

# UPSETTING FAKE IDEAS

*Jeannette Armstrong's "Slash" and  
Beatrice Culleton's "April Raintree"*

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**J**UST AS HAROLD CARDINAL'S *The Unjust Society* (1969) resisted Trudeau's vision of the "Just Society," so Jeannette Armstrong's narrator, Slash, resists John F. Kennedy's concept of the "Great Society": "he said 'to reject any among us who seek to reopen old wounds and rekindle hatreds.' . . . I knew he talked about the blacks or any people that upset the fake idea about a 'Great Society.' I thought about all the history books and stuff at school and in movies. How it was all like that, a fake, while really the white people wished we would all either be just like them or stay out of sight" (36). 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, even though they cause confusion and frustration in those for whom they do not seem "natural" or "commonsense." And even when Slash has "seen through" the fake idea that society must be built on the repression of dissent, he is still faced with the simplistic choice offered to him by the dominant discourse: to assimilate or vanish. Beatrice Culleton's *April Raintree* (1983/1984)<sup>1</sup> and Jeannette C. Armstrong's *Slash* (1985) expose the fake ideas and debunk the "choices" that white acculturation has forced on Native peoples in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

Slash has figured out that there is something wrong with the dominant "liberal" ideology's promise that western democratic society offers equality for all, a consultative and just political process and free choice to minority group members. He quickly discovers that the Native peoples are not seen or treated as equals, that their opinions are not valued in the political world, and that the promise of "free choice" applies to whites only. At first, to the naïve, it might seem like a choice, albeit a limited one: assimilate or vanish. In practice, because of the combination of institutionalized racism and economic marginalization, even those who "choose" assimilation are usually unable to succeed on white terms. And to do so they usually have to repudiate their past, their culture and even, as Culleton's novel makes clear,

their family. The brutal reality imposed by structural racism (see Bolaria and Li 14) means that for a “visible minority” even those that do attempt assimilation rarely succeed: “assimilate or vanish” becomes, except for a token few, simply “vanish”: into the wilderness, into death, the slums and skid row, into the economic and social margin, the margin whose major purpose is to affirm the centrality and superiority of white culture.

In an analysis of imperial-colonial cultural relations, Abdul R. JanMohamed talks of a “manichean aesthetic” that sets up a system of oppositions — white/black, good/evil, civilized/barbaric — invariably privileging the dominant power. The model of colonization has been applied to white-indigenous relations in Canada at the social and economic levels (for example, see Frideres), but it works at the ideological and literary levels as well. JanMohamed explains:

The dominant model of power- and interest-relations in all colonial societies is the manichean opposition between the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native. This axis in turn provides the central feature of the colonialist cognitive framework and colonialist literary representation. (Jan-Mohamed 82)

To decentre this model is not easy; however, indigenous activists have made progress in forming a collectivity strong enough to promote its own interests and have been actively constructing a counter-discourse. The narrowness of the white stereotype links these works, since, like Cardinal, all set up, either overtly or covertly, an oppositional discourse that struggles with the dominant one: “discourse is not the individual’s way of inhabiting the language, a kind of self-expression. The language takes on meaning and discourses are constructed through struggles” (Macdonell 47). Recently, creative works have begun to join the early political and educational writing. Those that put the issue on the table, at least in literary terms, were Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed* (1973) and George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (first performed in 1967, published in 1970 and alluded to in *Slash*, for which Ryga wrote a foreword). More recent works are not so much aimed at educating white audiences as at strengthening Native readers’ sense that there must be a better way to think about themselves than that presented by the dominant discourse.

Dierdre F. Jordan notes the difficulties facing those who struggle to “formulate an ideology and a program of action” coherent enough to require government response, but flexible enough to allow for local differences:

This coherent view must be projected not only to outsiders. If the next generation is to be socialized into the customs and language of the indigenous group, then there must be projected a “world-of-meaning” which is plausible not only to contemporary adult members of the group but also to the youth. Certain cultural attributes from the past, which can still have currency today, must be selected and emphasized as distinctive of the group. The problem, however, is to find both a *mode* of theorizing that does not mythologize the group’s past in a way that prevents contemporary development and a commonly accepted *site* for theorizing. (281)

Slash, speaking of changes in the late 1970s, puts it this way: "There were young people who were very aware of what was Indian in approach and what wasn't. They were rebuilding a worldview that had to work in this century, keeping the values of the old Indian ways. To me that was more important right then than anything else. I thought that through this way, there was no bullshit that could get through for very long" (232). Fiction provides both a mode and a site for theorizing in a way that will reach these young people.

Although both *Slash* and *April Raintree* work through many fake ideas, the need to undermine the "manichean aesthetic" is at the heart of each. Despite their differences then, these novels are trying to open up a space between the negative stereotype of the Indian and the romanticized popular view — Paula Gunn Allen calls the two sides the "howling savage and the noble savage" (4) — or the even more depressing dichotomy resulting from enforced acculturation, that between those April calls "gutter creatures" (115) and the assimilated Indian: the "brown, white men" (Armstrong 69). And how is that space opened up? And what is to be inserted in that space? A simple answer to these questions from these writers is "our way" and "whatever we work out." A comprehensive answer is impossible (since the "working-out" process will continue indefinitely), but some generalizations can be made.

**T**O JUDGE THE DEGREE to which these novels disrupt the stereotypical dichotomies, it is worth remembering Umberto Eco's point about Ian Fleming: "Fleming is not reactionary because he puts a Russian or a Jew in the slot marked 'evil' in his schema; he is reactionary because he proceeds by schemas; Manichean role distribution is always dogmatic and intolerant" (cited Cros 6). To simply invert the hierarchy may be a useful polemical or political move, but ultimately it simply reinforces the power of such schemas. April valorizes being "white" and the belief rebounds on her; Slash's hatred of white oppression starts him drinking again rather than solving the problem (121-22).

The incredible pain, anger, confusion and frustration that Slash suffers is the result of his inability to accept either of the only choices offered by the dominant discourse: "join the rats" or "cop out and be drunks and losers" (198). As Catherine Belsey points out, "the attempt to locate a single and coherent subject-position within . . . contradictory discourses and in consequence to find a noncontradictory pattern of behaviour, can create intolerable pressures," and can lead to a retreat into madness, drugs, suicide, or into attacks on the discourse (65-66). Slash finds some outlet in politics, where a new radical political discourse of Native activism is being constituted; when the politics lead nowhere, he retreats into alcohol and drugs: "Same old conferences, same old bitch sessions, same old resolutions, same

old speeches. Same old problems growing worse and worse . . ." (195). *Slash* is full of scenes where the focus is not on *events* — it scarcely matters which roadblock, which occupation, which march — but on talk. So far, *Slash* can't see the value of "bitching" that does not lead to action or to concessions from Ottawa. He does not yet realize how gradual, painful and repetitive the process of forming a counter-discourse can be.

Culleton's main tactic in undermining the dichotomy is to use characterization to represent the "choice" of assimilation or oblivion. The novel is the story of two Métis sisters taken from their parents and sent, for much of the time, to separate foster homes, although they remain emotionally close. The elder, April, succeeds in making it to the pinnacle of "success," married to a rich white man, living in the mansion of her dreams, while Cheryl, like *Slash*, starts out doing well at school, strongly identifies with Métis ways, but, after struggling with the problems of urban Indians for a long time, finally ends up "vanishing." Isolated by white social welfare policies from their Métis cultural context and from their family, they fantasize: Cheryl, too young to remember her parents' drinking, romanticizes her past; April, old enough to remember it, but not to comprehend it, overreacts, basing her fantasies of the future on the ads in magazines.

All three have been forced into the manichean schema, and the subsequent unfolding of the novels describes their attempts to get out of its trap. Just as the white version of equality has ignored differences in power, *Slash*'s version of equality has ignored cultural difference. Gradually he realizes that he "had spent a lot of time convincing [him]self that we were the same as non-Indians in every way, except that we were oppressed and were angry" (180-81). 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: "There was no question of whether or not we should or should not do things our way. We just had to do it or lose it" (211). April sees cultural difference, although she rejects everything Native, but does not recognize the role of power in constructing her belief in the superiority of white culture or in the creation of the demoralization that is all she can see of Métis culture. She is nearly assimilated, while Cheryl nearly succeeds in making it as a Métis activist; however, Cheryl has developed a romanticized view of her own parents. When she is confronted with the emotional desertion of her only sister and the completely demoralized reality of her alcoholic father, she follows her mother in committing suicide.

The use of the first-person narrator in each novel is a primary tactic used against the dominant discourse. In providing the illusion of a coherent and unproblematic subject this form of narration has traditionally worked to "suppress the role of language in the construction of the subject, and its own role in the interpellation of the subject, and to present the individual as a free, unified, autonomous subjectivity" (Belsey 67). However, to present as a whole that which has always been seen

as fragmented, the construction of a Native "I" performs a shift from that which has always been constituted as Other to Self. This may not be a subversive tactic in the classic realist text or in the popular novel, but it is within the literary discourse of Canada. Native readers finally will find what white Canadians take for granted — a first-person voice that does not implicitly exclude them. These novels hold out hope to young Native readers, many suffering from more than the "typical adolescent identity crisis," for a less contradictory subject position. The novels give a voice directly to those who generally are silenced. April tells her story directly; her sister Cheryl's letters and school essays give her more political perspective its own freedom. *Slash* consists not only of Slash's first-person narrative but also of the direct speech of many different characters, most of them disagreeing with Slash. These narrators are constituted as speaking for themselves. Although, given what we know of discourse, this promotes the illusion that individuals speak for themselves, rather than out of a discursively constructed subject position, the illusion is compensatory.

These texts, in Althusser's terms "interpellate" or "hail" the Native subject, "always-already" a subject of the dominant discourse (162-63), on behalf of the counter-discourse. Both contain within them occasions where the elders "hail" the younger generation: "many of you are talking about losing out to the white man. You talk about losing your culture. I will tell you something about that. It is not the culture that is lost. It is you. The culture that belongs to us is handed down to us in the sacred medicine ways of our people" (Armstrong 191). April's "hailing," her only positive encounter with a Native person other than her family, occurs in complete silence. Cheryl takes her to the Friendship Centre and they meet some old people: "I knew that Cheryl saw their quiet beauty, their simple wisdom. All I could see were watery eyes, leathery, brown skin, aged, uneducated natives" (173/139). Then an old woman comes and takes her hand: "her fingers were swollen at the joints, disfigured, the veins stood out and it took everything I had not to withdraw my hand from hers. . . . I waited for her to take her hand away. I looked at her questioningly but she didn't say anything. . . . Without speaking a word the woman had imparted her message with her eyes. She had seen something in me that was special, something that was deserving of her respect" (175/140).

They both learn that they have been hailed as part of a generation, not just as individuals. Slash says, "I was important as one person but more important as a part of everything else. That being so, I realized, I carried the weight of all my people as we each did. . . . I saw then that each one of us who faltered, was irreplaceable and a loss to all. In that way, I learned how important and how precious my existence was" (203). Instead of being interpellated as subjects by "a society that neither loved us nor wanted us to be a part of it" as "second class citizens" (249) the characters in these novels *and* their Native readers, are hailed as precious members of a threatened group. Both novels end with the vision of a child who represents the next generation: Slash and Meg's son Marlon "Little Chief" and

Cheryl's son Henry Liberty Lee. Slash addresses Marlon: "You are our hope. You are an Indian of a special generation. Your world will be hard but you will grow up proud to be Indian. . . . You will be the generation to help them white men change because you won't be filled with hate . . ." (250).

**E**ACH TEXT NOT ONLY DESCRIBES the experience of having been interpellated by the dominant discourse as "second-class citizens" and then by the counter-discourse, but also moves on to interpellate the next generation as counter-discursive subject. Given Althusser's account of how the dominant discourse "subjects" us to the rule of the powerful, one might see this process as highly dubious. However, human beings cannot live outside ideology or speak from outside a subject position: "Because ideology has the role of constituting concrete individuals as subjects, because it is produced in the identification with the 'I' of discourse, and is thus the condition of action, we cannot simply step outside it. To do so would be to refuse to act or speak, and even to make such a refusal, to say 'I refuse,' is to accept the condition of subjectivity" (Belsey 62). However, as the Native counter-discourse to which *April Raintree* and *Slash* belong affirms, "while no society can exist without ideology . . . and while it is impossible to break with ideology in the general sense, nonetheless it is possible to constitute a discourse which breaks with the specific ideology (or ideologies) of the contemporary social formation" (Belsey 62-63).

Culleton focuses her account on the psychological, Armstrong on the political aspects of the Native experience, although there is considerable overlap. *Slash* not only gives a condensed and fictionalized historical account of the rise of Native activism in Canada and the United States since the 1960s, but also as it does so shows Slash working his way through his experience of endless debates, meetings, marches, occupations, and demonstrations, some peaceful, some brutally repressed by police, to a political position. Importantly, neither the Native subject position nor this political position is presented as obvious, or as a *fait accompli*, but as the result of a continuing process of struggle. As Partha Chatterjee notes,

nationalism seeks to assert the feasibility of entirely new political possibilities. These are its political claims which colonialist discourse haughtily denies. Only a vulgar reductionist can insist that these new possibilities simply 'emerge' out of a social structure or out of the supposedly objective workings of a world-historical process, that they do not need to be thought out, formulated, propagated and defended in the battlefield of politics. . . . the polemical content of nationalist ideology is its politics. (40)

Slash decides there is no point in having special status in the Constitution if those given the special status cannot reproduce their culture, and comes to see that

moral and literal ownership of the land is all that provides a base for that cultural reproduction: "We don't need anybody's constitution, what we have is our own already. We hold rights to the land and to nationhood. . . . We want to keep it. They are trying to make us hand it over by telling us that we have no choice. That's a lot of bull" (214). It does not seem surprising that shortly after coming to these insights, Slash settles down, marries Maeg and they have a child. Nor does it seem surprising that he develops the position that the settlement of land claims to get economic power is dangerous without recognizing the need to remedy the effects of cultural dispossession: "Not too many realize the biggest victories won't be in politics and deals made, but in the putting back together of the shambles of our people in their thinking and attitudes. . . . Even if one-quarter of the people come out stronger about being Indian, it would be worthwhile. The heck with what happens in politics. We would grow in numbers because we would pass it on to our kids, and someday there would be better days for our people in the new world" (148-49). A faith that process and struggle are more important than conclusive settlements or final answers pervades the novel. When aboriginal rights are recognized in the Constitution Slash is appalled: "Many of our leaders would be lining up to get compensation on their lands. That would be the worst devastation of all. Our rights would be empty words on paper that had no compassion for what is human on the land. . . . We would no longer know freedom as a people" (249).

**A**LTHOUGH THIS POSITION has the privileged place at the conclusion of the book and of Slash's long struggle, it is shown in contention with other views. Even Slash's wife Maeg voices her feeling that to refuse to negotiate on land claims is simply too hard: "your way guarantees years of bitter struggle" (243), and she gets actively involved in the campaign to include aboriginal peoples in the patriation process and in the Constitution. Slash comes to many insights, but he also understands how hard they were to reach for him: "It was as though a light was shining for my people. I felt that we were moving toward it faster and faster. There was a rightness about it that the past few years didn't have. Yet I realized, without the past few years [of confusion and suffering], I would not have made it to this point. I knew that as a certainty" (203). Therefore he can leave room open for others to find their own way. His friend Jimmy, who has attempted to assimilate, gradually realizes what went wrong: "He was all gung-ho on the same things I had been into a couple of years before that. I saw that he had to do that" (234). Although a teleology is implied here — that everyone eventually "gets to" where Slash is — in another instance Slash agrees with his cousin that people can use spirituality for the wrong reasons, but adds, "everybody's got to approach it from different angles, though" (239). Even the traditional Okanagan leader, Pra-Cwa,

admits that those who push towards white ways might “Need a new way all their own to be able to live good again” (48).

Consistently the position is expressed that people have reasons for their behaviour, that different experiences lead to different reactions, and that these need to be accommodated. Solidarity becomes a paramount value: “we can all support each other on whatever position each of us takes. It doesn’t mean each has to take the same position. The government weakens us by making us fight each other to take one position, as each one wants their position to win out. Each position is important and each has the right to try for it. We should all back each other up. That’s what I think” (235). However, *Slash*’s determined defence of his own final position means that he is not simply advocating pluralism, which Gayatri Spivak has described this way: “Pluralism is the method employed by the *central* authorities to neutralize opposition by seeming to accept it. The gesture of pluralism on the part of the *marginal* can only mean capitulation to the centre” (cited in Barrett 45).

While *Slash* grows up in an “old-fashioned” Okanagan-speaking family whose support leads him to his final position, Culleton writes the story of children much more seriously dispossessed. April and Cheryl are born in the city, and taken from their parents very young. Already scarred by what she sees as her parents’ desertion, April, when her new “family” calls her “half-breed” and “squaw” and uses her as a servant, quickly decides she wants to be white:

And when I grew up, I wouldn’t be poor, I’d be rich. Being a half-breed meant being poor and dirty. It meant being weak and having to drink. It meant being ugly and stupid. It meant living off white people. And giving your children to white people to look after. . . . When I got free of this place, when I got free from being a foster child, then I would live just like a real white person. (49/34)

This “decision” is consistently reinforced by her experiences at school and in her daily life, but nonetheless she confesses: “I felt torn in different directions and often changed my mind regarding my parents” (53/37). Since unlike her sister Cheryl, she doesn’t look Indian, April is able not only to internalize the white position, but also to live it, at least for awhile. Her decision is very much like that of Jimmy, in *Slash*, who also declares, “I hate being an Indian. I hate Indian ways” (44) and decides he is going to be “just like the people on T.V.” (46). However, neither of them succeeds. April’s attempt to live as a “real white” fails and her failure reveals the unbalanced system on which the majority/minority split works. Only one feature distinguished her from the majority — significantly, given the importance of family in Native culture and the ubiquity of racism in ours, it is her sister Cheryl’s appearance and April’s refusal to hide her sister from her white in-laws. April overhears her mother-in-law talking to a friend: “Didn’t you notice her sister? . . . And they’re not half-sisters. . . . That’s the trouble with mixed races, you never know how they’re going to turn out and I would simply dread being grandmother to a bunch of snivelling little half-breeds” (126/99-100). Finding a

mansion insufficient compensation for living with this, April walks out and returns to Winnipeg to find Cheryl hospitalized, having been found beaten, intoxicated and suffering from hypothermia. Cheryl has become symbolic of April's split-off "Indianness."

When April goes to Cheryl's apartment to pick up some clothes to take to the hospital, she is dragged into a car and raped. Afterwards, April "began wondering for the hundredth time why they had kept calling me squaw [that which April has always defined as Other] . . . that really puzzled me. Except for my long black hair, I really didn't think I could be mistaken as a native person. Mistaken? There's that shame again. Okay, identified" (161/129). Here April "thinks white," before catching herself. She has, in fact, been mistaken for Cheryl, but the point is that she has "mistaken" her place in the racist society around her and is punished for her "innocence" about Native oppression.

Culleton is writing a novel about the forcible construction of Native as Other. For April, this forcing is symbolized by her rape as a "squaw" and by her sister's suicide. This violence is analogous, in Gayatri Spivak's words, to "the epistemic violence that constituted/effaced a subject that was obliged to cathect (occupy in response to a desire) the space of the Imperialist's self-consolidating Other" (209). April finally constructs her identity, like so many colonized people, through a reaction. She is not allowed to be white; she refuses to be that Native constructed for her by white discourse. Angry and frustrated by her failure to communicate with her sister, she finds an empty bottle in Cheryl's room and smashes it, yelling "I hate you for what you've done to my people! Our people!" (214/172). In these last two words — our people — she has opened up a new identity and a new community for herself, opening up the space between the two "authorized" possibilities — white and the drunken Indian Other, both isolated from any community. She chooses, like Slash, to give her loyalty to a people, a community and a future that stands against the imposition of the dichotomy.

What saves this resolution from simply imposing a different, but equally fraudulent dichotomy on the reader is that April has been through the process of internalizing both the oppressor role and that of the oppressed. Just before Cheryl's suicide, their relationship deteriorates because of Cheryl's drinking. April's boyfriend points out to her that during this period not only did Cheryl see April as "in a superior white role" but that April played that role, using the money from her divorce settlement: "You've stressed that she can depend on you, right? . . . Maybe you could have told her that you needed her help from her" (205). In a sense, then, the relationship between the sisters shows what goes on within someone crammed into the stereotype: she becomes her own best oppressor, or in terms of ideology, she internalizes the belief in her own "Native" nature as inferior in a way that maintains and reproduces the power of the dominant elite. Shortly after smashing the whisky bottle, April finds a suicide note, revealing that Cheryl has had a baby but hadn't

been able to tell April about him. April gets a second chance to communicate with her sister by raising her baby, a symbol of a new generation that will grow up with a new perspective because of his mother's comprehension of how the dominant ideology can harm him.

That both novels end looking at the potential of the future rather than at the bleakness and pain of the past is only the simplest of the ways, too many to recount here, that they open up possibility rather than dogmatically closing it down. But even that vision of the future, for peoples that, as Emma LaRoque says, are typically perceived as "frozen" in the past "as if Indians cannot change and adapt with the rest of humanity" (11), is liberating. Both show that people can and do change, although the process is as much the result of large-scale social changes as of individual will. Both show how the dominant discourse functions so clearly that some readers may find the demonstration too "obvious" or explicit to be aesthetically pleasing. Instead of simply saying "You are and must be Indian" they show what it means to work that out, to construct a new place from which to think and speak.

MOST WHITE ACCOUNTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE have simply reinscribed the oppressive dichotomy these novels are trying to displace, as demonstrated most recently by Terry Goldie in *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand Literature*, 1989, and by Gilles Thérien for Quebec in "L'Indien Imaginaire: Une Hypothèse" (1987). Thus it is worth pondering the extent to which any account of these novels published in a journal called *Canadian Literature* is in itself an act of colonization. Obviously, the construction of a national literature serves the ideological interests of the state. As Harold Cardinal points out, Indian people have trouble dealing with the response of white people that if they are not satisfied with their place in Canada, they don't want to be Canadian: "In Canada there is no . . . universally accepted definition of the concept of Canadianism. There is no easy, sure national identity for Canada or for Canadians. When the question, 'You do want to be a Canadian, you don't want to be something else?' is asked it's always immensely difficult for an individual or a group to answer, because so much depends on the questioner's concept of Canadianism" (9). Canadians in the "normal" sense of "real white people" have defined themselves reactively, for the most part, as neither Indian nor American, which gives this interchange at a cocktail party in *April Raintree* its point:

"Oh, I've read about Indians. Beautiful people they are. But you're not exactly Indians are you? What is the proper word for people like you?" one [white guest] asked.

"Women," Cheryl replied instantly.

“No, no, I mean nationality?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. We’re Canadians,” Cheryl smiled sweetly. (116/91)

Here Cheryl resists a label which in other contexts she would be proud to adopt in order to resist its exclusionary thrust. First she asserts a common humanity, and when that doesn’t work, she asserts a common nationality — one that has been implicitly denied by the line of questioning. But in other circumstances, that assertion might be to fall into the trap of acquiescing in the denial of one’s own difference. Sometimes the struggle will be to enter the Canadian literature that is published, read, reviewed, canonized, taught; sometimes the struggle will be to fight it, to rewrite it, to undermine the very assumption that such a simplistic concept can survive at all.

The construct/stereotype of the Indian, in fact, has been crucial to both the definition of English Canadian, of Québécois, and of their literatures, as Thérien points out: “En effet, l’Européen qui décide de s’installer sur le territoire de la Nouvelle-France se trouve placé dans une situation de perte d’identité. En devenant ‘canadien’, nom antérieurement attribué aux seuls Indiens habitants du Canada, le colon pose l’Indien comme nouveau pôle de référence” (4). [In fact, the European who occupies the territory of New France finds himself in danger of losing his identity. To become Canadian, a name formerly attributed to the Native inhabitants of Canada, the colonial situates the Indian as a new point of reference.] Both Goldie and Thérien argue that white Canadians have consolidated their identity through means of a symbolic transaction with the constructed figure of the Imaginary Indian. To change the terms of that construction is to threaten our own identity: to quote myself, “we are afraid that if we don’t believe in Indians, we will have to become Americans” (30). So far, the way we have dealt with “our” identity problem and the related fear of colonization is by colonizing the indigenous people, both ideologically and economically. Now, unless we want to identify ourselves as imperialists, we must struggle to answer Maria Campbell’s question: “Why can’t I be *me*, with my bag of stuff, *within* what’s supposed to be *our* society?” (Hillis 58)

Given the depressing record of past writing about Native peoples and the power of the dominant discourse, this article is despite my best intentions at least as likely to oppress as to liberate. So why am I writing? Because like Armstrong and Culleton, I believe that writing can escape, if only transiently, the traps of ideology. Beatrice Culleton satirizes the usual approach, using the setting of a party in an upper middle-class white home: “Then two men came over and one asked Cheryl what it was like being an Indian. Before she could reply, the other man voiced his opinion and the two soon walked away, discussing their concepts of native life without having allowed Cheryl to say one thing” (116-17/91). This process goes on in academic writing, as various “experts” carry on discussing their ideas without reference to the ideas, opinions and feelings of their “subject(s)”; I cannot believe that my writing is immune. But to say I can’t write about Native writing for fear

of automatically and inadvertently oppressing them is to fall for another of those impossible "choices": shut up or be an oppressor. Silence can be "oppressive" too. And because of my institutional subject position and the audience of this journal, I can hope to shift the institutional discourse a little. Michel Pêcheux, in *Language, Semantics and Ideology: Stating the Obvious* (1982), talks of "fleeting forms of appearance of something 'of a different order,' minute victories that for a flash thwart the ruling ideology by taking advantage of its faltering" (218). Helen Tiffin, in "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse," paraphrases Wilson Harris: "'Genuine change,' Wilson Harris suggests, proceeds (as does his own fiction) through a series of 'infinite rehearsals' whereby counter-discourses seek not just to expose and 'consume' the biases of the dominant, but to erode their own biases" (32). Ultimately, with *Slash*, we have to learn "them ain't the only choices. There is another way. We just got to see it ourselves, though . . ." (198).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I have given page numbers for both *In Search of April Raintree* (1983) and *April Raintree* (1984) after quotations, that for the earlier edition first; the text is that of the 1984 edition.
- <sup>2</sup> I am using the convention laid out by Brand and Bhaggyadatta to lower-case "white" and upper-case "Native," because the latter is a designation of a cultural heritage, while whites "do not claim their colour as a distinctive heritage; as the dominant race it is not necessary" (iii). Using lower-case "native" may also cause needless confusion. I use Native as a general term to cover status and non-status Indians, Métis, Inuit, although usage varies. Government practice has complicated the problem; see Frideres, *Native*, 2-13. The general term Native can be liberating in some contexts and oppressive in others; see the discussion of "Canadian" above.

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