: he will neither transform himself to fit in nor erase himself to avoid offending any of the white middle class. Rather, he will resist in any way that he can — even to the point of self-destruction.

Slash makes it obvious that the “party down” attitude reflecting the “opportunistic, hustle-media politics” (*IAW* 137) of some of the “Bros” is not only basically unable to bring about any of the necessary changes, but that it is also, in effect, a form of cultural suicide. The path of booze, drugs, and chicks leads Slash to one place only: rock bottom. However, it is when he hits more or less absolute rock bottom that Slash finds the hope of a way up. In detox, when drying out is a choice between life and death, he meets a man, “deeply religious in the Indian way” (S 199), who profoundly changes the direction of his life — who saves his life (as simply drying out cannot) by offering a possibility beyond the options of assimilation or extermination.

‘Them ain't the only choices. There is another way. It's always been there. We just got to see it ourselves though. There are some people who help people who are looking for another way to live as an Indian person. We don't have to cop out and be drunks and losers. We don't have to join the rats either. There is another way.’ (S 198)

That other way is linked to traditional Native worldviews, like those of Slash's parents and old Pra-cwa, and the medicine ways, such as Uncle Joe's, which are

inseparable from the land. The examples and words of his parents and elders are that Slash and the people as a whole need to follow, as he realizes the truth that “in order to achieve anything, *we had to do it in the Indian way*” (*S* 120; my emphasis). Those words, “in the Indian way,” are almost a refrain in the novel, and although Slash is always aware of what they represent, he has long been unable to integrate that approach into his politics. The breakthrough comes for him when he sees the discrepancy between his (and Mardi’s) revolutionary activism — in the movement and continually on the move — and the work that he identifies as a priority when he settles down on the reserve: defining “Indian government” by practice rather than with words. When on the move with the “Bros,” the tension between feeling powerless and attempting to gain some power through political change filled Slash with bitterness and despair. However, when he begins to encourage rather than criticize (knowing that “respecting people and being a good teacher just by [his] actions is enough” [*S* 20]) and sets and acts upon his own priorities, he feels good about what he is doing for the first time in years — and begins to make positive changes.

The key to the future lies, paradoxically, in the past and the lessons it has to offer. Slash finds that the traditional ways, particularly the medicine ways, of his people — whom he defines as all Natives — provide the only means for him to survive and succeed as a whole person, an “Indian person,” and on his own terms. For a long time, the essential, and unanswered, question in his life asked “what does being an Indian mean?” But in all his years of searching, the only source of answers that he finds is the tradition. As he puts it, “All the questions that were unanswered for years suddenly seemed so simple . . . it wasn’t a matter of belief. It was more, it was knowing for sure” (*S* 201). The medicine clears his body of the drugs and replaces the need for them by giving him not only a sense of empowerment, but also actual power. For example, when he returns home, his father is in the hospital after a heart attack; Slash, simply by holding the sick man in his arms, can take some of the pain into his own body and in doing so has the means to heal him. The medicine, and tradition, relieve him of the burden of failure he has felt for so long by offering him the means to achieve the necessary changes — first in himself, and then in the world around him.

It is through understanding and acceptance of the traditional ways that healing can begin for the community, breaking the chains of the internalized oppression. Understanding his identity as an Indian person makes obvious for Slash what has been missing all along, an identifiable, long-range goal: “we are slowly learning decolonization” (*S* 223). In effect, the healing process that the struggle began was the real victory, since “when a people have to fight, then pride returns and with it inner strength” (*S* 133): they change their reality and their world by changing themselves. When they define the world on their own terms, when they perceive their own ability and inherent right to control their own destinies, and when they

make their ways “viable” in the twentieth century by practising them, they begin to bargain from a position of strength, so that external forces must react to them in a new and different way.

THE “INDIAN APPROACH” TO ANY ISSUE, which involves an understanding of tradition and laws, is more productive than purely political analysis or revolutionary fervour: by providing a “sense of the self and our importance to the community” (*IAW* 50), a sense of responsibility and a sense of power, it improves the analysis and proposed solutions. Slash realizes that culture and tradition will be lost if not practised — and, correspondingly, that rights also are lost if not practised. “There was no question of whether or not we should do things our way. We just had to do it or lose it” (*S* 211). His parents have, all along, provided him with the best example of traditional values, rights, and culture as they can be practised in “modern Indian lives.” Not until Slash begins to understand the traditions and their importance to the people does he begin to understand the laws, which are inseparable from tradition. The Canadian legal code prohibiting the traffic of illegal drugs did not prevent him from doing so (until he was sent to jail); only his realization that drugs contribute to the destruction of the people, and that he participated in that destruction for a profit, keeps Slash from dealing again. And, unlike his involvement in the Movement, based on European conceptions of power which legalize Indian oppression, the knowledge that Indian law “forbids our oppression” (*IAW* 47) provides an unshakeable source of strength for Slash, since it assumes not only personal worth, but also personal power.

To the Kelaskets, tradition does not mean that all Indians will return to a way of life of a hundred (or two) years ago, but it does mean that everything they do is done “in the Indian way.” The particular activity is not the issue, but rather the manner in or process by which it is done. Much of Slash’s search throughout the novel for a way to make Indian ways viable could have been avoided if he had only accepted the example of his parents. However, the years of struggle were essential and necessary.

It was as though a light was shining for my people. I felt that we were moving toward it faster and faster. There was a rightness about it that the past few years didn’t have. Yet I realized, without the past few years, I would not have made it to this point. I knew it as a certainty. (*S* 203)

The politics have provided him with an insight into the problems, a passionate desire to solve them, and exposure to the perspectives of other Indians from all over the continent, while his awakening spirituality and growing knowledge of tradition enable him, in effect, to match the solutions to the problems: the sum of his experience on the move has led him to the “place from which to stand erect”

(Maracle, “Fork”). Since the future is informed by the past, he will not repeat his mistakes; the memory of the losses will keep him honest and prevent him from falling into hypocrisy. Slash is not a “reformed alkie, . . . jumpy and over-happy. . . . desperate . . . to prove that being sober was just hunky-dory” (*S* 199), nor has he become “‘pious and full of the spirit’” (*S* 238) in such a way as to trivialize the traditions and medicine as some kind of weird cult. His previous feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness arose out of his recognition that something was missing: having identified and incorporated that missing element, Slash becomes part of a community “rebuilding a worldview that had to work in this century, keeping the values of the old Indian ways. . . . through this way there was no bullshit that could get through for very long” (*S* 232). Self-sufficiency and an Indian approach are the keys to the solution on any issue, the most basic of which, of course, is land.

Interestingly, the people who share this view — that the solution can only be based on Indian ways, knowledge, and definitions — are the elders, the traditionalists, and, in Slash’s own generation, the women. These are the people who open his eyes politically and whose words and example lead him to the insights which help him to integrate spirituality and politics. This integration is best expressed and clarified when Maeg speaks at a meeting, putting the whole task, and process, into a nutshell:

‘We are not aggressors. We must simply resist for as long as we can the kind of destruction we are talking about here. . . . If we are to be successful to any measure then we will have to be sure that we see the whole question we are faced with and deal with all of it in an Indian way. It is the resistance of our forefathers and the continued resistance of our fathers that has left us with something to call ours. It was not negotiating on our rights to this land. They can pass any legislations they want but they know and we know that the land belongs to us unless we sell it out for money. As long as we don’t sell it out we still own the land, and we shall retain the right to resist destruction of it and of the people and things on it.’ (*S* 225)

Slash’s ability (not shared by many of the “Bros”) to listen with respect to the words and learn with love from the examples of women like Mardi and Maeg, without appropriating or taking credit, is an indication that healing, decolonization, is possible: a continual struggle, but possible. His geographic distance from (yet emotional and intellectual closeness to) Mardi was representative of his recognition of the gaps in his understanding and his desire for complete understanding. In the same way, his relationship with Maeg, which is not based on power differentials and the subordination of one (woman) to the other (man), is symbolic of his fuller understanding and his commitment to the future. Together, they work to make the changes they see as necessary; through that work, which includes protecting the rights of their child (who is, like the land, their stake in the future), they plant the seeds which can make revolutionary changes in the future.

“Through the word, both spoken and written,” change begins to occur: the word is powerful because it makes manifest thought and is the medium through which understanding is transferred (Armstrong, “Voices”). Breaking generations of silence — of being silenced — by naming the oppressors, the process of oppression, and the effects of that oppression is part of the political and spiritual path to healing and change. Slash moves beyond purely political activism to end the material oppression in the lives of his people to spirituality, which provides him with the understanding of connections that makes change — even in systemic and institutionalized oppression — possible: his is the kind of faith which believes “that we have the power to change our lives, save our lives” and acts accordingly (Moraga, xvii). Based on a people’s own definition of their priorities and integrated with political analysis and activism, this faith is the foundation for pro-action rather than re-action.

As Lee Maracle has written, *Slash* is about the fork in the road and the choices it represents: about perspectives as much as colonialism, about solutions as much as problems. The kinds of solutions which lead to hopelessness and frustration — Jimmy’s attempts to assimilate and Slash’s involvement with the “Bros” — do so because they are not based on an Indian approach. As Jimmy learns, trying to ‘pass’ puts too much of his personal power in the hands of the colonizers, who can therefore choose to let him through or not according to their whim: by accepting their terms, he gives them the power to shape his future. And, since they created the standards which find him inadequate, it is not surprising that they dash his hopes. Mardi’s definition of the necessary third choice, and correspondingly that of Slash, defines itself so much against the externally determined options of assimilation or extermination that it is generally limited to reaction: by defining itself negatively, it has some difficulty in achieving positive results. The fact that the circles Slash moved in were often modelled on confrontational-style (Euro-American) politics and discussions of violence for its own sake (a concept completely alien to tradition as defined by Armstrong) is definitely related to the political “failures.” The alternative “third choice” of traditional approaches to any issue or problem, however, has virtually nothing to do with the white oppressors and everything to do with Native people actively determining their own futures. It offers them the opportunity — forces them, even — to set their own agendas and gather the strength of self-sufficiency.

It is this kind of approach — the “Indian way” — which has the potential to alter the future. This solution is neither easy nor naïve, but one which provides the means to continue the struggle by ensuring the survival of the people in the face of genocide. The road leading up to the fork is presented and understood via Armstrong’s unflinching analysis of “political realities, even when such observations are painful” (Ryga 11) and her clear understanding of the colonial legacy. A return to tradition and spirituality does not isolate and disconnect Slash from the physical

world and those painful political realities; rather, it connects him to himself and his community. Recognizing that Native people “stand at a pivot point at this time in history,” each having the responsibility of “deciding for our descendants how their world shall be affected and what shall be their heritage” (S 13), traditional approaches which inform modern solutions provide a source of strength and truth to combat generations of misinformation. The Canadian colonial story is an old one and it has remained relatively unchanged in many ways, as the blusterings and evasions of federal government officials during the 1989 hunger strike of Native students (to name only one example) made obvious. In *Slash*, however, Jeannette Armstrong has envisioned “the survival of what is human in an inhuman world” (S 251) and presented the possibility of a new ending to the story.

NOTES

- ¹ It is important to note here that many Native women writing in North America, of whom Gunn Allen is one, suggest or state that sexism, patriarchy, and misogyny followed conquest and colonization and did not exist prior to them — that in pre-contact Native societies, women enjoyed actual and not just symbolic power in the life of the people.
- ² Celia Haig-Brown’s *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School* (Vancouver: Tillacum, 1988) provides an excellent study of the goals, realities, and effects of the residential school, as seen by students who attended the Kamloops Indian Residential School. Assimilation, on the settlers’ terms of course, was the stated goal of Indian education; however, that “assimilation was to take place under conditions which could cause no threat to the surrounding business and farming community” (67). In particular, the racist and sexist European assumptions perpetuated by the schools, designed to beat the Indian out of the children in order to create Europeans, the elimination of language as part of the process of cultural genocide, and their effects on Native individuals and communities are well documented.
- ³ *Slash* is, apparently, the exception that proves the rule: unlike the other couples, in which “the women aligned themselves with their champions” (S 153), Mardi is his ticket to political credibility.

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