

## SEARCHING FOR A PLACE OF ONE'S OWN

### The Sense of Belonging in First Nations Children's Books by Jeannette Armstrong and Ruby Slipperjack

Grit Alter

*For a Child running with outstretched  
arms in Canyon de Chelly*

*You are small and intense  
In your excitement, whole,  
Embodied in delight.  
The backdrop is immense;*

*The sand drifts break and roll  
Through cleavages of light  
And shadow. You embrace  
The spirit of this place*

*(Navarre Scott Momaday 1976:49)*

Separated into different provinces, territories and loose affiliations, Canada's land and landscape is as diverse as her population. Uniting the Maritimes, Prairies and Rockies, metropolises, isolated villages and rural areas under one dome, Canada is also home to First Nations, Inuit and Métis as well as to millions of immigrants from all over the world, their descendants, and newcomers who are welcomed to Canada each year.

With the *Announcement of the Implementation of a Policy of Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework* on October 8, 1971, Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau set the official foundation for a policy that was supposed to avoid the homogenization and centralization of the tenets of Canadian nationalism. Canadians of each generation were given the opportunity to establish an identity according to their cultural background and, thus find a place not only in society but also in the country and her various regions.

Writers of children's books from across Canada's diverse territories have greatly contributed to a deeper awareness of regional cultures and experiences in order to develop a sense of identity, be it national or regional, individual or communal (see Galway 33). All of these options can involve a political, economic, cultural or linguistic distinction.

It is the intention of this article to explore the contributions made by Jeannette Armstrong and Ruby Slip-

perjack, through the medium of First Nations' children's books, towards the development of a regional identity. Following the general remarks on the importance of land and place in First Nations cultures, the text will discuss the novels *Neekna and Chemai* (1991) by Jeannette Armstrong and *Little Voice* (2002) by Ruby Slipperjack. The discussion will refer to texts by several other authors, such as Basso, Hafen, or Bhabha, in order to establish a deeper understanding of the importance of the connection to the region.

## The Importance of Region and Regional Identity

Geographical terms describing parts of Canada, such as Atlantic Canada, Prairie, and the Maritimes, offer an insight into "the traditionally environmental approach to identifying regions within Canada" (Galway 33). These terms also reflect the importance of the environment towards shaping the country's identity. Nurse explains that identity is not only a fluid, dynamic and dialogical phenomenon, constructed and reconstructed through processes of interaction between self and other. It also encompasses a range of features such as region, gender, ethnicity, social location, ability, sexual orientation, age, and religious affiliation, among others:

In the Canadian context region is an[other] important consideration that needs to be assessed in considerations of identity. Indeed, for much of Canadian history, region and regional identity were viewed as key identity markers . . . Exactly how region interacts and intersects with other identity markers is not completely clear, but it seems evident that different conceptions of region and regional identity can encompass diversity in different ways . . . Regionalism is clearly an important marker within Canada. (Nurse 5)

To create a sense of belonging and a regional sense of identity would seem to be of particular importance to First Nations people, who, in the history of Canada, have been displaced and relocated, mainly by the arrival of immigrants and because of the influence of the Church, destroying families, communities, and cultures. One of the many philosophies on which the way of life of aboriginal people in Canada is based is the relationship to the land and environment. In his award-winning ethnography, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (1996), Basso describes this central view thus: "Places are as much a part of us as we are of them" (Basso 1996: xiv). It is therefore not surprising that this interdependency of land and the individual

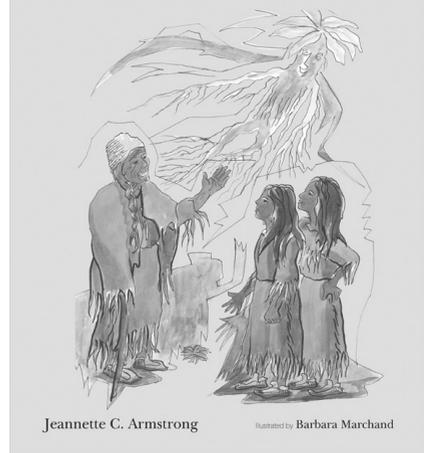
is part of the fiction and non-fiction of First Nations, Inuit and Métis writers such as Leslie Marmon Silko, N. Scott Momaday, Jeanette Armstrong, Alice Masak French and Alootook Ipellie.

The diaspora had a devastating influence on indigenous peoples which, for many, led to a loss of identity. Over the last two decades the aboriginal people have used many methods in an attempt to re-gain and re-inhabit their land and reclaim their culture and thus to re-define themselves. Literature was, and is, but one means of achieving an identity that allows First Nations to (re)define who they are and (re)establish their position in Canada's society<sup>1</sup>. Children's literature plays a major role within this process.

**L**and and Identity  
 Jeannette Armstrong's *Neekna and Chemai* (1991) and *Enwhisteetkwa – Walk in Water* (1982) are two stories for young readers that introduce children to an indigenous way of life. That indigenous involves being native to a land becomes obvious in *Neekna and Chemai* when the reader is taken through the cycle of a year in the Okanagan Valley by two girls and their *tupa* (Syilx'tsn<sup>2</sup> for great-grandmother).

Starting off in winter, the time of a new beginning and renewal of nature, Chemai and her friend Neekna begin

## Neekna and Chemai



to deepen their awareness of their culture. They are taught to see nature as a part of their community, a partner in survival that needs to be respected. Nature must be treated in a way that allows her to renew herself in order to support all beings dependent on her. Collecting bitterroot and Saskatoon berries and fishing for salmon become acts of engaging with nature. The story describes how the people of the Okanagan Valley live in close contact with nature. From the conversations of the two girls and *tupa*, the reader learns that the people depend on their environment and that it needs to be respected and protected in order to ensure the very existence of the people themselves. *Neekna and Chemai* also offers the reader an interaction with the Okanagan Valley by the detailed des-

criptions of the surroundings, names of plants and where they can be found. This, again, reinforces the importance of an interdependent existence of the Okanagan people and the Okanagan Valley.

The last two pages of the book depict a process of recognition in which Neekna and Chemai come to understand their dependency on the land, not only for themselves but also for the following generations:

I said to my grandma, "Can I start to eat?" "No, you have to wait for your bowl of the four main foods," she said. "We will all pray together in thanks for the foods that come into our bodies and become us. That is how the plants, the fish and the animals are part of us. That is why we respect them. They are part of the big Circle that makes up everything. We are a part of it, too. Now hold your bowl of foods and think about the things I have told you. Think most of all about the Great One who made it so."

As I held my bowl of the four main foods up, I thought of all the things my Tupa, my grandma and my mother had told me and the things I had seen this whole year from the first season of preparations to this ending season of thanks. I could see how all the things worked together and how we were part of it. I knew that we

were living the way the Great One wanted us to. We used what He gave to us . . . As long as we keep the respect for all things the Great One made, we will not have any hardships. That is the way it was planned. I thanked the Great One and all the great food Chiefs, for through their help, I could be here on this fine day. (Armstrong 40f.)

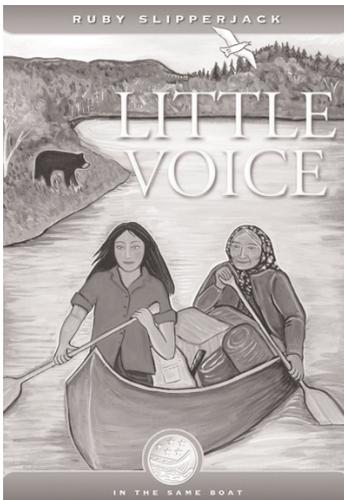
This passage also shows that Armstrong writes about land with a passion that goes beyond establishing a setting or creating a descriptive backdrop for action and characters. Land gives life, identity, and wisdom, to indigenous communities. In two of her articles, "Sharing one Skin" (1997) and "Land Speaking" (1998), Armstrong describes the close connection of ancestors and land by saying that she cannot separate herself from her place and her land.

We are keepers of Earth because we are earth. We are old Earth. ... Without being whole in our community, on our land, with the protection it has as a reservation, I could not survive. ... Without my people, without my land, I am not alive.

For the Okanagan people it is not just any region that supports their existence, but this region of the Okanagan Valley in which they find the

environment they need to keep their cultural heritage alive. Land and region thus become the foundation of the existence of the people.

Ortiz et al. embed land within a literary theme as “a material reality as well as a philosophical, metaphysical idea or concept”; and explain that “land is who we are, land is our identity, land is homeplace, land is sacred. The land is sacred, the land is voice” (365) Regionalism in First Nations’ literature transcends aspects of environment, language, and the mentioning of certain landmarks to include the whole person, an identity that interweaves all parts inextricably. Thus, regionalism implies a continuous reciprocal dependency of environment and community (see New 948-953).



## Two regions, two identities

In Ruby Slipperjack’s children’s novel *Little Voice* (2002), the reader meets 10-year old Ray, a girl whose mother is Anishinaabeg<sup>3</sup> and whose father is white Canadian. The story is set between 1978 and 1982 in Northern Ontario. Having lost her father a few years previously, Ray lives with her mother and two younger siblings in a small village in a rural area. Not only the loss of her father but also the financial situation at home afflict her. Ray’s mother struggles to feed and clothe her children.

More worrisome to Ray even than her family’s financial problem is her appearance: Her green eyes, long black hair and dark skin mean that she is noticed in ways she does not like. The racist attitudes of her teacher and classmates lead Ray to the assumption that it is best not to answer questions. At times, she stops talking at all. Ray’s name proves to be another problem at school and in the community: When she was born, her grandfather expected his first grandchild to be a boy and wanted to name ‘him’ Raymond. Slightly disappointed that the child is a girl, he decides that the family should name her Ray.

Ray’s environment, characterized by poverty, isolation, racism and being ignored, creates a situation in which

she rarely feels at home and which engenders no sense of belonging. Having lost the contact with their heritage, their harsh environment rarely allows Ray's part-Anishinaabeg family to approach their cultural roots. Only at certain times, such as when preparing food on an open fire and telling stories, do Ray and her siblings feel the comfort of their Anishinaabeg culture. Importantly, however, the particularly significant aspect of First Nation culture, storytelling, through which culture is inherited and the coming generation is educated, is interrupted by chores around the house. These force Ray to stop being a child and she takes on the role of an adult, caring for the siblings and cleaning the house. Her disrupted encounter with storytelling is not sufficient for Ray to develop a connection to the part of her culture that has been neglected for so long.

Ray only has access to this other culture when her grandmother comes to visit and when Ray is allowed to spend a few months with her grandmother, living in a small hut in a settlement close to railroad tracks. First and foremost, Ray sees this as a chance to leave her rough school life and the bullying of her classmates behind. On a different level, which Ray only recognizes towards

the end of the story, she is offered the opportunity to become familiar with the traditional Anishinaabeg life style.

Swimming in lakes and the river, picking berries and cooking, she engages in traditional activities and comes to celebrate a close connection to nature through adventurously befriending a baby moose and a black bear cub. Although Ray experiences dangerous encounters on a forbidden canoe trip, the region is benign and, by producing berries and fish, supports her existence. In contrast to her other home, the surrounding Ray now finds herself in offers her the possibility to establish a new self, a self that re-learns to use her voice.

Ray's grandmother turns out to be an excellent teacher, guide, and supporter. Going on travels with her, Ray learns to live in harmony with nature and to cope with situations that demand caution as well as respect for nature. Staying with her grandmother, Ray realizes that she is slowly being introduced to her grandmother's perception of nature, especially that of herbs and plants. Her grandmother is a midwife, responsible for childbirth, saving lives, and easing suffering, tasks that Ray is chosen to inherit. Thus, region becomes the carrier of knowledge and heritage. This mirrors

the experience of Chemai in Armstrong's *Neekna and Chemai* when Chemai realizes that she has to carry on the knowledge of nature she gained from her mother and *tupa*.

Traveling back and forth between both places, Ray moves from one culture to the other, seemingly distancing herself from her mother's home and gradually moving towards her grandmother's. The self-identity and self-awareness she is able to establish at her grandmother's is disrupted each time she returns home where her mother's re-marriage and the birth of a new child change the family dynamics. Because Ray is absent from home so often, she misses out on many decisions. Even if these are as trivial as buying a new TV set or radio, she experiences her missing-out as a loss. Going back to her grandmother's, meeting her animal friends and having to accept that they chose freedom rather than staying with her, Ray increasingly realizes that this is where she feels most at home.

The fact that Ray is a part of two cultures, which she has difficulty uniting, also manifests itself in language. When Ray and her younger siblings go berry picking with their grandmother, a conversation is virtually impossible because the children only have a very limited knowledge of Anishinaa-

bemowin and their grandmother only speaks a few English phrases. Ray is aware of the problems this causes and regrets their inability to communicate. Her younger brother and sister, however, do not seem to recognize this and reply in fluent English, too rapid for their grandmother to understand. After spending many months with her grandmother, re-gaining a voice and claiming a language for herself, Ray also re-gains the voice and language of her ancestors. Thus, she comes into touch not only with the traditional knowledge of medicine, but also with another important marker of culture: language.

## Merging into one

By having Ray take the train between her mother's and grandmother's houses, Slipperjack includes a means of transport which, in Canada's history, stands for the destruction of First Nations people. When the railroad was constructed between 1881 and 1885 many First Nations were driven off the land to make room for European settlers and their need to own and cultivate the land. Traveling back and forth between her mother's and her grandmother's place, the train, ironically, becomes the medium which allows Ray to get in touch with her heritage. She re-learns what she

had lost while living with her mother and being separated from her Anishinaabeg heritage: a knowledge of the past and the means to transfer it into the future. By taking the train to get to her grandmother's home, Ray literally creates what Homi Bhabha has called the "Third Space" which is "not based on exoticism or multi-culturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity" (56). She personalizes Bhabha's hope that it is in this space

that we will find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others. And by exploring this 'Third Space', we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves. (56)

Comparing Ray's positive development during her stay with her grandmother to the situation at her mother's place, the passage to and fro between both places can be interpreted as a process of curing a disease. The separation from her mother's original culture, the separation from the land and region, and the cruel experiences at school led to estrangement and alienation. Re-finding a home, a region, a culture and, most importantly, a language, Ray is healed by engaging with her grandmother. As Nelson states: "Whoever wishes either to re-

cover or to sustain a healthy state of existence, then, must enter into some working identity not only with cultural tradition but also with a particular landscape." (266)

## **R**eturning home as a process of healing

Novels such as N.S. Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968), L.M. Silkos's *Ceremony* (1977) and also Jeanette Armstrong's *Slash* (1990) explore the psychological and physical separation from community and its consequences which, at its most extreme, can lead to the loss of identity experienced by the protagonists of these novels. This loss demonstrates the interconnectedness of the different parts constituting an identity as well as the idea that land connects community, traditions, and ancestry and helps to shape the identity of a person. Consequently, when the connection to a region is lost, the individual ceases to feel whole as a person. According to Shanley,

nothing defines indigenous peoples more than belonging to a place, a homeland . . . Yet, "home" also functions metaphorically to refer to a future place of self-esteem (on the individual level), and self-governance, cultural maintenances, revitalization, and sovereignty (on the collective level). (as cited by Hafen 154)

In all the novels mentioned above, the reader meets a protagonist who in some way suffers from cultural estrangement. Tayo, in *Ceremony* (1977), is a 'half-breed' who has a Laguna mother and Anglo father. Abel, in *House Made of Dawn* (1968), is 'mixed-blood', with a Towan mother from Jemez and a father from a different people. Their respective stories begin with their feeling separated and distanced from their communities. As the stories develop, the protagonists overcome their alienation and move closer to a particular landscape. Finally, they recover their Native identities by becoming native to their ancestors' land and thus re-gaining a position of worth in their communities. They become an important part of their region. A prerequisite for this process is the ability to enter into identity with the landscape, a place where the events of their lives *take place* (see Nelson).

Slipperjack, through the character of Ray, places this important message of First Nation education on the level of a novel for children and offers them, and other children, a chance to find an approach to the rich traditions of First Nation communities. Just as Abel, in *House Made of Dawn* (1968), remains inarticulate until he completely re-enters the cycle of life at Walatowa, a Jemez Pueblo, Ray can only find her

language and voice with her grandmother, who helps her to overcome her silence.

For Ray, being a member of both cultures is no longer a contradiction. The new region she inhabits initiates the process of overcoming her silence and isolation at school and of rediscovering her voice. The goals her grandmother sets for her transcend Ray's auspicious name – she is no longer "Little Voice":

You are someone who can handle both worlds – the Native and non-Native, the old and the new. Someone who can learn the knowledge of the past and carry it forward into the future" (Slipperjack 2002:245).

Finally, through the teachings and wise words of her grandmother, Ray transcends both places and cultures. This hybrid identity (see Ashcroft 118), enables her to inherit both – a process necessary to secure her identity and that of her family. With the help of her grandmother and by spending time with her in a region that allows her to get in touch with Anishinaabeg culture again, Ray "learns to embrace the spirit of this place" (Momaday 49), including all the diverse aspects this entails.

Children's literature can serve different purposes. If written adequately

it can offer an enjoyable reading experience and establish in children a love for literature and discovering new spheres of expression. Beyond that, children's books also support processes of identity formation and cultural education concerning cultural phenomena. In order to do so, children's books must draw readers' attention not only through the narrative but also through the depth of the protagonists and the characterization of the setting. When reading and analyzing the children's books by First Nation authors introduced here, it becomes obvious that they offer stories that entangle both. The protagonists move in authentic cultural spheres from which the reader can derive characteristics of the culture they represent. Moreover, they also move in geographical spheres that allow for conclusions regarding the close connection, or rather interdependency, of people and region. Thus, the authors transcend a depiction of the surroundings as nature and introduce nature as a region which defines the protagonists' way of life which – helping them to know who they are, where they come from and where they will go.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Others were for example the establishment of cultural centers and the creation of educational institutions esp. for First Nations.

<sup>2</sup> Syilx'tsn is the term for the traditional language of the Okanagan people of the Southern Interior region of British Columbia, Canada, and North Central Washington State. Jeanette Armstrong is member of the Okanagan people, known in their own language as St'elsqilx, or Syilx.

<sup>3</sup> Ruby Slipperjack is a member of the Anishinaabeg people (Nishinaabe or Anishinini), in English known as Ojibway or Chippewa. Anishinaabemowin is the term describing their language. They form one of the largest and most diverse North American nations, their traditional territory covers parts of western Quebec, where they are known as the Algonquin, the Great Lakes region, where one subdivision is known as the Odawa, and the prairie provinces, where they are also known as the Saulteaux. Since part of the purpose of this article is to support an authentic representation of First Nation literature, the autonym rather than the term given by Western anthropologists is used. New (2002) offers more information about the Anishinaabeg and their culture, esp. concerning literature.

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