

RH: We have some questions that we kind of sketched out, but we also anticipate veering from those questions as much as you see fit.

So the first question is how each of you came to playwriting as your format of choice? Working primarily as a playwright, do you do other formats; what is it about a theatrical format that appeals to you in expressing what it is that you feel you want to express? JudyLee, I know you pretty much write primarily . . . cause we were talking in the van about promoting your work and stuff like that, and it's important to you that you want to see your work produced.

JLO: Yes, I'm a trained theater person. I sort of came in the back door in terms of my native writing because I grew up in Oklahoma and it was not a good thing to be an Indian in Oklahoma, so I majored in theater but I never wrote about being an Indian or anything like that, but I always wrote. I started writing poetry and then I went into theater, and it took me a long time to figure out I could write about my background or lack of a background that I didn't know. So I feel that I've come in the back door, obviously trained very much in Western theater, I have an MFA in acting and directing, did all that stuff. But it wasn't til about ten years ago that I really decided I could go back to Oklahoma and write about my family and write about my childhood. For me, the only way to express the things I want to express is through the medium of theatre, although I do like poetry, but I have these big, huge visions of what I'd like to see on stage for all people, not just Native people, but I want my plays to speak to all people, so the reason why I'm writing right now is just to realize that vision on stage.

RH: I think the flip side of that . . . you were saying because Diane had said that she doesn't care if her plays ever get produced, that she wants them published, so that's an interesting kind of . . .

DG: Right, because I never had anything to do with the theatre before. I started out as a poet and moved into short stories and novels, and I began writing plays too, early on -- I think plays are the closest to poetry. But I think for me it was also the lost voices that I never had a chance to know. You know, I can say pretty much what JudyLee did, I did not grow up in Oklahoma though I've lived there twenty years in my adult life. My father left there during the depression to find work -- he went to the far north, which was Kansas City, Missouri, and worked in the stockyards all his life, and so I grew up mainly around my white mother's family, and when we would go back down there, they would be like strangers to me, and I never had the privilege of knowing them. And it was out of anger, a sense of loss, a sense of homesickness, really, for something that had been erased, I guess, although you never really do erase a culture. I grew up in Kansas City in the late forties and early fifties, and those were the melting pot days, when we all came together as one people, you know . . . well there's some things that don't melt. Like our voice and our character and our way of life, our style, our thumbprint, you know whatever we are, there is an individuality. And of course I came from both white and Indian, but the Indian was also terribly confusing to me. When I grew up, in grade school, for instance, Thanksgiving you made a feather headbonnet and a teepee and talk about the buffalo . . . well I would go back home and I never saw any of that, you know, and I thought, "that's Indian?" And my father says "We are Indian" and yet we're not this, and my mother says

"We're white," and there was a big gulf between that. So it was like having all these dots that you had to draw lines between. And writing for me was the avenue, the vehicle, to do that, and there's still such an overwhelming sense of loss because you write a play, which is like an emblem, it's not the real thing, and yet, somehow, when those voices come alive again, I think it brings back oral tradition. It's such an artifact, the word on the page -- in fact, there's some belief, Native belief that writing actually kills the word because the voice is a spirit being, and you tell a story and you make a trail on which you have to walk, you create a whole world. And so what is this written thing here on the page, it was like a little coffin. But, you make that facsimile, and then it's brought to life again, and on stage or in the speaking of it that old life begins to move again, even though it never has that real life, it gets somewhere in the neighborhood of, a gist of what maybe what was at one time, that is so integral to my being that there was this great hollow space. And I remember in my father a great silence and an anger too, and I never understood it. He's been dead now since 1962, he was a fairly young man when he died -- '72 I mean, he was 62 when he died in '72 -- and I think part of the burden of what he was and never allowed to realize, he just had a hurt and a loss, and I think it was part of, he turned his back on that culture, and there's a price that you pay for that.

MM: I came to writing as an actor, and I actually was, I guess, writing for many years before I recognized that I was writing, cause I was creating original work and creating original work collaboratively, and I never considered myself a writer or a playwright. I came to having to write my own material because there was no place or no characters or no stories that I didn't have to bend myself way out of shape to play. I mean, yeah I studied the Shakespeare and the Chekov and I can do that, but I'm real tired of having to do that and that being the only choice. In university I performed with the black theatre workshop, and that was better in some senses and I could, you know, relate, but it still wasn't right in there with what I needed to say. I was part of the women's theatre collective there, and that was okay too, but then again, there was another part of it that did not fit. And when I moved to Canada, I moved because at that time there was a beginning of a vital community of performers, of artists, and within that, as well, it was always the guys' voice, you know -- being part of the first production of "The Rez Sisters" still left that taste in my mouth, well, you know, there's a feeling here about women that doesn't seem to be coming from us, and being caught between fighting the sexism in the Native community and fighting the racism in the women's community didn't really leave me any choice but to write it my damn self! So, I had a great resistance to writing things down, and so a lot of my early pieces I don't have a record of because they were pieces . . . I come from the Spiderwoman tradition, they trained me, and that again is a very organic process of having it come from the body, from the image, from the story, from the gesture, out of the body, the word comes as whole form, which is theatrical. So I had a great resistance to writing down my work other than as the notation of what I said. And what I said in any piece never really gave the full picture if you read it of what the piece is when it's performed. I still haven't really gotten a handle on that except being really detailed, and sometimes that's boring as hell. When I did finally write down "Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots", it was after the fact of the production, which always drives production people mad, you know that kind of work, because they're running the show and saying, "Ah I don't have a script!" But it's often not finished at the

time when you start with that kind of work. The first time I really went through and wrote down was when I was preparing that script for manuscript. Now, so that was ten years ago -- now I do sit down and compose at the computer, now, more often I'm in the subway or on a plane or on a streetcar somewhere, I write more like that than I do, as much as I go through the motions of, okay, this is my little sanctuary, this is my office, this is where I write -- I really don't write there. I write walking down the street, I write going somewhere, I write talking to myself, I write in the shower -- and yet, when I sit down, it's like the act of notating what I've been writing all this time. I still write best on my feet, because that's my . . . there's two different things going on in the process -- I'm most at home with the process of starting with a feeling, a word, and getting it up through the body and the text arrives. But there's also times when I've written things in another process where it also came out cold. It took me a long time to call myself a writer for all of those reasons, and because I come from a storytelling tradition but also the storytelling, the method of storytelling as a play building technique, that seems somehow to be apart from sort of the sacredness of a text which never then gets changed -- and one thing, I don't feel because a piece of mine has been published that it's finished, and I resist that feeling of "Well, I've got this book now, its out, does that mean I can't change anything?" Well, no, so . . . that's how I came to it . . .

VM: My people are very visual storytellers, and I come from that too. My father was a well known leader, and I used to see that when he'd tell stories. . . and my mother was a spiritual leader and I used to see that when she talked. And so my whole life I've been really working closely with my people, with the struggles that I see my people going through, generational grief things that people are struggling with. And I see that, when I started coming to it I see that they were silenced, you know, and there was no way to tell that story because the grief was so big, and a lot times they were so frozen, so numb, so I used to work closely, I still do work closely with people who are [...] survivors. So I use theater as a way to get them to be able to put words to their experience, and I ask them to develop, and start telling me, a little bit about their story. I ask them to show it to me. And so I started to get interested in that way, and I used to write it down like poetry, when somebody would tell a story, I'd get that image stuck in my head. I remember this one woman talking about how, when she was a little girl, she used to be so quick she would catch fish with her hands, and then something happened, she lost that. And so I get an image like that and I start working with it, and working with the person with that image. The first play that I wrote, "Song of the Circle," it was the first time I had actually written a play, and I didn't know anything about Act One or Act Two or anything about character [...], and I was asked to write this play for this youth conference, and I just started to write and all these characters came up from my experience. People that I knew of and some of my own experiences came in [...] And I saw how powerful it was for healing, for people to be able to see their experiences, and what a powerful tool it was. So I got excited about it, and that's how I started. I did that play for awhile, and it was shown at different places, but I felt like that wasn't enough. It seems like as I was evolving, the ideas would get bigger. The first play had to do with the place that I was, and I wanted to move further along that. And so the history of residential schools is something where there's lots of silence, and people have a really hard time talking about that history. And so I wanted to [...] a passion in my heart to write a play about residential school. And all

of that came from stories my mom told me. Listening to her stories over the years, you know we'd go on trips and she'd just be talking and talking -- she'd be talking to keep me awake cause I was the one who was driving -- so she'd talk and talk and a lot of times she'd tell me the same story over and over, and I'd think, "doesn't she remember she told me that story back in [...]" And we'd be going along and she'd tell it to me again. And she told me so many stories, and sometimes she'd tell me really deep stories that I know was coming from someplace was inside her, that she'd been holding onto for a long time. And she'd tell me these stories and I decided I was going to write this play called "The Strength of Indian Women," and that's all I had was the title. But I was going to write this play about the strength of Indian women. And when I started to write, I don't think the idea of being a playwright or storyteller, that I had planned it that way, I always think about it that I was chosen to do that, because I had this gift to hear what this girl said. And so when I write "The Strength of Indian Women" a lot of those pieces, like Maria, it's a long piece, a long monologue, that's exactly what came out, and I heard the accent of the woman who was speaking, and I was writing and it was like she was talking as I was writing . . . then I'd get up to walk around and cry for awhile because that's what was happening [...] and then I'd go back to writing, and I wrote it all down, and then I never touched it again, I didn't change anything [...] And so that's how it is a lot of times when I'm ready to write, it comes out like that, and it's just such a sacred experience that I was really concerned about where my words are going to end up, what's going to happen to them because it was a sacred ceremony that brought them, and they are connected to ancestors, to the ancestors' stories. I always thought about it that way, and I always think that I could wake up tomorrow and quit writing. So every day I have to say thank you for it, for that gift, because when it comes out of me, it releases hundreds of years of oppression, coming off of me, and I think that that's a real gift, and that was such a big responsibility to care for the people. So I've been asked to do another play about residential school in Canada, that is this Aboriginal Community Foundation that's been set up, and the issue of residential school is front and center [...] and I've been asked to write another play about residential school that would take it into a bigger scope, not just women but the men's experiences, and families, and how it broke families. So that's already starting to come, and I'm really excited about that. But I don't know how long I'll be doing that. I write poetry too, I write lots of poetry, short stories sometimes. But I travel to a lot of really remote communities in the north and I work with Native people and black people, and I use this way a lot, it's a big part of what I do.

SHF: You said you want to be very careful, very cautious about where your words go, do you mean that in terms of who is doing the play? How do you feel about non-Natives, for example we're doing a reading tomorrow of "The Strength of Indian Women," as non-Natives, is that problematic for you? Is that what you meant about being careful about where your words end up?

VM: That's probably part of it, because those words have a history, my mother's, my grandmother's, my great-grandmother's. I just found out not too long ago, I thought it was a Native group of women who were doing the play, and then when I spoke to you and I asked and you said, "no -- we're in Oxford, Ohio." But I didn't get a sense that that was going to be a problem. I would have a problem with non-Native people doing my play

and bringing it into my community -- I would have a problem with that, but I guess it just depends on the context and how it's being brought out. And I really appreciate the fact that you invited me to do it too.

RH: I'm really glad that you agreed to do it. I wasn't sure how to ask, whether you wanted to be an active participant in it . . . I know you've seen this work a lot, you've worked with that particular play a great deal, I know that doing a play that you haven't worked with quite so much, sometimes it's very difficult participating in the reading, it's more helpful to be hearing it, but I was hoping that you would be amenable to doing it with us.

VM: I'll be glad of that.

JLO: One thing I wanted to say about what Vera was speaking about, which I really admire, was she said, "I didn't know Act One, Act Two, I just wrote . . ." and again, I kind of had to come in the back door, you know, I knew Act One and Act Two, and I learned a very traditional Western structure that my plays don't fit into. You know, I've been working on a musical for almost five years now, and I hear, I write the lyrics and most of the music, and trying to get that music down on paper has been very, very difficult because it doesn't fit, even the music doesn't fit, it's not quite two-four time, it's something else. So I can really appreciate that you just trust what you were hearing and didn't worry about a format. What I'm having to do is break out of the strictures of what I was taught, and it's taken me a long time to break it down, but I realize there's just no way that the sounds and the words and the music that I hear can fit in that mold, it just doesn't fit, you know.

DG: I appreciate that too, because I teach the conflict resolution, and yet the voices, when I start to write are not that at all, so how do you put those two worlds together? You don't really. How do you call what you do "drama" or "plays" when actually it goes around them pretty far.

SHF: I wonder too if that has to do as much, at least partially due to the fact that you're women, I don't know, I mean that's another question I have. Certainly, what you've talked about already is a perspective that's drawn from your cultural background. Many female playwrights are also sort of writing against the traditional, the canonical Aristotelian style. Do you think that being a woman has anything to do with breaking from that, or has that influenced your writing at all? I mean, here we are at a conference [. . .]

DG: Getting back again to what JudyLee said about "Is this really worth writing about?" I think maybe as a woman you feel that, but then as a minority on top of that, is it "Who cares?" You know I remember . . . and the way part of my family looked down on the other part, you know, who wants to hear, I had to get over that hurdle too, is this worth the words on paper. I would like to talk more too, later, about the vehicle of playwriting.

MR: I never sat through it, until 1985, and I went to Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, and the reason I went to Penumbra was because I had a brother who was in Vietnam, and they were doing a play about African-Americans in Vietnam. I mean it just totally blew me

away, but at that point I didn't think, "I'm going to go home and write a play." I mean, it was that experience in the theatre that blew me away. Last year was the first time I ever saw [. . .] It was the first time I had ever seen anything like that, and, again, it totally blew me away. I had no idea that those kind of things were possible. It was probably in '89 or '90 that [. . .] looking for radio plays, and she said, "write something [. . .]" and I said "no, no, no, I write poetry, I write stories, I write, I write, I don't do plays, I don't know what that is." And she kept calling me and I finally wrote something just to get her off my back. And nothing ever came of that piece, and looking back on it now, I wrote, and this has happened in everything I've written since then, where there's the two worlds, there's the physical world and the spiritual world. And, I mean, that's just what comes out when I write. And at that point in time I didn't know how to put it on a piece of paper in a way that anybody else could understand it. So I literally wrote two scripts. You know, I don't know, I mean I write, and it's the kind of thing where it just happens or it doesn't happen. The things that work are things that, it seems just literally come through me, I don't have a choice. It's just like the whole thing is there and I have to just sit down and write it out. I was commissioned by Child's Play Theatre to write a children's play for them, and what I set out to do was to write a piece that was completely androgynous, so any character could be male or female, and because Child's Play Theatre is a white, suburban theatre, I tried to write a piece that could be played by anybody of any race. And I worked on it and worked on it, and then Monica Marks from Winnipeg came down and Gary Farmer came down and we workshopped it at the Native Arts Circle, and I thought that "this works." And then when Child's Play Theatre took it and they had a reading by an all white group of suburban kids, I realized how badly I had failed to make this piece I had that could be played by anybody, because once these white kids sat down to read it, it was so clearly Native that what I had set out to do I had totally failed at. So that was a shock to me.

MM: But was it good? Did you like it?

MR: Well I liked what I had written.

MM: Did it work for that bunch of kids?

MR: They didn't do it with that group. What they did was, Child's Play collaborated with a black theatre, and what they did was, they cast inner city youth in the piece, and that worked, with the exception of the end scene, because in the end scene the grandmother goes into the Spirit world. And when they directed it, they had her die, which is a totally different concept. So I had little kids leaving the theater in tears, and I thought, "that's not what I meant to do!" But it was one of those where in my mind it was clear what I was thinking, and I thought it was clear on the paper, but that's not how it got interpreted by the people who were reading it, and so one of the things that I learned was, like when stuff is so internalized that you don't even think about it, that if I was going to put my stuff out there I had to think more clearly about how I was putting it out there, or what needed to be explained. And then there's stuff that I refuse to explain.

I think the thing that I'm trying to do in theater is, right now, is to put the tools into the hands of the people. And my last three projects have been actually to figure out how to get people from a grass roots community level to do theater that grass roots community

people will come see. And with the "Free Fry Bread" piece, I mean, it was in a white theater, in Minneapolis, and it was the Indian community that filled the house. And that was just by word of mouth, people coming to see the piece, then going out and saying, "You got to come see this." And so that the last night of the show they turned people away at the door. And it's the kind of thing where it was Indian people coming to see it and liking it, and that's what I was trying to do.

PJ: What I was going to say, was that experience, as you described it, really opens up a kind of question that centers around how do you, the process of writing, then the after process of marketing your work, then the aspect of finding the audience for the work as well as finding the performers for the work which you talked about earlier. I just would be interested to hear how that's negotiated in the process. Do you think about, in the process, about the audience or the marketing or the reception? Earlier, I believe you mentioned that, I don't want to say your words, but something to the effect of, "it's the work right now, I'm not really concerned about the commercial or . . ." And then there was a response that "I do care about that." I think that's a very interesting tension. I know that's often a concern in African-American writing.

DG: We're also very different people, I think that's a good lesson too.

VM: Could I just say something about that? When I did "Strength of Indian Women," it opened in at the Women in View festival, which is an organization that is non-Native, and it opened there, and then I had the opportunity to have it continue to play in that theater, the theater in Vancouver. And so I went and talked to them about two things that I was concerned about, because of the spiritual content of the play and because of the issues that it brings up for people, because of the history of our people, the struggle with alcoholism--I had asked them if they would not have their bar as part of the theater, that they could close down. And I asked that if she wanted to direct it as a non-Native woman, that she have a co-director who would help with the interpretation. Because the first play I did had spirits, and the non-Native director who directed it was so confused with that that he said, "I'm just going to put the railroad track right in the middle of the stage, and I want the dead people to stay on that side and the living people on this side," and so he missed the whole idea. And I could see what was happening, he couldn't interpret it, it wasn't laid out for him. So I didn't want that to happen with this one. And so, she told me that she would consider those things, but she didn't know about the bar, but she would consider those things, if I would consider putting my play on and double bill it with a play about white men, because we can't just tell that story about [ . . . ] and bring it out. And so I refused, and it never got to a mainstream theater. And then someone came to me after that and told me, "if you ever want to make it in mainstream theater, you know, you're going to have to make the nuns the focal point of that story, not those kids . . . nobody wants to hear that." And I said, "well, I guess I'll never make it in mainstream theater, cause I won't do that." And so, I think of my audience, I think of my responsibility to my people, and I always dreamed about writing a play, writing something that's universal, but I think there's too many of our stories that need to be told as yet, that need to be written by us, from our experience. There's a lot to think about.

MM: I don't think about the audience, to me, especially since it's a process that you say, you have a need, it has to come out, I don't think about who's going to see it, hear it, if they care or not. I know that comes in somewhere down the road, but in the process of creating, it doesn't come into it. And I also try to write different voices, spirit voices and [ . . . ] and, again, how to write that, how to write that so that it comes close to representing what you hear, see, or experience is something that, you know, the railroad track--CONTROL YOUR SPIRITS! That's a great story.

DG: You know, at a recent conference we were talking about critical theory for Native plays, and trying to come up with a word of how you access both worlds, just as you said. And we really couldn't--we started off with "magical realism," but you can't borrow a term from another culture. How do you say "both worlds coming together and interacting," you know, having a term, having a nice, clean term? And I think that's one of the next steps of . . .

MM: But that characteristic that you're asking about is what is [ . . . ] look like the cultures that we come from [ . . . ] particular women. I think that that characteristic, the awareness of more than one world, more than one reality, is something that is specific to Native women.

DG: You come up with a word, something like "spiritual dualism," it's so hard...

MR: See, I don't even see those as two things...

MM: It is all part of the same thing.

DG: So whenever you have a word to suggest, or a term, it's important to come up with something.

MR: What I did with one play was I just wrote everybody's character, to say, this one's a spirit, this one's not, then once it was played, it was actually clear who the spirits were...

JLO: I have a, in my musical, I have an old woman who to me just comes through the sky, I mean, that's the stage direction, she comes as if she was God. To me that is so clear, and I had a designer that just, "How do we do that on stage, JudyLee?" I mean, it just, we don't have, in my view, enough designers who can share the kind of... lack of a terminology, or, I don't know, I mean I couldn't, I didn't want to prescribe to him, I didn't want to just design the set, but at the same time, it was so clear to me, it was so clear, and I thought, "how could it not be so clear to you?" But he wanted to technically "know" how to do that, and I kinda wanted to play with it and see how you might kinda follow that. So those are the kind of serious issues if you want your work out there, particularly if you want it out there in mainstream theatre, those confront me all the time.

PJ: I guess what I'm hearing, which is so exciting, is that there's at least this duality, how to talk about it, and finding that vocabulary to talk about it and how to realize it, you see... But then, at the same time, being conscious and resisting given paradigms, which, in turn,

defines it, do you see what I'm saying? I know this issue of "magic realism," that term, you know, it's been applied to Toni Morrison, to her writing, but really what's happening in her writing really traces back to certain kind of African relationships with the living spirit world, and so forth, and so on. So how do we then talk about it, when perhaps there are these, and, you know, God forbid I would bring this word in too, these multiple borders that are everywhere.

JLO: I think that, in terms of the anthology, that what I would like to see is for us not to be defined by all those words like "this play is a drama," "this play is a musical," "this play is a..." whatever, I would really like for that to not happen. I don't know how you organize it, but there's no need to put a stamp on it, you know.

RH: No, no, that wasn't in the plan.

VM: I was thinking about words, you know, and about a lot of times when I'm working, I'm trying to figure out a word or something that I do that's really strongly from my culture [. . .] my writing, and I will go to the Elders and try to find a word in the language. So I go to them to find out, is there a word in the language that describes this [. . .] Maybe it could be this or this... But I always like to try explore the language even though I don't speak it, so that the work is truly, it is describing something to me that is truly from my culture, which is what my writing, what my writing is firmly connected to. Otherwise I'm trying to describe something that is outside my whole system and whole way of thinking and then trying to immunize it. [. . .] from the other side...

LAH: We have a term that I actually used in one of my plays, it's [. . .], it mean everything is everything. It doesn't, you know that's the Choctaw language, and it doesn't apply to everybody else, but that's the term that, you know, that [. . .]

DG: I took a physics class in college because I'd never had the privilege of taking science before and when I went into energy fields, and I never really did create [. . .] but we talked about energy fields and electricity and other words I can't even remember right now, I got so close to [. . .]

LAH: I started to use a term in the academic side to explain literature and [. . .] really what I think that I do. I started to use "polyography" because the work that I think that I do as an artist has to do with not just itself but accumulating within that wholeness. So I started to apply that to what I think many writers do.

(Break for refreshments)

DG: It's my interest to talk about how you write Native plays on the basis of oral tradition which does not build to a crisis like the standard--you have to have a character and what gets in the character's way, and how is the outcome--you can't really do that when [. . .] So how do you take something like oral tradition, which is very close to theatre, I mean, it's the spoken words, in which there are some stories that take seven days to tell--there are some stories that don't have a [. . .] until a week later, and it suddenly dawns on you,

"Oh--that's what it means." It sometimes depends even upon the elements, the time of day, the time of year, the hearer also changes the meaning--and so how do you get all those intricacies into something as static as the theatre that we now represent? And how do you also reach an audience--I mean you can do something sometimes very Native, you lose your audience, they start looking at the ceiling, their watch, you know, to move on? So these are just things that interest me . . . so I would like to hear [ . . . ] how is it possible to do both? You have to communicate, I mean, you have an audience, some of [ . . . ] audiences, some don't. These are just issues that interest me.

[ . . . ]

LAH: You know, you're right, for teachers and for teaching that is a good question, and I don't want that muck up anything that I do, and I start with a . . . and it goes back to what you were saying . . . when I start to write, whether it's . . . I just do it, you know that wonderful story about Oklahoma, or . . . I just can't worry about that. I really think that that's got to stay out of the process of writing, the question of audience is not important, it's about what I'm doing as an artist. What I'm doing with my community, who I call on to do it with. It's all got to be separate, you know? I have students too, I teach in a white institution, who take literature or theatre to help get that, but they get "Frankenstein," as a trickster character. [ . . . ] teaching, but it's got to be separate from the process of creating. And some of our stuff that we go back to doesn't have a conclusion, doesn't have that air that art . . . and I just can't worry about that, you know, I just sit down to write. So what if we don't become Tony Kushner? I don't know.

DG: I was thinking for an image . . . I'm also thinking [ . . . ] if I could just find a concrete image, and this last playwriting conference that I was in, in Albuquerque, the one I told you about, we sat around the table talking about Native theatre, and we could never come up with any definition-- "oh, it's like electricity, somehow the magic happens, you plug it in and there it is." But I left this New Mexico terrain and I was flying back to Minneapolis and all of a sudden the snow was there, and the ponds were frozen, and you could see the pattern of snowmobiles or whatever, ice fishing houses, and I thought, "a Native play is like a frozen pond in winter, it's just there if you're in the right place," you know, and I tried to get all this abstract imagery and I felt I got near to saying something that it was like, and then I wrote it down on paper and it kind of disappeared. You know, it's like walking by a picket fence, and there's this scene behind it, and if you don't look directly at it you can see what's there, but the minute you try to get to it, it's gone. So this is the area, the difficulty I have . . . all the areas we are trying to define, and yet I think it needs to be defined.

[?] Why do you need [ . . . ]

DG: Because it's something so magic and so wonderful in the world [ . . . ] And to relate something that you know in your heart to somebody who doesn't [ . . . ] I feel it's important, because I've known both [ . . . ] and I know they never understood where my father came from, and he was very wise . . .

MM: Do you have it, the explanation? Do you have it? The communication?

DG: I go to a conference [ . . . ] where you have to talk about it [ . . . ] but there is something dismissed, and I don't want it dismissed, maybe it's because where I come from and what I've experienced, whereas you who've grown up in it may not feel that need that I personally do.

JLO: See now, I feel the same way as Diane, [ . . . ] I want desperately for people to understand what I finally get down on paper to move it on to the stage. I don't care if they get the possibles, and I don't really care if it fits any mold, but I want them to get it, I do . . .

MM: It's not so much that [ . . . ] necessarily creates that, I mean, I'm there too, but it's, in the writing and performing the voice and the telling, has been so much a part of my resistance, that if some white folks don't get it, well, too bad.

[ . . . ]

VM: You know what I feel about that, is that I feel like white people have to work harder to understand, why should we have to [ . . . ] defining ourselves in the white context. Why don't they work harder to understand it?

[ . . . ]

VM: I remember doing a performance of "Strength of Indian Women" at a conference [ . . . ], and one of the things, we weren't going to do it at first because I just was starting to feel tired all the time, because afterwards people would be coming up and they would be wringing out their guilt and shame and stuff, and wanting me to take care of them. And I didn't want to have feel like I had to do that, because [ . . . ] it needs no explanation, it's so clear--this is a story, this is the reality, this is what happened, and this is the story I'm telling. And I didn't want to deal afterwards, to take care of people, who got stuck on [ . . . ] And what happened at that conference was I put that out there [ . . . ] I said, "you're going to have to work really, really hard for the next two days, to understand what happened [ . . . ] but I really don't want you to come and ask me. I want you to work hard to figure it out, because we're coming from two different worlds here, and I won't have much energy afterwards to try and help you understand my world. You're going to have to understand my world the best way you can, coming from where you're coming from. So I don't want you to come bothering me or any of the rest of the storytellers." And it was really interesting because then they couldn't even say "hi," "nice day," or anything, and they, like skirted around us . . . And so the next day I said, "it doesn't mean you can't talk to us, it's just that I don't want you laying your stuff on us. You know, there's a huge piece of communication or understanding that's missing here, and I've been working at trying to overcome that all my life--I want you to work it now, and then we'll meet in there somewhere, if you're willing to work at it. But I don't want you coming to me, expecting me to explain it, interpret what I'm doing, or try to fit what I'm doing into, try to fit something that's circular into a square, which is often what happens." It takes too

much energy, and then I end up feeling just angry. So, then it was interesting, cause that's, it was interesting that people came up to us at the last day of the conference, and they started feeding back to us insights about their own, it forced them to go inside, it forced them to find those answers, and they came up with some really incredible things. But I worried the entire [ . . . ] because it's not just our responsibility to de-colonize, it's also other people's responsibility.

RH: That's what you were saying, the story about the theatre manager wanting you to do the story of the nuns along with it, I mean the story of the nuns would stand by itself, they would never say, "Well, if we're going to do a play about nuns, we've got to do a Native play that talks about residential schools . . ."

VM: Cause they did do that about a year ago, all by itself, and they wouldn't have any [ . . . ]

MR: [ . . . ] and if something that I write works, it works because my formula makes really good sense [ . . . ], and I think I could drive myself crazy, and make myself feel bad, because I don't know the difference between the first, second, and third act. And I could spend twenty years of my life trying to learn to fit into something that would make me a playwright, or I could spend my time writing plays, or writing stories. I think there's also something about just keep doing the work, [ . . . ] I just thought about Ingrid doing [ . . . ] and it was a thing that, as women, we just do the work [ . . . ] and for me, lots of times, writing isn't work. In fact, I feel guilty a lot of the times because I'm just doing what I want to do, and I get rewarded for it lots of times. I think there's a way that the oppression, can come [ . . . ] trying to figure it out, rather than doing what we do. And that's what I want to do, cause I would like to [ . . . ] I like my family, I like my community, and so [ . . . ] You know, if they don't like what I do, they let me know, and it doesn't matter whether, you know, what the review in the Star Tribune says, and that's [ . . . ]

SHF: Let's get back to who are you writing for? Are you writing for you, are you writing for your community, are you writing for, are you trying to teach something with your writing. [ . . . ]

VM: It's all of those things.

SHF: It could be all of those things, certainly . . .

LAH: The best experience of my life is that, a [ . . . ] came from two short moments--one was a performance for the Musquokie (sp?), and because I write kind of absurd things, this particular, this laughter fell all over itself, and so I thought, "okay, that's it." And I've done this same play for a lot of audiences that sit on their hands and they react, they don't know what to do with it, but that experience, and then the experience in California, where it started to [ . . . ] okay, Indians just laugh, "okay that's it." But the point is I did it for myself, but to have other Indians validate me, that's really the most important thing to me. My family, and other Indians laughed at the things I think are funny too, is all that counts, and it's still the only thing that counts.

[ . . . ]

DG: [ . . . ] I just never had the courage of saying, well that's the way it is, you know.

[?]: Perhaps it's because of your scholarly or academic position that you're challenged on that [ . . . ] practitioners [ . . . ] the privilege of not having to answer in the same way, in an academic or scholarly way, but it's not really fair, it's not really fair that you're put in that position.

[ . . . ]

DG: When you go to conferences, as an academic, people ask you this question, that's what you're being paid for, that's what a conference is about. Questions about "How do you explain this?" [ . . . ] It becomes almost more important than the play itself.

[ . . . ]

VM: You know, I'm thinking about, we've been studied and defined to death [ . . . ] I felt that that was real exercise in helping people understand my work [ . . . ] make them experience it.

JLO: That's what I was going to say, you know, it seems to me like everyone wants to print our plays in anthologies, but no one wants to do them. I mean, they want to read and they want to study them, but no one wants to do them on stage, so my goal is, I want to get up on stage so they can experience it, so we don't have to maybe come and define it and analyze it but just be there. You know, maybe they won't get anything but one thing and that's enough, you know. But I think there's this enormous interest right now, and I'm not denegrating the anthology by any means at all, because I think we need more of it, you know, but there is this interest in trying to define it, and slice and cut up and, you know, in that kind of academic way. But there doesn't seem to me to be an equal interest in coming to see our work and experience it [ . . . ]

RH: Let's get back to an earlier question about . . . Vera talked somewhat about it . . . about having your work performed by non-Native companies as opposed to not having it performed. It is more important to you as a writer to have the work done, or to have it done by Native companies?

LAH: The first people who produced one of my plays was Sojourner Truth, which is a black theatre company who hired Native actors . . .

RH: [ . . . ] difference between professional productions too, I mean, which have more wherewithal to identify and bring in performers from outside, or companies that are more [ . . . ] specific reason, who have to draw on a pool of talent [ . . . ]

LAH: Our director was an African-American, and he . . . Vera you were talking about the

difficulty in understanding our spirituality from our point of view . . . so he just, he just spent a lot of time with this material, kind of worked around, good staging, did a wonderful job. It was a wonderful job. So it was a matter of the director, I think, wanting to come to that place, and wanting to be a part of that experience, working with [ . . . ] Extra work and research, you know it has to do with desire.

MR: That's what Vera said, instead of us having to do it, why don't the white people work harder to get it, and work harder to bring in Native performers, and educate audiences to [ . . . ] become your responsibility.

[ . . . ]

MR: You know, I go up to Canada, and I'm just in awe of all the Native people and all the Native theatre and all [ . . . ] And yet, it's like once I decided Minneapolis would work, and to recruit Native actors, people showed up. And out of, what do they say, 16,000 people here on campus? . . . there have to be Native performers here, there have to be, and where's the closest reservation?

RH: Michigan.

[ . . . ]

MM: There have to be Native communities around.

?: Administrators are very good at making excuses. [ . . . ] trying to sort of break down the barriers, the ideas, you know, to find Native actors.

MR: Well, there is an assumption too, that those people you bring in to do a work, have to be taught, but they have the experience already, and it seems to me that, perhaps someone who has a cultural experience, storyteller, might very well be able, they don't have to be an actor as a profession, to be part of a project.

[ . . . ]

MM: [ . . . ] the struggle to be produced hasn't changed since [ . . . ] It doesn't change, and that's, that's part of theatre, that's part of the glory and the horror of it. It takes such effort to get something produced.

JLO: That's interesting . . . I had a very strange experience around to get something [ . . . ] workshop sites, and I wanted to cast particularly people from my tribe, and I even went to my tribal headquarters and I've advertised it, and I've used that because I was determined, you know to get my people in that play. And they were trying to audition for me in their small space, but to bring them to where I wanted to produce to play was a whole new issue, and they were very afraid, and so, then you have that kind of problem too. I wanted to cast all Native people, and this was just a workshop production, but they were afraid to come to a larger space, this was at the University of Oklahoma, they were afraid to be in

that environment, afraid to use that theater. For the people who auditioned for me, theatre was a new thing. Theatre is a new thing for a lot of people in Oklahoma, I mean it really is. In my tribe, the rodeo is this big thing, and I was able to, if I could have cast the play and done it right there in tribal headquarters, that's probably what I should have done, because I was not going to be able to move them, and have them do it in an audience that they were not comfortable with yet, that's kind of an issue that I have to deal with, do I do my play right there in tribal headquarters for just that audience, or do I want to put it towards another kind of audience and another kind of production.

[ . . . ]

MM: Were you bringing people in to work with the tribe there, so they would feel secure in what they were doing?

JLO: I think they've done that.

VM: In all of my productions, I've had very few professional actors. In each production [ . . . ] I always hand picked them because they had the gift of storytelling, or they seemed to be somebody who's always performing in life, but they never had seen themselves on stage. Someone who's connected to the story that's being told [ . . . ] In terms of the performance here, I was wondering, this is a conference for Native women playwrights, how come you didn't ask them? [ . . . ] The people that are attending the conference, they just look like my characters. [ . . . ]

RH: I would be absolutely thrilled if anybody wants to step in and do this reading tomorrow, I would be absolutely thrilled to have that happen. This project evolved in a way that, I didn't have a lot of time to do that, and as the attendees [ . . . ] exactly who was coming [ . . . ] It's not an ideal situation, and I apologize for that.

VM: But it's interesting [ . . . ] working harder.

DG: [ . . . ] I know in Oklahoma, I was telling about this, they have a Five Civilized Tribes Playwriting Competition, I've known about this since 1984, it must be at least twenty-five, thirty years old. Every other year they choose a play that wins, and nothing ever happens to any of those plays--they're never produced, they're never . . . a prize is given, a thousand dollars, and who knows, after that, and so this is the story I hear, what happens to all this work?

[ . . . ]

LAH: You know, in Oklahoma, there is an underground Native theatre that do their own . . . they've got this where my sister got her start as an actress in Oklahoma City. And the Indians used to hang out at the bar, and then say, "Let's go write a play." And then they'd do it at somebody's house or somebody's garage. And it's just, of course I'm talking probably twenty or twenty-five years ago . . .

DG: I actually lived in Tulsa, and there was an American Indian Theatre Company, and they did one of my pieces, "Weebjob." Well, the Indian who played him was having problems with alcoholism, and he could not be trusted, so a black man ended up being [ . . . ] and then, what was he, Lebanese or something, was the third character. So there was a problem even there in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

VM: I think part of the rejection, for me [ . . . ] is what Hollywood has done, I mean all these movies [ . . . ] it's just really left an impression [ . . . ]

DG: I think that's one of the reasons I still feel the need to explain so much, because of that inborn shame, you know, when you feel that, you kind of need, or I do anyway, to define to yourself that you have legitimacy, this voice, this fragmented voice [ . . . ]

[ . . . ]

MM: [ . . . ] you know right away [ . . . ] that it's still accepted to take a white actor, it's like put some brown contacts on them, send them to the tanning spa, dye their hair, and [ . . . ] all those Hollywood movies they saw, and . . . and it's really hard to be, then, also expected to help out this white actor or actress, because you're also in the cast with them, you're expected to give them all your stuff so they can do it . It's not right.

[ . . . ]

LAH: There's also though, we also have, not everybody that is Indian looks Indian. So we have plenty of spectrum, we've got white, black, red, you know we ran the spectrum in Indian country with the way people look, they could play all the parts, you know, so it isn't just the way we look or don't look. [ . . . ] Who was it who was talking to me about the theatre company in New York, and the Indians that run the spectrum, and he said to me, "It's just so, because we could play all the white parts, too." I can't remember who was telling me that.

RH: Does anybody have anything else they want to ask or talk about?

VK: It's really great to hear that you're all thinking about the same things that I think about over there thousands of miles away, you know, and have the same kinds of dilemmas about casting and who I'm writing for . . .

[ . . . ]

DG: I just wanted to say one more thing [ . . . ] look how important what everybody has said has been today--what if you just saw the work without what we've said. I want to make one more argument with you all for explanation, for some sort of conversation like we've had here for explaining the problems and . . . I feel it's important, they may outvote me.

RH: Well one of the purposes of doing this, as I said, as we do the anthology, is that we

didn't just want to say "here's the biographical information" and that's it, but we wanted to have some context with it. (The discussion continued with talk about the specifics of the ensuing conference, and finalizing details and casting for the reading the next day of Vera Manuel's "The Strength of Indian Women.")