

Conversations with Another Woman: The Biography of Malinda Bullshields

Precious Jones

Born at the Blood Indian Hospital in Cardston, Alberta, Malinda Bullshields begins by revealing one of the many names she took on in her life. Native peoples are given names from the “circumstances of their birth,” and being born the fourth female, her parents named her “Mutdageeguan” which translates to “another girl” from Blackfoot. Unfortunately, this is not an endearing term, as her parents were hoping for their first boy. There is no documentation that shows her name, as her mother was legally not allowed to register it on the birth certificate. Instead, a black nurse gave her the second name, “Malinda which means caring and giving in an African language.” Her surname “Bullshields” was inherited from her great grandpa, Buffalo Bull Shields, after the “Indian agent on the reserve [incorrectly] registered it as a surname.” Bullshields, now deemed “Old Man Bull Shields,” was a warrior and a medicine man when they were pushed to the reserves.¹

Indigenous family ties were much different than the patriarchal arrangements Anglo-Americans practice. Since their economy was based on subsistence, “many Native cultures understood ancestry as matrilineal: family and clan identity proceeded along the female line, through mothers and daughters, rather than fathers and sons” because it was predominantly the women of the tribe who cultivated wealth. This network provided extra security for families because they had a community to help them with the stress of raising young. Though a perfectly practical system, it can be confusing when viewed from the outside in.

When colonizers came to this land, one of the trading goods they shared was liquor. “Native American's responses to alcohol were heavily influenced by the example of White frontiersmen;” prior to white influence, they had no exposure to the drink which meant tolerance was low.² Since

Europeans were heavy drinkers, they were more resistant to inebriation. This gave an advantage to Caucasians in diplomatic pursuits which often ended in deals detrimental to Natives, one being the generational curse of addiction. Malinda's grandfather had fallen ill to the disease of alcoholism and was incapable of taking care of his son. His sister, Aunnie and her husband Me-nee-che-goo, stepped up to adopt her three-year-old nephew as their own. What patriarchal standards view as her great aunt (Aunnie) and great-great uncle (Me-nee-che-goo) were, through the kinship network, now her great and great-great grandparents. And after the birth of her brother, they adopted Malinda, moving her biological parents to the position of sibling. She bonded with them as they taught her the culture, and by the time she had reached two years old, she spoke fluent Blackfoot. Malinda was four years old when Aunnie died of tuberculosis and eleven when Me-nee-che-goo passed away at 98 years, "I could say that was when I lost my real parents whom I bonded with love."³

She was forcibly removed from her family because of the exposure and sent to a sanatorium. "The sanatorium was a tuberculosis hospital for native people exclusively who were bedridden for many, many years," in her case it was 4.5. There she witnessed Native children from all backgrounds being brought in. Often, they were carried in full body casts that severely restricted movement with openings only on the face and privates. "I did a lot of dissociating because when I was bedridden on that bed, my mind dissociated completely. I only remember a few things that happened in [those] 4.5 years that I did there," her voice becomes distant as she recounts one instance when she came to and heard the cry of a young girl. As she looked around, she realized an orderly was looming over her roommate, "in my young mind that didn't feel good cause that young girl was crying, but right now I could say they were molesting her by fondling her and touching her" as was often the case for those innocent souls held captive in these hospitals. The

orderlies would come to their beds at night and abuse these young children, it was worse than a prison. “My uncle [who spent 8 years there] was [a victim of] repeated sexual abuse by hospital personnel during his whole time there” our mainstream society often tries to cover up the sexual abuse young boys face, but Malinda makes it a point to explain that adults targeted both sexes in the sanitariums.⁴

At eight and a half years of age, she was finally allowed to go back home. “I had pure anger when I came back from the sanatorium,” she had spent 4.5 years there, surrounded by white people who had only spoken English. Because her language was not reinforced, she had lost it by the time she had gotten back. With this in mind, her grandfather gave her the warrior name: “Astutsapiaki meaning looks both ways woman.” Most indigenous people receive their warrior name in adult years, but she had received it at age nine when her grandpa deemed her “a warrior when [she] survived the sanatorium. I’d earned the name by overcoming the isolation and abuse of systematic racism.” Her parents and relatives made fun of her for not being able to communicate with them. It was not her fault she had forgotten how to speak Blackfoot, but all her kin acted as if she’d lost it on purpose. She felt like an outcast and it hurt. The years of abuse in the sanatorium coupled with the emotional abuse she received from her family led her to tantrums. To quiet her, her father strapped her with a harness, and her mother threw water in her face. She was not given compassion, and no one showed her they understood her plight.⁵

Her time spent with family was short lived. At the time, dozens of children were being taken to residential schools, most via cattle truck. When the government saw the work native women took on in domestic life, they took it upon themselves to educate these women how to be “proper” housewives. These boarding schools often educated their children in a strictly martial fashion. It severely differed from “tribal educational patterns that often-mixed learning with

play.”⁶ They were unable to put aside their own ethnocentric beliefs to realize the abundance that indigenous peoples lived in harmony with. Unlike most, Malinda’s parents drove her to residential school. They did not understand her pain or why she consistently threw tantrums, so, two weeks later, they sent her away.

It was at this time she had received her fourth name: #35, no meaning, no significance, just a label to be identified by when her self-imposed superiors gave orders. For ten years she was identified this way; she “wasn’t introduced, consulted, [and]... they never mentioned [her] first name,” she was not treated with respect or dignity, she was only another cog in their tyrannous approach to assimilation. Again, she was an outcast: neither the native children nor white adults acknowledged her with kindness. They were not allowed to publicly speak their native languages. She, unlike the others, was fluent in English. Having spent 4.5 years in the sanitorium, it was inevitable for her to learn. The kids did not see it that way, instead she was seen as a native trying too hard to be white, so she was cast aside as a reject. Fortunately, she was not the only reject and had clique who spoke their home tongue when the adults were not around, so hearing Blackfoot reignited the recognition of her lost language to her mind.

From bedridden to bullied, she had never gotten a chance to interact with peers on mutual social grounds. She had a small group of friends, but all she knew was self-preservation, “I had to protect myself. They were hittin’ me, they were pullin’ my hair, they were makin’ me box” so she became violent. From first to sixth grade, she learned to defend herself and in an act of psychological predisposition began to safeguard her heart. As seventh grade began, she and her peers were integrated into white schools. Every day, she would take a bus to Cardston to receive education. She had never associated with white children, so this was a new experience. According to residential school policy, if siblings are the same age, the youngest is held back so as not to

progress with each other. Therefore, she was sentenced to consign two years of her life. On the first day of seventh grade, when she walked in the door, she was immediately met with laughter and ridicule. Being demoted two years did not stop her from growing; she would “sprouted up to 5 '10 by the time [she] was 13 years old,' 5' 10 for any teenage girl is exceptionally tall. Add the fact that she was a 5 '10, 13-year-old surrounded by a sea of red and white 11-year-olds with no sense of consideration, and it is easy to see how harassment remained prevalent in peer interaction.

During 11th to 12th grade, Malinda lived in foster care. Since she was eighteen, she was too old to attend high school, but too young to be considered an adult. The experience was “weird, isolated, and [left her] angry.” At this time, Bullshields lived with “with strangers, three dysfunctional families, each expressing stereotypes, assumptions, and racism.” These families did not try to include her in activities, and she felt she was not welcomed in their homes. Her experience is reminiscent of the “Outing System” described in Robert A. Trennert’s: *Educating Indian Girls at Nonreservation Boarding Schools* what should have been a “vehicle for acculturation” quickly became a means of “providing servants to white householders” in the name of education.

She does not have many happy memories of her childhood, only those involving Sundance. Agooga-sin is a spiritual time full of festivities and laughter. “Everybody was there. No fighting, kids playin,’ there was laughter, you see men working. It was a very peaceful time in our lives, during the Sundance,” she recalled with great fondness. It was only in these summer moments that she experienced joy with her community. But of course, any joy that is not white joy is unacceptable. When the government caught wind of these annual festivities, they shut it down. For 10 years they were not allowed to participate in worship as their ancestors did. “Partly due to the self-torture aspects of the controversial ritual, the Sun Dance was outlawed by the Indian

Department and the Mounted Police,” on the outside, their rituals look torturous, but to them they were practices of dignity and strength.⁷ Their only time to forget about the hundreds of thousands of peers who ended up missing or dead; to forget about the pain and abuse of acculturation, was snatched away as incentive to submit. Naturally, the chip on her shoulder evolved into full on rage. Every opportunity she had for happiness, for pleasure, for anything that was not disassociating from life, had been snatched away with no remorse.

At age 20 she graduated high school and married a white man. During this marriage Malinda gave birth to three children before he abandoned them seven years later. A common phrase to tell adolescents is “it gets better,” and we always hope it is true. What should have been happy years of motherhood and love did not come to pass. In 1985, Canada passed the Indian Act which states “an Indian woman who married a non-Indian man... would lose her status.”⁸ Consequently, she was removed from the reservation. To this day she does not know why she married him. The only reason she could fathom is that she was looking for love, and all the native men wanted to do was sleep around, “cause they were not groomed in any way to be respectful to a woman, because those [residential school] supervisors, and the priest, and the nuns, did not respect the children in that way.” This idea is also represented in an essay of Paula Gunn Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop* where she writes “under the old laws, the Iroquois were a mother-centered, mother-right people whose political organization was based on the central authority of the matrons, the mothers of the...clan,” the once predominately gynocritic structure of native society had been chipped away and replaced with the derogatory viewpoint of patriarchal terrorism. In the coming years, she remarried several times, and had five more beautiful children. Although her husbands were Native, she and her children did not regain their status until 1985 when bill C-31 was passed to correct transgressions the Indian act had solicited.

White people were not allowed on reservation grounds, and natives were not allowed off. Malinda struggled to provide for herself when her husband left, so although her children were considered white, the child welfare system allowed them to live on the reservation with her parents. She could not live with her children, only visit them. She could not spend time with her family. All she could do was live day by day in this racist and bigoted society, hoping she would be able to find a means to sustain herself in the days to come. So the cycle continued, her children were taken care of by their grandparents, but luckily had not been forced into the residential school. Unfortunately, they suffered abuse and injustice just as she did, just as her parents did, and just as their parents. Four generations of mistreatment and bigotry, and all she could do was peer in from the outside. "My daughter passed away in a year of that time, and I could not live on the reserve to watch her, take care of her. She died in the hands of my mother babysitting. She was nowhere home, and nobody acknowledged where she was, and it turns out she was runnin' across the road to get to a candy store. She got hit by a car," her voice shook. Though I could not see it, tears were falling down her face. No words exist to comfort a loving mother distraught by the echo of her fallen child, so there was silence.

The world seemed to be against her: so much hate, violence, and racism it should not have to be this way. It was not always this way "the coming of the white man created chaos in all the old systems, which were for the most part superbly healthy, simultaneously cooperative and autonomous, peace centered, and ritual oriented."⁹ She was a scorned woman, and it did not have to be this way. They tried to take her autonomy, they tried to make her a sheep, but she did not let them, "when you live on the earth you must have your own invention, not everybody's. You must have your own autonomy. It's how you know the earth, and how you can survive it... [If] you don't have autonomy, you only have obedience." In college, she majored in Psychology and

minored in Native Studies. She only needed one more semester to receive her Bachelor of Arts at the University of Lethbridge in Southern Alberta. This allowed her to see life from a new perspective. She realized that she did not have to be angry. Malinda had been sober 30 years after losing her daughter. I imagine this sobriety gave her renewed invigoration for life, because she states “when I was in my 60s, I made a vow that I would quit fighting and hurting myself and others and quit drinking” she did it for her children. Malinda saw the impact her parents’ lifestyle had on her and realized she was leading her children down the same path. At this time, her mother had begun participating in Agooga-sin. Malinda saw the positive impact these ceremonies had on her mother’s life and knew she could make a change within herself.

Malinda Bullshields is a Blackfoot woman living in Vancouver, Canada. She is a kindhearted firecracker of a woman, who was nice enough to set time aside to participate in an interview about her life. She, like many Native Americans, has faced innumerable trials and tribulations. From being institutionalized in a hospital at age four, to being imprisoned in residential school for 10 years, to having to face the world without a tribe, she has lived a full life full of hurt and pain. Despite all the obstacles she has faced, she has made a personal vow against violence in exchange for a peaceful happy life. She is a strong, resilient woman who understands the necessity for autonomy. This is her story, one that deserves to be heard and needs to be shared.

¹ Precious Jones, Interview with Malinda Bullshields, Fall, 2022.

² J.W. Frank et. al., “Historical and Cultural Roots of Drinking Problems Among American Indians” *American Journal of Public Health*, Mar. 2000 90(3): 344-351.

³ Precious Jones, Interview with Malinda Bullshields, Fall, 2022.

⁴ Precious Jones, Interview with Malinda Bullshields, Fall, 2022.

⁵ Precious Jones, Interview with Malinda Bullshields, Fall, 2022.

⁶ Robert A. Trennert, “Educating Indian Girls at Nonreservation Boarding Schools, 1878-1920.” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (1982): 271-290.

⁷ Lab for Education and Advancement of Digital Research

⁸ “Welcome to Indigenous Foundations,” indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/

⁹ Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. Beacon Press, 1992.