

## **êkâya-pâhkaci – don't freeze up**

“The Plains Cree believe that nearly everything has a spirit essence. All living things, plants, animals, people, storms, and some inanimate objects have souls. This belief demands a deep respect for the natural world. This fundamental belief is reflected in the religious ceremonies of the plains Cree. Besides the thirst dances, known also as sun dance or rain dance, there are society dances.”<sup>1</sup>

In 2004 while presenting at Dakart Lab as part of the 6<sup>th</sup> Edition of the African Biennale, I had the opportunity to hear the Tasou, a very old Western African tradition of rapping. It was mainly used ceremonially by the Griot (or Gewel in the Wolof language), the storyteller/musician caste of many Western African tribes as a form of praise-keeping. As was explained, anyone born into a Griot family was, at an early age, taught hundreds of songforms and rhythms, had to become adept at a variety of ceremonies and had to know their language, history and stories. An important note is that to be able to deliver, the Tasou improved with age, making it something that was eventually mastered as one matured.

This reminded me of what I'd read and been told about a similar person in pre-contact Cree camps – namely the Camp Crier, whose duty it was to move about the camp waking people, chronicling the ongoing happenings of the people, keeping the peace and dispensing food and supplies in the absence of the chief. More contemporarily we may know these people as 'stickmen' or 'whipmen' and I've since heard recordings of elderly Cree people who embody this nature. As someone who hopes someday to speak Cree with fluency, I found that their ability to use language to convey messages with meter, tone and meaning is entrancing and commanding.

**êkâya-pâhkaci**, (don't freeze up) is an ongoing research and performance project that dances around and voices utterances relating to Aboriginal multi- and inter-disciplinarity, which is symbolic of and references the contemporary state of being mixed blood. Contemporarily, Aboriginal artists rarely are specialists in one artistic discipline alone. This phenomenon is due in part to economy and survival, but also points to some very intrinsic values whereby we utilize all our talents, skills and

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<sup>1</sup> Ironstar, Martha: Essay. *Horse Dance of the Plains Cree*, sourced March 2009, <http://www.sicc.sk.ca/saskindian/a93jan05.htm>

gifts for the survival of the camp. This multi-faceted ability also stems from an embodiment of multi-strand narrative creation stories and holistic models such as the tipi pole teachings that instruct us how to live together and be balanced and whole.

The many versions of the project (2005 to present) use a tent as a metaphorical container of this hybridity as a related reference to the kinds of structures my relatives used in the bush and to the 'little counting shack' - what a computer is sometimes called in Cree language (nêhiyawêwin).

The subtext 'don't freeze up' is meant to reference primordial flight/fright/fight responses and the post-traumatic stress that we as Aboriginal people have experienced due to colonization and attempts to make us fit into mainstream culture.

"Since the beginning of time, women have been creating families and building universes. From the ancient shores of Africa to the deteriorating staircases of run-down projects, women have been responsible for keeping everything together."<sup>2</sup>

The project's genesis was also inspired by some recordings of early hip hop/rap recordings called *Fat Beats and Brastraps: Women of Hip-Hop*, a compilation that underscores the importance of women in the genesis of the now popular form of the once ancient ceremony. For the 2005 workshop performance presented here, I borrowed the beats and verses of Nonchalant's song *5 O'Clock*, changing key words to speak to the camp of artists assembled at the Aboriginal themed New Works Residency (i.e. 'mister blackman' became 'mister redman' etc.).

Because of my inability to master the form, mimic any of the moves or speak Cree fluently, I instead assumed the identity of a kiskwêkân (crazy woman) who despite existing in a tent with no windows or doors, still had a unique perspective on the goings-on of her camp and came out one day to speak. Her existence and that of other extraordinary beings such as wîhçikôkân (contraries) reminds us of the importance of radical inclusivity in pre-contact camp life.

The title was also incorporated into a short rap (co-written with Joseph Naytowhow) that played off a similar sounding phrase meaning don't give up and became the refrain:

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<sup>2</sup> Simmons, Zenobia: Liner Notes. CD Recording - *Fat Beats & Brastraps*: New MC's Rhino Entertainment, 1998.

(translation)

**êkâya-pâhkaci, askiy ohci iyiniwak** Don't freeze up, people of the earth

**âpacihtâ mâmitonêycikanawaw** Use your minds

**êkâya-pakaci ka-tipêyimisowik haw!** Don't give up you who are your own bosses!

**êkâya-pâhkaci askiy ohci iyiniwak** Don't freeze up, people of the earth

**âpacihtâ kimiyo-têhinawaw** Use your good hearts

**êkâya-pakaci kitatamiskatinawaw.** Don't give up - I acknowledge you all.

Cheryl L'Hirondelle, 2009

Cheryl L'Hirondelle (Metis/Cree/German/Polish) is an award winning multi- and interdisciplinary artist and musician whose creative practice is an investigation of the junction of a Cree worldview in contemporary time and space.