TheWriteQuestion_1119_JulianBraveNoiseCat_PT01

Note: THIS IS AN UNEDITED TRANSCRIPT.

Lauren Korn Hello and welcome to The Write Question, a radio program and podcast featuring authors from the American West and beyond. The Write Question is supported in part by members of Montana Public Radio and by the Greater Montana Foundation, encouraging communication on issues, trends, and values of importance to Montanans. I'm Lauren Korn and this is the first half of my conversation with Julian Brave Noisecat, author of the memoir, We Survived the Night. Now available in paperback. Julian's childhood was rich with culture and contradictions. When his native father, an artist haunted by a turbulent past, abandoned his family, Julian and his non-native mother were embraced by the urban native community in Oakland, California, as well as by family on the Canum Lake Indian Reserve in British Columbia. In his father's absence, Julian immersed himself in Native history and culture. Understand the man he seldom saw, his past, his story, where he came from, and, by extension, himself. Julian is a proud member of the Canim Lake Band and descendant of the Líl̓wat Nation of Mount Currie. Again, this is the first half of my conversation with Julian Brave Noisecat. Julian, thanks so much for joining me. Welcome to The Write Question.

Julian Brave NoiseCat Thank you so much for having me, Lauren.

Lauren Korn So let's start with the descendants of Coyote, the interior Salish people, your people. You write that we are our lands and our lands are us. Tell me about these lands that make up your lineage and introduce the interior Salish People to our listeners.

Julian Brave NoiseCat Well, firstly, thank you so much for having me. And I believe this is being recorded from the University of Montana, right?

Lauren Korn It is. We are on the traditional and unceded territories of the Salish and Kalispel peoples.

Julian Brave NoiseCat Yes, that's right. My long-lost cousins are linguistic relatives. They also speak interior Salish languages. People say when they talk, it sounds pretty similar to the way that Sihwap Mokhtin, my people's language,

Lauren Korn Mm-hmm.

Julian Brave NoiseCat So, yeah, my background is that on my mom's side, I'm an Irish-Jewish New Yorker. And on my father's side I'm a Sukwetmoch-Statliank man. And the Sukwettmoch and Statliank people are interior Salish peoples from what is now British Columbia, Canada. We hail from specifically sort of like the Fraser River area. I'm member of the Canham Lake Band, which is a rez. Um, on the sort of plateau in the woods, um, near the lakes between the Thompson and Fraser rivers. And then my grandfather, my pa, I was from, um originally a village called Shamakwam on the Líl̓wat River, which is a tributary of, of the Fraser river, um down, downstream from, um, Mount Currie, uh, which has sort of the main, uh lower statley and court headquarters, uh north of what is now. Whistler and so my peoples on on my father's side of the family are both interior Salish speaking Peoples, which is to say that we speak one of the many Salish languages that are indigenous to the Pacific Northwest and the our our languages are part of the interior Salis branch of that language family Um, so about 5 000 years ago give or take according

to linguists archeologists and also reflected in our own oral history, our people sort of branched off from the ancestors of all the Salish speakers who lived in the sort of area around sort of Vancouver in the Fraser River Valley and started following the Fraser river into the interior, fishing salmon from the river and eventually establishing ourselves. But the shtetlink, our name for ourselves, means the people of the canyon, essentially shtatlink. That's what that means. And then sqwetmokh literally translates, actually, to the spread out people. Hwep, in the middle of that word, means spread out, and mokh is a Salish ending that means the People of. So the sqwatmok people are literally the spread-out people who eventually found ourselves the furthest north interior Salish-speaking peoples. And are still residing in those homelands that our ancestors walked to fishing salmon, doing the Salish thing thousands of years ago.

Lauren Korn One thing I really loved about this book, Julian, was the way that you sort of, you go so in depth and you integrate these ideas of geography and language. You have a glossary at the end of your book and you talk about the different ways in which the Salish people have spread out. And I think that you did a very brief and concise job just now, and I encourage our listeners to read this book and get a deeper understanding of. Of those geographies, of those linguistic differences and similarities, I wanna go sort of back. I introduced you or introduced that question by saying, let's start with the descendants of Coyote and Coyotes stories, trickster stories are not only integral to your own story but they're sort of utilized in this book as a sort of grounding mechanism. There's bits of humor and chaos that kind of appear throughout the book. And you write that the trickster was not just a mythological being, he was also a worldview, philosophy, storytelling style, and tradition. So Julian, explain that idea. I think maybe some of our listeners might be familiar with Coyote as the trickstar, as this being, but what do you mean by worldview, philosophy, and storytelling style?

Julian Brave NoiseCat So firstly, I would say that like many indigenous peoples and many other peoples around the world our people Understood ourselves and our world through stories about our ancestors about our land And one of the largest bodies of that oral literature is what's referred to as the coyote stories in English It's a it's a form of story about the trickster forefather of our people coyote That is actually an incredibly widespread uh set of oral literature it stretches all the way from central america to western canada which makes it probably one of the most significant bodies of oral storytelling about a trickster character figure you know probably in the world i mean across that geography there are dozens and dozens of nations um many different language families you know people who spoke languages that are more different than, you know, English and Russian. So video. You know, this is a really significant body of human knowledge is what I'm saying, first of all. What I would secondly say is that it is also, at least from my part of Indian country that my family comes from in my own family context, it is a very endangered form of culture and art and storytelling. I never heard anyone in my family tell a coyote story except for my uncle. Uh who told one coyote story uh his name was Bucky and he was my grandfather had 19 kids um that I could name there's probably more actually and Bucky was kind of one of the ones over here on another rez who we didn't meet until he was over 50 my dad didn't even know he existed until my father met him um which is to say that you know Bucky was kind not not really a part of our family until later in life And he's also gone now and he's the only one who I ever told heard tell a coyote story Which I think is an accurate reflection of where this this form of our culture is, you know, it has nearly died out Despite the fact that it was an essential part of our way of understanding who we are so when I started set out to write we survived the night I um Made the probably pretty unusual decision for a 28 year old bachelor at the time Which was to move in with my my old man with my dad Um, you know, he was, uh, so quite much stat link

artists who I remember being pictured on the cover of native people's magazine, uh with a backwards Kangal cap and purple rock star shades. So he was. He was quite a Coyote himself, so to speak. And, um, you, I, he left our family when I was about six years old. Um, so I didn't really spend a whole heck of a lot of time with him. I had a kind of complicated broken relationship with him And I knew that the book I was writing, which was about our relationship, about indigeneity, I knew they would have a lot to do with him. And so I figured I might as well move in with the guy and understand him and our relationship and our identity, our culture sort of firsthand. And so while I was living with my dad, because he's an artist, he'd be out in the garage. Um carving and and making his work while i would be sitting at this exact desk actually that i'm doing this interview at right now i'm working on we survived the night as well as um a documentary that i i co-directed called sugarcane about the indian residential schools and an investigation that unfolded at the school where my father was born and um you know i i had this notion that i would ornament the the text that i would have these little flourishes that touched on some of our oral histories And it began as a very small idea. And to learn the Coyote stories because they have very nearly died out among my people, I actually had to go read them in old anthropological texts, like books that are over a hundred years old that I was finding on like Google Scholar and JSTOR and things like that, just to give you a sense for what indigeneity can be sometimes in the 21st century. Sometimes you're learning about yourself and your own people, you know, through the internet. Um, so, you know, there I was sitting there living with my dad, um, learning about him and our relationship and learning about our trickster forefather Coyote and in the PDF, it was talking about basically, um if you read between the lines, how Coyoti was this epic creator, destroyer, survivor, deadbeat dad, and I was, you know, reading this and, and one day it kind of struck me, you know, I was like, oh my God, like, you know, was looking out at the garage where my dad was making his own art, um you know out there. Listening to Led Zeppelin, leaned over a log, smoking weed, like this epic creator, destroyer, survivor, deadbeat dad. And it hit me, I was like, oh my God, these stories are talking about men like my father. My dad is in a sense the trickster coyote himself. That was our first ancestor, and we understood that we had the trickstar in our bloodlines, that that was part of who we are. That was what our first forefather, that was part of. You know, our complexity, which is, I think, a really complicated and beautiful thought, you know? That we are descended from a trickster who is second only to the creator and the creation of the world, at least our part of it, and yet who is also, in every story about him, sort of an example of how not to behave, you know an example of someone who was up to no good and self-serving. I think that there's so, I think that that's actually a really profound way to look at it and understand our human nature, you know our humanity. Um, and it became very clear to me that that was one of the purposes of the coyote stories, you know Just one of them but but but certainly an important one um, you, know the coyotes stories are are are They truly are a body of um oral literature that is you know Getting at so many different things in addition to you know Talking about our patriarchs and our fathers and our grandfathers and our uncles and ourselves and why we are the way we are They also get at major environmental and cultural transformations in our history. One of the biggest coyote stories told across the Northwest is a story about how a coyote led the first salmon up the rivers. Essentially in every version of the story, coyote finds himself caught in a fish trap that's being operated, it depends on the version, but it's usually being operated by two witches of some sort who are doing something that's obviously bad, which is they're catching all the fish and keeping them for themselves. And you know, Coyote does his coyote thing. He sort of tricks them and then breaks their fish trap and leads them up the river and then, you know uses the fish to try to marry into every single village that will have him along the river because you know he's the coyote, that's kind of his MO. But really interestingly in the Sukhwetmukh version the Shushwap version of that story, we situate that fish trap. At the

same place where experts will tell you 11,000 years ago there was in fact an ice dam that held up a series of glacial lakes across the interior of what is now British Columbia, Canada. And 11, 000 years ago that ice dam really did break in what is called a Jokuljop in Icelandic. That's the term for an ice damn flood forming the present course of the Fraser River which was then populated by the salmon. So in this coyote story in this oral history there is a human memory of an event at the end of the last ice age that is thousands and thousands of years older than the pyramids than the bible and you know i mean like i think people tend to have a very low view of supposedly pre-literate cultures and you know our knowledge and our contributions to the humanities i mean the entire project of colonization is premised on the idea that eliminating our people was a form of progress, that getting rid of us was a form of humans becoming more enlightened, that when we got sent to these schools and colonized and all that sort of stuff, humanity was becoming smarter. When in fact, if you understand the incredible wealth of knowledge, of perspective, of philosophy, of what we would describe as non-fiction, social science, truth. Uh... You know in these coyote stories you know they are it is quite profound you know there there's a quote in uh... In a reader on salish oral history where uh... A guy from uh... Kaluya so he must be from the interior of washington state i believe they're from like nespelum or something the kaluyas uh... Talks about how all the knowledge in the world that you need to know is actually right there in the coyote story and what's really beautiful about it uh... Do you know just put an even finer point on it. Is that that knowledge is very often encoded in metaphor, in forms of describing events that are not literal, which is something that is shared across the indigenous world. For example, the Maori and Aotearoa, they talk about how Maui fished the island of New Zealand, the North Island of New Zeeland out of the South Sea using the jawbone of his grandmother, which is a metaphor for the fact that he found. Uh... You know the the the people who found discovered new zealand you know using use the knowledge of their ancestors use knowledge of the matriarchs uh... Which is undoubtedly what happened you know that is a form of uh... Of significant cultural and intellectual history that is encoded right there in in the story and uh... You know i think that those kinds of things are exist across the coyote stories across indigenous forms of oral storytelling, and that they have nearly in many, many instances, like the coyote story has been wiped off the face of the earth, which I think has represented one of the most significant losses of human knowledge in the history of the world. And I don't think that that's a hyperbolic statement.

Lauren Korn You're listening to A Conversation with Julian Brave Noise Cat. I'm Lauren Korn. This episode of The Write Question is supported by Bookworks of Whitefish, offering new books of all genres, stationary, and puzzles. Open 11-6 Monday through Saturday, located in downtown Whitefish Montana in the 3rd and Spokane building. I want to go in so many different directions with your answer, but the first being you kept talking about creation and destruction. So I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit more about the relationship between creativity and destruction as it pertains to Coyote, yes, but also your dad, his work and your own work too.

Julian Brave NoiseCat Yeah, I mean, I think that what's really interesting about the coyote is that he hit the stories about the coyote often pertain to moments of significant transformation, environmental transformation and cultural transformation. The coyote himself, of course, is a transformer. And I think in that there is a really interesting relationship to tradition and to transformation. I think that there is often this assumption that indigenous cultures are, you know, supposed to be this freeze frame at the moment in time when our first ancestors met the first white man who happened to wander into our homelands and that that is all our cultures ever can and should be. And I think anthropology has played some role in portraying us this way. And still to this day, modern

biases against indigenous cultures. Say essentially that our that's what our cultures have to be that they're not allowed to change or transform like other cultures are which is to say that indigenous cultures are still not allowed to live and i think within the the the observation that the stories themselves are about transformation that our first ancestor one of them at least was himself a shape-shifter a transformer there is an acknowledgement that our ancestors were incredibly wise to to pass down to us. Which is that you know in order to survive sometimes we have to transform sometimes we have to change that that transformation that process of creating some things and destroying other things you know metamorphosis is inherent to the world and to our people and into our survival. But there's also I would say a word of caution you know part of the reason why The coyote is often losing his way is that he's constantly he's constantly transforming, he's constantly tricking, he is constantly changing. And the Coyote was, at the same time as he was this creator of the world, he was also our example of how not to be. And so I think in that, there is a note of caution around be discerning about the kinds of transformations that you make to yourself and to the world this culture. Because if you change too much, you can lose your way. And I think that therein lies, you know, a real wisdom about what tradition really is. You know, I think that a tradition is something that remains relevant to our lives to this day. You know it's something that connects us to one another, to our land, to our ancestors. It tells us what our obligations are to those things while at the same time remaining true to some of the ideas at its core. And so, you now I think that there's just a lot. In these stories, an acknowledgement of the complexity of the world, the complexity of ourselves, you know, the need to transform while also retaining, you know, who you are. And, you know, I think that remarkably they have survived despite persistent efforts to wipe them off the face of the earth, and they still also remarkably, I would say, speak to are the way that our people still are. The way that we still retain a significant connection to our river that provides a salmon, for example. The way that, despite efforts to tear native families apart through Indian residential schools and Native American boarding schools, still place an enormous emphasis on the importance of being related to our people, like being someone's cousin, really means something. And I'm half white. I can tell you that on the white side of my family, I have cousins, sure, but we're not involved in each other's lives in any significant kind of way.

Lauren Korn I want to point out a moment in your documentary, in Sugar Cane. An elder named Charlene says to you, this is while you are visiting a building where many Native children were kept, and you're seeing inscriptions and engravings on the walls. And she says, Julian, I ask you to open your eyes, your ears, your heart. Our elders are now looking to you to listen to our stories, you're going to make sure people are being held accountable. So the healing and the stories that you're spotlighting, not only in Sugarcane, but in We Survived the Night, they are not only yours, they are your fathers, your peoples. And I'm wondering, what does sharing that process look like for you when you're writing not only towards your own understanding of a past and a living history, but many peoples? How do you carry what seems... Especially in this moment, in this documentary, a very large responsibility. How do you carry that?

Julian Brave NoiseCat Yeah, you know, it is a very heavy thing to be sort of tasked in a sense with being a spokesperson for the genocide that your people survived, you know, and nobody like officially put that title on to me. But you know when you end up making a documentary that is, you know, the most significant feature documentary about the history of the Indian residential schools that gets nominated for an Academy Award and travels around the world, like to a certain extent, that is kind of the mantle, the responsibility that's placed upon you. And it is a very, it's a very heavy one. And it's one that has haunted me and has kept me up late at night many times. And I've had nightmares about different

aspects of telling this story. And I... I think that I'm gonna be processing that for a long, long time. I mean, it's both like a very beautiful thing that my Auntie Charlene and my people, you know, the Limbs like First Nation, my family trusted me to tell this story. And on the other hand, you know interestingly, it's not something that I like set out to do on my own. Like I didn't like instigate the making of Sugarcane, my co-director did. And she reached out to me and just happened to, You know? Choose to focus while I was like making decision about whether I was going to even work on the movie, she happened to choose to focused on the very same school that my family was sent to and my father was born without even knowing that that's what she had done. So when I called her back to be like, hey, you know, about that documentary, I'd be open to working with you on that. You know, that's when she said like, I'm working on following the investigation at St. Joseph's mission, which laid before me a whole set of other considerations and decisions that have, you know. Completely changed my life and changed my father's life and changed family's life. You know, my family, I would say like many other families that survived the Indian residential schools, we survived it in part by not talking about it because what happened there was so heavy and so painful. We often talk about the silence. In indigenous studies, there's sort of overarching question, which is like, why is this history not known? Why are these histories invisible? Why are our people a race? Um, from the historical record. And, you know, I think that the usual culprits and rightful culprit are usually churches, you know, the government, um, you know, the media, things like that. But what I would add to that is that the silence, the erasure, you know, it was also something that in, at least in my community, in my family, we internalized ourselves and then we ourselves perpetuated, um not in sort of a malicious way, but as a way to survive, you To move forward because like if you were just going to keep thinking about what happened at these schools You know that was incredibly difficult And so, you know my father for example Even though he was born at st joseph's mission and found in the trash incinerator moments after after he was Born on the night of august 16 1959 by the night watchman You know who described his cries for life as sounding like the noise of a cat which by the way is crazy Because our last name is noise cat You know, like he didn't know that story until I set out to write We Survived the Night and to make Sugarcane. And so, you know, I think that there's a lot in there. You know I think in my work, I think there's the question of what is it to break these colonial silences and in so doing, do you further harm or do you create the possibility for, you now? Truth and reconciliation and healing and things like that. And I think so far I would say that it's been much more of the the latter than the former um, and then you know, I think that there's also in there a question of at the end of the day we're talking about a system of I think sometimes like secular terminology doesn't even fully get at it like even the term genocide sometimes I don't think gets that You know the attempted spiritual elimination of our people and our way of life and our way of belief, which was, you know, the stated goal of the Indian residential schools in the Native American boarding schools. That's what they were trying to do. They were trying to get rid of our way life and way of being and replace it with another one. And so you know when you get placed, not by your own choosing in this in the situation of telling that story, when you happen to be placed in that situation when you were the son of the only known survivor of the trash incinerator at St. Joseph's Mission, an until-hour work, unreported pattern of infanticide at one of these schools. And then when you discover that in the story of your father's survival, there is a reference to his cries for life as sounding like the noise of a cat. Uh... When in fact you know our our our last name noise cat actually only became noise cat because the missionaries wrote it down wrong uh... So in a sense it was a name that found its meaning a new meaning in my father's survival you know listen i wasn't raised religious like i can do the catholic hymns in our own language and things like that but you know i i I didn't go to church when I was a kid, but like when when you find yourself in this set of circumstances, I think you have to also be open to spiritual truths and spiritual ways of telling and

approaching these stories. I mean, in a sense, these stories were spiritual from the get-go. That was the intention. And so, I think that the way that you tell them and the way you heal from them also leaves open the reality that our experiences as human beings are not. Entirely secular that like, you know, we deal with questions of our relationship to, you know, spirituality to, life and death, whatever's beyond those things, ancestors to beyond in ways that

Lauren Korn This was the first half of my conversation with Julian Brave Noisecat, author of the memoir We Survived the Night, out now in paperback from Vintage Books. To listen to this conversation again, to share it with friends, or to learn more about Julian, head to mtpr.org. You've been listening to The Write Question. This episode was produced by Chris Moyles and me, I'm your host, Lauren Korn. Chris also engineered this episode. The artwork for The Write Question was designed by Molly Russell. Funding for The Write Question is provided by the Greater Montana Foundation, encouraging communication on issues, trends, and values of importance to Montanans. Many thanks to Humanities Montana for supporting this program since 2008. And thank you for listening. The Write Question is a production of Montana Public Radio.