Ecosustainable Narratives and Partnership Relationships in World Literatures in English

Edited by
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Tony Hughes-d'Aeth

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CHAPTER 8

HEAL THE EARTH: TEACHINGS FROM INDIGENOUS WOMEN

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"What befalls the Earth, befalls the People of the Earth"
(Chief Seattle, Dkhw'Duw'Absh).

In the opening of Lee Maracle's novel *Ravensong* (1993), the female trickster Raven tells Cedar about her plan to spread a flu epidemics in the village of wolf clan in order to shake the people out of their spiritual paralysis and return them to "the place of sacred thought"[1] where they can remember their ancient ways and hear her song:

> Change is serious business – gut-wrenching really. With humans it is important to approach it with great intensity. Great storms alter earth, mature life, rid the world of the old, ushering in the new. Humans call it catastrophe. Just birth, Raven crowed. Human catastrophe is accompanied by tears and grief, exactly like the earth's [...] Still, Raven was convinced that this catastrophe she planned to execute would finally wake the people up, drive them to white town to fix the mess over there. Cedar disagreed but offered no alternative.
>
> "Be patient", Raven repeated. "There isn't much time. These people are heading for the kind of disaster they may not survive" (14).

Today, as the world faces a terrible pandemic, the crumbling of its economies, and an unparalleled environmental crisis, Raven's call for change and dialogic partnership among the peoples of the planet seems evermore compelling. Indeed, if we are to save the Earth and the human race from irremediable disaster, we need to rethink the dominator dialectics

[1] Maracle, 1993: 23. All subsequent page references are to this edition.

that underpin our socioeconomic systems. As ecofeminists and environmentalists warn us, we need to stop unregulated capitalist exploitation and turn to more equitable human relations and more eco-sustainable economic practices based on caring, respect, solidarity and altruism[2], instead of individualistic greed for power and wealth.

Precious in this crucial battle to heal the Earth are the teachings of those peoples who still preserve their ancestral ties with the land and value their earth-centered mythologies. Indigenous women of North America like Lee Maracle have long been aware of how colonialism, capitalism, racism, sexism and environmental violence[3] unjustly perpetrate genocide, feminicide, ecocide and other forms of violence. Resiliently, through their activism and writing, they have been reclaiming their traditional ecological knowledge and animistic beliefs to teach both their Indigenous communities and all humanity how to restore a renewed respect for Mother Earth and thereby re-establish an ethical relationship with the land and with each other. As Maracle states, "if we are caretakers of this land, then the obligation to alter the destiny of this society is our collective responsibility"[4]. For Okanagan land-speaker Jeanette Armstrong undertaking this collective task involves acknowledging foremost "human relationship as land ethics" since "the way in which we make decisions, and in which we choose to look at each other as people – as equal human beings – is fundamental to how we interact with the land". Ultimately, we have two choices: "we can destroy the land. Or we can love the land and it can love us back"[5].

Developing such a land ethics cannot overlook the violence against women implicit in the colonial-patriarchal metaphor. Mohawk grandmother Katsi Cook reminds us that "we as women are earth" because "we are the first environment […] the doorway to life. At the breast of women, the generations are nourished and sustained. From the bodies of women flow the relationship of these generations both to society and to the natural

[2] Cf. Eisler's model of a caring economics: Eisler, 2007.

[3] Environmental violence refers to "the disproportionate and often devastating impacts that the conscious and deliberate proliferation of environmental toxins and industrial development (including extraction, production, export and release) have on Indigenous women, children and future generations, without regard from States or corporations for their severe and ongoing harm" WEA, 2016: 14; based on Carmen & Waghiyi, 2012.

[4] Maracle, 1996: 42.

[5] Armstrong, 2020: 165. The original talk "Human Relationship as Land Ethic" was delivered at the Bioneers National Conference in 2002 and can be accessed at https: youtube.com/watch?v=qwNOX3MNisE. The subsequent transcription was published in 2020 in the volume *Living Earth Community*.

world"[6]. As sources of life, women and the land are inextricably connected, for better or worse. They are interdependent for their mutual health and well-being, but also in their subjection to violence[7]. To simultaneously counter the abuse of women and the Earth is therefore necessary to ensure a new paradigm of healing and survival.

Two eco-narratives which elicit an environmental care ethics grounded in a loving and respectful relationship with the land and its creatures are Jeanette Armstrong's *whispering in shadows* (2000) and Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song* (2014). Drawing on the beliefs of two different tribal nations (the Okanagan and the Stó:lō) based in British Columbia, both novels foreground alternative ecologies capable of overturning globalized (neo)colonial capitalism as well as the environmental destruction and gender-racial violence it upholds. Indeed, through their female protagonists they enact a decolonizing of the feminine that relinquishes abusive attitudes toward women and the land and allows for the retrieval of feminine values like caring, empathy and caregiving. With their focus on Indigenous ways of healing both texts also provide the valuable teachings needed to envision a new partnership approach to our planet and fellow humans. This essay examines these novels within the broader context of Armstrong and Maracle's politics of colonial contestation and their use of storytelling as a sacred healing ceremony through which to pass down knowledge on how to heal spiritual and emotional fractures. The aim is to show how these narratives retain the transformative power inherent in Indigenous orature so as to debunk the anthropocentrism responsible for our current disconnection with the land and to conversely prompt mutually supportive community-based interrelations.

Central to the ecological ethos propounded by both Armstrong and Maracle is the core belief shared by the various Indigenous Peoples of North America in the interdependency between humans and the land, which debunks the human/non-human divide. Armstrong, who grew up on the Penticton Indian reservation, explains how in the Okanagan worldview the self and the land are conceived of as an integral whole, and not as separate entities:

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[6] Cook, 2003, qtd. WEA 2016: 58.

[7] On the connection between violence against the Earth and violence against women see Maracle, 2012 and the 2016 WEA report which denounces how the recent increase in rape and murder rates of Indigenous girls and women is linked to the increased presence of male workers on extractive sites situated on or near Indigenous lands.

> our understanding of the land is one in which we are not just *part* of the land, nor *just* part of the vast system that operates on the land, but that the *land is us*. In our language, the word for our bodies contains the word for land […] Therefore, every time I say the word for my body […] I'm saying that I'm from the land and that my body is the land[8].

In her view, body, land and language are thus intricately linked. "[T]he body" – she writes in her essay *Keepers of the Earth* – "is the Earth itself […] our flesh, blood and bones are Earthbody"[9]. In other words, for the Okanagan People, our physical, spiritual and cultural selves are located in the natural elements: "the flesh which is our body is pieces of the land […] The soil, the water, the air, and all other life-forms contributed parts to be our flesh"[10]. Equally, the land is a body/spirit with its own language that constantly speaks to those who identify with it, providing them with invaluable teachings and cultural memory. In *Land Speaking* she states: "language was given to us by the land we live within […] it is the land that holds all the knowledge of life and death and is a constant teacher […] Not to learn its language is to die"[11].

Retrieving this body/land/language identification is essential to healing our relationship with Mother Earth and is the nexus of Armstrong's decolonizing efforts as a writer and poet to 'reterritorialize' herself in the mythic Okanagan land. Indeed, analyzing her poetry, Mongibello argues that the poems are "narratives of re-appropriation that attempt to rebuild the connection between the *I*, as a member of the Okanagan nation, and the land"[12]. The need to listen to the language of the land emerges prominently also in Armstrong's second novel *whispering in shadows*, which recounts the life story of Penny Jackson, an Indigenous artist, activist and single mother who faces both dislocation from her community as a young university student and the added trauma of cancer as an older woman. Like the lyrical I in Armstrong's poems, Penny seeks a healthy, symbiotic relationship with the land and its stories, which will help her make sense of her existence and of the shadows – i.e., the physical and emotional fractures – within her.

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[8] Armstrong, 2020: 164 (author's italics).
[9] Armstrong, 1995: 4.
[10] Armstrong, 1995: 6.
[11] Armstrong, 1998: 175-176.
[12] Mongibello, 2014: 145. As the basis of her argument, Mongibello draws on Dreese's concept of "mythic reterritorializations" which "take place when writers salvage the stories and places from the past and rewrite them in order to claim an identity and to establish a sense of place concurrent with their present sense of self", Dreese, 2002: 24.

A first step in this direction involves acknowledging the link between human disease and environmental degradation caused by negligent human overexploitation. Having been raised with the precepts of traditional Okanagan philosophy through the stories handed down by her great-grandmothers, Penny knows that her physical illness cannot be separated either from the spiritual crisis she experiences vis-à-vis the alienating globalized mass culture of urban settings or from the ecological destruction brought about by the dualistic hierarchies of colonial culture. Discussing her diagnosis with her friend Tannis, for example, she equates the cancer she has contracted from exposure to pesticides to "the flesh-eating monsters" in the Coyote stories of her people and explains how those shape-shifters once banned from the world "so we could survive" are back now "[i]n all kinds of different forms. Not just cancer, but aids, mad cow disease, superbacteria, mutant viruses and so on" because the natural order is "out of balance"[13]. Envisioned as monsters in the novel are not only the cancer cells that eat her body away like a new colonizer, but also the industrial machines of multinational companies that are clearcutting the trees on Indigenous lands, thereby perpetuating colonial de-territorialization: like "huge alien insects" they crawl steadily forward, drowning out "the voices of the people chanting and shouting […] Stop the slaughter. Stop the Monsters. Stop the killing of trees" (113).

As living entities, trees are powerful elements in Armstrong's representation of Earthbody and have a pivotal role in Penny's process of spiritual healing. Indeed, it is in the forest of Vancouver Island, where she is welcomed by the soothing trees and hears them whisper, that she rediscovers a renewed sense of familial connection and wholeness with the natural world:

> For the first time in long months, she can feel her whole body relax as a familiar lethargy takes over […] Look up! It's the tree moving! She leans so far backward, looking up at the swaying tops of the trees above her, she almost falls backward. She watches them nod toward each other, whispering. They're talking! An overwhelming emotion washes over her. […] She leans close to the tree, her cheek pressed sideways against the trunk and closes her eyes. Her words are barely audible in the still air. The sounds of her language mixing with the soft movement of ferns, the whispering of branches and the sound of birds overhead (97-98).

Hearing that other-than-human language spoken by the trees, the ferns and the birds enables Penny not only to retrieve a sense of belonging to the landscape as her body fuses with the body of the land, but also to re-establish

[13] Armstrong, 2000: 247. All subsequent page references are to this edition.

a sense of kinship with the land which provides sustenance, protection and parental care in a family-based relationship. She, in fact, acknowledges that the trees touching her "*feels the same as a relative holding me. Soothing me*" (99).

Recognizing the land as a family and community member is equally important in reclaiming a sense of cultural-ecological belonging and is linked with the Indigenous belief that the land is a source of memory and nation. As Armstrong explains, N'silxchn, the Okanagan land language, is "the old land/mother spirit of the Okanagan People" through which the voices of the grandmothers – or *tmixw*, the "loving-ancestor-land-spirit"[14] – speak to us. The landscape is thus inseparable from the spirits of tribal ancestors who are present therein as living memory and pass down ecological knowledge to the future generations, thus allowing them to identify with their land/nation. The guiding voice that Penny hears throughout her life is that of her great-grandmother Tupa, a powerful feminine presence who helps Penny understand her identity as an Indigenous woman, her mission as a painter, and her place in the world. Indeed, as a young child, Tupa teaches Penny how to relate with the non-human through songs and stories, how to listen to the voices of spirits in the colours around her[15], and how to keep the shadows of the night away by wrapping herself in the warm light of the rising sun each new day. Most importantly, Tupa teaches her how to be out on the land with others while partaking in communal activities such as gathering, fruit-picking and farming, which nurture cooperation, bondage, familial reconnection and mutual support, as well as love, care and enjoyment. Returning to those ancestral gathering lands as an adult, Penny rediscovers the pleasure of being part of a collaborative unit of family and community members and is reminded that "*it's our community together in a certain way on land which makes us a full person*" (273).

It is this sense of community as an interconnected, harmonious whole that Armstrong envisions as foundational to her land ethics. "We need to be loved, we need to have the support of our community, and the love and the care of the people surrounding us", she says, because "it is not material wealth that secures and sustains you and protects you from fear. Rather, it is the people and the community that secure and sustain you"[16]. In *whispering in shadows* Indigenous communal cultures based on bio-

[14] Armstrong, 1998: 176.

[15] As Haladay observes, Penny's ability to hear the colours infuses her art: "the colours speak to Penny who, in sensory translation, paints what she hears so that others may see colours' voices", 2006: 38.

[16] Armstrong, 2020: 165, 168.

regionally self-sustaining economies are thus opposed to neoliberal capitalist economic practices and provided as a model for both a healthy community and for more equitable human relations also with members from other communities. While visiting the Mayan coffee co-operative in Mexico, Penny proposes, for instance, a system of Indigenous fair trade capable of creating a network among the Indigenous communities in North America in opposition to the growing influence of multinationals and NAFTA.

Healing as a community-based process is also a core idea put forward by Maracle in *Celia's Song,* where various members of a Stó:lō community have to confront the pain of intergenerational trauma. Written as a sequel to *Ravensong*, it focusses on the effects that both colonialism and the flu epidemics spread by Raven in 1954 have had on that community three decades later and denounces how the uncaring attitude of the Euro-Canadian settler society has fueled poverty, violence, suicide, alcoholism and sexual abuse among the Natives. Indeed, during the epidemics, the people from white town had failed to provide their medicines and doctors thereby causing massive deaths among the villagers, which meant an irreparable loss of knowledge and cultural identity for the community. The death of the shaman Dominic, for example, deprived Celia, the community seer, of guidance on how to understand her visions. Thus, instead of valuing her gift and using it to help the community, she came to regard her visions as a manifestation of insanity.

To heal from such cultural genocide – Maracle's narrative suggests – urges a holistic and participatory approach grounded in the community's ceremonial way of life and traditional healing rituals, such as smudging, dancing, singing, drumming, storytelling and sweat-lodges, through which bad spirits can leave the body. The Winter Spirit dancing ceremony is, for instance, used in the healing of Amos, the child abuser who tortured and raped little Shelley, leaving the entire community to face a new form of lateral violence, for which their language has no name. Rather than adopting punitive measures, the community offers Amos a possibility of relief and redemption in line with the Indigenous belief in ceremony as a means to restore the sacred connection between body, mind, soul and nature. During his comeuppance, Amos faces both the guilt for his horrific actions and the weight of the unbearable fear and pain caused by the emotional and physical abuses he suffered as a boy in residential school. As he cleanses himself through dancing and song, he embraces death and reunites with the spirits of his grandmother and forbears. While releasing Amos from "his toxic

insane life"[17], the ritual offers redemption to the community as well, as it acknowledges its own responsibility toward the victim-turned-victimizer: it did not "watch that child, didn't see the twists inside the boy who became this hateful man" (147). Ultimately, it failed to protect him and provide him with love and care, leaving him forever broken and "dislocated from himself" (40).

Like Armstrong, Maracle believes that "[l]ove itself has the power to heal"[18] and to root out all violence, thereby allowing us to shift from virulent hatred to deep caring. To undo the hate, she argues in *I Am Woman*, love has to be decoupled from sex and the scorn associated with its envisioning as "a womanly thing"[19], since these attitudes uphold both the idea of women as "sexual vehicles rather than sexual beings" and the "perversity of child sexual abuse"[20]. Conversely, we need to embrace love as the spiritual force that defines us as humans and as the basis "for 're-constructing' the passion and compassion we should naturally feel for one another"[21] and for the land that mothers us.

Since "violence against women is violence against the Earth"[22], restoring love for the land cannot be decoupled from restoring love for women. As part of her environmental ethos, in *Celia's Song* Maracle thus addresses the need to decolonize Indigenous women who have been reduced to sub-humans. Vilified, abused of, and unloved by white people and their own men, women like Shelley's mother Stella lose their self-love and become prostitutes, alcoholics and neglectful, abusive mothers. Their path to healing hinges on 're-feminizing' their original beings, which means overcoming the denial of Native womanhood by retrieving their sacred roles in Indigenous cultures. This process of Indigenous self-determination is achieved by rediscovering motherly love and the capacity to nurture. Thirty-eight-year-old Celia, for example, reclaims her identity as a Stó:lō woman when she re-bonds with her mother for the first time since she had been sent away as a child during the flu epidemics. During their encounter Celia starts healing the wounds caused by her childhood separation from her family when her mother recalls how she had been inspired by the colours of Celia's drawing to plan her beautiful garden of herbal medicines, which for Indigenous peoples is a source of sacred cultural heritage. The sharing of this memory empowers Celia and allows her to accept her role in the

[17] Maracle, 2015: 255. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[18] Maracle, 1996: 7.
[19] Maracle, 1996: 23.
[20] Maracle, 1996: 28-29.
[21] Maracle, 1996: 10.
[22] Maracle, 2012.

community as a seer since her drawings were representations of her visions. Further on, when mother and daughter participate in the tending of little Shelley, Celia also learns to appreciate the value of caregiving, despite the great fatigue it involves.

Besides providing care and ceremony, women facilitate the reconnection of Indigenous people with their cultural heritage, which is both ecological and spiritual. By virtue of their special connection to the Earth as mothers, they are both in charge of the land and the knowledge holders of their communities. They thus have the responsibility of what Faith Spotted Eagle (Lakota) calls "generational braiding"[23], of sharing their wisdom and experiences with all the members so as to restore balance and identity. In the novel, it is indeed the women who aid the would-be shaman Jacob during his initiation back into his Indigenous culture and show him the importance of land as ceremony. Celia teaches Jacob not to fear his prophetic visions, nor Cedar's voice, which she herself had learned to listen to as a child; the women of the community tell him stories about Ravensong to help him overcome his own personal trauma of being fatherless; and the spirit of Jacob's grandmother – like Penny's Tupa – guides him during his vision quest on the top of the mountains where his song is waiting for him. Looking out at the mountains, the river, the trees and all the other elements of the landscape, she tells him: "Them are your relatives" (176), thereby endowing the future Medicine Man with the basic knowledge he will need to heal his people, namely that we are all Earthbody. Significantly, like Penny who interacts with the bones of Old Tupa Bear in the mountain camp, Jacob sees the old bones that had been calling him to his initiation and is reminded of our interconnectedness with the Earth in its cyclical renewal of life and death.

As a final remark we need to mention the relevance of storytelling in the pan-Indigenous environmental care ethos embraced by both Maracle and Armstrong. Throughout our analysis we have highlighted how stories are themselves sacred healing ceremonies since they favour both the handing down of knowledge and a dialogic interaction among community members. Indeed, telling and listening to stories are community-based activities that engage both the teller and the listener in participatory interrelations and connect them to the sacred words of the land. As crafted storytellers, Maracle and Armstrong have listened to the languages of their lands to weave two powerful eco-narratives that teach us how to restore a healthy environment and healthy, partnership-oriented communities where each member is a necessary link of an interdependent chain. It is our call

[23] WEA, 2016: 12.

now to endorse that type of change that can prevent us from destruction and lead us on the path to survival.

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