

# **Spirit gifting: Ecological knowing in Métis life narratives**

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## **Abstract**

In *Spirit Gifting: The Concept of Spiritual Exchange*, Elmer Ghostkeeper offers poignant insight into the ways that expanding capitalist modes of production have challenged the maintenance of Métis traditional ways of knowing, living, and being. Ghostkeeper situates his upbringing as being rooted in the maintenance of sacred and cyclical relationships with human relations, with the land as a relation, and within an ethics of kinship obligation to the land's other, non-human, inhabitants. Similar discussions on Métis ways also appear in the stories of two other Métis people – Victoria Belcourt Callihoo and Herb Belcourt. Like Ghostkeeper, Belcourt Callihoo and Belcourt offer personal accounts of the transitions that they and their respective Métis communities have undergone as a result of the changing human landscape in what is presently, and most widely referred to and known as, Alberta. This paper thus begins with its own offering. In order to reciprocate and honour the gifts that they each give through sharing their stories, I share a bit of my story as a gift. I also do so to provide some insight into my investments in undertaking such writing and research. After doing so, I turn to reflect on Belcourt Callihoo, Belcourt, and Ghostkeeper's articulations of Métis ways as living in a symbiotic relationship with the land. Then, with an emphasis on Belcourt and Ghostkeeper, I address the implications of the arrival of industrial capitalism to the authors' lives and the impacts of this on the maintenance of what may be called their "Métis traditional knowledge" systems. Lastly, the paper argues that such stories should have greater influence in the political spectrum of Métis peoplehood and Métis political activism.

**Keywords:** *Métis; Indigenous knowledge; decolonization; storytelling; land narratives; capitalism*

## Introduction

Traditional ecological knowledge, passed down through our stories and place names, figures our relationship to our homelands. This form of embodied knowledge is becoming more difficult to pass on, as changing landscapes, urban and industrial sprawl disfigure or erase those sacred spaces. As the road allowance people become mobile, Métis gravitate to large cities, to live and work in urban environments. The hectic pace of urban environments and the many distractions they offer make it easy to forget *bush ways*. (Leclair, 2003, p. 103)

In the quote above, Carole Leclair reflects on Métis relationships with our ecologies, but also on the challenges posed by monumental shifts that have impacted Métis continuances of these ecological relationships. The Métis of Red River were subjected to a “reign of terror” at the hands of the Canadian military during its incursion into Red River and from their intent to drive them from their homes (Barkwell, n.d., p. 8). This reign of terror continued as Canadian soldiers advanced on Métis in their homes in Batoche in 1885. Across the Métis homeland of woodland, parkland, and prairie, Métis were interrogated, violated and displaced. In spite of these and many other challenges, Métis remain remarkably adept at maintaining their kinship responsibilities to one another, which have arguably served as the backbone of Métis societies, and have thus allowed us to survive the onslaught of Canada’s assimilatory agenda.

Historiographical literatures have scarcely considered that multiple modes of displacement – military aggression, hostile settlement, and economic change – have challenged but not eradicated Métis peoples, lives, stories, and ways of knowing. This is largely due to the fact that such literatures have cast Métis through reductive lenses that above all else fail to present a picture of Métis on our own terms and through our own senses of self. One of the most widely read texts comes by way of historian-ethnologist Marcel Giraud; Giraud’s two-volume *Le Métis Canadien* (1945), translated into English as *The Métis in the Canadian West* (1986), was based on site visits to select Métis communities and on comprehensive archival research. While Giraud’s book might be interpreted as useful for the fact that it is one of the rare historic texts to include a kind of fieldwork in Métis communities, it is nevertheless founded upon one of the other great challenges Métis peoples have faced – deeply entrenched racism.

Métis have undoubtedly been subject to aggressive racial regimes of truth that as Chris Andersen (2014) writes in his groundbreaking work, *“Métis”: Race, Recognition, and the Struggle for Indigenous Peoplehood*, “permeates nearly every nook and cranny of Canada’s colonial landscape” (p. 203). The effect of this is the negation of the existence of Métis as a collective *people* (p. 203; pp. 23-25). As a *people*, Métis are woven together by shared language, kinship ties, stories, cultural practices, and worldviews, all of which have been negated by a preoccupation with race thinking. Indeed, Giraud spends an exorbitant amount of time trying to approximate those he calls the “Red River” Métis and the “Prairie” or “Western” Métis to the poles of savagery and civility, to Indianness, Europeaness and Canadianess, and to “red” and “white” (see Tough’s critique, 1989). He positions Métis and all attending aspects of Métis

personality, expression, understanding, etc., as simply oscillating between First Nation and European knowledge systems and ways of being and thus caught on two horns of racialization (Andersen, 2014, p. 202). Giraud is entirely unconcerned with how the Métis peoples he researches and meets understand their own existences.

Given the comprehensive work produced by Giraud and the way in which academic texts like his have been accorded an aura of objectivity, it has long been held up as providing insight into communities and worldviews in ways other texts have not. Adam Gaudry (2014) writes that the “vast majority of the literature on Métis history and political thought does not examine how Métis understood themselves, or how Métis understood their relationship with other peoples” (p. 2). If one of the foundational texts in Métis historiography, and the oldest academic study to involve any kind of Métis community-based research, is entrenched in racial (il)logics and does not move beyond framing Métis racially, then it is no surprise few academics since its publication have sought to consider what makes Métis, as a distinct people, who we are.

A reflection of this negation is the absolute lack of scholarly literature that engages with the great vessels that are Métis *kihteyayak* or *lii viyeu* (“the mature ones; the older people”) (NAHO, 2008, p. 21). As the keepers of Métis worldviews and as those responsible for passing along these worldviews to future generations, *kihteyayak/lii viyeu* are the first and best source of information about Métis. They carry our histories in their stories, our visions for the future, they are caretakers of the ways of knowing of *how* Métis are Métis, and most directly relevant to this paper, they carry understandings of Métis kinship that neither begin nor end with inter-human relations. Sadly, successive waves of rapid change, displacement, and racism, have meant that many Métis have been induced to forget that *wahkohtowin*, our interrelationships, are with *all* of the inhabitants – the living, physical and spiritual beings – of the ecosystems that Métis exist as a part of. This is precisely why there is great need for Métis to put forth our own reflections on Métis histories and contemporary realities.

In light of this, this paper brings together the voices of selected *kihteyayak/lii viyeu* as they are presented in literature. Paying particular attention to the personal narratives of Victoria Belcourt Callihoo, Herb Belcourt, and Elmer Ghostkeeper, I consider some of the many “everyday Métis” whose stories and life experiences reflect individual and collective understandings of who Métis are and of Métis worldviews. I began by offering some context for the work undertaken in this paper before moving into an examination of all three texts and their articulation of what might be called Métis “traditional knowledge.” Then, I turn to a focused discussion of Ghostkeeper’s text; here, his work is revealing for its emphasis on Métis encounters with industrialization and resource capitalism, the latest of many modes of displacement that Métis have faced. I emphasize these texts and have chosen them from among the many other Métis-authored life narratives in part because, compared to the other texts, they have been largely unexamined in scholarly literature. Further, these storytellers share more than just their experiences as they remember them; each of them place a significant emphasis on articulating Métis ways of knowing and the challenges Métis have encountered in maintaining these relationships over successive generations.

Further, examining their texts takes seriously the importance of reading localized Métis stories, experiences, and ways of knowing, ways that may be fairly diverse given that the Métis homeland reaches across woodland, parkland, and prairie. Each of the texts is local in their focus. As distinct as these localized accounts and experiences are, I do believe that when acknowledged in the context of the larger body of literatures written by Métis peoples, these stories reflect the ways in which Métis have developed and have struggled to maintain their reciprocal relationships with their environments.<sup>1</sup> As a form of personal reflection that is also steadfastly committed to ensuring the continuance of Métis worldviews, Métis life stories such as these also effectively expose the impact of colonial processes on Métis. Perhaps most importantly, these stories call us home to remember that our relationships to our ecosystems must be at the core of contemporary expressions of Métis nationhood.

## **How I remember: Life stories and memory**

Each of the authors I discuss affirms the value of remembering stories, of recording stories to reflect Métis realities to the wider world, and also of recording them for future generations of Métis. This is an important practice for Indigenous peoples more widely, as Gregory Cajete (1995) writes, “To remember is a way to re-know and re-claim a part of your life” (p. 87). Each of the authors remembers, re-knows, and re-claims, through their storytelling, what outsider narratives on Métis peoples have often obscured. In doing so the authors form relationships with their readership, entrusting their stories to them. They enable a re-knowing, re-claiming of Métisness, an act that is, even if it does not directly intend to be, a rejection of race thinking and of efforts to assimilate Métis.

As a sign of respect for their sharing, I think it important to enter into a relationship with them and their words by offering a bit of my own story. By sharing a piece of my story I make an offering as an act of reciprocity; in my case this act of reciprocity is also a conscious act of rejecting race thinking and assimilation. As I was not raised to see myself as Métis, nor was I exposed to Métis worldviews from a young age, it is also my hope that by offering a bit of my story I can make clear my investments in this research, which are rooted in articulating the relationship between myself and the work that I commit myself to. It serves as an acknowledgement that these words reflect my understandings at this stage of my life and that they are words inevitably shaped by whom, how, and what it is that I remember.

Remembering is also, as Dian Million (2009) writes in the context of Indigenous feminism, a “political act” of “insisting on the inclusion of our lived experience, rich with emotional knowledges, of what pain and grief and hope meant or mean now in our pasts and futures” (p. 54). This is precisely because, she argues, we “*feel* our histories as well as think them” (ibid). To be sure, inasmuch as I am thinking throughout this article, I am also re-claiming

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<sup>1</sup> At times throughout the paper I will use the term “land” as shorthand, but it does by no means mean only the dirt, rocks, and grass – it also is intended to encompass and serve as shorthand for the waterways, air, and the many physical and spiritual beings that share space with Métis.

Métis worldviews that *kihteyayak/lii viyeu* are asking me to, and I am feeling the implications of the cycles of life, loss, and regeneration that emerge from within their stories and from within my own. This is likewise an important practice within Métis oral traditions; people need to identify themselves and their family, “community and place, before continuing on to speak to issues of interest to contemporary Metis” (Leclair, 2004, p. 1).

Born to a mother who was adopted into a Mennonite family and a father I knew little about, for many years I identified as “part-Cree” or “Native” in keeping with fragments of information passed down by my mother, about my father’s family, and based on my experiences with urban Indigenous community identification. Today, I understand myself as being of the Otipemisiwak/Métis of Amiskwaciwaskahikan Duffield, Manitou Sakahigan/Lac Ste. Anne, and St. Albert. Those are the lands of the *nehiyawak*, *nakawe*, Nakoda, Métis/Otipemisiwak, and some of the key lands that *notawiy* (my father), *nokum* (my grandmother), *ni-chapanak* (my great-grandparents), and *nitaniskotapanak* (my great-great grandparents and ancestors) lived in and traversed. My *wahkohtowin* (relations), going back from *nokum*, carry surnames like Lenny/Lennie and Dubie/Dubé, Gladu and Belcourt, and Blandion/Wabasca/Dion and Suprenant.

I was not always aware of the richness of these ties. I understood very little about them as a result of the early loss of *notawiy*, who committed suicide the month following my second birthday. During my childhood, in part due to the silences caused by grief and loss, and in part due to poverty and physical distance, I had little connection with my family from *notawiy*’s side, save for the too brief conversations with *nokum* over the phone, in letters, and on her visits to Ontario from Alberta. In the absence of a Métis community through which I could develop a sense of myself as Métis, I turned to literature to make sense of the bits and pieces of story I was receiving. While I did not yet belong to a physical community of Métis, I immersed myself in a remembered and imagined community of Métis and Cree storytellers and historians, something that continues to today.

In 2009, a life-changing event compelled me to look at these stories through different eyes. I became pregnant for the first time and, from the instant that I found out that I was pregnant, I was transformed. The gift of life that I had been given responsibility for, in combination with the precariousness of the pregnancy, made me profoundly aware of the connections between the life I was carrying, the things I was putting on and into my body, and the relationship between that life, its spirit, and my body, and the earth, water, and air. While, sadly, I lost the pregnancy, that experience caused a profound shift in my consciousness. In addition to rereading texts by Métis authors, I began reading much more widely, expanding to writings by Winona LaDuke (1999, pp. 17-19) on maternal health and environmental pollution in Akwesasne, and writings on the ecological and physiological damage of petro-chemicals, affecting the people of Aamjiwnaang (Wiebe, 2012, p. 215). Their writings took on a new meaning for me in the wake of my pregnancy loss.

At the same time, I began to wonder about the specificities of Métis ways of knowing that connects us, as an Indigenous people, to the environments around us. I became preoccupied

with wanting to understand how Métis conceptualize our relationships to our environments, how these relationships have been impeded and transformed by colonialism and Canadian nation building, and how Métis have dealt with these challenges. While over the past decade I have spent time reweaving myself back into the web of kinship ties from which I was separated, Métis literatures have continued to serve as an important companion on my journey. Just as I have sat at kitchen tables with extended family, drank tea and eaten bannock, and visited a range of aunties, cousins, and more cousins, I have dog-eared page after page of Métis-authored texts, letting the words, memories, and stories of the authors wash over me. Through their words I hear the voices of my ancestors, and with each passing day I am earning a greater understanding of what it means to say that I am of the “Otipemisiwak” or I am “Métis.” I am so because I come from Otipemisiwak/Métis peoples who I am responsible to and with whom I share in the concerted continuance of these family ties, memories, languages, and worldviews. This reflection on some of their stories is also a part of this commitment.

### **Living with the rhythm of the land: Land as a relation**

Victoria Belcourt Callihoo (1861-1966) was born as the granddaughter of Joseph Belcourt, a voyageur, and Catherine L’Hirondelle, a first cousin to my great-great grandmother, Lucille “Lucie” Gladu Lennie. In 1948 Granny Belcourt, as she is affectionately known by some of her descendants, shared stories through oral history interviews that were published in the *Alberta Historical Review* in 1953, 1959, and 1960. Herb Belcourt (herein referred to as Belcourt), a relation of Granny Belcourt’s and Lucie’s, reflects on his upbringing in the 1930s in Lac Ste. Anne, in *Walking in the Woods: A Métis Journey*. While Elmer Ghostkeeper bears no direct relation to the Belcourts he offers valuable insight into Métis ways from his upbringing at Paddle Prairie Métis Settlement along the Peace River. In *Spirit Gifting: The Concept of Spiritual Exchange*, he organizes his narrative in two primary stages, the first of which reflects on life in 1960 from when he remembers “living with the land.”

Each of the storytellers reflects that in their communities Métis existences were traditionally conceptualized through an understanding of oneself as a part of creation. This is because, as Ghostkeeper (2007) writes, the Great Spirit created living beings, “plants and animals, including insects, and all other elements of Mother Earth” (p. 10). Métis as *ayiseniwak* (human beings) are another of these living beings and, like all living beings in creation, “have a life cycle of birth and death, and have good and bad forces” (ibid). As all parts of creation, *ayiseniwak* are connected through “wahkootowin,” a worldview that “privilege[s] relatedness to land, people (living, ancestral, and those to come), the spirit world, and creatures inhabiting the space” (Macdougall, 2011, p. 3). Wahkootowin is based on a “broadly conceived sense of relatedness with all beings, human and non-human, living and dead, physical and spiritual” (ibid). As beings that understood ourselves as a part of creation and as a part of this complex web of relations, Métis exemplify what Ghostkeeper refers to in the context of his family’s ways, a “Métis way of being” (2007, p. 10).

This Métis way of being is exercised through a practice of living in accordance with the seasons, respecting the life cycles of those in the natural world. Balance is of vital importance to Métis and involves being attentive to “natural signs” which would indicate, “when to begin and end a seasonal round of activities of cleaning the land, planting, and gathering and harvesting both wild and domesticated plants and animals” (Ghostkeeper, 2007, p. 13). The seasonal round of activities followed the “Metis cosmological calendar to pattern” that consists of twelve seasons that reflect changes within the ecosystem (ibid). The seasons include: Niski Pesim (Goose Moon), Ayeki Pesim (Frog Moon), Pininawawe Pesim (Egg-Laying Moon), Paskawe Pesim (Egg-Hatching Moon), Pusko Pesim (Molting Moon), Ohpahoo Pesim (Flying Moon), Nochetowi Pesim (Mating Moon), Kuskutino Pesim (Freezing Moon), Yekopew Pesim (Hoarfrost Moon), Pawastun Pesim (Snow-Drifting Moon), Kese Pesim (Cold Moon), and Mikisiw Pesim (Eagle Moon). Each reflects the continual movement of the life cycles of the earth and all of its inhabitants.

Prayer is a significant part of the movements through each of these seasons, with Métis expressing gratitude and affirming their relationship to creation. They engage in continual practices of collective ceremony, like other Indigenous peoples, in acknowledgment of the reciprocal relationship between the seasons, themselves, and other beings (Little Bear, 2000). For example, as Ghostkeeper’s family participates in planting through Ayeki Pesim, they carefully negotiate the entrance of Catholicism into their lives by participating in special Roman Catholic masses and reciting prayers in Cree at home (2007, p. 15). In both places they demonstrate gratitude for the seeds and the season and extend offerings to plants and animals before, during, and after the harvest.

Prayer is also important at the individual level, as the person doing the gathering or harvesting makes offerings of tobacco or food as a sign of the “spiritual equality” between Métis and the life force being taken (Ghostkeeper, 2007, pp. 11-12). It is a way of affirming the connection between them. During Pininawawe Pesim, Ghostkeeper, his aunt, and his mother, travel to tap birch trees for sap and to check rabbit snares. His aunt delicately cut the birch so as not to kill the tree, ensuring that it would be able to heal itself (ibid, p. 20). She gave offerings of tobacco out of respect for each of the trees. When Ghostkeeper recovered rabbits from the snares that had been set, his aunt taught him to offer tobacco to the earth for the spirits of the rabbits, “because the rabbits had sacrificed their lives so that their bodies could be eaten as food by people” (ibid, p. 21). The respect for the sacredness of life is also reflected as Ghostkeeper (2007) recalls his father’s relationship with moose during Pusko Pesim:

My father considered moose to be similar to other plants and animals, a gift, and harvesting them was conducted within the Metis context of ceremony, ritual, and sacrifice. He required a dream in which his dream spirit would inform him of having made contact with a moose spirit and when and where to harvest the moose. The information contained the age and sex of the moose, topography of the land, weather conditions, and the equipment required for the harvest. (p. 31)

The author's father explained to him that in his dreams he would vision the information needed to successfully harvest the moose. Dreaming and ceremony were thus intimately tied to seasonal harvest and to the sustenance of the Métis.

As with Ghostkeeper's family, Métis of Lac Ste. Anne have a long tradition of living in accordance with the seasons, and of honouring all life. Living as buffalo hunters, gatherers, and agriculturalists, Métis lived in an abundantly rich world where they never starved and shared with one another, ensuring balance through the community (Belcourt, 2006, p. 25; p. 39; p. 46). This emphasis on balance and respect for the life cycles of animals is reflected in both Belcourt's and Granny Belcourt's recounts of their community's buffalo hunt. Belcourt acknowledges the centrality of the hunt for the people while Granny Belcourt reflects on how, at thirteen, she was able to take part in her first hunt. She recalls that the hunting party left Lac Ste. Anne "after the leaves were out on the poplar trees and our small fields and gardens were seeded or planted" which also meant that the hunt was aligned with the life cycles of the buffalo (2006, p. 200). In her community the buffalo hunt would take place each spring and fall and would bring together a procession of Red River carts comprised of the people of Lac Ste. Anne and their relations from the larger settlement of St. Albert, and occasionally some from further north.

Granny Belcourt implicitly acknowledges the emphasis that her community placed on respecting the buffalo's life cycle. She notes that while the buffalo was the most important animal for her people to live from as it provided for food, shelter, and trade materials, they refrained from harvesting the calves (2006, p. 202). Métis knew the life cycles of the animals and would wait until young calves would be grown and fattened and the Métis could harvest enough to last through the winter and until the spring hunt. For those Métis who eventually worked as hibernants, or winter hunters, observing the life cycles of the buffalo also meant that the buffalo hides and fur garnered for trade and sale in the growing buffalo robe market, were of thicker and warmer quality.

Respecting the buffalo's life cycle ensured that they did not waste the precious gift given and, as with other animals and plants, as much as could be used from what was harvested was used. This is precisely because food, whether for the body, mind, emotion, or spirit, "comes in the form of a gift (*mekiwin*), or something that is freely exchanged and charged between a donor and recipient through the relationships of giving and receiving" (Ghostkeeper, 2007, p. 10). It is a reflection of the appreciation of the life given. Granny Belcourt recalls ensuring that none of the buffalo's sacrifice went to waste: "The buffalo was a very useful animal, for we ate the meat, we used its hide for robes, shelter for our lodges, footwear, clothes, and bags. The meat was cooked and sun-dried and also made into pemmican" (2006, p. 202). To take the body and spirit of a living being from the earth and then to be wasteful of that which it provides would not be respectful of its great sacrifice; as Leclair (2003) writes it was not only an important staple of Métis lives, but li buffloo (the buffalo) is the "great shaggy guardian of the western doorway, stands within the realm of reason" (p. 61). As with Métis peoples' nehiyawak relations, the buffalo taught Métis about perseverance, that life is continuous "and that knowledge is created

through a continuous process of mutual exchange between all beings, individuals and groups” (p. 62).

Granny Belcourt recalls, though, how with each of the four buffalo hunting trips she went on, each trip saw the hunting parties traveling further and further south (2006, p. 203). She never believed the buffalo could be killed off, as there was what seemed like thousands on the open prairie (2006, p. 201). Yet the buffalo would go into catastrophic decline. Métis in Red River and within local First Nations communities witnessed the decline of the buffalo as early as 1830, which John Milloy (1991) argues is largely attributable to the fact that it was then that the buffalo emerged as a prime, fur-trade commodity (p. 64). This means that the buffalo was seen as a product and not as a relation.

A number of authors, such as den Otter (2012), place the responsibility for this transition solely on the Métis: “By the 1840s, Métis hunters had perfected the bison hunt into a productive, well-conducted, if wasteful, industry” (p. 159). Non-Métis historians of Métis history, such as den Otter, however, have long ignored a number of other significant factors in the rapid waning of the buffalo. One factor is that there was a lack of coordination and agreement between various peoples whose terse relationships were agitated by the pressures of aggressive European settlement and colonization – such as the Cree, Métis, Blackfoot, and Sioux. Further, there is clear scholarship to suggest that the American and Canadian states engaged in a concerted effort to exterminate the buffalo (Tobias, 1983, pp. 525-526; Charette, 1976; Erasmus, 1999). An additional factor is the implication of disease in driving the buffalo further west and south.

For the Métis of Lac Ste. Anne, the buffalo did not significantly decline until waves of smallpox entered into Lac Ste. Anne and the surrounding area in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Their numbers also reduced because over time the changes which been impacting the Métis further east began to have an effect – increased immigration, settlement, conflict, and the intensification of trade and competition between American traders and the HBC (Milloy, 1998, p. 104). Further, the Canadian government legislatively intervened, restricting Lac Ste. Anne Métis hunting abilities through broad policies such as the *Unorganized Territories’ Games Preservation Act, 1894* (Sandlos, 2007, p. 27; p. 49). Estimates posit that by 1887 buffalo populations had been so greatly reduced that buffalo hunting was no longer a viable option or central source of survival for Métis in Lac Ste. Anne and nearby communities (Barkwell et al, 2012, p. 47). While some Métis may have come to see the buffalo as a commodity rather than as a relation and contributed to the buffalo’s decline, as Granny Belcourt demonstrates others continued to respect the life cycles of the buffalo until they recognized that buffalo hunting was no longer suitable.

While the Métis were greatly dependent on the buffalo for its spiritual and physical contributions, their relationships with other animals and on plants for food and for knowledge allowed them to survive. Métis engaged with numerous other animal and plant relations for everything from medicines to “everyday life” information, and for material necessities. Granny Belcourt recalls that the moss was gathered in the fall, after haying (2006, p. 199). Moss was then also used for wiping floors and as well for absorbing human waste of babies. Spruce logs,

like other plant sources, were gathered with certain usages in mind. In certain seasons, the spruce logs were used to build small houses with hide in place of glass for windows, dried bark collected in fall was placed on the “top like shingles,” and mud, wood poles, hay, and water mixed together to create mud stoves (2006, p. 195). In a pinch, and when available, old, dried piles of buffalo dung could be used in place of wood to create fire. All of these examples demonstrate the ways Métis worked with the resources provided to them by their Creator.

Belcourt demonstrates the continuity of some of this knowledge as he points out to his granddaughter Amethyst, on a walk in the woods of Lac Ste. Anne, how the location of moss’ growth on a tree provided important directional information, should someone become lost (2006, p. 19). While the buffalo was undoubtedly important, and its decline a cause for great sadness, the significance of something as seemingly small as moss reflects that across generations Métis retained their ability to live in concert with the land. Métis in Lac Ste. Anne and Paddle Prairie have been very resourceful and able to adapt their diets and material needs to their realities of their changing environments. Granny Belcourt recalls that the Métis transitioned to raising cattle, hogs, and chickens. Although many Métis disliked the transition to beef, one or two cows could provide meat that would last through the winter (Belcourt Callihoo, 2006, p. 197). Cows also provided milk, with Métis adapting their canoe-making skills by using birch bark, roots, and spruce gum to create pans for holding the milk. The deer, bear, moose, fish, and fowl all became more important to Métis diets.

By the time Belcourt and Ghostkeeper were born, these new ways were readily entrenched in their families’ ways of living. Belcourt reflects on the way Métis adopted a mixed trade, harvesting-agricultural system:

During the summer, when the berries came out, we would stop along the road to pick them. We would pick the wild strawberries or raspberries. When blueberry season came, we had to walk a long way to an area where the blueberries grew. We would make sure our pails were filled with saskatoons, chokecherries, gooseberries, all that sort of thing. My mother and my grandmother preserved all of these berries, as it was our only fruit for the winter. They worked constantly on that. My mother would also tells us to go into the woods and get a partridge, or to snare rabbits...We also ate dried fish, and sometimes neighbours would bring us moose meat...We grew cucumbers, beets, carrots, peas, and lots of potatoes. We had marrows, and turnips to cook with butter and pepper. Everything we grew, we ate. The women kept everything going. They raised the kids, made the food and clothing, kept the house. (2006, pp. 46-47)

While Belcourt demonstrates the transitions in Métis subsistence and the introduction of new dietary staples, his narrative also reveals something else very important – the continuity of Métis women’s roles in family and community livelihood. His words draw attention to the ways that Métis women, the core vessels for transmitting Métis traditional knowledge to future generations, continued in their vital role during times of great upheaval and change. The valuable and consistent role that women filled is echoed in Granny Belcourt’s intimate knowledge of the

everyday subsistence patterns of her Métis community, as well as in Ghostkeeper's experience tapping for birch sap and checking snares with his aunt and mother.

Each of the texts demonstrate that while the overhunting of the buffalo may have led to a significant transition in Métis peoples lives, in large part due to Métis women's ability to adapt their agricultural knowledges to new contexts, Métis ways of living with the land have endured. Leclair's narrative exposition in her doctoral study of Métis relationships with their environments, demonstrates continuity with the experiences of Granny Belcourt, Belcourt, and Ghostkeeper, writing that through the stories she heard of her mother's childhood in 1920s Manitoba, while Métis men worked "cutting timber and ganging for the Canadian National Railway" it was the women who tended vegetable gardens and were the most formative presence in Métis children's lives (2003, p. 40). All across the Métis Nation homeland, Métis in communities were "learning to forget their buffalo-dependent past" (ibid) and, in its wake, Métis women helped to ensure ways of knowing remained vibrant, adaptable, and responsive to new ecological contexts allowed Métis peoples, as peoples, to survive.

## **Métis and the importation of industrialized modes of living**

Few of the accounts of the buffalo's decline that claim Métis saw the buffalo as a commodity, and as such are principally responsible for the buffalo's decline, ask whether Métis continued to intimately engage in practices of spiritual exchange with the spirit of the buffalo. Instead, they argue, as A.A. den Otter (2012) does, that as a result of their participation in the buffalo robe trade and the buffalo's decline, that Métis turned toward their "European and Canadian paternal heritage" (p. 136). den Otter claims that this involvement and the later adaptation of fixed agricultural modes means that "the Métis too sought to become independent of the vagaries of nature" (2012, p. 137) and had thus developed a "new [distinctly European] ecological perspective" (p. 161). Equating the buffalo's decline with the disappearance of Métis traditional ways of knowing and a transition to Europeanness, a decline that is the consequence of a number of intersecting factors, is problematic.

den Otter is caught by the aforementioned racialization of Métis, that insists that Métis are "either/or" Indigenous or European. Yet Métis life stories, such as Belcourt's and Ghostkeeper's in particular, provide us with insight into the way scholars like den Otter disregard how practices such as farming were *Métis-ized* by the Métis. Critiques such as den Otter's contribute to the body of literature that neglects to consider Métis voices. Rather than trying to understand the lens through which Métis viewed their relationships to agriculture and rather than consider the way that spiritual exchanges can be read as high functioning forms of ecological-agricultural stewardship, such scholars remain wholly preoccupied with upholding the civilized/savage, modern/pre-modern dichotomy (LaRocque, 2010).

In addition, they chose to ignore the most aggressive threat to Métis ways: the introduction of industrialized modes of living. The importance of living in balance through understanding relationality and practicing reciprocity is key to Métis ways of being in the world.

Métis worldviews are resilient and many, although not all, managed to adapt themselves to and weave themselves with new modes of living. Belcourt and Ghostkeeper's narratives, however, chart for us the most aggressive challenge to the continuance of Métis ways of being *and* to Métis abilities to continue to adapt and persist in their relationships with the land – namely, the concretization of consumer capitalist society that is founded on the invasion of extractive economies, and its integration into Métis peoples' lives.<sup>2</sup> Taken together, Granny Belcourt, Belcourt, and Ghostkeeper's reflections bear witness to the extent to which Métis become embroiled in the "rapid transformation of a large part of a whole continent into personal and corporate capital" (Hall, 2010, p. 95). The storytellers reveal the twentieth-century shift away from what had become a subsistence-based, mixed agricultural system that was still ultimately concerned with the well-being of communities and environments, a shift to one that threatens to destabilize the very core of Métis ways of being – their relationships with their environments.

Anthony J. Hall (2010) argues that the British Crown's granting of ubiquitous rights of Dominion to the corporate entity of HBC, and to itself by extension, demonstrates the monarchy's longstanding desire to turn the environment and the "earth into property" (p. 4). While this is undoubtedly true, it is not until the Victorian era and the expansion of discourses of civility that "mastery over the environment" comes to be seen as "essential for progress and for the survival of the human race" (McCormick, 1991, p. 3). As the fur trade peaked and recessed, there emerged new economies founded on an ethic of frontier capitalism, consisting of "dependence on export market...increasing intensity of capital, paternalistic labour relations, and reckless rates of resource extraction" (Tough, 1999, p. 100). If Métis were able to engage in trade relationships while maintaining balanced and respectful relationships with their environments, they could continue to be well. The rise in frontier capitalism, of extraction-based economies and the attending environmental impacts of these economic modes and the societies they have built, however, have severely challenged Métis ways of knowing, health, and well-being and have threatened to rupture Métis relations with their environments.

Ghostkeeper - and Belcourt, although to a lesser extent - reflects that environmental degradation came to have significant impact on the health of the animals that their families were dependent on. Belcourt and his brother Ken (who had been trained by their father in the family fur business and who co-authors a section with Belcourt), observe the decline of muskrats, their health, and the displacement of them, as well as the otters and the beaver, noting that they are all interdependent on one another and the water (2006, p. 140). The Belcourts are as well dependent on the animals, given the family's longstanding tradition of working with animal fur from the fur trade and into the twentieth century. The pressures of settlement and increasing industrialization contribute to the animals' decline, which in turn impedes the Belcourt's subsistence. Similarly, Ghostkeeper details changes experienced by Métis on the land in his community writing that Métis hold the belief that the prairie chicken population has been "destroyed by DDT" (2007, p.

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<sup>2</sup> As Leclair (2004) writes, "We live in cities and suburban places in or near *the bush* and in rural farming towns. This means we drive cars, fuel ski-doos, watch television, use computers, buy food, make money. From the early fur trading era to present practices in mining, forestry and industry, all the human inhabitants of this land continue to be implicated in the sad legacy of ecological profligacy" (pp. 6-7).

45). Birds, such as the prairie chicken, had their numbers reduced so drastically that people came to the realization that the prairie chickens should no longer be harvested.

The gradual changes that interfered with Métis subsistence meant that to survive both Belcourt and Ghostkeeper had to leave their communities. In linear fashion, the degradation of their environments contributed to their having to move from their communities, leading to the breaking of their ecological relationships, and both of their entrances into environmentally harmful ways of living. While Belcourt left Lac Ste. Anne at age fifteen to work, first in various jobs such as laboring in coal mines, then installing telephone lines, and later for himself and urban Métis people, Ghostkeeper left for an education and then to work.

Ghostkeeper's experience is perhaps most telling, having been required to leave his community in order for him to attend high school. While away, he attended college and received a diploma in Civil Engineering Technology. He admits that when he returned to his community in 1974, he did so with the introduction of the "exploration and development of a natural gas field, in the Blue Sky Formation of northwestern Alberta" (2007, p. 2). A multinational oil company had employed him and when, in the following winter, companies expressed interest in extending drilling into Paddle Prairie, he took the opportunity to return. He became involved in the project, which he refers to as the first time that he came to understand the "impact of non-renewable resource development on a sustainable livelihood" (p. 2).

Ghostkeeper draws on the entrance of oil companies into his community as an example of when contrasting notions of earth as property clearly entered his life. Paddle Prairie is one of eight remaining Métis Settlements established by the Alberta government under the *Métis Betterment Act*.<sup>3</sup> Government officials that administer the *Act* take the view that land ownership is about "the legal right of dominion, possession, and proprietorship of Settlement land by the Crown" (Ghostkeeper, 2007, p. 61). Métis, on the other hand, have long held the view that their relationship to land is far more sacred than a Eurowestern-defined "legal" right. Ghostkeeper writes that what, in the legal system, is referred to as "Aboriginal title" is, for the Métis, because the land exists as "a gift from The Great Spirit to the Metis prior to the creation of dominion of the province of Alberta and the country of Canada" (2007, p. 62). This title is then "a spiritual gift, and so cannot be extinguished or sold by living human beings" (ibid). Yet Métis Settlements are granted occupation rights and different forms of surface rights (such as to build or harvest certain amounts of wood), which are different from subsurface rights. Subsurface rights, such as mineral rights and the overarching underlying title to the land, are considered held by the province as a part of their "Crown land" entitlements (ibid). In 1990 a Co-Management Agreement (CMA) allowed for royalties while still vesting ownership of mines and minerals in the province.<sup>4</sup> When oil companies sought access to particular lands, they began their projects by bidding on mineral rights, thus circumventing Métis opposition to resource extraction.

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<sup>3</sup> The Métis Settlements were established in 1938.

<sup>4</sup> Co-Management Agreement." *Aboriginal Relations*. Government of Alberta.  
<http://www.aboriginal.alberta.ca/973.cfm>. 1 May 2014.

As previously discussed, the storytellers offer a fundamentally different view of the land (and thus of “resource”) than is encapsulated and held by the Eurowestern ideology of frontier capitalism. Ghostkeeper writes that from his time growing up in Paddle Prairie to his adulthood in 1976, there remain tensions between Eurocentric concepts of land ownership and Métis beliefs that it is not possible for one to possess the land. It is

viewed as a gift of collective stewardship for Mother Earth, a living being, from The Great Spirit (*Kechi Manitow*). This stewardship descended through our ancestors, allowing us to make a happy and healthy livelihood in a relationship with the land. Metis in turn pass the gift of stewardship on to their children and grandchildren for their collective use. No monetary value is attached to this spiritual concept of ‘ownership’. (emphasis in original, 2007, p. 61)

This highlights a fundamental transition in the notions of both ownership and of “value.” Granny Belcourt points out that for Métis in her community and during her lifetime, ways of understanding “value” were not inherently monetary. She reiterates a few times in her stories that there was no money and that value was linked more to survival and to the well-being of family and community (2006, p. 202). The importation of ideologies of ownership and a sense of the land having monetary value did not align with Métis ways of living. As the late Metis elder Adrian Hope put it, “We belong to the land; the land does not belong to us” (qtd. in Ghostkeeper, 2007, p. 61). Under frontier capitalism the land is the greatest commodity one can claim ownership of. The rise of ideologies that invert this understanding are embedded in the Canadian state, its institutions, and many of its occupants, and have disrupted the delicate balance of relations between Métis and the natural world.

In taking responsibility for his complicity in systems that eclipse Métis worldviews and promote ecologically damaging way of living, Ghostkeeper comments on the notion of value, writing that compensation or value for “right-of-entry” into the Settlement was determined by “a yearly monetary amount given for the loss of use of the land during the lifetime of the natural gas field” (2007, p. 60). The expectation by the oil company and by the province was that minimal monetary compensation could mitigate severe ecological impacts. Ghostkeeper documents the environmental disruption that he observed in his early survey work for the oil company, noting,

[t]he land showed signs of supporting wildlife such as moose, rabbit, coyote, and squirrel. Winter birds of the area included the whiskey jack, chickadee, and raven, some of whose habitats would be destroyed by clear-cutting the forest. There was also a skidoo track meandering throughout the region, indicating that a local trapper was harvesting the area for mink and martin fur. The clear-cut would also interfere with his trap line, as the noise made by the heavy machines would drive away these fur-bearing animals. The trapper would not receive any compensation for this loss of income. Although the work would have all of these effects, all of its activities were conducted according to Alberta forestry and environmental regulations for oilfield construction and the Settlement’s surface rights policy. (2007, p. 57)

In a complete inversion of Granny Belcourt's notion of "value," no one from the oil company, the province, *or* the Settlement Council, considered "the impact upon the land and our relationship to it" (2006, p. 64). Métis, including Ghostkeeper, had accepted an outsiders understanding of "value," accepting the transition from a "sacred to a secular worldview of the bush" (Belcourt Callihoo, 2006, p. 65). In the absence of other viable alternatives through which they could survive, many Métis had come to the point of needing to suppress their sacred relationships with their environments in order to find ways to survive.

In spite of their realities, of needing to find ways to survive, both Belcourt and Ghostkeeper lament the loss of their connection to the land. Belcourt reflects on his return to Lac Ste. Anne later in his life: "We entered the woods and started to climb up a wide trail. I remember my own dog, pulling me to school through the woods on a smaller sleigh. I wish I had come back here to appreciate nature on this land a little sooner. These woods were full of berries, small animals, birds – full of life" (2006, p. 18). Ghostkeeper's lament is even more explicit. When he later thought he could return to farming as a way to facilitate the spiritual connection he so deeply missed, he found himself entering into what he terms, "The Season of Mechanized Farming." In this season, machinery has taken the place of human and animal labour. Whereas the Métis could work with horses that had "the same aspects of body, mind, emotion, and spirit," mechanized equipment, on the other hand, kept people removed from this important intimate relationship (Ghostkeeper, 2007, p. 67). Even Ghostkeeper's father, who due to age could no longer cultivate the land in a physical manner and maintain the Métis way of doing things, opted to forgo mechanized farming and rent the land out to others in order to forgo the spiritual pain that came from inevitably "treating [the land] like something that was inanimate and lifeless" (p. 68).

Through this important story we also are given the meaningful experience of listening to an even older voice than that of Ghostkeeper – we are privileged to hear that of his father, coming through the written voice of his son. Ghostkeeper's father asks his son if he ever dreamt about farming. This harkens back to earlier in their lives (and earlier in this paper) when it is mentioned that the father only engaged in hunting through the guidance of his dreams. The implication here is that if Ghostkeeper was not able to dream of his relationship to the land, that there could not/was not/should not be one. His father blamed mechanized farming, as being far too fast and thus unable to allow for the farmer to develop a meaningful relationship. Ghostkeeper writes, "In my father's view, this shortened time frame, combined with treating the land as a commodity, was what kept me emotionally and spiritually detached from it" (2007, p. 69). Ghostkeeper's entrance into extractive work required the denial and suppression of his inclination to understand the world around him through the prism of relatedness, leading to his detachment from the land.

## **Concluding thoughts: Métis life stories as teachings for contemporary Métis**

Colonization has not just been about land but also about “the exploitation and subjugation of our knowledge, our minds, and our very beings” (Geniusz, 2009, p. 2). It is through Ghostkeeper’s analysis that we come to develop a language for understanding the changing face of colonization and the most destructive threat it poses to Métis lives/livelihoods; the transition to a way of living that supports resource extraction economies as they decimate animal populations, damage the ecosystem, and threaten the continuity of life itself. Ghostkeeper refers to this as the transition from living *with* the land, to living *off* the land: “By making a living off the land through natural gas field construction and grain farming, I had entered into a social relationship with the people with whom I worked, but not with the land and its plants and animals. I had accepted an outside view of the land as an object” (2007, p. 69). Living off the land involved violating the gifts of the Great Spirit, actively participating in the destruction of those gifts, and transitioning to a highly materialistic way of being (p. 73). The transition which Ghostkeeper’s experience represents is not unique. There are many Métis who have gone through this transition and who have also come to embrace a different understanding of what “survival” means, a notion of survival that at its very core has a fundamentally confused and an anti-Métis notion of “value.”

Leclair (2004) writes that, “The telling of a good Metis story creates and strengthens our connections to each other, to our collective remembering of who we are, and to our personal and communal aspirations for our children’s future” (p. 4). While the stories of Granny Belcourt, Belcourt, and Ghostkeeper are not necessarily “good” in the sense that they are overly positive stories, their sharing not only bridges Métis pasts with Métis presents in their families and communities, they contribute to the collective memory of Métis. What distinguish Métis as distinct Indigenous peoples is precisely these things and the way in which notions of kinship and relatedness have long framed Métis interactions and existences within their environments. Métis have had, continue to have, and struggle to hold on to, understandings of and relationships to the water, land, air, sky, and animals. This is but one part of the legacy of colonization and settler encroachment for Métis, a legacy that is far too rarely acknowledged. Even for those Métis who from very early on embraced Catholic worldviews, many nevertheless retained a comprehensive sense of their existence as a part of Creation: through the practices of everyday life, of survival, conservation, and preservation, observation, stories, and teachings imbued Métis with a sense of responsibility to take care of the beings around them.

The storytellers I have discussed also, and perhaps most crucially, bridge the generations, weaving in stories of their ancestors and allowing their words to stand as the collective hopes and dreams for the future of Métis. Belcourt’s entire book is at its core anchored in powerful reflections from his journey back to Lac Ste. Anne, the journey that gave rise to the book’s title. The title came from a day spent reflecting, sharing, and walking in the woods with his grandchildren, Amethyst and Azlan, and his partner Lesley. In his closing chapter, Belcourt

issues a call to Métis, that Métis must be proud of their heritage and make a promise to themselves to keep it. To keep their heritage, however, Métis need to rediscover and recover their traditional ways of being in the world. Belcourt (2006) writes,

I want to live long enough to see people take care of this beautiful country we have inherited from our ancestors. We cannot keep depleting the earth. This is where we need to go back to the traditions of the Native people of early Alberta. They regard all life as sacred. If they took something from the earth, they replaced it. They saw interconnections among all the forms of life. We have lost that ability. Our ancestors knew that if you interfere with the natural cycle of life, something goes wrong. Today, we see many imbalances caused by human interference, often motivated by greed, by more often ignorance. (pp. 191-192)

In this way he is encouraging a re-knowing of Métis relationships, and *all* peoples' relationships, to their environments. This is Belcourt's call to/for revitalization. Ghostkeeper's move towards revitalization is somewhat different as he clearly indicates his desire to remain individualized in the process. He takes pains to distance his individual revitalization from literature that is preoccupied with group revitalization (2007, p. 75). While on the surface it may seem that he is negating the communal contexts and relationships so central to Métis ways of being, it is in fact, the opposite. Ghostkeeper recognizes that without individual transformation and reclamation that is attentive to each person's experiences - as it is the people who own themselves - Métis will never be able to exist as a collective, functioning whole.

To come back to my own personal interest in these stories, I think it is important to recognize that these stories are vital accounts of the changes that Métis communities, even those with a "fixed" land base such as Paddle Prairie, have undergone. It is true that as Leclair (2004) writes, "log cabins are replaced by condos and strip malls," "mountains once held sacred can become multi-nationally owned ski resorts," and "bulldozers are painfully real" (p. 103). As a result as there are "political and spiritual risks in settling for an imagined land. For many Aboriginal people, to have no land is to be motherless and powerless" (ibid). As a number of our First Nations cousins mobilize and take up great initiatives in defensive of Mother Earth, our Métis Nation provincial council political leadership sits in consultation meetings over notions of "aboriginal title," privileging conversations about economic development and wondering why we are not getting a piece of some proverbial pie. My personal fear is that we may become consumed by these discussions, with Eurocentric, legalistic notions of "Aboriginal title", to the point that we slowly allow what it is that makes us Métis to slip away. While we have done remarkable jobs of adapting our notion of kinship to keep our familial ties strong, there is overwhelming talk of economic development in Métis communities. We must be reminded to ask ourselves: what have we done for our environments lately?

Undeniably, in part due to dispossession from our lands and in part due to the forces of assimilation and industrialization, many Métis have moved away from maintaining their responsibilities to their environments. Recognizing the challenges faced by Métis, how have some of our storytellers used writing as a tool to reflect their ecological ways of knowing, to

transmit these ways of knowing for future generations, and have reflected on the monumental shifts to Métis lives? Victoria Belcourt Callihoo's "Early Life in Lac Ste. Anne in the 1870s" and "Our Buffalo Hunts," Herb Belcourt's *Walking in the Woods: A Métis Journey*, and Elmer Ghostkeeper's *Spirit Gifting: The Concept of Spiritual Exchange*, reminds us that without our reciprocal relationship with our environments, Métis can never be a truly healthy or prosperous people. As such we must re-center more than just diluted and commoditized notions of land in our advocacy and activism work for our futures. Our understandings of what it means to demand "our rights" must necessarily place the well being of the environment, of all of our ecological relations, at the heart.

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