Features



WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

by Lisa Bird-Wilson

Being Indigenous in Canada falls into a special category of identity politics. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that identity would preoccupy an Indigenous writer's work.

As Indigenous people our identities are regulated by federal legislation and legal rulings. The more well-known pieces of legislation include the Indian Act and the Constitution Acts 1867 to 1982, sections 91(24) and 35(1) respectively. These pieces of legislation dictate and impact Indigenous identity. For instance, the Constitution of Canada entrenches the definition of Aboriginal as inclusive of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. It recognizes and affirms existing Aboriginal and treaty rights. The Indian Act regulates who will be registered as "status Indians" in Canada, thereby impacting connections to culture, family, language, and land. The recent Daniels decision says that Métis and non-status Indians are "Indians" under section 91(24) of the constitution act 1867.[1]

Don't worry if it's all a bit overwhelming. The takeaway from this brief look at some of the regulation of Indigenous identity is that a) it's complicated and b) Indigenous identity is both legitimized and marginalized by these pieces of legislation. The legislation and its execution have tangible and real consequences to Indigenous lives. It can serve to tie Indigenous people to, or separate Indigenous individuals from, our cultural traditions, land, and languages.

Additionally, many Indigenous people have been separated from their communities of origin through forced adoption, removal of children, alienation, sexist legislation of the Indian Act, or a combination of these violent acts of colonialism. Indigenous people have been forced into the position of having to reclaim and fight to protect our identity because of systemic violence intended to terminate our rights, assimilate and separate us from our identities. Due to legal and historic aspects of Indigenous identity in this country, the violence of colonialism, and harmful government policy, there exists a special emphasis on being Indigenous in Canada.

"The Cree word miskâsowin embodies the concept of finding one's origin, centre, identity, and belonging."



Multitasker 2, 2017
by Catherine Blackburn
Gel photo transfers on canvas, beads, and thread, 25.25" x 25.25"

Opposite page: *Multitasker 3,* 2016
by Catherine Blackburn
Gel photo transfers on canvas, beads, and thread, 25.25" x 25.25"

In March, I will be going to communities across Saskatchewan to read, talk, and engage with people about the concept of identity through my short story fiction collection, *Just Pretending* (Coteau Books, 2013), which the Saskatchewan Library Association has named as their choice for *One Book One Province* for 2019.

The Cree word miskâsowin embodies the concept of finding one's origin, centre, identity, and belonging. Identity and belonging are central to *Just Pretending*, but instead of asking the question "Who Am I?" I've chosen to ask instead, "Who do you think you are?" to act as a guiding theme for the One Book, One Province tour. The question, I think, fits with the overall tone of the book, which can be summed up as irreverent, a bit dark, but with some humour as well.

While dealing with many "mature themes," the stories in the collection also tackle issues of a colonial legacy and the impacts on Indigenous identity. Colonial violence has separated us from our identities through systematic vehicles such as residential schools, adoption and child welfare systems, language stripping, banned cultural practices, and so on. Reclaiming our identities is a part of our resistance to such colonial impacts.

For me, what's on the cover of my book, is symbolic of what's inside the book. The cover art, one in the photo-series *Cyborg Hybrids* (New York Series) by Winnipeg artist KC Adams, features a model who embodies Adams' criteria of being a cyborg hybrid—mixed Indigenous-European heritage, forward thinking, and technologically connected.[2] The model in the portrait meets your glance with a defiant, steely stare. The viewer is unsure what to make of the stoic pose and expression. What's out of frame is the t-shirt the model wears. Each model in the series selected their own slogan to have beaded in white beads onto their white t-shirt. The effect is to challenge and ridicule the narrow identity columns Indigenous

people are often channelled into. The model on the cover of *Just Pretending* ironically wears a t-shirt beaded with the words "REAL INDIAN." At the same time, "their defiant poses challenge the viewer to try and classify their identity."[3] The irony, of course, is what exactly does it mean to be a "real Indian?"[4]

At the heart of *Just Pretending*, the characters are searching for miskâsowin. Many are MIA, having been adopted out, have given up children themselves, or are otherwise estranged from their origins and roots. In other words, the centre is uncentred in some way. For instance, a nitanis (daughter) invents the mother she never knew, at the same time re-imagining herself in the womb, a reluctant participant. A fourteen-year-old girl attempts to come to terms with her feelings of abandonment; her confusion doesn't extend to her sarcastic opinions of those around her. A young man struggles with his moshum's imprisonment in a damaged body and what it means for his own Métis identity.

Finding origin, claiming space, clarifying the unclear—these are the ideas with which *Just Pretending* grapples.

The title story in the collection has the narrator positing that she, being adopted, and her whole family, all being from separate origins, are, in fact, not related at all. As if they are all just pretending to be a family. As if they are all just pretending to belong to one another. The story begs the question, what does it mean to be a family? What does it mean to belong to a family?

A number of stories are about birth, pregnancy, or infants, both lost and found, and about separation. Birthing is by its very definition a separating—accompanied by pain and blood and an enormous wrenching free. Becoming whole again has a lot to do with what happens after the pain of birth, after the pain of separation. When the child/parent goes MIA, loss and confusion, anxiety and grief ensue. Blood memory, heredity, DNA, and an active claiming of identity lie dormant, often for years, finally to be shivered into shape and shaken into the air—dust motes on a beam of sunlight. The beginning of the journey to miskâsowin. In March, I look forward to the *One Book One Province* readings and events, to discussions of identity and belonging, and to meeting people across Saskatchewan with amazing experiences and identity stories of their own to tell. Ⓕ

[1] A note on terminology: Sometimes, terminology can be confusing. Aboriginal is used in a legalistic sort of way in the Constitution; Indigenous is a more current and accepted term to refer generally and collectively to all First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people; Indian is a dated term that has been used pejoratively at times, and so might be best confined to use when referring to the Indian Act.

[2] kcadams.net/art/photography/Hybrids/hybrid-main.html

[3] ibid

[4] Many writers experience the cover art of their book as something proposed by the publisher and over which the publisher usually has total veto, contractually speaking. I'm so glad the publisher of *Just Pretending,* Coteau Books, was willing to work with me to find the right cover art to match the content.

