

Literary Space in the Works of Josie Boyle and Jeannette Armstrong

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Angeline O'Neill in collaboration with Josie Boyle,
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Abstract: In their collaborative article, Angeline O'Neill and Josie Boyle discuss the interconnection between the spoken and written word and the manipulation of literary space, here defined as a continuum characterised by different modes of intellectual production and developed in a socio-historical context. In particular, the article focuses on the work of two Indigenous women storytellers, Josie Boyle of the Western Australian Wongi people, and Jeannette Armstrong of the North American Okanagan people. O'Neill examines the movement from oral to written speech as a process by which the word is essentially "reconstituted"; a process which is utilised by these women as a means of empowerment and to affirm individual and group identity as well as promote greater cross-cultural understanding. Importantly, the article also acknowledges that any reading of Indigenous literature is problematised by the fact that critics and authors, whether indigenous or not, are affected by ideologies concerning the processes of reading, writing and speaking. In order to understand these processes better it must be acknowledged that when texts are transformed from one medium to another they may also move from one discursive regime to another. Through their manipulation of literary space the storytelling of Josie Boyle and Jeannette Armstrong opens this transformation to further enquiry.

Angeline O'NEILL in collaboration with Josie BOYLE

Literary Space in the Works of Josie Boyle and Jeannette Armstrong

In recent years, much has been said and written by the academy about the process and production of "literature." A necessary and particularly challenging question arising from this discussion concerns the manipulation of literary space which contains both oral and written traditions. The work of two Indigenous women storytellers, Josie Boyle of the Western Australian Wongi people, and Jeannette Armstrong of the North American Okanagan people opens this question for further discussion. While there are some important distinctions which will be noted between their respective approaches, both are greatly concerned with the interconnection between the spoken and written word as a means of empowerment and a way to greater cross-cultural understanding (for an excellent site of Aboriginal Studies, see *Australian Aboriginal Writers* at <<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~ozlit/aborigwr.html> >).

If we accept that the term literature is a culture-bound and time-bound concept, then literary space may be construed as "a continuum developed in a socio-historical context characterised by different modes of intellectual production" such as the oral and written; a continuum, if you like, in which oral, written and more recently, audio-visual media are dynamically interconnected (Merolla 15). This is not, however, to deny the profoundly ideological distinction between oral and written - quite the contrary. It is to reinforce this essential distinction and, in so doing, destabilise conventional Western ideas of literature, leading us to acknowledge that the basic orality of language is permanent, and while "oral expression can exist and mostly has existed without any writing at all" (Ong 7), writing could not exist without orality (12). This is an important point, given that writing is "a particularly pre-emptive and imperialist activity that tends to assimilate other things to itself" (12). Walter Ong goes to great lengths to show that this distinction between the oral and written word must be observed, as "you cannot without serious and disabling distortion describe a primary phenomenon by starting with a subsequent secondary phenomenon and paring away the differences" (13). To describe (dismiss?) oral tradition as simply "not written" is to miss its uniqueness and the way these remarkably different modes of intellectual production work together to create what I am calling literary space; a space framed by culture and time and encompassing "the shift from sound to visual space" which is the movement from oral to written speech (117). The storytelling of both Josie Boyle and Jeannette Armstrong operates within this space.

Orality has always been and continues to be a source of power and a means of establishing individual and group identity. For Indigenous peoples, in particular, as Jeannette Armstrong says in her poem "Threads of Old Memory," the spoken word "stretch[es] across the chaos brought into this world" by the written word in English (1998, 231-33). As we shall see, the subsequent claiming of the written word by Indigenous writers makes use of the dynamic interconnection between oral and written literatures while yet maintaining the profoundly ideological distinction born of the everchanging text-context relationship. If the movement from oral to written speech is, among other things, "a shift from sound to visual space" (Ong 117), then the speaker has a different relationship with the printed page from that of the writer. The word is essentially "reconstituted" (Ong 123) and this knowledge impacts on speaker and writer. As we shall see, an oral storyteller such as Josie Boyle is "caught" between the oral tradition of her people, the Wongis, and the written tradition of her Western education. Depending on the intensity of her consciousness of the cassette recorder during our meetings, her stories alternate between a fascinating mixture of animated performance sprinkled with Wongi words and phrases, and a more sedate approach marked by a comparatively formal discourse, as she anticipates the reconstitution of her words as they move from mouth to cassette to paper. Despite this, she is convinced of the primacy of the spoken word. On the other hand, Jeannette Armstrong consciously manipulates both oral and written traditions to frame the literary space in which both women tell their stories. Through the "performance" of her writing she challenges the sense of closure frequently found in the written text, consistently challenging her reader to move beyond the confines of the printed page. This seemingly paradoxical quest returns our attention to Boyle's uninhibited verbal and

physical performance which "cannot be saved, documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so it becomes something other than performance" (Phelan 146). So it is that "performance's being ... becomes itself through disappearance" (146) and the challenge is for the storytellers themselves, as well as those who write about them, to unleash the performative possibilities of writing itself.

Any reading of indigenous literature is problematised by the understanding that critics and authors, whether indigenous or not, are affected by ideologies concerning the processes of reading, writing and speaking (Fee 25). Non-Indigenous critics, in particular, "must use all the knowledge they have gained from their own experiences as colonised to consider their role as colonisers, to interrogate their own political and psychological investments in reading Indigenous literature in ways that produce themselves as Subject (Fee 25). This means becoming aware of the prevailing scriptism of Western culture and in particular the myth of literacy, according to which the written representation is held up as a model of what the spoken reality should be. Oral and scribal art forms can thus be mistakenly placed in an evolutionary context. Consequently, storytellers such as Armstrong and Boyle must subvert the master narrative written in English if they are to maintain the art of orature and its effectiveness.

In his essay, "Making Space For Orality On Its Own Terms," Phillip Nanton states that it is possible "to trace an identifiable epistemology of orality ... [which is] reflected in ways of structuring and composing ideas which are unique" (83). He then proceeds to describe the centrality of performance to orality, including time, audience interaction and specific word play which is frequently linked to locality. Performance, he convincingly argues, can never be put into print. Yet this should not be construed as a dismissal of the dynamic interconnection between the oral and written; an interconnection acknowledged by Nanton when he describes "true" orality, which evidences a clear break with the scribal form, and "reader-influenced" orality, which is "sufficiently powerful off the page to utilise the artifice of orality to good effect" (85). Both Jeannette Armstrong and Josie Boyle find themselves at the junction between the oral traditions of the Okanagan and Wongi peoples respectively and the Western written tradition in English, into which both were educated at an early age. Importantly, however, they were born into what Nanton calls "truly" oral traditions. Both women have taken up the challenge to manipulate the literary space in which they find themselves, seeking to communicate the truth of these traditions as well as the artifice of their presentation in such a way that they are made accessible to the reader in English.

Contemporary Indigenous writers assert their claims, both to the oral tradition and the land, by adapting oral stories and the story-telling process to the written text, "a move which marks both content and form" (Fee 24). The story and its telling are integral to the process of self-definition; a repository for cultural practices and social memory, challenging the biases and strategic silences of anglo-european history (van Toorn 42). As Jeannette Armstrong writes in her article, "The Disempowerment of First North American Native Peoples and Empowerment through Their Writing," "We wish to know, and you need to understand, why it is that you want to own our stories, our art, our beautiful crafts, our ceremonies, but you do not appreciate or wish to recognise that these things of beauty arise out of the beauty of our people" (1998, 240). Her work -- whether oral or written -- deals with this paradox, and with discourse as a means of survival. Jeannette Armstrong was born in 1948 and grew up on the Penticton Indian Reserve in British Columbia, Canada. She received a traditional education from her family and Okanagan Elders, from whom she learnt the Okanagan language of which she is still a fluent speaker. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Victoria in 1978, and since then has become known as a writer, teacher, artist, sculptor, and activist for indigenous and women's rights. As the first Native woman novelist from Canada she is most concerned to reveal truths about her people and herself, and describes the process of writing as a Native person as both healing and empowering, although she is the first to acknowledge that one of the great obstacles for Native people when writing is having to express themselves without the use of oral storytelling. She questions what happens when the body is removed and replaced by a piece of paper. How does one compensate for the loss of the body? Josie Boyle, on the other hand, was born in the Western

Desert in Western Australia in 1941. She is of the Wongi people, whose original country is around Maralinga, from where they were forcibly removed during a series of nuclear tests in 1956 and 1957. She grew up on Mount Margaret Mission, where she was taught "Western ways" and received a minimal formal education. Unfortunately, part of this process involved an almost total separation from her Wongi parents and their traditional ways, although she is proud to say that despite the authorities' best efforts she and the other Wongi girls continued clandestinely to speak their native language, of which she is now not only a fluent speaker but also actively promotes its teaching throughout the North-West (several years ago she compiled and published a Wongi-English dictionary in collaboration with her Anglo-Australian husband). Recently, she has spent much time with her mother, who continues to pass on the rich heritage of her Aboriginal storytelling. Josie now lives in Perth with her husband and their children. As a prominent figure in the Aboriginal community she works as an oral storyteller, visiting primary, secondary and tertiary institutions to cook kangaroo tail stew, bake damper, and share her Dreaming stories and personal experiences. She regularly returns to Kalgoorlie and Leonora, however, to spend time with her own people and to return with them to what she calls the "pure" bush life.

Most of Armstrong and Boyle's work is autobiographically based, reflecting the emergence of the genre of Indigenous women's autobiography. Although this genre is a hybrid, drawing on oral as well as written traditions, it does not necessarily reflect a departure from the storyteller's own cultural traditions. In fact, as an adaptation of the oral to the various restraints of the written word in English, it is a comment on the impact of colonial order; a response to the imposition of patrilineal logic on the individual's gender-related views, for example, or on traditional narrative patterns and social practices. As Armstrong writes in her poem "History Lesson": "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" (1998, 226-227). Or, as Boyle aptly remarks on the issue of Western education: "Is this white way the right way? Going this educated world way, with bits of paper, and Aboriginal people haven't got a piece of paper, and they've got this much knowledge. Should we be listening to the ones without the paper rather than the ones with the paper all the time?" (Interview 09.06.1999).

While autobiography is not an Indigenous oral form, it does share some basic characteristics with oral forms. These include affirmation of cultural values and tribal solidarity, concern with landscape, and attention to the sacredness of language (Bataille and Sands 3). Coupled with this, most autobiographically-based material communicates the connectedness of all things; episodes often are not sequential but "linked thematically to establish a pattern of character developing through the response to private experience" (Bataille and Sands 8). So it is that in orally communicating her story, which she ultimately wants conveyed through the written word, Josie Boyle links it with that of traditional Wongi women and their Dreaming stories. Although her own story ranges from the Western desert to Melbourne and finally Perth, where she has spent most of her later years, she repeatedly focuses on the semi-arid country around Mt Margaret Mission and Kalgoorlie, and not surprisingly on women's experiences. There is usually an educational purpose to what she says, which leads her -- in the traditional way of oral storytelling -- to repeat points, approaching them from various positions, resulting in a narrative which is more circular than linear. In our first afternoon working on her book, she began thus: "My first look at a Wongi woman was when I was growing up. As little children, we saw many Wongi women who walked along with little babies on their backs. They always looked so strong and they always carried their luggage on top of their heads -- they actually sat down and weaved ... like a little crown ... and they called them munga. Munga. And they had this little covering on their head and they carried things on top and they walked so gracefully. They had the most graceful walk and I used to sit and watch.... The Wongi women, they had their ways of doing things. We used to be fascinated as children, to sit and watch the women, you know, go past. We'd sit with the women and we'd watch them and we'd be fascinated. They'd be chewing the tobacco, the tobacco they had. You know, they chewed that a lot, and they chewed that and had a lump in their mouth where the tobacco was, and we'd be fascinated.... Bush tobacco. And it might've been from the trees, and they

chewed that, and we used to sit and watch these big lumps in their mouths. They always looked so horrible!" (Interview 12.01.1999)

Interspersed with such descriptions of people, places and activities -- no matter how trivial or significant they may appear to her non-Aboriginal listener or reader -- are some of her mother's and her own Dreaming stories, which, interestingly, she tells in much the same way and with similarly mischievous humour as she narrates her own lifestory. Repeatedly, she "authorises" her stories and comments by referring to her mother. For example, by way of introducing a Dreaming story about Minyma (the trapdoor-spider woman) Josie affirms that "my mother, she's not part of the reading and writing world. She's full of names because she knows all her stories ... she's full of her culture and she's full of the Dreamtime ... And she's singing about Minyma, about the terrible woman that everybody feared that was like a trapdoor spider. Minyma was a terrible lady that was very evil and she used to sit and trap men all day when they'd hunt. And Minyma sat there and every time a traveller came back with a kangaroo slung over his neck, she'd come up and say "Put that kangaroo over here next to the tree." And she had her little home, trapdoor house, you know, next to the tree, and the poor man would come over. She was so beautiful that this poor man was mesmerised. And between them they'd make a fire and she'd jump in the flames and say "Help me! Help me!" and he'd be paralysed with fear at this woman in the fire (but actually, she was in her own little trapdoor house on the other side and it looked like she was in the flames) and he'd run! And she'd just stand up, take her form back into a woman... And she'd get her kangaroo without going hunting." (Interview 12.01.1999)

For Josie, Dreaming stories -- particularly those about "conniving trickster women," as she describes them -- are "a marvellous way of looking at life today" (Interview 12.01.1999; this is an intriguing area beyond the scope of this paper but awaiting further research.) Such stories are also an important statement on her identity as an individual and a member of the Wongi community, and the significant role attributed to oral literature in defining and communicating this identity. One of the most obvious examples of this latter comes in the story of her tribal father, Binghi, whom she describes as a mythic Dreaming figure in the making: someone whose remarkable story will live on, passed orally between generations ad infinitum. She recounts: "Now Binghi was the song-man of the tribe in real life. My father was a man that went out and got into a trance and followed the pilgrimages of the Dreaming stories.... And he followed them and he'd get into a trance and he'd be shaking and he got inspired to write all the corroboree songs. And many of the songs people sing today in the tribe are actually songs he brought back to the tribe. He'd spend six months of the year in the bush on his own being cleansed.... He was a wonderful man, and he was one of these real big, powerful men of the tribe, my father was.... He had ten cuts in his back, ten stripes, cut with a big iron, you know, hot iron rod to mark all his achievements in burn form. It healed and he got all these big scars on his back, and he had this bone in his nose too, and he just looked so powerful ... and he had a little bag ... and it was full of magic stones -- meteorites -- and that made him powerful, and he'd pull them all out and draw power from them." (Interview 12.01.1999)

Through their stories and the telling of them Boyle and Armstrong show that the social memories of a people "remain lodged in [their] minds and encoded in their everyday speech and life practices" (van Toorn 43). As such, it becomes evident that for these women adaptation is in no way akin to acculturation. Both view narrative as a way of exploring history, myth and memory, thus making it a potential tool for decolonisation, promoting what Bill Ashcroft has called a "hybridised and syncretic view of the modern world ... a framework of 'difference on equal terms'" (Lundgren 14). I would argue that hybridisation and syncretism are essential features of Armstrong and Boyle's manipulation of literary space.

As mentioned earlier, there are notable differences between these two storytellers. One of the distinguishing factors of their respective approaches must be that, while Boyle sees herself as primarily an oral storyteller (who nevertheless acknowledges the significance of the written word), Armstrong more readily situates herself between both forms of literature. In her poem "Indian Woman," for example, she experiments with the appearance of the poem on the page as well as the way it sounds when read aloud, visually and aurally punctuating stanzas of varying lengths in

the first part of the poem with such assertions as "I have no feelings," "I have no beauty," "I have no emotions" and finally, "Some one is lying" (229). The second half disproves the poem's opening lines, which mechanically voice a litany of lies: "I am a squaw/a heathen/a savage/basically a mammal." In this way, from the viewpoint of the colonising male, Armstrong reverts to the speaking voice of a proud Indian woman, describing her great social and ceremonial roles and contribution to the continuation of the culture: "I am the strength/of nations," "I am the giver of life/to whole tribes," "I am a sacred trust/I am an Indian woman" (230).

A way of talking is not simply a deviation from the standard norm, but represents "a whole system of solidarities and identifications" (Fee 35). This is certainly the case in the work of Armstrong and Boyle, which is further enhanced by the complex interweaving of patterns of silence and language. This means knowing the true power of each; when to speak and when to be spoken by the silence. In her poem, "Threads of Old Memory" Jeannette Armstrong focuses on what amounts to a battle between languages and silences, between the dangers of the newcomers' language and her own people's words, which come "from a place of magic/the underside of knowing/the origination of place" (1998, 231-32). She goes on to say that this place is "a pure place/silent/wordless/from where thoughts I choose/silently transform into words." For Armstrong and her people words and the silences between them are powerful, even sacred. To create a space where the oral meets the written with maximum impact and effect requires the precision for which her poetry is known.

Boyle also questions our need to fill silence (and empty pages) with words. One of her primary concerns is the limitations of a Western education dominated by the written word. She sharply contrasts this with the instructional silences of the Wongi elders when she says: "We must come back to these people with their beliefs and ask them what is right and what is wrong ... sometimes we have to go back to those people, and those ways. They still can't read and write ... and when you're living in the way of the non-reading and writing world you're looking at life a lot differently.... You're still looking at the birds that tell you the time every day and the sun, what time the shade is coming. You're not in a time world, you're in a space world still.... So they've got something wonderful to offer to people, to sit there and look at their world for the day.... You've got to learn respect for nature, what nature is. Like calling the rain, you call to nature, you strip yourself and vibrate and chant and hopefully you talk to the Nature Man in the clouds, the man from the spirit world from way back, and he's in that spirit form now and he'll hear you and he can make it rain. That power's there and those people, instead of reading and writing, are happy with that." (Interview 12.01.1999)

What I have termed the manipulation of literary space by Indigenous writers has significant implications for intercultural social relations, pedagogy and "the survival of Indigenous culture as a set of living communicative practices, rather than as a set of 'dead' texts and artifacts" (Fee 24-25). This involves the difficult task of tapping in to the dynamic interconnection between oral and written. Yet, while the manipulation of literary space is clearly empowering, Indigenous storytellers are nevertheless forced to contend with continuing issues of disempowerment. As Penny van Toorn notes, there is no such thing as a "free space outside any system of cultural, financial or political regulation" (4). In this case, the cultural is frequently forced into battle against financial and/or political factors, as, for the most part, the West still controls the means of reproducing and authorising Indigenous enunciations. Jeannette Armstrong eloquently expresses this predicament in "Threads of Old Memory" when she says: "I choose the words gently / asking the whys / dangerous words / in the language of the newcomers / words releasing unspeakable grief for all that is lost" (1998, 233). The conflict between these gently spoken yet dangerous questions in Armstrong's adoptive language and her people's own "words steeped in age" is too frequently made to suit the biases and silences of white history. It is this conflict that academics must negotiate when invited to take part in the difficult dialogue between oral and written literatures. If we are to negotiate it successfully as non-Indigenous mediators and collaborators we will do well to remember that texts frequently "exist in a space of overlap" between conflicting regimes (van Toorn 44). When they are transformed from one medium to another they also "have the potential to move from one discursive regime to another" (44).

Consequently, the so-called finished, often edited product may be several steps removed from its origins; shaped by the biases and silences of white history which are perpetuated by white scholarship. Studies in comparative literature and culture are significant for the way they address this problem, alerting us to what Penny van Toorn describes as a "shift between different regimes depending on whether we view them at the moment of production, transmission or consumption" (44). The movement between spoken and written modes, coupled with the literary space created by this movement, helps illuminate the shift. So too does a cross-cultural comparison between areas traditionally regarded as marginal -- the Wongi and Okanagan peoples and their culture and beliefs, for example. As such, this study is a work in comparative literature as well as comparative culture, culminating in a more expansive view yet detailed knowledge of what has traditionally been termed the Self-Other relationship.

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin contend that "the inscription of language variants in the text is one of the most exciting tools available to the cross-cultural writer" (116). These tools play an important role in the manipulation of literary space. They are significant in the dynamic interconnection between oral and written, contributing to the development of a continuum in a socio-historical context, while simultaneously underlining the ideological distinction between oral and written. In so doing, these literary tools destabilise conventional Western ideas of literature. In their own ways, Josie Boyle and Jeannette Armstrong inscribe language variants in their texts and manipulate literary space to great effect. While Boyle advocates the primacy of the spoken word and seems to expect written conventions to adapt accordingly, Armstrong works from the assumption that her writing is necessarily syncretic and hybridised. A sense of the power and sacredness of the spoken word pervades the storytelling of both, however, as they articulate the shared conviction that: "There will be no new words / in man-designs / to break up what is sacred / and leave forget in its place // ... the sacred words / will still be whispered / in shadows / You will hear and understand / nothing is new / only changed...." ("Keepers Words" 235-36).

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Author's Profile: Josie Boyle was born in the Western Desert in Western Australia in 1941. She is of the Wongi people, whose original country is around Maralinga, from where they were forcibly removed during a series of nuclear tests in 1956 and 1957. She grew up on Mount Margaret Mission, where she received a minimal formal education. Remarkably, she managed to maintain contact with her parents; their traditions and the Wongi language are central to Boyle's being, and she is not only a fluent speaker of Wongi but actively promotes its teaching throughout North-Western Australia. Recently, she has spent much time with her mother, who continues to pass on the rich heritage of her Aboriginal storytelling. Boyle resides in Perth with her husband and their children. A prominent figure in the Aboriginal community, she works as an oral storyteller, visiting primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions to share her stories and experiences.