

EDITOR'S NOTE

One respondent who contributed to this Forum recently withdrew their piece stating to us their fear of political reprisal for themselves and their family. In this small space we wish to remind readers that it is not safe for everyone in British Columbia to publicly write about the politics of naming.

Naming as Theft and Misdirection

GIKINO'AMAAGEWININI

MOST OF US CAN'T remember the precise moment we were named as sometimes we are given names before we even come into existence. (Perhaps there is a cellular memory of this naming event buried somewhere deep within us, but that possibility is beyond the scope of this exploration.) These first names, as they are usually given to us before we can form meaningful words, don't involve any choice on our part. Forces beyond our control determine them. These forces are very often in the form of people, and these people are quite often bonded to us either by biology or by some other sacred arrangement. Either way, our names carry with them a mystery that is typically infused with love and vision. This vision is comprised of one eye on the past and one eye to the future. In a real way, our names are calling out to both the alpha and the omega – to those who walked before and those who are yet to come. They connect us to our relations and root us to a place and time. They both symbolize that connection and *are* that connection, in that the loose rhythm and aural vibration of our names become us.

Imagine a family of six children all given names by their mother and father that connect them directly to their ancestry. Each of these names is specially chosen and in their language. Not too hard to picture. Now imagine these same children being forced by the Indian agent to see the local Anglican minister, who proceeds to rename all the children with arbitrary English names. This is what happened to my dad and all of

his siblings from the late 1920s to 1940. Gwiwii – that sounds something like Kelly, that’s what we’ll name this one; Kwez is somehow now Jessie; George is much more suitable than Watis, and so forth. My dad’s family was one of hundreds if not thousands of families affected by this dehumanizing experience. The exact scale of this dehumanization remains hidden.

Son of Gwiwii, my name is a mystery. Even though I have a surname and it connects me to my family, my ancestry, and my home, it is still a mystery in a very real way. My ability to detect its origins only takes me as far back as three generations. Beyond that, my search turns cold and is populated with speculation and rumour. One of these rumours comes from my dad, a top-notch storyteller to be sure. It’s a story I heard many times as a child, recounting our relations to one of the most famous chiefs in recent memory. And although there are some scraps of circumstantial evidence that point to a statistically remote possibility, as an adult, I can now see the story for what it is: a fantasy you tell a child to fill in the blanks. My real identity was not lost or casually misplaced; a church, in collusion with the government, intentionally took it. And from what I know, my experience is far from uncommon in the Indigenous world.

This is what colonization does. Through systems of oppression, it intentionally shrouds destructive realities, such as the dehumanizing replacement of identities, in a mystery. There was a deliberate attempt to sever the connection my people have with their past. For many of us, the question “where do I come from?” can never be answered beyond a few generations, rendering any meaning insufficient, superficial, and ultimately empty. Whether it’s the names of people, places, or processes, ambiguity and doubt are manufactured through the deployment of opaque and often misleading terminology. For example, the present-day map of British Columbia is speckled with a litany of European names, giving the false impression that it was these people who have the most legitimate claim to these mountains, rivers, lakes, and settlements. When these names are repeated, fictions become amplified, sometimes to the point at which it can be hard to imagine the realities behind them. Our shared colonial history is falsified and sanitized with empty words. What follows are just a few examples that illustrate how terms mystify people’s understanding of this shared history and the ongoing realities for Indigenous people.

Colonization in Canada and elsewhere on Turtle Island is often referred to in history texts as beginning with “contact,” which makes it sound inevitable and benign – something like, “It was flu season and I

came into contact with the virus at work.” A term as clinical as “contact” can make it difficult to connect to, or even contemplate, the scale of death and destruction that was to quickly follow, with upwards of 70 percent of our people dying in the decades immediately following the arrival of newcomers, largely as a result of disease. Faced with the facts, a more fitting term would be something like “invasion” or “the great death.”

The government department that has so much power over us has gone through a series of name changes throughout the years: the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, and now Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. These names make transparent the link between government’s interest in us and the agenda to “develop” the land. In this case, “development” is a euphemism for extracting resources for corporate profit, leaving undrinkable water, replacing forests with tree farms, and leaving toxic waste from abandoned mines, all of which make it next to impossible to live sustainably from the land as we have done since time immemorial. Many of our communities know this reality all too well.

Pelican Lake Indian Residential School is the child labour detention centre where my mom was detained as a four-year-old and my dad as a six-year-old (he was later transferred to Shingwauk Residential School, where he served out the remainder of his dozen-year sentence). The term “residential school” gives the false impression that Indigenous children simply received an education at schools where they lived in residence. The intention behind these schools, which was to “kill the Indian, save the child,” is masked by this bureaucratic language. Also masked are the thousands of cases of child abuse, for which the vast majority of perpetrators were never even charged with a crime or given any form of reprimand. Even though the last of these schools closed in 1996, dozens of these criminals are still walking freely and anonymously among us, their names never having been mentioned. It is these outstanding injustices that paint the colonial backdrop for the age of “reconciliation.”

“Reconciliation” is the latest buzz word in the present arc of our ongoing colonization. When I asked my dad about why he wasn’t interested in the Truth and Reconciliation process, he replied: “Although it may be helpful for some, why would I want to participate in a catharsis festival, when all I ever wanted was justice and that’s something that has always been denied to us.”

We continue to see justice denied. Whether it’s in the form of secretive impact and benefit agreements functioning as modern-day proxy treaties and continuing to extract wealth from our lands while original treaties

go unhonoured and unceded lands receive, at best, token recognition; whether it's in the form of more of our children being "in care" now than at the height of the residential school era; or whether it's in the form of dozens of our people of all genders continuing to be murdered or declared missing, so much is being unjustly taken from us.

Nothing that I've written here about injustice should come as a revelation. But perhaps it can serve as a reminder that Indigenous peoples must receive justice not only at the systemic level but also at the individual level, where names need to be named and actions must be taken. Instead of reconciliation, perhaps a better name for what is required to obtain this justice at all levels is one that might cause those in power some discomfort and that is the almost forgotten concept of revolution.

POSTSCRIPT

In choosing to identify with my traditional name, it is a way of being grounded, speaking more from my centre and calling out to my ancestors that the sacred act of naming is still living and breathing within us as Indigenous people. Systems of oppression have the power to name, but it doesn't mean we have to fully accept them as primary signifiers.

Science, Race, and the Alchemy of Love in Postwar British Columbia

KIRSTEN EMIKO MCALLISTER

AS A CHILD GROWING UP on Vancouver Island in British Columbia during the 1960s and 1970s, I learned early that the world was ordered and arranged according to systems of classification in which everything had its place in relation to everything else. Names within these systems had meanings that had social and material consequences. As I was to learn later, one of the most pervasive and powerful systems of classification in the province was that of science – specifically, the colonial pseudo-science underlying provincial and federal laws and