

# Canada

## Chapter 11: Gwayakotam, She Finds out the Truth

**Shanese Indoowaaboo STEELE (Nipissing and Métis)**

### Where I was...

I started writing these stories and poems around my identity at 18. Lost in who I was and where I was going as a little brown girl with no language to understand what that means. Sometime I believe we enter the world knowing who we are and it's society who convinces us otherwise. At 18, living with my boyfriend, another young Indigenous person, a man of Haudenosaunee heritage, surviving through abuse and intergenerational trauma, I reflected on the girl I used to be, and the girl that I felt I was.

### Who am I?

Who am I? I find myself asking this question constantly, and with each passing year the answer seems to change. Being mixed or multiracial has not always been easy for me and it has been a struggle to try and find out exactly where I fit in.

A recent conversation with a friend brought up some feelings that I have to admit I was too afraid to say out loud. The term my friend used to

describe her feelings towards identifying as an Indigenous woman was “fraud.” She felt as though because she did not appear to look Aboriginal and because she was not a certain percentage Indigenous, then how did she have the right to call herself Aboriginal? It was as if she was reading my mind, because for so many years I have felt the same way.

See, this friend and I have very similar backgrounds: both our fathers are Trinidadian, and both of our mothers have white and Aboriginal backgrounds, more specifically Métis backgrounds. I also have Venezuelan, Irish and French lineage and yet identifying as any of them feels fraudulent. While I have always loved my diversity, over the years, I have at times tried to be one of these ethnicities more than any other.

At nine years old, living and going to school in Toronto for the first time, all I wanted to do was fit in. For the first time I wasn't the odd brown girl out, and I so desperately wanted to be black. I was “Trini de Bone” and nothing could change that. Oh, how I hated to be called white-washed or portrayed as anything but black, and that's how it was until I was 15. I tried to immerse myself into “black culture” as much as I could. I listened only to soca, hip-hop and dancehall and wouldn't be caught dead listening to “white music.” I started wearing extensions and acting “ghetto” and only having black friends. Growing up without a father, I didn't know that this wasn't what it meant to be black, and

it wasn't what it meant to be Trini. As I looked around, I realized I didn't fit in with the other “black kids”; I never felt “black enough,” or that I belonged.

When I turned 15, I took a sudden interest in my family history and heritage. We were just finding out that we had some kind of native heritage in the family and we also came across some Venezuelan heritage on my father's side. I was so excited, I had just made some Latinx friends and oh, how I wanted to fit in with them. So I became “chickita,” half-Trini and half-Venezuelan, once again forgetting completely about the heritage on my mother's side. I loved the Latin culture, the music, the dancing and of course the boys back then. I started hanging out with mostly Spanish kids and slowly began to move away from being “black.” I hated being seen as black or white because that wasn't me, that wasn't who I was.

No matter what the “phase,” I never found myself wanting to be “white”—I hated the idea of it. Even to this day, I catch myself making comments like “I ain't white” or trying to distance myself from whiteness by saying “that's what white people do.” And, if I do something that I perceive as white, I'll apologize by saying “sorry, that's my white side coming out.” Over the years, I have questioned my distance and sometimes hatred towards my white heritage. I grew up in Milton, which used to be a predominantly white town and, due to this, there was a lot of racism. So when I

begin to contemplate my anger, I wonder if it could be because, at the age of three or four, I was taken down to the basement of my babysitter's house by the other children, stripped half-naked and beaten; or maybe it's due to the fact that on the first day of kindergarten, I was told by another student that I couldn't play with the toys because of the color of my skin. Could it have been the bullying in elementary school, when other children called me “buffalo hair” and ignored me at recess? Or maybe the final tipping point was when my best friend in the third grade stopped being my friend because the girls at her new school didn't think she should be friends with a black girl.

It wasn't really until I turned 18 that I began to get more involved with my mom's side of the family. We had always been close but I had no real interest in where they came from or who they were. But the deeper I looked, the more I began to love and embrace what they were. I was proud to be French; my family served as the personal guards to one of the kings of France, they had been in Canada since 1506 and they were among some of the first Métis families in the country. I loved that I was Irish too, and I began putting the Irish flag on everything and even got a four-leaf clover tattoo. And oh, how I loved the Indigenous history, the stories of Indigenous women ancestors, the Cree, Ojibwa and Métis. I fell in love with the culture and the beliefs and for the first time in a long time, I felt like I found who I was. Shanese Steele, an Indigenous woman.

Looking back, I remember being 15 years old and convinced that I was going to attend the University of Georgia for psychology when I got older, and I remember my mother being so against it. She feared for my safety in the south and I remember saying, “Come on mom, it's not the 1960s anymore. I'm not going to get lynched, plus I'm mixed.” She looked at me and said, “But Shani, when a racist person looks at you they don't see a half-white girl, they don't stop hating you because you are half-white, they will always see you as a young black girl.” At the time, I brushed it off and laughed but, as I got older, I realized she was right—to the rest of the world, I will always be seen as black. So how do I have the right to claim anything else?

This very question is what brings me back to that earlier conversation with my friend. How can I identify as an Aboriginal woman if I don't look like one? If I'm only a small percentage in the eyes of others? How do I have the right? It's the same question I asked myself when I identified with my Latina heritage, with my white heritage. I mean I *am* French and Irish, I *am* Venezuelan, I *am* Cree, Ojibwa and Métis as much as I *am* Trinidadian, and yet I always feel like I'm a fraud. Although I look black, I don't feel black enough to identify as black. Although I can pass as Latina, I don't feel as if I'm enough. Although I know so much about my Aboriginal culture and I do identify as Aboriginal, I never feel like it's enough. And although I have a

rich French and Irish heritage, because I don't look “white” I feel like I will never be enough to identify. So I guess the question I am left with is: will I ever be enough? And are myself and my friend the only multiracial people that feel this way?

### **Two women**

Two women, two generations of shame, and another two of ignorance, explains how my family went without knowing who they were. It is this ignorance that's fueled my search for the truth and has allowed me to gain a sense of reassurance in who I am. *To Carry The Ceremony* is my spirit name and I've spent the past six years trying to figure out what that exactly means. The ceremony involves five rocks that represent obstacles I need to overcome. The search for my cultural identity has been one of my biggest obstacles because I grew up thinking that there was only black, white and in-between, and for the majority of my life that in-between fueled a hatred for who I was. I constantly tried to fit in with both my Trinidadian heritage and my white one by playing mass in caribana and dancing highland. Yet neither seemed to work. For my white side, I was always too dark, my hair was always too big, and the name “buffalo hair” followed me as a child. It was ironic that I was an outcast for being too black for one side and was viewed as too white for the other. It wasn't until I came across Magdeliene Pewadjiwonokwe and Archange La Hironnelle, both Aboriginal women and both forgotten names in my family trees, that I learned that I wasn't the only one that had felt in-

between. I came from two long lines of “mixed breeds” and became proud of my Métis, Ojibwa and Cree heritage. It’s this pride that’s allowed me to begin the search for where Magdeliene and Archange came from, giving my family the chance to also know who they are. So in my own way, I am carrying the ceremony of educating along my way.

### **What I discovered ...**

Finding oneself is always described as a journey. Especially for youth. As an Anishinaabe youth, we are told about the importance of the medicine wheel and specifically the colors, directions, animals and medicines of that medicine wheel. Being a youth means that for now I am experiencing the teachings of the red, *Misko*, south, *Zhaawanong*, where Cedar, *Giizhik*, lies, and *Waawaashkeshi*, the deer that teaches us kindness. It is said in this space that we are in a place of searching, searching for creator, searching for ceremony, searching for culture and searching for ourselves. During this time of searching through identity this is what I found...

***Not your typical Métis*** [Shanese Indoowaaboo Steele,  
Nipissing and Métis]

*I am not your typical Métis  
I do not fit in the confines of the images  
Found in newspapers  
On walls  
In pamphlets*

*In media*

*I'm not your typical Métis*

*Faces filled with blue eyes  
and covered in blond hair  
where women are erased  
because for some reason  
for some reason  
men were the only people  
who could be Métis*

*As if our very existence could not happen without  
an Indigenous woman  
lives given to children who would always walk two  
paths  
breathing their souls into a people so vibrant  
that we refuse to be forgotten*

*I am not your typical Métis*

*I do not fit the stereotype  
this hair ain't so blonde  
and this skin  
this skin is touched with a color  
that could never be called white*

*stained with the blood of those who came before me  
what those books forget to say  
is we have never laid dormant,  
birthing a fire so bright  
that this nation could not ignore us*



*I am not your typical Métis*

*I won't be found in coloring books  
Given to children by their teachers  
Métis men and women whose faces are stripped  
making way for societies  
colonial ideals of what we should look like to take  
hold  
Leaving faces chained by prejudice  
Lives lost by ignorance  
voices forgotten in conversation  
and lost forever*

*I am not your typical Métis  
Those features you think you know  
Building barriers for me to climb over  
Constantly defending who I am  
Who I was meant to be*

*I am not your typical Métis*

***Indian Enough*** [Shanese Indoowaaboo Steele, Nipissing and Métis, and Dawn Martin, Kanienkehaka and Mohawk]<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dawn Martin is a Kanienkehaka kanonkwe (*Mohawk woman*) from Six Nations of the Grand River Reserve. She has recently finished her Bachelor's degree in Indigenous Studies at Trent University and her Bachelor's degree in Education from Queen's University this past May. She is currently studying Kanienké:ha (*Mohawk language*) in her home community of Six Nations where she hopes to become a language teacher. Dawn hopes to create accessible resources in the Mohawk language for youth in her community. She also

*You called me out by the color of my skin and said I  
wasn't "Indian" enough  
You said my people are too watered down to really  
be "Indian"  
You said my people were too savage to be human  
Well let me tell you  
I was "Indian" enough when my peoples way of life  
was infiltrated and deemed as uncivilized  
when we showed you how to live off these  
lands  
shown you medicines you now practice  
kept you from starving  
I was "Indian" enough when you labeled my people  
"half breeds"  
Using our Indigenous knowledge  
Stripping our women of their identity  
While denying our existence  
I was "Indian" enough when you killed my people  
based on indifferences  
taking men taking women taking children  
burning down villages that kept food  
trying to erase our culture  
I was "Indian" enough when our settlements were  
burnt down  
Making us flee from our homes  
As you killed our men  
And raped our women  
I was "Indian" enough when you cut my peoples  
hair off trying to make us look "Proper"*

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is working towards becoming completely sustainable: living,  
growing and being in her home community.

*making us go back and pick up every last  
strand  
before leaving to our resting stop  
reliving traumas that you set in our  
paths  
I too, was “Indian” enough when our children were  
stolen from their homes  
No matter how “pale” they were  
Or how “blue” their eyes were  
Or how much they looked like you  
I was “Indian” enough when you banned our  
languages our culture our traditions  
strapping us leaving welt marks down backs,  
down our legs, on our hands and feet  
sticking needles in tongues to stop us from  
speaking  
trying in your every power to control what  
you didn’t understand  
I was “Indian” enough when you sterilized our  
women in the hopes to end us  
To break us  
To erase us  
To “assimilate” us  
I was “Indian” enough when you made it an  
everyday struggle to get up in the morning  
facing racism  
facing injustices  
facing prejudices  
I was “Indian” enough when you hunted down our  
hero, our leader  
When you killed him  
When you murdered his dreams  
Our dreams*

**(RE)Membrance** [Shanese Indoowaaboo Steele, Nipissing and Métis]

*Our life sources were offered  
the men and women of our next generations  
enlisted, volunteered or conscripted  
we were ONE of the driving forces  
for this movement*

*we fought with pride (pause)  
we fought with courage (pause)*

*we fought for peace... (longer pause)*

*Over four thousand men sent for these wars  
Our men, the life givers of our nations  
The men who carry the burden  
Of histories left or forgotten*

*4000 men  
of First Nation descent will fight in a war that is not  
theirs  
wives sending husbands, mothers losing sons  
and children growing up without fathers*

*Three hundred and twenty-three  
The number of men offered  
From ohswe:ken  
The place of the willows  
The place where my ancestors' voice  
Sing loudly through  
Waters,*

*Through trees,  
and through skies  
The place of alliances  
The place of the Grand River*

*Unknown  
The number of Métis men  
Who enlisted  
Lives given but not returned  
Hands holding guns  
Instead of sashes  
Weaving stories of rebellion so instilled in our  
blood  
That when called to the front lines  
The only answer given  
was yes*

*The panting of Longboat  
Thomas Charles  
The boy who ran  
Ran, and ran  
Message carrier  
The connection between community  
Kokwake (cogwagee)*

*Henry Louis Norwest  
Canada's most famous Métis sniper  
Whose story was rewritten to hide an identity  
Only to be retold  
Through the eyes of a nation who could not see him  
Who could not see us.*

*The number of men killed in battle  
Where their bodies lay rest  
In lands foreign to their own  
Buried in the soil of  
Homelands not our own*

*July 1917  
My great grandfather is choking on gas  
Using clothes covered in urine  
Trying to breathe  
Feeling as though his lungs were on fire  
Fighting to stay alive  
Fighting for his family  
Fighting for a home so far away  
That the only real thing in this moment  
Are his lungs  
Fighting a battle of their very own*

*Men and women lost  
Men that give life-rakaniha  
And that women give power-akehnistenha  
Blood mingled with yours  
Sons and sons together*

*The untold war  
The war not spoken of  
But heard by the communities they returned to  
Fighting in foreign lands  
Only to return to a fight at home*

*Broken promises  
From a country  
Who will not see their right to live*

*But will sign their approval for their choice to die*

*Sights of rifles flashing (Everyone)*

*And canons that roar*

*Carriers of the shields*

*Loyalty to the flag*

*Nations efforts to restore peace*

*I hope you will remember*

### **Where I am going...**

Genocide. It changes the way we find who we are and where we come from. It cuts ties and threads woven through sashes and sewn through beads and hide. Grandparents who can't or won't pass down the knowledge of our ancestors. When our elders cannot teach us the way of our people, then where do we go to learn? Colonial institutions have only watered down versions of the teachings of our people. So it's up to us. Well, me. To fill in the blanks, to trace the footsteps and to find the words to speak our truths. *Nokomis*, Grandmother, *Mishomis*, Grandfather, will you understand the language I have learned when I speak it you? Or will it fall on blocked ears that forgot the sounds of our words when the ships brought the sounds of guns?

### **Ships**

Ships. The story always begins with ships. Big ships arriving by the ocean onto shores where they do not belong. Ships that take and give. Ships that bring death, always death. I often wonder what my ancestors thought when they first saw these ships. Were they filled with awe and wonder at the massive *jiimaans* or *obontos* that arrived on the St. Lawrence or the shores of what is now Ghana? Or did they know? Did fear fill their hearts and minds? Did they run or does the image of Pocahontas standing on the mountain edge ring true? Either way, the ships came, and they took, and they gave.

*Anishinaabe Mukaade kwe niindaw.* I am an Afro-Indigenous woman. For me, ships will always be vessels of death and destruction. A cage my ancestors could not escape and a tool to bring diseases and genocide to others. Everything about me should not be here, should not be alive, surviving or thriving. A system was created to extinguish the very light of people, let alone generations to come after. As an Indigenous youth, I am constantly reminded of this as I walk the streets of cities and towns in what is now known as Canada. They scream, “You do not belong here.” The concrete sometimes suffocates the voices of my ancestors trying to reach through and wrap me in an embrace of their love. At times, I picture their hands clawing at the cement, the weight of the buildings crushing them as they try. And they do try. They try with all their might to push past the colonizing roads, to reach the grass and clouds, to hear the eagle sing. Sometimes though, if you listen closely,



you can hear them. Their whispers on the wind of sweet nothings, stories of white buffaloes and fields of sage and semaa.

At least, that is what I like to tell myself on the days when their genocide and this colonization becomes too heavy. When the shadow of those ships darken the sky and I remember that I am not supposed to be here. It's a strange feeling, I will admit. As an Anishinaabe Kwe, feeling as though I don't belong on the land that my ancestors walked on for thousands of years. Where their bodies are buried, where they lived, laughed and prayed. Where creator came to them and brought them teachings and ceremonies. Where *Nanaboozhoo* played his tricks, and where he stole fire from the summer people for the winter tribe so that they could stay warm. On these lands, the great flood happened, and muskrat and turtle gave their lives so that we could be. These same lands where *mnoomin* grows tall and the Haudenosaunee plant their three sisters. It's strange to be displaced without being removed from the land itself. At least, not physically. Maybe it's displacement on a spiritual level? Is that even a real thing? To have your spirit displaced from the land?

Being the descendant of slaves too means that I know what physical displacement looks and feels like. It's a visceral state of being for me. It's something that I cannot escape no matter how hard I try. There is no way to hide from this displacement. I can delve into my "Africanness" as deep as I want,

but the result will always be the same. Displacement. The Diaspora. And even still, I am doubly—no—triple displaced. Who knows? Maybe even more so than that. What I do know is that my ancestors were taken from what is now Ghana on those ships of death. Shackled, put in the bottom of boats and sailed across the middle passage to lands not their own. They landed in what is now called Carriacou. The name comes from another Indigenous Peoples whose blood surely runs in my veins. It comes from the Carib word *Kayryouacou*, meaning land surrounded by reefs. My family worked these lands and when slavery ended, when there was no more land to work, they were forced to move to Trinidad. Another island devastated by ships and the people they carried. And when the genocide, colonialism and racism became too much there, they fled and came to these lands. Turtle Island, Kanata, Canada, the land of my ancestors and the nation of their genocide.

So where does that leave me? A child displaced more times than I can count? Whose connection to land, *Aki*, and water, *Nibi*, the things that give life to my people, has been tainted? Will I ever look at ships the same? Will my eyes fill with wonder at the sight of their sails? Will my mind move to images of faraway places to explore? Or will ships, *jiimaans* or *obontos*, always fill my heart with fear and my nose with the stench of death?

## Where am I...

*Aaniin, Boozhoo, Boujou, Shanese*  
*Ndizhnaakaaz, Indoowaaboo digoo*  
*Anishinabemong, Jijaak ndoodem, Anishinaabe*  
*Mukaade kwe niindaw, Niizhtana ashi indapiitiz,*  
*Nipissing dongeba miinwaa Dibenjige-Ni-*  
*Naakwiiya Omàmiwinini.* Can you understand me?  
Do the long o's and double a's make sounds that  
you are used to? Do you know that *Aaniin* means  
hello or that *Jijaak* is the Crane Clan I call family? I  
now have the language to introduce myself, my  
tongue no longer feels as heavy in my mouth,  
weighed down by loss and colonization. Being a  
youth in this world means to fight for your voice to  
be heard by those older than you. Being an  
Indigenous youth means not only fighting that fight  
but also fighting to stay alive. And I am alive.  
Breathing and moving. Being the wildest dream of  
my ancestors, and the biggest fear of the people  
who killed them. Who am I? What have I  
discovered? Where am I going? Where am I? I am  
me, I have discovered the world, I am going  
forward and I am here on the land of my ancestors  
still fighting in their footsteps.