

A person with long hair, wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt and dark pants, is sitting on a large, fallen tree trunk in a grassy field. The person is seen from behind, looking towards the right. The field is filled with tall grass and several other fallen tree trunks. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

**My
Conversations
with
Canadians
Lee
Maracle**

My Conversations with Canadians

Lee Maracle

BookThug
Toronto, 2017
Essais no. 4

FIRST EDITION

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The production of this book was made possible through the generous assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. BookThug also acknowledges the support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Book Publishing Tax Credit and the Ontario Book Fund.



Canada Council
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Financé par le
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BookThug acknowledges the land on which it operates. For thousands of years it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

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LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Maracle, Lee, 1950–

[Essays. Selections]

My conversations with Canadians / Lee Maracle.

(Essays ; no. 4)

Issued in print and electronic formats.

softcover: ISBN 978-1-77166-358-8

html: ISBN 978-1-77166-359-5

pdf: ISBN 978-1-77166-360-1

kindle: ISBN 978-1-77166-361-8

I. Title. II. Series: Essais (Toronto, Ont.) ; no. 4

PS8576.A6175A6 2017 C814.54 C2017-904674-8 C2017-904675-6

PRINTED IN CANADA

Conversation 1: Meeting the public

You are always sitting just out of reach of my kitchen table; you occupy a large space in my mind, and so I thought I would like to have a conversation with you. You are not invited into the text to respond, and for that I apologize. Instead I take it upon myself to scribble a number of chapters in response to a number of common questions. I hope to create a conversational book. Perhaps we will meet at some justice event in the future. But now, in my imagination, I locate you in my kitchen. I am living in a co-op, the first Indigenous co-op in Western Canada. The women own the units and we were influential in the design of the kitchen, living, dining rooms. This is a long kitchen/dining space bordered by windows at one end and stove, fridge, sink, and cupboards at the other. I have papered the wall halfway up in the seating area with wallpaper that is very much like the cloth I use in my quilt making. We are seated around my oak table with its ten chairs. It is an antique. It took twelve years for me to be able to afford this table. The children are in the living room, down the hall from the kitchen. This is so they can play undisturbed but

be heard from the kitchen while the women gather around the kitchen table to plan the transformation of the world, so to speak. I drop a cup of coffee on the table and begin these conversations that I would like to have with you.

I have seen many of you at book launches, panels, conferences, gatherings of all sorts, including protests against some injustice or other of which there are so many. Not a single Canadian has ever approached me to say: “Why are there so many injustices committed against Indigenous people?” or “Why is there not a strong movement of support for justice and sovereignty for Indigenous people’s sovereignty movement in Canada?” Canadians love causes, but they love the causes that are far away—out of their backyard, so to speak.

Oh, wait: they don’t actually have a legitimate backyard. They are here at our goodwill and by our host laws and by way of honouring our treaties—should that happen. Most Canadians don’t see it that way, however. Nothing that happens to Indigenous people, no matter how unlawful, is of much consequence to many of the people occupying Indigenous territories. In fact, just the other day, several police officers were suspended for sexually and physically abusing Indigenous women in Peterborough. While no charges were laid—due to lack of evidence (this usually means the women themselves were the only evidence, and of course, they are not normally considered credible witnesses when facing white men, particularly police)—there was sufficient evidence to suspend them. The community came out and demonstrated in favour of the police—unprecedented. No other women are regarded in this fashion. Being a feminist, I await a feminist reaction—none. Again, unprecedented. It is as if no one cares.

We occupied this entire continent before the newcomers came. The border between the United States and Canada is

an arbitrary one and it was only recently established—1812, I believe, before Canada was Canada. Many of our nations straddle this border and live on both sides. When Britain handed the reins to Upper Canada, the new country called itself Canada. In the early period of confederation we were named as permanent immigrants to Canada. They first named us permanent immigrants to Canada, then wards of the state, children in the eyes of the law, incapable of making adult decisions, and finally we became citizens. These were all arbitrary decisions made by your various governments at various times and applied to us without consultation or choice. We were not permitted to vote. Now, everyone knows this is not Europe, it is not England, or France. It is not China, India, or Africa. So how did our land get to be a country called Canada without our consent?

Further, many Canadians, when asking questions about us, refer to us as “our Natives,” “our Indigenous people.” You consider us your possessions at best; at worst we are like a personal footnote to the Canada that is owned by Canadians. When did we ever agree to all this?

Canadians talk *about* us oftener than *to* us. Even when they are speaking directly to us, they refer to “the Indians” of the “First Nations” as though I was not First Nations. The worst insult is being labeled with the possessive “our First Nations” as though they owned us. The conversation about us goes on in a language of possession and distancing that no one thinks about and yet everyone is shocked at the myriad of injustices visited upon our persons every day—except for the injustice that begins with the story: “It all started one day when Christopher Columbus landed a ship and asked to dock. The Indians said yes, and then Columbus drove a flag into the ground and established ownership of the Indies for the queen

of Spain.” Less than a hundred years later, some captain did the same in Canada for the French Crown, then another captain drove his flag into the ground in the name of the British Crown, and everyone thinks that was all it took to establish Canada as a colony of England or France—depending on your national persuasion. You are convinced this is all yours and that we are a footnote owned by you.

Your previous governments secured this country by hook and by crook. These “newfound” lands cost Indigenous people their lives. Headhunting and epidemics were the forces most commonly used. Now by policing that is so chronic and relentless it feels like a solid wall of semi-military occupation: Canada controls us instead of protecting us. Not a single Canadian has ever asked me how this happened without our consent. Couple this with the majority population’s accepted belief that this is all good and proper, and you have summed up Canadian colonial strategy.

We cannot say no to the development and rape of the land or our persons. We have been infantilized and animalized and finally objectified and commodified. Canadians are horrified at some of the answers to their questions: “No,” they blurt out, and then they gasp. That is just annoying. Sometimes they say, “I don’t understand.” “Actually,” I answer, “you do. This is English, this is your language.” They admit that they do understand, but they are shocked. It is the shock of the innocent.

Canadians have a myth about themselves, and it seems this myth is inviolable. They are innocent. They gave us things; they were kind to us. The reality is that Canada has seized vast land tracts, leaving only small patches of land specifically for us, as though they indeed owned everything and we had nothing, not even a tablespoon of dirt. Canada says it gave

us these lands, and Canadians actually believe that Canada “gave us” these reserves. In fact, Canada took all the land but the reserves it set aside for us. You cannot give someone something that already belongs to them.

There are a number of treaties between Indigenous people and Canada. The treaties between Canada and us don’t say that we own nothing and Canada owns everything; in fact, they imply the opposite: Canada gets to be Canada by meeting its treaty obligations. That is, you get to be here, at our good grace and our goodwill, not the other way around.

Nor do the treaties say we do not get to be ourselves. Most of the treaties attest to our right to hunt and fish. And they accord us education rights. Some promise us homes, others say the “canoe will never be empty,” and at least one says the treaty payments will go up as the income from land secession rises. There could be no hunting or fishing guarantees unless the treaty makers had recognized our original freedom of access to our ancestral lands. They show that we had the absolute right to continue to provide for our lineages. Canada just doesn’t behave in accordance with the treaties’ intent. It does not say in the treaties that should we change our way of sustaining ourselves, we will be violating Canadian law. They knew we occupied this land. They knew that it was the land that sustained us. The hunting and fishing rights affirm uninterrupted dominion and economic access to our original territories or treaty lands.

We know the land will continue to sustain us. The only difference in our lives is that we would have new neighbours and in exchange for sharing the land with them, we would receive some of the benefits they bring without payment from us. So-called fishing and hunting rights are just a nod to the already-existing authority we had over our land. Fishing and

hunting are all we have left of our economic rights to access the wealth of our land. They are the cost to the settlers for having been granted permission to live here. The treaties outline the newcomers' obligation to us and the land as the cost of that permission.

In many treaties, the British wrote about the notion of “surrender[ing] to the crown all lands,” etc. Few of our elders tell that version of the story; most say that through the treaties, the Indigenous nations allowed white people to live here. If we had surrendered our lands, there would be no “hunting or fishing rights” contained in the treaties. The hunting and fishing rights presume our uninterrupted and total economic access to the wealth of treaty lands. For more on treaties, read Harold Johnson’s 2007 book, *Two Families: Treaties and Government*.

I did not know very many Canadians well when I began my writing career, or, I should say, reading and public speaking career. In fact, I wasn’t even aware I would have to meet the public with my book when I began touring for *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* in 1990. Book writing and publishing is definitely a Canadian cultural phenomenon. My editor told me I would have to “tour the book.” “And do what?” I asked. “Read from it.” “Do you really think that people who cannot read are going to buy a book?” I asked. “No,” he answered, chuckling, “they can all read.” “Then they can read it their own damn selves,” I snipped. “You really don’t know anything about publishing, do you?” he said, and laughed out loud. “Apparently not,” I answered, somewhat humbled.

No one I knew had ever published anything. I take that back. I had met Malcolm Lowry, who lived on a houseboat off our reserve at Cate’s Park, but I did not know he had pub-

lished anything until I was nearly forty years old and I was asked to read for the Under the Volcano Festival of Art and Social Change. I knew him as Malcolm, a friendly old white man who liked me to visit. He would ask me to tell him a story, and I would, and always when I left, he would say, “Go to school and when you learn to read, you write them stories down,” and he would laugh. I did not write down the ones I told him but I did want to be a writer by the time I went to college. It surprised me that my Malcolm was the author of *Under the Volcano*, which I had read.

The first reading I did was in Vancouver (or at least that is what my memory is telling me now). It was not all that important to me, this business of reading. I was mildly terrified. I did not shake, nor show my fear—not the Sto:lo way. It is our way to calm ourselves. Once we have committed to doing something, we do it with courage and conviction. Standing up and shaking is not the way to go once you have agreed to read to everyone. I recall thinking, it isn’t like you are going to stumble over the words, and they are, after all, your own. And it wasn’t as if I didn’t know the story that was my own too. But I was cognizant that this was not my culture and that I did not know anything about it, so there could be all sorts of traps I could get caught in. I persuaded myself that might be fun too; after all, I like laughing, even if I am at the center of the joke.

Lately my audiences have been largely women of colour, Indigenous women, and white women, with a few men salting the group. Not so in the early seventies. There were a lot of men; in fact, they were mostly white men, with a few men of colour peppering the audience. I read from the first and last chapter of *Bobbi Lee*, a habit I maintained until I published with Cormorant Books, who suggested I treat the book like

a script, and my editor separated out a script-sized chunk of chapter one from *Celia's Song* for me. I was not an actor then, that came much later, when my kids roped me into it. At the end of my reading of *Bobbi Lee*, the audience was invited to ask questions. "Who wrote it for you?" was a common question, asked of me as though I could not possibly have written my book myself. I half wondered how they knew very few of us could write. Or was it based on some racial dumbing down of the possibility of writing developing among us? Those kinds of questions annoy Canadians when I tell them that they were asked of me in the early days of my writing, but actually I liked them; they are so easy to answer. "No one—I wrote it myself, but I did not edit it."

About halfway through the question-and-answer period, an older man got up and bellowed out his question: "What are you going to do with us white guys—drive us into the sea?" He shook his fist. I stared at him for a while, thinking. On the one hand, there is this business of his fear, which affects so many white people here in North America. In so many movies, the line "We are in Indian country now" pops up when the heroes enter enemy territory, no matter what country the enemy is from. This is particularly true for Westerns and Vietnam War movies, but it is also true for cop shows and other war movies as well. "Indian country" is dangerous country, full of ambushes, secrecy, guerrilla fighters, traps, and maybe even some torture. I am not sure if any of this fear is grounded in reality, but I do know that a few of us gave both Canada and America a very hard time in their pursuit of subduing us and establishing the two aforementioned countries on this continent.

Hence the treaties. But that is not all. Although we gave the British and the French a hard time, we did not have genocide as a goal. Canada and the U. S. did have genocide as a goal.

“Nits breed lice” was General Armstrong Custer’s famous line when the American army killed everyone at Wounded Knee. During the beginning period of residential school, when Dr. Bryce complained to the Superintendent of Indian Affairs that the children were all dying of disease, the superintendent’s response was “If they are dying, isn’t that the point?” Does the man asking me what we’re going to do about white guys know about General Custer? Does he believe we are angry enough about the first forty years of residential-school child killing that we want to drive him into the sea?

I didn’t know the answer to his question and I didn’t say anything right away. I don’t remember what popped up in my mind then, but I suspected that it required a much longer answer than what I was able to give him at the time. Did he think we hated them for taking our land, for confining us to reservations, for deliberately impoverishing us? Or was it something simpler: Canadians hate Indians so we also hate them; they don’t want us here and so we naturally don’t want them here.

Or is there a hundred-year-old fear hidden in that question? I do recall white children telling their teacher that it was not fair to have to compete with me because I was an Indian and everyone knows Indians are better at sports and stupider in class than white kids. Was this it? He was older than me, so maybe the creepy racism of the forties and fifties had filled him with that sort of nonsense. Or was he just being insulting, letting me know he believed me to be savage and brutal, not genteel like a white girl?

In any case, this was not a simple question, but we were running short of time and I suspected that I could not answer him adequately, even if I had had the time. Despite the racist nature of the questions everyone asked, I still believed that anyone who came to a reading deserved an adequate answer,

free of attack, but I did not have the time or an adequate or well thought out answer. One of the great teachers of my life was my Ta'ah, my great-grandmother. When I asked her about cannibalism, she was not offended, she simply answered: "No, or my Ta'ah would have taught me how to cook them." I decided to give the man a short response that showed intelligence because so many of the people in this room did not think I had much smarts when they came here.

Finally, after looking thoughtfully at him for a while, I said, "Thank you that you think I could," and I smiled, flashing all of my teeth. The answer shocked him as much as the question had taken me by surprise, but it made most of the men of colour in the audience chuckle. After the reading, my moderator pointed out that no white folks had laughed at my joke. Not sure why this was her first comment coming out of the reading, I responded as honestly as I could: "That's probably because they knew I was not joking," at which she laughed heartily.

We went for coffee and spent fully an hour discussing that question after the reading. Now I have the time and understanding to answer it. First, it is a complicated question. I often comment that not many Canadians know very much about us. Those that do know something about us seem to tread carefully around us. Any white person who was around in the 1940s might know about the George brothers' trial in Vernon, BC, in 1936. If they do know about the George brothers, they know we have power. Not the kind of power Canadians have but a unique brand of power. We can do things.

In Merritt, BC, there was an RCMP station. The police did something to a member of the Nlaka'pamux from Merritt. So

this old woman sang all night on the hill in the back of the police station. One of the RCMP died. She went home. They sent his corpse to autopsy, and his death was inexplicable. We knew what happened: we can sing you up to wellness or sing you down to illness, even death. It is the power of our songs. We can even raise our poles with song. I should say, we could then.

The police arrested four brothers and charged them with the murder. The Nlaka'pamux protested every day of the trial, until the trial was held in secret. They hung the brothers for it, but most people knew it was that old shaman who killed the cop and they feared us. Even the RCMP feared us. One of the cops I knew from Alberta used to say: "The *see* of the Cree in Alberta is legendary. If a child got lost, the cops went to an old shaman woman. She sang a song, holding an article of clothing of the child, then told them where to look. Generally, they found her or him exactly where the old woman told them. I tell you, we had a healthy respect for that old lady. We treated her and her relations right. No telling what she could do," the RCMP said to our chief after telling him a story about her.

I talked with my friend about the fear white people have of us that drove them to believe that we really could drive them into the sea. She agreed with me. "What?" I asked, sipping my tea. "You think I could?" I should not have got as excited as I did. "Maybe not you," she said softly, "but one of your shamans could." She told me how the Mozambique Liberation Front began with a shaman singing outside the chief's post, the soldiers running out screaming and forgetting their weapons, the Mozambicans running in and stealing the soldier's weapons and bullets, then arresting the soldiers. I stared at her, a half grin on my face, and said, "You don't

know that I am not a shaman's daughter." "But I do know you wouldn't, which is because your values make it impossible, in which case you can't." "That is true," I said, and we both laughed.

But I wondered still if that old man was talking about this kind of power. People whispered about us. They talked about shamanism, about devil worship, and even Voodoo. They had witnessed things. Old Dominic Charlie would get dressed in his regalia and get onstage and begin to shake. The women would sing. After a few minutes Old Dominic would burst into the air, fly six feet off the ground from a straight standing position, and then he would dance. He was well into his nineties the last time I saw him dance like that. We all stood stock-still when he did that and the white folks hissed with fear. We would later laugh.

Old Dominic was as kind as a Squamish man could be, but he was as loyal to his people as he could be too. Is that where the white man's fear emanates from? On the one hand, some of us have extraordinary powers. We are, many of us, as a result of the legacy of residential school, afraid to talk about these powers, or gifts, as the elders call them. Seattle once said, "The white man has to realize that there is more than one way of seeing." We heal ourselves through song and we can also make others sick, even die through song. We can empower ourselves through our seeing, singing, and bodywork. Many of us are fiercely loyal to ourselves. The Kwakwalth were described as completely recalcitrant and committed to their culture, stubbornly holding potlatch after it was banned, going to jail for it, but coming out and doing it all again. We were afraid to talk about this in my generation because our elders were punished severely for it. But today, everything is out in

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the open, the gifts are returning, and we are talking about it. Had this white man witnessed some shaman's power?

That was the public I met in the mid to late seventies. *Bobbi Lee* did well (she is still in print), and people called upon me to speak and clear up their ignorance. I struggled mightily to be as neutral about answering questions as my Ta'ah, but I did not always succeed.