

Learning to Walk Relationally and Live Métis

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Received Feb. 2023

Accepted for publication March 2023

Published May 2023

Abstract

Métis is a complex identity, both born out of and shaped by the history of colonization in Canada. Despite playing essential roles in ensuring the survival of early settlers and working as mediators between Indigenous and Settler peoples to present day, Métis have been marginalized and misunderstood for centuries. Yet, somehow, we thrive. In this chapter, Jennifer shares her experiences as a Métis person, learning about and living our worldview that centres relationships and accountability to others. She expresses gratitude to her teachers who have helped her to view the world differently, through ceremony and fostering her relationship to place.

Keywords: *Métis, relationships, responsibilities, community, interconnectedness, place-based, spirituality*

Returning to what is customary in many Indigenous circles, I will begin by introducing myself. The practice is similar to stating one's positioning in a research paper, but with an emphasis on the relationships that connect us to specific families, communities, locations, ontologies, epistemologies, and worldviews, in what Kathy Absolon and Cam Willett describe as putting ourselves forward (2005, 97). In Métis gatherings, family names are often repeated by others; we share our community connections as a way of making kin. In doing so, we are also establishing trust, because our families and communities hold us accountable to each other.

Respectfully, I offer that I am Métis with family ties to Red River. Beginning in the 19th century, my family members moved west and north across Canada, some even followed other Métis kin south into Seattle, Washington. My family names are McKay (John Richards), Favel, Ballendine, Linklater, and McDermott. I was raised in unceded Wet'suwet'en territory in northern British Columbia on land that borders the unceded territory of the Gitksan. From an early age, I knew I was Indigenous, but like many, I did not have a clear idea of what that meant. My lack of understanding did not stop me from claiming and celebrating my indigeneity throughout school. When we would discuss heritage and culture in class, I would

announce it proudly even if I was met by jeers, disbelief, or an exacerbated teacher – like Leanne Betasamosake Simpson encountered during her grade 3 class trip to the sugar bush (2014, 6). Because why would anyone want to identify or associate as a primitive or lesser being? Fortunately, I was naïve to the racism and had the privilege of growing up surrounded by family, both Métis and Settler, inclusive of Swedish and English grandparents on my mom's side. For over twenty-five years I have been learning what it means to be Métis: first, by respecting my grandpa's troubled relationship with being Indigenous, then connecting with teachers and seeking out spaces of Métis community.

Métis are often described as walking in two worlds, but rarely with the recognition and respect for who Métis are as a distinct people (LaRocque forthcoming). Social studies, history textbooks, and educators have described Métis people as having been born of unions between primarily French or English fur traders who had taken Indigenous wives during the earliest days of colonization. Known as "half-breeds" and mixed-blood, Métis warranted their own supervisory agency. This was the North West Half-Breed Commission run by the Department of the Interior in the early years of Canada. There are many misconceptions of

who the Métis are, so it's no wonder people are claiming Métis when they learn about a distant Indigenous relative. People tended to not question *Métis-ness* out of politeness, disinterest, ignorance, or apathy. Métis have only recently been recognized as a distinct Indigenous group in Canada (Daniels v. Canada 2016, SCC 12). Identifying as Métis requires a connection to the early Métis people and communities typically associated with Red River and the development of commerce, distinct language (Michif) and ways of living (Shore 2018, 16)

For a long time, Métis have been treated as second class Indigenous citizens (Lavallee forthcoming); it could be argued that we continue to be discriminated against as not Indigenous or not Indigenous enough and that doesn't say much for the treatment of Métis because Indigenous people have been billed as primitive, lesser beings who have needed to be saved and civilized through acts of colonization (King 2003, 131).

Legacies of colonization have made Indigenous identity a precarious landscape to navigate as people have been forcibly disconnected from their communities through residential school systems, the 60s Scoop, the child welfare system, and internalized shame that has been passed down from generation to generation, to name a few (Markides 2021, 108). People have chosen to not teach their children and grandchildren the language or spiritual teachings that might bring them harm or hardship for *being* Indigenous (St. Denis 2007, 1073-1077).

Beyond the Indian Act and other oppressive policies, hegemonic societal structures have continued to perpetuate ignorance and stereotypes of the "noble savage" and untamed lands free for the taking (Williams 2021, 25; King 2003, 78). Western education has taught the narratives of colonization and continues to colonize through schooling that is biased and partial, privileging the stories that support and reify the dominant worldview.

Like many Indigenous people who have been educated in the public-school systems, we are having to decolonize our minds, bodies, and spirits to unlearn and relearn the teachings of our Elders and ancestors. The opportunities to reclaim knowledge and learn through ceremony are gifts to all of us. These experiences are often life changing.

The processes and paths back to our communities, knowledges, and ways of being are varied. Sometimes the

events that lead us back to community are tumultuous and involve great personal losses. Racism still exists in society and in the subsequent social systems such as health care, justice, education, and child welfare. Despite the structure and barriers that have created distrust and inequity, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people have survived many forms of genocide—past and present. Our strength, resilience, and hope come from our kinship circles.

On my personal journey of Indigenous education, I have been fortunate to have had opportunities to learn from Cree, Métis, and Anishinaabe Elders and Knowledge Keepers in many circles. These ceremonialists and guides have been generous role models and friends. They enlarge the circle in all that they do and create safety for people to share the important teachings that they have spent their lives learning, protecting, and honouring. These are educators of the highest degree.

It is no wonder that colonizers sought to obliterate Indigenous cultural and community ties. When your worldview holds you responsible for and in relation to all things, your connection to other beings and people—inclusive of your ancestors and the generations to come—is like a superpower. You are never alone. You are also less likely to view relations as resources, free for the taking (Cajete 1994; Wall Kimmerer 2013).

Put differently, a **kinship worldview** (Wahinkpe Topa and Narvaez 2022) requires us to move from thinking that we are discrete beings separate from the natural world to being held in a web of relationships (Little Bear 2002, 79; Hart 2002, 34). We move from being alone and isolated to being deeply connected in relation to all things and places. Relational responsibilities go both ways; gifts and respect travel in both directions to and from our plant relatives, animal relatives, the land, the water, and the Cosmos.

I appreciate the creation story I used to read in my Montessori class, about the big bang and the universe, the earth, and eventually all things being born out of star dust. It has a beautiful synergy to the notion that our ancestors live among the stars; and in our passing, we also return to the stars as an ever-present part of the universe.

If you think about the tiny imperceptible threads that extend out from us to the more-than-human world, you feel the boundaries of self blur and stretch. You feel connections to trees, leaves, soil, and moving water, and the pheasants on

the path – two male, one female – as they strut hurriedly back into the safety of the underbrush out of an evolutionary abundance of caution. Some threads may be thicker as the relational bonds feel stronger, some are whisps almost subconscious in the attachment and others feel like ropes that pull at your attention to them, depending on your relationships. Land defenders know and feel these bonds greater than anyone. The call to stand up for our water and land relatives in the face of violence. For those who do not see or feel those bonds or responsibilities, there is little understanding or empathy. Why *stand* in the way of progress?

If the threads were visible to the human eye, we could see each other in our various degrees of connection to the world. There would be those with the fewest threads walking around with the most impoverished spirits, living precariously amongst us. Others would have so many threads of relationships radiating from their bodies that it would become impossible to see the boundaries of where their skin parses their bodies from the world beyond them – the defined outline of their being blurred and the separation of themselves from the world is indistinguishable and non-existent. All the boundaries are as absolute or arbitrary as we imagine them to be.

In the moments that the connections feel most tangible, on the land, in the places I have the strongest ties and relationships, I feel the strongest, healthiest, and happiest, too. My spirit, mind, and body are nourished. I am at peace. I am inspired. I am at home.

Many people have experienced the thrill of travelling. Exploring and discovering new places. Right now, I have friends traveling in Marrakesh. They are constantly posting beautiful pictures of their experiences in the areas they are visiting. It is exciting and creates a rush for the senses, so many new things to see and take in. It can feel overwhelming and even exhausting. The relationship to place does not exist in the ways it does at home. When you are in a new place, you are meeting everything and everyone there for the first time: the air, the sounds, the sensations. The materials that make up the roads, pathways, and architecture. The land that rises from beneath your feet to greet you, anew. The plant-life that you see and breathe to share the air with is unfamiliar and unknown unless you take the time to learn who they are and what they need to live in this foreign habitat. This ecosystem where you are the guest. In these distant places you don't have familiarity and relational

knowledge that is pre-existing, established, and reciprocal. There can be a sense of danger in so much unknown.

Returning home after travel can be nourishing to your spirit in a different way. The comfort of a familiar tree in your surroundings. Winged friends that you anticipate being there. Evidence of others who co-exist in the spaces. For me, the distant sounds of river and even the highway are familiar and comforting. Seeing the distinct cuts made by beaver teeth that cause the low growing bushes to propagate additional branches in spring, that make me question the sweetness of the bark and tender growth. Is this plant a treat or a staple? Does the plant appreciate the careful pruning that instigates new cycles of growth? The beaver never overharvests; she just takes a little and moves on to the next. What lessons can be learned from observing these relationships in the places we inhabit? I know where to look in hopes of seeing a porcupine in a tree. I watch for the return of the swans that shelter safely on the far side of the frozen wetland. I know where the eagles tend to perch in the distant trees downriver. I recognize the familiar tracks of deer and jack rabbits. I linger to investigate when the paw prints are unfamiliar. Yesterday, they may have been raccoon marks near the back gate, longer claws than those of a dog, digits splayed more similarly to a human hand. *All Our Relations*.

How do we nurture our bonds and relationships with the more-than-human world (Abram 1996)? How do we propagate new growth that will be reciprocal and mutually sustaining? I believe that place-based learning and relationships are what feed our souls and strengthen our spirits. This was not a realization that I came to overnight or with some sort of romanticized notion of learning on the land. I need to give credit to Elder Bob Cardinal of the Maskekosihk Enoch Cree Nation and Papachase scholar Dr. Dwayne Donald, and co-instructor Dr. Christine Stewart for offering the "Four Directions Teachings" course (University of Alberta 2016). At the time of being given the place-based assignment, I was skeptical of what it could mean for me. I relied on my love of photography and reflected on my relationship with the Highwood River after the 2013 Alberta Floods (Markides 2018; Markides and Markides 2020; Markides 2020a). I never imagined that would just be the beginning.

In relation to the more-than-human world, it is slow learning: relational, selfish and selfless, time spent in place. I did not know I would take the basis for that learning and

carry it forward in a new place after we had moved back to the city last year, but I have. I walk out of my house, north through the neighbourhood, then east towards the river, south between the Bow and the other wetland habitats, and west along the golf course road until I reach our back gate. I am in a new role, an Assistant Professor, and ceremony is a regular part of my work and personal life.

Cree scholar, Dr. Michael Hart, holds sweat lodges that create community for all who attend. I have brought my husband and my boys. My dad might also join us when his heart is feeling up for it. Anishinaabe ceremonialist Toni McCune has also become a dear friend and mentor. She has led pipe ceremonies with many of the educators and social workers I teach and in-service teacher professional learning as well. The Elders associated with the University of Calgary –Piikani Elders Reg and Rose Crowshoe, Siksika Elder Clarence Wolfleg, and Cree Métis Elder Kerrie Moore – offer prayers and lead ceremonies as part of so many campus-related events.

I am an infant in my learning from these and other Knowledge Keepers. I am surrounded by Métis and First Nations leaders in my work in the fields of education and social work. I am humbled to have these opportunities and to have this be my life. As my friend and colleague, Dr. Jennifer MacDonald, and I have often commented one of the most daunting aspects of Indigenous education is that the more you are in this learning, the more you are aware of how little you actually know (Macdonald and Markides 2018; Macdonald and Markides 2019). Depending on where people are in their journey, the reactions to my suggestions here will range widely and wildly.

As Four Arrows suggests in the Worldview Chart (Wahinkpe Topa 2020; Wahinkpe Topa and Narvaez 2022, 5-7), the differing manifestations should not be taken as ascribing to dichotomies of absolutes, but rather along continuums of varying degrees of affinities. What we can know, connect to, understand, or believe is context specific and in flux (Little Bear 2016, 2002). Unconsciously at first and serendipitously upon reflection, my place-study is ongoing. I am continually looking for and listening to my more-than-human relations. I seek out the bonds, and responsibilities as a thank you for the gifts these relatives bestow on me (Markides 2020b; Bouvier and Macdonald 2019; Wall Kimmerer 2013). Not everyone is ready for this way of thinking, others will have always thought this way.

Reclaiming and learning these relationships is purposeful, important work. I find myself asking, how do I become a good relative for the web of relations that sustains me? In my Métis circles? In learning from Métis and First Nations teachers and ceremonialists? And in relation to the places I inhabit and co-exist with the land, water, wind, and more-than-human relatives? Pursuing the answers to these questions is a lifelong commitment. I believe that shifting to a kinship worldview is likely the only way we will be able to prevent the complete destruction of the Earth. But selfishly, it is the only way to have millions of invisible strands of relations connecting you to all aspects of the world around you. As if made by spiders, the tensile lines are infinitely stronger than they appear. The connections create physical, social, emotional, mental, and spiritual strength beyond material possessions, relationships are all that we really have in life. Becoming a good relative requires trust in the world that is outside of our control, and passion to advocate selflessly for the more-than-human beings. The place-based relationships are ever evolving, responsibilities and gifts, that we will never be isolated or alone. Interconnected and in community. Loved, valued, and accountable to being a good relative.

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