

Dear Wynonah (First Daughter)

Denise S. McConney

[I also send this letter and include in the dedication of this piece, my nieces and nephews – Brandon, Nadia, Blake, Ginnini, Kathleen Denise, Jack, Annie, Mariah, Jaime, Davis and Austin – that the world they grow up in will be a safer place for them to be who they are.]

Dah-Niss (my daughter):

I am writing this letter in anticipation of the question that you will someday ask me: Why do I, a White woman, teach Native Studies? This letter will explain how I came to teach Native Studies and how I developed the background to be able to teach Native Studies. I also want to discuss with you my specific purpose in teaching Native Studies. I hope this letter will answer the questions I think you will have.

First of all, I want to say that I am proud to be teaching Native Studies and even more proud about the way I came to be teaching it. I believe that what we can do in Native Studies is of crucial importance to both the immediate and long-range future of all our peoples. In our Native Studies classes, we – both my teaching colleagues and our students – have an incalculably valuable opportunity to affect the future of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, and I am proud to be part of this.

Our classes have Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and both of these groups of students have vital roles and responsibilities. In our classes, we¹ have the opportunity to change the way Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relationships have developed since the arrival of Europeans on Turtle Island. That history has not happened in a good way. There has been much damage both to Mother Earth and her Original peoples here. And that must stop. None of us will survive – into the seventh generation² – if we do not make fundamental changes in the way we deal with each other and our Mother. In Native Studies, we have the chance to explain the damage (too much of the actual history of this land and her peoples and the efforts of the colonizers is not understood by people) and to explore different (not new³) ways of relating to each other. Quite honestly, my girl, I cannot imagine any more important work.

It is very important to me that I was offered the chance to be part of this

work. This means being part of explaining the damage from the perspective of the Aboriginal peoples. It means being part of encouraging Aboriginal excellence from the position that Aboriginal peoples have much to offer to others when they have an honoured place and space to do so. It also means I must teach those others to listen carefully and respectfully. I take this responsibility very seriously. I carry this responsibility with great humility and the awareness that it is a delicate bundle⁴ for one of my colour to have been entrusted with.

Even before Auntie Trish⁵ brought me into this work, I knew there were/are those who do not believe (having brought their hearts and minds to this) that it is appropriate for White people to be teaching in Native Studies. And this has been discussed within our family too.⁶ I know that simply being your mother is not enough to guarantee that I would do a good enough job. Many non-Aboriginal people have raised and are raising Aboriginal children – some as birth parents and many as adoptive or foster parents. These children have not necessarily been raised in ways that affirm who these children truly are. The simple fact of birthing and/or parenting Aboriginal children does not guarantee understanding or appropriateness. This takes something more.

Only you and I and our Indian relatives know how I go about the task the Creator has given me – the responsibility of single-parenting an Anishnaebaequae.⁷ This brings up your tri-cultural heritage. The Anishnaebae Midewin people taught me and support me in most of what I have come to understand about being Indian in the traditional ways. That is what I pass on to you. Those are the ceremonies we participated in while I was still carrying you. It was a Midewin teaching that I followed when you were first born, to introduce you to the world in the only good way that I knew. I put you to my breast, before they cut the umbilical cord that bound us together, so you would receive your first nourishment within a circle of life. As I understand it, this was so that you would know that you were part of the circle and would always be cared for and nurtured when you were within the circle.⁸ You are Kainai, a Blood of the Blackfoot Confederacy.⁹ We also visit our other family in Banff regularly; partly so you know them and partly so you also have time in the mountains and territory of your people. Frankly, my girl, you are learning a lot. For example, with all of these various kinds of help that we get, and given that we live in Cree territory, although you do not yet speak your language, you do understand and speak parts of most of the Algonkian language family. All of this is just to say that I know “having Indian friends” or “raising / being raised with Indian children” does not necessarily mean very much in terms of understanding. To raise you in a

good way and to help make a better world for you, means learning for you and learning with you. This also grounds my university teaching.

Teaching Native Studies is not a responsibility that I would have taken up on my own initiative. Nor would I likely have accepted the task solely on the invitation of non-Native

scholars. For me, it was necessary that this come at the request of an Aboriginal scholar and one that knew me well. And, as usual, if I had any idea of what I was getting into, I probably would not have done it. (If you and Kate develop a relationship anything like mine and your Auntie's, remember those words.) It is also one of the most wonderful and exciting things that I have done in and with my life. And, as you read further on this letter, you will see that really means something.

I took up teaching Native Studies because Auntie Trish,¹⁰ after knowing me for many years and knowing my work for and with Native people, trusted me. She trusted me to teach, to present information about Native peoples in a way that they, Native peoples themselves, would find appropriate. This may be putting words in her mouth¹¹ but I assume she came to believe I could do good work because she watched me struggle with treatment centres, support programs, schools and social services to make appropriate spaces available. These were not just for my adolescent clients. I have also argued for Native staff (plural) and management level positions – for Indian people to run Indian programs.¹² I think she saw that I used what privilege I had to open spaces for Aboriginal people to move into.¹³

She also saw me drive many miles, spend many hours and put my own money into supporting the Native Brotherhoods in the Kingston-area penitentiaries. Yes, my girl, your mom has spent a lot of time in a lot of prisons. As a matter of fact, when the father of one of my clients was threatening to kill me, I “ran away” to Kingston Penitentiary to feel safe with the Brotherhood there. The guys thought that was pretty funny. I actually spent many, many happy hours with the various Brotherhoods at meetings, workshops, socials, pow wows and ceremonies. I also spent time just helping out the Native Liaison service and others. I would meet the elders and drive them around town. I did not spend much direct time with the Prison for Women Sisterhood. I did more background work for them: making sure elders got there and back to their hotels; checking on clearances for special guests and “materials”; providing game (meat) for their feasts and that sort of thing. Sometimes I miss those days. I learned so much from those men and women: from the elders and teachers; from doctors, lawyers, counsellors, activists, workers in Native organizations and community people that I first met back there.

From those experiences, I came to move lightly in Native circles and communities. This is not because I would be shunned by Native people when I made mistakes. They are, in general, tolerant of honest mistakes and understanding with learners. Rather, it was (and is) my concern and awareness of the generations and generations of oppression and damage that my people have wrought. I have absolutely no wish to add to that. I know, too, that some White scholars have contributed to this and continue to contribute to this with their sometimes unconscious assumptions of superiority, and even "superior" knowledge of Aboriginal ways and cultures. I do not wish to join this group in telling Native people who they are, even if this appears to be coming from the "study" of Native history and culture. I feel humble and honoured that my more recent Aboriginal colleagues support my efforts.¹⁴

If I am telling my Aboriginal students anything, it is about the hidden history of the methods of their oppression. It is about how their oppression was accomplished; how it was so cleverly and thoroughly planned. It is important for me to clearly identify the current state of affairs as the on-going effects of this. It is my hope that they can come to understand what went wrong; the how and why. From this, they can then begin to cast off the internalized oppression and believe in themselves and their people. The current state of too many Aboriginal peoples was constructed *for* them – it was not created by them and it has not come about because of some inherent flaw in them. It is also not necessarily a permanent state of affairs. Encountering this belief (that is, Indian peoples believing that they cannot achieve good self-government) breaks my heart. It angers me to see the internalized racism and genuine fears of what the current leadership would do.

As a brief aside, if you have not been reading the footnotes so far, I recommend that you do so. They contain important and different information. To the non-Aboriginal readers: many of them mention my teachers, colleagues, friends and family. This may seem to be either appropriate "referencing" or name dropping. From a Eurocentric cultural perspective, either would be a reasonable assumption. To the Aboriginal readers, the name dropping may seem like a defence mechanism (and likely one that you are all too familiar with). You may be asking yourselves if this is the old "See, I'm OK, I like Indians and Indians like me" excuse. It is not and I am sure we all know how much credibility to give that one.

I had to do some thinking myself about why I was putting in all these names and thank-yous. As I was writing this, they just appeared as part of the flow. They were a natural part of the text. They were integral to what

I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it. It was only with subsequent re-readings and editing that they began to stand out. So, what are they? I have come to two understandings with respect to the "people" footnotes. One is that they locate me in the web of relationships and connections that form Indian country. For me, these people are my relatives. The other thing is that this is my thanksgiving (no, not the turkey and pumpkin pie one). For me, this feels like the appropriate way to pay my respects to all these people.¹⁵

I know that I have been very fortunate to be able to hear and know these people. They are some of the people whose vision goes beyond the simple "Let there be Aboriginal people in mainstream places." They are some of the people who envision Aboriginal spaces emerging. These changes are very exciting. Rather than changes, I should be talking about a returning; about the retrieving and revitalizing of the strengths of Aboriginal peoples.¹⁶ This has been coming for a number of decades now. Chief Seattle was correct with his prophecy: with the coming of the Europeans "came the end of living and the beginning of surviving."

I want you to know, my girl, that there were other prophecies that are also coming to pass. There is the (Southern) Dine prophecy that when the eagle lands on the moon, the Indian peoples will rise again. I have heard many elders draw our attention to this prophecy and speak of the landing of the Apollo spacecraft, named the *Eagle*, on the moon as being the time when the traditional renaissance began. Likewise, the Anishnaebae teachers speak of the "Seventh Generation" prophecy. As I understand it, it says that when the White men first came (or returned), they would either come with the face of brotherhood or with the face of war. If they came with the face of war, hard times would result for the Indian peoples. That part certainly came true. A latter part of the prophecy says that in the seventh generation after the coming, a second chance would occur. The Indian people could retrieve their bundles¹⁷ and begin to live again. Likewise, the White brothers would have another chance to learn to live in harmony with the Peoples and the land. If these two things do not happen, the world will be destroyed. In many ways, we are destroying the world and not just in terms of what wars could do. Our everyday life is destructive of our Mother. This is one thing that we, or my non-Native students and I, can learn from Native Studies. We can learn how we have come so close to destroying the Aboriginal peoples, Turtle Island and indeed, the rest of our Mother. We can learn from the Aboriginal peoples how to stop doing this and how to live in sustainable ways. I believe we – non-Aboriginal people – must start this change with taking collective responsibility for what we have done so far.

To do that is not easy. It is not easy to teach even the history of

colonialism in a way that reflects kindness. And it is not easy for some of my non-Native students to hear. It contradicts everything they have learned so far and most of what they believe about themselves and their people. Too often, we learn in school that in comparison to the Indian wars in the United States, Canada acted with great kindness and made treaties with the First Nations. Students are shocked at the actual story since it is one of great cruelty and heartlessness. And they badly want to blame their ancestors (or people that came before them) and so relieve themselves of any responsibility for the damages. I believe that as those who have prospered from this, we do have responsibilities for what happened and what continues to happen. I do not even have to suggest that this might mean sharing some of the prosperity that most non-Native people believe is rightfully theirs and theirs alone, because it came by the sweat of their own brows, for them to begin to react. It is a struggle for me to explain the hidden benefits they and their people received and it is a struggle for them to understand.

They get very angry with me, my girl. Some days, with some topics, I know and can anticipate their reactions. I explain as clearly and simply as I can. I do not blame or "White bash."¹⁸ It does not always get received in a good way. Some of them say and do hurtful things. Their anger and fear lashes back at me. I stand in the classroom, with my face kept still and my hands in my pockets to hide my clenching fists. I try, oh how I try, to respond in kind and gentle ways that will unpack the twisted and multiple layers of lies that Eurocentric hegemony has developed – "but everybody knows that. . . ." Oh, how those unquestioned untruths, ones that have supported the status quo for so long that they have almost disappeared from sight, torture me. I bend and twist as I try to respond in ways that will not be hurtful and will help them see that Canadian prosperity had a high Aboriginal cost; and that Aboriginal people are still, and too often paying, for "our success." Still, they don't like it.

They want to continue believing that success comes as a result of individual initiative and effort (a favourite Eurocentric belief). There is no doubt in my mind that the immigrants to the prairies suffered as they homesteaded. The non-English-speaking peoples, in particular, experienced the consequences of many of the same prejudices. Their children, too, were beaten in schools for speaking their languages. For example, this happened to German and Ukrainian people. These same peoples were later interned in camps¹⁹ during the wars because the "English" Canadian powers doubted their loyalty. I know that is real suffering, too. What I want them to know is that they were not the only the ones and the difference is that while their people have had the opportunities to overcome the early struggles and do

well, the Aboriginal people continue to struggle. Still they get angry. That is why sometimes I come home and cry. It is nothing that you do. I cry to release the pain, frustration and worry so that I do not carry it and share it with you. And I go back and do it again because of you, too.²⁰

I teach for you and for all of our children. When I look at the students in my classes, I see the people who will be the teachers, lawyers, judges, police officers, doctors, social workers and politicians in your futures. I do not mean just the Aboriginal students. I include the non-Aboriginal students in this, too. I pray that the Aboriginal students will be good role models for you. And I pray, even more, that the others will learn to appreciate you and be kind with you. That is why I teach Native Studies and why I teach it the way I do. I am responsible for your "good life."²¹ I want the adult people who will have responsibilities to you and to all of your relations in your later lives to recognize and affirm you – our children of Turtle Island, the Native future.

Love and Meegwetch to all my relations,

Professor Mommy Denise (Nimama)

Notes

- 1 Or maybe I should just say I. I am not sure that all of my colleagues would agree with what follows.
- 2 I have often heard the elders say that when we make plans and decisions we should ensure that these will continue to have good effects for seven generations.
- 3 The reason I do not call these ways "new" is because I believe it is an important part of our work in Native Studies to revisit the various traditional ways of living on the territories of Turtle Island and assist in the project of bringing them forward to the present generations. Therefore, these ways are most definitely not "new"; rather they are both ancient and current.
- 4 "Bundle" is the English word that my Anishnaebae teachers use to refer to the traditional "lifeways": the ceremonies, the languages, the everyday practices, values and beliefs.
- 5 Patricia Monture-Angus: sister; beloved friend; colleague; and fellow schemer; a faithful Flint Woman whose Thunder has shifted my path more often than I can count.
- 6 I am thinking here of Marie Battiste: educator and pedagogue *par excellence*; mother mentor; dear friend; family; and steadfast M'kmaq woman who carries and lives the ways of her people in a manner that is awe-inspiring.

- 7 In the Anishnaebae language, this means a Anishnaebae woman – a woman of the Original people.
- 8 I am deeply grateful to Edna Manitouwabing – of the Midewin Society – for this teaching. It meant a very long, horrendous labour had a kind and wonderful conclusion.
- 9 I look to Leroy Littlebear and Amethyst First Rider, for example, for guidance with this part of raising you.
- 10 We first met in a prison parking lot, but that's another story.
- 11 And if you think that's an easy job, my girl, it is only because you are growing up far away from Kanyen'kehaka territory.
- 12 I am talking about the idea that institutions and services must make space, both philosophically and physically, for Native peoples to operate and participate in programs that address their interests and needs. I hope this will not be such a radical and innovative idea when you are older.
- 13 As compared to creating the "work" for myself or some other "White" experts to use to build their credentials.
- 14 Here I am thinking of people such as Sheldon Cardinal, Rodolfo Pino-Robles, Brenda MacDougall and Ron Laliberte. Sheldon and I made the only treaty/land sharing agreement that was ever completely fulfilled.
- 15 The other thing that this will explain to those of you who have classes with me is why I stumble over names when I am giving you references. For me, it's natural to say "Trish." It's awkward to say Patricia Monture-Angus. Likewise, it's easy to say "Hello Sakej, how are you?" I have never said to him "Hi Sakej James Youngblood Henderson, did you have a good day today?"
- 16 This personal note is for Sakej Henderson: warrior; healer; father; scholar; a man of great drive and passion who has often taken the time and trouble to explain to me the things I need to know. And in the finest Indian tradition, he is often teaching me the things that I did not know I was asking about.

As well as being a good and kind friend, he is so often in the footnotes of the material I read, I could no more write something about Native Studies without a "Sakej J. Y. Henderson" footnote than I could . . . – it just would not be possible!

- 17 See footnote number 4.
- 18 It is pretty ironic that so many of my students can call me "racist" and a "White Basher" on my course evaluations. I wonder sometimes if they really see me. It does give me some pleasure that my Aboriginal colleagues – in other disciplines – can point to my class evaluations as being similar to theirs when they need to defend themselves against these accusations. It shows that the problem is more the content than the delivery.
- 19 Does the similarity to the reserve system in this method of controlling people "not like us" strike you as clearly as it does me?

- 20 The academic year 1996-1997 was a particularly difficult one to continue working on the University of Saskatchewan campus. There were acts of racism and racist violence in the first weeks of the fall term. These escalated throughout the year. As I trace it, it began with racist taunts from some residence students during the Welcome Week Pow Wow. It continued with a threatening note to an Indian colleague; the trashing of the Indigenous Students lounge; the verbal abuse of visiting Indian high school students in the university common building; and, finally, a faked complaint to the dean's office about the work of another Indian colleague. "Going to work" meant working while being physically frightened, afraid for my own safety, for most of that year.

Since I began working on this piece, there have been a number of reports that said the "trashing" had been done by an Aboriginal student. There was an underlying sense of relief in these reports. My concern with this is twofold. First, this was only one in a series of racist incidents. Second, actions that may come from internalized racism need to be understood as deeply problematic, too. The issues, problems and dangers remain.

- 21 As I have come to understand the Anishnaebae Seven Stages of Human Development, good life is from birth to age seven. To explain this very simply, during good life, it is the mother's responsibility to unconditionally love and look after the well-being of the child. Again, I thank my Midewin teachers for this.