**Gina COLE**

**Navigating Identity**

“You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise...”

Maya Angelou, *Still I Rise*

Aha! Hanweh pi, Iowke, Kia ora, Aloha, Talofa lava, Fakaalofa lahi atu, Malo e lelei, Bula Vinaka.

Hello, good day. You are a rainbow. Have life. Love. Life.

I recognize the Ioway Nation as the Indigenous people of this land that we stand on today and I greet you in their language. I also greet you in some of the many Indigenous languages of the Pacific Ocean. From the Marshallese people of the Marshall Islands, Maori of Aotearoa, of Hawaii, Samoa, Niue, Tonga and Fiji.

What is the “not self”? How can I think of this “not self” when I search for my “self” every single day? In my writing, I swim in a constantly shifting pool of identity, navigating many currents in order to write my “self” into existence. I am a second-generation immigrant, a New Zealander, a Kiwi. I am a citizen of Aotearoa, the Land of the Long White Cloud, New Zealand. My heritage is Fijian and Scottish/Welsh. I am manuhiri, a visitor, welcomed by Maori, tangata whenua, the people of the land, the Indigenous people of Aotearoa. I am a Fijian lesbian woman who writes. I am an Indigenous woman, part of the Pasifika diaspora in Aotearoa. I am Other.

As an Indigenous woman my proposition today is that I live in a post-apocalyptic dystopia. Colonization is the apocalypse for me, for my ancestors, for all Indigenous peoples. Of course, we are not one homogenous group, we do not have one essential experience. But we have all suffered atrocities otherwise related as adventure stories by Europeans. We were searched out, killed, hunted, infected with diseased blankets and diseases we had never seen before, poisoned by alcohol laced with strychnine, our lands stolen, our religions outlawed, our languages prohibited, our children taken from us, our skins flayed, our heads shrunk and put on display, our populations decimated, reduced by 95%, our very right to exist denied by law, by a stroke of the legislative pen. “Smooth the pillow of a dying race” was official policy. “Breeding out” of our racial characteristics was encouraged, even by rape.

We are still believed to be savages, animals, cannibals, inferior, promiscuous, of no consequence. This thinking continues to be reflected today in the negative statistics for our housing, our education, our employment, our disproportionate incarceration in the prison industrial complex, our early mortality, our targeting by the authorities. This thinking allows our islands to continue to be bombed for “the good of mankind,” for testing nuclear weapons, and intercontinental ballistic missiles blasting our reefs apart, over and over and over again, while we face the devastating effects of climate change. This thinking allows the building of pipelines, and marinas, and roads, over our sacred sites.

I thank my ancestors for their strength, their will to survive and thrive and resist. My ancestors are with me today; their power lives on in me. Outwardly, you may never know that. I have assimilated to your ways in order to survive and this is an ongoing violence visited upon my “self.” I have learnt to be a chameleon switching between codes. I know your laws. I fight in your wars. I speak your language. I write your language. I write my “self” in your language. I write you in your language. I thrive and survive in a hostile environment, looking over my shoulder, questioning and looking for my “self.”

I live a version of my “not self” every day. I struggle to be my authentic “self” minute by minute. You may not notice my “self” while you are living your “self” every single day. I am here with you and I am still learning your language, and my language, and the languages of other Indigenous peoples. We have our own enlightenment, our own traditions, our own wisdoms, our own stories, our own songs, our own languages, our own futures, and pasts and now. Is this too on-the-nose for you? Do you feel uncomfortable? Do you see the cost? Do you want forgiveness? Do you harbor guilt?

Oh, you want to write *my* “self”? Fair enough. You are a writer, a story teller, you have imagination. We both use the tools of writing, of language, of words. Words like power-differential, alienation, truth, authenticity, compassion, partnership, equality, fairness and kindness. But remember our shared history. I challenge you to use these tools wisely, with respect and understanding and with an eye for your blind spots. Try to remember my humanity. Because I try to see your humanity every single day. We are both human. I am you.