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メタデータ	言語: 出版者: 琉球大学法文学部 公開日: 2009-12-21 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: 喜納, 育江 メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12000/14168

Listening to the Voice of Silences: Animism in Jeannette Armstrong's *Breath Tracks*

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In her 1991 collection of poetry, *Breath Tracks*, an Okanagan poet, Jeannette Armstrong, expresses her animistic understanding of the Okanagan landscape, the homeland of her tribal community. For Armstrong, the tribal landscape is not simply vast emptiness covered with dead silences, but it is filled with the living voices and the spirits of diverse beings, which are not necessarily animate, visible, or even audible to most of the human senses. The language which Armstrong attempts to introduce in this volume may sound mysterious to many of the readers since she claims in her poem "Visions" that it is the language "whose speakers have no tongues" (*Breath Tracks* 19). Armstrong's ability to sense the "speakers with no tongues" on the land of the Okanagan is indeed a source of her poetic discourses. In a language nurtured by her interaction with her Okanagan homeland, she demonstrates that the language of indigenous people enables a different human and non-human relationship from that in white European practices.

While the anthropocentric lack of ecological sensitivity in Western tradition has degraded and demeaned the lives of non-humans, central to the human and non-human relationship of native people of North America has been animism. In North American native tradition, Arthur Versluis explains, nature is considered to be "the theatre in which the spirit realms and the human world intersect" (71). Not only

do humans feel the spirits in nature, but also they feel that those spirits are on a higher place of existence than humans. Versulis states that the indigenous people believe that nature is "also the reflection and manifestation of higher realms" and thus "like the theatre in which the higher realms can be seen acting, having their effects" (71).

Whereas Western tradition has created a view that subordinates non-human beings such as animals and plants to humans¹, traditions of native North America do not regard non-human beings as human's subordinate. On the contrary, native people in North America are often capable of finding divine spirits in non-human animals and everywhere in the landscape surrounding them. A number of traditional tales of the tribes of North America tell that great spirits are sometimes represented with a mixture of human and non-human bodies². Versluis thus suggests:

Certainly, then, the American Indian reverence for nature is not a matter of "heathen idolatry," as some Christians once held, nor of "worshipping divinized nature," as anthropologists once tried to assert. Rather, for tribal peoples nature is metaphysically transparent, and in it they recognize the manifestations of spiritual reality. (32)

Unlike Western metaphysical tradition wherein physical existence of life-forms is easily overlooked because of human's adherence to metaphysical exploration, the natural environment for native people is "spiritual reality," and most importantly, it is not non-metaphysical lived reality. Spiritual reality is at the same time lived reality because the sustenance of indigenous people's spiritual life and the survival of their body—their physical existence—cannot be a separate issue.

One of the most significant purposes of using language for indigenous people is, therefore, to enable physical contacts between

human bodies and non-human body of nature as their "spiritual reality." Words are, therefore, considered to be sacred in native culture. As a carrier of the spirit, each word is supposed to be spirited and should not be wasted. N. Scott Momaday comments on it:

One who has only an oral tradition thinks of language in this way: my words exist at the level of my voice. If I do not speak with care, my words are wasted. If I do not listen with care, words are lost. If I do not remember carefully, the very purpose of words is frustrated. This respect for words suggests an inherent morality in man's understanding and use of language. (73)

In native North American oral traditions, words with spirits are also believed to have a supernatural power to transform reality. This special power—magic—could be a representation of people's ultimate belief in their language. An Inuit song translated by Jerome Rothenberg entitled "Magic Words" precisely expresses this native belief in the transformative power of language. The poem tells us that there used to be no boundary between animals and humans in terms of their conditions of being since people and animals could not only be interchangeable by transforming physical appearances but also could communicate with each other speaking the same language:

That was the time when words were like magic.
The human mind had mysterious powers.
A word spoken by chance
might have strange consequences.
It would suddenly come alive
and what people wanted to happen could happen—
all you had to do was say it.
Nobody could explain this:

That's the way it was. (41)

It also should be noted in this poem that magic worked most powerfully at the time humans regarded themselves as being in the same states as animals. The words could prove their magical power when human beings could communicate with non-human beings and when they coexisted in the world with the same importance of lives and with no discriminative boundary between their existences.

The indigenous people of North America thus have developed a language which blurs the boundary between humans and animals in terms of the state of being in the world. David Abram also observes that one of the most distinctive differences between white and indigenous cultures could be found in differences in their use of language. He finds the words of native people "do not speak *about* the world"; rather, they "speak to the world" (71). Indigenous people speak a language to "give voice to and thus to enhance and accentuate, the sensorial affinity between humans and the environing earth" (Abram 71). Abram further states:

In indigenous, oral cultures, in other words, language seems to encourage and augment the participatory life of the senses, while in Western civilization language seems to deny or deaden that life, promoting a massive distrust of sensorial experience while valorizing an abstract realm of ideas hidden behind or beyond the sensory appearances. (71-72)

Claiming the aspect of language as "sensorial experience," whereby we do not use but experience language "bodily" involving every sense of one's bodily existence, Abram introduces us to a new understanding of language. He radically invalidates the semiotic view of language in Western tradition, which separates language from a speaking subject—and spirits in many indigenous cultures—and treats it as signs.

According to Abram,

communicative meaning is always, in its depths, affective; it remains rooted in the sensual dimension of experience, born of the body's native capacity to resonate with other bodies and with the landscape as a whole. Linguistic meaning is not some ideal and bodiless essence that we arbitrarily assign to a physical sound or word and then toss out into the "external" world. Rather, meaning sprouts in the very depths of the sensory world, in the heat of meeting, encounter, participation. (74-75)

In order to regain "the body's native capacity to resonate with other bodies and with the landscape as a whole," the process of reconnection, to a great extent depends upon indigenous sensibility to listen to the silences and see the invisible since it is the way to rediscover what has been missed in the tradition of Western metaphysics. The body is the generative center of the meanings in indigenous oral tradition, which is based on an animistic view of nature. In "bodily language," the words are spirited through the body, and each spirited word comes through a body and becomes a voice. It seems to me the basis of bodily language is animistic belief in multivocality of diverse lives and spirits in nature, and Armstrong's language in *Breath Tracks* exemplifies such bodily language, which "speak [s] to the world" and helps human beings recover a lost connection among language, body, and the land.

Armstrong's project in this volume is, indeed, to explore an alternative relationship with nature by creating poetic language that reflects her sensibility inherited from her tribal culture. How, then, could the indigenous sensibility of language become an alternative in a

world predominated by anthropocentric discourses? Armstrong is conscious of the sacred aspects of language and senses how her linguistic sensitivity as an Okanagan differs from Western ones. In her interview with Hartwig Isernhagan, Armstrong states,

So to put it really simply, in my thinking the Western mind takes... a material and attempts to spiritualize it, attempts to create it in a way which speaks about the spiritual... whereas the Okanagan person will take the spiritual, the understanding, and the connection with the spiritual, and the attempt is to materialize that, to bring that forward into the physical plane, because it's not knowable, it doesn't have voice in the physical plane. (151)

Presumed in her indigenous sensibility is spirituality; spiritual understanding of the existence of what is "not knowable" and what "doesn't have voice." One of the most poignant emphases in terms of the language of *Breath Tracks* is the fact that audibility of human beings is so limited that it could be deaf to a countless number of the sounds that pervade the natural world. As I have quoted earlier in this essay from her poem "Visions," Armstrong is aware of the sensorial limitation of human beings:

We live in silences,
little bits of spaces,
slim fitted slivers,
wedged between bunches of sound.
Places where jewel fishes
dart through dark green.

We speak in languages
whose speakers have no tongues.

We will come to you,
soft edged in the night
or mirror-image clear
in warm sun noon.

We breathe in the voices
of little children.
We play in the god-minds
of the great,
who capture us
only in silences. (19)

In seeking alternative language that could make connection rather than cause separation between human beings and nature, Armstrong looks for possibilities of "silences" in order to respect an ecological balance with other living beings. Armstrong sees "silences" as that which has the same importance and power as "bunches of sound" and is the part of the space she and her community place their lives. For her, silences do not mean nothingness and "slim fitted slivers" do not express hollows. On the contrary, she considers silences as the space filled with meanings and languages spoken by non-human lives with which people of the Okanagan community have shared the same space for living.

To make sense out of silences requires a great deal of attentiveness, and in order to be attentive, one needs to give up his or her human ego. Abram asserts that human beings could become more sensitive to phenomena and events in the natural environment, in other words, become better aware of the motions and voices of inanimate and silent beings, when we have visual and auditory foci function "as a single, hyperattentive organ; we feel ourselves listening with our eyes

and watching with our ears, ready to respond with our whole body to any change in the Other's behavior" (129). He also suggests that "it is only through a mode of listening that we can begin to sense the interior voluminosity of the boulder, its particular density and depth" and "in an oral culture, one's auditory attention may be joined with the visual focus in order to enter into a living relation with the expressive character of things" (130). For many Native American poets whose creativity and poetic imagination originate in their intimacy with the community of the natural environment, attaining a keen sense of belongingness in the natural world is poignant. Simon Ortiz, a native Acoma poet of Armstrong's contemporary, for instance, "accomplished" becoming a part of the soil "by losing human identity and ego, letting go through the heightened senses desert solitude draws from the individual, and using the visionary motions of a poet to escape into the terrain" (Gonzalez 162).

Armstrong is also a poet who is willing to lose her human identity to become a part of the land by speaking bodily language. What Abram calls the moment of "integrating visual and auditory foci into a "single, hyperattentive organ" can be observed in Armstrong's poem "Winds":

winds	moving			clouds
past		earth	sky	
are		one		moves
around	me	silent		colours
drifting	sometimes	present		dark
			white	
			flakes	touching
life		rich	lacework	unknown
	hands		twined	with care

a place forever still tracing quietly
 a line stretched to a horizon
 fading with time and gently
 ending breath (10)

The spacing between the words creates audibly the poses of the sounds and visually the blanks of the meanings. Even though the words are articulated and shown, they only contribute to expressing the stillness and quietness of the landscape she depicts. By offering each word after a pose, the semantic sphere of each word expands and could be treated as a voice loaded with spirits rather than a sign, a lifeless object. As in "Visions," absence of the sounds are represented as "little bits of spaces," "slim fitted slivers wedged between bunches of sound" (19). Also as expressed in another poem "Travelling Song": "A spirit / traveling on the wind / touched me / with its song" (79), the poet see and hear spirits everywhere, even in open air. With sharp attentiveness, the landscape could be felt to become a physical place and the meanings that the landscape generates are internalized in one's body to become a sensory experience.

For Armstrong, inaudibility and invisibility do not mean absence of meaning, as long as the land, to her perception, is filled with the voice of grandmother ancestors of her tribe. Armstrong believes that the language of the Okanagan is given by the land as their intense sensory exchange. She states,

All my elders say that it is land that holds all knowledge of life and death and is a constant teacher. It is said in Okanagan that the land constantly speaks. It is constantly communicating. Not to learn its language is to die. We survived and thrived by listening intently to its teachings-to

its language-and then inventing human words to retell its stories to our succeeding generation. ("Land Speaking" 176)

To her perception, N'silxchn, the old land/mother spirit of the Okanagan People, surrounds her "in its primal wordless state" ("Land Speaking" 176). Armstrong asserts that the voices of the spirits do not exist in the form of words; rather they exist "as the colors, patterns, and movements of a beautiful, kind Okanagan landscape" ("Land Speaking" 176). Listening to the voices of the grandmothers-Tmixw in Okanagan, meaning "loving-ancestor-land-spirit"-the poet feels the landscape as manifestation of the spirits of her tribal ancestors. Thus, she speaks in her poem "Grandmothers": "In the part of me that was always there / grandmothers / are speaking to me / the grandmothers / in whose voices / I nestle / and / draw nourishment from / voices speaking to me / in early morning light" ("Land Speaking" 176).

Toward the end of this poem, she speaks of her sensory experience in which her body transforms into part of the land. She writes: "I am / night glittering / the wind and silence / I am vastness stretching to the sun / I am this moment / earth mind" ("Land Speaking" 178). Since she states, "I am," throughout this part of the poem, she is aware of her existence identified with the world of grandmother-spirits. It is a moment in which all her sensorial foci work together to attain the language, which can verbalize and materialize the wholeness and harmony she felt through her body. While she humbly acknowledges that she is "small a mote of dust / hardly here," she also brings herself to self-affirmation that "the voices of grandmothers" powerfully hold her to the land of the Okanagan.

In Armstrong's poetic perception, animism is understood as even less metaphysical concept than the regular belief in which spirits are

from unfamiliar "higher realm." The realm in Armstrong's imagination are pervaded with the spirits of the grandmothers who surely are sacred but are also familiar and sympathetic because she has either met them in person or she heard about them through communal storytelling. In oral traditions, a highly respected legendary people are found in their tribes and families and remembered through the stories passed down from generation to generation³. Likewise, great spirits dwell in every familiar presence on the land, such as rocks, trees, rivers, mountains, and peoples. Storytelling, in this sense, works to make something familiar into the sacred, and enables people to experience the sacred through the memories of the storytellers. Words are, therefore, not merely the signs that facilitate communicative needs among human beings; rather, they become a strategy for people to find the sacred in their everyday lives and coexist in harmony with it.

Armstrong also understands that spirits in the soil of the Okanagan community do not come from a dimensionally separated realm but come from communal memory or history: the realm which is chronologically distant, yet connected through the people's memories passed from generation to generation. The poem "Threads of Old Memory," in this sense, represents Armstrong's challenge for reconstructing her grandmothers' lost language with the help of the spirits from the past. The poem reads:

Speaking to newcomers in their language is dangerous
for when I speak
history is a dreamer
empowering thought
from which I awaken the imagining of the past
bringing the sweep and surge of meaning
coming from a place

rooted in the memory of loss (58)

What distinguishes most of the indigenous poets from nature writers is, perhaps, their attentiveness to the history of their tribal homeland. As an indigenous Okanagan, Armstrong's sensory organ is directed not only to every voice of the natural environment but also to recollection: the voice from the chronological distance. Thus she continues, "only those songs / hidden / cherished / protected / the secret singing of which / I glimpse through bewildered eyes / an old lost world / of astounding beauty" (58). In articulating, "When I speak / I attempt to bring together / with my hands / gossamer thin threads of old memory / thoughts from the underpinning of understanding / words steeped in age" (59), she is aware of her task to give "tongues" to the silent spirits from the "old lost world."

"Threads of Old Memory" is, in many ways, a pivotal work in understanding Armstrong's challenge to extend the range of her sensory experience to the sphere of communal memory. In order to locate herself in communal history, however, she can only be attentive to the place where she is located at present. Her body is located, in the present, on the land of Okanagan, but her imagination transcends the chronological boundary. Her decision is to become a poet who is "the artist," "the storyteller," "the singer," and "the weaver of memory thread / twining past to future" (60). She continues:

I search for the sacred words
spoken serenely in the gaps between memory
the lost places of history
pieces mislaid
forgotten or stolen
muffled by violence
splintered by evil

when language collide in mid air
when past and present explode in chaos
and the imaginings of the past
rip into the dreams of the future (60)

Without feeling the spirits of communal memory, she cannot accomplish her task of reconstructing and reconnecting the body, land, and language toward construction of the future of her community. As she also says, "through words / shaped as sounds in air / meaning made physical / changer of the world / carriers into this place of things / from a place of magic" (59), she attempts to transform this world with the help of the sacred power of language.

Carefully generating words out of "a pure place" which is "silent" and "wordless" (59), the poet affirms herself to be responsible for enacting the role of a weaver of new memories and "different stories in the retelling of [her] place" (59). With a strong self-awareness of taking a role of a communal storyteller who "gently" chooses the words from the "dangerous words" of "the newcomers," she feels a responsibility to recreate the right words to express the voices coming from a sensorial distance. The poem concludes with her resolution to become a poet who not only mediates the voices of the non-human world but also recovers the voices lost in history:

I choose threads of truth
that in its telling cannot be hidden
and brings forward
old words that heal
moving to a place
where a new song begins
a new ceremony
through medicine eyes I glimpse a world

that cannot be stolen or lost
only shared
shaped by new words
joining precisely to form old patterns
a song of stars
glittering against an endless silence (60-61)

As it has been always the task of a "word maker" of indigenous oral tradition, Armstrong, at the center of a web of voices, connects the threads of the human and non-human voices, the voices of the past and the present, and the voices from the physical and the spiritual realms. In so doing, the sensorial, as well as spiritual, experience she had through her body could be integrated into words which are material yet loaded with spirits.

Armstrong's vision of the landscape is indeed animistic for she believes in the spirits which exist in everything on the land. Nonetheless, in practice, she complicates animism by extending her sensorial experience and awareness of multivocality from synchronic dimension to diachronic axis wherein she locates all her senses, not only in the Okanagan landscape, but also in the history of Okanagan community. In articulating the languages of the communal land and communal history, Armstrong is willing to give up her human identity and become a part of the soil and memories of her Okanagan homeland. In "Degrees of Green," Armstrong states, "one needs to feel the immensity of meaning / in the reflection that earth will continue / bereft of humanity" (101). For Armstrong, animism is not conceptual, but emerges in a sphere of human praxis in which one is challenged to deconstruct his or her human identity and acquire a keener awareness and sense for recognizing the spirits of the Other who has no tongue in the human world.

Notes

1. It is possible at this moment to refer to Alexander Pope's concept of "great chain of being" in his "Essay on Man" as a precise representation of a traditional Western view of human condition in which human beings are lower than divine existence but higher than other non-human forms in natural landscape.
2. The Inuit, for example, believe that "chief in their cosmology is the Keeper or Master of the Animals, Takanakapsaluk, Sedna, or Takanaluk, a semiaquatic, semi-human figure at the bottom of the ocean, who controls the sea animals upon whom the Eskimo depend for their sustenance" (Versluis 8). Pueblos also have a number of half-animal-half-human-figured sacred spirits such as a corn woman and spider woman.
3. Leslie Marmon Silko, for instance, believes her family becomes an important source of imagination in her storytelling. *Storyteller*, a collection of her mixed-genre writings, contains her family stories and explains these stories are associated with the stories of the Pueblo community.

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沈黙という声を聞く：
Jeannette Armstrong の *Breath Tracks* にみるアニミズム

論文要旨

Jeannette Armstrong は、アメリカのワシントン州とカナダのブリティッシュコロンビア州の境界に生きるオカナガン先住民族の書き手である。1990年の詩集 *Breath Tracks* において、彼女は、先住民としてその生まれ育った大地とそこに生きる様々な生命とどのように関わり合い、生きてきたかを描いているが、その関係性を描くための素地となる Armstrong の自然観には、先住民族が伝統的に育んできたアニミズムという自然観が反映されている。

本稿では、David Abram の言語論に言及しながら、アニミズムという自然観がつくりだす詩的言語の可能性について、Armstrong 自身の発言と、*Breath Tracks* にある数編の詩を中心に考察していく。特に、*Breath Tracks* に頻出する「沈黙」に着目し、自然界において人間には知覚できない「自然の言語」を、先住民の書き手として Armstrong がどのように言語化しているか、そして、その言語化のプロセスの中で、Abram の説く「身体的言語 (bodily language)」がどのような形で表出しているかについて分析しつつ、先住民の伝統としてのアニミズムからさらに進展した Armstrong のアニミズムとはどのようなものかについても考察する。