

nîwî-âtotên nikiskinwahamâkosîwin¹

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I am a mixed blood woman raised in Canada with two ancestries, Ininiwak (Cree) and French, that have competing worldviews from social-political and religious ideology to ancient philosophies. These mixed ancestries set me on numerous paths, ultimately leading me to philosophy. However, when did this path begin? No one in my immediate family entertained ideas of education, so I had no guidance or understanding of what university would mean. I came from an ancestry of hardworking men (with backbreaking employment) considered to be lower-class French men and a time when women stayed home raising families. My other ancestry involved hunting, trapping, and fishing where there were no class distinctions and everyone worked together in order to survive. Women here were not restricted to the home but free to hunt, trap, and fish if that was their choice. One ancestry included transience, of employment and of values, and strict religious doctrine (and a whole lot of hypocrisy). My other ancestry held permanence, in land, employment, families, and in friendships, and faith was intrinsic to all life. The diversity within my worldviews, the hypocrisy witnessed, and the rejection of my matrilineal worldview/philosophy sent me along my philosophy journey and kept me there. I wanted to know who “this man was that owned my mother’s world.”

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Two weeks after my birth, in the northern town of the Pas Manitoba, my parents moved 624.5 km south to Winnipeg where they permanently relocated their family. I was raised in the city rather than in northern Manitoba. It also meant complete immersion in the English language, Euro-Canadian education system, and Catholic religion. My parents passed neither of my ancestral languages on to their children. In spite of losing our languages, we remained in close contact with our northern family. We listened to them speak Cree, eat moose meat and bannock² (which we could share), but we were not allowed to speak the language ourselves.

I also come from a large family; I had seven sisters and three brothers, and many, many more cousins who at times felt like extra siblings. I came fourth in my parent’s lineup and full of ancestral contradictions. Today I acknowledge that my dual ancestries ultimately led to the field of philosophy. I have always recognized the differences in my two family-lines. One side ate pork, beef, chicken, and bread while the other side ate moose meat, ducks, rabbit, and bannock. What both sides had in common, however, was a lack of appreciation for higher education.

I quit school in grade eleven, returning after having been married twice, birthing four children, and burying one. I was divorced, a single mother and afraid of my own shadow. I had experienced every form of abuse sexual, physical and mental, including intense violence from my own brother. I finally understood if I was going to do anything for my children, I would have to do it myself. Ironically, it was male strangers who provided the guidance I later needed and two women, one ninety-year old and the other an Indigenous philosopher, who believed in me enough to push for education. Mrs. Georgina Yule told me I was worth more than the minimum wage I was receiving for being her caregiver. I was astounded—*me* worth more? That was not something I had heard throughout my life. Much later an extremely vocal Dr. Viola Cordova³ encouraged me to try

for a PhD program. She told me I owed it to my culture because I now was in a place of privilege relative to most of my family. As I said before, education held little value, at least until my seventh sibling.⁴ Nonetheless, between the encouragements of these two powerful women I was fortunate to encounter Dr. Douglas Rabb in my first year at Lakehead University. He was the chair of the philosophy department and almost completely responsible for my later entering a master's program. He was a philosophy mentor during my undergrad, then a couple years later personally drove to my house with application papers and encouraged me to apply for a new program in Canadian and Native philosophy. I applied never believing I could be accepted, but I was. This was the first MA degree of its kind in North America.⁵

I met Dennis McPherson, an Ojibwa scholar from the Couchiching First Nation Band (Fort Frances, Ontario) and the founding chair of the Lakehead University Department of Indigenous Learning in my fourth year at Lakehead. Dennis and Doug were co-teaching a new course, "Native Canadian World Views." Dennis has since become a lifelong friend while continuing to mentor me.

As co-directors, Dennis and Doug were responsible for the co-coordination of the first and only Native Philosophy Project⁶ at Lakehead University, which in turn allowed them to attract Indigenous scholars from all over North America. For the first time in my life I was introduced to professional Indigenous philosophers: Viola Cordova, PhD (Apache), Lee Hester, PhD (Choctaw) and Gordon Christie, PhD, LLB (Inuit), and Anne Waters, PhD. With the exception of Gordon Christie and Michael Pomedli, the other scholars came to Canada specifically for the Native Philosophy Project. In retrospect, I believe that was when the reach of philosophy was understood as a potential reality.

Dr. Viola Cordova was to become a powerful force in my life, first as a mentor, encouraging me to take my education all the way to a PhD, leading to a friendship I treasure to this day. Although she has long departed our world, her sage advice still lives within me and strengthens me in time of need.

My first graduate teaching position was with Dr. Lee Hester. Our relationship has since evolved to a special friendship. We continue to communicate via email with occasional phone calls. Lee once took 35 students (myself included) on a cross-Indigenous cultural trip to Oklahoma. It was in Oklahoma that I first saw Christian regalia at a powwow.⁷ This woke me to a new kind of diversity in Indigenous communities I had never before encountered. Undoubtedly I understood Christianity, but never had I imagined it as an expression at a powwow.

Dr. Gordon Christie perhaps left the most indelible print on my scholarship when he wrote "How One Might Think about How to Think about Approaching the Project of Articulating a Native Philosophy" (Christie 1994). Gordon was concerned with the methodological structure of argument in philosophy inherited from the Greeks. His concern recognized that in engaging with western philosophy to do Native philosophy we might in fact harm the very philosophy we were trying to articulate. Dennis furthered this concern, claiming western ideas are understood as "the only possible ideas to hold" [...] (McPherson 2006). It would be horrifying for Indigenous students/scholars to approach philosophy with these deeply seated ideas. These concerns have haunted me throughout my philosophical career.

In my last year I met the indomitable Ann Waters (Seminole, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, and Jewish descent), who not only published the first edited book of Indigenous philosophy (Waters 2003) but also fought to have the American Philosophical Association recognize the legitimacy of an Indigenous philosophy. This led to the successful creation of an *APA Newsletter on Native American and Indigenous Philosophy*⁸ and formulation of a committee on Native American and

Indigenous philosophies. I was a long-standing member of this committee, and for a number of years I was the co-editor and then the editor of the *Newsletter*.⁹

Because of the Native philosophy project, I was able to meet three non-Indigenous professors working in the field of Native philosophy, Michael Pomedli, Jim Cheney, and Sandra Tomsons. All three scholars had a significant impact on me. Michael was the first person to tell me about using *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* like an archeological dig. He would say, “You have to dig through the Christian dogma to find kernels of truth.” He, like many others since, cautioned against believing everything the Jesuits wrote. Michael was mostly interested in the Huron people¹⁰ and therefore the *Relations* was important to him.

Jim Cheney was an ethical environmentalist. The scent of wood smoke always surrounded him. He would laugh and call me *Cree warrior*. He shared many special moments culturally, academically, and socially with me, including attending my MA graduation ceremony.

Sandra Tomsons was the last non-Indigenous scholar I met. She too was invested in environmental ethics but later moved to Aboriginal rights. Unlike the other two scholars, Sandra and I began and sustained a lifelong friendship—no doubt aided by her relocation from Prince Edward Island to my home province, Manitoba.

I was introduced later to Dr. Scott Pratt, a philosopher from the University of Oregon, who had come to Lakehead for a conference. He was a man who was to play a pivotal role in my life. This brave man invited me to apply at his university for the PhD program. I applied never expecting to be accepted, but I was. At that time, Scott was working in pragmatism but with strong advocacy for Native philosophy. I called him brave because he was the person I raged and vented at when I finally found my voice. I directed all my anger, confusion, and racist experiences at him but he never turned his back on me, not even when I hurt him by linking his names with that of the notorious General Richard Henry Pratt (USA) and the equally infamous Duncan Campbell Scott (in Canada). Both men used education to advocate for absolute destruction of the “Indian,” Pratt with his “kill the Indian, save the man” philosophy and Scott with his, “In a few years there will be no Indian problem because there will be no more Indians.” I admit there were times when Scott Pratt as my academic advisor simply could not understand me and times when he believed I was being overly critical of “white scholars,” but regardless of how far out in left field I appeared he always supported me and encouraged me to think critically.

To get to Oregon I had to leave my family, my friends, and everything familiar to me. I had never left Canada so this was a terrifying experience, beginning with the Border Patrol screaming across the room, “Native American, don’t touch her medicines!” in response to a guard opening my bundle, to the outright racism disguised as curiosity by fellow graduate students. Questions ranged from, “How did *you* get here?” to “So, what do *you* read?” or worse yet, “I have five minutes, tell me about Native philosophy.” In what world is it acceptable to question another graduate student like that? Even more astonishing were the students following me to relate their dreams! One even said she just wanted to be in my presence! What the...! In spite of Scott Pratt’s support, and a few other professors in the philosophy department and even fewer of the grad students there, I do not believe I would have survived if not for Dr. Robert Proudfoot, associate professor from the International Studies Department and proud member of the Seneca Nation, and with the Native students at the Native American Student’s Association (NAISA)—in particular Mitch Wilkinson (Osage/Japanese). Rob and Mitch took me under their wings and walked through my entire PhD with me. When I needed to talk about ancient Native philosophy, I turned to Rob. When I wanted to give up, Rob and Mitch would remind me why I was there. When loneliness overwhelmed me, they provided comfort, and when my first grandson was born, Rob gifted me with a teapot and tea, saying all

grandmothers should have teapots. When I lost my mother, Rob came immediately, as did Mitch's wife (then girlfriend) who came to make all arrangements for me. I grew to love these people and they became family. My greatest source of strength did not come from the philosophy department though they guided me philosophically; rather it came from international students in the International Studies program and the Native community.

When I completed my PhD, I did so with ceremony. It was beautiful. There was prayer, smudging, and gifting afterwards, and nothing a western university had seen at a defense before.

I returned to Canada in 2004 to a position in Native Studies, and in my mind, I could hear Viola again when she visited me in Oregon as she calmly stated, "They'll never hire you in a mainstream philosophy department but do not let that stop you." Frustrated I asked, "Why am I doing this then?" She smiled, "Because *we* have to teach them."

I have learned many things since returning home. I have since published a number of articles, two books, *Cries from a Metis Heart* (Mayer 2007)¹¹ and a co-authored tome with Sandra Tomsons, *Philosophy and Aboriginal Rights: Critical Dialogues* (Tomsons and Mayer 2013).¹²

I have presented in Hanoi, Vietnam; in Vijayawada, India; London, England; and New Zealand. I have travelled throughout Canada and the United States. I have taught countless students both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Through all this, I have been following Viola's admonition "to teach them." My ultimate goal is to teach about who we are, not what or who the government dictated we be. This means devoting myself to philosophical inquiry into governmental, religious, and educational myths. I need to sift through the dogma to find the truth—not a universal truth but an Indigenous truth.

One of my first debunking of myths begins when I ask university classes to describe a traditional Indian. They give all the appropriate stereotypical responses of feathers, braids, dark skin, flowing locks or braids, loincloths, buckskin britches and shirts, riding horses bareback. In other words, they describe Hollywood's creations. I repeatedly ask them if they are sure these are the images belonging to traditional Indians. With an unqualified "yes" from them, I begin debunking, starting with the question of how Cree peoples from the northern Manitoba could withstand winter in loincloths or parade around the bush wearing headdresses. They got my message. I inform them it is not their fault for thinking this way; it is a result of centuries of indoctrination. The "Euro-Canadian" has forcibly instructed us to accept his education, to believe in his religion, and to play his politics to accept his law, his justice system, and his gendered prescribed reality. Anything Hollywood produces simply reinforces an imperialist image.

Socrates claimed we should know ourselves. For Indigenous peoples that injunction is of paramount importance if we are to continue as distinct peoples with valuable philosophies. With institutions claiming to indigenize it is vital that we know ourselves; otherwise, we stand to perpetuate imperialism with the idea we are indigenizing. Do I know myself? Yes. I am a mixed blood woman carrying two ancestries, two educational systems, and two religious understandings and two philosophies. Nevertheless, other equally relevant questions should be asked: do I respect both sides, do I value both sides, and how can I bring the two sides to reconciliation if I continue to denigrate one side over the other?

For new scholars, especially those from marginalized cultures, I would strongly advise seeking out scholars knowledgeable about your cultural background, although I am not implying that *only* scholars sharing our cultural backgrounds are capable of educating, advising, or helping us. Of course there are many scholars capable of educating us. However, we need cultural advocates to keep us grounded, as I had with Dr. Proudfoot. I also found an open mind was beneficial. I found scholars from other disciplines equally able and willing to provide support, and those supports could

and did cross disciplines. I found support in unexpected places, the APA, for example. Through the APA, I was fortunate to meet significant Indigenous students (now faculty). With the advancement of Indigenous philosophy, feminist ethics, and social theory, the APA paved the way for success for both new and senior scholars.

Lorraine Mayer is a Cree-Metis mother with two sons and a daughter who have gifted her with nine wonderful grandchildren, and soon to be great-grandson. She counts herself fortunate to be a cultural grandmother to many more children. She has been a professor in the Native Studies Department at Brandon University since 2004. She is the editor for *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, and past editor for the *APA's American Indian Newsletter*. Lorraine has long been committed to Indigenous philosophy and Indigenous rights, taking both Indigenous philosophical and feminist approaches to her research.

¹ I am grateful to Elder Solomen Ratt for his willingness to provide a title in the Cree language. The translation means “I am going to tell a story about my education.”

² Bannock is a flat bread made of flour, baking powder, salt, and lard. Bannock is either baked, fried, or cooked over an open fire. Although inherited from the Scottish settlers, it is now widely recognized as a Native bread in North America.

³ Dr. Cordova was an Apache philosopher from Idaho.

⁴ As I stated, education held little value at least until my seventh sibling graduated with a grade 12, as did the two youngest.

⁵ Unfortunately, the degree program was able to graduate only two Native students (myself and one Ojibway man) as well as some non-Native students before the university cancelled the program. As Dennis has explained in “Indian on the Lawn,” “The Masters in Native Philosophy was not cancelled for a lack of students. The year before the program was cancelled sixteen Native students applied to enter the program. My colleague, who was Graduate Coordinator for the Department of Philosophy at the time, tells me that the University decided to change the entrance requirements after the sixteen students had applied.” In a letter to the president of Lakehead University Doug Rabb wrote, “I could not live with the fact that the University would deny sixteen Native students access to the qualifying year of the Master’s Programme in Native Philosophy. I consider it unethical to change the entrance requirements after such students have applied.” Doug retired.

⁶ This program made Lakehead University the first Canadian University to receive a prestigious Rockefeller Foundation Visiting Humanities Research Fellowship Program in 1993.

⁷ Today powwows are huge social events where Indigenous people are able to demonstrate cultural pride. These events showcase drumming and songs sung in Indigenous languages. You can find plenty of food, crafts, and friendships at these events. Powwows are held for all ages and provide an opportunity for Indigenous communities to gather. These events are hosted all across North America. Dancers wear beautifully decorated regalia (clothing specific to the type of traditional dance, to fancy dress or jingle dress for the woman and traditional, fancy (feather) or grass dances for the men).

⁸ Originally, the committee was called the “American Philosophical Association Committee on the Status of American Indians in Philosophy.” It evolved to “American Philosophical Association Committee on the Status of Indigenous Philosophers” and by 2015 it became the “Committee on Indigenous Philosophers,” then finally in 2016 “Committee on Native American and Indigenous Philosophers.”

⁹ See https://www.apaonline.org/page/indigenous_newsletter.

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- ¹⁰ The Huron people, also known as the Wyandot people or Wendat, are an Iroquoian-speaking people from the north shore of Lake Superior. Iroquoian-speaking is not to be mistaken for Iroquois people, as the Iroquois people were historically mortal enemies of the Huron.
- ¹¹ Lorraine Mayer, *Cries from a Metis Heart* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Pemmican Publishing, 2007).
- ¹² Sandra Tomsons and Lorraine Mayer, *Philosophy and Aboriginal Rights: Critical Dialogues* (Toronto, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2013).