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# Becoming Unapologetically Métis: A Reflection on *In Search of April Raintree*

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## Abstract

As a mixed Métis (Scots-Cree) grandmother and PhD student, I constantly find myself navigating colonial waters while living in, and writing from, a space of resistance and change. Reflecting on Beatrice Mosionier's novel, *In Search of April Raintree*, I reflect on my own experiences of overcoming encounters with identity, inheritance, and violence. Using poetry and critical reflection, I illustrate the power of remembering as a way of challenging social and political narratives of identity and belonging.



## Keywords

Indigenous, anti-colonial, Métis women, poetry

*Awina kiya?*
I come from nothin' they said
Dirt floors, empty cupboards, split lips don't tell secrets
Broken windows a gathering of spirits
The cold comes in like an enemy ghost
Its hand around my throat until I can't breathe
Sisters never forget
Ripped pants sewn to wear again
Dutiful hands tried to mend and didn't ask questions
But you can't heal a wound you ignore
Flies buzz at plastic sealed windows
Tap tap tap
Like your secrets they want to escape too
Little sister cried when you kill them
No more witnesses.
*Atishipweeteew*
Dirty hair dirty clothes dirty
I'm a good girl, not good enough though
You still looked the other way
We told you what he did
Liar. Traitor. Stupid Girl.
I come from nothin' they said
But look at me now
Not bad for a girl they said
*Ni kiskisin*
You come from everything *Ma fii*
Scraps of cloth make the most beautiful blankets
Weaving them together makes them strong
Like the stories Granny wrapped you in for protection
You are the earth you work with your hands
And the seeds that feed us all winter
Mind quick like a rabbit
Heart like uncle's traps, always full
You come from wild blueberries warm in the sun
Following the seasons like a forest spirit
*Gitchi Manidoo* welcomes you there
You come from medicine women
From secrets Spirit whispered in your ear
Held in your blood and your bones until it was time
*Ni kihceyihten niya Mechif*
*Ni kiskisin*

I recently revisited Beatrice Mosionier's novel, *In Search of April Raintree*. While reading the narratives of the two Métis sisters, Cheryl and April, I was reminded of things I have long tried to forget. Like April and Cheryl, my connection to my Métis heritage is deeply influenced by processes of settler colonialism and acts of reclamation. In my family, themes of dislocation, addiction, colonial violence, forced assimilation, interpersonal trauma, and poverty are combined with resistance, love, hope, and deep connection to land, family, and the spirit world. My identity continues to be interrupted and reclaimed.

I grew up in an isolated, rural area in Northwestern Ontario located on the Kaministiquia River, outside of what is now known as Kakabeka Falls–the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe peoples and part of Treaty 60 (Robinson-Superior Treaty). The Kaministiquia River, as well as the Albany River and Lake Superior (Gitchee Goomi), were important waterways for the Métis people, and my ancestors would have travelled along the rivers trading furs and following the seasons with their kin My family is a mix of Métis (Scots-Cree)–Ukrainian on my maternal side, and mixed European on my paternal side. Perhaps this is why I am so comfortable on the water, canoeing or kayaking, getting lost along the shoreline.

Such ease must be a blood memory, as growing up, I was disconnected from my culture and history. My family history was comprised of whispered stories told with raised eyebrows, whenever my mother was out of earshot. Teachings about the land and the spirit world were passed down from my grandmother, and in recent years, ancestral research conducted by my cousins. Interestingly, growing up I knew more about my biological father's family history, even though my siblings and I are now estranged from him. In terms of my maternal side, I was told that we were 'Indians,' but received no further context or information about what that meant. I assumed that I was Ojibway like most of the Indigenous people I knew in Thunder Bay. It was not until I was a teenager that I discovered I was Cree/Métis.

This secrecy, disconnection from, and shaming of, who I was–who I *am*–was meant to protect me. But all it did was hurt me, manifesting as sites of pain and loss throughout my life. No matter how hard we try, our secrets have a way of unearthing themselves from the graves that

they're buried in. I have decided to treat my secrets like medicine and weave them back into my soul. If life has taught me anything, it's that all of our stories have a place in our medicine bundles. It's knowing what to do with them that's the real challenge.

I found these struggles mirrored back to me in the pages of *In Search of April Raintree*. I feel the characters of both April and Cheryl living inside me as a mixed blood woman struggling to belong and exist. The crisis of identity this causes speaks to a deeper knowing of Indigeneity within me and of my ability to truly love this part of myself. Yet, at the same time, there is a feeling of shame. That I can never let people know who I am. And if I do, I will not belong.

At times in my life I have felt like a ghost, unseen and insignificant. I have questioned how I could be perceived by others if I, myself, did not know who I was. This was exacerbated by the knowledge that my family has kept our Indigeneity a secret for generations. But as a young person, I was not able to articulate these troubles in any way. What I could name, however, was that I felt dirty, deserving of the abuse that I was enduring, and that aside from when I was with my Gran, I neither belonged nor mattered.

I felt a strong sense of shame for much of my life. I was only liked and accepted when performing whiteness. I believed that if people knew me and got close to me, they would discard me. This led to years of anxiety, hiding, masking, and passing. In this way, I connect to April from the novel, who denies parts of herself in an attempt to fit into mainstream culture. As April tries on her false identity, she is aware that it's a thin disguise, but she is also taught to believe that it is her only option. Indeed, at times, our identity becomes a performative survival and occurs within the backdrop of internal and external colonization (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

While colonization has impacted all Indigenous people, women and girls experience higher rates of violence, not only within their own communities, but by men writ large. A broader historical context marred by colonialism and discriminatory government practices, in addition to gendered experiences of child welfare and the residential school system, has created conditions for violence against Indigenous women and girls to thrive. For Indigenous women, the experiences of violence on the body and through gendered racist constructions of our identity is both personal and public, connected to the ongoing context of domination and subordination.

According to research by Downe (2005), constructions of the Indigenous female body through gendered practices of colonization have marked this identity as "dirty, unkempt, and inherently rape-able" (p. 4). According to Weaver (2009), these stereotypes "have severely undermined traditional ways of life and have also contributed to the rise of domestic violence [and]…continue to deny the personhood and sacredness of First Nations women" (p. 1556). Constructing the Indigenous female identity as worthy of harm and misuse is one of the long-standing acts of colonial practice that continue to affect our women today.

I am a survivor of physical abuse and sexualized violence; however, it was not due to my race. It was due to my father. He did not target me (to my knowledge) as an Indigenous woman. But it is possible that my Indigeneity contributed to the silence around my abuse. And to its pretense. I've long wondered: was my father aware that we, his children, his wife, were Indigenous? In his mind, did this afford him additional rights to our bodies? I do recall several white uncles and cousins calling us derogatory slurs, so it is possible. My mother continues to deny the abuse to this day. It remains, for now, another conversation we will not have. I suppose I will have to leave her to tend to her own secret graves, as I attend to mine.

Dominant discourses about Indigenous women remain a site of social injustice. They further marginalize our roles and entrench our lives with colonial sexist narratives. Most often, our lives are framed in terms of damage. Tuck (2009) explains that damage-centered accounts focus on hardships experienced by Indigenous communities and mobilize narratives of pain and loss. Although sharing experiences of

exploitation and violence are necessary, damage-centered narratives make it difficult for women and girls to think of themselves as anything other than broken. Tuck states that "without the context of racism and colonization, all we're left with is the damage, and this makes our stories vulnerable to pathologizing analyses" (p. 415).

Damage-centered discourses naturalize the effects of settler colonialism and not only support the idea that Indigenous people are deserving of the exploitation and violence that we experience, but that we are ultimately void of the agency, ingenuity, and strength required to demand social change. Mosionier (2008) resists such thinking in her novel. She situates her experiences directly in the context of settler colonial policy and provides deeper understanding of the systemic issues that mobilize the pain, loss, and abuse of her life. This is a brave and significant contribution to understanding both her own experience and the experiences of so many other Indigenous women, me included. This is a gift I am grateful for.

As I reflect on the story medicine Mosionier (2008) has provided, I am humbled by her bravery and wisdom in sharing. It's an affirmation that our experiences are teachers, and that our culture is a source of strength, unity, and connectivity, as well as an ever-present force in our lives–as long as we choose to honour it. As I move forward and collectively heal with my family and community, I will continue to challenge myself to authentically show up, both in my work and for myself. To make medicine of my secrets.

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## Author Biography

Jolene Heida is a mixed Métis (Scots-Cree) Auntie, mother, and grandmother from Kakabeka Falls, Ontario and a Registered Social Worker and practicing trauma therapist. She is currently a PhD Candidate with the School of Social Work at York University in Toronto, Ontario. Her doctoral research explores the connections between sexualized violence of Indigenous women, girls, and 2-Spirited people and land theft and exploitation in settler colonial societies.