

# Speaking About Language

## *An Interview with Chrystos*

by E. Centime Zeleke

*Dans une entrevue avec la poète autochtone Chrystos, l'auteure examine les difficultés et les joies liées à la manipulation de la langue.*

*My friend translated one of my pieces into Navajo and that was very interesting for me because the poem was one page in English and in Navajo it went on for fourteen pages.*

Having gone through the educational process of the dominant culture I now use a language where I must conceptualize myself as having to speak clearly. But really what are the possibilities of a Black lesbian ever speaking clearly, of ever achieving academic excellence, or of ever being rational? And who came up with these terms anyway?

Yet, if I can't be rational then I must be mad. But hasn't madness been constructed in very racialized and feminized terms?

If you don't believe that madness has been racialized and feminized think about who gets to occupy the spaces called naive, emotional, or innocent and what those spaces mean within this urban geography.

Also, as a woman of colour what does it mean that my fear of madness (my need to be rational) is embedded in my desire to speak clearly? Does it mean that I can never be myself within this urban geography.

On a not so hot, not so cold day this past July I hooked up with First Nations (Menominee) poet and artist Chrystos to contemplate what it meant to be a lesbian writer in this colonized land. While we did talk about being lesbians—she dislikes Naiad Press novels and thinks vibrators are signifiers of our instant coffee culture, what was really interesting was a discussion on our relationship as brown skin lesbians to the English language. Because our bodies, our lives, our tongues are constantly being appropriated and so split from ourselves.

Chrystos has published *Dream On, Not Vanishing*, and *In Her I Am* with Press Gang publishers. Her most recent book, *Firepower*, was published last fall by Press Gang. She writes about street life, gardening, nut houses, incest, the Man, love, sex, and hate. While she wants everyone to have poetry in their lives, she writes primarily for First Nations people, people of colour, and lesbians.

Centime: *The first question I was going to ask was what*

*does it mean for you to be a poet that is read and how is that different from doing oral readings and which one do you like better?*

Chrystos: I don't really separate those two things because I hear a poem in my mind, before I write it down. In the process of editing and changing my work, I always do it orally—I'll read a poem out loud in the house or to the trees or a lot of times I go down to the water near where I live.

For me writing is about oral process, a poem does not start out on paper. It starts out verbally in my mind and then it continues in that way and for me reading to an audience is the completion of that cycle. So I actually prefer readings to being published in a book or an anthology and that's part of why it took me so long to get published.

I was never focused on pieces of paper and books, I was always interested in the oral aspect, because I come from an oral tradition. I almost do my editing, I would say, with audiences. I have not published poems, generally speaking, unless I've read them many times first, and to some extent that's been a disadvantage because people have taken some of my ideas as they were not printed, used them, and not credited me. When I'm reading to an audience I'm very conscious that we're doing this together—and you become very hypersensitive to the audience and you can feel when the piece is dragging or where you're losing people. So doing readings and writing really are not separate processes for me, they are pretty connected.

*One thing I really like about your poems is that there is little punctuation but instead you arrange your poems visually and with empty spaces instead of commas and full stops, to have a sense of orality. Can you talk about this?*

Well, it's interesting, when I first was becoming published by Press Gang—Barbara and I were joking about this today—my lines were far too long to fit in a print text and I wanted to turn the books on their side so that I could keep my long lines because for the most part my lines are by breaths. They're by breaths and by thought and by what goes together.

The whole issue of, say, sentence fragments, you see I don't understand why they're fragments, do you see what I'm saying? Because it seems to me English is such a fragmented language and it is so fragmenting to speak it—how can you say they're sentence fragments—all of it is sentence fragments, because it doesn't encompass a whole philosophy. So when we were trying to figure out how to publish these books, I had to go through this whole process where they gave me this grid, which was very funny, that showed me exactly how long the lines could be

otherwise they would not fit on the page. I had to then rethink my writing based on this grid in order to be published, which was actually, quite a difficult struggle for me. I mean it sounds so silly, I think most people would think oh well that's your problem, can't you do this very simple thing, but for me it was very difficult, and I still have trouble with line breaks. I mean we just finished proofing this book and my lines still were too long, you know I had to rearrange and shift things around.

*Okay. I am interested in the violence of the command by the west for non-western people to turn to the West,<sup>1</sup> and I think the violence of this command is embodied in the fact that a lot of us don't speak the languages of our grandparents, that we have to use English as our primary language, and that it is nearly our mother tongue. So I was wondering what your relationship to the English language was?*

Well, it was not my first language, and my first English was Black American street slang because we lived in the projects. As I got into school they would scold you for speaking in that way, and also in high school I was humiliated a lot for speaking that way. There was this push to speak the American version of the King's English—which of course had nothing to do with the way people in Britain speak at all.

I suppose that when I'm writing I often am frustrated by English. I feel like it's a very stiff language. It originates in hierarchies—that's one of its main problems. The way English works is that it has a subject, a verb, and an object, so there's a very linear way that that thinks. In Menominee language for instance that's not how you would construct a sentence. And that's true also in other Native languages so that the relationship between the people who are there is more important than the verb for instance and the place and the time. You wouldn't talk about the two of us talking, you would talk about what had happened before, what our relationship was, how we were connected in the world, what we planned to—you know, other languages are far more dense than English is.

My friend Wesley who's Dene, or Navajo, translated one of my pieces into Navajo and that was very interesting for me because the poem was one page in English and in Navajo it went on for fourteen pages. So it was very interesting to me how complex and dense it could be made.

I think that English imposes certain thought structures on our relationships with people. It's very difficult in English to say "I am in sympathy with what you are feeling"—you see that's an awkward construction. And the English language has so few words for relationship which is one of the things I find very frustrating so that last night for instance when that person said to me "How long have you been in a relationship with Ayeesha," it was assumed that we were lovers, that it was not possible that we could love each other so passionately and not be lovers, you know that friend was somehow this limp word that doesn't convey all that we have been through. And that's very sad to me because I feel like relationship is the centre

of our lives, it's really the most important thing, and I would like to be able, in English, to talk about my relationship with Ayeesha and with other people, but English does not have words for that.

English does not even acknowledge memory as a part of its structures, so in English it would be impossible to say, "Ayeesha and I sang unchained melody in the bar last night which was an echo of something that happened—" you know there's no way to say that kind of thing without sounding really awkward and crazy! So I think English has a very infantile structure that does not embrace relationships or embrace, I don't know, see there's no English word for the spirits that doesn't sound crazy. But there are spirits all around us—spirits of the dead, spirits of the trees, spirits of change, and there's no way to really talk about the density of our lives in English.

*Yeah. I think for me, for women of colour using English, it's impossible for us to describe our experience without sounding totally whacked or without recolonizing our experiences, particularly in terms of describing pleasure and emotions.*

Yeah, it's true. The other part of what makes English difficult is that our minds run in many directions at once. I feel like our minds are like these enormous pools, and there's all these eddies going at once, and what you give attention to, or which eddy that you pick is not necessarily the most important one. And so it's important to always remember that you have all these eddies in your life, but there isn't any way to talk about that in English that is not kind of, like you say, crazy. So for instance I can be cleaning a house to make my living, I can be thinking this cheque will pay part of my rent, I can be thinking that I hate these people, I can be thinking of how to get that stain out of the couch, I can be thinking about something I'm writing, I can be thinking about my brother and his children and what's going on with them, I can be thinking about my friend who is dying, and all of that is happening in one minute or less.

There's many things going on in my mind at the same time and I feel English has no way to convey the multiplicity of our spirits—the way we all are existing on many many planes and levels and spaces at once and that I think that our minds are touching even if we're not in physical contact with each other, so that I'm very clear sometimes that when I'm thinking of someone who is, say, distant, that they're also thinking of me, and we are having a conversation through our minds, but if you try and say that in English, especially to certain people, they'll lock you up as crazy, because that's psychotic from their point of view.

The other part of English that's very interesting to me is that there are many English words that cannot be translated. For instance there's no word for psychotic in Menominee, there's no word in Dene for termination, there are all these very brutal words that have no translation in other languages, words that are really almost instruments of torture. What this means is that if your mind can conceive of psychosis, then psychosis happens.

Because the word is power, the word is magic, the word is sacred, and the word contains reality.

Another part of all of this is that English is so abused in terms of advertising jingles and sitcoms and just a multiplicity of media and words printed that the English language does not have the capacity to be sacred anymore, it's diluted. This is because it is so easy to lie in English, to say what you don't mean, which is not true in other languages. Some Native languages it's not possible to lie—it's simply not a concept, it does not exist. English feels to me like this very well organized way to lie, it seems that lying is its forte, lying and oppressing and telling people one thing and meaning another.

The whole issue of English being a conqueror language, and used to conquer people all over the globe, is very bizarre because if I had not been colonized and you had not been colonized, we would not know how to speak to each other so I can now make community with people that I would never have had an opportunity to have community with before as a result of this colonizer language. What you have then is something that seems like a gift but it has this terrible undertone with it, and it is rapidly becoming, I am afraid the only language spoken. It really frightens me how quickly languages are disappearing. There has been a renaissance in Native communities of trying to re-establish the power of language ... because language really does determine how we think, therefore how we act. I think language is far more powerful than western culture acknowledges, and English itself is in denial about the sacredness of the word. Just the fact that there are so few words to describe sacredness is a clue. I suppose actually that if your business in the world as a language is to participate in the conquering of other people then you can't be sacred because conquering other people is evil.

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<sup>1</sup> This notion is informed by Elisabeth Grosz and Gayatri Spivak's discussion, "Criticism, Feminism and the Institution" in *Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews with Gayatri Spivak* (Ed. Sarah Harsym, New York: Routledge, 1990).

J.A. HAMILTON

## Epiphyte 2: Moss

When you wanted to know  
what I was preoccupied with  
in the dusk, I wasn't thinking  
I was facing the mirror  
lying against your right side  
while beyond the window  
the mountains rose like blue women

Seagulls tore the sky leaving indigo wake  
I was looking at the shape of your  
cheekbone high on your face, and at your  
thin arm. There was the sound of spring

We'd seen a dozen city  
hummingbirds in our garden  
and I remembered the hover of  
their ruby throats. And you  
wrapped in our red towels. It was  
mother's day; we had risen  
and fallen like landscapes on our bed

I watched your breast which was fuller than  
the night on my porch when I first undid  
your buttons. The sheet beneath you was  
green  
It was almost our anniversary

I was naked. You wore  
blue jeans still clasped. Your  
nipple pointed down like a tear  
drop, and I remembered how  
after you came, you prayed that  
I would never leave you  
and then I never left

*J.A. Hamilton is the author of a children's book, Jessica's Elevator, two poetry books, Body Rain and Steam-Cleaning Love, and a volume of short fiction, July Nights. Body Rain was short-listed for the Pat Lowther Award. July Nights was short-listed for the VanCity Award and the Ethel Wilson Fiction Award in the bc Book Prizes.*