

LITERATURE GUIDE

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**“Land Speaking” and Other Works
by Jeannette Armstrong**

Literature guide created by
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“Land Speaking” and Other Works by Jeannette Armstrong

Read, Listen, Tell: Indigenous Stories from Turtle Island (pp. 141-155)

INTRODUCTION

Jeannette Armstrong is a N’silxchin and English-speaking Syilx (Okanagan) activist, artist, and writer from Penticton, British Columbia. Her 1985 novel *Slash* is widely recognized as the first novel published in Canada by an Indigenous woman author.

Born in 1948, Armstrong grew up on the Penticton Indian Reserve, where she attended a day school while receiving a traditional education from her Elders. She then attended the University of Victoria and received a BFA in 1978. In 1986, Armstrong became the director of En’owkin Centre, a First Nations Centre of Learning, and in 1989 she helped found the En’owkin International School of Writing and became its first director.

Armstrong has written many works of literary criticism, a collection of poetry, three children's books, and a second novel, *Whispering in Shadows* (2000). She has also edited a number of important anthologies, including *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature* (1993), and *Native Poetry in Canada: A Contemporary Anthology* (2001). In 2009, Armstrong gained a PhD in Indigenous Environmental Ethics from the University of Greifswald (Germany), *Constructing Indigeneity: Syilx Okanagan Oraliture and tmix^vcentrism*. Currently, Jeannette Armstrong is an Associate Professor and the Canadian Research Chair (of Indigenous Knowledge and Philosophy), based at the UBC Okanagan Campus. In 2016, she was awarded the George Woodcock Lifetime Achievement Award.

Armstrong describes her goals as a writer as wanting to “change deeply biased misconceptions related to Aboriginal people” (Li 1). She is passionate about Indigenous research that “advances knowledge and will better guide environmental practices” (5), and her works engage with Indigenous philosophies, Syilx thought, and environmental ethics. Some of the recurring ideas that surface in her fiction, poetry, and literary criticism include the powerful impact of land and location upon language and identity; the fluidity of genre and art-form (including visual art, music and poetry, with oral tradition); and the significance of expressing one’s journey in recovery from loss and displacement.

In [a 2013 presentation](#) on her hopes for Canadian engagement with the land and Indigenous knowledge, Armstrong states that part of what fuels her research in Syilx culture is what she’s observed to be a striking difference between Syilx and Western environmental philosophies. For Syilx people, she explains, “all the living things... are as valuable as we are, as valuable as the next person, so how we interact with them is incredibly important” (UBC Okanagan). She urges that Indigenous points of view, and other strains of thought from “many diverse corners of humanity,” need to become part of the social dialogue in order to solve the most pressing environmental and existential challenges around the globe. These values are something she expresses in all of her work.



Scholarship on Jeannette Armstrong

Scholarship on Jeannette Armstrong focuses primarily on her two novels, *Slash* and *Whispering in Shadows*, and on her book of poetry, *Breath Tracks*. In both analyses and criticism of her work, Armstrong’s ecological focus is often the central point of discussion. Literary scholar Anna Mongibello has written on Armstrong’s environmental ethics extensively. As Mongibello emphasizes, according to Armstrong for Syilx people, the land is more than an ecological entity. The land speaks (as Armstrong argues in “Land Speaking”) and is also an “archive of memory” (144). As Mongibello turns to Armstrong’s poetry in *Breath Tracks*, she ponders the multiple meanings of the word “tracks” – for example, the marks left by Indigenous peoples on their own territories, as well as the traces left “by the land in the blood of the Indigenous nations” (146). Tracks are also routes mapped by “Grandmothers” or ancestors, as well as “breath tracks” as the teachings that come from the land into the stories, “transmitted from one generation to another” (146). For Armstrong, the responsibilities associated with Syilx citizenship are ecological and cultural, taking care of the landscape of the Grandmothers. In Mongibello’s words, Syilx citizenship thus “surpasses the borders of the Canadian law and recognizes the land as the constitutive measurement of selfhood” (151).



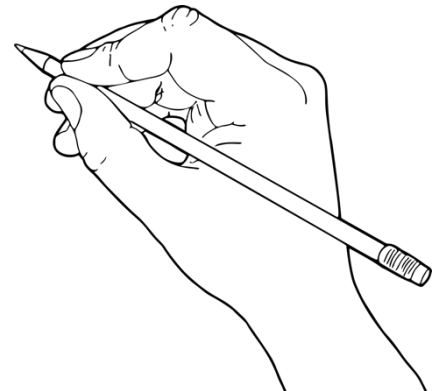
As Mongibello moves into a discussion of the role and identity of Indigenous women, she emphasizes the ways the state has dispossessed and devalued the traditional roles they held in their communities, as well as their “bond with the land” (153). She argues that, through Armstrong’s poems, the speaker’s “reterritorializations” serve as “rituals of healing” and as a way to “regain a sense of the self as overlapping with the land” (153). The first-person speaker finds healing in reconnecting with the landscape and the spirits encapsulated within. Mongibello refers to the ways in which the gendering of the New World as feminine was hugely problematic in a colonizing, sexualizing, and conquest narrative. Yet she is hopeful that Armstrong, through her poems, will “rebuild identity in place and heal from the trauma of colonization before deconstructing patriarchal representations of gender, as the land provides the spiritual strength as well as the language” to accomplish this act of resurgence (155).

Another key issue for Armstrong is the contestation of colonial legacies. Louisa Sorflaten’s article, “The Aboriginal Intellectual,” looks at Penny, the central character of *Whispering in Shadows*, a young woman who is a painter, poet, activist, and a single mother of three. The article analyses the predicament that Penny finds herself in as an Indigenous intellectual: how does she navigate a “commitment to fighting globalization through her art and activist work as a call for a return to

Aboriginal localism and as a model for recovering and maintaining the particularities of Indigenous difference in a global era” (383)?

The contrast between globalization and localism is made prominent in the article’s discussion of the challenges facing Indigenous peoples’ struggles for sovereignty and self-determination. Sorflaten argues that *Whispering in Shadows* represents a “new form of resistance against the incorporation of Indigenous peoples into the world’s marketplace by tracking specific and localized effects of globalization on Indigenous communities” (384). Sorflaten sees *Whispering in Shadows*, published in 2000, as continuing the work of Armstrong’s first novel, *Slash*, published in 1985, in engaging with Indigenous people’s struggle for decolonization in a global age. Sorflaten discusses the protagonist’s role as artist and activist in navigating the tension between the global and the local in her position as an Indigenous Intellectual.

Noel Elizabeth Currie’s article, “Jeannette Armstrong and the Colonial Legacy,” discusses how Indigenous women writers are “correcting the misdefinitions” often circulated about them in media and public discourses, and instead “defining themselves” by “writing their own stories” (138). Currie argues that in order for this to be accomplished, Indigenous writers have to carry out an examination of “the forces of oppression” (138), locating the roots of this oppression in constructions of race, sex, and class underpinning Canada’s colonial history. Focusing especially on *Slash*, Currie looks at protagonist Tommy Kelasket—also known as Slash—and his awakening to his history and his present. Tommy’s character begins to see the division his grandfather had described between those who embrace consumerism to “be more like white people” (Armstrong 42) and those who hold to traditions. He begins to wonder which system of values he should adhere to.



When Tommy meets an Indigenous activist named Mardi, he begins his search for an “all-important third choice against assimilation or extermination” (Currie 142). Mardi, with no connection to tradition, sees this third choice as “direct political action to change the conditions of oppression” (143). Though she is tragically killed by the FBI, she is “the instigator of Slash’s political awareness and commitment” (144). Eventually, Tommy removes himself from the patriarchal and misogynistic gender dynamics which permeated much of the political organizing he participated in. As he connects Mardi’s example to Indigenous tradition, he concludes that to “bargain from a position of strength,” Indigenous peoples must “define the world on their own terms,... perceive their own ability and inherent right to control their own destinies, and... make their ways ‘viable’ in the twentieth century by practising them”(147-148).

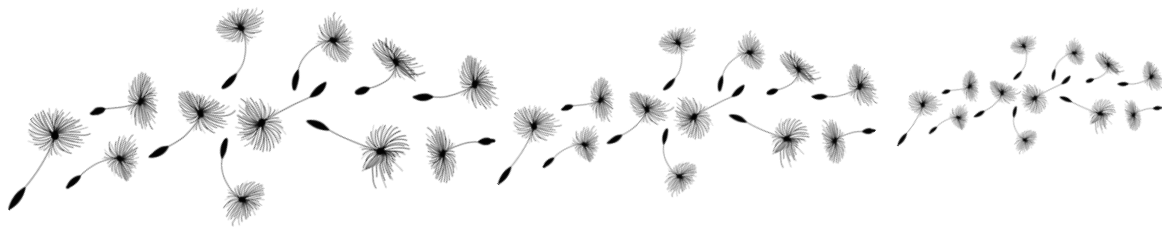
In this way, Tommy/Slash, a young Indigenous man whose life was caught up by violence, finds harmony with his traditions and community including his parents and his elders by learning to listen to and follow the examples of the Indigenous women in his own generation.



LAND SPEAKING

Summary	<p>In “Land Speaking,” Jeannette Armstrong draws from the teachings of her Syilx Elders as she shares some of her experiences as a N’silxchin speaker. She relates how her understanding of her own language “permeates” her experience of speaking and writing in English. Finding English insufficient to communicate her embodied experiences on Syilx land, Armstrong describes how she must constantly “reinvent” English to preserve ideas and aspects of her own language. “Land Speaking” demonstrates Armstrong’s skill at this reinvention as it weaves various excerpts of Armstrong’s own poetry and fiction.</p>
Through-lines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The land as the primary source of Syilx people’s language, N’silxchin • The limitations of an imposed language in conveying meaning • The importance of language revitalization in preserving cultural identities
Significant Quotes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English as a language “is deaf to music and only chances on it through the diligent work of writers. Perhaps this has to do with the loss of the body as the sole carrier of words. Perhaps literacy—with its marks on stone, wood, paper, and now in electronic impulses—silences the music that writers are able to retrieve” (152). • “...writing in English is a continuous battle against the rigidity in English, and I revel in the discoveries I make in constructing new ways to circumvent such invasive imperialism upon my tongue” (155). • “Okanagan carries meanings about a time that is no more. Its words speak of a world different in experience from this one. Its words whisper more than the retelling of the world.

	Through my language I understand I am being spoken to, I'm not the one speaking" (146).
Secondary Reading	<p>Armstrong, Jeannette and Douglas Cardinal. <i>The Native Creative Process: A Collaborative Discourse between Douglas Cardinal and Jeannette Armstrong with photographs by Greg Young-Ing</i>. Penticton, BC: Theytus Books, 1991.</p> <p>Anderson, Kim: "Reclaiming Native Space in Literature / Breaking New Ground: An Interview with Jeannette Armstrong." <i>West Coast Line</i> 31.2 (1997): 49-65.</p>
Discussion Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How does Armstrong express her environmental philosophy in "Land Speaking"? Identify a couple of examples that stand out to you from both the poetry and the prose. 2. Armstrong's poem "Threads of Old Memory" uses literary techniques such as repetition, personification, synesthesia, and metaphor. Choose one example of these literary techniques that stood out to you. What is your analysis of the effect of this literary technique? 3. How does "Threads of Old Memory" depict the loss suffered by Indigenous peoples as a result of colonialism? What does the poem say about the path forward? 4. Explore how Armstrong challenges traditional genre boundaries. What effect do you feel is achieved by her shifts between poetry and prose?



BREATH TRACKS

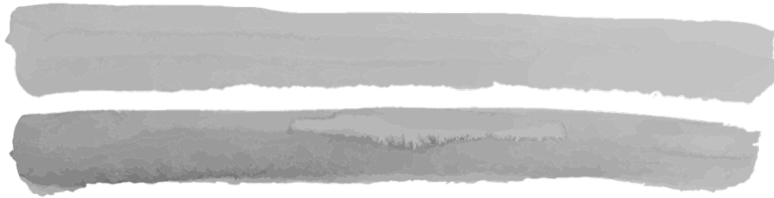
Summary	<p><i>Breath Tracks</i> is Armstrong's poetry collection, published in 1991. This eloquent, forceful, and innovative collection embodies all of Armstrong's arguments from her critical writing, her personal views, and her understanding of language as a whole. Poems are used throughout Armstrong's other works, including both her novels and her essays. <i>Breath Tracks</i> is broken into four separate sections: From the Landscape of Grandmother, History Lesson, Fire Madness, and Wind Woman.</p>
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<p>Through-lines</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dispossession of Indigenous peoples and their territories by colonizers • Versions of history and truth • Revitalization of Indigenous languages and the rejection or subversion of English, as the colonizer’s language. • Syilx ways of knowing: “The syilx people know history, passed on from one person to another, from generation to generation, as a record called cepcaptikwl. It is a history of the meaning of being syilx, rather than a history of dates. The meanings in the cepcaptikwl are formed through story. They are the truths and knowledge of the natural laws made active through story” (Okanagan Rights Committee and The Okanagan Indian Education Resources Society for the Okanagan People).
<p>Significant Quotes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Out of the belly of Christopher’s ship/ a mob bursts/Running in all directions/Pulling furs off animals/Shooting buffalo/Shooting each other/left and right” (“History Lesson” 28). • “Somewhere among the remains/of skinless animals/is the termination/to a long journey/and unholy search for the power/glimpsed in a garden/forever closed/forever lost” (29).
<p>Secondary Readings</p>	<p>Mongibello, Anna. “Speaking the Language of the Land: Jeannette Armstrong’s Green Poetree.” <i>Green Canada</i>, edited by Oriana Palusci, P.I.E. - Peter Lang SA Éditions Scientifiques Internationales, 2016.</p> <p>Mongibello, Anna. “Tracking the Land/Memory: Healing and Reterritorializations in Jeannette Armstrong’s Breath Tracks.” <i>Indigenous Perspectives of North America: A Collection of Studies</i>, edited by Enikő Sepsi, et al., Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2014.</p>
<p>Discussion Questions</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Consider the resonances between the two titles, “Land Speaking” (the essay) and <i>Breath Tracks</i> (the poetry collection). What relationships between land and humans (or living beings) do these two titles suggest? 2. In her article “Tracking the Land/Memory,” Anna Mongibello discusses the “ambiguity of the noun ‘tracks’” (146), and suggests several possible interpretations with examples from the text. What are some of the resonances and meanings of the word “tracks” that you have discovered?

	<p>3. Listen to Jeannette Armstrong’s author interview [HYPERLINK]. At the end of the interview, the full text of Armstrong’s poem “The History Lesson” can be read. What parallels can you draw between the message in Armstrong’s interview and the poem?</p> <p>4. Do a close reading of the poem “History Lesson,” paying special consideration to the implications of the title.</p>
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SLASH	
Summary	<p><i>Slash</i> is Armstrong’s first novel, published in 1985, and widely recognized as the first novel published in Canada by an Indigenous woman author. <i>Slash</i> tells the story of a young Okanagan Indigenous teen named Thomas “Tommy” Kelasket, and his journey towards self-acceptance of his Indigenous identity, as well as his engagement with political struggles for Indigenous rights. After unintentionally participating in a knife fight, Tommy ends up in the hospital. There, he meets Mardi, a young Indigenous activist who gives him the nickname “Slash,” and sets him on the path to becoming an activist in his own right. Set during a period of increasing vocalization and cultural revolution for the Indigenous peoples of North America in the 1970s and 80s, including many references to AIM (American Indian Movement), <i>Slash</i> explores both personal and social revival for the protagonist.</p>
Through-lines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American Indian Movement (AIM): A Native American grassroots movement founded in Minneapolis, Minnesota in July 1968. AIM was originally focused on systemic issues affecting Native Americans in urban areas. Ultimately, the movement expanded to address the full spectrum of issues stemming from settler colonialism. AIM is still active today, decades after its founding. • Identity and Belonging: <i>Personal</i> identity and <i>communal</i> identities are inextricable in many respects; however, the concepts of individualism and collectivism can be still contrasted in terms of whether the individual or community is prioritized. • Code-Switching: The practice of alternating between any two or more languages.
Significant Quotes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I realized then that...we had to rebuild our people. My part was that I had to find out what things were left of the old ways in my own Tribe and make it useable in our modern Indian lives” (150).
Discussion Questions	<p>1. What is the effect of combining historical events with a fictional narrative?</p>

	2. Writings on Armstrong often comment on her political emphasis. How do you interpret the relationship between the story and the political analysis in the novel?
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WHISPERING IN SHADOWS	
Summary	<p>Armstrong's second novel, <i>Whispering in Shadows</i>, was first published in 2000, and follows the life of Penny Jackson, a painter, activist, and mother. Penny's journey is one of coming to terms with her own identity, her desires to paint, and her hesitation to embrace the images and the feelings that come to her, while also fighting for recognition for her people. The story incorporates conventional narration, 'unsent letters', poetry, diary entries, sketchpad notes, and incomplete thoughts, focusing more on the rich internal life of the protagonist than on a narrative or plot-driven story arc. Externally, Penny Jackson's life follows a similar trajectory to Jeannette Armstrong's own biography: they both were raised with traditional Syilx education, went to the University of Victoria, and became artists and activists. Penny Jackson moves through her life seeking ways to assert her people's right to self-determination and the value of Syilx language (or N'silxchin), history, culture, and stories.</p>
Through-lines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female Indigenous identity: Among the many ways Indigenous women have been marginalized, one of the most prominent injustices which still affects Indigenous women and their descendants today is related to the Indian Act. Under Bill C-31, between 1869-1985, any Indigenous woman who married a non-Indigenous man lost her status and the right of her children to have status. Conversely, non-Indigenous women who married Indigenous men gained status for themselves and their children. The legacy of this policy continues to affect Indigenous women and their place within their communities to this day. • Genre fluidity: The shift between two or more genres; in this context, relating to Armstrong's combination of prose, poetry, and less common forms (such as letters and diary entries, which fall under the genre of epistolary fiction) to compose a single work. • Indigenous activism: In addition to local efforts, Indigenous activism takes the form of resistance movements such as Idle No

	<p>More (INM), an Indigenous-led social movement founded in November 2012, but which ultimately grew to inspire activism and attention to Indigenous self-determination across North America and beyond.</p>
<p>Significant Quotes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Maybe backing Native people in their fight is the only real way of protecting these and other forests. I would rather put my trust in people who care about their homeland than those who care about profits somewhere else” (109). • “I forgot how this feels. It’s like we’re being embraced by something so strong yet so gentle. Oh, my people. You are my medicine. Heal this small family of its wounds. Help us to become whole again as part of you. I give thanks that you are still here. I pray that you will always be here. I pray for each of you and I give myself back to you. I give you my children to be part of you again. I commit myself to honour you and to do all that I can, that there will always be community, in this way, here and wherever such community thrives. I give myself to this land, our home” (135).
<p>Discussion Questions</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In a speech given as part of her “Techno-Utopianism and the Fate of the Earth” presentation in 2014, Armstrong describes Indigenous knowledge in terms of “economic interaction[s].” In this sense, to have Indigenous knowledge is to “have deep knowledge about the limits and the requirements of all the different living things in the place you use. It is understanding that we as humans can partake in that place like every other living thing, but we have to know those limits. Indigenous economics is about knowledge, in how we view nature” (IntIForum). How is this idea about Indigenous knowledge embodied in her works? *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ib9BVGDW6sw 2. Consider Armstrong’s description of the land as the source of Indigenous knowledge and identity in light of the fact that many Indigenous peoples live in cities, and may have infrequent or no access to their traditional homelands. How do Indigenous knowledges and identities persist? 3. In her 2011 TEDx talk(*), Armstrong describes Indigenization as a process that “occurs over a long period of time in a specific place, where people and organisms adapt and become interrelated.” For Armstrong the way to “Indigenize” is to participate “in relationships that help regenerate the land and systems of that place” (Indigenization). How does her definition of Indigenization include non-local communities? What is your understanding of the relationship between environmental activism and Indigenization? *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jL0fXsF1b18

ENWHISTEETKWA, NEEKNA AND CHEMAI, DANCING WITH THE CRANES	
Summary	<p><i>Enwhisteetkwa: Walk in Water</i> (1982) is Armstrong’s first children’s book. <i>Enwhisteetkwa</i> is set in the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia, in 1860, and explores life at that time from the perspective of an eleven-year-old Syilx child.</p> <p>Armstrong’s second children’s book, <i>Neekna and Chemai</i> (1984), tells the story of two young Syilx girls from the Okanagan Valley. Growing up in a time before first contact, the two girls learn about their people’s seasonal customs and ceremonies from their Great-Grandmother. They also learn the importance of oral tradition as their Grandmother’s stories are passed down to them.</p> <p>Her third children’s book, <i>Dancing with the Cranes</i> (2004), is a story that deals with the cycle of life from an Indigenous child’s perspective. Chi, the central character, is grieving the recent loss of her grandmother, Temma, at the same time that her mother is pregnant and soon to give birth. Chi’s parents help her to understand that life and death are a natural cycle, and that Temma will always be a part of their family. Together, they prepare to celebrate a new life.</p>
Through-lines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elders sharing Indigenous knowledge and stories, teaching their family’s traditions to younger generations, showing them how to participate. • Syilx seasonal life patterns and ways of life, culture, and history. • The cycle of life from a child’s perspective (experiencing and understanding) • Captikwł: “a collection of teachings about Syilx/Okanagan laws, customs, values, governance structures and principles that, together, define and inform Syilx/Okanagan rights and responsibilities to the land and to our culture” (“Captikwł”).
Secondary Reading	<p>Armstrong, Jeannette. <i>Constructing Indigeneity: Syilx Okanagan Oraliture and tmix“centrism</i>. 2009. Greifswald U, PhD dissertation.</p> <p>“Captikwł Stories.” <i>Okanagan Connections</i>, 26 Mar. 2014, okanaganconnections.wordpress.com/captikwł-stories/.</p> <p>Johnson, M. K. (2012). k^{sup} w^u sq^{sup} w^a?q^{sup} w^a?álx (we begin to speak): Our journey within nsyilxcn (Okanagan) language revitalization. <i>Canadian Journal of Native Education</i>, 35(1), 79-97.</p> <p>Marchand, Barbara. <i>Kou-Skelowh = We are the people: A trilogy of Okanagan Legends</i>. Illustrated by Barbara Marchand, Theytus Books, 1999.</p>

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