[00:00:00]

Michelle: Do you want to start by introducing yourself?

Alice: My name is Alice Olsen Williams. I live at Curve Lake First Nation but I am from Northwestern Ontario at a place called Trout Lake.

Michelle: Could you tell us about the memory work that you do? Tell us about a project that you have on the go?

Alice: Well, I feel very fortunate that these gifts have been given to me. I make quilts, a form of blanket making, and I’m very proud to partake in work that women have done all through the ages. Women are blanket makers, which brings warmth and comfort to the family. And also many times they tell a story. And so the stories can also be passed on through the help of blankets and the design of the blankets. And also that it’s women’s work. In probably every culture, it’s women’s work. So I’m very proud to be able to keep passing on women’s work down through the generations.

Michelle: Can you tell me more about the stories and how the stories are told through the blankets?

Alice: Well, in the centre of my quilts, I usually have an Anishinaabe picture. By that, I mean animals or birds that figure heavily in the culture. We are very close to the natural world. We are part of the natural world but we get a lot of our values and directions through the natural world. And so I honour that and put it in the centre of my quilts. That is the heritage that my mother gave me. She is Anishinaabe from northwestern Ontario, Trout Lake, Lac Seul territory. As oppose to Big Trout Lake. (When I say Trout Lake, a lot of people think I mean Big Trout Lake, so I just want to clarify that.) I am Anishinaabe. I have ties to this land for… from time beyond memory. And I want to help remind people, Anishinaabe, that their connection to this land goes very, very deeply. My father was white, and I represent the culture, the heritage he gave me, in my quilts, by making conventional quilt blocks that white women do and have re-invented since their trip across the ocean to this land. So I use those quilting blocks to frame my pictures or to decorate my central theme. But also, somewhere in the central picture, I always put in the medicine wheel. And that is a reminder of the teachings that we live by.

[00:03:07]

Like I said, we get our guidance and teachings from Creation. We have four directions. A lot of Indigenous Peoples all over the world talk about the four directions. And to us they are sacred because Creation happened in four sacred directions. And I honour those teachings, those teachings which give us guidance on how to live in a good way on this earth. Our life, our lifestyles, our daily lives have been so horribly interrupted and perverted by the invaders’ patriarchal, capitalistic values that some of us have to have reminders of connecting back to keep our connection to our ancestors and to all of Creation. For example, when I say that the natural world gives us teachings, well, one of the teachings is water. Water is sacred to all the Indigenous Peoples of the world. Like in English, or whatever language, French, whatever the conquerors’ or the emperors’ language is, that’s how we know the name of those rivers. For example, in Canada, we have the St. Lawrence River. Well, it wasn’t that. When we had it, we called it, say, if it was translated into English, we would call it the Great River, g’chi ziibii. And we carry that in our daily lives, in our memories, because those rivers, those waters, they are life givers. Without water we wouldn’t last long on this earth.

[00:05:03]

And so we remember to keep our waters clean and to respect that water. For example, water teaches us about kindness, and it talks to us about healing. Clean water helps to heal us. We also have a lot of bodily functions that remind us of water. For example, our blood. The blood flowing through our bodies, full of oxygen. And it’s clean, helps rejuvenate us, it helps us to have a clear mind, it helps us to have good energy. We also think about the Great Mother who, without her, we would have nothing. And we think about keeping her blood clean. Those rivers, those waters, are the lifeblood of the Great Mother. If we do horrible things, if we pollute the lakes and the rivers and the streams, the waters of the earth, how could that help us in our daily lives to be strong, to be healthy, to have good thoughts. And we know that’s what the earth is like today.

[00:06:26]

Michelle: So when you’re making the quilts, and you’re putting the designs in, that’s the resistance. And then you’re sharing this across the generations as well?

Alice: Yes. I teach a lot of quilting and I do a lot of quilt presentations where I talk about the Anishinaabe teachings of the natural world and the four directions. Like I say, I’ve taught classes and I’m mindful of the gifts of Creation.

Michelle: Mm-hm. And I know you’ve shared your work with political work as well, political organizations.

Alice: Yes. Yes. You see people, the settlers and invaders, well, not the invaders so much as settlers, but settlers want to hear about Indians. They want to know how we do things. Oh, they love to see our stuff. They’re just nosy, you know? And that’s not just my feelings, but whoever thought that we are to be spectated upon, you know? We’re not a spectator culture like dominant culture is. And somehow it’s infiltrated our beings that we put on powwows for white people. You know? That’s part of the not resistance, that we put on these show for white peo- But it also is a way of making money. Like I would love us to have powwows where it’s only us and we invite other Nations, other First Nations all around the world, to come and see us and how we live our lives. Because for white people it’s like, again, a spectator thing… And oh, they have such romantic notions about Indians. You know?

Michelle: Mm-hm.

Alice: If they really knew us… [laughs.]

Michelle: [laughs]

[00:08:21]

Alice: So I wish that we could have celebrations where we, it’s just us, and we share, you know?

Michelle: Mm-hm. So if the quilt is an activist memory work, where does it go from here? What happens next? With your work.

Alice: Well, although it hasn’t happened directly. In my family, my daughters are too busy working, you know, so they don’t have time to do quilting. Mind you, they work in Indian things, so in that way, they do connect with other Anishinaabeg. They work for Anishinaabe organizations and that. But I’m sure they’re not talking about the medicine wheel [laughs], you know?

Michelle: Mm-hm.

Alice: They’re talking business as consulting does, you know. Land claims, you know that there are issues, there are life issues that we have to talk about, we have to deal with. Who has time to quilt? Really and true. And then again, that’s an imposition from a patriarchal, capitalist culture where all our time, all our energy is taken up serving them so that we can put food on our table. You know?

Michelle: Mm-hm. Yes. Absolutely.

Alice: And I’m older. Well, I could only have done quilting because I have a husband who brought in the money so that I could live like this. But also that we had food on the table and a lot of other goodies. But if I didn’t have a husband who brought that in, I’d have to spend all my time working. As a profession, I’m a teacher, the biggest passer down of dominant culture.

Michelle: [Laughs]

[00:10:10]

Alice: Education. I loved that work, I loved that work. But if I had to work while all my children were growing up, I wouldn’t have had time to quilt, and you know, relax, and think about things. All I’d be thinking about, “Oh, I’ve got to get ready for my kids, my school kids,” so that they’re not sitting around doing nothing, and going wild in the classroom, you know? And so your mind is always engaged in those things. You don’t have time to let Creation, to let life, that sacred, sacred life, come into you.

Michelle: Mm.

Alice: Now, I’m talking real good. I don’t mean to fool you into thinking I’m like that. Because even though I live alone and I’m as old as I am, sometimes I don’t get to my quilting, my sewing, you know? So how does that make sense? You know?

Michelle: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. It sounds like you’ve shared a lot of teachings through your quilts.

Alice: I have done, yes, yes I have. Oh!

Michelle: Can you talk a bit about the project where you included the squares from other organizations?

Alice: Oh, sometimes I make quilts totally made up of – what’s the word? It’s not contemporary… conventional. I make quilts that are totally from conventional blocks, and that’s because I just, I think those particular blocks are beautiful. You can do so many things. For example, say, a traditional quilting block, I don’t like to use the word, ‘traditional’ when I’m also talking about dominant culture things because people think I’m talking about Anishinaabe things. So I like to use that word, ‘conventional,’ but it doesn’t flow out of me like the word traditional does [Laughs.]

Michelle: [Laughs.]

[00:12:02]

Alice: So these conventional quilts, the only thing that they contain, say, of my Indigenous culture, is the colour, the colour. I have lots of colour and fabric in my work. I don’t follow, like, there’s such a word as monochromatic and I forget what the next one is. But I find a lot of dominant culture women are afraid of colour. They don’t trust it. You know, there was a very beautiful but hard to understand article once written in, I think it was called the *Indigenous Women’s Journal* - no, no, excuse me, *Indigenous Studies Journal*. It was a little book that was printed probably quarterly, and in there, there was an article about colour, what colour means to Anishinaabe. Like red isn’t just red, it stands for something. And some of them are strong things, strong cultural things. So we see colour very differently. And when you see Anishinaabe women’s work especially, like say, for bead work, when they make a flower, there’s many, many colours of beads in there. I also do Anishinaabe women’s designs, which are floral, and I have tons of colour in them. Everybody in the white world remarks about the colours I use, and yet hardly anybody breaks away from that, what they worked on, what colour is about. Which is matching, you know, match-y this, and match-y that [laughs].

[00:13:45]

Michelle: This sounds like a form of resistance.

Alice: Yes, that’s true!

Michelle: To bring in all this colour, and then, like you’re saying, memory work, that you’re bringing the floral designs.

Alice: And another thing I do which people are unaware of because, like I say, people like to see Indian things, and they want to know about Indian stuff. Well, they don’t know anything about their own culture. They do not know that their culture is patriarchal. They do not know, I mean, sure, you can rattle it off, but they don’t know what it means. Well, no, they can’t even rattle it off. They don’t know that it’s patriarchal, that it’s Christian. For example, Sir John A. Macdonald, who was the first Prime Minister of Canada, he hated and loathed Indians. He put in policies that tried to genocide us. He was Christian. So those cultures, that culture wants to, if they don’t eradicate, want to eradicate us, they want to, it’s a spectator culture, like I said before. But what I do - and I never say this in any of my write-ups because I think if I did, I wouldn’t be asked to speak. So I say, what I do is I put in in my presentations sort of like juxtaposition white cultural values as oppose to our values. For example, when I taught Grade 3 on the reserve, I was supposed to teach ‘hibernation,’ ok? You know, it’s a word that’s taught in school. If you’re tested at Grade 3, you fill in the blank, and ‘hibernation’ is supposed to fit in there somewhere. But I thought, “hm… Anishinaabeg know bears hibernate, they know turtles hibernate, they already know these things, why the heck am I teaching them?” I thought, “You know, Anishinaabeg, when we talk amongst each other, we don’t say ‘hibernate,’ you don’t tell your children, ‘That bear is hibernating.’ You’d always say, ‘he’s gone to sleep for the winter.’ ” And that language also helps us keep connected to the natural world. And so the words and images we use are very different from what we learn in school, for example, ‘hibernation.’ How do I see that bear as my relation when he or she ‘hibernates’ and I go to sleep?

[00:16:25]

Michelle: Mm-hm.

Alice: Those kinds of things. I also talk about how in our language, I don’t know what it’s like for your language, but in our language, it’s divided by what is called in English, animate and inanimate, that’s the two divisions in our language. And our language is so supposed to exemplify our values, our cultural values. And so, again, that keeps us connected to the natural world, to each other, to what’s, you know, important. But, in English, and I’ve asked my audience this, I ask them, “Well, how does your language, how was it divided so that it shows your cultural values?” And nobody can answer that. I mean, as Anishinaabe people living on the reserve and we’re talk, talk, talking, we don’t think about that either. But, I mean, us, who have lost our languages, due to the impositions made on us by a Indigenous-hating culture, we know this, when we take classes in our own language that’s set up by white people. And so that’s when I knew, for example, I have to be told, I wasn’t smart enough to pick it up, but that language shows you what your culture values, what your culture is.

So English is divided into three, which is masculine, feminine and neuter. Ok? And in this culture, of course the masculine is way more highly valued than women or ‘it’ or animals. Even animals that we are close to, let alone dogs and cats. So they don’t understand that. They don’t know that. And you even hear some white people say, “Oh, you people are so lucky. You can talk in English about your culture. You know, I don’t know anything about my culture. I’m white and-” The whole world operates on their culture! But they don’t know it. We know it. We who are so much “less than” them (quote and un-quote), we know it. But they don’t, they don’t know that they live in a culture that is totally dominated by them.

[00:18:56]

Michelle: Mm-hm. Yep. That’s true. So it sounds like you’re active in the resistance. In many ways.

Alice: In every breath I take.

Michelle: In every breath you take.

[Laughter]

Michelle: I really appreciate talking to you about all these things.

Alice: Thank you.

Michelle: It means a lot. I’m curious to learn about the quilt work that you did with the TRC. Oh yeah, the AFN and NLAC stuff too. That’s what I was trying to poke you for.

Alice: Oh, OK.

Michelle: Thank you.

Alice: Ok. Well, I’m home alone. There was such a big thing at the time of the Kelowna Accord. It was really a very big deal because, well, the Liberals, small ‘l’ and big ‘L’, Paul Martin was Minister then, and *learn-ed* Anishinaabe in Ottawa, they tend to be Liberal in voting. Or they just thought, “those damn Conservatives.” (Not that I love them either, Conservatives are very open in their hate and racism.) So Paul Martin, he had this conference, First Ministers’ conference, and the Anishinaabe were saying – Anishinaabe organizations like Assembly of First Nations, the Native Women’s Association of Canada, the Métis- different Métis organizations across Canada, they wanted to be included. So yes, they were included.

And the theme of that particular First Ministers’ conference was about the environment, the land, looking after the land. And so I was thinking to myself, “Now, I’m a quilter, I’ve been given these gifts, I want to use these gifts to help Anishinaabe voices be heard.” So I thought of sending out a call, and I used the Assembly of First Nations, I even used Indian Affairs, and the Native Women’s Association. I used them to help spread the word, to spread that callout. I wanted a call. I wanted quilt blocks that represented how you feel about the earth, about the environment. I remember an 80-year-old woman – and they all have to write their story about their blocks – and an 80-year-old woman who said, “You know, I haven’t quilted in a long time, but seeing that ad has got me quilting.” And so she told her story about how we have to keep these things clean. And so that was very precious to me. Another guy had a leaf, a big leaf, and he had a Band-Aid on it. And his story was about, you know, you just can’t use Band-Aids to heal.

There were 44 blocks. So it’s a huge quilt. It’s now hanging, I think, at the Labour Congress, the Canadian Labour Congress in Toronto. And I’ve got to get it back. When I advertised it, I said I made it for AFN. But I wanted it to be a working quilt. Like I say, my quilts that go to organizations, I want them to be working quilts. I don’t want them shelved somewhere. All these women’s stories, all the people’s stories who never get heard, I wanted their voice to be seen and heard and read. So it did hang at that conference, and it’s hung all over the place.

[00:22:32]

I’m so lazy. Or I should say, I’m disinclined, to work at getting it back. But there are so many places it could hang. But when I say I made it for AFN, and when I advertised for the blocks to come, I did say it was AFN’s. But you know what? AFN is a patriarchal structure also, and you know what? They oohed and awed about it. Phil Fontaine was the head honcho then but, you know, you know what? I just got the impression, well, the women care. There’s a women’s council at AFN and they cared. They’re the ones who took it to – I don’t know how I got it, I can’t remember right now, but I’ve had that quilt ever since then. How many years ago was the AFN – that particular Kelowna-

Michelle: Kelowna Accord?

Alice: Yeah. I think it was 2005. So how many years is that? Anyway, nobody at AFN even misses it. I try and keep track of it so whenever something important happens, I try to remember to write to these things happening, and tell them, you know, I have this quilt, and it’s the voice of the Anishinaabe people. And I do. Every time I make a quilt I always specify I want Anishinaabe people’s work to be seen and shown. And yet lots of times white people will enter even though I have specified, you know?

Michelle: Mm-hm. I hope it comes back soon.

Alice: Yeah. It’s up to me to do it. Yeah. Mm-hm. I better get on that. And I made it for – I have done the same things for the Sisters in Spirit, actually. There’s a quilt at NWAC – National, Native Women’s Association of Canada. So they have a quilt that’s made by Anishinaabe women for their purposes. There’s another organization…

Michelle: TRC?

Alice: Yes! TRC, I made four wall-hangings from blocks that Anishinaabe women have made. So it’s hanging at the National Centre in Winnipeg.

 [00:24:54]

Michelle: Good. Good. I can’t wait to see them.

Alice: Yeah.

Michelle. Thanks so much. Miigwech.

Alice: Thank you.

[Recording ends 00:25:03]