Listening to Indians

JANICE NACKE, Shoshone - Navajo
October 30, 1975
Pocatello, Idaho

This transcript is one of a series of interviews with American Indian people throughout much of the United States by S. I. Myers of the History Department of St. Louis Community College at Florissant Valley, St. Louis, Missouri, 63135.

The purpose of these interviews is to bring the Indian peoples' own comments to students in classrooms, and to foster greater understanding among the peoples of the United States by providing Indians the opportunity to express their ideas and opinions to a wider audience.

This transcript has been edited for clarity and ease of reading, but every effort has been made to preserve the original feeling. Conversations and opinions were encouraged on any subject of interest to interviewees; questions and responses do not necessarily reflect the viewpoint of the interviewer, the National Endowment for the Humanities, or St. Louis Community College.

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No. 96

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Sam Myers:

I'm in Pocatello, Idaho, at Idaho State University, and I'm talking to a young lady here whose name is Janice Nacke. She's half Navajo and half Shoshone. Is that right, Janice?

Janice Nacke:

Right.

SM: Were you born in this area, and did you grow up here, Janice?

JN: Yes.

SM: At Fort Hall?

JN: Um hm.

SM: I was up at Fort Hall this afternoon at the tribal council headquarters building there. Generally speaking, most of the people, from the superintendent on down, didn't want to get involved in one of these conversations without the permission of the council. Is that typical?

JN: Yes.

SM: Why is that? Has some injury been done to people up there?

JN: Not really. They just don't like to give out that kind of information, because the tribe is losing a lot of things, like their culture and heritage, a lot of stuff like that, and they think, I guess, it's kind of like a selling out.

SM: That's the way they feel? I didn't understand that, but now that I do, I would be in sympathy with their feelings.

JN: Some of the people that go out there, they get in lot of people's way
out there, just bothering them with all kinds of dumb questions, and it's a waste of their time too.

SM: If it had been a day without the council in session, maybe the superintendent or somebody would have been quite willing to talk. Anyway, I'm glad to find you and learn more about it, 'cause now I already feel a little bit better about this afternoon, because I sort of felt that I was intruding, that I had been trying to do something they didn't like, and I guess I was, wasn't I, in a way?

JN: Yeah, it just probably depends on what was going on over there.

SM: We're sitting in the Student Union building. Is this one of the lounges of the building here on the second floor?

JN: Yeah.

SM: It's a nice room, it's quiet, a big room, comfortably furnished. Do you like the school here?

JN: Yeah, I really do. It's kinda large though.

SM: About how many students?

JN: I'm not really sure.

SM: Well now, let's get back to you. Which one of your parents is Shoshone?

JN: My mother is.

SM: And your father is Navajo?

JN: Yes.
SM: Is he up here now?

JN: No, he's back at home right now on a vacation, but he should be coming back.

SM: He'll be home soon. Do you have any brothers and sisters?

JN: Just two sisters.

SM: Are you the oldest?

JN: No.

SM: The youngest?

JN: No.

SM: The middle?

JN: Yes.

SM: Is there any truth in that old adage that the middle child always feels left out?

JN: I don't know. No, I don't think so.

SM: Well, anyway, you went to school up there on the Fort Hall Reservation. Is it a government school or a public school?

JN: They're all public schools. They're trying to get their own school started, I guess a high school, started out there.

SM: This committee I was talking with is working on a curriculum for
basic education and adult education too.

JN: Yeah. Some of their adult education is getting started now. The curriculum, I understand, is only for the tribe, though. They're publishing some books, but it's not gonna go out to be sold on the market. It's just gonna stay within the tribe.

SM: I didn't know that. I figured they'd want to sell all they could.

JN: No, they don't. It's more for the younger kids who are growing up, the small ones, 'cause a lot of the history has died, has gone away.

SM: This is true in many cases. In fact some whole tribes have just disintegrated and disappeared.

JN: Um hm. And this is one way to keep it a little bit alive. The old people won't still be here when the younger kids are grown up. They won't know what they experienced and everything.

SM: It's a very worthy attempt. I hope it works.

JN: I do too.

SM: Do you feel more at home up here or down in Navajo land?

JN: Well, I'm not really sure. When I stay here for a while, I think of my people over there, and then I go there for a while, like I've been goin' to school there, then I think of my family here.

SM: You have relatives down there too?

JN: Um hm.
SM: You graduated from high school here, up near Fort Hall?

JN: Yeah. I graduated from Blackfoot.

SM: Blackfoot High School?

JN: Um hm.

SM: That's a town just north of Fort Hall?

JN: Um hm.

SM: And then where did you go?

JN: And then I went to Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado.

SM: That's way down in the Four Corners country, isn't it?

JN: Um hm.

SM: Colorado doesn't actually have any part of the Navajo Reservation, does it?

JN: Well, it used to be on a reservation, and then I guess they changed it or something went wrong.

SM: The reservation is in Utah, Arizona and New Mexico now, and it's rather noticeably missing from that corner of Colorado. That's where your relatives are?

JN: No, they're on the corner of Utah, right around the Four Corners area.

SM: Beautiful country down there. Have you been through the Monument Valley?
JN: Yeah.

SM: That's west of where your relatives live, so if any of our listeners see a picture of Monument Valley, they'll know that that's near where you go to visit sometimes. You didn't stay at Fort Lewis College in Durango, though. You came here. To get closer to home?

JN: Yeah. It's mostly financial. Like I can stay with my parents free, without paying any kind of a house . . . my board and stuff.

SM: That's the biggest part of the expenses, board and room, isn't it?

JN: Yeah.

SM: Do your folks live out at Fort Hall?

JN: Yeah.

SM: You drive back and forth?

JN: Um hm.

SM: It's only eight miles. That's not bad. Lots of our kids drive farther than that in the city. You can get a grant from the BIA and go to any school you choose, can't you?

JN: Yeah.

SM: Have you looked into it?

JN: Yeah. That's how I went down to Fort Lewis.

SM: How did it go in Fort Lewis?
JN: It was all right. There were a lot of Indians in school there too.

SM: More than here?

JN: Yeah, I think there were a lot more than here.

SM: You don't know how many Indian students there are here?

JN: I think about 80.

SM: In a student body how big?

JN: Oh, I'm not sure. I'm not sure how big this is.

SM: Two thousand?

JN: Yeah, about that.

SM: It looks like it, from the size of the campus. This is Idaho State University. The University of Idaho is on the other side of the state over there at Moscow, isn't it?

JN: Yeah, it's way up there.

SM: That's farther north and much farther west too. Did you consider going there?

JN: One time I did, but it would be too far. I don't know anybody up there either.

SM: What's your major going to be, Janice?

JN: I'm not too sure yet, but I think education.
SM: Are you going to be a teacher?

JN: Yeah, I want to try to go out and help my people some way. I don't know how, but I'll . . .

SM: Elementary school?

JN: No, in secondary.

SM: High school. That would be at Blackfoot? Is that on the reservation?

JN: No, that's off of the reservation. We don't have any kind of high schools or junior highs on the reservation, but we do have one elementary school, and that's been on there for quite a while, it's a public school.

SM: Well, then, if you were to teach in a high school, you'd have to get off the reservation some place, wouldn't you?

JN: Yeah. Well, that's what the curriculum is for, to try to get their material together so they can possibly form some kind of high school on the reservation.

SM: How many people do you have on the reservation?

JN: I'm not too sure about that either. I know our tribe isn't too big.

SM: It's called the Shoshone-Bannock, isn't it?

JN: Um hm.

SM: And you are adding a new element by being half Navajo. Shoshone-Bannock, they're northern people compared to the Navajos, aren't
they? I mean, they're found up here in Idaho and Montana?

JN: Um hm.

SM: At least if my old maps are correct. Then the Navajo people are found down there in Four Corners, mostly in Arizona, which is another whole state south of here yet on the other side of Utah.

JN: Well, that's where they were located on discovery of them, but originally they came down from the North, because that's where they picked up a lot of their skills and traditions, like the basket-weaving and some of the pottery and some of the legends.

SM: Are you familiar with the historical background of the people pieced together by archeologists, how they came across the Bering Straits?

JN: Oh that! I've heard of it and stuff. For me, I don't really believe it or anything. But I think ... I don't know, it's kinda hard to say. I'm not really sure. I haven't thought about it that much.

SM: Well, you know some of the Navajo people, the older folks, believe they've always lived down there in the country of Arizona, that they've been here since creation. Maybe they're right, but archeologists say that they drifted across from Asia and Athapascan Indians in Canada, northwest Canada, Alaska, can still understand Navajos and Apaches. They're of the Athapascan linguistic group, aren't they? Well, it would be interesting to speculate more about it. Do you have any religious conflicts with that theory?

JN: Not really.

SM: Anyway, here you are, and this is your first semester at Idaho State?

JN: Yeah.
SM: Everything going O.K. so far?

JN: Yeah, everything's all right except one class.

SM: You've got one toughie?

JN: Yeah.

SM: What's that?

JN: History.

SM: Is it hard?

JN: Yeah.

SM: American history?

JN: Yeah.

SM: Do they teach you as much as they should about Indians?

JN: No. They have a couple of classes on Indians, but they're only touching on a few of the tribes.

SM: Well, it's a pretty complex subject, you know. It almost takes a special course.

JN: Yeah. Well, it's kinda hard to teach Indian history, because a lot of it is just oral, and they can't really take the documents of the white man either, because their point of view was completely different than the Indians'.
SM: Have you taken any of the other courses in Indian history?

JN: Some of them I have.

SM: Are you going to take more? You're interested, aren't you?

JN: Yeah, I am. There's a lot of the material that they teach that I kind of disagree with. It's kinda hard for me to sit through the classes.

SM: Can you think of an example?

JN: Well, we have this history class over here, taught by Mrs. Bagley, and it's American studies or history class, and she has a Chippewa-Cree speaking about religion, and he kinda went into that, and religion is kinda . . . you know, hard to explain to the white people, because it's completely different.

SM: And his would be different than yours too?

JN: Yeah, um huh.

SM: And yours would be different from the Hopis?

JN: Um hm. Yeah, it's kinda hard to teach. And even in their own tribe they're kinda different, their beliefs are different in their tribe too, and the way they live is different, so I don't see how they could try to sum it up. Because there's a lot of things, like the Chippewa-Cree believe in, you know, that maybe his family or the part where he comes from will believe in that, but you just can't generalize. This guy said that the Chippewa-Cree are really friendly, and if you have a Chippewa-Cree for a friend you're just about adopted into a family. Well, that's just about the same that
happens to almost any Indian tribe that I've seen. Like the Navajos, they're quite friendly when you get to know them, you know, and so are the Shoshones.

SM: There have been times when they used to make war on each other.

JN: Of course, they still do that too at this time. I kinda have trouble doing that too, because I'm half and half. There's a lotta people on the reservation who kinda . . . I guess they don't like the idea of me being both. When I'm staying here I'm noted for as a Navajo, and then when I go back to the Navajo Reservation they note me as a Shoshone.

SM: Do they really give you any trouble though, or is it just a word now and then?

JN: Yeah.

SM: It isn't anything really serious?

JN: No.

SM: Because isn't there a kind of movement or tendency now among all the tribes in the United States to sort of get together a little more?

JN: Yeah, that is true, because I've been to a lot of powwows, and there's been a lot of instances where a lot of Indians kind of all come together and unite that way, and they're kind of proud to be.

SM: It's a marked change. A Sioux man from South Dakota said that ten years ago if he saw somebody from another tribe he wouldn't pick him up. Now he would go out of his way to pick him up, and he would take
him over to his home and ask him if he was hungry, and he would give
him something to eat and help him on his way, because Indians have
changed from this idea of quarreling with each other to sticking
together, 'cause it's one of the only ways they're going to make
real progress. Is that O.K.?

JN: Yeah, that's right. There was a conference at Sun Valley, and there
was different kind of Indian tribes going there.

SM: When was this?

JN: I'm not sure. About last month. And there was quite a few Indian
tribes got together up there. I didn't get to go, I went to Ship-
rock Fair. It's really dusty though. And everybody just unites.
They kinda give respect for what kind of Indian tribe you come from,
and stuff.

SM: There's another meeting in Portland next month. Have you heard about
that one?

JN: No.

SM: National Congress of American Indians. There was another one too, in
Oklahoma a few days ago. There are three meetings we just mentioned
between us. The Indian people are getting together more and more,
aren't they?

JN: Um hm.

SM: And then there are other movements too, like the protest movements.
Have you heard of the American Indian Movement?

JN: Yeah.
SM: Have you ever seen them, or do you know any of the people in it?

JN: Some of them are my friends. I'm not really involved in it. Some of their opinions are all right, and some of them I disagree on.

SM: I've talked to people who say it's very bad, and I've talked to other people who think many of the things they do are very good.

JN: Well, a lot of people, they consider AIM as being so vicious, you know, tearing everything down, and guns and the whole works. Well, a lot of my friends are AIMs and they're not like that. They've got their beliefs and they're proud to be Indian. I guess when they say "Indian" I mean . . . the people, that's what they call it. In our language we call each other "the people" instead of "the Indians." I think all Indian tribes, they relate to themselves as "the people." And anyway, they kinda . . . got their beliefs and stuff. I guess it just depends on the people who are in AIM. There are some people who don't protest. There's a guy downstairs. He's an AIM and he won't do anything like . . . that, but there's a lot of different . . . they've got a lot of good opinions, and there's just, I guess, a way of going about it that gives them a bad name.

SM: Your commenting on this is helping because more information helps make the whole picture more clear.

JN: See, at Crowfair, I have attended that, and we were talking to some guys and they said, "We're AIM, we're AIM" you know, they were out there having a good time, they were war dancing, and after the war dancing they were busy forty-nining, and they stayed away from liquor.

SM: What is "forty-nining?"
JN: Forty-nine Dance. That's one of the songs and they get together you know, all night long, and there's some guys over there, and they said they don't believe in drinking, 'cause that downgrades the Indian image, and so we decided to go to town, my friend and I. And we went to that next town and saw some more guys. And they says, "We're AIM, we're AIM," and they were so violent about it, you know. I think it's those kind of people who ruin the image of being AIM.

SM: Unfortunately then the most extreme things are the things that get the news coverage. It's been one of those things that's stirred more opinions pro and con than anything that's happened recently.

JN: Yeah.

SM: At least it's got people talking about Indians.

JN: Well, it seems like when you say "Indian"... what do you picture?

SM: Me?

JN: Um hm.

SM: I see a thousand different kinds of people.

JN: If you say that to somebody else they picture these other things that has come out, I guess, the one-sided vision, like lazy Indian, no-good Indian, that kind of stuff.

SM: Well, we're working hard to correct that. You look like it's kind of doubtful we'll ever make it, but I think we will.

JN: Yeah, we'd better.
SM: Well, with people like you. Here you are, going to college, you're going to get a degree, you're going back and work with your people.

JN: That's what I hope to do.

SM: You probably will. Of the last dozen people I've talked to, about eight or ten of them are going to do the same thing. They're going into law, medicine, education, counseling. It looks good for the future, doesn't it?

JN: Um.

SM: Well, you have that meeting waiting for you. I want you to know I appreciate your taking the time. Thanks very much, Janice, I appreciate it.

JN: O.K.