

# Brown Girl Dancing

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KATE MONTURE

*L'identité et toujours un problème pour les Premières Nations et dans cet article une danseuse adolescente nous raconte ses expériences durant sa formation de ballerine. Son rêve de danser hors des traditions de son peuple l'a isolée. Il est question ici d'ethnie.*

When I was a little girl, I loved pink. I even wanted all my clothes to be pink. Imagine, growing up in the bush near Turtle Lake on the Thunderchild First Nation and I wanted pink jeans—not dark pink, pastel pink! My love of pink would always make my mother's face twist and contort. My mom has always said that I knew my own mind from the minute I was born.

On a trip to the library at Thunderchild School when I was in kindergarten, I found a book with a little girl in the cover in a pink leotard and tutu. I loved pink! I grabbed the book and went running to the teacher to ask her what the little girl was doing. She told me she was a ballerina. I asked my teacher to read me the book and she did. It was about the little ballerina going off to ballet school. And when she was done the story, I told my teacher: "That's what I want to be when I grow up! A ballerina!" My teacher laughed and that made me mad. I went home and told my mom and dad, "When I grow up I want to be a ballerina!"

Until I was eight years old, I kept up with the idea that I wanted to be a ballerina. From the time I was two I was powwow dancing and I learned all three women's styles. I especially like jingle-dress dancing. My mom said she would often see people pointing at me and saying things like that girl just floats when she dances. It hardly looks like her feet are on the ground. So my family knew I was a good dancer.

On the reserve, just about any reserve on the prairies and not just the Thunderchild First Nation where I grew up, you cannot take ballet classes. There are no dances schools. So the opportunities that many children have who grow up in cities are not available for First Nations children. Sometimes I think about the other children who have dreams to be something, like my dream to be a ballerina, who can't live their dreams because there aren't opportunities on the reserve or their families are poor.

My mom listened to my constant "I want to be a ballerina" demands and turned our lives around so I could take dance lessons. In the summer of 2001, when I was eight, she found a town house in the city and moved us two to town. My brothers and dad stayed on the reserve. It was funny living in the city and I was scared of everything. The cars drove so fast and there were so many of

them that whenever we walked downtown I walked with my shoulder almost against the buildings. All of my family made sacrifices so I could dance my dream.

That fall I started dance classes in both jazz and ballet. I loved it! My mom laughs all the time because as soon as I started classes I never walked anywhere again. We'd go to the grocery store and those big long aisles looked like a place to do a series of chassés in jazz or gallops. I danced through parking lots and in the halls at school. I am grateful that I have a mom who listens and went to school for a long time. I know she would rather be watching lacrosse or hockey than ballet. But she has always supported me and my dream to dance. We aren't poor like a lot of people I know on the reserve. So I have had the chance to be a brown girl dancing ballet.

One of the stories that gets told about me happened at one of the very first dance competitions I went to. I was sitting beside my mom in the audience in between my own dance numbers watching the other dances. I was nine years old. After a while of watching, I leaned over and asked my mom: "Where are all the other brown girls dancing? I have only seen one other brown girl." My mom explained to me that dance was expensive and often First Nations families don't have the money

to enroll their children in dance. And she also explained about having to move away from the reserve for me to have the opportunity. It made me very sad that all the brown girls couldn't dance and another dream was born. As I get older, I want to find ways to help make opportunities for other brown girls to dance.

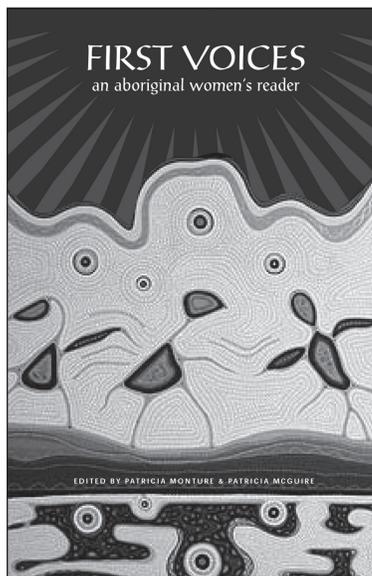
Sometimes it is not easy being a brown girl dancing. I am often the only girl in my classes who is First Nations. It is sometimes isolating and I feel very alone. I have had opportunities to dance with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, the National Ballet School of Canada, and Quinte Ballet School. When I was eleven, I

went to Winnipeg to dance. When we walked into the school, I felt like I had been slammed into a wall of white. There were at least 100 dancers there and I saw only one other dancer who was not white. I have had to learn how to deal with this isolation and I sometimes have to remind myself that there is nothing the matter with me. The reason I don't fit is because I have crossed cultures and boundaries. I am a brown girl dancing ballet. My love of dance keeps pulling me across these lines.

Sometimes, the white people I dance with make it clear that I don't fit—sometimes through their words

and actions. But most often, just by how they look at me. Other times, other First Nations people treat me like I am odd. But what I know in my heart, Creator gave me the gift to dance—jazz, jingle, ballet, and sometimes even hip hop! And I will always be a brown girl dancing.

*Kate Monture is 15 years old and lives in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. She is Mohawk from Grand River Territory and also has ties through her father to the Thunderchild First Nation (Cree) in Saskatchewan. She is a grade 11 student at Centennial Collegiate. Her passion other than dance is soccer and her team won gold at NAIG 2008.*



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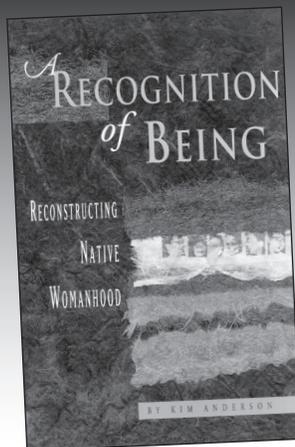
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