

Lee Maracle

*'an infinite number of pathways to
the centre of the circle'*

JANICE: Your public readings are dramatic in that your stories are teaching stories.

LEE: In the tradition of the Big House speakers and storytellers there is a way of presenting story. In the Big House there are powerful people who know the history, the families, the relationships between everyone. And they're also the people who are asked to articulate whatever it is that people want to decide or discuss. They have a cadence and a drama when they speak, which matches up with our songs and story dances. Inadvertently, I suppose, I'm influenced by that. My poetry comes from, first of all, a desire to write and, when I was little, to confront the differences in how people interact. Old people are one way; people in the next generation are another way. And the people in my mother's generation were, I think, very confused. They're the students of residential school, the students of abuse. These were not the kind of residential schools that supposedly forced us to learn English. They were basically industrial schools, where males learned to farm and females learned to cook and clean. When they came out, my great-grandmother used to call them crippled two-tongues. They couldn't speak either language as adults. When you're an adult, it's time to marry, procreate, work, provide for your family, not the time to learn to speak a language. They never did overcome this. There were a few exceptions. My dad was one, but we didn't live in the same house. I went to public elementary school. Our folks wanted us to learn to write, to learn how to live with these people. In the course of that public schooling, I learned about story – Dickens

and Fitzgerald and Chekhov and all these people. Zola. I love Zola. I read them at a very young age. From the time I was ten until about thirteen, I read furiously. I suppose from my own background and the way we speak English and the things we look at and see and the structure of Indigenous story comes a kind of poetry that's not poetry in the European sense and not story in the European sense either. I think Marlene Philip has termed it – oratory.

JANICE: Your poem 'Perseverance' is set in Toronto, where you figure yourself as a dandelion on Bay Street 'Perpetually rebellin' / against spike heels and blue-serge suits.' In the poem there is pain as well as a fierce fighting desire for survival. You write, 'I really hope I keep the elite awake at night.' How enabling is fight-back rage?

LEE: First of all, it's *outraged*. At one time it was *enraged*, and I think that's destructive. Wow, that poem comes from a number of places. It comes from a five-hundred-year history of silence, a largely self-imposed silence because no one was listening. Our folks believe we will know when people are prepared to hear. That poem is actually fairly old and comes from an experience in Toronto when I was sixteen or seventeen. It had been eating away at me for years, but I didn't write it until I was about thirty-eight. Two people, I guess, contributed. One was Patrick Andrade, a Black man from the West Indies who had just left Toronto. In a letter to me he said he felt like 'his skin had been scraped off him.' And I thought, 'That's it'; that's what I needed to hear. So there's Black rage, which is why I ended with a Black desire. In the poem there's also one of my relatives who always wondered why people don't think dandelions are beautiful because they are medicine, they're a clothing dye, and they're so much like a sunburst. And they survive anywhere on almost *nothing*. I thought of myself in that way. I hadn't asked this world for anything. And neither had my ancestors. We got nothing. We got less than nothing. But still we had a kind of grit about the future – the forwardness. So it's not totally rage. There is a contradistinction between the destructive kind of economic development that created the urban centres, urban madness if you will, and the kind of development that we imagine could be. There is an element of hope in the forwardness and the huge desire that Native women have to rectify, not just life

for ourselves, but the colonized land and the impoverished people capitalism naturally creates. There's great beauty of perseverance under terrible conditions. There's not so much pain in it as you might imagine. At least not for me. I love that piece.

JANICE: As a White woman, there are certain experiences I can in part share with you about my own history which have to do with discriminatory structures, sexual abuse, whatever, but on the other hand, institutions and structures of authority are set up to confirm my racial privilege. What do you imagine my role as a White literary critic should be in relation to your work?

LEE: It's easier for me to see things in metaphor. From our perspective we think of life as climbing mountains. Some people don't climb very many. Some people don't even make it to the top of their first mountain. Doesn't matter. But every time you confront something that's an obstacle, it's a mountain. For me racism was a huge mountain. We come at it from two difference sides, White and Coloured. It's only when we've scaled and reached the summit that we have much to talk about. I can tell you how racism is for me and how it is to undo it, how it is to keep going up that mountain and keep falling back and keep going up because I know at the top, no matter how hard it is to climb, you can see the world. You can see the magnificence of being a small creature in the world. At some point, someone's going to get up there with you. At some point I'll get to the top too. I think I'm probably closer.

JANICE: I'm sure you are.

LEE: That doesn't matter, I'll wait there. I'll enjoy the wait, I think. I can't answer that question for you, you see, because I'm not undoing the dilemma you've been caught in, and being deprived of me is a serious thing. It's a serious thing for you to pursue and undo.

JANICE: So in some ways it's up to me and other women like me to try to work out in ourselves a space which is self-critically enabling and doesn't appropriate. In fact, you dedicate *I Am Woman* to two White women who supported your writing.

LEE: Always remember – I think it's a significant lesson – 'everything you do and every word you speak, either empowers or disempowers.' And you have to always double think. I know I have to make these decisions every time I'm in a white audience because sometimes a

momentary disempowerment in the end is long-term empowerment. I'm extremely open with what I think. I decided on a January day in 1988 it's time to take on all this stuff out there in the public world and so I do. I started in Montreal in June of 1988 asking White women in the feminist movement to 'move over' – actually *telling* them to move over. In their own interest they must move over because half of them is missing and I'm that half. Not me personally, but Native women. There's no other way, there just isn't any other way. I think some of these American White women have learned that in their relationships with Black women. They still have to learn it in their relationships with Native women, either English-speaking or Spanish-speaking, they're all Native women to me. I think it's a devotion to be critical of White feminism. I think it's a kind of love and devotion we have inside us, and it's not seen as that. It's seen as pain and rage. And it's not! Otherwise I wouldn't bother talking to you if I didn't *feel* you were prepared to listen.

JANICE: One of the problems I sense in these discussions is that one of the only models for difference of opinion is oppositional confrontation. Some of the critical engagements that have happened over the last while between White feminists and Women of Colour seem so painful for everyone that I wonder what kind of conversation we could have that would work through our differences without the aggression. Or is the aggression implicit in it? I agree with you, it's generated not just by one group of women necessarily.

LEE: This is a complex one. Canadians definitely have a parasitic culture. It's also a male culture. It's a utilitarian culture. It's a culture based on pain where courtesy is a class question. A sense of courtesy in Canada is developed by upper-class people who have no respect for the lower classes in their own communities. It's based on nuance, inference, and hiding that typifies a sense of politeness. One doesn't say *this* because you might hurt the person's feelings. I want to say something about this because it moves and motivates me. When you get cut, at first, you hardly feel it. Next day when that flesh, and those veins, and that skin start to mend, you experience the pain of having been cut. Social pain and social healing is not any different. For you to become a racist was painless. For you to un-become and become something new is going to be excruciating. Just like me to

become self-racist is painless. The shame part was easy to learn, easy to internalize. The un-becoming is very, very difficult and very painful. But it's healing and there's no other way to heal. There's no other way to knit things back together except to go through it. People say, *trust hurts, but the hurt of it is the healing. It's not the infliction of a wound. The infliction of a wound is silence, and women in this country are silenced by the culture that is parasitic and upper-class White male. I really want to get specific here because there are some White men who just shovel dirt and don't know anything about how this all came to be. There are conventions around what you say and what you don't say which are really killing people. They're killing Native people in huge numbers because there's no way for us to express ourselves and how we feel, and the reality is that deep in our hearts we do want to be at one with other Canadians. Despite all the racism, despite all the neglect, despite all the abuse, we still dream, deep inside us, of unity. Even when we don't like you, we still dream of it.

JANICE: *I Am Woman* was published by your husband's Write-On Press. Was that a decision that had to do with the way publishing organizes itself in Canada?

LEE: First of all, I come from a culture in which asking for something is almost a crime! I come from a situation where I didn't want to be up on the stage and talking, but at the time I wrote it someone asked me to send in a manuscript. A *Woman of Colour* press in New York rejected it. One of the comments which was made was that it was too beautiful for a political non-fiction book. But that's my political discursive style. It's written as oratory because I don't really know how else to put politics plainly so my folks can understand it. It's a collection of things in my life which shaped me; it's a summation of my life from different angles. It's an attempt to give a picture of colonialism as a whole, not in abstract theoretical terms, but as it affects us in our real lives – how Native women relate to White folks, and our own folks, our children. It's all about the worst that has happened to us.

JANICE: So you were addressing an audience where politics wasn't just a theory.

LEE: Well, it's theoretical, sure, but not the way that Europeans theo-

rise. It's a real dilemma for most scholars – all scholars, whether they come from Africa, India, America, are Black, White, or whatever. Everything is taught and expressed in a White, upper-class male style. Anything else is weird, or impossible to market as politics or ... So she asked me to send it to her again, and I said no, I think I'll do it myself. It was probably a dumb think to say! But I told my husband to do it and he did.

JANICE: You have a whole range of readers – the Native community, feminists, specialists in Native studies. Do you have a sense of an audience you write towards? You said you want to locate your writing in a particular way.

LEE: Native people have a great command of oral language. First of all, they want the raw, bare truth, and secondly, they want it put with energy and as beautifully as possible. It is the raw, bare truth. A lot of people say my book is very angry. But most of my folks say it's a very inspiring, empowering book because there's an energy there that never lets up. There's a thread that says to them every sentiment they've ever had about the world they live in is a good one. Every doubt they've ever had is a wonderful doubt. It makes us sharp. It makes us brilliant. It makes us very powerful just to see – just to see.

JANICE: So the Native reader finds experience affirmed, while the White reader is confronted by the pain of your experience. You write: 'I really hope I keep the elite awake at night.'

LEE: Mm-hm. Yeah. They just have to look at something they've never looked at before and didn't want to see.

JANICE: M. Nourbese Philip sent her manuscript of poetry out to twenty-two publishers before she finally published it. Many Native writers have talked about problems of access. What do you see is the solution to discrimination in Canadian publishing?

LEE: Access to capital. The development of our own presses and our own publishing houses.

JANICE: Like Pemmican and Theytus.

LEE: A non-discriminatory kind of access. Usually what happens is only the people with a certain politic gain access to money, which acts as a kind of censorship. I've experienced it in my own life. Status of Women wanted me to do an article. But a political organization said Native women don't want to write and be identified with other

Women of Colour and squelched the project until a survey was done. This happens to us. Writers do not represent anybody. What they represent is a personal direction, a new humanity and a new sense of the world. That's something this world always is going to need. Chekhov did not represent the Russian people, but his work contributed to the dismantling of serfdom in his country. Zola did not represent the Basque people in France. Dickens did not represent his class when he began a process of undoing the child exploitation which existed in England. And I don't represent anybody either. But ten years from now, people are going to be different because I'm a writer, just like Chrystos, Jeannette Armstrong, Maria Campbell, etc. Every single Native person who writes is pointing to a road over there. I don't necessarily agree with every writer who ever wrote something. But it needs to be said and thought about. It needs to be approached from every angle we can. There's not enough of us out there. There are *tens of thousands* of Canadian writers; there should be *thousands* of us. There are *thousands* of Canadian presses; there should be *hundreds* of ours.

JANICE: My grandmother was a rural Manitoba schoolteacher, and when I visited her house as a child, the first poetry I read was Pauline Johnson's. Her popularity meant that she represented the tradition of Indigenous writing by women. I connected with her as a young White girl who wanted to write. What is your relation to Johnson's writing?

LEE: I loved her when I was nine; I still do. Betty Keller, a White woman, wrote a good book about her. She talked to a lot of older Native people who know quite a bit about Pauline's family history. She was raised by an English mother. Her father was Native. So her writing skill arises out of an English tradition, but throughout her life she struggled to capture her heart as a Native woman.

JANICE: Not only did she hobnob with royalty, but she travelled across the continent fourteen times and brought her poetry to many small communities along the way.

LEE: I have tremendous respect because she did it at a time shortly after they'd hung Louis! It stuns me to think that there was a man in her audience who had actually done some of the killing, who would listen to this poetry and be moved by it. She moved a lot of Canadians,

and I like the fact that her hundreds of readings may have prevented an awful lot of conflict.

JANICE: Discussions about Native writers have been hindered by the fact that they are often framed from an outsider's point of view where you locate a single writer as representative and lose sight of a diversity of writing and positions.

LEE: I've got a story coming out. It's called 'Polka Partners, Uptown Indians, and White Folks.' 'Polka Partners' is a kind of urban metaphor, Métis for courting. Uptown Indians and White Folks have a lot in common. There is this tendency to look upon us as a monolith. When we break that monolith, White people are terrorized by it. Someone said that the reason people don't like Chrystos is because of homophobia. We have no way of knowing that. But this woman was so sure because 'homophobia exists in our community.' So does internalized racism! So does sexism! So does alcoholism. Perhaps it's that she's not an alcoholic that people are prejudiced. There are a whole number of reasons why people could be upset with Chrystos. Perhaps it's because she wants a different world, and there are conservatives in our community. I think conservatism is a whole bunch of things – it's sexism, racism, homophobia, and all the rest of it. Perhaps there's professional jealousy. That exists. We have all of these contradictions, and we can't go on speculating that it's only one and be so categorically sure of any single one. All of the contradictions this woman sees exists everywhere in the same degree. That's part of the racist legacy we're left with. I want to say something on the good side, though you may not agree with it. The women's movement, much more than the rest of the country, is willing to look inside at their own motivation and really consider what the impact of their actions or words is. I'm not saying all women are that way and certainly not every feminist. Maybe it's a legacy of patriarchy, I don't know. But there is a sense women have that maybe we don't know everything, maybe we ought to get in there and look at everything. We've changed enough diapers to know dirt is not that bad; cleaning it up is not so horrible. So I think we're a lot better equipped to look and clean up. Homophobia to me is organized rape. And I think that it exists in our community. Residential school is filled with sexual abuse. Two things happen when kids are sexually abused: one, they

internalize it and develop a victim consciousness; and two, they become perpetrators. Generally, males become the perpetrators, females become the victims. The children were taken from their homes, sometimes hundreds of miles away, and had no upbringing by their own people.

JANICE: There are Native myths in which homosexuality is revered and Native histories which talk about homosexual shamans.

LEE: In White culture homophobia is a kind of rape because we're forcing everyone to submit to what you decide. But I think of homosexuals as people with a dualism, two-spirit people. It makes them good healers because they understand both male and female sexuality. We don't have a he/she in our languages, so we don't have the homo-, hetero-, and all that other kind of sexuality; it's just human sexuality. And choice. Nobody can tell you how to express our sexuality. Sometimes men and women form a marriage in which their sexuality is actually expressed homosexually between them. All kinds of things happen in the bedroom nobody knows! The whole question of your sexuality is very very personal and private and determined by the spirit inside you. If you have two spirits, you're considered more powerful, because you have twice as much as everybody else.

JANICE: You teach part-time at the En'owkin Native writing school in Penticton. How do you see your role as a teacher?

LEE: When you're teaching, you're not actually doing anything except encouraging learning, and when you've written as long as I have you learn some short cuts. We need many more Native writers in this country very quickly because publishers are starting to see they've got to publish us, and they're going to start looking for manuscripts. Six Native writers are not going to do it for this country. There's got to be hundreds of us from all different cultures. The En'owkin school is made up of people from different cultures. We try to hot-house the students' own skills to build what's in their own selves. It's the way Native people teach and learn. My parents, my mother anyway, encouraged me to realize myself rather than battering me with useless instructions about don't touch this, and sit at the table, and be still, and don't talk to much. I was given choices at a very early age, either reading or working. I always chose reading. To recreate that skill in

someone else from his or her own perspective is marvellous, like watching a flower going from seed to flower in a human being.

JANICE: You're working on a novel now. How does this project differ from your earlier work?

LEE: A novel is a whole piece. It's not a long short story; it's a whole chunk of somebody's life, how people interact, how they come to being. Mine is about the kids who were sold to Americans in the fifties, and what happened to them. I wanted to articulate in it what we call tribal memory. We believe every one of us is born with the memory of the essence of who we are. In the novel, a child, who is completely divorced from her heritage and grows up in L.A., is abused and then rescued by an unconscious tribal memory which finds its expression in her relationship to a place in the hills around Topanga Canyon. Here she rescues herself in traditional fashion, but she doesn't know this till much later. She's a frightened child. In the end, the three women, the natural mother, the adoptive mother, and the child, come to a kind of understanding among each other, and you get the sense at the end of the novel a new direction is in store for all of them.

JANICE: How do you come upon a form to write a novel such as this?

LEE: Probably accidentally. A young guy asked me indirectly; he just said that that story had to be written. He knew I was writing on women and hinted in good Indian style that I should take on this responsibility. And so I did. I started to do a bit of research about the case of a young man who was sexually abused, and then became an abuser. His life came to light in his trial, and the scandal of being sold to an American family also came to light. I couldn't bring myself to use his story. First of all, I don't know what it is to be male and sexually abused, and my imagination would tend to be angry about him becoming an abuser. I decided to use a woman character. I decided to put her through things and find a way for her to rescue herself in the course of her life. Secondly, the man, whose case became quite well known in the papers all over the place, was from the Midwest, and I don't have a sense of the landscape and the weather. So I used a young girl on the West Coast.

JANICE: If your relationship to other Native writers is cross-cultural in that you have different tribal histories, languages, and customs, is your reading of each other's writing a process of translation?

LEE: Before White people came, a lot of trade routes led to the development of cross-cultural kinds of thinking. And certainly some of our very, very old stories relate to a relationship with other people on this continent. We didn't have the massive communication that now exists, and we certainly didn't have a common language, so it was a limited cultural exchange which took place. In the last thirty years there has been a pan-Indianist movement at least in the cultural sphere. We writers no longer feel isolated from each other the way we used to. I met Paula Gunn Allen and fell in love with her *Woman Who Owned the Shadows*. Jeannette [Armstrong] and I haven't met Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, but I'm sure I'm gonna love her when I do. I just edited *Songs of Rita Joe*, a Micmac woman's poetry book, and I met the artist Joan Cardinal-Schubert and have seen the work of Jane Ash-Poitras. They are all influential in bringing about what is common to us. We come from our own specific place, but we have a commonality and a common dream.

JANICE: What's the effect of reading someone like Paula Gunn Allen?

LEE: She makes me laugh because she is inside all of us. Some things she writes about are tragic, but at the same time we're laughing because her manner of expression is exactly the way we think. In *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* every now and then this tornado of words and thought happens. I think it's how we actually think, at least it's how I think. There I am – [mini tornado sound] – and I love that tornado, it's very disquieting, but you know the end of the tornado is this wonderful peace, and calm, and knowledge. For most of our people knowledge is sacred. Here she is actually writing a novel which is after all just a novel, but every now and then, there is a wonderful tornado of thought, perception, sense, and then clarity. It goes back to being a regular European-style story, then *sheooo* it happens again. I just love it. She's becoming an influence, at least an affirmation in my life.

JANICE: *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* isn't separated into conventional chapters. Episodes are interrupted by poetic lines. For

me, this way of breaking up the narrative initiates a reading meditation in the middle of unfolding events.

LEE: I think of it differently. I always think of by-plays. In any situation there's something else underneath it all which happens at a level we don't quite understand. Some people call it the spiritual level; some people, the centrifuge. I don't know how to define it myself. There's always something else going on sparking the imagination. I love that part of life. People are so complex. I don't know if that was Paula's intent, but it doesn't matter what her intent was anyway, does it?

JANICE: How is your spirituality connected with your writing?

LEE: Writing is like ceremony for me. I have to be in a certain place to start talking to those dead trees, the paper that was essentially murdered so I could put little black ink etchings on them, draw little word pictures. It's a relationship I have to trees, to the oil from the ground that makes up the typewriter ribbon. It's a relationship to the people in my life who need to have their lives articulated and to myself when I need to go forward out into the world. It's a huge ceremony for me.

JANICE: Within Canada, who are the writers with whom you feel a kinship?

LEE: I don't read very much. I read and listen to a lot of Jeannette Armstrong's work and Dionne Brand. I read Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and Roy Kiyooka's poems. But I don't think I draw inspiration so much from other people's writing. A lot of Native writers will be writing from a different place, about the same thing, and come to the same place. We call it the medicine wheel and there are an infinite number of pathways to the centre of the circle. Chrystos is another writer I like a lot, though she's not Canadian. I don't look to any other writer for something to write about; I don't think they're deserving of that kind of attention. *I'm* not either. The people who deserve to be written about are those who will never sit down and write. They won't sit in the closet at two in the morning and cudgel themselves with a dictionary and a blank piece of paper. Those are the people who need to be talked to and spoken about. Sometimes it's animals ...

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JANICE: I think my spirit guide is a dog, Mars.

LEE: Just like wolf, right. Mine's supposed to be a wolf. Someone's gonna send me a werewolf story ...

Edmonton, April 1990