



MEDIATING MÉTIS IDENTITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH JENNIFER ADESE AND ZOE TODD

JENNIFER ADESE, ZOE TODD, AND SHAUN STEVENSON

Introduction

The mediation of Indigenous identity in Canada cannot be disentangled from the ways that non-Indigenous Canadians attempt to mediate their own settler identities. For significant numbers of non-Indigenous Canadians, this mediation occurs through uncritical and problematic mobilizations of what is often *perceived* to be Métis identity—an identity which, for many with little connection to Indigenous histories or politics, simply signifies the mixing of cultures, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Indeed, countless Canadians who otherwise would not identify themselves as Indigenous, will inevitably cite a distant First Nations or Métis relative, claiming they themselves are Métis, part-Métis, or possess Métis heritage. Hardly a month goes by that notions of “Métis-ness” do not appear to be up for debate, or, more often, especially in the east, uncritically championed as part of Canada’s own national identity. If my claims here appear merely anecdotal, the recent controversies over the supposed Indigenous identity of author Joseph Boyden,¹ along with the deluge of non-Indigenous op-eds in support of his lucrative and ambiguous claim to various Indigenous communities—at times Mi’kmaq, Anishnaabe, and of course Métis—is indicative of just how much investment settler Canadians put into propping up and leaning into unsubstantiated claims to Indigenous identity, while deriding legitimate assertions of Indigenous rights (Elliott 2017).

While many questionable claims to Métis identity likely do not come from an explicit desire to cause harm, they represent the endless iteration of what Terry Goldie, way back in 1990, referred to as “indigenization.” Goldie

¹ See Jorge Barrera, “Author Joseph Boyden’s Shape-Shifting Indigenous Identity,” APTN National News, 23 December 2016. <http://aptnews.ca/2016/12/23/author-joseph-boydens-shape-shifting-indigenous-identity/>.

writes, “In their need to become ‘native,’ to belong in their land, whites in Canada have required a process I have termed ‘indigenization,’ the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous” (2004, 194). From Grey Owl and Boyden to the seemingly innocuous passing dinner table comment about a distant “Indian,” “Native,” “métis,” or “sauvage/sauvagesse” ancestor, limited understandings of Métis identity have consistently been utilized as a means of mediating an indigenized settler identity, wherein non-Indigenous peoples seek to reconcile or justify their presence on Indigenous lands.

It is indeed the responsibility of settler Canadians to better understand the implications of these settler moves to indigenize, especially as they do so at the expense of the Métis peoples; however, the meaning of Métis identity is undoubtedly a complex issue. Where identities are often mediated through complicated negotiations, this is especially true for Indigenous peoples who have been forced to articulate or define their identities in various ways within the veiled blood quantum provisions of *Indian Act* legislation. Issues of blood quantum and gender have consistently been operationalized to limit and, in many cases, eradicate expressions of Indigenous identity.² Métis identity has been further mediated by the state, serving as a kind of floating signifier positioned between Indigeneity and whiteness and deployed at various points to bolster Canada’s sense of its own history. It is no wonder that confusion abounds on behalf of non-Indigenous peoples with little connection to Métis histories, nationhood, and political struggle.

As Alicia Elliott writes, “telling Indigenous people who they are and what to think is never an entirely benign exercise” (2017). To be sure, as a settler scholar, it is not my intention to further contribute to the policing of

² Canada has a long history of policy legislation that has sought to define who and who does not possess “Indian status,” and thus who is recognized as possessing rights as “Indian” under the *Indian Act* and as Indian, Métis, and Inuit through Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution. Prior to the passing of Bill C-31 in 1985, for example, Indigenous women with a blood-quantum based “Indian status” who married a non-Indian status man would lose their Indian status. If a status Indian Indigenous woman married a status Indian Indigenous man from another band or nation, she would lose status within her own nation. The *Act* went so far as to accord Indian status to non-Indigenous women who married status Indian Indigenous men. In short, Indigenous women’s Indian status and to some extent, Indigenous identity was mediated through the men they married. While Bill C-31 sought to rectify this gender discrimination within the *Indian Act*, it has been criticized for simply delaying the removal of Indian status by one generation and thus perpetuating gender discrimination. For more information on issues of blood quantum and gender in defining Indigenous identity, and how Indigenous peoples define themselves beyond colonial legislation, see Bonita Lawrence’s 2004 *“Real” Indians and Others: Mixed Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood* or Pam Palmater’s 2011 *Beyond Blood: Rethinking Indigenous Identity*.

Indigenous identity. A recognition of the implications of false claims to Indigeneity does not necessarily result in a nuanced understanding of the meaning of what it means to be Métis or how this meaning becomes constituted within a complex nexus of colonialism, rights discourse, kinship relations,³ and personal identity. How then do I engage colleagues, friends, and family who might perpetuate limited claims to Métis identity? How do I reckon with these claims in the classroom, where many students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, may be negotiating the mediation of their own complex identities? What about those individuals doing the hard work of re-claiming their Indigeneity amidst the backdrop of colonialism and a settler society still seeking semiotic control over the meaning of that identity? How do I reckon with these issues in a way that is informed, responsible, and ethical?

I have the privilege here of engaging in conversation with two respected Métis colleagues to explore these complex mediations further. In responding to “Canada’s continued obsession ... with the ‘mixedness’ of Métis identity” (Andersen 2011), I am joined by Jennifer Adese from Carleton University’s School of Indigenous and Canadian Studies and Zoe Todd from Carleton’s Department of Sociology and Anthropology, located in the traditional territories of the Omàmiwininiwak, also called unceded Algonquin territory and the City of Ottawa. This dialogue is an attempt to interrogate the ongoing and uncritical mediation of Métis identity in the settler colonial nation state. Before turning to this important dialogue, I want to further elaborate on the terms of engagement Métis people have been forced to mediate their identity through under the confines of settler colonialism.

Where the Métis have most generally been conceptualized as “the descendants of fur-trade marriages of Europeans and natives” (Andersen 2011), the Métis have come to stand in as a simple marker of mixed identity, mixed

³ Indigenous notions of kinship are complex and diverse depending on the particular needs and organizing principles of a given Indigenous nation. However, for many Indigenous peoples, kinship embodies a sharable philosophy across nations and often represents much more than simple blood or family lineage. Later in our interview, Jennifer Adese, drawing from the work of Brenda Macdougall, will offer a Métis conception of kinship based on the idea of “wahkohtowin,” meaning “everything is related” and wherein kinship is “an active process of relationship that speaks not just to flat points of connection but to an active process of responsibility and reciprocity.” Daniel Heath Justice (2008) has similarly said in the context of Cherokee people, “Kinship ... is about life and living; it’s not about something that *is* in itself so much as something we *do*—actively, thoughtfully, respectfully” (148). For further discussions on Indigenous kinship and its relation to specific Indigenous nations and communities see the work of Rob Innes (2013), Daniel Heath Justice (2008), and Brenda Macdougall (2011).

heritage, and mixed histories. In his quintessentially liberal-Canadian text, *A Fair Country*, John Ralston Saul suggests that Canada ought to be understood as constituted, not merely through French and English interaction, but through settler interaction with the continent's Indigenous peoples, somehow making Canada a "métis Nation." Through a levelling out of complex historical, social, and political relations, Saul raises notions of "mixing" and "mixed-bloodedness" to the status of Métis. As Métis scholar and activist Chelsea Vowel notes, "After all, that's what the French word means, and that is almost exclusively how we are discussed in the mainstream; as a hybrid people formed from the unions between European men and First Nations women" (2015). While good intentions are a troubled hallmark of settler Canadian engagement with Indigenous peoples, Saul's seemingly well-meaning prompt to consider the integral role of Indigenous peoples in the formation of the nation only reinscribes settler colonial "possessive logics" (Moreton-Robinson 2015) wherein the political, historical, and cultural specificity of Métis peoplehood are collapsed under the banner of mixed identity. Saul's position, one uncritically reflected throughout dominant settler Canadian mediations of Métis identity, works to reaffirm the nation-state's place as rightful inheritor of Indigenous lands.

As Andersen, Vowel, and many other Métis scholars have noted (Andersen 2011 and 2014; Gaudry and Leroux 2017; Macdougall 2010; O'Toole 2010; St.-Onge, Podruchny, and Macdougall 2012), such a move to what is referred to sometimes, and especially in eastern Canada, as "métissage"⁴—an increasingly popular position in Quebec and the Maritimes—constructs Canada as an unproblematically "indigenized" nation-state, while also posing significant challenges for contemporary Indigenous, and in particular, Métis, claims to self-determination (see Gaudry and Leroux 2017). Indeed, claims to Métis nationhood are often in direct tension with settler claims to nationhood, and worse, are pitted against other Indigenous assertions of self-determination in the settler state. In many ways, the Métis are at the frontlines of navigating the complex terrain of Indigeneity in Canada, with Métis identity consistently, and often uncritically mediated through the courts, through public opinion, and the media, rather than through Métis communities and peoples themselves.

⁴ See for example, Gaudry and Leroux's 2017 "White Settler Revisionism and Making Métis Everywhere: The Evocation of Métissage in Quebec and Nova Scotia," where they describe the "evocation of métissage"—that is, the tactical use of long-ago racial mixing to reimagine a "Métis" identity that prioritizes mixed-race ancestry and disregards the historical development of Métis peoplehood" (116–117).

Countering the move to mobilize Métis identity as an uncritical settler construct of Indigeneity, Andersen (2011) argues that, “‘Métis’ refers to a nation with membership codes that deserve to be respected. We are not a soup kitchen for those disenfranchised by past and present Canadian Indian policy and, as such, although we should sympathize with those who bear the brunt of this particular form of dispossession, we cannot do so at expense of eviscerating our identity.”⁵ Andersen instead foregrounds the significance of Métis nationhood, and of constituting the Métis as a distinct polity, with historically grounded geo-political roots. Andersen writes, “Thinking about these issues through the lens of Indigenous nationhood might allow us to tell a much different—and more complex—story, about a Métis society historically centred in the area of Red River (now roughly Winnipeg, Manitoba).”

The recent Supreme Court judgment in *Daniels v. Canada* (2016), referred to largely as the “Daniels Decision,” further illustrates the ongoing complexities in mediating Métis identity, as well as the state’s consistent inability to reckon with the political specificity of Métis nationhood (See Adese; Gaudry and Andersen; Vowel and Leroux; and Todd in a special issue of the journal *TOPIA* on the Daniels Decision, 2016). While the decision affirmed the inclusion of Métis and non-status Indians within s. 91(24) of the *Constitution Act* (1867), the Supreme Court’s focus on “mixedness” re-entrenches many of the above-mentioned issues. Responding to the Daniels Decision, Métis scholar Brenda Macdougall writes, “focusing on mixed ancestry ignores the history of who the Métis and Non-Status people were and therefore misrepresents who they are today.” Macdougall is careful to note, that “of course there were mixed-blood people in eastern Canada as early as the seventeenth century, but equating them with the Métis, known historically as *la nouvelle nation*, is not borne out by historical evidence” (Macdougall 2016, 2). Further, legal equivocations around the specificity of Métis identity opens the floodgates for non-Métis and even non-Indigenous claims to Métis nationhood, once again undercutting Métis political rights and self-determination.

⁵ Andersen recently addressed and elaborated on his oft-quoted “soup kitchen” reference in a Twitter thread (@DrChrisAndersen, 29 November 2017). I offer an abridged version of that elaboration here: “The point about the soup kitchen metaphor is not just to suggest that while Métis are legendarily generous we are not limitlessly so (i.e. we can’t feed everyone nor should we be obligated to); It is to ask us to think about the ethics that ground our willingness to feed those who we do. Any of us that come from Métis families know that in nearly all situations, those in need get an extra plate at the table—food (and generosity) can always be stretched. But (and here I give a nod to Dr. Jill Doerfler’s brilliant book *Those Who Belong*): what are the responsibilities of those who are being fed? What does it mean to act ethically when you are being fed in accordance with someone else’s generosity?”

Andersen, in his pivotal text *Métis: Race, Recognition, and the Struggle for Indigenous Peoplehood* (2014) suggests that to understand the Métis through mixedness represents a mediation of Indigeneity premised on colonial logics wherein biology, and limited notions at that, take precedence over more complex and formal political structures, such as treaties and kinship relations (11). For Andersen, and many Métis scholars, activists, and community members, the “national core” of the Métis must be traced back to its historical location at Red River, and “in the shared memories of the territory, leaders, events, and culture that sustain the Métis people today” (13). Andersen foregrounds “historical, peoplehood-based relationships” as the basis for Métis claims to recognition (11).

While these issues must be better understood by non-Indigenous peoples in Canada, and while it is up to non-Indigenous Canadians to push back against the trend of métissage, the ongoing mediation of Métis identity, both at a political and cultural level, must be, and has been consistently led by Métis peoples—by scholars, activists, and community members.

And so to elucidate these issues further, I now turn to a conversation with Métis scholars, writers, and activists at the frontlines of these debates in various ways. In light of Canada’s preoccupation with the “mixedness” of Métis identity and Andersen’s assertions that “recognizing Métis as ‘mixed’ rather than as a nation is an ethical choice,” our discussion here thus serves as an attempt to respond ethically and responsibly to the mediation of Métis identity in the settler colonial nation state.

Shaun: By way of introduction to you both, I want to invite you to introduce yourselves and ask how it is that you have come to mediate your own identities as Métis people?

Zoe: As I position myself with academe, I draw on my kinship relations. I’m an otipemisiw/Michif/Red River Métis woman who grew up in amiskwaciwaskahikan (Edmonton), which is a city that rests within Treaty Six Territory in Alberta. The city is in the heart of the prairie/boreal parkland transition zone, and the North Saskatchewan River (kisiskaciwani-sipiy in nehiyawewin or Plains Cree, Y Dialect) runs through my hometown. My mom’s family are British and Norwegian settlers who moved to Alberta between the 1880s and 1920s. My maternal grandmother’s family, the Petersons, moved to Alberta from Oklahoma and Minnesota. My maternal

grandfather's family, the Crouchers, moved to Canada to homestead in Alberta after WWI. My dad's family is Métis. His mom's (Sharpe) ancestry was British-Pennsylvania Dutch. My paternal grandfather, George Todd, was Métis—his family stretches through time and territory across the length of the Lake Winnipeg watershed. Through nimosom's family we are related to Métis and Cree families with roots across the plains, including the Cardinal, Desjarlais, Dumont, Dusfresne, Dennet, Howse, Laframboise, Laboucane, and Todd families. I draw especially on the stories my Dad and Aunties share of their grandparents, Caroline LaFramboise (whose mother was Cree-Métis from Whitefish (Goodfish) Lake, Alberta) and James Todd (whose parents were Métis). These kinship relations tie me to histories and stories across Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and North Dakota—in other words, bind me to a great majority of the Lake Winnipeg watershed. So when I position myself, I gesture to this settler history and Métis kinship. I think it's really important for me to be explicit about these links as they manifest through time and space in the prairies. I am an unapologetic prairie philosopher, and my immediate passion is for tending to the stories, histories, and entanglements of people and fish in the context of settler colonization of the prairies throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. I see myself as bound to upholding and reciprocating the legal traditions and philosophies of my Métis relations, which position me in specific ongoing reciprocal responsibilities as a scholar, community member, feminist, artist, activist, and writer.

Jennifer: My name is Jennifer Adese. I am of the otipemisiwak/Métis/Michif people who for generations before me called places like amiskwaciwaskahikan (Beaver Hills House/Edmonton), and communities such as St. Albert and Manitou Sakahigan, home. My father was raised in amiskwaciwaskahikan, and maintained a close connection to his grandparent's home in Duffield, a hamlet next to the Paul Band reserve, south of Manitou Sakahigan. His mother, my grandmother, Myrtle Lenny, was born and raised there in Duffield, and comes from a large Métis, Cree, and Dene family that stretches from Duffield, to Manitou Sakahigan and St. Albert, all the way up through Athabasca to Tulit'a in the Northwest Territories, and beyond. She is the daughter of Mary Justina Dubé and Dolphus Lenny and Great-grandma Mary was born in St. Albert and raised in Meanook in the Athabasca region. Following what may have been a postpartum depression, attributable to a breakdown in her early 20s, she spent the remainder of her life in the Provincial Mental Hospital for Ponoka and Raymond Home in Raymond, Alberta. Her mother, Adelaide Wabasca Blandion/Dion was the grand-niece of the well-known leader mistahi-muskwa (Big Bear). Great-grandma married my great-grandfather Dolphus, who was the son of Lucille Gladu, daughter of Marie Amable Belcourt and Oskinikiw aka

Joseph Gladu, headman of the Michel Band of Manitous Sakahigan at the time of the signing of Treaty 6.⁶ Grandma Lucie was born a member of the Michel Band, a treaty person, and was later enfranchised through the North-West Half-Breed Scrip Commission.⁷ She married John Flett Lennie, an Orcadian employee of the Hudson's Bay Company who ran a well-known stopping house near Duffield. My paternal grandfather, Joseph Seib, was the son of Ignatz Seib and Adellheid Engel, Russian-German settlers who arrived to Alberta by way of the United States, and before that, their birthplace along the Volga River in Russia.

I place great emphasis on the stories of my maternal Indigenous relations here, and I also place them first, as an inversion of common practice in identifying relations. They connect me to innumerable relations—Lenny/Lennie, Dubé/Dubie, Gladu, Belcourt, L'Hirondelle, Chartrand, Blandion/Blondion/Dion/Dionne/Blyan/White/Powder, Petit Couteau, Nipissing, and Gray/Grey, among others. For me, it is my maternal Indigenous relations who ground me in my identity as a Métis woman. Insofar as my paternal Indigenous relations, and my many other non-Indigenous relations are deeply important to me, it is my maternal Indigenous relations whose homelands, labour, and language that have been, and continue to be, the birthplace of my Métisness. In contrast to popular Franco-centric and patrilineal narratives of Métisness that attempt to seat its origins in Québec or other points eastward, my Métisness—and indeed that of most of the people I know who are Métis—cannot be dislocated from our maternal relations.

I did not always know these stories. I have had to work very hard to learn these stories through conversations with family members, oftentimes through heartrending tears, while my unasked question as to whether they would embrace me as one of theirs hung in the air between us. Extended family members that I have met know of me as the “one who was adopted out,” although I was never, in fact, adopted out. Like all other members of my father's immediate and extended family, I was born “out west,” but unlike every other member of father's family I was not raised within this familial context. I was born in North Vancouver and spent the first few years of my life in Squamish, British Columbia. Following my father's disappearance and the later discovery of his body—and the determination of his death by suicide in October 1982—I was relocated by my mother's hometown in Neutral and Haudenosaunee territory, the City of St. Catharines, Ontario. My mother was born here and at the age of 8 months she was adopted into a family of English

⁶ See http://digital.scaa.sk.ca/ourlegacy/exhibit_treaties.

⁷ See http://digital.scaa.sk.ca/ourlegacy/exhibit_scrip.

and Scottish Mennonites. Her birth mother was of English and Pennsylvania Dutch background, and other ancestral relations that remain unknown to us. Her birth father was born in England in 1885, arriving to Saskatchewan on the promise of “free land” and a better life than workhouses and struggle.

Over the past 12 years I have made many returns to “out west” to visit immediate and extended family and I have seen how deeply intertwined our families and communities are across the Métis homeland. I have sat with my late Auntie Helen Perreault Lenny at her kitchen table in Duffield, pouring over suitcases full of family photographs; I have walked the Lenny homestead with my dad’s cousin Paul; I have taken a ride with my grandmother’s cousin Don Dubé through the Dubé family homestead in Athabasca, and heard his granddaughter tell me stories about our family and the land; I have walked through graves in St. Albert and paid my respects to my relations; I have returned to Batoche, where my great-great grandma’s sister, Virginie Blandion and her husband Charles Saluste Gariépy lived, and near where Charles was wounded in resisting Canadian colonization at Duck Lake in 1885; and I have sat beside the Red River, where my great-great-great-great grandmother Josephite Chartrand was born before moving to Manitou Sakahigan, and where my great-great-great grandfather Antoine Wabasca Blandion Jr. met and married his second wife, Marie Desjarlais. I have laboured, at times tirelessly, and with no reward other than to know my own relations, to reweave myself back into the web of these kinship ties and to learn what responsibilities I have to be a good family member to past, present, and future generations.

The people and stories ground me and guide me and I am grateful to all of these people, without whom I would not be here today. I carry their stories forth in my teaching, research, and everyday life, as I am responsible to them. I am also accountable to the ones waiting with these ancestors in the spirit world, the ones who have yet to be born. I owe a great debt of gratitude to the urban Indigenous community I was raised within in St. Catharines where the generosity of Haudenosaunee helped to foment this responsibility from an early stage. All of this comes forth with me in my work as an anti-colonial, anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-homophobic mother, academic, educator, and activist.

Shaun: Given the complexity of your introductions—the familial webs, histories, and stories that ground you in what it means to be Métis—my next question should by now be irrelevant. And yet, in recent years there has been an

increase in pushback against the assertion of a coherent Métis nationhood,⁸ situating it as a claim to a kind of ethno-nationalism, or essentialist form of identity politics. Further, as discussed above, notions of mixedness abound, wherein simplified conceptions of Indigenous heritage result in claims to Métis identity. Despite the extensive literature elucidating the complexities and significance of Indigenous nationhood (Justice 2008; Weaver, Womack & Warrior 2012; Andersen 2014), reductive moves to undermine this complexity are common in relation to Indigenous claims to recognition and self-determination. While it seems that Indigenous peoples, and increasingly the Métis, are forced to rehash these arguments over and over again, and at the risk of asking this of you myself, I'm wondering if you could speak to these issues and about what nationhood or peoplehood means to you in relation to Métis self-determination.

Jennifer: Nationhood is the political expression of our indigenous peoplehood—that as Indigenous people, we are entitled to express ourselves politically in whatever manner we see fit—even if it is a manner that makes some uncomfortable. I don't think the fact that there are people within the Métis Nation who disagree with the current predominant political representation we have undermines this—it is innate to any nation to have discord. I'm less concerned with people *of* the Métis Nation who are displeased with its political direction than I am with people who feel a sense of destructive entitlement *to* the Métis Nation. Within this, I am concerned about people who access Métis through appeals to “métissage” because it fundamentally ignores what we say about how we come to exist as a distinct yet interconnected people. As a Métis woman, I find that claims made regarding Métis as “originating in the East” or from the “paternal homeland of Québec” are unforgivably sexist. As Adam Gaudry and Darryl Leroux (2017) have demonstrated in their recent work on métissage and claims to Métis identity in Eastern Canada, appeals to métissage are often deeply invested in patrilineal narratives—particularly French and/or Québécois ones. For me, as I mention a bit earlier, this problematic narrative makes a pretty powerful statement about how the claimants of such identities devalue Cree, Saulteaux, and other prairie and parkland-based Indigenous women and their stories and lives. Further, these narratives debase the Métis women who come from them, offering a public narrative wherein these women are erased as if they do not matter to

⁸ For further discussion on claims to a “new Métis” identity which works to undercut the centrality, coherence, and political significance of a Métis homeland and peoplehood, see Darryl Leroux and Adam Gaudry's 2017 article “Becoming Indigenous: The Rise of Eastern Métis in Canada.” <https://theconversation.com/becoming-indigenous-the-rise-of-eastern-metis-in-canada-80794>.

Métisness. This is dangerous and sexist. It elides the rootedness of Métis in their *maternal homeland*—and thus in the language, kinship networks, and knowledge systems of maternal relations. People such as Maria Campbell, Brenda Macdougall, and Nicole St-Onge have spent their lives countering the violent erasure of Métis women and their ancestors. They have worked to highlight the centrality of Métis women to the Métis Nation. When pressed on the matter, people upholding these métissage-based narratives dig in and assert that they value Métis and other Indigenous women, but in truth, if they did, they would have to concede that Michif and the worldviews it conveys are not inseparable from the aforementioned (particularly Cree and Saulteaux) women.

Zoe: I really appreciate the detail and clarity that you offer here, Jennifer, regarding Métis women, political action, and nationhood. To be honest, I am a little fatigued by the fact that the misrepresentation and mis-interpretation of Métis peoplehood and nationhood by settler scholars, lawyers, jurists, journalists, and others forces us as a Métis people to constantly rehearse and re-negotiate ourselves as a polity within a settler nation-state that is ill-equipped to interpret Indigenous law and sovereignty. For me, Métis self-determination is a recognition of the specific and quantifiable ways in which Métis asserted and assert their relationships, responsibilities, histories, stories, language, laws, kinship ties, diplomatic traditions, inter-nation treaties, vis-à-vis their own communities, other Indigenous nations, and the settler-Canadian nation-state. Because I research human-fish relations, I tend to think of Métis self-determination in terms of which fish and waterways we had and have relationships to. Métis nationhood is a territorially and temporally bounded series of relationships between human and more-than-human kin that is rooted in a very tangible series of events and localities in the Lake Winnipeg watershed and its neighbouring watersheds in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. I think of this in relation to the responsibilities we owe to other Indigenous nations, too.

I am currently reading Dr. Robert Innes's *Elder Brother and the Law of the People* (2013), and his work has also prompted me to ask: how did nehiyawak (Cree), Anishinaabeg, Saulteaux, Dene, Dakota, Lakota, Nakota on the Plains recognize the Métis? Building on his studies of kinship in his community of Cowessess First Nation, I now realize we are self-determining in part because other Indigenous nations recognized us through naming us, negotiating trade relations and treaties with us, co-constituting certain stories and narratives with us, and by placing sanctions on us if we were not living up to our responsibilities as kin (or as guests, depending on the circumstance). Other Indigenous nations on the Plains acknowledged our shared connections but also our distinctness in specific time(s) and place. I am less interested in

what varying and shifting terminologies settler actors applied to the Métis, because that terminology was rooted in racialized understandings of Indigeneity and a need to assert white supremacist and dispossessing logics to “the Other.” Building on the work of Chris Andersen, and his description of the relationship between Fort Edmonton and Red River Settlement as “heartbeats” (Stirling 2016), I think of these relationships in terms of the flows of people, stories, life, and labour along specific rivers, creeks, and lakes that are incorporated in to the legal-political consciousness of who the Métis are.

Jennifer: I appreciate Zoe’s tiredness. Indeed, it is emotionally and quite often physically exhausting to be constantly pulled into a position of having to address something that to us is pretty self-evident. I think, though, I am perhaps less fatigued by it than some of my colleagues in Métis Studies. Given that I was raised in Southern Ontario, I have been exposed to these “Eastern claims” in different forms for the majority of my life. I often talk about the time that the Métis Nation of Ontario, then in its infancy, began to make inroads into the urban Native community of St. Catharines. This was in the early 1990s, and I can’t recall ever meeting someone who claimed Métis identity as also claiming a connection to Red River. Métisness, to me, always appeared as a politically expedient way for people disenfranchised from First Nations communities—or far more often, many generations removed from them—to attempt to lay claims to them. I did not identify as Métis when I was younger because the claims of such people around me made me come to think Métisness was a vacuous thing. Nothing unified the people making the claims to Métisness, other than the claims themselves. Claiming a Métis identity—*any* Indigenous identity—is a serious thing and it has implications far beyond oneself. If anything, I’m so very relieved that other people are seeing the problems with such self-identifications and calling into question the ethics and accountability of them. I feel less alone. At the same time, though, the fact that we have to do this work, and repeat it over and over for those who haven’t been listening, is frustrating. It takes away from the important work we have to do in addressing all of the important things that Zoe has outlined, and it keeps us away from the work of making meaningful inroads against the ongoing impacts of the colonization of the Métis Nation.

Shaun: As you both highlight, we should be long past the point of Métis people having to educate non-Métis and non-Indigenous people on the politics and history of Métis peoplehood. Still, misinformation is perpetuated on all fronts—through media, court decisions, official associations, and even in the classroom. Jennifer, you work specifically on Métis literature as a means of mediating Métis identity. What is the significance of literature in understanding and teaching others about what it is to be Métis?

Jennifer: Literature is, to me, one of the many forms of the creative expression of our distinct Indigenous peoplehood. It is a mechanism through which we tell stories about who we were, who we are, and who we intend to be. With the threat posed to oral tradition by the loss of Michif and other related Métis-spoken languages, literature in some ways has become a stand-in for this (though at times it is inept and not without its problems). My current work on Métis literature is focused on Métis children's literature. I see this area of under-discussed writing as absolutely crucial one. The Gabriel Dumont Institute (GDI), headquartered in Saskatoon, has been publishing texts directed towards Métis children since it began its publication efforts. Métis children's literature is a bridge used to transmit our distinct ways of knowing as an Indigenous people to future generations. Given the impact of colonization on Métis, Métis children's literature can, and does, bridge past and present generations of Métis. At the same time, it also gives voice to Métis people's experiences under colonization.

What I do find concerning with respect to literature is the way in which non-Métis uncritically glom on to what is marketed to them as bona fide Métis literature. The more convincingly an author performs "Métisness" that is recognizable to a wider, non-Métis audience, and the more placid they are with respect to positioning Métis as a "bridge between cultures," or a true example of settler Indigenization, the more likely they are to find success. We are still dealing with the fallout of what (for matters of self-preservation) I'll term "the Joseph Boyden Affair." Non-Métis have been catching up to where many of us have been—that despite numerous self-identifications and awards bestowed upon him for being so, and despite his ongoing refusal to reckon with the implications of his identity claims,⁹ Boyden is not from the Métis Nation.¹⁰ He does not hold membership with any of the organizations that link to the historic Métis Nation (a nation of Indigenous people led, most notably, by the late Louis Riel). In any instance wherein he has adopted this label, he has used it as shorthand to describe his "mixedness"; indeed the concept of "Métis-as-mixed," as has been discussed, is wholly problematic.

Children's literature is not immune to this. For instance, there have been questions raised in publicly available documents drafted by the Métis Nation of British Columbia (MNBC) as to whether children's author David Bouchard is or is not Métis. I think that perhaps because Bouchard is a children's literature author, and his work is skewed towards a much smaller audience, the

⁹ See Joseph Boyden, "My Name Is Joseph Boyden," *Macleans*, 2 August 2017. <http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/my-name-is-joseph-boyden/>.

¹⁰ See <http://www.metisnation.ca/index.php/who-are-the-metis>.

documents circulating online regarding Bouchard's purported lack of Indigenous ancestry—and his purported lack of demonstrable connection to the Métis Nation—doesn't really wind up on anyone's radar. When the stakes are seemingly low, problematic claims go unquestioned. But the stakes are *never* low. This last part is also vitally important to me as a Métis mother. I am unendingly worried about the misrepresentation of Métisness in children's literature where for most people such stakes are perhaps mistakenly seen as low. Children's literature is not innocuous and, for me, the stakes here are quite high.

Shaun: I recently taught a second-year Canadian literature survey course. The inclusion of Indigenous literatures in such a course is complicated but necessary, in my view. Even more complicated is representing something as complex as Métis Nationhood and peoplehood through one or two texts, and usually within one week. I taught Maria Campbell's short story "Jacob" because it raised important issues around the use and attempted destruction of Michif, the relationship of the Métis to residential schools, and allowed me to foreground Campbell's pivotal work while giving an overview of Métis settlement and colonization, and the history of road allowances in the prairies. My goal was to convey the distinct histories, struggles, and political orders of the Métis people. It was a challenge, and as teaching goes, I'm not sure I was entirely successful in my use of this text.

Jennifer, can you talk a bit about what other kinds of literary texts you mobilize to help students understand Métis identity in a more responsible way? What are the challenges, limitations, and potential of teaching about Métis identity through literature and within the constraints of the classroom?

Jennifer: I think that at this stage, given the absolute lack of awareness among most people I meet in university classrooms, that educators should pair literary texts that are more creative in their form with pieces by people at the forefront of Métis Studies theory. For instance, Chris Andersen's path paving book "*Métis*": *Race, Recognition, and the Struggle for Indigenous Peoplehood* is, for me, required reading. Although not a literary scholar, Andersen's work resonates with what we do for its emphasis on rhetoric and (mis)representation. He tackles, in concrete ways, the permeation of mischaracterizations of Métisness and exposes the problematic rhetoric around "Métis as mixed." I also think that Nicole St-Onge, Carolyn Podruchny, and Brenda Macdougall's edited volume *Contours of a People: Metis Family, Mobility, and History* is valuable reading. Their introduction, in particular, renders Métis peoplehood undeniably intelligible to those who are not Métis. Andersen thoroughly explores who Métis are not and makes a sound statement as to who Métis are—

St-Onge et al.'s chapter, although published prior to Andersen's, extends this conversation. I have argued in my own work (Adese 2016b) for the need to read Métis Studies pieces alongside Métis creative text.

The biggest constraint to teaching in such a manner is that English, as a discipline, still has yet to properly confront its originary fantasies about fantasizing. A cornerstone of creative writing, and fiction, in particular, is the idea that one is free to creatively imagine and express themselves. We are free to write whatever we may be able to conceive. Yet as Edward Said's (1978) work has profoundly pointed out, the entire idea of imagining worlds outside of one's own is intimately tied to legacies of colonization, enslavement, and dispossession. The stories of other people outside of ourselves are not free for the taking and embellishing or playing with. Métis people—and our histories and stories—are not for everyone. In fact, there are stories that aren't even for me, as a Métis person. There are protocols around how stories are shared, when, where, and with whom. It can be hard to convey this to students in a university classroom because the very nature of that kind of education is supposed to be about free thinking and exploration.

Shaun: Zoe, above you orient yourself, your nationhood and politics, in many ways, around waterways and fish. Indeed, much of your work is on human-fish relations, and you even identify yourself as a "Fish Philosopher" (see Todd 2014, 2016, 2017). My own doctoral research is largely interested in the role of water in mediating relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and so I'm wondering if you could say more about the role of water, and in particular fish, in mediating Métis identity?

Zoe: Building on my above comments, I also have a tongue in cheek "legal test" that I apply to claims to Métis identity that I call the "fish test." It is as straightforward as it sounds: if you are indeed claiming to belong to a polity that is intrinsically bound to the watersheds within which Métis legal-political action takes place, then who are the more-than-human kin with whom you share stories, time, and space? What fish do you recognize as integral to your survival in the territories you come from? What stories about fish do you draw on in your family/community/nation? There are very specific fish that inhabit the Lake Winnipeg watershed and its surrounding watersheds (such as the Churchill River watershed or the Peace-Athabasca watershed), and there are very material-historical relationships that Métis peoples have developed to these specific fish over time. I draw here on the historical work that Brenda MacDougall has done in documenting the involvement of Métis, Dene, and Cree women in supporting the fisheries at the HBC post in Sakitawak (Île-à-la-

Crosse) in northeast Saskatchewan in the 19th century (MacDougall 2011: 143-144).

Further, I think about water as a medium that brings us, as Métis, into and out of different territories. It moves through watersheds and binds us as otipemisiwak through time and space to complex assemblages of stories, people (both human and nonhuman), experiences, meanings, memories, laws, protocols, and histories. For me, I cannot position who I am as a Métis person without also tending to the rivers and lakes and watersheds within which we negotiate our laws, our ethics, and our kinship through time. I like thinking about territory from a watery perspective because it so often up-ends broader euro-western societal understandings of neatly bounded political or geographical borders. Water insistently implodes earth, and it carves and shapes land. And water contains worlds that are as worthy of care and attention from humans as those that are visible to us on land. Water exists in relation to land, too, so humans always have the responsibility to tend to the messiness or complexity of life and meaning at shorelines and riverbanks. For these reasons, I think water is really important in our thinking about Métis life, longing, and the legal-ethical negotiations of our kinship relations as a people. But I also think thinking “with” water is also really important for us as Métis in order to tend properly and thoughtfully to our responsibilities for all of the other Indigenous nations whose waterways we move through.

Shaun: One of the most oft-contested notions of Métis nationhood is the idea of a Métis homeland—that Métis nationhood can be traced back to Red River and the kinship relations that emerged out of that territory. Can you talk about why the idea of a Métis homeland matters?

Zoe: Here I really draw on the fact that the Lake Winnipeg watershed accords pretty closely with the lands and waters within which Métis political action took place in the 19th and 20th centuries. I think of the Métis polity as inhabiting a watershed (and certain neighbouring watersheds), and therefore we have responsibilities to specific Indigenous nations within that watery geography. Focusing on where we have lived, and where we therefore hold reciprocal legal-ethical responsibilities to human and more-than-human kin, is important. To me, a Métis nation homeland is important because it recognizes that we have time- and place-specific relationships, laws, stories, and histories through which we approach the world. And a homeland is important because it is explicitly recognized in certain Canadian legal formations (i.e.: Manitoba Métis Federation Inc. v. Canada). Ultimately, a homeland matters because it disrupts the supposed “slipperiness” of the Métis-as-mixed narrative. We are very explicitly *of* a particular place. We are not everywhere. We are not “coast-to-

coast-to-coast” as one “nouveau Métis”¹¹ organization claims. We are explicitly bound to very real, very visceral, living kinship formations and legal-ethical responsibilities in very particular places. And that is also how other Indigenous nations hold us accountable: we have treaties in this homeland, we have responsibilities that outline what it means for us to co-exist.

Jennifer: I don’t know that I can say it with any more clarity than Zoe has. The homeland is where we are from—it is who we are. It is our home. And if we understand, as I argue earlier, that this homeland has deep maternal ties, it is also our mother. It is where we were born, both figuratively and literally. It gives us our knowledge, our medicine, our language, our kinship ties, and our way of relating to the world around us. It is where our ancestors are buried and where our future generations will continue to return. This is in direct contrast to “Métis-as mixed” claims that often try to de-tether Métisness from the homeland, and it is unlike pro-Canadian narratives that try to recoup Métis as an ideal figure of the possibility of settler indigenization. By insisting on recognition of our homeland, we reject attempts to separate us from land-based existences and claims.

Shaun: If the significance of a Métis homeland is one integral means of tethering the Métis to particular histories, treaties, kinship relations, and political orders, I suspect that language is another. How does language fit in with respect to Métis identity, and with respect to how Métisness is currently understood and articulated in mainstream society?

Jennifer: I would argue that most contemporary assertions to Métis identity from people outside of the Métis Nation homeland ignore the ethnogenesis of the Michif language. Métis were traditionally and by necessity multilingual, given their position on the prairies, which at the time of the ethnogenesis of the Métis Nation was a multicultural/multinational Indigenous place (Bakker 1997). Generally overlooked in conversations on Métis identity is the role of language and Québécois (and further east) attempts to co-opt Métisness choose not to contend with the fact that Michif is the language of the Métis Nation, and that the core of the Michif language is Cree and Saulteaux (Bakker 1997). Not only that, but Michif language is rooted in place—it is born and gives birth to our connection to our homeland, and to our human and, as Zoe argues, other-than-human, relatives.

Zoe: For me, I yearn to be able to speak Michif. My family was a Cree speaking Métis family living in and around the St. Paul des Métis Settlement in

¹¹ This is language mobilized by the Métis Federation of Canada, as demonstrated in a notice posted on the Association des Acadiens-Métis Souriquois website (AAMS n.d.).

the early 20th century, so the language reclamation work we are doing in my family centres around neyihawewin (Plains Cree language). This work on reclaiming nehiyawewin in my family also enables me to better tend to my responsibilities to Cree friends in Alberta and Saskatchewan whose territories my family has lived in and moved through. My Aunt, Loretta Todd, formalized this work in her Cree language children's TV show *Tansi! Nehiyawetin*, which was picked up by Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) for three seasons. But, knowing the specificities and power of the Michif language as something that formally grew out of our relationality to Cree, Saulteaux, French, and Gaelic kin really moves me. Perhaps I am not equipped to speak about this with any authority as I have *no* language training and I am not a linguistic anthropologist, but to me Michif really demonstrates those ongoing, reciprocal, kinship-based responsibilities we hold to specific people in place and time throughout the prairies. I am distressed by posts I see on social media where people misinterpret Michif as just “any” mix of French and an Indigenous language, in an effort to advance métissage arguments. Linguists very clearly demonstrate that Michif is a time- and place-specific language unique to the Métis people, and I hope that we can continue to do serious work tending to this language for current and future generations.

Shaun: Kinship has come up in various ways throughout your responses. As Métis people are dispersed throughout Canada, as people come to learn about their Métis identity later in life, as the Michif language is variously spoken or not spoken, learned and unlearned, can you speak further about the meaning of kinship in relation to the mediation of Métis identity?

Zoe: I really love recent work by Brenda MacDougall (2017) on kinscapes, and Rob Innes' (2013) work on kinship. Both are really informing how I think about shared responsibilities that Métis carried and carry across the Plains.

Jennifer: As Zoe mentions, both Brenda and Rob's work are crucial in highlighting the importance of kinship. The significance of kinship to Métis communities is not unlike as it is for other Indigenous communities and nations. Our relationships to/for/with one another is the glue that binds us all together as a distinct, and discrete, nation. Some of us have been separated from our families and we have to work, as I mention earlier, harder to reweave ourselves back into the web-like network of kinship ties that we come from. I think that people who arrive to Métisness later in life—especially if they live outside of the homeland and/or are disconnected from their family—struggle to move beyond the simple invocation of family names as constituting kinship. It is more than who you are related to. Kinship and in particular our concept of *wahkohtowin* (as Macdougall (2011) writes about) is an active process of

relationship that speaks not just to flat points of connection but to an active process of responsibility and reciprocity.

Shaun: One of the many reasons that the mediation of Métis identity is so contentious is that there are significant material ramifications for the misrecognition of Métis identity. These range from Indigenous rights under the constitution and the potential for Métis assertions of self-determination. One area where the three of us see these ramifications play out is in the academy, through grant applications, graduate student admissions, and perhaps most contentiously, through the often poorly defined mandate of “Indigenous hires.” While the necessity of universities foregrounding the hiring of Indigenous faculty cannot be understated, can you talk about how limited conceptions of Métis identity have complicated the need for more faculty positions designated for Indigenous peoples?

Jennifer: This has serious consequences. For instance as of summer 2017, the Government of Ontario and the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) were using a definition of “Indigenous” that emphasized descent from what the website termed the “Original people of Canada.” While definition has been changed, this time returning to the language of “Aboriginal” and an emphasis on entrenchment within section 35 of Canada’s Constitutional rights, the confusion over terminology reveals something important. The current definition states, “An Aboriginal person in Canada, as recognized in the *Constitution Act, 1982*, is a person who identifies with First Nations (Status/Non-Status), Métis, or Inuit cultural and/or ancestral background.”¹² This language is quite obviously problematic to Indigenous people in the sense that while the constitution is invoked, Indigeneity on the basis of culture *or* ancestral background is an amorphous entity that says little about whether people exist in relation to Indigenous *community*. It leaves the door well open to those who want to lay claim to an Indigenous identity without actually having to demonstrate a connection to living Indigenous communities. For most institutions there is a financial incentive to deploying self-identification rather than imagining beyond it—and increasingly, social capital for doing so. In the “TRC moment,” universities are rushing to be seen as doing something, yet thanks to decades of racist policy meant to deny Indigenous people access to postsecondary education, there is a severe shortage of PhD-holding Indigenous people. A combination of it being the right thing to do and desire for financial and social capital, as well as universities’ reticence to defining Métisness for fear of facing Human Rights challenges, has meant the importation of relatively

¹² See https://osap.gov.on.ca/OSAPPortal/en/A-ZListofAid/PRDR015048.html#P16_1550.

lax approaches to Indigenenity. Academic and other institutions adhere to a self-identification/self-reporting model that has no provability.

If we understand that bringing Indigenous faculty into the university in light of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) recommendations, then it is our responsibility to bring in faculty that are a reflection of the historical *denial* of Indigenous access to postsecondary education. This means that hiring practices are very much about *equity*—yet you can't achieve equity if self-identification policies mean hiring people of minimal Indigenous ancestry and no grounding in Indigenous families and communities, and who have not faced exclusion from the academy on the basis of Indigeneity.

Shaun: By way of concluding this discussion, I first want to thank you both for taking the time to so generously engage with me on these issues. In returning to my initial questions about how to ethically engage with the meaning of Métis identity in the settler state, I would assert—and I do so now with your immense insights and guidance—that it is integral for non-Indigenous people in Canada to interrogate why we continue to have such an investment in the mediation of Indigenous identity—to ask what aspects of settler identities are mediated or negated through uncritical claims to Indigeneity? And these discussions, of course, must move beyond the requirements of non-Indigenous Canadians. They are conversations that are integral for the rights and self-determination of the Métis people, and settler Canadians would do best to step aside and cease skewing the terms of these conversations.

I want to end with the important words of Chris Andersen and then by returning to you, Zoe and Jennifer.

Andersen writes (2011), “If Métis identity is ‘caught between two worlds,’ it isn’t because it somehow reflects the ‘core’ of our identity. Rather, it is because Métis identity carries the freight of more than a century of official Canadian attempts to impose binary ‘truths’ — ‘Indian or Canadian’ —onto Indigenous social orders, the avenues of resistance such attempts have opened up (and closed off), and the ‘leakage’ of such racialization discourses into our perceptions of the world.”

You have both articulated perceptions of Métisness that push back against any notion of binary truths, that resist simplified conceptions of mixedness, and that ground the mediation of Métis identity in distinct political, social, legal, and kinship orders. Your words here in conjunction with an increasing body of pivotal Métis scholarship articulate a kind of Métis futurity that will move and is moving well beyond Canadian impositions on Métis

identity and nationhood. I'm wondering if you want to end by briefly talking about what Métis futurity might look like moving forward.

Jennifer: Ultimately, my Métis futurity is my son. Because of him, I believe it involves getting back to the work that matters. I am fairly tired of being drawn into conversations about Métis identity; the objectives of which I often find are fairly self-focused and self-invested. My Métis futurity involves continuing to work with Métis people in our homes, our families, our communities, our political associations, and to help make this world a safer, healthier, and healed place for future generations of Métis. It involves remembering our non-human relatives and doing our part to live alongside them in ethical and respectful ways. It involves land restoration and strong and healthy relationships with our other Indigenous relations in the Métis homeland. It involves protecting and transmitting our Indigenous ways of knowing to future generations and enacting these in our interactions with the new people who arrive to our homeland every day.

Zoe: I think of Métis futurity as the ability to continue to tell our stories on our own terms. I am so excited by the courageous and badass Métis thinkers and community leaders working every day to honour our reciprocal and ongoing responsibilities to one another and to other Indigenous nations. I think of Métis futurity, probably unsurprisingly, in terms of fishy futures, too. Given that we are heading into what many scientists believe is the Sixth Mass Extinction event (Barnosky et al 2011, Kolbert 2014, Regnier et al 2015), I can't help but couple our future as Métis, as humans, to the well-being and futurities of the more-than-human beings we built and build our polity alongside. So, for me, Métis futurity is about tending to one another with care, and also about tending to more-than-humans with great care and kindness. I yearn for the ability for us to even *have* that futurity, when so much of the policy and political debates in settler Canada are about delimiting and parsing out our past for current settler deconstruction or consumption (either in limiting our rights through problematic court decisions, or in outright settler consumption of our identities in what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) refer to as a "settler move to innocence"). In thinking about Métis futurity, I turn to my Aunt Loretta Todd's path breaking film and television work. A few years ago, she developed a pilot for a TV show called *Skye and Chang*: it was an intergalactic martial arts science-fiction show that told the story of an Asian-Canadian and Indigenous crime-fighting duo who had a dojo in Vancouver. In this piece, my Aunt brings her careful attention to the nuanced relationships between Indigenous and other oppressed or racialized communities in Canada to bear on contemporary Métis storytelling, and in this show she turns to the other-worldly possibilities that come from working across these communities, ontologies, and cosmologies to

literally *save the world*. This kind of work deeply inspires me. This is what I see us being robbed of when we have to keep rehearsing our past to fend off settler consumers trying to claim our identity for their own. We lose the space to tell our own vibrant, entangled, philosophical stories, stories that we have a right to imagine and to tell, and share and tend to. Similarly, the work of Chelsea Vowel and Molly Swain in their podcast *Metis in Space* inspires me. They are, I think, at the forefront of a new kind of Métis relationality, one which positions us firmly in the rich entanglements of past, present, and future and into new forms of kin-making and diplomacy beyond the constrictive borders of the Canadian nation-state and static settler imaginaries. So, I imagine our futurity to be one where we tell our stories on our own terms, and where we do not have to accommodate settlers who insist that our stories cater to them or make sense to them. We deserve to have this space to think, courageously and audaciously, through our own kinship entanglements and responsibilities to human and more-than-human, and perhaps even other-worldly, beings.

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