

MAKING MÉTIS PLACES IN BRITISH COLUMBIA:

The Edge of the Métis Nation Homeland

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SELF-POSITIONING, or locating oneself in time and space, is a key feature within the field of Indigenous studies, so I begin with my own identity and its relation to place as it is relevant to the work that follows.¹ It only seems appropriate to situate my family relations and the place(s) that I come from as my personal experiences identifying as Métis have affected the research process, including my motivation for conducting this research. The community to which I tie myself comprises the Métis families of Lac Pelletier, Saskatchewan, who were forced out of the area prior to the 1950s, after which the area was transformed into a regional park and made into a recreational site for predominantly white settler families.² The nearby town of Ponteix – where I was born, to which I returned every summer, and where my extended family still lives – was a typical small, predominantly white, Catholic Fransaskois farming town. As a child, nearby Lac Pelletier was known to me as the former road allowance where my great-grandmother lived along with other Métis families (including Adams, Allarys, Fayants, Guns, LaRocques, Lemerres, Pritchards, Sinclairs, Trotters, and Whitefords). Here they lived, trapped, hunted, fished, gathered medicine, made homemade chokecherry wine, gathered for celebrations, spoke Michif, attended church (where they were forced to sit away from the white parishioners), and told bedtime stories about *Wiisakaychak*.³ I have only learned these

¹ Margaret Kovach, Jeannine Carriere, M.J. Barrett, Harpell Montgomery, and Carmen Gillies, “Stories of Diverse Identity Locations in Indigenous Research,” *International Review of Qualitative Research* 6, no. 4 (2013): 487–509.

² In 2009, Cecile Blanke, a Métis Elder born and raised at Lac Pelletier, attempted to fight resort development in the area on behalf of Métis, stating that the proposed development was in the traditional territory of the Ponteix Métis Local (*Kane v. Lac Pelletier* (Rural Municipality), 2009 SKQB 348). The application lost on the basis that there had been no previous attempt to assert Aboriginal rights in the area in accordance with the *Powley* decision, that she was not qualified to represent Métis Nation Saskatchewan, and, thus, that there was no duty to consult Métis people in the area prior to development. Cecile Blanke, *Lac Pelletier: My Métis Home* (Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute Press, 2019), 71–73.

³ Blanke, *Lac Pelletier*.

stories as an adult. As a child, Lac Pelletier was recreational: the place where we attended Catholic summer camp and where our family gathered to fish and relax.

My mom often states that, to a large extent, she was raised by her grandmother Julia Fayant.⁴ She is the family matriarch through whom I trace my Métis ancestry. Stories of Grandma Julia figured prominently throughout my childhood and adolescence. My interest in the relationship between Métis identity and place emerged from a recognition that my own self-understanding and external categorization as Métis shifted according to the places where I was residing. Growing up in Saskatchewan, I was identified in elementary school as Métis and participated in events at the Indian and Métis Friendship Centre in Saskatoon. Here, Métis children filled my classrooms and were my neighbours. It never occurred to me that people might be unfamiliar with the term “Métis.” Upon moving to British Columbia, it was clear to my adolescent self that there was a distinct lack of awareness of Métis peoples, and, after embarrassing experiences identifying myself as such, I ceased to do so. That is, until I returned to Saskatchewan during my undergraduate studies, where, through participating in Métis youth events, I once again gained confidence in my Métis identity. Then, upon moving to unceded Syilx-Okanagan territories to conduct my graduate studies, I once again noticed a shift in how my identification as Métis was received.⁵ As my location changed, so did my experiences with my Métis identity, giving rise to the question: What was the relationship between Métis identity and place, especially within British Columbia, a land that predominantly exists beyond the official boundaries of the Historic Métis Nation Homeland?

⁴ Grandma Julia's mother was Marie-Angelique Fayant, who was born in Willow Bunch, Saskatchewan, and her parents were Jean-Louis Fagnant and Elise Laplante, who lived between Cypress Hills, Fort Qu'Appelle, Lac Pelletier, and Swift Current, Saskatchewan. Jean Louis Fagnant was the son of Antoine Fagnant and Brigitte Desjarlais (both Métis from the Red River Settlement), while Elise Laplante was the daughter of Antoine Laplante and Josephte Gagnon (also Métis from the Red River Settlement). I share this as a means of situating my family within the web of Métis relations.

⁵ It is crucial that I recognize the territories upon which this research began, upon which it continues to be conducted, and where I am able to live and work as a Métis woman. Syilx-Okanagan people have acted as custodians of these lands since time immemorial and continue to be generous, patient, and hospitable hosts to myself and to the University of British Columbia, the institution through which this study was conducted.

PLACE-IDENTITY AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Scholars from a variety of fields of social analysis have engaged in research concerning the relationship between people and places, between the social and the spatial.⁶ Challenging earlier notions of places as fixed and mapped-out territories, places are increasingly accepted as being “necessarily multiple, dynamic, fragmented, and changing.”⁷ Places such as British Columbia, then, are not restricted to being a matter of location or scale but, instead, are accepted as “narrated into being” and emerging out of historically contingent processes and practices as well as the structural features that support them.⁸ As such, Western, colonial, and cartographic understandings of places as fixed territories have been increasingly overridden in favour of notions of places as “locations of particular sets of intersecting social relations.”⁹

Emerging from such studies of place and space is a discussion concerning the role of place in identity formation.¹⁰ Known as place-identity or place-based identity, this concept refers to parts of identity that are determined in relation to place and physical environments.¹¹ Moving beyond Cartesian notions of space-as-container, place-identity stems from postmodernist notions that “identity is constituted by the interactions between the extra-local forces of political economy and the historical layers of local social relations.”¹² As a constitutive feature of the politics of identity, place is crucial to narratives of the self, with particular expressive factors of identities being represented in relation to places.¹³ Within human geography, recognizing that place and the histories of places are themselves constructed has been critical as a means for

⁶ Arturo Escobar, “Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization,” *Political Geography* 20 (2001): 139–74.

⁷ Vanes Castan Broto, Kate Burningham, Claudia Carter, and Lucie Elghali, “Stigma and Attachment: Performance of Identity in an Environmentally Degraded Place,” *Society and Natural Resources* 23, no. 10 (2010): 954.

⁸ Margaret Wetherell, “Debates in Discourse Research,” in *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, ed. Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, and Simeon J. Yates (London: Sage, 2001), 396. See Allan Pred, “Place as Historically Contingent Process: Structuration and the Time-Geography of Becoming Places,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 74, no. 2 (1984): 278–97; and Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975).

⁹ Cited in Anssi Paasi, “Place and Region: Regional Worlds and Words,” *Progress in Human Geography* 26, no. 6 (2002): 807.

¹⁰ Nicholas Entrikin, “Place and Region 2,” *Progress in Human Geography* 20, no. 2 (1996): 214–21.

¹¹ Broto et al., “Stigma and Attachment,” 951–68.

¹² Tim Oakes, “Place and the Paradox of Modernity,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 87, no. 3 (1997): 510.

¹³ Broto et al., “Stigma and Attachment,” 951–68; Anastasia Christou, *Narratives, Place, Culture and Identity* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006); Paasi “Place and Region,” 802–11.

opposing essentialist notions of identity.¹⁴ Much of the focus within human geography has been on the ways in which territorial place-based identity combined with ethnicity, gender, religion, race, and class can result in particular power relations and, consequently, political mobilizations.¹⁵ Place-identity as a theoretical lens for understanding identity in relation to land is a valuable approach when combined with poststructural notions of the subject.

The notion of place-identity is particularly relevant in discussions of Indigenous peoples, as relationships to land are integral to understandings of indigeneity. The emphasis on ancestral territory and the “tie to the land” is a dominant narrative for Indigenous people, informing Indigenous cultures and identities in Canada.¹⁶ For Indigenous peoples, the concept of land moves beyond geographic notions of physical landscape or mapped locations and, instead, can signify place, landscape, home, and/or territory.¹⁷ Land has a history and meaning that is generated through narrative practices and acts as a profound mnemonic device to elicit stories and self-reflection as well as individual and collective memories.¹⁸ Consequently, land is connected to Indigenous identity in a variety of ways.

Following the assimilationist policies of the 1969 White Paper, Indigenous groups in Canada began to assert their sovereign rights through the lens of nationhood, which has since emerged as a critical intersection of contemporary Indigenous identity in Canada.¹⁹ Using the political language of nationhood, Indigenous groups in Canada locate themselves within the larger nation-state as a means for making

¹⁴ Nicholas Entrikin, “Place and Region 3,” *Progress in Human Geography* 21, no. 2 (1997): 263–68.

¹⁵ Anastasia Christou, “Deciphering Diaspora – Translating Transnationalism: Family Dynamics, Identity Constructions and the Legacy of ‘Home’ in Second-Generation Greek-American Return Migration,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29, no. 6 (2006): 1040–56.

¹⁶ Chris Andersen and Claude Denis, “Urban Natives and the Nation: Before and After the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples,” *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 40, no. 4 (2008): 373–85; Rebecca Boock, “Constructing Whiteness: Regulating Aboriginal Identity” (MA thesis, University of Toronto, 2009); Joyce Green, “The Complexity of Indigenous Identity Formation and Politics in Canada: Self-Determination and Decolonisation,” *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies* 2, no. 2 (2009): 36–46. See also Nathalie Kermoal and Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez, eds. *Living on the Land: Indigenous Women’s Understanding of Place* (Edmonton: University of Athabasca Press, 2016).

¹⁷ Mishuana Goeman, “From Place to Territories and Back Again: Centering Storied Land in the Discussion of Indigenous Nation-Building,” *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 23–34.

¹⁸ Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

¹⁹ Andersen and Denis, “Urban Natives and the Nation,” 373–85.

claims to rights, recognition, autonomy, and territory.²⁰ National identity “suggests a definite social space, a fairly well demarcated and bounded territory, with which the members identify and to which they feel they belong.”²¹ While acknowledging that this is distinct to the Western model of national identity, Smith argues that the people of a nation must be tied to a historic land, known as the “homeland,” which then acts as a repository of collective memories and resources.²²

TRACING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE MÉTIS NATION HOMELAND

The land that the historic Métis people interacted with was closely tied to their identity as post-contact Indigenous peoples.²³ The region of central and western Canada that came to be known as the Historic Métis Nation Homeland developed not only out of Métis territorial occupation but also out of ancestral connections to the land through the pre-contact Indigenous women who acted as the roots of all Métis relations.²⁴ According to Macdougall’s study of Métis in northwestern Saskatchewan, patterns of (at times temporary) Métis residence were broadly defined by matrilineal residency, “where women drew men into the region and grounded them in the values, beliefs, and behaviours of the local culture.”²⁵ This distinct pattern was counterbalanced by the sociological importance of patronymic connections and the recognition of the location of particular family surnames in certain places. Family narratives gave particular places meaning and acted as a means for passing on collective histories.

The notion of matrilineal residency contradicts historical writing that regards historic Métis society as transient and unstable.²⁶ Undoubtedly, networks of Métis families demonstrated high levels of mobility within this region and extended beyond the edges of the Métis Nation Homeland,

²⁰ Steffi Retzlaff, “What’s in a Name? The Politics of Labeling and Native Identity Constructions,” *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 25, no. 2 (2005): 609–26.

²¹ Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991).

²² Problematically, the distinction between Indigenous notions of nationhood and scholarly and state understandings of nationalism remain muddy and are often conflated. Although “nation” is largely considered to be a Western concept, “nationhood” as employed by Indigenous groups is not representative of nation-state processes but, rather, represents a process of group identity formation in the service of a united (though exclusive) political and cultural community.

²³ Jean Teillet, *The North-West Is Our Mother* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2019).

²⁴ Brenda Macdougall, *One of the Family: Métis Culture in Nineteenth-Century Northwestern Saskatchewan* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010).

²⁵ Macdougall, *One of the Family*, 54.

²⁶ See Marcel Giraud, *The Métis in the Canadian West*, trans. George Woodcock (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1986); and George Francis Gillman Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellions* (London: Longmans, Green, 1936).

which were either marked with the difficult terrain to the west or the encroaching settler societies to the east and south.²⁷ Macdougall argues that the emphasis on “a form of nomadism that discouraged permanent settlement in favour of following animals and goods between distant posts” is a male-centric interpretation that tends to relegate women to the position of inactive assistants or complete absence.²⁸ According to such colonial narratives of Métis ethnogenesis, the only possibility of stability occurred at the political core of the Métis Nation Homeland, the Red River Settlement, which acted as a mere stopover during the perpetual movement of Métis families.

Academic and political discourses concerning the Métis have a history of placing emphasis on the centrality of the historic Red River Settlement. Macdougall argues that the previous “Red River myopia has given way to a Plains – whether Canadian or American – myopia that still constrains our ability to recognize the diversity of the Métis experience in Canada.”²⁹ This has since shifted from examining solely the Red River Métis and their descendants as homogenous groups centralized in Canada’s Prairie provinces to an exploration of localized peoples with distinct characteristics and traditions.³⁰

The shift away from the Red River Settlement towards a more regional focus has often been centralized on the Great Lakes region. According to Peterson, “intraregional mobility seems to have fostered, by the early decades of the nineteenth century, a personal and group identity which was less place-specific than regionally and occupationally defined.”³¹

²⁷ Mike Evans, Jean Barman, Gabrielle Legault, Erin Dolmage, and Geoff Appleby, “Métis Networks in British Columbia: Examples from the Central Interior,” in *Contours of a People: Métis Family, Mobility and History*, ed. Nicole St-Onge, Carolyn Podruchny, and Brenda Macdougall (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012).

²⁸ Macdougall, *One of the Family*, 94.

²⁹ Brenda Macdougall, “Wahkootowin: Family and Cultural Identity in Northwestern Saskatchewan Métis,” *Canadian Historical Review* 87, no. 3 (2006): 440.

³⁰ Peterson and Brown’s (1985) volume *The New Peoples* was instrumental in marking this shift. Following Peterson and Brown’s volume, multiple studies have emerged that use micro-historical and genealogical approaches to study specific historical communities of Métis peoples, including David Burley, Gayel A. Horsfall, and John D. Brandon, *Structural Considerations of Métis Ethnicity: An Archaeological, Architectural, and Historical Study* (Vermillion: University of South Dakota Press, 1992); Heather Devine, *The People Who Own Themselves: Aboriginal Ethnogenesis in a Canadian Family, 1660–1900* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004); Ute Lischke and David T. McNab, eds., *The Long Journey of a Forgotten People: Métis Identities and Family Histories* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2007); Frits Pannekoek, *Métis Identities and Origins* (Athabasca: Athabasca University Press, 1998); Nicole St. Onge, *Saint-Laurent, Manitoba: Evolving Métis Identities, 1850–1914* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2004).

³¹ Jaqueline Peterson, “Many Roads to Red River: Métis Genesis in the Great Lakes Region, 1680–1815,” in *The New Peoples*, ed. Jaqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985), 63.

As these historical relations predate events that are considered to mark the beginning of the Historic Métis Nation Homeland (such as the Battle of Seven Oaks, or *Paashkiiyaakanaan La Prayrii di la Goornouyayr*), scholars tended to designate Great Lakes region Métis communities and others “whose inclusion in the Métis Nation would be problematic” as “other métis,” or lower case “m” métis.³² Andersen argues that the use of the term “Métis” as “a conceptual placeholder to mark a perceived distinctiveness – technological, political, economical, and biological – from social relations pre-dating ‘their’ genesis” is based on a racialized understanding of historic Métis identity, which is ultimately detrimental to the Métis as a whole.³³ Moreover, he suggests that, rather than debating whether self-identifying Métis communities outside the geographic and temporal core of the Métis Nation are in fact Métis, we should be exploring how such communities are Métis (beyond understandings based primarily on interracial relationships).

The same holds true for other self-identifying Métis communities that occupy the geographical, temporal, and sociological edges of the Historic Métis Nation Homeland. Biologically speaking, racial mixing was not uncommon among various Indigenous and European groups since early contact; however, being distinctly Métis as a community was “an infrequent, if not unique, sociocultural product of particular events and circumstances.”³⁴ Ens and Sawchuk do not approach Métis ethnogenesis in the Great Lakes region as based on Métis mixedness; rather, they “try to contextualize a ‘process’ of ethnogenesis through a fur trade instrumentality.”³⁵ In doing so, they describe Great Lakes region Métis as being culturally and ethnically distinct from surrounding Indigenous and European communities. Yet, compared to the Plains Métis, who declared themselves *la nouvelle nation*, those in the Great Lakes region didn’t share a political consciousness, an attribute that was necessary for the creation of Métis nationalism. As a result, for Métis peoples outside the Prairie core, Métis ethnogenesis occurred at different rates as military conflicts such as the Riel uprisings had less significance.³⁶

³² Jaqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown, “Introduction,” in *The New Peoples*, ed. Jaqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985), 6; see Annette Chretien, “From the ‘Other Natives’ to the ‘Other Métis,’” *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 28, no. 1 (2008): 89–118.

³³ Chris Andersen, *Métis: Race, Recognition, and the Struggle for Indigenous Peoplehood* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 49.

³⁴ Gerhard J. Ens and Joe Sawchuk, *From New Peoples to New Nations* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 43.

³⁵ Ens and Sawchuk, *From New Peoples*, 48.

³⁶ Ens and Sawchuk, *From New Peoples*, 59.

Rather than depending on acts of nationalism in defining Métis identity, Ens and Sawchuk argue that, despite divergences in the process of Métis ethnogenesis throughout North America, common patterns exist among Métis peoples, with the fur trade economy as the central catalyst. As a result, various groups living along the geographical and sociological edge of the Métis Nation Homeland could potentially be understood as Métis not as a matter of mixed blood, race, or ancestry but, rather, as a matter of having shared experiences as emerging bicultural peoples during a specific time in history. Similar arguments have been made within the context of historical Métis peoples living in British Columbia.

THE EDGE OF THE HOMELAND: BRITISH COLUMBIA

Scholars and legal cases have argued that a historical Métis presence in British Columbia did not exist.³⁷ Despite significant historical evidence of fur trade activities occurring west of the Rockies, there is a widespread perception that Métis fur traders did not settle collectively in British Columbia.³⁸ In 2006, the British Columbia Provincial Court applied the *Powley* test within British Columbia in *R. v. Willison* to determine whether there was a “historic rights bearing Métis community” in the specified region, whether there was “continuity between the historic practice and the contemporary right asserted,” and whether the accused Mr. Willison belonged to a contemporary Métis community. While the provincial court judge concluded that Willison had a proven Aboriginal right to hunt, the British Columbia Supreme Court appeal overturned the judgment on the basis that, based on the trial evidence, “there was no historical or contemporary Métis community in the relevant region.”³⁹ Despite such “evidence” that no historic (or contemporary) Métis communities existed in British Columbia, historical experiences within this province were similar to those in other regions outside the Red River

³⁷ For a scholarly example, see Olive Patricia Dickason, “From ‘One Nation’ in the Northeast to ‘New Nation’ in the Northwest: A Look at the Emergence of the Métis,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 6, no. 2 (1982): 15.

³⁸ See Jean Barman, *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014); Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849–1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); and Bruce Watson, *Lives Lived West of the Divide: A Biographical Dictionary of Fur Traders Working West of the Rockies, 1783–1838* (Kelowna: The Centre for Social, Spatial and Economic Justice, 2010), for descriptions of Métis fur traders who settled in British Columbia.

³⁹ *R. v. Willison*, 2006, 2006 BCSC 985; Ian Peach, “The Long, Slow Road to Recognizing Métis Rights: Métis Aboriginal Rights Jurisprudence in Canada,” in *Métis in Canada: History, Identity, Law and Politics*, ed. Christopher Adams, Gregg Dahl, and Ian Peach (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2013), 289.

Settlement in that “ethnic differentiation was not a matter of blood but a social process reinforced by government policy,” and even in cases where there was an absence of external intervention, it appears that “social forces [determined] patterns of association and identification.”⁴⁰

According to Barman and Evans, the ethnogenesis of the Métis in British Columbia can be understood as being autochthonous, yet continuing the social processes of ethnic formation that once flourished at the confluence of the Assiniboine and Red Rivers. They argue for a broader understanding of the historical process of becoming Métis, as tracing ancestry to the Historic Métis Nation Homeland centralized at the Red River can be problematic for many self-identified Métis living in British Columbia. Tracing ancestry to a community that is heavily linked to traditionally accepted Métis communities would allow the definition to be more inclusive to those who currently self-identify as being Métis.⁴¹ Building on this work, Evans et al. provide evidence of a historic Métis presence in the Central Interior region of British Columbia that comprises a network of families with ties to local Indigenous communities as well the historic Red River community.⁴² Since the fur trade, the historical experiences of mixed Indigenous peoples deemed historically as either half-breeds or Métis in British Columbia suggest that the ongoing process of being and becoming Métis happening throughout the Prairies was occurring similarly in British Columbia. However, there were no specific events in British Columbia that crystallized a singular image of Métis identity within the Canadian psyche (such as military conflicts) and there remains work left to do in terms of examining historic relations with First Nations in British Columbia.

Arguments supporting a Métis existence beyond the official boundaries of the historic Métis Nation appear to be based on the notion that the Métis Nation as a political entity did not “spring from the soil” at the confluence of the Assiniboine and Red Rivers but, rather, that it can be understood as a form of social cohesion “rooted in a historic past and a wider geographical frame” as it had grown out of networks of relationships that were established during the fur trade in the Great

⁴⁰ Kenneth Coates and William Morrison, “More Than a Matter of Blood: The Federal Government, the Churches and the Mixed Blood Populations of the Yukon and the Mackenzie River Valley, 1890–1950,” in *1885 and After: Native Society in Transition*, ed. F. Laurie Barron and James B. Waldram (Regina: Canada Plains Research Centre, 1986), 270. See also Evans et al., “Métis Networks in British Columbia,” 331–67.

⁴¹ Jean Barman and Mike Evans, “Reflections on Being, and Becoming, Métis in British Columbia,” *BC Studies* 161, no. 1 (2009): 59–91.

⁴² Evans et al., “Métis Networks in British Columbia,” 331–67.

Lakes region of North America.⁴³ The argument is that this process of ethnic formation would continue outside the Red River Settlement, beyond the period of cultural florescence. Barman and Evans's argument conceives of Métis as more of a sociological category with distinct cultural patterns than as a predominantly political category centred on nationhood and acts of military resistance. While some Métis families may have migrated west prior to "effective colonial control," following the federal scrip program several other waves of Métis peoples moved westward to British Columbia, seeking employment, opportunity, and/or following earlier family members. As a result, despite having no successful harvesting rights claims and/or legally validated evidence of a historical community in British Columbia, a sizable number of people who claim a Métis identity are now living in this province. According to the 2016 census, there are 89,405 self-identified Métis people in British Columbia, twenty thousand of whom are citizens of the Métis Nation of British Columbia.⁴⁴

CONTEMPORARY MÉTIS IDENTITY IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

To better understand contemporary Métis identity in British Columbia, twenty Métis people living in this province were interviewed, the central goal being to interrogate the ways in which their Métis identities have been constructed, developed, maintained, represented, and expressed. Participants came from diverse age groups, genders, political orientation, socio-economic backgrounds, and areas of residence. The degree of involvement with Métis organizations among nearly all participants was fairly significant; however, not all participants were particularly engaged with what they considered to be "Métis politics" at local, provincial, or national levels. While it is evident that the interviews do not represent all perspectives or all areas of the province, a diversity of Métis voices was expressed throughout the interview process. The intent of this research was not to reveal a single truth but, rather, to represent a multiplicity of experiences and perspectives regarding Métis identity. Participants were interviewed, their words transcribed and member-checked, their names retained and used with consent, in alignment with Indigenous

⁴³ Peterson and Brown, "Introduction," 5; Peterson, "Many Roads to Red River," 38.

⁴⁴ Statistics Canada, "Census Profile, Aboriginal Peoples," 2016, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=PR&Code1=59&Geo2=PR&Code2=01&SearchText=Canada&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=Aboriginal%20peoples&TABID=1&type=0>; Métis Nation British Columbia, "About," 2020, <https://www.mnbc.ca/about/>.

research practices, despite opposition from many postsecondary institutions' ethical research policies.⁴⁵ Conducted through the lens of a critical Indigenous research methodology, this study involved working closely with Métis Elder Maria LaBoucan to provide recommendations for working "in a good way," which included being ethical, respectful, critical, reflexive, and humble while also seeking feedback from the local Métis service agency. The latter acts as a Métis community hub in the Okanagan Valley and is known as the Métis Community Services Society of British Columbia (MCSSBC).⁴⁶

Narrative analysis was used in combination with critical discourse analysis (CDA) to study participant interviews. The combination of these methods for studying identity is not a novel approach as studying the kinds of stories that people tell can assist in exploring everyday linguistic practices that contribute to identity claims.⁴⁷ Similar to discourse analysts, narrative analysts understand identity to be constructed through the stories that we tell about ourselves and others.⁴⁸ In the context of this study, Narrative analysis assisted in understanding the ways in which Métis people related their Métis identity to their current place of residence – British Columbia. Importantly, narrative analysis also allows researchers to determine the implicit stances of narrators towards social definitions – in the case of this study, what constitutes being Métis in British Columbia. This kind of close textual reading is significant with regard to understanding group identification while avoiding the temptation to overgeneralize.

MÉTIS PLACE-MAKING IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

According to the twenty interviews conducted in this study, participants had diverse experiences identifying as Métis, but place was a crucial aspect of identity not only in terms of geographic places of residence within British Columbia but also in terms of the places where

⁴⁵ Mike Evans, "Ethics, Anonymity, and Authorship on Community Centred Research or Anonymity and the Island Cache," *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health*, 2, no. 1 (2004): 59–75.; Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2008).

⁴⁶ Cindy Gaudet, "Keeoukaywin: The Visiting Way – Fostering an Indigenous Research Methodology," *Aboriginal Policy Studies* 7, no. 2 (2018): 47–64.

⁴⁷ Chris Barker and Dariusz Galasiński, *Cultural Studies and Discourse Analysis* (London: Sage, 2001); Anna DeFina, "Group Identity, Narrative and Self-Representations," in *Discourse and Identity*, ed. Anna Defina, Deborah Schiffrin, and Michael Bamberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 351–75.

⁴⁸ Bethan Benwell and Elizabeth Stokoe, *Discourse and Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

participants encountered ideas about what it means to be Métis.⁴⁹ Only one participant understood being Métis as having “native blood” and a “native great-grandmother” Indigenous to British Columbia, with no reference to a historic Métis culture. For all others, their identity was rooted in connections to the families of the Historic Métis Nation Homeland. Yet for Joanie, Laranna, Jean L., and Terry, all of whom have family ties to the Historic Métis Nation Homeland centred in Canada’s Prairies, being Métis is about a shared experience of being of mixed Indigenous descent. Those who had only recently begun to identify as Métis, such as Sarah and Barb, still had many questions about what it meant to be Métis. Like others who locate their Métis identity based on shared experiences of being of mixed descent (even with ties to the Historic Métis Nation Homeland), the ways in which Sarah identified as Métis were tied to her involvement in the local urban Aboriginal community (as opposed to a Métis-specific community). Meanwhile, many participants who were raised with the knowledge of their Métis identity, such as Zach, Carlene, and Peter, understood “Métis” less in the political sphere of citizenship and nationhood and more in the shared experiences of their families (and communities) and the values with which they were raised. Yet such participants were also aware of the needs of Métis communities and were interested in gaining access to harvesting rights and/or increasing Métis recognition. For participants whose experience of “being Métis” followed their involvement with Métis Nation British Columbia (MNBC) or a local chartered community (Métis association), such as Dan, Brittany, and Jean N., their understanding of what it meant to be “Métis” was directly tied to their experiences within such organizations.

The study demonstrates that the ways in which participants define Métis for themselves and for others is closely associated with their position and participation with particular communities – their place. Learning about what it means to be Métis or “how to be Métis” emerged from experiences with immediate and extended family and through interactions with people and texts at organizations such as urban Aboriginal organizations, postsecondary institutions, MNBC, MCSSBC, as well as local Métis Chartered Communities. Extending understandings of “places” beyond cartographic notions (as in the province of British Columbia) to places as social locations (such as particular organizations and institutions) allows for a more specific

⁴⁹ For extended transcripts of interviews, see Gabrielle Legault, “Stories of Contemporary Métis Identity in British Columbia: ‘Troubling’ Discourses of Race, Culture, and Nationhood” (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2017), 157–226.

analysis of Métis place-identity. Participant interviews indicated that particular articulations of Métis identity (including the discourses that are drawn upon) are closely related to the places (communities, political and service organizations, educational institutions) where Métis people are or have been positioned.

Of the participants interviewed, most families arrived in British Columbia from the Métis Nation Homeland in later successive waves of relocation (post-1940). For such Métis living in British Columbia, while the origins of their identity as Métis may be rooted in their Métis Nation Homeland, their experience of living as contemporary Métis peoples and their identity as such is reinforced and enacted through their experiences at urban Indigenous organizations such as friendship centres, Aboriginal Elders groups, and local Métis associations, thereby creating Métis spaces. Brittany, an active youth representative from Vernon, was one of several participants who demonstrated a strong connection to British Columbia. Despite having ancestors from Duck Lake, Saskatchewan, Brittany explained how her identification as Métis has been distinctly connected to the contemporary community with which she engages in British Columbia:

It's hard for me to identify with Louis Riel, Red River and all that homelands ... stuff because I've never been there. I've been here and I like to identify with my community and other Métis people. Just like the things we do. So, we try to still follow the culture and we'll try the bannock, do the jigging and we'll having drumming sessions ... I think it's being around the Métis community that makes me feel most Métis. Just being around other Métis and at events and gatherings and everything.

Territory-based understandings of Indigenous nationhood can be problematic for the large percentage of Indigenous peoples who have been dispossessed and/or removed from their traditional territories, or have dispersed across the Canadian landscape and are now concentrated in urban areas.⁵⁰ Andersen and Denis argue for a rethinking of urban Indigenous peoples and communities which takes into account displaced or dispersed peoples who may still have connections to land and territory, but that such a relationship occurs in a different way than it does for Indigenous peoples living in rural areas. Urban Indigenous peoples are redefining indigeneity for themselves individually and collectively,

⁵⁰ Environics Institute, *Aboriginal Peoples Study: Main Report* (Toronto: Environics Institute, 2010).

transforming cultural practices and meanings so that they “[adhere] to the geography of urban spaces.”⁵¹ Such a rethinking of urban Indigenous people can only be understood through a lens that sees authentic Indigenous cultures as dynamic and not as “static ruminations with locales far removed from urban life.”⁵² Cultural revitalization is a part of city life for Indigenous people as “urban Aboriginal people with no culturally specific identity relations must use whatever resources are at their disposal to create and claim Aboriginal identities, thereby filling the holes in their hearts.”⁵³ For Indigenous peoples who have experienced dislocation from traditional homelands, a community-based form of place-making has been a crucial component in strengthening local communities. Creating spaces for participation in cultural and spiritual activities is important in maintaining Indigenous identities while also acting as “a process of spatial resistance that redraws the boundaries of identity and struggle.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, through creating spaces that reinforce shared political consciousness, a new form of contemporary Métis nationalism has emerged. For Canada’s urban Indigenous peoples, (re)claiming places and connecting to others with similar upbringings and worldviews are ways that displaced Indigenous people “make places.”

The notion of place-making is particularly significant in discussions of Métis people in British Columbia, as changing relationships to land due to historic diaspora have significantly affected articulations of Métis identity. The degradation caused by displacement has had a profound effect on Métis peoples, disrupting kinship ties, the intergenerational transfer of knowledge between youth and Elders, community cohesion, cultural continuity, and traditional identities. For Zach, whose connection to his identity flows through his family rather than through his place of residence, continuing Métis harvesting practices in British Columbia is essential for cultural continuity and is a natural extension of Métis historic mobility:

I went out berry picking with my mom, my dad, and my girlfriend this fall, or earlier, in the summer – it was August. I have no Indigenous roots there, but when I’m going out with my mom and she’s telling me stories about when she used to pick berries with her mom and you realize that you are surrounded by a bunch of medicine, that there

⁵¹ Andersen and Denis, “Urban Natives and the Nation,” 385.

⁵² Evelyn J. Peters, “Emerging Themes in Academic Research in Urban Aboriginal Identities in Canada, 1996–2010,” *Aboriginal Policy Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011): 96.

⁵³ Peters, “Emerging Themes,” 95.

⁵⁴ Kathi Wilson and Evelyn J. Peters, “‘You Can Make a Place for It’: Remapping Urban First Nations Spaces of Identity,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23, no. 3 (2005): 405.

is meaning to this and you are out now in a place connected to the land on a very physical level, with your family. That to me is Métis harvesting, that's the epitome of Métis harvesting. So I think I felt my sense of Métis identity was heightened at that moment.

I've done the same thing with my mom in the Okanagan, I've done the same thing with my family in other places, but it's the practice and the ceremony and the actual connection that you get from that activity, it's the same regardless of the place. The thing that changes is the landscape, the resources, and potentially the people you are doing it with. But at a very basic level, the practice is the same, I think that's what our ancestors essentially did, like you move about, you follow the animals. That's why I think an overemphasis on a physically bounded notion of place is inconsistent with my personal sense of identity, but I'm sure if you talked to people from the Métis settlements, they would probably say something different.

We're mobile people, we've always been that way and the practices transpose. I'm not saying I could just head up to Squamish and head in the bush and know what to eat and be really good at it, but I would basically [get] the connection there and if I lived there long enough, I would adapt. You would never be Squamish [(Skwxwú7mesh)], but you would probably be Métis living in Squamish.

Zach's comments point to a unique issue for Métis in British Columbia: unlike much of Canada, where treaties exist, a contentious environment of multiple overlapping First Nations claims to territory complicates Métis claims in this province.

While some Métis families may have migrated west during the early fur trade, several other waves of Métis peoples moved westward to British Columbia following the federal scrip program seeking employment, opportunity, and following earlier family members.⁵⁵ The issue of a lack of legal support for historic Métis communities in British Columbia remains a challenge as it has limited the ability of contemporary communities to make particular legal claims. Despite academic arguments

⁵⁵ From 1885 to 1923, the Canadian government issued scrip through various scrip commissions to extinguish Métis title to the land throughout the Prairie provinces, so it could be used for incoming settlers. Due to delays, fraudulent claims, mishandling, and land speculating, this process has been described as a failed system inconsistent with early promises made to Métis peoples in the *Manitoba Act*. See Teillet, *The Northwest Is Our Mother*, 381–97; and Supreme Court of Canada, *Manitoba Metis Federation Inc. v. Canada (Attorney General)*, 2013 SCC 14.

whereby ancestry is traced through networks and nodes of familial and community relationships tied to both BC First Nations communities and the Historic Métis Nation Homeland, interviews suggested that contemporary inter-Indigenous relations between Métis and First Nations in British Columbia are fractured.

Participants described localized experiences of exclusion within British Columbia and a lack of awareness in the province regarding Métis peoples. For most participants who had moved from Canada's Prairie provinces, their experiences identifying as Métis while residing in British Columbia differed from those they had previously experienced. Participants such as Val, Peter, and Janet described a lack of understanding and knowledge about Métis people (as a distinct culture) within British Columbia. For instance, Val described moments of tension with local First Nations people and Janet described being called a "wannabe Indian" by local First Nations people, whom she described as understanding "Métis" as "a new word." Peter was told, "Oh, you're one of those green-eyed Indians." He described how, due to misunderstandings about Métis people and their motives, particular areas in British Columbia where Métis have attempted to make harvesting claims were especially unsafe places for Métis to publicly self-identify. He also differentiated between the ways in which people from British Columbia understand Métis identity versus how those from Alberta do so. He attributes the lack of understanding of Métis identity to a lack of familiarity with Métis people.

For these participants, articulating a Métis identity while residing in British Columbia was at times challenging, whereas for others who were raised in British Columbia – such as Zach, who travelled between his home in Penticton to his Métis family in Alberta, and Greg, who grew up in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside – being Métis in this province is all they have known. Most interviewees had a keen awareness of local First Nations claims to territory and located their Métis ancestry in the Canadian Prairies; however, a few justified a Métis presence in British Columbia by citing historical fur trading posts as proof of historical Métis communities.

Though asserting Métis nationhood in British Columbia is not readily accepted by First Nations, some Métis people continue to do so, without full understanding of political and social ramifications. A result of such missteps is that Métis people have been stereotyped as naively breaching protocols in territories where there are pre-existing First Nations claims to land. While some participants, like Val, indicate that relationships are improving, others, like Zach, are cautious about asserting Métis nationhood within British Columbia. He explains:

There's a number of people in political organizations who don't fundamentally understand that the assertion of Métis rights claims in the province is an affront to unresolved title and rights claims of First Nations. And I think it's a function of the fact that maybe they weren't raised to. They just weren't exposed to what protocol means on a very practical level. That you have to respect that you came here later. And yeah, the court might say that your rights are just as equal as First Nations, but, on a practical level, I think from a perspective of respect it means something entirely different when you are on the ground and you ask permission from a family or community to hunt in their traditional territory as a Métis person. You might not always get consent and if you don't you shouldn't hunt, but I think you should be asking. So, it worries me. I think there is a lot of people who don't think like that and probably because they were never raised to think like that. But the risk that that could harm my relationship with First Nations people because of the fact that I'm going to be painted with the same brush scares me.

Zach is aware of the risk of Métis people not recognizing First Nations claims to territory in British Columbia. There are clear challenges in British Columbia that need to be addressed.

Not only was a lack of understanding of Métis people and issues cited as important, but Zach, Dan, and Peter each identified that, previously, Métis people had failed to observe protocols within territories claimed by other First Nations groups. Zach suggested that this could potentially be remedied through Métis political representatives learning and adopting Indigenous protocols, while Dan suggested that MNBC was in the process of correcting former missteps by doing things like signing nation-to-nation protocol agreements between MNBC and First Nations. Dan described his work with MNBC to repair damaged relationships through establishing agreement protocols regarding children and families. Alternatively, Peter felt that the current "technocratic" approach to forming relationships with other Indigenous groups is proving to be insufficient and that a "traditional" approach (such as hosting a feast) would be more appropriate. Similarly, Val suggested that it is the responsibility of Métis people to learn about local First Nations people and to be cautious about asserting a Métis identity and, especially, nationhood within unceded territories.

These attitudes echo Andersen's call for Métis people to address the "form of conceptual *Terra Nullius* ... where people who are making claims to Métis indigeneity are simply claiming particular territories as though

there aren't living breathing Indigenous people already living on those territories and taking ownership of those territories."⁵⁶ Andersen argues, like many of the people whom I interviewed, that, indeed, these people "can form attachments to new communities (urban communities) that are not necessarily those of our birth as long as those communities are willing to have a conversation about their relationship to the pre-colonial peoples whose territories they reside on."⁵⁷ He is critical of those who are making claims to a localized Métis indigeneity without recognizing the Indigenous people whose land they reside on – an act of self-righteous whiteness and entitlement that "requires no accountability to Indigenous place."⁵⁸ If Métis people seek to position themselves as belonging to an Indigenous nation while living in British Columbia, then it is crucial that we be accountable to already Indigenous places and our ongoing relationships with other Indigenous nations. This work is being carried forward through further community-based research on the topic of reconciling Métis-First Nations relations within British Columbia.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms my suspicions that, similar to my own experience, Métis identity in British Columbia is greatly influenced by the physical spaces in which it is enacted, the already occupied traditional territories that mark the landscape, and the complex web of sociological networks in which Métis people participate. Métis identity can thus be understood as representative of unstable points of identification formed within cultural and historical discourses that are intimately connected to place. Like other urban Indigenous peoples throughout Canada, Métis in British Columbia are place-making as a way of connecting to communities of other displaced Indigenous peoples. Though Métis peoples in British Columbia have a complicated relationship to this area, those residing here (myself included) have a responsibility to recognize the original inhabitants of these lands. As a post-contact Indigenous people living in territories beyond the Historic Métis Nation Homeland, decolonization for Métis peoples in British Columbia involves reconciling fraught inter-Indigenous relations with BC First Nations.

⁵⁶ Chris Andersen, "Ethnic Fraud as a Colonial Technique of Self: When White People Think/Feel/Say They Are Indigenous," paper presented at the Indigenous Foucault Symposium, University of Alberta, Edmonton, October 2015.

⁵⁷ Anderson, "Ethnic Fraud."

⁵⁸ Anderson, "Ethnic Fraud."