

INNU

Marie-Andrée Gill & David Gill

Daniel Grenier: Thank you for accepting this invitation! It was David's suggestion, initially, after we spoke on the phone, and it makes me think that this isn't an interview, but more of a conversation between the two of you, who know each other personally. Two people whose interests are at once super different but that necessarily overlap a little, as you said, David, when you were suggesting subjects for conversation. I had the feeling that you didn't have any trouble finding something to talk about, it just came out. What I noticed when I was talking to both of you, though, was the difference in your approaches and reactions to the topic that we're here to discuss. When I talk to David, he's the one who starts suggesting things: we could do this, or that could be interesting. While, Marie-Andrée, it's not that I feel you're reticent, but I did sense some hesitation on your part right away with regard to the topic. You know what I mean? About, the conversation itself, and the notion of leadership. As if artists didn't have the same responsibilities, as other public figures—not athletes

specifically, but let's say compared to who you've become, David, with your career as an athlete.

Marie-Andrée: It really depends on the individual, not artists versus athletes. People in the arts have a kind of desire to be leaders and to represent certain groups, but often we don't choose that. It's a combination of circumstances that makes you become a spokesperson for something without having asked for it. It's another kind of leadership; I didn't think that was leadership, in fact I thought a leader was someone who was hyper, who got up in front of people and said what they had to say, but in the end it's other people who come to you to ask for stuff. I don't impose myself, but people come looking for me. That's the thing, and it surprises me.

In any case, I know that there are other Indigenous authors who feel a lot of pressure from their communities to represent them. I often feel that too: I don't necessarily have a strong opinion one way or the other but they want me to speak out. I think that sometimes it's okay to just stay silent... It's like there's pressure from our communities to be good role models and to be positive, to be... maybe not perfect, but to not go over to the dark side, to addiction or that kind of thing. It's as if we had to be what people want us to be in public, maybe. We don't need negative models, that's not what Nations need. We're not looking for trash; it takes light too. What do you think, David?

David: It's interesting. I tend to talk all the time, but now I'm listening and I like it. I didn't think that

you, as an artist, felt that pressure to stay away from the dark side, for instance. For me it's a bit obvious because my whole field is about healthy lifestyle habits, and I've always felt that, and I've always laughed about it a bit. I believe a lot in balance. I've done high-level sports but I don't necessarily believe that high performance is the answer. That level is there for people who get off on it, and ambition can be relevant, certainly for those who really get off on overcoming obstacles—something that can be unhealthy in and of itself. But it's relevant precisely when we manage to use it to improve health in general. I've always thought that balance is really important: for example, I don't have a problem with drinking, moderation, drugs, or any of these things. I think I'm seen as having kind of an aura of health and it can make people uncomfortable, though it's not as bad as it used to be.

Marie-Andrée: There's also the fact that often, in the media, you become a cliché. People just see you when you give running workshops, for example. They don't know about any other part of your life, they just see you when you talk about that. You quickly become a stereotype and a cliché for other people. It's normal. When I write, I write a lot about nature, lyrical poetry, and people who don't know me have the impression that I'm totally like that, rolling around all the time in flowers and leaves, but I'm not. [Laughs.]

Daniel: Each of you, in your respective areas of expertise, has a desire to reach out to as many people as

possible, and that's where you're similar. But is it possible to make poetry more democratic in the same way sports can be? Because poetry is still a bit of a niche market, to a certain extent. I might ask you, Marie-Andrée, why you don't write novels instead. Why don't you write simpler stories? Because, although your poetry is truly quite accessible, it can seem complicated to the average person. Can it be democratized to that extent?

Marie-Andrée: It's complicated. For instance, my father can't read my work, except when I'm giving a reading on stage and there's, like, something extra to the text. But otherwise I think it's not that accessible to pick up a book and look at it. That's why I don't just write poetry: I do a lot of other things. I challenge myself to remain accessible and I want to speak the way I speak and I don't want to be embarrassed about it. I know that's what's true for me and I don't want to be someone else. I don't want to please a bunch of academics, I don't want to please people who are on TV. I don't want to appeal to them. I want to represent people who are important to me. Often, in these circles, there's a lot of ego, you want to be liked and you want to please, and that's okay, that's human, but if that's your main reason for doing what you do, then you're a little off base.

David: This brings me back to the first point you made, Daniel, about what makes a leader. There are two ways of being a leader. On the one hand, you can try to become a leader yourself, and then, whether you like it or not, you'll have to try to please people, you'll

have to try to change the person you are to please as many people as possible. On the other hand, you can also become a leader because people make you a leader, and that usually means being authentic. Marie-Andrée is an extreme example of that, and I would even say that, when I listen to you on the radio, Marie-Andrée, it inspires me to always push for that authenticity, to not compromise on who I am, because deep down I tell myself you can be a model by not being perfect. You can be a role model by being yourself. I've been in the public eye for a long time. I had my own company at eighteen and I wasn't as authentic as you. Since you probably became known and became a leader at a time when you were much more mature, you were already a bit more yourself. I wasn't; I think I became more authentic because I grew more mature through that process, and I learned by watching and listening to people like you that it was cool to just be me and not change the way I talk, not change what I think even if sometimes it might not please people. But I wasn't always like that. In sports, sponsors are important: you want to be able to pay for your competitions, there has to be someone to pay your bills, and they'll pay your bills if they like you.

Marie-Andrée: You have to be perfect for the sponsors. If you ever say something you shouldn't, they won't want to fund you anymore, you know. It's another game, it's a whole other thing.

David: The media game is that your sponsor gives you money if your face is in the paper. If your face is

in the paper, people are going to be talking about you. Becoming a household name doesn't happen all by itself. It can if you're really, really good. But for me it wasn't like that, it was a game I had to play, actively. Like it or not, there's something fake about it.

Marie-Andrée: Yes, when you get into the cycle of needing others to be able to pay for your dream, you have to pay too, in other ways. You get into that, and the whole thing, the whole process, the capitalist dynamic does that: to get money, you have to please others and then you'll get what you want, you'll be rewarded. You get into that and it almost takes away part of your soul because it has to do with selling—selling yourself. I made a conscious choice very early on that I wouldn't sell anything. I don't want to be subjected to that, I want to be free to say and think what I want. Really early on in my life, I could see the whole dynamic of capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism. I understood what those dynamics were and I didn't want to get involved, even if it meant not having a penny, at worst, in order to have absolute freedom of thought and speech all the time. And I'm not someone who's going to take that freedom of speech to the fullest, who's going to revolutionize the whole thing and be loud, that's not necessarily how I feel. I think I'm really lucky to have access to that, to all that freedom. I think that few people have access to that, because often you have an employer and you have to submit to your employer. Or sponsors. You have to submit to these people, or all sorts of other things, and you get a bit caught up in that sometimes. Poetry, as

a genre, is so free at its core. You can write what you want, put it out on the page how you want. That too has inspired me not to want anything other than to do what I want, without conceding anything. If I want some structure, I'll choose what suits me. That's it. Maybe I'm a bit of a princess but that's the way I am. [Laughs.]

There are plenty of messages in poetry. It's just that they're less obvious, you have to look a little harder maybe. I think it's great the way David delivers his message because it's clear and very accessible. If you want, you can find what you're looking for quickly and efficiently, in your body. And everything starts with that. It all starts there and even me, in poetry, that's what I'm saying, in another way: everything starts by going outside and getting your heart beating. I say it in every way possible, every cute way I can, but the message is always the same. You have to take care of your body and your mind. The word "hygiene" comes to mind. It's all about that, and escaping that kind of inertia or depression that plagues so many people. That's what it is, and I think David and I have the same goal in that regard. Don't you think?

David: Sure, in different ways. Of course, my goal, my real goal, is to be well. To be happy, to go to bed at night and be able to say, *I've had a good day*. And it does happen, if during my day I worked on some cool stuff, if I feel like I had a positive impact. In the end, it's not as altruistic as it sounds. The projects I usually do are volunteer projects. Usually it's to help people, but my goal is still to do things that make me feel good because

that's what makes me have good days. It turns out that what gets me going is building stuff that I feel competent in, doing things that work and making people around me happy. I'm lucky; I might have found a lot of other passions, a lot of other fields of interest or skills that could have been completely the opposite of health. If I want to create something exciting, it'll have to do with that. Don't ask me to write something, to write something inspiring, though I'd like that and sometimes I believe I could do it if I tried, but I'm not good at everything.

Marie-Andrée: Everything you're talking about is altruism. So much the better if it makes you happy! The whole idea of feeling good with yourself, that's something we all have, and I think it has to be. It's the only way we can shine. If you did everything just for others, that wouldn't work for you. That's the main thing, to go to bed with a feeling of accomplishment, as you say, and well-being. You do a lot of things that are altruistic by definition and, if you do it naturally, that's because it's part of you.

David: Yeah, that's true. I don't know if you had any other topics you wanted to talk about, but I'd love to hear your thoughts about the whole question of—I don't know how to phrase it—what impact being First Nations has had on your access to a certain level of prominence. If you hadn't been First Nations, would all of this have been possible? Did it make it easier? Because it sometimes creates a barrier for people, obviously, but I sincerely believe that, for me and you, being First

Nations was a total blessing, while for many people it's a strike. There are so many people I meet and I say to myself, *Well, shit, if they'd been born somewhere else, and if they had been born in another family, they would have so many fewer problems and challenges to overcome.* I'd like to know how you see it.

Marie-Andrée: I think that being born in Mashteuiatsh and growing up there really made me the way I am. I feel like for a long time it was a constraint that prevented me from getting out of my bubble and breaking free of certain habits, certain groups of people. And, you know, it's very closed, let's say. At the beginning, until I was twenty years old, my world was very closed. It was also rich, it was rich with so much humour and so many things, culture, school, family, and friends. It's only afterwards, when you leave the community—which is often the case, I suspect—that you realize that there's something different. Because you don't really see it when you're in it. But when I left, I realized that humour was different elsewhere, that the way of approaching things was different elsewhere, the relationship with the living, with reality, with everything, was different elsewhere. Just even moving to a little village—I came to Anse-Saint-Jean—my relationship with others was different. Other people greeted each other with kisses on the cheeks, and there were all kinds of things I didn't know. It wasn't a big culture shock, but it was a clash. That was how I felt it. But, from a career standpoint, there's a trend right now. The world is interested in First Nations, so I feel like we're riding a wave that has benefits, as you say, for

us. It means that people are starting to take an interest in our stories, and there's that. People are searching, too...

David: Was there a time, recently, when you were given an opportunity where it was clear that you had that opportunity not necessarily because you deserved it, but because you're Indigenous?

Marie-Andrée: Hmm, well... There was this time when I was shortlisted for the Governor General's Awards for my first book of poetry. And I was like, *Oh, they definitely picked me because there has to be a First Nations quota.* I know because I was a juror for that award later on, and they said, *We strongly suggest that you choose people from several nations.* It wasn't a requirement, but you felt the pressure all the same. It's lame because you can't know if they really picked you for your talent or if they just wanted to be politically correct. That's the weird thing, the double-edged sword. It's very nourishing to be First Nations, you know, and to have that background. But for other things, there's like a weird positive discrimination sometimes. I don't really know what to think about that.

You know, whatever title people give me, I just see myself as someone who makes poetry. I think that regardless of where you come from, or what your culture is, it's going to be rich. I don't think that's the most important thing to put out there. I have trouble with categories. I'd like to be accepted for what I do, period. It doesn't matter where I come from, who I represent or anything. What I do is either good or it's not, just that. Some people are chosen because they come from

a minority community, but if it's not good, jeez, it's not good. Just because you come from a minority community doesn't mean it's good.

David: It's funny because, you know, poetry is so subjective. If you read a poem and you don't know who it's by, or if you read a poem and you do know, that can completely change your perception of what you've just read. But in a race, your time is your time. You want to be on the national team, well, that's what you need to do. The colour of your skin has no impact. There's nothing less subjective. I was watching my kids, who play a million different sports, and I can see how performance is defined in each one and I realize that even within sport there is a lot of subjectivity, except in my sport. In running, it's your time, period. The coach may not like you, you may have run badly, you may not have trained well enough. What counts is your performance and your time and there is absolutely no conspiracy. It wouldn't have made any difference to my performance if I had shown up and claimed my identity or not. But I did claim it because it was always a marketing advantage. It's too bad, but it is what it is, for me anyway. There's always been that Indian ticket—I don't know if you know the term. It didn't used to be much of a ticket at all, but now it's becoming one. It's annoying; sometimes I get annoyed and I don't really know where I stand either, because I'm offered things, doors are opened for me, and sometimes I know very well that it has nothing to do with anything.

Honestly, I think I have an impact on my community, that's for sure. And these days, God, would it ever seem

wrong if there were just White people competing, if there were no First Nations athletes.

Marie-Andrée: Oh, yes, the offers you're talking about, I have plenty of examples like that too. People ask me to sit on their board and I know that it's just because they want some legitimacy. I've got a bullshit detector now, but people are super naive and earnest and they don't even see what they're doing.

David: So how do you decide if you accept or if you don't? For instance, I've got an email behind this Zoom window that I've got to reply to after this discussion, for a board. What do we do? Do we do it? Or do we not? This brings us back to the topic of leaders. It becomes an opportunity to do something positive.

Marie-Andrée: The thing is, it takes up energy, too, in the sense that, you, David, you've got your projects, and what you want to do, but if everyone asks you for help and siphons off your energy, you can't do your own work. Sometimes I realize that I've gotten involved in a lot of unimportant things. And now I'm careful, I just go for projects that I really feel have a big, positive impact. At first, I was jumping at everything: I couldn't believe that people were so interested in me, that they wanted my opinion. But, in the end, people are just doing it for themselves; they're looking for legitimacy, to appease some kind of guilt and all that. In my projects, I've tackled these sorts of topics, which can be kind of

heavy. And Indigenous people are in high demand in academic circles. Sometimes they have to resign because they thought they had a particular workload, but then their colleagues want to be validated, and everyone feels bad and dumps their stuff on you, and you've got three times as much work as you were supposed to. There's a weird momentum now. Would my books be as interesting if I weren't First Nations? I don't know. But for sure there's a kind of trend around that. And there's how we've been held in the public imagination. People have an imagined vision of Indigenous people that comes from the movies or from I don't know where. Everybody is proud to maybe have an Indigenous grandmother somewhere, you know. But beyond that, if you put those people on a reserve today, they're going to go, *Hey, they're weird*. There's a clash, there's the image of the Indigenous person who's wise and the whole thing, and then there's the image of the drunk. It's like there's nothing in between. And now people are realizing that there are things in between, but it doesn't match the image they have in their heads. Sometimes it's hard to put it all together, but I guess it's evolving.

David: The image of the Indigenous person that people have in mind, we sometimes have it too. I'm one of the only people I know who has spent time on every single reserve in Quebec. I'm going to be spending the next six weeks again going from one community to another. Reserves, real reserves, the real Indigenous world today, I know it, I know what it's like. And there's such a big clash, as you say, Marie-Andrée, between not

only what we see on TV, the stereotype, but even urban Indigenous, and what Indigenous people publicly show as to what it means to be Indigenous. I've even felt a little bit of bullying about being Indigenous enough or not. And it's like, these days, if you don't go to powwows and you're not wearing a feathered headdress, then you're not a real Indian. And I know what a real Indian is. Indians today don't have it easy, and you know what? All the Indian tickets left, right, and centre, and the government apologies and the cancelled national holidays, they don't feel that.

Marie-Andrée: No, and they don't care. All this talk doesn't reach the communities. It's on the news, but there's no impact, you know. That's not what's important, the priorities are somewhere else. What we hear is academic, it's another world, and it's a world that's closed in on itself. What happens on most reserves is so far from that. I was in Nutashkuan once and tents were set up for the event we were doing and there was a big Canadian flag. Because the guy who set up the site is a White guy, but, you know, people in the communities came and there was a big Canadian flag and nobody gave a shit. There's a discourse full of good intentions and then there are people who just go on with their day-to-day life and it's not at all the same thing. The priorities aren't there. I don't know how to put it, but I'd say they're really trying to survive from one day to the next, trying to fight against the inertia and trying to find themselves and deal with all the wounds of colonialism. Trying to find a new identity without being nomadic,

because for a long time it was nomadism that defined First Nations. But now, when you're not a nomad, what do you do, what defines you? There's language, there are traces of the culture that are becoming more and more scarce. And some people have lost their culture so much that they turn into a cliché of their own culture so that they can get validated by others. Where do we stand in this? The older I get, the more confident I am, the more I'm able to separate things and be myself and not want to play around with all of this. That's what's going on, but I don't really know what to think about it.

David: There are a few things you just said that in my opinion define the source of the problem. From the moment reserves were set up until today, and for another three, four, five generations, I think that the question that comes up is, what are you doing? What do you do? I think one of the reasons we have problems, and this is one of the things I try to remedy, is boredom. When we were nomadic, it wasn't because people didn't want to drink, it wasn't because people wanted to work hard. Who cares what they wanted; they were busy, they had no choice. When I went out in the woods with your father, I spent amazing days there, and do you know why? Because your father didn't chop his wood in advance. I would get there and say to myself, *Yikes, by nightfall it's going to be cold, it's January.* He hadn't chopped any wood, so what were we gonna do? And then I would spend all morning and part of the afternoon out with my axe trying to cut down a tree and bringing it back to camp, where he would chop it up with a chainsaw. During

that time, if I had had problems with drinking, or with anything, I wouldn't have had any problems because I had something to do, I had a job. And when we were nomads, that was it: people didn't need anything else in their lives, they were busy looking for food, taking care of their families, keeping them safe. Today, in the communities, there is nothing to do. Nothing to do. That's just it, and all the youth want is to find something to do. If all a teenager has to do is play on his tablet in his basement, well, that's what he'll do. It's as simple as that. The same goes for adults, because communities are a kind of environment where people wander around. In my opinion, one of the key solutions is that we're going to have to give both young people and adults things to do. And that includes employment, because when you work during the day, that's how you define yourself, that's what helps you get through the day. When you take off in the morning and come back in the evening, you're tired and you have to go to bed. That's one day without asking yourself questions. And it's the same for kids: you've got to give them things to do.

Marie-Andrée: Or you spend as much time as you can in the woods and keep yourself busy. In all the time I've been thinking about this, I've never seen any other solution. We're not going to go back a hundred percent to the way it used to be, but, if you spend a lot of time out there and you don't have all amenities, you keep busy. Comfort kills humans. We've reached a certain level of comfort, we're at the top, and we're destroying ourselves from inside. We're not made for

that, you know. We have bodies made to be able to run twenty kilometres a day: that's what we're made for biologically. You've got an amazing body that lets you do all kinds of things and you don't use it, so what happens? We develop autoimmune diseases, we atrophy, we get sick. There seems to be a hierarchy between now and then, as if we were now at the peak of evolution, but no. It's pure destruction. Pure destruction. It would be evolution if we were at our best, but we were at our best five hundred years ago. Now, it's like we're going downhill, so going back to the woods isn't a regression. On the contrary, it's a revolution. Going back to the woods, or getting out of your comfort zone. I say this and I live in a house where everything works by itself, but I know very well that that's not where the healing happens. I know that. And I like reading in the woods, once all my work is done.

David: In the woods you don't need an event like Ushket. We're trying to compensate by running around when all we need is to walk all day.