

# Coming out of the House: A Conversation with Lee Maracle

JENNIFER KELLY

Jennifer Kelly spoke with Lee Maracle in her home in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, on October 12, 1993. Maracle introduced herself as follows:

I WAS BORN in Vancouver, but I was raised in North Vancouver. My mother is Métis, my father Salish. I went to public school until the eleventh grade, and then I dropped out. I kicked around in the Red Power movement for about seven years, which became the sovereignty movement. I was one of the first Native people in this country to articulate a position of sovereignty, back in 1969. I have this reputation of being a pioneer of sorts, I suppose. Just after Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* [1973], *Bobbi Lee* [1975] came out. I did all kinds of writing. But after about 1988, I decided to be a serious writer.

I have four children. I should say that I have four adults—they all grew up on me. I recently moved to Toronto, basically to do a different kind of work. I've been doing a lot of empowerment work, through writing and counselling, particularly around sexual abuse issues, in Cape Croker and around the Toronto area. I bring a lot of indigenous teachings to that work.

My most recent work is *Ravensong* [1993], just before that was *Sundogs* [1992]. I think they were out within a month of each other. And, in fact, the first drafts were written within six months of each other and then they were re-written almost in tandem, while I was teaching, and going to school. *Sundogs* is about the tension of the moment, but *Ravensong* is about historical tension that I think keeps all Native people locked in a certain place—fear, that governs how we care for our children and what our responses are to illness and

what our feelings about the rest of the world are, because of the epidemics we fought solely on our own. We lost in most cases. And a whole lot of people in this country are kind of apathetic. They just watched us perish in huge numbers. So I think it's the hook to our fear of white folks, mainly.

*One of the things that I found interesting about "Ravensong" is that you seem to be saying that the Native community needs to change also, to somehow break out of that fear and maybe reach across to find some connections with the white community in order to make the change happen.*

I don't so much think that it's a connection that we need to find. We have a connection already. It's a human connection. We have an earth connection; that's endangered, though. We have the connection of a society run amuck. So the connections are all there. What I think is missing is the fundamental starting point of examining how we view the world and with what sorts of eyes we're looking at it. And *Ravensong* tries real hard, without explicitly saying it, to begin with the spiritual and end with it. And then things will take care of themselves. And so that requires that we come out of our house, out of our village, out of our self-imposed era of segregation, which I think was about from 1950 onward, and into the white communities. Prior to that we were deliberately segregated and not allowed to come out of the house, come out of our villages. So Raven becomes the trickster who tries a plan that isn't necessarily a pleasant plan, it doesn't necessarily work, but that's the nature of Raven. It doesn't necessarily transform things in a good way, but Raven is the transformer, or the harbinger of transformation, I should say, in our culture. Our culture is a culture that looks upon life as constant spiritual growth and social transformation. That's a constant in our lives. In this society, stability and conservatism—or hold on to what you got—are the constants. So if you kind of look at it as if everything is kind of opposite—although I don't like that word—as coming from different starting points, coming out from a different point of view, *Ravensong* tries to put that different view forward, using Raven.

*In both "Sundogs" and "Ravensong" there is an affirmation of community and of the importance of respecting matrilineal traditions and*

*heritage. But while you celebrate those traditions you also recognize that because their contexts are different, the daughters will take those traditions and transform them.*

That's basically it. "Canada" means village or community, and I've taken the spirit of that, the spirit of community, the spirit of Canada to heart. I really do love this country. And despite the wreckage in our communities, about how it was built, who built it, the direction that it's taken, I still have to have some sort of spiritual hope for it. We need to know that a part of our culture is that each generation brings something new. I guess it's in our origin story. Our origin story is that we begin as hidden form, we begin as spirit, mind, and heart, and then Raven calls us into physical being. We learn consequences and we bring stories of those consequences home to our ancestors to augment and bring glory to the spirit world. Our whole function in life here is to return to our ancestors with some understanding that's new to the spirit world. So it's kind of a challenge to be physically alive.

*Is the valuing of one's ancestors something that "mainstream" Canada needs to come to in its own context? There seems to be such an individualism right now.*

I think it's more an individuation rather than an individualism. Without the spiritual and personal significance, without the person, or any individual, being convinced that they have spiritual significance in the world, they can't be individual. They can be individuated. They're frail, they're fragile, and most of what you see is the kind of chaotic conformity to a kind of conservatism that holds the individual back from becoming significant. I think that's why all of us Native people are tremendously heroic, every single Native person alive today is tremendously heroic in some way or another. Our culture strives for personal significance and recognizes it, allows us to be personally heroic, where the other culture individuates, and separates, and isolates, so that individuals feel frail and vulnerable, rather than powerful and significant. And on top of that you have, I think, a false individualism, really, that goes with the individuation. You're isolated and you're given a measuring stick that has nothing to do with the self, a measuring stick that says "ah, well, I have nice

tables and look at the design on my chairs, and I have two paintings that are originals on the wall,” and so on, so that when someone comes in here they say, “Well, here’s success.” This is not success. The success is *Ravensong*. The success is *Sundogs*. The success is my ability to move people to another way of thinking, another way of being.

*Who do you write for? Do you have an audience in mind? Is it for Native Canadians? Is it for all Canadians? Do you think of that as you’re writing?*

I do, actually. I do think of it. Not as much as I used to. I used to not want to read and write for white people. Actually, one of the reasons I didn’t publish for a long time between *Bobbi Lee* and *Sundogs* was that white people would be reading it.

However, I just woke up one morning in 1988, really, and thought it was time Raven came out of the house. So, it doesn’t bother me that white folks read it. I don’t have this feeling that I’m writing to them as an audience, though. I can see my own community, my own upbringing, all the communities I’ve ever been into, all the Native people I’ve ever come across—and there are thousands, thousands of Native people; I’ve worked with Native people for twenty-five years—and I see their faces crossing before me when I’m writing. I also see the faces of the dead that died too young, those that were old, a host of people that I see. Those faces discipline my work. They don’t necessarily inspire it. I think I was a storyteller when I was born—somehow [laughs]. I don’t have an explanation, but I’ve always been a storyteller. So I’ve become moved myself to write the stories that I like to tell, I would like to tell. But the people that I see when I’m writing are Native people.

*And do you have a sense of responsibility to those people in terms how carefully you portray whatever character or situation it is that you portray?*

Yeah, I do. I have a responsibility to a set of laws that are articulated in previous stories and I try to juggle up the story that finds those laws irrefutable for us and workable for us in the new world, I guess. I don’t think we have a new world here. We have an old

world, supplanted on top of something that could be new. It's an old world, too. We come from an old world. But I think what we have a chance to do now is from that really old world that was here derive a new world with the people that came from another place and create something new here for ourselves considering both our real selves and the aspirations we might have hidden underneath what's here.

*I read "Sundogs" in many ways, but partially as a powerful story of the unifying energy of the events of 1990. Do non-Native Canadians understand the significance for Native Canadians of those events—Elijah Harper's "No," the failure of Meech [Constitutional Talks], the Oka crisis?*

They were dramatic events that affected everybody. That's for sure. There's a real interest in what happened during Oka, but certainly, it was our day of awakening, I think. I hesitate to call it a day because really, it's a short time in our long history, but it was a moment of awakening, it was a moment of recognition that we were not destroyed, that you cannot destroy culture, you cannot destroy the spirit of people. You cannot destroy our need to be, ourselves. It doesn't matter how overwhelmed you are, I mean, we are half a million in 26 million people; we're surrounded; we're besieged; we're constantly at threat; and every effort has been made to destroy what's there, and it's being revived faster than ever before, as a result of Oka. And I think what Oka told us all is that we're worthy of great being, not just surviving. That's why we did the "Beyond Survival" conference.<sup>1</sup>

*And how do you think those events are affecting Native communities, Native writing?*

I think since 1990, *Gatherings*, the journal that came out of En'owkin International School of Writing was brought out on the heels of 1990, when we found out there are literally hundreds of writers in the country that haven't the opportunity to publish. *Writing the Circle* came out in 1990; *Being on the Moon* came out just after 1990; Duncan Mercredi's poetry came out just after 1990; *Sundogs* was mostly 1990; there's a whole lot of programs that came out of 1990 which previously didn't exist. There are a lot

of healing societies now and healing work being done in our communities as a result of 1990—all kinds of communities are dealing with the effects of the residential school system, post-1990; the federal government finally came out with a self-government package, which wasn't good enough for us, but that's post-1990. Our youth now have hopes and dreams that they never would've entertained before. There's also the feeling, I guess, throughout all of our nations, that we're not alone, that we are not isolated, and that this country isn't in the same boat it was during the epidemics. It's no longer as apathetic as it used to be, and that's very heartening.

*So you're hopeful?*

That's full of hope. I don't know about being full of hope. There's a thread of hope in all of this. At the same time that all these good things have happened, I mean, the federal government has cut back on programs, cut back on dollars; so there's a whole bunch of negative stuff. The KKK is rising; the Reform Party is rising. So I'm not full of hope.

*When you say that Native Canadians found connections, that they've found they're not alone, where are those connections being found? I could see some at the Beyond Survival Conference. Are there a lot of connections with Canadian and American Native peoples?*

I think the wellness movement has got the biggest numbers of connections. A lot of our people go down to the American men and wellness conferences and the women and wellness conferences and a lot of connections are being made there. I think at the last men and women and wellness conference there were 2,500 men trying to move away from violence against Native women. I don't think you'd find a correlative in white communities, despite the large numbers of violent white men. There are a lot of men, Native men, moving to undo the violence in our communities toward Native women and there are a lot of Native women seeking to empower themselves, who have been ripped by the violence that exists, not just in their communities, but in the outside world. We no longer feel invisible. And we no longer accept the invisibility that we were consigned to as Native

women. We no longer put up with the women's movement talking about the rights of women and Native people, for instance, as though Native People doesn't include women. We no longer put up with people saying that women got the vote in 1927, when we didn't get the vote till '61, and so on and so forth. We're a whole lot cheekier, I suppose.

*What is your view of the definitions "Native American" and "Native Canadian"?*

I have relatives in Washington. We have a word for this island, we call it Turtle Island. We don't even have Mexican or Canadian, or U. S. distinctions. However, the U. S. colonial process is very, very different from the Canadian colonial process, and I'm cognizant of that on an intellectual level. But I have not met a Native person that I couldn't connect with immediately.

*And I think that was one of the strengths of the Beyond Survival Conference. Even though I was there as an observer, those connections were obvious.*

Everybody had a lot of heart there, a lot of spirit. It was so powerful to be all together, to know that the arts are just moving by leaps and bounds, the Native arts. It's just incredible what's happening, in our sphere, in our world, with our stuff, and with this language [English]. And how we've taken hold of that language and made it partly our own. Instead of an imposition, it's become our own, and it has a beauty, when we use it.

*I've always been interested in the female characters of your work. You create very strong female characters who, to me, seem to go through a very painful kind of questioning and come to a political awareness and a commitment to action. And this involves issues of race, and gender, and class, and national politics, as well. I often wonder how you juggle them all.*

I don't know. They just kind of unfold [laughs].

*It's hard to separate those issues. What of the competing politics among the issues? I wonder if you've ever encountered conflict among national politics, racism, and issues of sexism.*

Not in me. I suppose there are in men. And I think men have a vested interest in holding on to the issue of racism, because then the enemy is external. I can understand an Oka situation developing, where racism becomes primary. However, I think that very often racism operates as sexism in our community and often sexism operates as internalized racism. I see it just as much going one way as the other. I have not found a Native man whose sexism extends to white women in quite the same way that it operates in our communities. If we're sitting at a table and there's one white woman and four Native women and one Native man, very often the exchange will take place between the Native man and the white woman and then there will be silence from the four Native women. That's how racism operates at the table of sexism. Now, when you have life inside the home then sexism is operative, it becomes operative on the personal level. Outside the home, the racism is operative. It just depends where he's standing. I don't think those two things are separate phenomena in our communities.

*I think you do an interesting job of exploring both the sexes, the racism, within your characters. In "Sundogs," your portrayal of Rudy, for example, the brother-in-law that beats his wife, has a certain compassion in trying to explore where that behaviour is coming from. It's not a total condemnation.*

Yes, because she [his wife] loves him, right? I think when women are dispirited they move to apathy and males move to violence because, I believe, that is the way that humans have always operated together in unsafe environments: the males move and ready themselves for violence as protectors, because that's sort of the way the world has worked for thousands of years. I think that's a natural, hormonal, kind of adrenal thing that happens and the women move to apathy, not to fight violence, and that's part of the nature of the way we've lived for thousands and thousands of years. At a certain point, it becomes really clear. The woman who gives up and the man who gives up are two sides of the same coin.

*You stated in "Telling It" that one of the difficulties you've faced is, and I'm paraphrasing, that of mastering a language different from your own,*



*without having your own in the first place. But you also state that you write to and from your own, and sometimes I wonder how you negotiate culture and language differences in your writing. There are certain references that are culturally specific, but you're writing in English and you have non-Native readers reading this, who might misread and misunderstand.*

That's not my problem. I don't negotiate that. I don't explain any of the metaphors and I really don't have a big concern that my own people don't get it. If they don't get it, they'll start searching and start communicating with their elders and finding out where it comes from. And our elders will be hard-put to find the origins themselves. They have to think about "where did she get this?" But I've done a lot of work on reclaiming culture, which, you know, allows people to understand, my people to understand the nature of the writing, and where their origins are. We have not had the opportunity to sit down and really focus on reclaiming what we've lost. It's actually not lost. But what we're not aware of is what the givens are in our communities. And I have taken the time to figure out what the givens mean and how they operate in story. But that's a luxury, I think. You have to be out of the besiegement a certain degree to be able to stop and look at that, and I've had some very fortunate breaks in my life that allowed me to sit down and spend a month, and mull around stuff for several months, sometimes years, mulling around our old metaphors, our old stories, and trying to give them meaning in a modern context, with which to be reborn. I feel that all our people—anyway, my folks—are thinking people. They come from thinking cultures. There's a huge level of awareness that doesn't exist among white folks because white folks can afford to be apathetic. Ours can't.

*Recently there has been an increased awareness on behalf of non-Native critics that they need to "do their homework," to discover exactly where certain elements of a Native work might be coming from. Will their interpretations always be coloured by their own cultural contexts? Is there a limit to cross-cultural understanding?*

There might be, but I don't think so. I think that when I wrote *Sojourner's Truth* and the dead white guy in there, and the Snow-

dens in *Ravensong*, I depict those situations with a huge measure of reality, despite the fact that I was only ever in one white home as a child. I can imagine what's inside those homes from the people that I've known outside of them. I don't think you go through a great big metamorphosis when you go step inside the house.

*What's your position in the "appropriation" debate?*

If a white person writes a story, it's a white person's story. And I don't think there's such a thing as appropriation of voice and I really resent the fact that someone came up with that term, because it isn't what we were talking about. We were talking about appropriation of story, and I have said consistently over six years now that you can't appropriate anybody's voice. You can silence them so that they cannot come to the public. You can prevent them from being published. I'm speaking personally, of my own experience. *Sojourner's Truth* was not published at first because the stories were too controversial. They had drinking in them, you know, so "we can't publish that because people might think that we're promoting drinking among Indians" or some darn thing. The World War II story—my earlier attempts to publish it were met with "it's not culturally mythical enough"—it seems too real and too much like a good story, I suppose. *I Am Woman*—I was told that it was too beautiful to be political. *Bobbi Lee* was too political to be autobiography. And so on and so forth. Lots of reasons that people could come up with for not publishing our work, and, of course, that's been our history. Once you break through, though, I think, the [concern over] appropriation of voice is specifically aimed at white people who think they understand us. And I think they [white readers] are looking for the white person who is the expert on us as though by somehow taking your binoculars and peeking in our houses you can figure out what we're up to. I think you have to integrate yourself into our world and become a part of it, before you can understand how we are—how we really are. And there's a certain amount of institutional and personal arrogance in white folks who look at us and see us as simple [and say] we're "very spiritual people." So all they have to do is just be reverent and then they understand us.

It's not that simple. We're complex people, just like any other human beings in the world, and people have to come to grips with us. Particularly when half of us don't want to talk to white people, and the other half likes to tell them stories that may or may not be true. We're not a simple people.

The request to move over and not take up our space is a different one. That's not [about] appropriation of voice. That's just move over and let us sit at the same table. Don't think that you can write like [W. P.] Kinsella, stories of rape and plunder, and represent us. You can't re-present us, and you should stop doing it. It's just a question of honour. We present you much better than you present us.

*And much more accurately?*

With a great deal more accuracy. And I think that has to do with hierarchy and the way it works. The people at the bottom see more clearly what's happening than the people at the top seeing down. That just makes sense. It's like the woman question. Men aren't very good in the realm of anti-sexism. Their intentions might be there, but they haven't done much anti-sexist work.

*I've been troubled by what I see as an increasing distance between the texts that are being studied and the theoretical language that's used to talk about them. "Postcolonial" is the term that is now used by many theorists.*

I was at a wonderful conference at UBC [The University of British Columbia] on postcolonialism and literature, and I didn't understand a thing that was being said, with this "monologicistic hyperglossaic" this and that. I couldn't believe the Latin terms that they were coming up with. However, I did see a glossary of these terms today. So now I can figure out what they were all saying four years ago.

For us, though, just specifically myself, there has been no revolution in this country. We're still colonized. So postcolonialism has no meaning for us whatsoever, which is why it never comes up in discourse between us. We're still fighting classical colonialism.

*Technically, the term "postcolonial" is supposed to refer to all cultures from the moment of contact and to include colonialism, but what a lot of*

*people are saying is that the "post" is misleading. How can that gap between academic discourse and the texts and the realities out there be bridged?*

I think people in this country have to get real. I don't think academia is much different than the outside world, to tell you the honest truth. There's no serious attention paid to the history of this country. The history of this country is not made up of conquest. The history of this country is thousands and thousands of years old. And I think people should either sink roots here or go back to where they come from. Get real. You're in Anishinabe territory, and Iroquois territory; this is a Cayuga Seneca village. It competed with Toronto for commercial supremacy until 1900. This here place, right here. This house is sitting on it. And appropriation, expropriation, and disease killed that. But you know, we were just as anxious to get capitalism on the road as anybody else. I mean, just be real about what's happened here. The Anishinabes in the north stopped the country from expanding west for fifteen years. We should be real about who these people are and how this country came into being. We should know what its origins are. We should know something, and we don't. And I think it's because people here don't take this being here seriously. I think their parents came here with the idea that they would make their fortune and go home and never went home. But the grandchildren, somehow, and the great-grandchildren, were never given a past to being here—this is where you are, and this is who the people here are, and this is the history of this continent and these are the people that began this country, and these are the people that have influenced the land the way they have or come together with the land the way they have. And this is where we're going as a country. And we still have, I think, the essentials of all our cultures, and we could impact tremendously, in a positive direction, in this country. But Canadians have to be serious about who they are. And then academia will follow suit. It always does.

I think that's how the gap gets bridged. When the Canadian people themselves figure something's wrong here and we need to make it right. They'll make their institutions follow suit. They know how to do that. They know how to get together and protest.

*Many times you've talked about stories being theoretical, as being theoretical texts in themselves, and I think that's perhaps one bridge between theory and texts.*

For us it's very simple. We are spiritually disciplined. It's the foundation of everything. The physical world, the real world, the non-real world, the natural world. All of this is based on our spiritual discipline and sensibility about spirit. I think that speaks to a different spiritual discipline. It's all story, memory stored up. And coming to grips with our spiritual subjectivity, coming to grips with it socially and personally: What is moving Canada? What moves us spiritually and socially? We call ourselves tolerant. Tolerance isn't movement. So what's going to move us? Some sort of oneness perhaps. We need to perceive that. How are we going to oneness from tolerance? We've tolerated. Native people have been excessively tolerant and I'm not thinking it's been a good thing. I don't think that we should have been. There's no virtue in it. When white people say they're going to be tolerant, I say, "Right. I know that history. Forget it. Move."

*Both "Sundogs" and "Ravensong," I think, offer that same message—the power of spirit, but I think they do it in different ways. There's a certain traditional spiritual element in "Ravensong" and kind of a recovery or rewriting of history and in "Sundogs," kind of a creation of history, a writing of it as it happens.*

I heard Raven's song, that's why I wrote *Ravensong*. When I hear Raven sing, I pay attention to that. But coming out of the house is an essential move we're all making. We're all making our way to the other world. We all need that bridge and we all need to build it and we need to build it from where we are. We need to stand solidly in our own culture, our milieu, our understanding of how Raven and Raven's song work for us and how they lead us in certain directions of change.

*Do you want to talk about Raven?*

Raven is referred to a lot as trickster, which I think is a simplification of who Raven is for us. Raven is the harbinger of social transformation. Raven sings when the world itself is amiss. And some people hear that song. In this novel, Celia is actually the

one who hears the song from the beginning. But she was too small to come to grips with the meaning of that song until much later. Because Stacey crossed the bridge and went to the other side, she stopped hearing Raven's Song. Between the two of them the telling of the story, the recounting of the story between Stacey and Celia and Rena and the mother, between the four women, because these women came to the culture from four different directions, they were able to recount the story in a way that was useful to the boy who is asking why his cousin committed suicide. They were able to give a story that was rich and in which you could seek the answers, which is what Raven's stories do. As a child, when you ask a question you're given a story, and within that story is a number of directions. And all of our stories are kind of like that in that a number of people tell them, and they tell them from a number of different directions from where they're standing; they see the story in a certain way and they tell it to you. You go to another person and they're standing here. And they tell it to you. Pretty soon you have a full-fledged story. Which is also the reason why white people can't retell the stories because they can't tell them from four different directions at the same time. They can't get tangled around the politics and the sociology and the health and well-being and the spirit of it and the heart of it all at the same time. I think that's something that we do in our stories, so naturally we are going to do it in our writing. I guess that's the heart of where transformation comes from. And what Raven does when she sings is tell us that it's time, that the time is coming and to listen to what's going on in a whole bunch of different ways—listen to it spiritually; listen to it emotionally; listen to it intellectually; listen to it physically; listen to what's going on—listen to it socially, and personally, and in family ways; listen to it in a number of different ways. And I tried in *Ravensong* to not just hear but to unfold it the way I was hearing it.

*Sometimes I got the sense that Raven was a bit impulsive, constantly being warned by Cedar to maybe rethink her plans.*

I think Cedar feels that way about her. Because Cedar can't move, though, can't physically move, and Cedar lives a much longer life and a much more stable life; it sort of was for me, if you can

imagine this, we call this body our house. And it's stable and conservative and really reactionary, if you think about it, and our spirit inside wants to fly everywhere and do everything—so that Cedar becomes the house in our culture. Cedar represents our sacred house. Cedar represents all that is conservative and traditional, I guess. And Raven represents the spirit that just wants everything to move and shift and change and loves chaos.

*In the interview in "Sounding Differences," you referred to racism as a mountain, and it was a mountain that whites and non-whites had to climb, but perhaps from different sides. Is there a longer climb for one than for the other?*

It's in my interest to climb the one side, right?—to deal with the effects of racism on me as a person. I wouldn't have been able to get out there and say this is worth publishing if I hadn't started with the internalized racism in my life. But then, my survival depends on my struggle with it. And I think the survival of all Native people depends on the struggle with that phenomenon in our communities, because we're killing each other. And that's our reality right now. Eighty per cent of Native women are very likely to be abused sexually and physically in their lives. That's a huge number. So most of my stories focus on women empowering themselves, climbing that mountain—and it is a mountain of racism—to deal with the violence outside the home as well as inside the home.

I hope some white people start making that climb and start writing about the epidemics from the point of view of the person who watched us die. I hope they write about the effect that racism has had on them. I hope we're through with the kinds of novels that focus on writing about us from a distance and not about themselves from within their racial context, a white supremacist context. That they don't is an unwillingness to climb the mountain, not just necessarily that there's a longer climb.

*You're always trying to make those bridges.*

I think my characters do that. . . . What should I be saying today? That I come from a speaking culture. I come from a culture that says words are sacred and I have an obligation to my community as a woman.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "Beyond Survival: The Waking Dreamer Ends the Silence" was a conference of indigenous writers, performers, and visual artists from Canada, New Zealand, the Caribbean, Australia, the U. S., South America, and Central America, held in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, in April, 1993.

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