

Women,

CONTEMPORARY ABORIGINAL ISSUES,
AND RESISTANCE

Shirley Bear, *The Point*, private collection, 1984, watercolour



BOOKLET

1



CONTEMPORARY ABORIGINAL ISSUES,
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BONITA'S LUNCH

Beautiful coloured leaves are everywhere in that autumn when I'm in grade four.

I can't wait to get to school, with my new red high-tops, my fave lunch treats, and a new tune to drum out with my best friend Cherylynn.

OK, just avoid the boys. Run fast. I haven't been able to see much of Cherylynn over the summer because we live too far away from each other. At least that's what our mothers say.

My mom is making me so mad. One day during the summer toys, pots, pans, clothes, and everything was just thrown into boxes and garbage bags.

"We're moving," Mom said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Just get in the car," Mom hissed.

And faster than a speeding bullet, Mom drives away from our nice house in the city where we live with Dad and a big screen TV. We go to this stupid little shack on the reserve.

Mom proudly goes: "this is ours, ours, ours Bonita!"

So now I'm taking this long bus ride to my old school in the city in my new red runners. I used to be able to run to school.

Finally, the dumb bus gets me to school where I have the pretty blonde teacher for a second year. I'm thrilled to have the same teacher. And Cherylynn is sitting right next to me. That's a thrill too.



The morning goes great. I admire my awesome shoes and everybody talks about what they did during the summer. I say the only good part I can think of: "I learned how to fish, because there is a stream right by our new house, and my mom says we can fish and hunt all year round, as long as we don't take more than we need, because it's our Indian right."

I don't even want to hunt so I don't know what that is all about.

Now there is some kind of big uproar from the boys. They shout: "Why can't we and our dads and uncles fish and hunt whenever we want?! That's our Boy's Right. Boy's Rights! Boy's Rights!" They are chanting and start to make Boys' Rights signs with poster paints.

Teacher calls for order. She says: "That brings us to our first lesson for this year in Aboriginal history. After lunch we will talk about 'Indian' Rights, or a better term is 'Aboriginal' Rights."

I'm stuck with it. Being the only Indian in the class they are bound to ask me to explain Indian Rights and what I think. I don't really know anything about it except what mom said.

What do I care?

The BIG lesson happens after lunch, as promised.

The teacher says: "We Canadians thought we were doing the correct thing. Five hundred years ago, the Indians had nothing—except land. We gave them everything so we, the settlers, could live here too."

One of the dumb boys goes: "Whadaya mean gave them **everything?**"



The teacher says it was all perfectly legal: “So we could have houses and gardens too, we gave Aboriginal people hunting, fishing, and mineral rights on the free land we set aside for them called reserves. It was reserved for them. Plus, we gave them free education and medical care.”

Then the teacher smiles her big blonde smile at me. She has dimples. I’ve always loved dimples. “Isn’t that right Bonita? You said your family moved to the reserve this summer where you have everything for free?”

Tears sting in my eyes. My throat tightens. Not my family, just my mother. I don’t have everything. I don’t have Dad’s big screen TV. And I don’t have a house near Cherylynn’s.

The boys, especially one guy named Nate, all laugh and make kissy kissy sounds. “Kiss our Boys’ Rights” they chant around me and Cherylynn.

Then the teacher puts on a DVD. She plays a song for us she says she loves from an old-time musical named South Pacific:

*You’ve got to be taught
To hate and fear,
You’ve got to be taught
From year to year,
It’s got to be drummed
In your dear little ear
You’ve got to be carefully taught.*

*You’ve got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
And people whose skin is a diff’rent shade,
You’ve got to be carefully taught.*



*You've got to be taught before it's too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate,
You've got to be carefully taught!*

Of course the boys just laugh: "We're not in the South Pacific. We're in Canada!"



Shelley Niro, "Are You My Sister?" (detail), 1994, photographs on drilled mat board. Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston. Purchase, Canada Council Acquisition Assistance Program, 1996 (40-005) photo credit: S. Bardell

It would be so great if Cherylynn and I could just live like sisters, like the picture in our book, thinks Bonita.



NATE'S LUNCH

Maybe this is the afternoon for me to skip school. OK, it's hard to skip the first day of school. I could maybe hang out with my Grandma, complain about the teacher. But Grandma would call my mom.

Who wants to know more about what these dumb girls did over the summer? Who cares? I don't care for sure.

I don't need to know about Aboriginal studies. Who cares? Big deal. The teacher says we're doing that after lunch. I'm going to put the Brothers –the Bruz to us cool people -- on either side of me and take up so much desk space that no girls can sit even close to me. That'll make the little chicks mad, if we spread out all our stuff.

The teacher is cool, I'm not saying she isn't, but my people had it hard too. Ask my dad. They first lived in a tent, then a shack, then a house with no running water, and finally a two storey house that his grandparents lived in until they died. And my dad says they paid for everything. None of it was free. Dad says they had to pay taxes on all of it, you betcha. Just like I have to pay taxes on snacks and candy. Not like Indians, Dad says. They get everything for free.

I should know. Dad makes me help him paint our house. The paint isn't free, and we have to pay taxes on it too. Dad says there's taxes on everything but Indians don't have to pay taxes on nothing! Not snacks. Not paint. Not gas.

Indians can come to our gas stations and our stores and hang around and not pay taxes. But we can't go to theirs and hang around and not pay taxes. Is that fair?



After lunch I'm going to have to listen to how much harder some dopey Indian girl had it. Puh-lease. And then listen to some dopey white chicklets clucking in sympathy.

Dad says how hard is it not to pay taxes? And even with that she still gets to fish for however much she wants, where-ever she wants, when-ever she wants, for as long as she wants. She can hunt too, but she's probably too chicken to hunt.

Is that fair? Free fish. Free meat. And my Dad says those guys get to have guns all the time. Just watch what happens if me and Dad try to get a gun. I'd love to have a gun.

Maybe I'm not coming back after lunch. OK, if I can be surrounded by the Bruz. It would be OK if I can have them sitting in the desks next to me. None of those crybaby, sob story girls.

Dad says Indians just want to take, take, take. Well I'm not going to give, give, give.



Cherylynn brings a copy of this watercolour to school. Of course she didn't draw it. It is "Young and Old," 1984, by Maliseet artist Shirley Bear, and a gift from her best friend Bonita. Bonita says: "this is just what we look like!"

CHERYLYNN'S LUNCH

My best friend Bonita and I have the same red high-tops. How cool is that on the first day of school?

Too bad we didn't get to see each other much over the summer because of Bonita's weird move to the reserve. OK, so Bonita's Indian, but not that Indian! Well, to look at anyway.

I glance around and am glad to see my friends. Summer was too long.



There is a new girl in our class who is not so clean, has stringy hair, and nothing to eat for lunch. Really, truly she has no lunch. No food. Believe it.

Bonita stays away from the new girl. Bonita says she “doesn’t want anybody to think they know each other.”

I’ll give the new girl my lunch. So I’m a bit hungry. Surely everybody in our town actually has at least some food, somewhere?

Bonita is really upset when I repeat my mom’s “no visit” decree: “Bonita is welcome in our home at any time, Cherylynn, but I cannot have you going all the way out there to the reserve. There are all kinds of unfortunate people out there. I cannot allow it. I’ll take Bonita home to the reserve though if she visits us.”

Seemed OK to me at the time, but sounds a little stupid now that I say it out loud. And Bonita says she knows how her mom will react: “If those white people are too uppity to visit us, then you can’t visit them.”

Now the stupid boys are prancing around.

“Why don’t you girls fish for us? Ha ha. If you’re so wonderful that you can fish all the time. Ha ha. Hunt us down. Ha ha.”

I can’t fight everybody, I think sadly to myself. They can’t see me cry. A half day back in school and the boys are yelling. And there is this new girl with no lunch. Plus Bonita can’t visit me.

This is it. I’m having it out with my mom when I get home. Mom has got to change her order.

I decide I will visit the reserve if I have to walk! This is what I



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will say to my mother: “So what if they don’t have this or that. So what if the reserve people have made Bonita and her mom live in the worst house because they just moved back. So what if her dad sometimes tries to pound their door down and drag them back to the city. That’s why Bonita’s mom left him.

So what?

A friend is a friend. I have to stand beside my friends.”



SOME QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION AFTER READING BOOKLET #1

1. Which character do you identify with the most in the story (Cherylynn, Nate, or Bonita) and why?
2. If you could change one action or statement of any of the characters (Cherylynn, her mother; Nate; the Teacher; Bonita, her mother) which statement or action would you change and how?



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