

Interview of Janice Acoose
August 12/92 - Saskatoon

Question: Does your family recognize you as a writer?

Answer: I think a lot of native people don't recognize people in their families as writers because coming from an old tradition we had no such thing as writers, people who wrote. Also, writing, reading, singing, drawing things are kind of not necessary things in our community. So if you were really artistically inclined in my community, you were thought of as somebody that was lazy, somebody whose worth as a person wasn't so great because people thought you were lazy cause you won't do some "real" work, like farm work.

People, who we would call writers, were people who were storytellers. In Maryvelle, people who were storytellers, I would call them writers. These were people who would come over to my mom's and my grandmother's and they would tell about events, things that would happen in the community. They would talk about relationships between people.

In the community of Maryvelle, there was this old woman my relatives used to called labashun. That is the nickname I was given when I was very young. They used to called me after this old women. In English it meant "the mouth" That's what they called me, according to my friend.

So that's what they called me. It was like this old women had to know everything. She knew everything about everybody's else's business. She could tell you somebody history; she could tell you about people's relationships. She knew everything.

I was like that when I was a little kid. It was like, I had to know everything. If somebody came over to my grandmother's house, I would have to know who they were, what they were talking about and why they were there. What was so important about what they were talking about. Consequently, I was called this old women's name, labashun. That was my nickname, the mouth.

So, I think it is appropriate that I am a writer of things. I communicate things about people and histories.

Maybe I should use that. Maybe that should be my pen name.

I don't anybody else who writes. I don't know anybody from Maryvelle who writes. Actually from the reserve, my father's community, Sakimay, one of my dad's... my cousin, is also a writer and she becoming a fairly good writer. Even in the Indian community there were not writers, there were people who were storytellers. People who knew things about specific things.

Sometimes when I write things... I wrote this poem for my mom and after I wrote it, I gave it to her. She was just so overwhelmed with emotion. She wasn't sure how to respond. She had tears in her eyes.

I think that my mom can feel my spirit in my writing, she can feel the emotions and feelings that I have attached to it.

I have written a fair amount about my family, about my kids. I wrote this poem about my son called, "My First Born." To me, when I first had my son, my first son, it was such an emotional experience, even now when I think about it, I get tears in my eyes and I think that was one of the moments when I was most complete as a human being. It was something I really wanted to write about. Other people could understand it, other woman could understand that feeling.

I have written about my father and about my mother and grandmother and about my younger son, Blue. I have written about my family. They are a really big part of my life.

I was in this creative writing class one time, and this girl was in there that I knew for a number of years. I don't want to call her my friend, because now I don't think she's my friend. I used to put so much feeling into writing about my family. One time in this writing class, we had to read out our stuff and I was reading some of this poetry about my family and she said to me, "Is that all you can write about."

I just find that so boring. I know that there is so more to you than that. I know that you are so much more complex." I was so crushed, I didn't let anybody see, but I was. Tears came to my eyes. I didn't write about anything for a long, long time after that. I don't know why I let her do that to me and I don't know why I let it affect me that much, but I went out of the room. I went to the bathroom, sniffing, I was just so crushed. I had put so much energy and emotion into that. Maybe because relations with my family were not the greatest for a long time. Writing about them is a way of fixing those things. Writing was a way of idealizing my family. Maybe thinking of ways to make up and what I always wanted it to be.

When I was growing up, when I was a little kid from the time I was born to seven or eight years old, I knew that my family was really healthy, strong and whole. It was like a vital source of energy and power for me. When I went to residential school, all that stuff changed.

Some things changed my family, some things that intruded upon my family that changed it drastically and one of the things was residential school. When I went to residential school, I felt that my whole family was fragmented like my mother's and grandmother's were, sort of insignificant people in relation to who I was after that. The school worked very hard to make that happen.

Even though the place where I went to residential school was in the middle of the two places that I called my homes. The Maryvelle Metia Community and the Sakimay Reserve were on both sides of the residential school. Even though my grandmother and grandfather from the metia community, and my grandparents from the reserve, even though they would come to the school and try to take us home sometimes, their coming around was sort of frowned on by the priest and the nuns. Only on rare occasions were we allowed to go home.

What that did to me was broke apart the strength in my family, sort of disempowered my family to a certain extent. I feel really bitter about that. I feel really angry about that still because I think that I lost so much by not having that connection.

The other thing that had a strong impact on my family was the Indian Agent, the Dept. of Indian Affairs and the way that they tried to control my family, control certain individuals in my family. I think the fact that my grandfather and my father were so controlled, everything that they did in their lives, they had to check with the Indian Agent. Ever part of their live was controlled by the Indian Agent. For men, who influence by a patriarchal cultural, it is very emasculating to have people tell you how to do things, how to run your life, how to have family relations, how to have community relations. That is very emasculating to have people control that part of your life.

So, I feel very angry and bitter about that. That had such a strong impact on everything that happened in my life. I understand now that my angry is very appropriate. I think because of all that, I saw my father turn to alcohol and I saw my father allow alcohol to become so much a part of our lives. It really destroyed the structure of my family. It really destroyed the power in my family, not destroyed, affected the power in my family , to such an extent that we had a lot of problems in my family. I am angry about that, appropriately angry.

All of those things, changed my family drastically. I write about that. It is healthier to get it out of me and put it on paper and I think even appropriate to use the colonizer's English language as a vehicle for the poison. I'd rather have the poison inside of me, the anger, the bitterness and ill feelings inside of me, I'd rather have the English language hold that poison and hold that anger than my body. I think it is appropriate that language take responsibility for that anger and bitter. I think it is more appropriate for that language be a vehicle and a container for the poison than my body, because, after all the language belongs to the colonizer and they are the ones that should feel it. They are the ones who should be responsible and feel it and have it rather than me. I don't feel any responsibility for the things that happened to my family. The blame and the responsibility has to be appropriately placed and to me I would rather have the English language have it

than me. I think it is so appropriate to use the English language to express and to hold all of that resentment and anger than my body.

Question: Tell me about your homes.

Answer: Maryvelle? It's the Maryvelle Metia Community. Well, I have done a fair amount of historical research on both of the places I call home. I don't want to bore you with that. I will tell you about what it meant to me growing up in these places.

The place that I call home was my grandmother's house in Maryvelle. It was a great big gray, aluminium structure and it was like a lot of people were really afraid of my grandparents. They were kind of really stern, really strong people and they were very respected in the community. If you ever read Margaret Larenson's story, "A Bird in the House" and you know about Grandfather Connors, that's how my grandfather was, exactly. People were afraid of him.

On the outside, he was this real old gruff bear, but inside he was a real pussycat. I made him to be a real pussycat. My cousin, Sharon, and I used to help him often times do chores, because it was a community farm. Maryvelle was essentially a community farm. Land was set aside for half-breeds or metia people and it was like a community farm. All the people were supposed to share in the work and ultimately share in the produce that was produced, the milk and meat. Everyone was supposed to share in the workload. Essentially, what happened was that my grandfather and my grandmother did most of the work in the community. My mom tells me that when the inspectors, government inspectors, used to come around, that was when most of the people would pretend like they were working. But actually, it was my grandfather and grandmother who did most of the work on the farm.

So, when I used to go out with my grandfather and build the fences, put up pickets or go and milk the cows, it was really fun. Sometimes I would go with him to milk the cows. He would be swearing and kicking at the cows while he was milking the cows. These poor cows don't deserve all this anger but now I understand why he must have been so angry. He had to

shoulder all the workload in that community farm. There was a tremendous amount of work that needed to be done. If he was the only one doing it, I understand why he was so angry.

Yet people hated him. My mom says that people were really resentful of my grandfather. My grandfather was French, yet he chose to live in my grandmother's community. He chose to live there because my grandmother wanted to live there. Yet, people in the community resented him because he was French.

He and my grandmother were the only ones who actually used to do any work on the farm. When people used to gossip about him all the time, they were really appreciative of his efforts when it came time when there was food to be had.

That's kind of a little about my grandfather. People were really afraid of my grandmother too. Her home was the centre of this community. Her home, this big gray house that she lived in, it was the place where people could like to for example. She was such a hard worker and she was really well respected. People saw her as a role model. She was such a vital part of this community as was her mother. This is the woman I call my downcocam. We called her downcocam because she lived down the hill from my grandmother. Her mother, who lived down the hill, lived in a really neat house. When I lived in that community I would go from her house and my grandmother's house.

My downcocam lived in this wood, and mud and straw shack. I swear to God it was a shack. To her it was home. She didn't have linoleum or nothing on her floors. It was dirt floors. She didn't have walls, she had really basic furniture. She had this old bed with a straw mattress that she sleeps on. Everything was under her mattress and hung around her bed. My downcocam was really funny. I'm going to write about her some day.

She used to wear these old long long dresses. I never saw her in anything but these long long dresses and these old brown stockings. Even in summer she used to wear these. She always had this long apron and I remember when we used to go visit her, she always had

a place where she had goodies and candies. It was her handkerchief. She had these big white handkerchiefs. She had her money and candies wrapped in there. She wrapped it up in this little package and then stick it in her bra or her blouse. That was where her goodies were. She had money in her old brown stockings, on the top.

The thing that I remember most about her house was that it smelled of medicine and herbs. She had a phenomenal knowledge of certain kinds of herbs that were very useful for medicines. She was also a midwife, so people use to call on her all the time for help with birthing their children.

Her husband was a real character. He was born in the Red River. I guess he came out west and married my cocama and settled in Maryvelle. I only remember him as this old, old man who used to walk around with a cane. He also smelled of medicine. He was a really loving old man, a really fun old man. He liked to tell stories. He liked to tease us. He used to tease us and scare us. When I knew him, towards the end of his life, when he had started to go blind. He used to walk around with this cane and poke us with it. He was a terrible tease.

I remember also my downcocam house used to have this big rock in front of her house. We used to go there when she was using this rock. It was right in the area where the sunlight used to shine. I always wondered what she used this for. When I was older, I used to watch and help her. We would go picking chokecherries. After we were done, she would put these chokecherries on the rock and grind them with another rock. Pound them and grain them and leave them on the rock to let the sun dry them.

After the chokecherries were dried, she would take them in and fry them in fat. After they were fried, she would sprinkle sugar on them. We used to eat that with cream and banek. That was my favourite treat.

That's what that big rock was used for. Whenever I think of her house, I think of that wood shack with the big rock.

Both of these houses in Maryvelle, were very much a part of my growing up.

Up the hill from my grandmother, there were these little houses I used to see all the time. I used to ask my dad why those houses were there. It was very strange, you never see too many of them anymore, never hear people talk about them anymore. My dad told me that that was where they used to bury haters. That's where they used to bury people who were not Christians, who were not Catholics.

I remember that my mom's Aunty Jane used to sit up on that hill. I used to see her rocking back and forth, back and forth. I always used to wonder why she was up there. Now that I understand, that must be where her husband is buried. Her husband must have been one of those un-Christian people.

Running up in the hills used to be part of Maryvelle that I remember. Remember being affected by the land, the hills, the trees, the flowers. When I think about the country, I think about the trees. I think about that part of my home. The hills were so much a part of my childhood. I used to run up in those hills and I used to be scared there were garter snakes.

When it was nighttime, my dad used to tell stories. My dad was a storyteller. He could tell scary stories like you wouldn't believe. He used to light fires at night and sit around at the back of my grandmother's house and tell stories.

When we went up to the reserve to visit my dad's mother and father, that's one of the things we used to do. Storytelling was so much a part of growing up. On the reserve, other people would be busy in the house, I used to sneak outside and sit around the fire with my dad and my grandfather and my brother and my uncles. I used to listen while they would tell stories. Sometimes, when they didn't want me to understand, they used to tell stories in Soto. Same thing at my grandmother's house, they would tell stories in French, Chip, or Cree.

That's how I got to know what things were. You can tell by the way things are used in those stories, what

those words mean. Anybody with a brain, even a child, could understand that. That's how I got familiar with parts of the language from storytelling.

That's why I think my writing has to evolve these different languages that I call my own.

On the reserve, my grandmother's home, the place that I call home was my grandmother's not my grandfather's because it was her place. The home was very much her place. The reserve, the outside, was very much my grandfather's.

It's really weird, the differences in growing up between the reserve and Maryvelle. It was very simple things, like my grandmother's food was very spicy and I loved it. She used all kinds of different spices and pepper, wow, she used to lots of pepper. So many flavourable things.

Whereas my cocama, everything was bland. She didn't use spices. She cooked things in their natural state. Her home was just not like my grandmother's. Everything was so perfectly organized. My grandmother's home in Maryvelle was so earthy, so flavourable. My cocama on the reserve was very influenced by the Catholic church. In fact, I remember reading in this historical book about Fort Qu'Appelle. They were talking about Sakimay. They called my grandmother the first homemaker on the reserve, the first Christian homemaker. That's what she was like. She was so influenced by Christianity.

I think that why I say that my grandfather's place was outside, because even though he had to conform to Christianity, his outside being had to conform to Christianity, inside he was very much Indian. He was a Grass Dancer. He used to sneak away to the Sun Dances when it was illegal. He talked proud and loud.

Question: What do we need to know about you to understand what you write?

Answer: I always want to get a sense of what the person is like, where they come from, their values, their beliefs about life. For me that's what is important when I think about a writer.

I think that writer's spirits are naturally attached to their work. I think a writer's work is good if I can feel a writer's spirit. To me that's what's important.

Question: (Can't hear clearly)

Answer: I know that is not a very popular opinion. A lot of people feel that literature is not only about the author. A lot of people feel that good literature is about using words. Good literature is about being able to craft your words. A really good writer, is not so much a writer who's spirit you can feel, but a writer who knows how to craft words so that what they make is a masterpiece with words. I think that is important too, but maybe it is because where I come from, the places that I call home, words are very important. Words are extremely important and words have power and spirits attached to them. For me it is really important for people to know my spirit, to feel my spirit in my work. For a very long time, I didn't even like my spirit. I think that people could feel that. In a lot of people's work, I can feel anger, I feel bitterness. I can feel a whole bunch of things.

I am sure that people feel that way about mine too. There was a period in my life where I was very angry and really, really bitter. I focused on that a lot. To me writing is a way of lancing the boil, lancing the infected part of my being. So I feel like that is what I was doing with my writing.

I have a hard time calling myself a writer because to me writers are people like William Wordsworth, to me that's a writer. Someone that is very, very accomplished. I say that because to me, I can feel his spirit, not only his spirit, but his spirit that is attached to the earth. I have read a lot of writers when I was in University, and the writer that most stands out in my mind is William Wordsworth. He reminds me of my mushlam, on the outside he had to conform to Christianity but on the inside he was very much an Indian. I remember sitting with him sometimes and he used to be so proud and he would talk loudly about his relatives, all his relations, where he came from, how his relatives were a part of his life. To

me that was really important. Now I wish that I had paid more attention.

There are some things that he talked about that have stayed with me. I remember him talking about his father and his grandfather. I remember him saying how they were fast runners and how they used to outrun animals. How they used to chase down deer and buffalo. How people thought of them as really important and powerful men. I wish I had paid more attention, but I didn't.

I remember one story he told me about how this white guy came to the reserve to paint his picture. I could never understand, when he was telling me this story, why that guy came to paint his picture. I didn't see him for what he was. Like when I say that my family doesn't see me as a writer. When I was a little kid, I didn't see my grandfather as this great runner. I just understood that he was my grandfather. Even though I got a sense that in the community people looked up to him. I didn't really understand.

I got a better understanding of it, when I went to his funeral, when he died. When he died, there was this little church at the mission. It was packed full. There were people out in the courtyard waiting to say their last goodbyes to him. There were farmers and politicians from everywhere around. From Fort Qu'Appelle, some from as far away as Regina. There was a telegram from the Prime Minister when my grandfather died. Unbelievable. There was something from England.

I understood then, how important he was. People must have really looked up to him and seen him as someone very special. I felt really sad because I didn't understand that when I was growing up. I understand it well enough now, he was very special to me.

My grandmother is even more special. I grew up with her. I was her shadow. My grandfather suffered from the affects of alcohol and I didn't like the way he treated my grandmother. When I was a kid, I didn't understand why he used to drink. Now I understand why.

I think he used to drink because drinking used make him feel good. It made him strong. Drinking made him feel more himself. I am really angry at things that made him feel less than a man. I am angry at the Dept. of Indian Affairs, and I am angry with the Canadian Government and I am angry the Christian churches and I am angry with white farmers and the people who made him feel less than a person.

As I was saying about my cocoma, I used to feel so close to her, she was so kind. My cocoma was the kindest person I have ever known in my life. If there ever was a saint, you know how Christians have saints, if there ever was a saint I think my cocoma should be nominated for sainthood. Really. She would never turn a single person away from her house. If someone was hungry, she used to invite them in and feed them. If they travelled somewhere, a long way, she would invite them in to sleep. She wasn't really close to a lot of people, she was like that to everybody. When she knew that her daughter-in-laws didn't have food, she used to walk, sometimes miles, to give them food. Her and my grandfather, she would make him go with her. They would walk with the dogs. Just to go and help people out, that's the way she was.

She never swore or I never heard her say anything unkind about anything or anyone. She was what I think Indian women are about. About strength, kindness. My cocoma was the epitome of Indian womanhood. I really miss her.

That part of my history seems to be gone. My grandmother and grandfather house was like this place that everybody came to feel connected, a place we went to reaffirm our identities and our connection to that, to being an Indian, an Acoose.

Both of them are dead now and I get real sad about that because they were the centre of my father's family. It was so important for me to know them. Like my mom's family, they were so much a part of my growing up and a part of who I was and who I am. By the same token, my father's family was so much a part of my growing up. They contributed and they gave me so much that contributed to my understanding myself and my being. I get so sometimes when I think about

them being gone. That is something that I would love to give my kids, that way of knowing who you are, that way of feeling where you belong. I can't give that to my kids and I think that is really sad.

My kids have my mom, that's their grandmother but that's all they have. They don't have four people in their lives like I had. Four people who were so strong, so powerfully a part of my growing up. I feel really sad that they know that, and they never will know that. It is so important in terms of growing up with roots. Those are my roots. My kids have those roots but they don't have a knowledge of those roots as I do.

Maybe that's why I feel so strongly about writing about it. Maybe that's why. When I am gone, they won't have that connection, they don't have that information.

One of the first things that I wrote that I would say that I shared with people is that I wrote about my mushna. In 1985, I wrote a docudrama with a woman by the name of Brenda Zinner. I wrote this story about my mushna, who was a runner, but I also wrote the story of his father and his father before him. In a way, what I was doing was taking these stories that I know from our oral tradition, from my oral tradition in my family, about those men from my family and putting them to paper. I wrote about it because a) I wanted my family to know that my mushna contributed a significant amount to this province. He contributed a significant amount to the building and developing of this province and to this part of the country. I wanted other people to know that my relatives, my mushnam's and his people were important, in terms of the building and developing of this land and this country. And more than that, I wanted my family to know and I wanted them to remember and to never, ever, ever to forget that these people were very important. A very important part of our history. So, when I co-wrote with Brenda, it was so important to me that my family remember. When my family listened to it on the radio, it was on CBC, when my family heard it, they cried. My mom cried and my sisters cried. It was something that was really special. It preserved the memories of my mushnam, and his father and his father's

father. More than that, it told people about how important he was to the history, our history. I've always felt it was so important, and I still do.

Families are everything for you. My relatives is so much a part of my writing, so much a part of who I am. I can't separate myself from my writing. To me that's what being a native writer is about. About being connected, being loved, communicating you history.

Question: Do you think you'll write about anything else?

Answer: I want to try. But I can never separate myself from that, because that is so much a part of who I am. Ultimately, I think you will always feel the spirit of my relatives in my work. People will always feel the spirits of my relatives because that is who I am. I won't focus so much on them as subjects, they won't be the subjects of my writing but their spirits will always be part of work.

Certainly, now that I am becoming more familiar with the language, I feel like I am moving into an area where I am trying to craft my writing by using the words in a more artistic way, by using words in a more polished way. I am trying to fit words together. The raw materials for my writing are no longer my family. I have done that. The raw materials for my writing now are the words. Even though my family's spirits will be attached to the words, my family won't be the raw materials for my writing now, the words will. What I am going to try to do now is work with the words so that I can craft some sort of art.

Question: You are very familiar with native writers and native writing. Do you think that other writers are going in the same direction that you?

Answer: No. I think families are important to all native writers, but I don't think that all writers, all native writer, use their families as raw material for their writing to the same extent that it is for mine. For various reasons. Putting my family back together again was very important to me and I feel like that is what I have been doing with my writing, putting my family back together. Making it whole again. I don't know that it is an issue for other native writers.

Certainly, if you look at other writers, like Emma LaRocque, she talks about her mother and her cocama and her relatives. They are very much a part of her writing. She talks about being inspired by them, being inspired by oral stories.

Thompson Highway talks about his relatives as wonderfully, beautiful and rich and passionate people. He talks about them being the inspiration for his writing. I don't know that they are the raw materials for his writing, the way they have been for me, but certainly he has been inspired by them.

Thomas King talks about his relatives, he talks about all his relations but I have never heard him specifically talk about relations. So, in a theoretical sense, Thomas King's relatives are important to him. I would like to know who his relatives are. I have that kind of inquiring mind, I would like to know who his relatives are.

Someone who grounds themselves in their native cultures, somebody who calls themselves a native person, those are the people you will find whose relatives have inspired them tremendously. They talk about them. To me, those are the people that I am most inspired by. That's what I find is most important to me in my work.

Maria Campbell has written about her family. She is very much grounded in her family. In fact, her family was an important source for her when she was writing Path Free. She put her history back together. She put her family and her history and her community back together through her writing.

I think there are several writers who are inspired, whose family is the basis for much of their writing.

Question: If I was to say to you, "What do you write?" Would you call yourself a fiction or non-fiction writer. How would you describe yourself.

Answer: I don't think that I utilize one jon???? repeatedly. I think that I jump from that. I guess I am not comfortable limiting myself to something like that. I

like to write poetry, I don't know that people would say that I am a good poet or even that I am a poet. I like to dabble in poetry. I have written script for docudramas for radio and television. People call me a newspaper columnist because I write stuff for the newspaper which I think is a commentary about social issues that affect native people. I have also written some short stories. I have a short story published in the Canadian Women's Journal.

I don't know that I am a short story writer because I don't know how to write really good short stories yet, but I certainly experimented with different jon???. I am trying to write fiction right now. I am trying to work with fiction, not all that successfully, I might add.

So, I guess what I have tried to do is work in different ?????. I don't like limiting myself. I am also working on scripts for films. I have done that. I am not always comfortable working with that very specific kind of format. I like to go from format to another. I don't like to typed as anything. I am a non-conformist by nature. It is very difficult to conform or confine writing to a certain jon???? My spirit is so adventurous. I like to move from different things to different things.

Question: Do you think the short story about your cocama is fiction?

Answer: It's partly fiction, partly fact. When I wrote it, I was thinking about the time when she came out to the reserve. My cocama was Irish, she was born to culturally Irish parents. That's how she was described when she came out to the reserve. From what I gathered, from oral history, as well as from documented history, my cocama was in an orphanage in Winnipeg and she was brought out here to the Sakimay Reserve by a missionary. When she was brought out, two other kids were brought out with her. She was given to Chief Old Sue. It was very, very, very strange to give a white kid to Indian people back in those days, for all of the reasons that I am sure people are aware. Indians were not really looked at as people to give children to, but my cocama was given to Chief Old Sue on the Cowessess Reserve. I could

never could figure out why, why would she be given to him. So I made up this little story about the circumstances that led up to her being given to Chief Old Sue. So, my cocama was raised as an Indian woman. She was raised knowing that language only, knowing the values, beliefs, philosophies of that culture. She knew nothing about her own family. I am even told, that two men came to Grenfell when she was about 12-16. They tried to come out to the reserve to see her because they told her that they were her brothers. She would have nothing to do with them. She did not want to see them. For me, if I was married and didn't know who my real family, I would want to know who they were. I guess she always felt that she belonged.

When I wrote this short story, I was trying to figure out why she was given to Chief Old Sue. I thought about the residential schools and I thought about the missionaries. I was thinking that she probably was given to Chief Old Sue because the missionaries were having a tough time attracting kids to the residential school. They were having a tough time making the parents give them their children. So I thought, maybe the chief of that resort struck up a deal with the missionaries, telling that, "If you give us your kids, we'll give you some of ours". So I thought that Chief Old Sue would reply, "If you want some our kids, you have to give us some of yours" and so I made up the story about going to Winnipeg to get these kids from the orphanage and they gave these kids to people on the reserve.

That part of the story is definitely fictional. The stuff about my cocama being in residential school, that's not made up. It is very painful period for me when I was doing research on residential schools, I went to the archives and I had to read all these things. I found some stuff that was written about my cocama. When she was in residential school, she was given a number, I think it was 358. That's how she was known. That's how I introduced the short story about my cocama. I wrote a poem about her. She never had an identity, her whole life is a mystery to me. I always wanted to know about her. So I tried to write a short story about her and it was my way of trying to figure out who she was.

I was telling you because of the nature of the patrilocal influence, the nature of the colonizer was so much influenced by the patrilocal stuff. My grandmother didn't have an identity and her life was such a mystery to me. I really wanted to understand it, so I wrote this story and I called it, "In memory of (Cree name)" and she was born about 1890 and she died in 1979. I wrote this poem for her because I needed to preserve her memory, I needed to understand her life. It goes like this:

Dept. of Indian Affairs registered her, Old Sue,
The Oblites baptised her Madelaine
We called her Coca Paul (???)
She was adopted,
her Irish ancestry, erased,
became (Indian dialogue)
Flaming red hair hung down the length of her back,
worn, sun-kissed brown eyes could not ??
and angry words she never spoke
a stranger she never turned away
Quite unlike anyone I have never known,
my Cocama, may she rest in peace.

Prior to the signing of treaty poor, the oblites are very immaculate, have made several attempts to set up a mission's school among the ??????? of Crooked Lake. During this time, our elders try to show these first black robes our ways. They taught them our language, our customs and our values.

Once the oblites learned our languages they told us that we had to give up our pagan ways and become Christians. The black robes try to persuade our elders to give up their children, assuring them that they would raise them to be good Christians.

Old Sue, the chief of the ??????? at Asp???Reserve answered them. He told them, "If you want our children, give us yours in exchange and we will raise them up to be good people."

Although exchanging people was a common practice among ?????? peoples in North American, the oblites were unfamiliar and uncomfortable with Chief Old Sue proposal. They didn't understand that the exchange of children, secured peace, built alliances and formed sacred trust between nations.

However, anticipating a lengthy and cooperative relationship with the ????? and the ??????, the Black Robes agreed. It took them sometime however, to offer their own children. A Winnipeg orphanage subsequently produced three children. The oblites received these children at Crooked Lake in 1886 and they offered them to Chief Old Sue. Gaddy, Old Sue distinguished headman, opened his home to the younger brother and sister of metia descent.

Chief Old Sue accepted the baby girl the Black Robes called Madelaine. Like all good Christians, she was baptised, she was christened Madelaine Old Sue. Like all Indians, she also became

a ward of the Canadian Government and thus in accordance with the Indian Act, the Dept of Indian Affairs registered her with Chief Old Sue band. She was registered as Madelaine Old Sue of the Old Sue Reserve.

She spent the first 8 years of her life on the reserve, learning the ways of her people. In her 9th year, the missionaries came for her. Like many school-aged Indian children, her home became the Qu'Appelle Investment School.

At school, Madelaine simply became #382. At Qu'Appelle 382's basic education, combined with domestic and industrial training produced the appropriate Indian farm wife.

From the strict teachings of the principal, Father Hughganoff, she also learned obedience, order and politeness to God, Father and Husband.

While away at school, Old Sue had arranged for her to marry young Paul Acoose, a descendent of the ????? a neighboring Sakimay Reserve. Acoose and Old Sue had great hopes for the union between Madelaine and Paul.

Prior to the birth of their children, Acoose and Old Sue had witnessed starvation, malnutrition and hundreds of agonizingly painful deaths from tuberculosis and they settled on the reserves.

Their people once strong and healthy, were reduced to infected bodies, oozing green pus. Their dreaded disease plagued many reserves and only a few healthy people remembered their ways.

Strangely, the Black Robes were not affected. Seeing their strong power, the Indians abandoned their own medicine people and turned to a missionaries for protection and relief from the wretched sickness.

Acoose and Old Sue, witnessing the physical and cultural devastation of their people, proposed an alliance between their two families. As was the custom, Old Sue brought horses to Acoose. Acoose accepted the proposal, nodding his head and took the reins. The alliance was secure.

Chief Old Sue red-headed beauty Madelaine was to be joined to Paul Acoose. He was the son of Samuel Acoose, a very prominent and esteemed buffalo runner from Old Sakimay's Band.

Kiwich, old Acoose's father, had travelled for many years with Way ??? and his prowess as a runner was well remembered and the old stories of the ????? .

Many whispered that young Paul had also been blessed by the creator with strong medicine. Indeed, he carried the power in his name, Acoose, man standing above ground. The old people wizly predicted Paul would inspire many of these people. In later years, as a counsellor to the chief, a committed member of the Grass Dance Society, and an annual participate in the rain dance, he earned the respect and loyalty of the band members. As a runner he set a world record in 1909 acquiring the title, Fred Skin, running champion of the world.

Madelaine, as these told men had arranged, promptly became Mrs. Paul Acoose. She bore him nine children. Five dark and healthy sons and four fair and sturdy girls.

When their children married, Paul would boast that he possessed 105 grandchildren. We say Madelaine as only an extension of her husband, so we called her ????. She lived in his shadow for 75 years, celebrating his achievements and suffering his failures.

In drunken stupors, he would lash out, "You white Irish bitch." Punishing her for all the things he suffered under white rule. Never one to give into self-pity, she silently endured his cruelty and humbly asked God's forgiveness for making him angry. When she suffered, Madelaine believed she would have to try harder to please others. She never allowed anyone to go hungry or tired from her door. She encouraged others with a pleasant smile, tea and polite conversation.

Never tiring, Madelaine tended the house and farm chores, many times until late in the evening. Sometimes by dim light, I secretly watched her as she unbraided her beautiful hair. Slowly and methodically, she brushed and brushed, starting at the top of her head and stopping just below her waist. Her hair was like nothing I had ever seen before, but I had imagined there were many firey, red-headed Irish women where she came from. Just when I thought she was ready to turn off the light, she would turn to me, "Good night ???"

In the dark I'd think about how eyes held mysterious secrets of a foreign land. As I dozed off, dreaming, I would envision her home land while I silently vowed to someday locate the remains of her family in Ireland. Many times I desperately wanted to ask her about her real family, but just before blurting out the

words, I remember her tearful answers. "Wah Wah Mr., I don't even know this Irish" as she defended herself against his angry words.

Even as she laid dying many years later, I thought she'd magically become Irish. Hanging onto each precious moment at her death bed, I waited for her to mouth those Irish words or to recall colorful and exciting stories from her homeland. She didn't disappoint me. Her last words came from the language of her people, the ??????. In her last senile moments, Madelaine Acoose, #382, my cocama, said, "Cree dialogue" as she motioned for us to gather around the imaginary fire. She said, in other words, "Come and sit down with me. We will eat some rabbit stew."

Answer: Good story eh? I'd like to polish this story. I would like to re-write it someday.

I need to write some stories like this about my mom's mom and my ???.

I always thought writing this was so important because, native people need to understand how women, you know women, how all this stuff from the patriarchy was imposed on our lives. Even though so much of our identity, so much of who we were, was caught up in the men's lives and the men's identities and roles.

You know, women in my family had so much power and those were the people that influence me so much. Like my Downcocama, wow, she is so much a part of who I am. I see myself as so much a part of being connected to her. My grandmother, her name was ?????, and she is so much a part of who I am. Same as with my mom, she is so much a part of my life. She has given me so much, so much power and so much strength. I can never dismiss that part of who I am, you know.

So when people say to me, "You're an Indian." You know you don't have any right to tell me who I am. My mom is metia, and so I am metia. That's a very big part of who I am. But I am also an Indian. Who says you can be both.

This whole business about self-government has to do with identifying ourselves. If I say to people that I am just an Indian, to me that just ignores half of my history. It ignores the half of my history that is so important to me. That's my mom's history, that's my history, that's my connection to my metia-ness. I don't care who it is, people are not going to tell that I am not metia, because that's who I am. A big part of who I am comes from being metia, come from being half-breed, as my mom would say. So I won't let other people tell me that I can't call myself that. I am that. If people have a tough time with that, that's their business, not my business. My family is so important to me.

I think there was a time in my life where I was so confused by these labels that are put on us. At one time in my life, I used to think that I was just an Indian and I used to think, okay, that's who I am. Now I understand that that's just bullshit. All those labels that other people put on us, have nothing to do with who we are. Those are their labels and we have to recognize them as that. The sooner we recognize it, the better it the better it will be for us because when we start to define who we are ourselves and we become stronger people....

Question: Tell me about who you write for? Who is your audience?

Why do you write? Maybe your audience is yourself?

Answer: I write because it makes me feel good and I write because it makes me feel whole. I write because it is sort of a healing for me. It's very therapeutic in that sense. So, I guess, I have people come to me sometimes when I write things, and they tell me, "You made me think about this, or you made me think about that. I was so happy or I was so angry when I read this." I think that I have done a really good job, if I can make people feel. If I could elicit emotions in people, then I think I'm doing a pretty good job.

I write to feel whole, but I also write for other people to feel whole, to feel connected. Mostly, I want to make other native people feel whole and feel connected. I guess because of that, my first audience would have to be native people. I write about things

from my cultures and if you don't have a really firm rooting in those cultures, you are not going to understand the context.

Like I was saying earlier, I don't really give a hoot if people don't understand my context. If they want to understand my context, then they better find ways to do it because I'm not going to explain. I'm not going to explain anymore. I think I use to, but I don't anymore.

So, primarily, I think the audience I write for are native people. Now I guess we're into problem areas because a lot native people, by far, I think more non-native people read them than native people. So, if you ever really want to be a successful writer I think you would have difficulty being a successful writer if you wrote specifically for native people.

Also, in terms of publishers, you have to think of the politics of writing. In terms of publishers, you have to find a publisher who wants to publish your stuff. If they don't understand it, if they don't understand the cultural context, probably they won't publish it.

So, I think it is important to develop our own publishing houses. It's important to establish our own publishing houses that are owned by native people.

I guess, the biggest thing for me is that people, when they have read what I have written, feel whole. That's what it is about. To me, literature is people's stories about themselves, reflections of a people's experiences in their writings, whether it be poetry or short stories or whatever. Oral stuff. That's what literature is to me. It is reflections of a people, in whatever discipline whatever way you want to express those reflections. That's what it is about. I think literature just means that you take the best of those reflections, those attempts at communicating those reflections of people's lives.

Native people have a tough road ahead of us, because so few people are familiar with the English language and so many native writers are intimidated by the English language. We have to understand why, we have to understand the history of native people and the

English language. We have to understand that English is the language of the colonizer. English is the language of the people who came here and set themselves up as sovereign rulers of this land. English is the language of the missionaries, of the priests; it's the language of the Dept. of Indian Affairs, it's the language of the colonial officials. Rightly so, native people will feel intimidated by that language. I think that the more that we write, the more we are going to be comfortable with the language.

I am really excited about the possibilities of native people and writing. To me, if as native people, we can reflect our experiences with the English language, if we can reflect the peculiar aspects of our history and the English language, if we can make native people all over Canada understand our experiences, understand certain aspects of our lives, draw strength from that. To me, that's pretty exciting. The potential of that is pretty exciting.

Question: Does the English language have limitations for you?

Answer: Yes, a lot. I have numerous languages. I have three different languages that I call my own. Sometimes English is not appropriate. Sometimes there are no English words to express certain aspects of my culture. Sometimes English is not appropriate because it just is not enough. Sometimes English cannot express certain aspects of my reality because my reality is not rooted in English.

My reality is rooted in another ideology which stems from Soto, Machip, and Cree. English is not enough at times. I get really frustrated. I get extremely frustrated with the language. I feel like sometimes I am operating in a vacuum. I feel like I have done masters work in English and I should know this language, yet the more that I study English, the more I realize how insecure I am in the English language.

Yet, words from my own languages don't come easy for me. They don't come easy for me at all. Sometimes it is very difficult and very painful to try to remember words. But, I am remembering them. That's the main thing, I am remembering them and I am starting to

utilize them. Not that I am remember them, my conscience mind is tapping into that language. I think that there is something funny going on in my mind.

While I have knowledge at an unconscious level about those languages, I feel like my conscious mind can't tap into that unconscious place. Sometimes certain things trigger memories to that and I can bring those words from my unconscious mind to the conscious and I can use them. Not often enough for me yet.

While I can use them in my writing, I find it very difficult to use them in my speech. In my everyday talk.

Question: How do you take the English language and how you approach writing with it? You talk about words as being a major influence in terms of your writing.

Answer: Not in terms of my writing, just in terms of my reading European, Canadian literature. I don't that he has affected my writing. I think that I appreciate him as one of the writers from the colonizers literature.

I don't know of anyone that has affected my writing because I don't copy writing styles. Some people do, some people deliberately look at somebody's writing and say, "I want to learn to write like that." I don't think that I want to do that. I want to be able to craft my writing to the point where I feel that I have done it. I read a whole bunch of people, a whole bunch of different people's writings and I am sure to some extent, they have an affect on my writing. What I write comes from my cultures; the strength and the spirit of my writing comes from my cultures.

I couldn't possibly be influenced by William Wordsworth. I love the feel of his writing. I love the fact that he is so connected to the earth.

When I was doing under-graduate work in English, I found it very difficult to identify with European writers. I found it very difficult to identify with their experiences. Particularly writers from the romantic era. I found it very hard to get into their

writing, mostly because I couldn't find something that reminded me of my own reality and the writing.

When I read William Wordsworth, I was so astonished by his connection to the earth, by his understanding of the earth, by his understanding the way that he was connected to the earth. He is a writer and a poet that I feel that I can understand because I understand that connection. He wrote some wonderful things about how the earth was alive, how we should pay attention to the earth, how we should pay less attention to academic stuff and more attention to things of nature. I think that's a pretty strong and profound message. For somebody to writing that in the late 1700's is pretty significant for me.

Question: When you set out to do your writing, do you set out to use metaphors? I know you understand Westerners traditions and literature. Do you set out in your mind to put those things in your writing or are you focused on content of it? Do you work through the content and then come back to the style and the form that you use?

Answer: I just write. Sometimes when I am writing, I write almost unconsciously. I write about things, sort of like my pen is moving in ways that I have no control over. I don't consciously think about words. It's like something that comes through the unconscious mind.

That's the way that I write at first. When I do things a second or third time, then I concern myself with the sounds of words, implications of the words. Sometimes if I think that people won't understand things, I go like ..., so I use metaphors or similes or things like that. Then I am concerned about the length of the lines or style. Certainly, the first time I write something, I don't concern myself with that at all; in anything that I write. I sort of right from this unconscious place. I have to really feel like writing. I have to really, really feel like writing. Sometimes I don't.

Question: Do you create spaces for you to write in, spaces where you are alone?

Answer: I am starting to do that more. I am really affected by things that go on in my everyday life. Writing has not been something that I privilege over others things. I am finding that I want to do that more.

More and more, I am finding that if I'm going to write I need to find my own little space with things around me that are important like pictures of my kids and pictures of Clem and nieces and other relatives. That's really important, my things around me. That's gives me inspiration.

So, yeah, I guess I am more and more starting to think that if I am going to write, furiously, then I'd have to put more effort into it and I would have to schedule writing time. I think that's really important.

I have been reading how other writers have written, and the thing that has influenced me the most is this article I read in a book of Virginia Wolfe's called, "The Room of One's Own." That influenced me tremendously, about having space to write. Having time and space to write. It's extremely important to do that. Women that are writers and mothers, have a very tough time with writing because we have interruptions. In order to write, I think it is really important that you have time, undisturbed time. If you are a mother, I think you have so many disturbances in your time. If I was to keep a diary of things that I did during the day, it would be like this:

I started to write. I had to do laundry. I went back to writing. I had to attend to my kids. I came back to write. I had to go for groceries.

There would be all this interruptions. I don't think that very many men have these kinds of interruptions in their work. Women have tons of interruptions. It consistently. If you are a women who has children and that is committed to a home and a partner, you have interruptions. They are different than the kind of demands that a man has on his life.