

# **A HARD DAY'S KNIGHT: A DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS OF JEANNETTE ARMSTRONG'S *SLASH***

**Matthew Green**  
School of English  
University of Leeds  
United Kingdom, LS2 9JT

## **Abstract / Résumé**

Jeannette Armstrong's novel *Slash* presents the fictional biography of a Native man, describing his personal development from childhood to fatherhood. In the process, it depicts the discourses employed by the education system, Christianity, and organizations such as AIM during the 1960s and 1970s. The following paper examines the manner in which Armstrong's text foregrounds the myths of fall and redemption and the binary constructions (such as male/female, White/Native, and progress/regress) which structure those discourses.

*Slash*, roman de Jeannette Armstrong, relate la biographie fictive d'un Autochtone et décrit son développement individuel, de l'enfance à la paternité. Ce faisant, le roman dépeint les discours présents dans le système scolaire, le christianisme et au sein d'organismes tels que AIM pendant les années 60 et 70. L'étude suivante examine la manière dont le texte d'Armstrong met en relief les mythes de la chute et de la rédemption, ainsi que les constructions binaires (comme masculin/féminin, blanc/autochtone et progression/régression) qui structurent ces discours.

As a White, heterosexual male writing about Jeannette Armstrong's novel, *Slash*, I run the risk of crossing the often thin line between reading the text and appropriating it, between talking about it and talking for it. Because of my own cultural background, it would be pretentious—not to mention dishonest—if I purported to identify completely with *Slash*, or with any of the other Native characters in the text. Nevertheless, as someone who cares about combating racism and sexism, I hope that I can empathize, at least partially, with *Slash*'s dreams for an end to oppression. More importantly, I feel that I can learn a lot from what this text says to me. Like *Slash*, my desire for a better world has occasionally been articulated as a desire to be the saviour of the world, to rescue other people rather than to encourage them to help themselves in their own way. Above all, this text has helped me to recognize some of the multiple languages of paternalism, and reminded me that racism and sexism can be communicated through the best of intentions. In recording my thoughts on this novel I hope to solidify and accurately represent the lessons that I have drawn from my personal—and definitely not universal—encounter with this text. In presenting these interpretive experiences before a wider audience, however, I am acting under the belief that my individual endeavours will connect with other readers, and become part of a larger interpretive framework. By examining the text's depiction of certain Western constructions of heroism, I believe that we can better understand the way in which racist and sexist discourses permeate and pattern the thinking of the most well-meaning heroes. Similarly, tracing the development of *Slash* as a character yields insight into alternate constructions of strength and virtue, constructions based on wisdom rather than big words, on thoughtful acts rather than reckless conflicts.

In an interview with Janice Williamson, Armstrong asserts that "the process of writing as a Native person has been a healing one for me because I've uncovered the fact that I'm not a savage, not dirty and ugly and not *less* because I have brown skin" (Williamson, 1993:10). She goes on to say that "my people's philosophy, of harmony, co-operation, and healing has a lot more relevance today... where individualism is causing social chaos and where people are killing the environment out of individual selfish need, out of not thinking about their fellow humans or even the next generation" (*Ibid.*). It is significant that this interview is titled "What I intended was to connect... and it's happened," for, along with many other things, Armstrong's comments work to deconstruct liberal humanist constructions of the isolated (i.e. the unconnected) individual. In this respect, Armstrong's remarks to Williamson touch on the very issues that her novel points to, concerns which have to do with providing alternatives to the "arrogance that

has been handed to [Native political leaders] by... paternalistic European society" (*Ibid.*:15). Both the novel and its protagonist work to counter the misconceptions disseminated by a colonial hegemony that constructs Natives as "free" individuals, but restricts their rights and freedoms to "empty words on paper that [has] no compassion for what is human on the land" (Armstrong, 1990:248-249).

Unfortunately, the largest impediment to such cultural resistance is the common-sense view that West European constructions of individualism are both natural and universal. As Margery Fee points out, "What Slash calls 'fake ideas'—the ideology conveyed through social institutions and the language and practices of everyday life—are not always obviously fake to those subjected to them" (1990:168). The novel's characterization of Slash can seem unusual to many readers because his individual character development takes a backseat to the developments occurring in the community as a whole. Indeed, anyone looking for a hero in the traditional sense of the word is bound to be disappointed. But, as Armstrong asserts in an interview with Hartmut Lutz, "the character development of the people around [Slash], the pieces of character that come in and out, are all part of his character development, or his being... and the relationship of his thinking to those things" (Lutz, 1991:16). Armstrong's novel sets up a series of oppositions between those who seek independence from their community (often these are the characters who want "a high paying job" or "money for nothing" (Armstrong, 1990:220) and those whose lives are "apart from everything and also a part of everything" (*Ibid.*:70). Repeatedly, Slash is contrasted with characters such as Jimmy, who place a high value on individual independence and regards success as a matter of economic self-interest. Although initially the young Slash is somewhat persuaded by Jimmy's opinions, by the end of the novel he adopts instead a conception of identity that emphasizes the complex of relationships that connect the individual to his or her past, heritage, and community.

Another problem with conducting a straightforward character analysis of Slash is that since the text resists liberal constructions of singular, isolated subjects, its characters do not fall easily into such simple categories as good and bad. The first time I read Armstrong's text, I was confused and unsettled by the fact that I could rarely see the difference between the good guys and the bad, the Indians and the cowboys. It's not that there are not white or black hats for the characters to slip into, it's just that characters like Slash, Jimmy, and to some extent Maeg, have difficulty finding the hat that fits. Of course there are a few clear cut cases, such as the rabbit hunters, but most of the time the characters do not abide by the restrictions imposed by categories such as occupation, gender, or race. For example, Jimmy

gets swept up by a capitalist discourse that is associated with White society, while Walter, a man of European descent, comes to question the dominant discourses of what is taken to be his culture. Similarly, the ideological position espoused by many characters speaks to stereotypical constructions of race, for often the same character seems to express two or more contradictory positions at once. For example, while the young priest tells Slash "Don't ever change your way" (Armstrong, 1990:37), his very presence causes "more and more people... to go to church and [do] other stuff they wouldn't do before" (*Ibid.*:37).

In order to address such apparent inconsistencies, it is useful to examine critically the ideological assumptions and psychological models which fail either to account for personal difference or to accommodate the experiences of those whose lives are other than ideal. Nicola Gavey challenges the assumption that "the individual has an essential, coherent, and unique [read separate] nature" (1989:465). Instead, she advocates a psychological model that regards consciousness as "fragmented and contradictory" (*Ibid.*:464), and an approach to analysis "that identifies and names language processes people use to constitute their own and others' understanding of personal and social phenomena" (*Ibid.*:467). This sort of analysis seems particularly relevant for gaining an understanding of *Slash*, which, as Fee suggests, establishes "an oppositional discourse" (Fee, 1990:169); in its attempt to "open up a space between the negative stereotype of the Indian and the romanticized popular view" (*Ibid.*:170), Armstrong's text presents the dissemination of colonial values as an activity involving a variety of related—but different—discourses rather than as a clearly defined and monolithic structure of oppression. Instead of operating within an interpretative framework where struggle always leads to climax and where characters turn out to be either good or bad, this text consistently resists teleological approaches to analysis. Anyone waiting around for the "big one" is bound to end up both bored and disappointed. As Slash finds out, "the process of forming a counter-discourse" is "gradual, painful and repetitive" (Fee, 1990:171). In order to recognize this process, to comprehend the ways in which various discourses interact, it is more viable to discuss their diversity and multiple relationships than simply to label each as either "good" or "bad."

As Fee suggests, the text operates outside of the rigidly defined limits imposed by the "system of oppositions—white/black, good/evil, civilized/barbaric [which privileges] the dominant power" (*Ibid.*:169). This is not to say, however, that Armstrong's text is objective or relativistic. By the end of the novel, Slash's philosophical standpoint is being promoted; and, although it steers clear of belligerence, his position firmly opposes short-

sighted "solutions" and stereotypes of any kind. Furthermore, the text very deliberately exposes the racism which underpins the seemingly sympathetic discourses that encourage young Aboriginal persons, such as Jimmy, to get college diplomas, while continuing to assume that just because "[they're] Indian... [they're] incompetent" (Armstrong, 1990:221). It refuses to demean or otherwise efface the cultural and political differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. While it presents a wide variety of conflicting beliefs and competing discourses, Armstrong's text allows us to talk about discursive clusters, comprised of discourses which appear to be antithetical, but which actually share common ideological assumptions.

An analysis of these discursive clusters can successfully undermine the "manichean aesthetic" (Fee, 1990:169) in two ways: 1) by representing both sides of the civilized/barbaric binary (and, by implication, the binary itself) as elements of the same cluster, and 2) by presenting words and wisdom from other discursive systems, such as those inhabited by Pra-cwa and Uncle Joe. Only an analysis that examines the similar paths by which different discourses draw upon common and familiar ideological prototypes can adequately explain why, as Noel Currie describes it, "the revolutionaries and assimilationists... are difficult to tell apart" (1990:145). Exploring the shared elements within discourses which are often set in opposition to one another—i.e. those espoused by AIM and by the government—allows us to recognize the allure and pervasiveness of the common discursive structures underlying both sides. Only a critique of the emperors and their discursive clothing can allow us to understand the place, the merit, and the truly radical politics of those in margins who refuse to cheer.

If one were to begin reading *Slash* backwards, it would be hard to believe that Slash, who would rather lose everything than "[give] in and [sell] out the heritage of our descendants" (1990:244), could ever have been anything other than a teacher and spiritual guide. Nevertheless, right from page one the young Slash feels the pull of colonial ideologies, whose undercurrents have already begun to erode the foundations of his parents' way of life. One would think that living "way outa town" (1990:16), within a family determined to preserve traditional modes of existence, would shield Slash from the seductions of White society. But Slash gets caught up in the midst of several competing discourses that threaten to tear him to bits as they pull him in several different directions at once. The most obvious conflict which he experiences is between colonial discourses, grounded in capitalist economics, and those discourses spoken by his parents and closely affiliated with his Aboriginal tongue. The clearest example of this is the discrepancy between the discourse of the school, where Slash spends his winters, and that of his Elders, with whom he spends the summers. From

the former he learns to evaluate his world in terms of an exclusionary empiricism; from the latter, to use "plants and things for curing sickness" (*Ibid.*:22). But Slash is also strongly influenced by the talk of both his peers and the new priest. In the schoolyard he learns that everyone else has "got a T.V." and that "good" parents sell their labour in order to "get a new house with electric lights" (*Ibid.*:25). Meanwhile, in church sponsored youth groups, Slash learns how to "[talk] about all the news and stuff on the radio" (*Ibid.*:31).

As Slash grows up, the gap between these discourses increases. He begins to align himself with the more "progressive" discourses at the expense of the teachings of his extended family. Instead of broadening his understanding, the education Slash receives is restrictive, entangling him in a progressive/traditional binary that forces him to choose between the lifestyle promoted by his new friends and the ways of his family. Although he still has flashes of insight in which he begins to wonder "just who exactly [knows] what [is] what" (Armstrong, 1990:40), he thinks less and less about the lessons of Pra-cwa and Uncle Joe. He adopts the jargonetic vocabulary of his new, "educated" friends and, ironically, he begins to lose his ability to communicate. Increasingly he finds that, instead of accurately expressing himself, either his words "just come spewing out" (*Ibid.*:122), or he cannot even "get the right words together" (*Ibid.*:131). As this transformation takes place, Slash becomes increasingly dependent on the interpretative techniques and the cultural codings employed by these progress discourses. Unfortunately, these reading strategies do not work within discourses that are not as goal-oriented. For example, when Slash tells his father that he wants to leave school, he completely misinterprets his father's reaction. His father agrees that maybe he should withdraw and warmly suggests that he work at home instead; however, Slash reads this as a threat, for "it sounded a lot like...either I could work if I was not in school, or could go out and support myself" (*Ibid.*:52). Instead of regarding working on his parents' land as a meaningful and culturally significant activity, he considers it to be a punishment that will prevent him from achieving the political and material success promoted by his new friends. Similar miscommunications stop him from understanding the advice of his previous mentors. When he goes to Uncle Joe looking for solutions, he leaves disappointed because his uncle's advice "didn't sound like an answer" (*Ibid.*:133). Ultimately, he is still left wondering, "am I wrong or what?" (*Ibid.*:133).

Increasingly, Slash's quest for answers leads him deeper into a labyrinthine collection of colonial discourses. Each of these constructs itself as progressive and reflective of "changing conditions" (Armstrong, 1990:43), while at the same time constructing certain other discursive systems as in

need of "a lot of catching up" (*Ibid.*:43). In their most basic form progress discourses ask simply "What are your plans?" (*Ibid.*:30). They innocently suggest that "success" and individualism are goals to be sought after and that a meaningful life is one that is lived "in order to achieve [something]" (*Ibid.*:120). Supremely adaptable, various progress discourses provide the ideological grounding for organizations as diverse as DIA, AIM, the Catholic Church, and the Red Patrol. Although these groups often see themselves in opposition to one another, they all employ similar means to *achieve* their diverse ends. As Darelle Butler, an early AIM activist, points out in a discussion of the events at Oglala, "they [the government agents] were confused and victimized by the same corrupt values system that gave both sides the energy to fight with such deadly force" (Caldwell, 1995:7).

Even the most humanitarian agencies set out "to educate" Natives (Armstrong, 1990: 95), to "set up an example" for them (*Ibid.*:70); not surprisingly, all of them fail to see, to hear, and to give credit to those Natives who are "just Indian and [don't] mind a bit" (*Ibid.*). The major problem with such constructions is that they are based on a colonial model of fall and redemption—they set their sights on some big event, the occurrence of which, it is believed, will herald the emergence of a new world of health, happiness, and economic prosperity. Such models prove deficient either by setting the goal so far into the future that present suffering is downplayed or rationalized, or by creating the illusion that deep rooted differences and inequalities can be reconciled with a "quick fix." Moreover, models of redemption depend on the construction of one group of people as lost, in need of saving, and another as redeemers, as agents of salvation. Perhaps unexpectedly, Mardi provides an excellent example of one such model in action. Despite her best intentions, Mardi, who set out to save her people, ends up reinscribing the stereotype of the Indian who is "dead, in prison or drunk" (*Ibid.*). The fact that she is arguing that Natives are conditioned and coerced into the role of lazy outcasts merely transforms a biologically based essentialism into a socially based one. Although she asserts that "there is nothing wrong with our ways" (*Ibid.*:69), she completely ignores those families who have preserved the old ways, and leads Slash to believe that "she couldn't understand about Pops and them" (*Ibid.*:70).

Regardless of who defines it, "progress" always seems to exclude traditional Aboriginal ways of life. In order for progress to be achieved, regression must be avoided; in order for regression to be avoided, it must be pursued and pinned down. All too often this means singling out more traditional Native people as "second class people struck on reservations, living in the dark ages" (Armstrong, 1990:43). The Elders who have preserved their Aboriginal languages are construed as ignorant and blamed

for inequities in the original treaties because "they couldn't even understand English" (*Ibid.*:135). Because they are considered ignorant, they are ignored and their advice gets pushed to the wayside by those eager to start "moving ahead with the younger generation" (*Ibid.*). In certain, less belligerent discourses, a pretence of respect for the Elders is preserved, while their speakers engage in a kind of double-speak which "makes it sound like [they] agree with the elder[s], [but], really, [they are] disagreeing" (*Ibid.*:136). The disrespect for the Elders portrayed in Armstrong's novel is also depicted by AIM members who were active during the 1970s. As Leonard Peltier, a former AIM leader, recalls, "we never bothered with invitations from traditional leaders the way we should have" (Matthiessen, 1992:50). Rather than an act of cultural preservation and political resistance, living in accordance with traditional Native practices gets constructed as a distant goal that can be achieved only after an act of revolution.

This sort of redemptive paradigm grounds itself in the belief that there is one arch-enemy, one devil, who must be confronted before salvation can be achieved. As such, conflict and confrontation, rather than protection of traditional ways and cultural continuity, become the immediate goals. As Peter Matthiessen puts it, "the AIM leaders were eager for more confrontations, persuading themselves that militancy (and publicity) could accomplish what traditional patience and stoicism could not" (1992:64). These discourses of "progress" and "salvation" construct one's willingness to sacrifice one's own life as a cardinal virtue; rather than working to be teachers and spiritual guides, AIM members often set their sights on martyrdom. As Butler recalls, "I guess we were willing to die for what we thought was the continuance of our people" (Caldwell, 1995:7). Clearly a lot of Native people inside and outside of Armstrong's text are in trouble; however, one wonders how useful it is to take as a namesake "a tribe of Indians...that were wiped out" (Armstrong, 1990:69). Certainly injustice should be remembered and redressed, but what are the implications of rallying behind a symbol of extinction? As Butler points out, "when you are willing to give up life like that, there are consequences; that's not giving something to your people that will continue on. I think it's being selfish that way" (Caldwell, 1995:7).

In emphasising the role of the hero, of the white knight who is willing to die for his people, binary constructions of progress exclude those Natives who are "neither assimilated nor lost" (Armstrong, 1990:70). Since they insist on evaluating everything in terms of accomplishment and gains, progress discourses cannot understand the importance of "just working and living" (*Ibid.*:53). Furthermore, they refuse to admit the possibility of incorporating the benefits of modern Western civilisation, such as the tractor

(*ibid.*:27), into more traditional Native lifestyles. Slash encounters this process of exclusion at an early age when he goes out parking with Jimmy, Johnny, and the girls. When confronted with a bizarre phenomenon in a place reputedly frequented by Sasquatches, the youths immediately want to "forget it" (*ibid.*:35). Rather than admitting the possibility that a Sasquatch could exist in the 20th-century world of automobiles, the adolescents immediately dismiss anything that doesn't fit in with what they have learned from science textbooks. They decide not to talk about such things, not so much because they are afraid, but because they are ashamed of believing in what "some of the white kids... thought was 'superstition'" (*ibid.*:34). By discrediting essential parts of the Native children's spiritual reality, various progress discourses create a silence inside of these youths, a silence only partially broken by the promissory notes of an illusory and elusive progress.

Unfortunately, for Slash at least, these promises prove bankrupt. Like Mardi, Slash attempts to play the role of the Western hero. He drifts from town to town, shooting the breeze, trying to get in on some action, and hoping to help save the day. Eventually he grows disillusioned with political endeavours and tries to replace activism with spiritualism. When that does not achieve any immediately tangible results, he turns to drinking and drugs. Then he dries out and the whole cycle begins anew. Ultimately, however, his attempts at political redemption, his incessant binges, and his flights into spirituality are simply different attempts to achieve the same end. More than anything else, they are attempts to fill the "huge gaping hole somewhere in [his] chest" (*ibid.*:121), to cast off the internal "darkness there that was scarier than any moonless night" (*ibid.*). Lonely and afraid, Slash feels compelled to "keep doing stuff constantly to keep from falling down that hole" (*ibid.*); but, instead of love and consolation, he finds himself filled "with a kind of gut wrenching hate" (*ibid.*). He loses touch with the old songs and stories, replacing them with popular narratives from dominant European discourses. In the midst of his first drunk, Slash learns to identify with the speaker in the Beatles' song "A Hard Day's Night." Instead of looking forward to a life of ranching, Slash is faced with the bleak prospect of shift-work and "working like a da-awg" (*ibid.*:46). Here, the image of dog undergoes a transformation from the trickster figure, as in Pra-cwa's story about High-tuned Polly, into a symbol of utter despair. Slash works and works to keep from "feeling like the underdog all the time" (*ibid.*:98), but nevertheless he repeatedly finds himself at the bottom of a series of very large dog piles.

In a nutshell, Armstrong's text present the real products of progress as a whole bunch of "dead people, walking fast to catch up with something [Slash couldn't] see" (Armstrong, 1990:57). Forward thinking starts to look

an awful lot like prospecting, like gold-panning, like pan-handling; in other words, like a bunch of "Indians hanging around the skids" (*Ibid.*:57). The bigger and more glamorous the promise, the harder and more far-reaching is the disappointment, boredom, and hopelessness which disillusionment brings. The siege in Washington functions as a prime example of the way in which "everybody would get all psyched up as each new deadline came and went" (*Ibid.*:105). The teleological structure of AIM's political discourse conditions the protesters to expect a climax, but the government, as usual, doesn't deliver. Instead, they engage the "activists" in a waiting game in which political clout is used not to bust heads, but to wear down the protesters. By the time negotiations "succeed," the group's energy is diffused, and its members no longer care whether or not the government honours its promise. Instead, they drift off to different places and wait for the game to begin all over again. Such perpetual expectancy leaves Slash "hoping for a massacre" (*Ibid.*:122), and drifting, rather aimlessly, around North America. As Armstrong's text unfolds, a certain dramatic irony collects around the discourses of progress. Eventually, Slash's repeated assertions that "this is where things are gonna be done" cease to suggest change (*Ibid.*:103), but rather lead the reader to expect more redundancy and regression. Repeatedly the same people make the same apocalyptic proclamations. Repeatedly chiefs, government officials, and youth leaders warn that unless something is done "right now," the Natives will lose everything. But the more people "talk action" (*Ibid.*:107), the less they seem to do. Part of the problem is that progress discourses can only function inside of the hegemonic framework of colonial societies. Increasingly, Slash starts to feel like "an actor, acting without being really part of the scene" (*Ibid.*:179). More than a drifter, he becomes a veritable movie, "a film without sound" (*Ibid.*), written and directed by an over-arching, predominantly White, subjectivity. White governments govern the negotiations, White officials make up the "secret" documents, and White reporters decide what is "new" enough to go into the White paper(s). As Slash comes to realize, "the worst thing the government could do...is to agree to negotiate" (*Ibid.*:148); the Natives would get what they supposedly wanted, but after the climax they would go back to "waiting for handouts and getting drunk" (*Ibid.*). Everyone knows that politics make for strange bedfellows; less obvious is the fact that the government always ends up on top. Slash decides to get out of bed. As Fee points out, "he realizes that he has to articulate that difference for himself, that culture consists not of rights and definitions and laws on paper, but of practices" (1990:171). When Slash tells Jimmy "I don't like to sell myself" (Armstrong, 1990:220), he is not only rejecting the capitalist ideology dished out by DIA; he is refusing to abet any

organizations that place abstract goals and personal egos ahead of respect for one's ancestors, community, and descendants.

Slash has begun the process of reconstructing his identity by rejecting the dominant discourses and inhabiting a series of counter-discourses. He has started listening to other voices, to the songs, stories and teachings that support him in his times of need. Not loud and flashy like the progress discourses, this collection of voices and drumbeats seems perpetually in danger of fading away in the background. Rather than struggling to make themselves seen and heard above the "lights and the sounds of the city" (Armstrong, 1990:167), these are the voices of quiet vitality, inspired by "the 'heap, heap' of the blue grouse" and the sound of "a coyote laughing far away" (*Ibid.*). These discourses are old, as old as the "sage covered hills" (*Ibid.*:121), and they are spoken by people who do not immediately embrace "all kinds of new stuff," such as welfare, beer parlours, and land leasing (*Ibid.*:41-42). But despite—or perhaps because of—its connection with tradition, this collection of discourses does not ignore the activities of the present or the unfolding of the future.

These are the discourses spoken and lived by Pra-cwa, Uncle Joe, and—for the most part—Slash's parents. They are made up of the languages spoken by the people who "in every area... kept to the old ways regardless of what other influences had been" (Armstrong, 1990:202). But although they arise from Native languages, they are not confined to any one language; they are open for translation by the tongues of those who, like Maeg, invest their translations with passionate belief in what is said. Unlike progress discourses, these do not try to totalize, and they do not seek to silence other discourses. For the most part they circulate among "people all on the same wavelength who [network] but who [aren't] 'organized'" (*Ibid.*:217). Since this network is not oriented toward the achievement of any one goal, its participants "don't... have to all agree on any one position" (*Ibid.*:235-236). Rather than one discourse grounded in the beliefs of one nation, this cluster of discourses revels in its multiplicity, drawing strength from the belief that "we are talking about different nations here, not just one large conglomerate group called Indians" (*Ibid.*:235).

Despite its critique of political activism, Armstrong's text nevertheless suggests the need for change. But instead of constructing yet another teleological discourse, another discourse tied to colonial constructions of inferiority, the text motions toward a "new" world that has "always been there and [has] never gone anywhere" (*Ibid.*:202). The discovery of the new world is a European myth, written by colonizers, and is of limited value to the Natives who have been living there all along. The discourses that Armstrong highlights operate outside of the progress/regress binary. They

are not against change and looking ahead. Rather they see change as inevitable and imagine a future that goes on for more than the next hundred years. From this perspective, gathering knowledge is more important than spreading information, and teaching is more than a simple exercise in theme and variations.

As Currie points out, the people from whom Slash learns these lessons are "the elders, the traditionalists, and, in Slash's own generation, the women" (1990:149). Unfortunately, the progress discourses that Slash gets wrapped up in mislead him with patriarchal assumptions about male superiority as well as those colonial assumptions about racial inferiority discussed above. One of Slash's main reactions to the hurt and anger caused by the recurrent disappointment he experiences during his AIM days is the commodification of his female counterparts. He says that "them times I had to... find something to mellow out with" (Armstrong, 1990:122), and goes on to say that "if it wasn't a chick then it was dope" (*Ibid.*). In this way "chicks" are reduced to nothing more than something to be consumed in a vain attempt to escape reality. Slash states that "a lot of chicks were impressed" with him and his AIM brothers, and admits that "we got pretty arrogant in the way we treated them" (*Ibid.*).

Currie suggests that "the intersection of material forms of oppression (like racism and sexism) and internalized oppression due to colonialism is central to the novel" (1990:141). If we continue our examination of the colonial discourses that articulate these forms of oppression, it becomes possible to speak of their teleological aspects and to discuss the manner in which both sexism and racism underlie their constructions of salvation. In traditional West European narratives, the role of the hero has been reserved almost exclusively for men, having been constructed around the notion that women are inferior and in need of saving. Significantly, when Slash is in prison and is more or less helpless, his strongest desire is "to put [his] arms around [Mardi] and hold her and never let anything ever hurt her again" (Armstrong, 1990:62). Unable to help himself, Slash constructs Mardi as someone in need of saving; robbed of his own freedom, he becomes convinced that Mardi needs to be protected from hers, lest she be trapped by "some fast talking guy" (*Ibid.*:72). Of course, Mardi is equally imbued within a discourse of salvation (see above), but she has already begun rewriting the myth of the white knight via a process of role reversal. She inverts the colonial hierarchy by advocating the superiority of "Red Power" over White paternalism and demonstrates female empowerment by rescuing Native men—and women—from the streets. Although Slash eventually moves away from the AIM leaders and the other people associated with Mardi, it is significant that she is the one who puts him back on

the Red Road. From Mardi, Slash relearns how to be proud of his heritage, to be compassionate, and, above all, to resist the more obvious modes of racial oppression. Slash takes these teachings with him and continues to cherish them long after he has lost faith in political crusades.

As Armstrong asserts, "if you look at the shaping and progress of [Slash] from the beginning to the philosophy he develops in the end, he moves a lot closer to the philosophy which allows changes in the male role" (Williamson, 1993:14). Slash's relationship with Maeg serves as a demonstration of his hard-won freedom from both the racism and the sexism of the rescue motif. Although he has rejected the constitutional talks in which Maeg becomes increasingly involved, he does not try to dissuade her from participating in them. Most importantly, he does not present himself as any wiser than Maeg. He is supportive of her decision to go to the potlatch honouring participants of the Constitution Express, articulating his dissent as a desire to stay home with Marlon. This simultaneously facilitates Maeg's entrance into the political sphere and allows Slash access to the domestic space associated within patriarchal discourse with women. Just as he learns a lot from Mardi, so too, Maeg teaches Slash the importance of listening to the language of one's parents and of respect for Native traditions and traditional ceremonial clothing. By the end of the novel, Slash has learned to treat both the men and the women in his life with equal respect; in so doing he upholds the teachings of the Okanagan people who "see both sides of the whole family—aunts and uncles and grandparents and brothers and sisters—[as] equally responsible" (*Ibid.*:12).

Although Slash holds fast to his dreams of a better future, he no longer insists that his goals are the only ones and he no longer spends his days waiting or working for any single climactic event. Similarly, he no longer confines himself to a singular role. Becoming an active participant in the discourses of Pra-cwa, Uncle Joe, Mardi and Maeg, Slash learns how to be both a "mother" and a "father," how to address politics from a spiritual perspective and how to let others figure things out for themselves. Nevertheless, it is just these qualities which establish Slash as a role model, as someone who has decided "to tell [his] story for [his] son and those like him" (Armstrong, 1990:253). Discussing her choice of an ending for the text, Armstrong asserts that "at the end, Slash is able to be what he needs to be and have the strength he needs. That is a message I wanted to pass to my brothers, so they will be able to see and understand" (Williamson, 1993:15). The final portrait of Slash is of a self composed of a myriad of voices, shaped by a variety of influences from within his community. Rather than an autonomous individual forging his future in isolation, Slash pays heed to the many voices inside of him. He listens to the words of all his significant

others, both present and absent, drawing on their strength. In its critique of the restrictions of certain constructions of individualism, of martyrs and misguided heroes, *Slash* promotes a psychological model that sees the self in connection with the community, that regards individuals as specks on "a multicoloured star quilt" (Armstrong, 1990:231). This wider vision allows Slash to learn—from "the cruel blows of the harsh one some call destiny" (*Ibid.*:253)—how "to get up one more time" (*Ibid.*:251).

Ultimately, Armstrong's text privileges certain beliefs, and promotes some discourses over others. Although it gives voice to many arguments in support of constitutional negotiations, Slash has the last word with his assertion that "here [at home on the land] is where the real fight will be" (Armstrong, 1990:250); although the main body of the text is filled with a variety of competing discourses, Slash's voice enjoys a privileged position due to his role as the narrator. When Maeg dies, the epilogue is given to Slash alone, and his "hard nosed" position remains unchallenged. And although the text is critical of discourses that present themselves as authoritative, Slash's assertion that "people were grabbing at anything that looked promising, except the truth" implies that there is a truth worth working for (*Ibid.*:246), and that Slash is closer to that truth than many of the other characters.

When I first read this text, I was deeply concerned by the teleology implied here. It is tempting to argue that the text has fallen into the same teleological trap that it has worked so hard to avoid. It could be argued, perhaps convincingly, that the text performs a theoretical manoeuvre analogous to that performed by Mardi; in other words, that it simply reverses the red/white binary, rather than moving beyond it. Such an argument would have to assume two things: that Slash's voice does indeed occupy a privileged position, and that this position is anti-European, or at least anti-progress. It would be easy enough to attack such an argument by asserting that Slash's voice is simply one among many, and that the text's presentation of multiple perspectives discourages the placement of undo emphasis on the words of any one character, even if that character is the narrator. However, this argument too is problematic. On the one hand, it is based upon the assumption that Slash's voice is independent of those around him. In other words, it fails to take adequate account of the extent to which Slash, as a character, represents an individual firmly embedded in his community. On the other hand, de-emphasising Slash's final position and his closing remarks undervalues the political role played by the text, and precludes the presentation of Slash as a believable and effective role model.

However, it is possible to present a more fruitful reading of the text—one which appreciates the significance of the novel as both a critical examination of colonial discourses and as a work that presents alternatives to the dominant, “manichean” aesthetic. Such a reading necessarily insists that by the end of the novel Slash is an appealing character, whose words carry a certain weight. But it is possible to conceive of Slash as role model and teacher without suggesting that he has risen *above* the rest of the Native community. On the contrary, as we have seen, it is precisely because Slash has come to recognize his position *within* the community that he can speak confidently and insightfully. Throughout the novel, Slash has been jostled about by a multitude of discourses, each of which is attempting to tell him who he should be and what he should do. In learning to choose his friends and his words carefully, Slash stops being a drifter and becomes “living” proof that selling out or disappearing into the romantic forests of history are not the only options available for Aboriginal youths. Similarly, the text creates a space in which advocating the preservation of Native culture and acknowledging the injustices of colonialism does not have to mean retreating into the past or engaging in reverse racism.

In closing, I would like to call attention to two short episodes, which have been mentioned above, but which deserve further comment. The first is the purchase of the tractor, which takes place while Slash is still in school. In order to pay for the machine, the whole family must go down to Washington and pick apples. However, unlike “lots of people” (Armstrong, 1990:27), the family does not become dependent on this source of income; instead, this work is nothing other than a one-time activity which achieves a beneficial end. The purchase of the tractor is presented as an improvement, and as an event that the family participates in together—Slash describes how “we all took turns learning how to drive it around” (*Ibid.*). This episode is particularly important in its demonstration that preserving one’s culture does not preclude incorporating modern innovations and participating in the “outside” world—a spatial metaphor which is based upon binary constructions and which locates Native people in the domain of the other.

The second episode comes near the end of the novel, when Slash meets Walter, “one of the most outspoken of the non-Indians about [environmental issues]” (Armstrong, 1990:216). Sitting beside Okanagan lake, into which the municipality was planning to dump considerable amounts of 2-4D, Walter expresses regret for the ways in which people of European descent have treated both Natives and the environment. His comments are unique in that they acknowledge the mistakes Europeans have made and the injustices they have imposed upon Natives in a manner that promotes communication rather than conflict. He closes by saying: “Your people

could show us a lot if only we had the sense to listen. I hope we start to listen before it's too late" (*Ibid.*:217). In the character of Walter, the text advocates communication between Natives and non-Natives, suggesting that there are ways in which the two groups can work together as equals, toward common goals such as freedom, equality, and environmental protection.

Both of these examples suggest ways in which Natives and non-Natives can interact in a positive and meaningful manner. They suggest that instead of adhering to colonial roles based on opposition, we, as Natives and non-Natives, can learn to see ourselves as connected with those around us, even though we come from different cultures. This process involves resisting the historical pull of binary thinking and unlearning stereotypical assumptions—for example, that addressing inequities is a simple question of giving handouts or creating jobs. In this way, *Slash* represents a point of entry into a much needed discussion that is of significance for all those seeking to improve the world, and, by implication, themselves. It does so by providing alternative conceptions of progress and identity, by presenting the first as a process which works across generations and the second as a question of interconnectedness rather than of independence and opposition. Additionally, the text incites a critical analysis of paternalism, forcing us to reconsider long-standing narratives about conquest and rescue, about white knights and their victims. Finally, it reminds us that "drunken Indians" and heroic saviours are not discovered, but made, by the stories we tell—or neglect to tell—about ourselves, our communities, and our pasts.

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