

MÉTIS SELF AND IDENTITY:
THE SEARCH TO CONTRIBUTE A VERSE

By

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ABSTRACT

This project narrates a personal journey in search of Métis identity and sense of self. It examines themes, patterns and dualities relating to Métis identity and hybridity. The Métis experience is situated in the past and the present through exploration of the Métis history of marginalization, loss and exclusion. Utilizing autoethnography, the writer narrates a personal search for identity, intermingled with the empowering stories and shared experiences of three Métis authors: Maria Campbell, Gregory Scofield and Marilyn Dumont. The project presents an approach to autoethnography, which weaves life and art and creates space for dialogue and engagement.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my family and to Guy and Richard who encouraged me to unleash my creative voice and contribute a verse to the story of Métis identity.

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My Cheechum used to tell me that when the government gives you something, they take all that you have in return – your pride, your dignity, all the things that make you a living soul. When they are sure they have everything, they give you a blanket to cover your shame.

Maria Campbell, *Halfbreed* (59)

God knows Mary tried
To keep us clean and fed, respectable but
All the bleach and soup bones
In the Red and White couldn't keep our
Halfbreed hides from showing through

Marilyn Dumont, *A Really Good Brown Girl*, (17)

An old woman was soothing me in Cree. I
Cried in her lap she kept singing singing
An old man gave me four eagle feathers four
Songs four stories then painted my face
Divided in two

Gregory Scofield, *Thunder Through My Veins:
Memories of a Métis Childhood* (105)

Introduction:

The idea of writing this story has been in my head for several years. This paper is a narrative of my journey to understand my childhood and the profound sense of loss I felt as I grew up outside my birth family. Intermingled with my personal story are excerpts from the works of three Métis writers, who tell their lives and struggles in creative and courageous ways. This project is the culmination of my inquiry into my sense of self and my personal relationship with my Métis heritage – a cultural background that I was not aware of until I was well into adulthood. I record my process of inquiry and the search for responses to my questions about identity that have swirled around me since childhood. Throughout

this process, I have struggled with what to tell and what to leave out. I juggled and balanced memory and history in an effort to create a narrative reflective of my experiences. Milestones in my journey are marked with excerpts from my personal writing, created while I searched and questioned issues of loss and difference over a period of several years. I was not certain if I would ever be ready to tell this story. I have not been ready until now.

The writing of intimate details of my life has created significant challenges for me as a graduate student seeking to create work with academic merit. I struggled with finding a balance between what I wanted to write and creation of work that might be acceptable based on traditional and I initially assumed, more valid, scientific approaches. I considered the question of what constitutes knowledge and how I might interpret my search for meaning and make it worthy from an academic point of view. Initially, I thought I would focus on the autobiographical writings of other marginalized women to understand issues of power, culture and identity. Then, I moved to contemplating a study of the loss of childhood, narrated by writers who have told stories of cultural and personal loss. I kept returning to my own story and my compelling need to tell it.

As I have turned to writing during especially difficult periods in my life, I wanted to engage in exploration of writing and storytelling as a healing art. I believed my relationship with writing was not unique. Writing has always helped me think through life's big challenges. Poetry has been my vehicle to express deep emotions that I could not otherwise safely share. As I read the works of the three authors I have included in this project, I was struck by the similarities of our

experiences. What touched me most were the inner dialogues, reflecting emotions I have experienced as I struggled to come to grips with my cultural background and make sense of my life. And finally, as I read the works of other Métis authors, I understood I was not alone.

My graduate course work introduced me to a range of qualitative research methods and many forms of knowledge and of knowing. Over the course of my graduate program, I came to understand there were many ways of acquiring and sharing knowledge. The story of my inquiry into my Métis self became a legitimate project for me, primarily because it reflected my growth as a researcher and the empowering character of the personal story. I understood the value of my experiences as a source of knowledge. Armed with this belief and my newly found voice, I embarked on this journey - a narrative of my own inquiry into issues of Métis self and identity.

Throughout this project, I searched for meaning and understanding in Métis history, especially issues relating to the influences of two powerful cultures. I explored the marginalization of the Métis, especially women and children and explored political and social policy decisions that changed the lives of generations of Métis people, including my own family. I wanted to understand the unique characteristics of Métis identity and in the process, open a space to find my own.

Canadian literature and poetry resonates with a distinctive identity that links to Métis history and identity. In his book, "A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada", John Ralston Saul defines Canada as "a Métis civilization". Saul argues that Aboriginal thought and Aboriginal values of egalitarianism heavily influence Canada.

A mixing of cultures is Canada's strongest asset, yet it is not one that most Canadians recognize. Saul calls this our "inability to normalize – that is, to internalize consciously – the First Nations as the senior founding pillar of our civilization." (21) As a writer, I discovered a place that brought me closer to home and closer to the sense of identity I was searching for – the work of other Métis writers.

This paper progresses in a parallel fashion with my search for identity. I start with a description of disconnection from my adopted family that prompted me to seek out information on my birth family. Once I make contact with my birth mother, I am overwhelmed with the knowledge that she may be a mixed race person and potentially Metis. I am compelled to find evidence to confirm my cultural heritage. I explore legal and historical definitions of Métis and conduct genealogical research to affirm my inclusion in this group. I am disappointed as it is not easy to prove Métis origins when one is adopted and records are limited. I move backward in time and discuss clues in my childhood that pointed me in the direction to my family of origin. I read through old journals, stories and poems to recall the emotional experiences of disconnection from my family. As a means to understand my history and the collective Métis experience, I explore the public policy environment for Métis children and families. I research the impacts of government policies that removed children from their parents and placed them for adoption outside their families. I conclude with a sense of satisfaction that I have recorded this experience. I have confirmed my Métis identity, but there is another significant and more radical outcome for me, one that moves my project beyond words on paper. I have opened up my life to others who are seeking to understand issues of

Métis identity through creative approaches. Limitless opportunities for action and change present themselves. I no longer straddle the fence.

Beginnings:

I am adopted, living in a family where my cousins look more like my adopted parents than I do. In my present life, very few people outside my immediate family know this. One of my first memories relates to freckles, those clusters of genetic melanin make more predominant by exposure to the sun. None of the other children in my adopted family had freckles. In the summer, I was encouraged to cover up and stay out of the sun, as my skin got very dark when these freckles blended together. My adopted father was first generation Russian Mennonite. My adopted mother was second generation British-Canadian. I felt a disconnection throughout my childhood – disconnected from my adopted family, my birth family and my community – a French-Canadian village in southern Manitoba.

I carried a Mennonite surname, but most of the adults in my community who knew my parents, were aware I was not their child by birth. When I was eight years old my mother told me a story about my background, based on what the adoption agency had told her. I learned that my birth father was Swedish, a musician and minor hockey player. Very little information was provided on my birth mother and when I asked, I was informed she was “probably French” and very young when I was born. I grew up in a French-Canadian community and there were tensions between the Mennonite families and the French-Canadian families, many of whom were descendants of the original Métis settlers in the community. In my community you

identified as French or Mennonite or British. As I grew older, I had mixed feelings about attaching myself to my birth mother's purported French-Canadian heritage. This action would require that I reveal I was adopted and this was difficult for me, as I felt a sense of shame and confusion about my origins. In spite of my adopted parents efforts to assimilate me within the Mennonite wing of the family, I felt I was an imposter and eventually began a search for my birth family.

After the death of my adopted mother, I registered with the Manitoba Adoption Registry. I had legally changed my name and shed the questions about my Mennonite background. Two years passed before I received a letter from my mother, vetted through the Adoption Registry. We corresponded over several months and then she sent me a photo of herself. My heart sank with fear and disappointment. She had classic Native American features – dark skin, dark eyes, high cheekbones. I had found my mother, but had no better sense of who I was.

Autoethnography: Defined and Applied

This project narrates my journey to discover my Métis identity. So much of what I want to say lives in my poems, journals, short stories and letters. I explored a variety of approaches, as I was initially concerned about the scientific validity of engaging in a study focused almost entirely on my own experiences. An approach grounded in some aspects of ethnography, or a focus on the stories of others, seemed appropriate for a final project at the conclusion of an interdisciplinary program that merges the theories from a range of disciplines. Yet this approach did not tell my story. I wished to explore Métis experience through the eyes of other

Métis writers, while reflecting on my personal experiences as an adopted child, whose issues of identity have challenged me, as far back as I have memory.

While there are various definitions and the genre is especially fuzzy, autoethnography usually involves observation of the lives of others, while actively engaging in the process. In some circles, it is considered an emerging qualitative research method (Wall, 2006) but generally, it is considered blurred and subject to a variety of labels and interpretations. An autoethnography may begin with a personal story and the researcher connects the story to a larger social context. Spry terms autoethnography, “a self –narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts.” (Spry, 2001,710) Beyond this generic definition, theorists disagree on the elements of autoethnography. For example, McIlveen presents autoethnography as “a reflexive means by which the researcher-practitioner consciously embeds himself or herself amidst theory and practice, and by way of intimate autobiographic account, explicates a phenomenon under investigation or intervention. (McIlveen, 1) I investigate the loss of childhood and the resulting struggle to define my identity and give meaning to my experience. I narrate my stories with my own writing and the works of other Métis authors who have transformed their experiences and used their stories to promote social change. Bruner suggests that writers become the autobiographical narratives they tell about. (Bruner, 2004, 694) I initially had some discomfort focusing on my life and intended to draw on examples of the search for self from the writings of Métis authors. As I analyzed their stories, I found many instances where our stories and lives converged with similar examples and themes. Therefore, I have chosen to

include their stories along with my own, as a means of inquiry and validation of my experiences which in some instances, parallel those of the writers.

Autoethnographies “are highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding.” (Sparks, 21) I provide examples of experiences from my life and from the writings of Métis authors that illustrate the challenges Métis face or have faced as they attempt to straddle two cultures. In Stacy Holman Jones, *Autoethnography: Making the Personal Political*, the author suggests a more radical and politically charged definition. Holman Jones sees autoethnography as

Setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections among life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation...and then letting go, hoping for researchers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives. (208)

Examples of my personal writing are interspersed with other Métis writers throughout this paper to tell my story. I used this approach not to compare my writing with the work of published authors, but to track my journey of self-discovery through what I believe to be similar stages and phases of identity fragmentation. My project is an autoethnography in the sense that it is a qualitative approach, which include personal experiences as a means to explain and understand social and cultural issues of a group I have a connection to. My approach includes the following elements: it is personal, it involves a story of conflict or crisis, it weaves life and art, it has the potential to create space and dialogue and finally, it changes the writer who comes out to the audience as a result of the autoethnobiographic process. It may appear that autoethnography is more of a

philosophy that a well-defined method (Wall, 2006) but this offers flexibility to researchers who wish to be creative. The approach I have defined opens the door for me to tell my story in a way that is meaningful to me, as a Métis woman seeking a space of dialogue and understanding between two cultures.

This concept of the search for space between two cultures is reflected in the works of Métis writer Gregory Scofield. He expresses his place of insecurity, this “no man’s land” situated somewhere between the Cree world and the white:

I am not without history Halfbreed labour built
This country defending my blood has become
A life-long occupation

White people have their own ideas
How a real Indian should look
In the city or on the screen
(Gathering 81)

Like Scofield, I am light skinned but my cheekbones hint of my Métis origins. My ethnicity is Cree-Ojibwa, Irish and French. While this project includes portions of my story, I cannot claim the socio-economic suffering so poignantly described in the works of Maria Campbell and Gregory Scofield. My pain was less overt. In a letter to my adult daughter, entitled, “My Life or Why We Are Strong Women” I began what evolved into a series of five stories about my life.

I was adopted when I was six weeks old. I lived in a hospital right after my birth and for the first six weeks of my life, which seems like a long time. My birth mother Joan did not ever see me or hold me. With all the bonding that is supposed to happen during the first few weeks of birth, I don’t know if the nurses held me or cuddled me, before I was adopted. I like to think they did.

(Radke , 2005)

Many Métis children who were adopted by European-Canadians grew up without contact with their families of origin and their culture. Like Gregory Scofield, many lived lives filled with secrets while their cultural roots were hidden from them. In my case, I believe the secrets were kept in an effort to shelter me from racism and exclusion. I was told I was Swedish because the Children's Aid Society gave misinformation to my adopted parents. So, I became a Swedish-Canadian child with freckled skin, and brown eyes raised by a Mennonite father and British mother in the southern Manitoba Métis community of St. Francois-Xavier.

An excerpt from a poem I wrote for an Athabasca University Masters level course, "Writing the Self: The Experience and Potential of Writing for the Purpose of Personal Development" reflects my desire to connect and fit in with my adopted family:

I once had an abundance of parents
Crowds of siblings
Cousins with red hair
And a pair of aunts who hinted of secrets
My mother would not share
Always the other child
Not the right child
I craved a place where you see me
And my brown eyes
Here my soft voice
Shout in the wind
Dance with me
Mother me

(Radke, 2007)

It was only after meeting other Métis people, hearing their stories, and researching my genealogy, did I gain the courage to research and acknowledge my ancestry and embark on a journey to understand what my mixed race heritage

meant to me. This study has served as a method to record and frame my personal journey along with the affirmations I have received from the writings of three Métis authors. It is one more step on the path to find my Métis “self”.

Defining Métis:

Finding one’s Métis roots is not an easy task in Canada if you are adopted. Legal documents confirming parentage and area of origin are not readily available to adopted persons. Native identity in Canada is organized in a complex system of categorizations determined by government, and more recently by First Nations and Métis people themselves. Aboriginal peoples are constitutionally recognized as being Inuit, Métis and First Nations (or Indian) people. Under the Constitution Act of Canada, Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Aboriginals are defined as “Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada.” Métis are not white persons with some Indian blood, or Indian persons with some white blood. They are a distinctive people whose experiences are unique within Canada’s multi-ethnic history. The Indian Act of 1876 (the basic features of the Act remained intact from 1876 to 1985) was created without consultation with Aboriginal populations and failed to recognize the diversity of Aboriginal populations in Canada. The Act rested on the principle that Aboriginal people needed protection until they could be fully assimilated into “white” society. It was a paternalistic act that infantilized Aboriginal people, and applied race-based social policies with the assumption that Aboriginal people were incapable of governing themselves. Indian identity was controlled by Parliament and Indian Agents enforced the definition of Indian, under the Act in communities.

Gender discrimination is written into the Act. Until 1985, Indian women who married non-Indian men lost their status. On the other hand, Indian men who married non-Indian women transferred their status to their wives and to their children. Many of the women who lost status and their children were absorbed into Métis communities and eventually identified as Métis, as did their offspring. Indian women who married non-Indians lost their status, along with rights to live on reserves and federally funded health benefits. The Act, however, gave status to white women who married Indians, whereby “European women who married Native men were considered to have stepped outside the social boundaries of whiteness. They became, officially, status Indians.” (Lawrence, 9)

While governments did not tamper with some mixed blood communities, others experienced significant political intervention. Racial labels were applied, based on levels of Indian blood:

It is, however, important to note that Métis identity, historically, has in some basis been far more than a matter of government classification. Some mixed-blood communities, particularly those that developed in the Great lakes regions and at Red River, have been extremely culturally distinct and have had different collective histories from Indian bands; they have also asserted their goals and needs as such. Nevertheless, in many instances, the differences between “Indians” and “half-breeds” have been far less distinct, and divisions between them have been created quite arbitrarily by government classification and regulation of Native identity.” (Lawrence, 10)

What constitutes Métis identity in Canada is under considerable debate, both inside Métis communities and elsewhere. Frits Pannekoek suggests the debate over Métis rights, especially relating to land rights, centers around who is Métis. The term “Métis” reflects a mixing of two races and two or more cultures. Initially, the term

was narrowed to define the ancestry of children born from the marriages of First Nations women and European men. Later, being Métis meant your family came from the French-Canadian and Cree-Ojibwa descendants of Red River Valley settlers. (Pannekoek, 112) Provincial Métis Associations have had varying definitions, especially outside the prairie provinces where ancestral links to the Red River Valley appear to be less important. The Métis National Council defines Métis as “a person who self-identifies as Métis, is of historic Métis Nation Ancestry, is distinct from other Aboriginal Peoples and is accepted by the Métis Nation.” (Métis National Council website). Registry and membership with the Métis Nation of Alberta is based on a similar definition, but requires historical proof, or evidence of an ancestor who received a land grant or scrip under either the Dominion Lands Act or the Manitoba Act. The historic Métis homeland is considered to be west central North America, which was the traditional land of the Métis.

As I searched to confirm my Métis heritage and find my people, I encountered numerous challenges with the definition of Métis and how I would prove my heritage, in order to gain acceptance by the Métis community. I had a copy of my adoption certificate and I was able to research my birth family name. Eventually, as information came forward from various genealogical sources, I found other relatives and was able to trace my family to the St. Francois-Xavier area of the Red River Valley and to Flin Flon, Manitoba. I was astounded to learn parts of my family originated from the community I grew up in with my adopted family. Armed with this information, I began to piece together the story of my Métis family. I encountered diverse and sometimes conflicting definitions of who can call

themselves Métis in Canada. I could not necessarily be considered a “legal” Métis, or a person who would be accepted as Métis in the province I lived in, as there were some gaps, due to adoptions, in the types of documentation I could produce on my birth family. While adoptions were a common practice in Aboriginal cultures, I was seriously disadvantaged once I learned that I might need birth documents from both grandparents in order to provide proof of my family background. I learned I would have no problem being accepted as Métis in one western province, but it was not clear whether I could call myself a Manitoba Métis until I could prove my family connection to the Red River Valley. As issues of land rights are not the focus of this study and Métis identity is the primary consideration, the definition I consider the most inclusive, is the one used by Métis Community Services in Vancouver, the Ministry of Children and Families, British Columbia, and various Aboriginal Child and Family Services organizations. It is also the definition of Métis used by Statistics Canada:

A person of mixed North American Indian and European ancestry, who identifies as Metis. (We also accept people who may use other words to indicate their identity, such as, "bois brulez", "Michif", "half-breed", "mixed-blood", etc.)"

(Métis Community Services website)

As I proceeded, I realized that being accepted as Métis in a political or legal sense did not matter to me. What was important was a sense of recognition within myself that I came from Métis people. My goal shifted to understanding what being Métis meant to me. This realization led me to discourses around hybridity and métissage.

Métis Hybridity:

Initially used as a biological term, hybridity or métissage in French has emerged in cultural theory to reflect a range of cultural phenomena, involving the merging of two or more cultures. In post-colonial theory it is associated with issues relating to cultural imperialism. In literature and the writings of postcolonial theorists, it focuses on the impacts of mixture on identity and culture. Campbell, Dumont and Scofield seek those places Homi Bhabha refers to as “in between spaces [that] promote the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.” (Location, 2)

Hybridity usually refers to “the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zones produced by colonization” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 1998:20). In “Signs Taken for Wonders”, Homi Bhabha formulates a concept of hybridity and posits; “the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its presence as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference.” (107)

Conflict is necessary in order to create a new hybrid space, which can only be defined by those who have participated in the creation of this relationship. It is not the merging of cultures that creates Métis hybridity or Métis identity. All races could be considered hybrid races. Hybridity is reflected in a longing for a third space, between cultures which “offer an escape from Cartesian duality and polarized thinking, from being stuck between being a White person with some Indian blood or

a Native person with some ancestors” (Anderson, 66) Bhabha sees this as the third place where

unity is not found in the sum of its parts, but emerges from the process of opening a third space within which other elements encounter and transform each other. It is not the combination accumulation, fusion or synthesis, but an energy field of different forces (Bhabha, 1998, 208)

This holistic space between the Indian and white world is reflected in the writings of Campbell, Scofield and Dumont. It is a not a static place, as the Métis will evolve and change, as all cultures do. It is place where personal Métis stories can be created and identity can be expressed. As suggested by Bhabha, it is a place where “the application of third space thinking...quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force...” (Bhabha 1998, 208)

Métis Children and Identity:

While from some perspectives, my childhood was stable and comfortable; I did not experience a sense of connection to my family – an important criteria for a healthy childhood. I have spent the last twenty years of my life working in child public health, consulting on programs that provide children, including Métis children, with a healthy start in life. As many Canadians do, I believe the future of any society rests with the health of its children. Unfortunately, children are not recognized as cultural beings nor are they consulted on decisions that affect them directly as members of Canadian society. As is the case for Métis people, a realistic representation of children is not present in our history texts. The exclusion of childhood as a cultural phenomenon parallels the treatment of all Aboriginal people,

including the Métis, in Canada. Carole Henderson Carpenter, in her Ninth Annual Robarts Lecture states:

Childhood is effectively a metonym for the overall oppression of Native People, for it as children that they have been most marginalized, silenced and robbed of their cultural selves by Canadian culture either through omission or relentless commission. Prevailing paternalist thought and policies essentially transformed all indigenous people into voiceless children and by so doing, purposefully dismissed them. (4)

A loss of cultural identity was not considered a serious issue, as the colonization practices that the Canadian government adhered to, did not place the needs of children as the paramount concern. Almost no documentation exists on the lives of Métis children before the twentieth century. There is general acceptance that colonization had a detrimental effect on health, ranging from exposure to new diseases to changes in diet from healthy traditional foods to less healthy European diet. A significant setback for Métis children was the introduction of residential schools in 1849. The system was created on the premise that language, cultural and religious assimilation would improve the lives of all Aboriginal peoples, including Métis. (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada) By 1920, it had become mandatory for every Aboriginal child to attend school and by 1931; there were 80 schools in operation across Canada. The last of these schools closed in 1996, which coincided with the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples report calling for a public inquiry into the treatment of children in the residential school system. (Assembly of First Nations Longitudinal Health Survey)

Living in conditions of abject poverty, many Métis children were apprehended by child welfare authorities, citing poverty as a concern for the welfare of the child. Child welfare assessments conducted by Children's Aid Societies on Métis families may have stated that the house was messy and there was no food in the cupboards, therefore, the child must be neglected. Rather than addressing the root causes and intergenerational issues, which contributed to the poor parenting skills of Métis parents, child welfare officials removed thousands of children from their homes and communities. My birth mother was one of these children. She was removed from her Cree-Ojibwa birth family in northern Manitoba at a young age and placed for adoption. Her French-Canadian adopted family went to great efforts to ensure she was considered French by the community, in spite of her dark skin. To some extent, she was able to pass as white or was treated like a white person and because her adopted father was the foreman at the mine and had a position of authority in the community. She grew up seeing the poverty of Métis families living along the road allowance. She saw the living conditions on the local reserves. She was never interested in finding her birth family.

As I searched for my birth family and historical records, I kept a journal and recorded my emotional experiences in the form of poems. My search for identity was validated when I came into contact with elders and empowered Aboriginal women. I believed I could continue. When I saw the faces of homeless Indian men on the streets of Winnipeg, I was fearful of what I might find when I found my family. Mostly, I did not want the negative Aboriginal stereotypes to land on me and take over my comfortable life. My skin colour offered me choices. I could resist the

call of my heritage and continue to live as a white person. Or, like Marilyn Dumont, I would be very good at being Métis. "I would become the Indian princess, not the squaw dragging her soul after laundry, meals, needy kids and abusive husbands. These were my choices." (A Really Good Brown Girl, p. 19) I wanted to be Métis, but like Marilyn Dumont, I wanted to be a good Métis. I wanted to be Métis, but I didn't want people to see me differently or worse, reject me. For a period of time I gave up my search. After the birth of my daughter, I questioned whether I would continue:

She is my *daughter*
That precious word
Most cherished child

Who is *my* father?
Doesn't matter

She has our smile
And *her* father's eyes
She will know him
See her face in his
And mine
Sweet baby in his arms

(Radke, 1982)

One of the greatest tragedies affecting Métis children was the taking of children from their homes by governments. This policy affected me directly as both my mother and my grandmother experienced the lasting impacts of child welfare interventions. My mother was taken from my grandmother and placed for adoption as an infant. I was taken from my mother and placed for adoption when I was six weeks old. There were reasons for these decisions, but none reflected on the desires

of the mother. The reasons were based on race, income and the prevailing belief at the time that a light skinned Métis child would always be better off adopted by white family. Child welfare records from the 1950's and 1960's indicated that the children of poor Métis women as well as single Métis women were vulnerable to child welfare practices that included efforts to place the children for adoption with non-Métis families. This practice continues. The World Health Organization report segment, "Is Canada Failing Métis Children?" Barkwell and colleagues (1989) conclude that many Métis children continue to be taken into the child welfare system for economic reasons

"for no other reason than the real life Métis situation of living in poverty and overcrowded conditions. In effect Métis children are frequently being alienated from their families, their communities and their culture for economic reasons. Such children often are condemned to a succession of foster homes, thus creating a terrible instability in their lives, which defeats the reasons for taking them into care in the first instance: (1989:34).

While quantitative data may not be available, Métis writers, including Campbell speak to issues of depression, drug and alcohol use, emotional and physical abuse and family break up. Without the experience of nurturance and attachment to healthy loving parents, Métis who were born in the 1930's and onwards, did not have a sense of security. Families had become destructive places where children could not grow or thrive to their optimum. Concepts of the "other" are an especially poignant theme for children. Inclusion is a basic human need and children especially need to be nurtured and attached to parents or caregivers in order to thrive. First colonization, then residential schools and then child welfare

“scoops” of Aboriginal children resulted in generations of Métis children losing the opportunity to know their culture and its traditions.

Reports such as the Kimelman Report (also known as Kimelman, Edwin, C. et al. *No Quiet Place: Report of the Review Committee on Indian and Métis Adoptions and Placements*. Winnipeg: Department of Community Services, 1985) suggest that the practice of removing Aboriginal children from their cultural homes meets the United Nations criteria for genocide, as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. That these policies were directed at children – the most vulnerable of all groups, considered as gifts from the Creator in many Aboriginal cultures, is a huge injustice to Canada. These practices, coupled with the impacts of the residential school system, oppression, loss of culture, loss of language and forced living conditions in poverty has resulted in great damage to Métis children and their families. This is part of my story, my mother’s story and her mother’s story. This sense of disconnection is reflected in many of the stories and poems of the Métis author’s I have included in this paper.

Three Writers and Their Stories:

Comparative studies of the works of Métis authors provide insight into the history of political decisions in our country, especially social policy actions on behalf of children, our most vulnerable citizens. Children had few rights in Canada in the early part of the twentieth century. The Métis, young and old, were squeezed out of the European/First Nations binary and were perceived as even less than Indian in the eyes of many, including the Indians. Métis children were permanently

disconnected from their families and communities as social policies aimed at protecting them caused significant and at times, lasting harm. A study conducted on behalf of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation in 2003, revealed the efforts of residential and industrial schools to assimilate children:

For many Survivors, the first trauma they endured was the sudden separation from their parents and family. Leaving behind the familiar world in which they had been raised, children suddenly found themselves far from home, confronting a new culture, language and role expectations without any support whatsoever. Furthermore, the deliberate policy of establishing industrial schools far from the home communities of students only served to reinforce their isolation, as did the active discouragement by school officials of contact between children and their parents. (30)

After the children were disconnected from their families, they were denied any contact with their culture, language and value systems. Children experienced a range of adverse health concerns, such as tuberculosis, due to crowded living conditions. Children spent significant amounts of time working in residential schools and limited time on actual academic training. It is noted, “many Survivors reported symptoms reminiscent of post-traumatic stress disorder, including nightmares, sleep problems, blackouts, apathy and depression.” (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 32. The Foundation publications capitalize the word “Survivor” throughout, to honor those who were affected) Overall, many survivors “feel they were robbed of their childhood.” (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 31) and did not feel prepared to parent their own children, as they were not exposed to healthy role models or traditional child-centered child rearing practices, which would equip them.

In this paper, I focus on three Métis writers: Maria Campbell, Marilyn Dumont and Gregory Scofield. All three writers express the challenges of being a mixed-race person. Each provides a distinctly Métis perspective, which differs from the point of view of First Nations and white writers. Two of the authors are women and one is a gay male, who expresses a different and perhaps more excluded depiction of his childhood experiences as he struggled with his cultural and sexual identity in tandem. Gregory Scofield's passionate poetry, Campbell's seminal memoir and Dumont's ironical poems are key examples of Métis discourse. These writers have pulled from their life experiences and the surrounding culture to create a body of work that weaves together historical experiences and the current reality, to form the Métis story. I have included Scofield as his work adds another layer of diversity to the discourse on Métis hybridity. Scofield writes as a "two spirited person" who struggles with both his sexual and cultural identity:

And where did we start?

Was it the summer

Of my seven year molting

The day I thought

Another man's body beautiful?

(Love, 57)

These writers are in the spaces between two cultures and can move back and forth in either, but belong in neither. They rest in the space in between, the third space, which is Métis.

One of the texts I draw upon for this paper is Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*. Campbell speaks for Métis women and writes to "tell you what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country. I want to tell you about the joys and sorrows, the oppressing poverty, the frustrations and the dreams." (*Halfbreed*, 2) I choose this text for several reasons. The book was given to me as a gift long before I started my efforts to find my birth mother. It has always resonated with me for its honesty and strength. The gift was serendipitous as the person who gave it was unaware of my background, but she had read one of my poems, written many years earlier and knew I had grown up in a French Canadian and Métis community. Perhaps she suspected I was Métis, although we never spoke of it. The poem tells a story of my encounter with a Métis boy, who had promised to teach me how to drive a car. The boy spoke English, French, Cree and Michif – a language I did not know existed until then.

You are bad my Half breed boy
Those dark eyes
Like the river at night
My hear beats faster
Our first kiss
Beside your car
When you pulled my braids
And called me
Fille douce
Then, *nicimos*
So much for driving lessons

(Radke, undated)

I read *Halfbreed* a few years after it was published. I read it again in 1997 when I visited Maria Campbell and Batoche and again in 2009 as I started work on this project. As Campbell tells the story of her life, she describes the Road Allowance people, her people, who are segregated on the no-mans-land between European society and First Nations reserves. Campbell contrasts her life with the comfortable lives of the wealthier “white” children, who had food, clothing and many material comforts that she and her siblings were denied due to their impoverished circumstances. She speaks of her Michif language, different from her Cree neighbors and different from the English of the dominant culture. Like the Ledoux clan, whose cabin neighbored the farm that I grew up on outside St. Francois-Xavier, Manitoba, Campbell spoke a harmonious mixture of Cree and French. She transforms the racist word *Halfbreed* and reclaims it as a term that can instill a sense of pride in other Métis people. She described her Métis community in Northern Saskatchewan and her extended Cree family at the Sandy Lake reserve as she attempts to find a safe place in either world for herself and her siblings. While Maria Campbell was one of the first Métis women to write her story, other Métis writers followed with personal narratives of the impacts of racism, poverty, identity conflict and the impact of institutions such as church and government on the lives of Métis families. Campbell writes in an open and honest manner, while revealing deeply personal details of life, which resonate with honesty and tremendous pain. Her grandmother’s voice is her talisman and it is her grandmother who brings her home again and again. Her childhood resonates with a lack of home, lack of place, poverty

and rootlessness, along with a sense that her family could offer her no protection from her deep sense of disconnection and loneliness.

Campbell's description of the treatment of Métis children in the rural school system parallels an event I experienced as a young child. She describes how the teacher punished her younger brother for not washing his ears properly:

So she took him to the cloakroom and with a scrub brush – the kind you use on floors – started scrubbing his hands, neck and ears. We all sat still for a long time, waiting for her to finish. Soon I heard Robbie whimpering and became alarmed. He had always been a real toughie, and if he cried he was really hurt. I went into the cloakroom. She had him bent over the basin, his poor little neck was bleeding and so were his wrists. (Halfbreed, 88)

As a six-year-old child in a one-room school in rural Manitoba, I witnessed a teacher beat a Métis boy, Lornie, because he brought a bag of store bought cookies as the only lunch for himself and his brother and sisters. The family was impoverished and the boy used what little money he could earn doing odd jobs to buy food each day for himself and his younger siblings. The teacher had warned him that was not a proper lunch several times previously, culminating in a terrible scene where she lost control of herself and strapped the boy in front of other students. He and his siblings left school and never returned. The events of the day

marked my first memory of violence. I cannot say that I felt Lornie's shame and humiliation. I did not understand what this meant until I was much older. However, I learned what dignity meant, that Lornie had it and the teacher did not. I learned that humans are capable of inexplicable acts of cruelty. I learned that an adult could be terribly wrong. (Radke, Last Métis, 14)

Campbell's grandmother Cheechum is her guiding force who draws her back to her culture and instills a sense of pride in who she is, not who she might be if she was white. She takes pride in drawing distinctions between herself as a half-breed and treaty Indian women and says, "[t]reaty Indian women don't express their opinions, Halfbreed women do." (Halfbreed, 26) Campbell grows up in poverty and at times there was not enough food for herself and her siblings. She also hungered for the symbols of white Canadian society. "My childhood dreams [were] of toothbrushes and pretty dresses, oranges and apples, and a happy family sitting around the kitchen table talking about their tomorrow." (Halfbreed, 131) It is important to not apply a contemporary feminist lens to Campbell's work (or her personal aspirations as described in her memoir) as her way of life and need for survival is not a comparison that white culture can necessarily appreciate. Beverly Hungry Wolf clarifies the importance of women in Aboriginal society when she suggests that women's work and survival went hand in hand and "the work of the women was generally respected and honored, for men knew very well they could not live without them. (109-110) Campbell's grandmother, Cheechum was a descendant of Gabriel Dumont, a historic Métis leader. Cheechum encouraged her to wait for the man who has the strength to believe in the Métis cause, who lead he Métis out of despair to a better place.

Wait my girl. It will come. I've waited for ninety years and listened to many men. I have seen men quit...but we have to keep waiting and as each man stands unafraid we have to believe he is the one and encourage him. You'll feel discouraged...but, like me, you'll wait. (Halfbreed, 76-77)

Campbell uses the Michif language to subvert the authority of the dominating culture. She uses the Michif word “Cheechum” to describe her grandmother. Her use of Cree during her short stay in a residential school results in punishment. Throughout the text she uses Cree and Michif words to describe her experiences and her family. In the French-Canadian community where I grew up, the European families believed that the two Métis families who lived along the road allowance spoke “poor French” or “patois” among themselves. In reality the Métis were speaking Michif, a language I did not realize existed until I was well into my teens. The utility of speaking Michif had diminished by the early 1970’s as most Cree adults spoke English by then, as a result of their education in residential schools. Some of the elders still speak the language, but there has been little uptake by youth until recently, as a result of the influence of Métis leaders, federally funded Aboriginal language programs and a resurgence of interest in promoting Métis culture, especially in the western provinces. In my childhood community, however, Michif was considered a language for uneducated people. It was not English or French or Cree.

In her book “Stories of the Road Allowance People” Campbell provides examples of Métis storytelling traditions. She has translated the stories of the elders, but ensures that the reader is aware that the stories belong to the elders and only they can allow others to share their words. Campbell writes the stories in an English dialect, with the authentic accents and grammar of the Métis. Campbell did not believe that Standard English could capture the “voice” of the elders, their

unique characteristics or honor their experiences. The stories reflect a culture that has suffered the effects of poverty and exclusion:

He tell us he die
Dat old man
He was always dying an going to dah heaven
An when he come back
He gots a new song

(Stories, 56)

In conversations with a Métis elder in 2009, I learned that Métis women were encouraged to marry white men as there was a general point of view among the elders, especially the grandmothers, that young Métis women would be treated better by white men than the Métis men who had grown up in residential schools or in abusive families. Many Métis women became invisible as a result and their light skinned children, rarely identified with their Métis roots. I believe some of the grandmothers advised their grand daughters to marry white men, so the children would never be taken from them or subjected to the abuses of residential school. This fear and denial is very much a reflection of what it meant to be a Métis twenty or thirty years ago. The stories of this generation are not idealistic narratives of the free and unspoiled life before colonization, such as those told by Maria Campbell in the preamble to *Halfbreed*. These stories are grittier. They are in the later chapters of *Halfbreed*, where she describes her treatment by white society and white men. These stories reflect a loss of hope that is only regained when she starts to write her memoir.

Gregory Scofield's work is perhaps the strongest reflection of the implications of hybridity in a Métis child's life among the writers in this paper. His work, *Thunder Through My Veins* is autobiographical, a risky undertaking for a young writer barely in his thirties at the time of writing. His descriptions of his poverty, deprivation and detachment from his family are painful to read. Scofield grew up in an urban setting and had little contact with traditional Métis culture. His trauma-filled memoir is study of conflict about his origins and his place in the world. Scofield grew up without knowing his father, a situation that causes him considerable anguish and regret:

Looking back at them now, I can only guess what my life might have been like had she waited for him, had I tried to find him. And yet, over the years, he has become more fiction than fact. Sometimes I look at myself in the mirror and wonder if I look like him. And I wonder if he ever thinks about me or imagines that many presents I might have given him on that special day, a day I have never celebrated. (*Thunder Through My Veins*, 5)

As a youth, Scofield is separated from his mother and is placed in numerous foster homes and ends up on the streets of Vancouver. His disadvantages as a child, coupled with his search for identity and acceptance of his homosexuality makes his search for his Métis identity a huge challenge, especially since his family manages to keep the secret so well. Both his mother and step-father (who is part Métis) did not acknowledge their Aboriginal roots. Like my adopted family, they went to great lengths to avoid questions. In Scofield's case, they knew he was Métis and chose not to acknowledge it. As a youth, he does not feel he belonged anywhere and because he is light skinned, with light brown hair, he does not fit the physical stereotype of either Indian or Métis. Yet, he does not quite feel "white".

His epiphany about his identity comes when he visits Batoche, which he sees as place of healing. At Batoche, he immediately finds comfort in his hybridity and acknowledges he is not native, he is not white, he is Métis. (Thunder, p. 165-6)

Scofield's quest to be Cree was displaced with Métis pride:

The importance that I had once placed on being Cree – a true and pure Indian – seemed to disappear with the sinking sun. Suddenly the colour of my eyes, hair, and skin seemed to *belong* to me, perfectly matching the prairie landscape that held such a dignified history. Now I had new heroes – Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont, the half-breed soldiers who had given their lives for *our* homeland, freedom and independence. (Thunder, 166)

My process of self-discovery has been a lengthy one, but like Scofield, the experience of visiting Batoche had a profound affect on me. In 1997, I visited Maria Campbell at her home near Gabriel's Crossing, not far from Batoche, Saskatchewan. The visit was a social one as I accompanied a colleague who was a friend of Maria's on the way to a conference in northern Manitoba. I had recently re-read *Halfbreed* and hoped to ask Maria about her writing and her teaching. I had started writing poetry and short stories to record the emotional experiences of searching for my birth family and my cultural roots. Maria suggested I go to Batoche - a national historical site and a cultural gathering place for Métis people. I went, but did not expect anything that would help me find my family.

The Batoche grounds include a church, a school and a small cemetery containing the graves of Métis killed in battle. Many Métis consider it to be a sacred place. Batoche was the site of a battle, lead by Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont that symbolizes the resistance and the fight against the exclusion and marginalization of Métis people. When I arrived at Batoche, I walked around the grounds and stopped

in the small cemetery to look at the gravestones, searching for familiar Métis names. Near the fence, someone had built a small inukshuk, a pile of rocks shaped like a man with outstretched arms. With that image burned in my mind, I wrote this poem when I returned a few days later to my home in Calgary:

Ancient Voices

*The inukshuk stands
Among the bold flowers in my garden
Strong, flat stones
Facing north
One spoke of a prairie field
Bathed by ancient tides
Another, covered in velvet moss
Hinted of cool shade and rustling poplars
The pink-grey stone was the last to speak
It called from above the Angel Glacier
You and the Land were made for each other
Are parts of one another
It has always been yours*

(Radke, 1997)

Batoche was a turning point for me, as it had been for many Métis people who seek to understand their history and their roots. It provided me with a sense of place as a Métis person and evidence that Métis are not just mixed race people, but have a separate and unique history of resistance and oppression that I was part of. Like Scofield, I was intrigued by the story of Gabriel Dumont and the dispersal of Métis people to Alberta and the United States after the battle. Parts of my family chose to move to Montana and eventually back to northern Manitoba, near the Saskatchewan border. I learned that Maria Campbell's Cheechum was a niece of Gabriel Dumont and Maria lives on the site where Gabriel Dumont ran a ferry over

the South Saskatchewan River. (NewBreed Journal, November 1982) Like Batoche, Gabriel's Crossing has a rich history and is a place of spiritual healing and strength for Métis people. As Maria Campbell states in the conclusion of *Halfbreed*, "Cheechum never surrendered at Batoche: she only accepted what she considered a dishonorable truce. She waited all her life for a new generation of people who would make this country a better place to live in. (Halfbreed, 183-184)

Like Campbell, Scofield refers to his memoir as a political story and describes the marginalization of himself and his family:

The whole history of my family. The whole history of denial. The whole history of Métis people. That's all about politics and it's all about histories of shame. Histories of denial. Histories of poverty and coming out of a disadvantaged environment. The shame of my grandfather. The denial of my grandfather of being Native. That all comes from a political history. (Richards, 11)

Scofield's work focuses on resistance to the predominant view of European-Canadian society about Métis and gay men. As a youth, Scofield preferred to be Cree, rather than Métis, because of the more prevalent view that Métis were less worthy of Aboriginal status. Scofield recently discovered that his birth father was Jewish, which further complicates his identity and his public wrestling with identity as described in his writings. It was his Aunt, not his mother or stepfather who revealed his Métis identity to him (Thunder, 42). Scofield preferred to be Cree (Nay-he-yow-wuk), especially as a child as he appreciated the colorful costumes and the pictures of strong and powerful chiefs. In *Thunder through My Veins*, he illustrated his determination to not be Métis, but later resolved his identity issues through writing, support and self-reflection. In the introduction he states:

I speak for no one community, although my heartland, my ancestral and spiritual homeland, is among the scrub poplar and wolf willow rusting along the banks of the South Saskatchewan River, the fiddle as it echoes through the empty coulees of Batoche – the very place where my ancestors fought to keep our nation alive. (xvi, Thunder)

In Western Canada, in the late 1880's the Government of Canada issued scrip to the Métis, which entitled them to either monies to purchase land or a specified plot of land. This was done to satisfy Métis claims for land. Scrip certificates allowed the owner to claim lands available for settlement. Unfortunately, many Métis did not receive scrip or were placed in situations, which required them to sell or otherwise dispose of it. As well, the Juvenile Act of Manitoba was amended to allow minor children of Métis parentage to sell their script, which provided opportunities for abuse and coercion of children. Métis children lost their birthright. Scofield writes of the loss and pain of a land based culture that has no land.

Yet

I've heard them say

Not to worry, not to hate

But I carry their bones

Their tears

Like a basket of berries

. (I Knew Two Métis Women, 100)

Scofield's status as a gay male and Métis provides a complicated scenario for

him, especially in an already disadvantaged childhood. In *Thunder Through My Veins* he described the efforts he made to hide his sexuality from those he worked with. His more recent poetry published in *Love Medicine* shares intimate and erotic poems about his emotional and sexual feelings for his male lover – a previously taboo subject in Aboriginal literature. While Scofield searched for his Métis identity, his writing clearly helped him come to terms with his loss of childhood, his sexuality and the freedom and self-acceptance to find his spirit.

Marilyn Dumont is a descendant of Gabriel Dumont, and therefore, a relative of Maria Campbell. Dumont's text, *A Really Good Brown Girl* is a collection of poems, which address family issues, oppression, poverty, and the challenges of growing up as a Métis female in Canada. Many of the poems describe her dual life and her efforts to be accepted in non-Aboriginal society. Her poem, *The Red & White* reflects the conflict and duality of her world as a mixed race child.

God knows Mary tried
To keep us clean and fed, respectable but
All the bleach and soup bones
In the Red and White couldn't keep our
Halfbreed hides from showing through
(*A Really Good Brown Girl*, 17)

Dumont's childhood was not typical of many Canadian children of that period. She starts school and tries to be invisible, watching and following but careful to not be noticed as different in a predominantly white classroom. She plays with the white children after school, but keeps to a circle of Indian kids at school. (A Really Good Brown Girl, 15) As a child, she tries to ignore her color and fit into the white world. She tries to be good.

My skin always gave me away. In grade one, I had started to forget where I was when a group of us stood around the sink at the back of the class washing up after painting and a little white girl stared at the colour of my arms and exclaimed, 'Are you ever brown!'. I wanted to pull my short sleeves down to my wrists and pretend that I hadn't heard her, but she persisted, 'Are you Indian?' How could I respond?

Like many Métis women, she did not embrace her culture, but found it only after a focused period of soul searching and reflection. Dumont's poems in *A Really Good Brown Girl* are organized into four sections: "Squaw Poems", "What More Than Dance" "White Noise" and "Made in Water." The cover art of the text shows mixed media artwork entitled, Children's Blackboard, by artist Jane Ash Poitras reflecting the duality of a Métis child's world, the duality of being Métis in Canada. These of this duality abound in Dumont's work: Aboriginal traditions versus white society, the school system's rigidity and the spiritual world of the Métis belief system, Cree language and Michif. While her work reflects her wit and humor, there is a deep vein of pathos in her poetry, which emphasizes the tensions of the Métis psyche. Rather than living the free life of a child, learning through play, Dumont learned at a very early age, as did Scofield and Campbell that her difference did not the open the doors she wanted for her. She would be forced to choose her alignments with either a white society who rejected her and hurt her, or a more difficult road as a Métis

(brown girl). Another key theme in Dumont's work is a sense she is judged by white society. Her poem, *The White Judges*, describes judgment for her poverty, her lifestyle, and the food she ate, their music, dancing and fights. (*A Really Good Brown Girl* 11-12)

Of Dumont's poetry, *A Really Good Brown Girl* most clearly narrates the tensions she faced, as a child growing up Métis in a world of whiteness. Dualities of white/brown, bad/good, red/white are central to her poems, especially in the "squaw" poems where the good = white, bad = Métis notion is more evident. Being a good brown girl meant being clean and virginal, and having as pure blood as possible for a mixed-race woman. The imagery suggests that squaw is bad, brown and Indian. "We are Made of Water" are poems of motherhood, poems of women sliced into transitions from baby/girls/childhood and sliced along cultural lines, white, Métis Indian.

Métis writers, playwrights and poets are part of the fabric of Canadian cultural artists who have contributed to a growing awareness of Métis culture in Canada. Writers such as Maria Campbell, Gregory Scofield and Marilyn Dumont deal primarily with the sense of "otherness" that Métis experience as a distinct society and culture, of mixed heritage, different from both Europeans and Indians. Maria Campbell, Marilyn Dumont and Gregory Scofield provide haunting examples of personal loss and childhood trauma as a result of racist public policies and lack of acceptance by the dominant European society. In many texts, these authors also speak of discrimination from their First Nations relations. Negative emotions such as shame, fear, anger, guilt and regret relating to family secrets of hidden Métis

status, have resulted in Métis children experiencing what many consider a more intense sense of exclusion than their First Nations relations. In many families, including my own, white parents adopted Métis children. Mixed race children grew up with little or no knowledge of their origins or cultural background. Learning of these secrets as adults has had a profound affect on how many Métis see themselves and their culture.

Conclusion:

The title of this project is Métis Identity: Finding a Self and Contributing a Verse. The idea for the title comes from a Walt Whitman's poem, O Me! O Life! found in his book, *Leaves of Grass*. The poem is Whitman's lament on the futility of life.

Whitman answers his own cry with:

Answer:

That you are here --that life exists, and identity;

That the powerful play goes on, and you will contribute a verse.

(Whitman, 234)

Through this project, I hope to contribute to the Métis story and open up spaces for dialogue and change. It is not enough to tell my story and find comfort in my identity. I believe this project has pointed me towards action. Métis children and families continue to be affected by social policies that distance them from their culture and place them in situations of disadvantage. Barkwell concludes "many Métis children are taken into care for no other reason than the real life Métis situation of living in poverty and overcrowded conditions". (34) Like Gregory

Scofield, these children are placed in a series of foster homes, frequently detached from their culture and their roots, continuing to create generations of rootless children with no stable forces in their lives that can assist them in building resiliency. They have little hope of finding their culture or identity as Métis persons. I have moved closer to my Métis self and have come to terms with those decisions in the past that tore me away from my birth family and my Métis culture. My personal writing and poetry has helped heal me and move me forward on a path to find my place as a Métis woman. More recently, as I explored how to express my search for identity using other art forms, I recorded my journey home to the Red River Valley, with photos of prairie landscapes and weathered headstones carved with Métis surnames. My journey continues as I seek out new creative methods to record my story and develop my sense of self. As suggested by the autoethnographic elements I defined for this project, the process I have undertaken has the potential to create space for dialogue and change. I have been changed by the experience.

I conclude this project with satisfaction that I can confirm my Métis roots and more importantly, I had the courage to share my story. Through the writing and sharing process, I have connected to a larger Métis story that is in the process of creation by Métis writers, artists and researchers. I have discovered the power of telling the story – the irony of which is not lost on me as this is the traditional Métis method of sharing knowledge. As a result of this work, I have opened up spaces for conversations about Métis identity and self. My life is no longer filled with secrets about my origins. Events, conversations, ideas and emotions that have been private

and stored away for many years are public and are alive on these pages along with the stories of three inspirational Métis writers. I have transformed the complexities of identity, self, and difference for myself and I am hopeful, for others who may read this story. I share theorist Stacy Holman Jones abiding interest in telling the story, writing the story and performing the story. I love a good story. I have started this process for me as I recognize “these endeavors point to how personal stories become a means of interpreting the past, translating and transforming contexts and envisioning a future.” (Holman Jones, 211)

If I look to the messages from the three Métis writers whose works I have included in this project, and my personal experiences as I researched and narrated my story, I see the value of personal writing and autoethnography as a transformational tool. I want to move beyond discussion to take action to lift the veil of secrets for others who may not have had the encouragement and opportunities I have been granted to write my story.

I was the girl with the frozen heart
I am the woman who has climbed
Where the mountains lift my soul
I carry my daughter, hold my lover's hand
I walk long and often
On air

I am the woman who was wary of closeness
I traced the outlines of my dreams
In careful circles

But I can lift my heart and sing a song of prairie fields
Where footprints linger
Weaving a path through the grain
There
I can dance

More of me turn up every day
I am like a comet that circles the earth
My light is seen on the other side of the galaxy

(Radke, 2007)

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