"When you move to a new country, you learn their language": in conversation with Si'yam Lee Maracle

Fenn Stewart

Si'yam Lee Maracle and I spoke by phone on December 15, 2017. The following is excerpted from our conversation.

FS: I'm hoping that we can talk about place names, as well as your most recent book [*My Conversations with Canadians* (Book*hug, 2017)]. In January, I'm going to start working at *The Capilano Review* … and the magazine has been thinking lately about the name—about using the name "Capilano."

LM: Well, it's the name of a person.

FS: Exactly. And how did the magazine and the university end up with this person's name?

LM: … I was given to understand that that's not actually his name, that he was loaned that name to go to England.[1] I think he was loaned from Musqueam, but I could be wrong about that, too … This is what I understood from my Ta'a. His name—his real name—was not big enough. When we say that, it means he wasn't the Prime Minister. He was the county clerk, you know? [laughs] I don't know how else to explain it, but that's sort of what it is. This name had a higher status, and he couldn't just go to England and talk to people without a high-status name, without a name with authority … I'm relying on a four-year-old memory. [laughs] "Okay, this is what I remember from when I was four," which, you know, may or may not be reliable.

FS: You know, my daughter is four, and she has an amazing memory right now—much better than mine.

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1 According to Andrew Paull (quoted by J.S. Matthews in 1933), Chief Joe Capilano "was formally given the name Capilano" before travelling, with a delegation of chiefs from BC, "to England to lay before [King Edward VII] the matter of the Indian Land grievances." This took place in 1906, long after the death of the ancestor **qiyəplenəxʷ** described by Larry Grant (as quoted on page 5 of this issue). As Grant explains, the name is currently held by his younger brother.

LM: I had one like that. Anybody would say something to me and I would remember it. But then, as you age, you know, your memory changes …

FS: I was thinking about this name because I was reading this interview with you in the *Toronto Star* … [You say] that you don't belong to Canada, that Canadians belong to you. I was thinking about this, all these many, many settler Canadians growing up on the North Shore, for example, not knowing who Capilano is and not knowing … where they are.

LM: Yeah, exactly, and not knowing that 43% of the territory they live in really is not theirs, and that 47% is shared, that Canada actually only owns a tiny, little bit. [laughs] … So, then, they have to think, "Holy crap, who are these people?" [laughs] But it's also a big thing for us because who are we then? And I've always believed that because my family knew it and believed it, and so I've believed it. But the thing that we're not ready for is, "Okay, let's just take it back." We're not ready for that, so what are we ready for? Then, I think of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. They included economic and territorial equality, and that had nothing to do with residential school but everything to do with all of us. That's where reconciliation starts. So, then it means something. It all means something now because of the work that [Murray Sinclair, Marie Wilson, and Wilton Littlechild] did. I'm sure Canada is upset about [the TRC] because they went outside of the bounds that Canada thought they would stay inside, but they didn't name the bounds. Canada didn't name the bounds, so they can't complain. [laughs] … So, it was a perfect combination for Indigenous people because they pushed the envelope. We passed what Canada thought they were going to do. Now, everything is stuck and not stuck. We are not stuck. Canada's very stuck, like, "What the hell do we do now?" [laughs]

FS: … In the book you said people often want to ask you about decolonization, and you just want to remind people that … it's not about a mental exercise. It's about taking back land, space, territory, governance, and economy.

LM: Yeah. See, you know when you come to Canada, you're supposed to learn English? That's because Canada's a colonial empire governing many nations. If you came here 150 years ago, you would've spoke Chinook.[2] Ninety percent of the people in this country spoke Chinook 150 years ago. Why did they speak

2 Chinook (or Chinuk) Wawa, also known as Chinook Jargon, was widely spoken along the Pacific Northwest in the 19th century, and into the 20th. It allowed communication between Indigenous peoples, and with settlers, prior to English becoming commonly spoken. Chinook is still spoken today in some areas, with the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde offering an elementary school program in the language.

Chinook? Because it was the trade language between nations. Some of the words still survive. You and I both say "okay." That's a Chinook word for "done deal." … "Tête-à-tête," "head-to-head," it's French, but it's also Chinook. "Tyee" is Chinese, but it's also Chinook. Every word in that language is pronounceable by everybody that was here—Chinese, English, French … There was only 1,000 words, but you could finagle them so that you could have a conversation. It was brilliant, absolutely brilliant. And, I mean, we invented this so that we could get along with each other and communicate. And it worked until about 1905 when English started to really fight for itself, and then Chinook died.

FS: I grew up with the word "skookum," and I never knew what language it was until a few years ago. I found out that it's Chinook.

LM: It's Chinook. Yeah, it means "really big and tough." … So, if you're afraid, in our culture, you're small. It doesn't matter how big you are, but "skookum" is "not afraid." So, you're big and not afraid. That's a really scary person.

FS: Yeah, that's a great word. It's a great word.

LM: It is. It is a great word. I love that word.

FS: …I was reading an interview recently with Métis visual artist Christi Belcourt. The article was focusing on some of her recent paintings where she's focusing on Anishinaabe place names. I wanted to get your thoughts on some of the many projects that are going on right now, with many Indigenous artists and leaders, with place names and resurgence around original place names …

LM: It actually began in BC quite a while ago with restoring the place names. When Gordon Campbell started the treaty process, they wanted the place names restored. So, he agreed to that, so they have English and Indigenous place names now—you know, Homulcheson Park and Stanley Park … you know, that sort of thing. **X̱wáýx̱way** is Lumberman's Arch, etc., etc. **Seṅáḵw** is … what the hell do they call it? I can't even remember what they call it, the white name for it. It's so ridiculous, hey? I grew up with that white name, but I also knew the Indigenous name. [laughs] Oh, False Creek, which is, you know, the richest piece of real estate in Canada, and it's now called "**Seṅáḵw**," as well as "False Creek." So, that's what began about 20 years ago. I think during the talks about … What's that games, the ski games?

FS: The Olympics?

LM: Winter Olympics, yeah, yeah. Oh, gosh, my English is failing me now. [laughs] So, it spread here, and I think it spread here [to Ontario] because people like me said, "What the hell is Spadina?" I asked this person. They said, "I don't know." "Well, what language is it? Because I've looked it up in the reference library, and I've looked it up … I've Googled it. I've done everything I could to find out where the hell does this word come from? That doesn't have any linguistic origin." Finally, this old Anishinaabe said, "It's Anishinaabe." I said, "'Spadina' is Anishinaabe? I have never heard that." He says, "No, it's 'Ishpadinaa.'" "Oh, that makes sense." I said, "So, why aren't some Anishinaabes trying to get that restored?" Because that's a major artery, and we're still there. First Nations House is there. The Native Centre is there. The library where all the First Nations books are is there. I mean, there's so many of us at Richmond and Spadina that … Native Women in the Arts is there. There's so many of us that are still on that street. It struck me that it must be an Indigenous name because there's so many Indigenous organizations in a very short space and time on that street … Plus, there's Chinese people there, and I will tell you, anywhere in this country where there's Chinese, we're right next door because white people didn't allow Chinese to be around them. "Go over there where the Indians are." [laughs] … So, all the major cities, the Asians—the Japanese and Chinese people—are pretty near to Indigenous people … Chinatown is right on Ishpadinaa. So, I was telling that to everybody that would listen to me. Finally … Susan Blight … got together with the Businessmen's Association of Toronto, who were listening to myself and the Minister of Indian Affairs give a book reading club talk, and that's one of the things I said…. "Well, the language speaker at First Nations House would like to put the 'Ishpadinaa' up. They do it with paper right now, put up various names—Anishinaabe names—but they would like to put up a permanent one."

So, the Businessmen's Association agreed to pay for it. So, that started something going on in Toronto. So, that's an avenue that people can look at to get a translation for various streets. The other one I want renamed is Davenport, which is the oldest continuous-use highway in this freaking country. It's 15,000 years old. There has to be an original name for it, and somebody must know it. This country should find that out because if people think about it, when you move to a new country, you learn their language. You don't make them learn yours. You know, that is so stupid! I'm going to Russia. "You guys gotta start

speaking Halq'eméylem. "El swayel there, Russians! [laughs] Everybody after me!" You know, because it's so stupid! That's ridiculous, but that's what happened here … I have my students and I teach in English and all that, but I also tell them that you can't know anything about Anishinaabes and Six Nations unless you study the language. So, we have an awful lot of young, white kids that are learning the language and can actually converse with each other in Anishinaabe. So, eventually, it's going to change Toronto. You know, there's going to be a group of people that are not Anishinaabe, that are familiar with the culture, that speak the language, that can handle the culture, that can do things in the right way. I mean, it's just gonna change Canada if we're encouraging non-Native people and Native people to speak the language. They would've learned it if we were not colonized. They would've learned Anishinaabe. In fact, lots of white people in 1700s to 1800s spoke Cree and Anishinaabe, difficult as they say it is to learn. I don't think it's that difficult. I mean, what the hell, you know? "Anishinaabe" is their name. It means "people that can go out and get everything they need." They can go out naked and get what they need. They're completely self-reliant people. So, that's amazing. You know what? Europeans talk about that all the time, that we're so self-reliant. But our name means that. Our very language says that.

I have to tell you this. I've been asked by my folks to use the word "si'yam" as opposed to "Ms." Because I said to my aunt, "You know, 'Ms.' and 'Mr.' and 'Master' and all that is connected to private property. We must have a word … " and I knew it was "si'yam" but I didn't want to tell her what it was. She's elder, right? She says, "I could get 'si'yam.' Just wait." So, they had a little meeting, and they said, "We would like you to use that from now on." It means "the one who knows." At least I know something. It's an honorific. It's there to honour you. So, the family, at my uncle's funeral, has made the decision that I deserve this honorific in my own country because, you know... I know when my brother talks to me … The way we talk to each other is kind of strange to the Europeans, but we'll say, "And then I was walking down the street, si'yam, and I walked by and I saw my uncle, si'yam, and my uncle said that you know something about this law, si'yam, and so I wanted to ask you, si'yam." We'll say that, "si'yam," over and over again, this honorific—over and over again, every sentence that we say because he's wanting something from me, and I have it. So, he's gotta recognize it, and he's gotta convince me that he's totally persuaded I have it—I have this information he needs. So, it's like calling the Queen "Your Highness," you know, "Your Royal Majesty" and all that kind of stuff. We say it every sentence, and it just sounds so beautiful when you hear it … And it humbles the other person. It also is humbling

for the person receiving it because it's said so many times that it actually feels humbling as opposed to great. You know, you don't feel great after that. You feel very humbled because he's your brother, a year younger than you, and he's really honouring you in a way that no one else will. In this moment, you are so special to him, and he's willing to say "si'yam" every sentence. So, now they've asked me to use that instead of the Ms., Mr., Dr., whatever it is that their honorifics are, and I'm really glad about that.

FS: So, I should write down that I have been honoured with an interview with Si'yam Lee Maracle? Is that how you use it?

LM: Yeah. I would like you to do that … I've already used it in conversations … I'm thinking, "Oh, I should've probably asked permission a long time ago," but too late. Better late than never. [laughs]

FS: … My mother was telling me … She works with some elders in Alberta, and I said, "Oh, you know, Lee Maracle said that she'll speak to me." She said, "Oh, you need to give Lee Maracle some tobacco." I said, "Oh, well, I'm gonna do a phone interview." So, I was thinking, is it okay if I send you some tobacco in the mail, or is that … ?

LM: Yeah, that would be good because my mother is from Alberta, and that's the Cree-Métis and Cree way … They're very clear about that, yes, and the Métis are very much like that, too. My mother is from Lac La Biche, which is a Métis community, and her family was part of the Riel rebellion and all that kind of stuff. They speak Cree, just the same as Cree people. A lot of Métis speak Cree. So, they have the Métis ways, and they definitely do do the tobacco. It's so you can do spirit-to-spirit. It's not a conversation between two humans about "pass me that board over there." What do you call that in English? I can't remember the word. Ah shit, there's a word for it—utilitarian. It's not a utilitarian conversation. It's an exchange of knowledge, which requires tobacco, and that binds me to truth-speaking. Don't make up stuff, because we are terrible for making up shit. [laughs] If you don't give us tobacco, we'll make all kinds of stuff up. If they don't know the rules, they'll really get themselves in trouble. I know that's terrible to say, but it's true. [laughs]

FS: All right, well, I will make sure that I will send you some tobacco then. Thank you so much. I'm really, really grateful.

LM: All right, bye-bye.