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Hegemonic discourses of Métis identity in British Columbia, Canada

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Abstract

Viewing Métis identity not as a natural, essential, or fixed phenomenon, but as an experience formed through internal and external factors, this article examines the mechanisms by which people residing in British Columbia identify as Métis. Through interviewing Métis People and engaging in critical discourse analysis and narrative analysis, this research demonstrates how Métis narratives centre on and replicate three hegemonic discourses based on racial mixedness, Métis cultural values, and Métis nationalism. The “Métis subject” is then not an easily described coherent subject, but rather a co-constructed description based on transient identification with multiple and sometimes contradictory texts, which are themselves made meaningful through discourses. Understanding “Métis” in this way allows for an exploration of the role of power in producing meanings of “Métis” and how individuals, groups and institutions can strategically mobilise particular meanings and resist definitions of Métis prescribed by Eurocentric perspectives embedded in colonial institutions.

Keywords

Métis identity, critical discourse analysis, identity, nationalism, narrative analysis, Métis People

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Understanding Métis identity remains a pressing and enduring conversation within Canada. A divide has emerged, however, whereby Métis People have become representative of either a bounded community descended from a distinct pre-Canadian historical nation that emerged from the North American fur trade, or people whose ancestry includes both European and Indigenous heritage and may or may not be descended from historical “mixed-blood” communities (Gaudry, 2018). Métis People have come to negotiate and situate their identities against Eurocentric perspectives embedded in colonial institutions. Approaches to identification continue to be transformed by court rulings and government policies regarding Métis identity and community membership. Historically, Métis were categorised by government bodies in Canada through the lens of race, as half-breeds, and as such, ineligible for Indian status, band membership and participation in treaty agreements (with some exceptions), and inclusion in the Indian Act (1876). The inclusion of Métis as an Aboriginal people in the 1982 Canadian Constitution, amendments to the Indian Act (such as Bill C-31), and an emerging patchwork of legal decisions brought forth through the Canadian judiciary continue to impact earlier definitions of Métis, such as the Canadian Supreme court rulings in the Powley and Daniels cases (*R. v. Powley*, 2003; *Daniels v. Canada*, 2016).

The 1982 redrafting of the Canadian Constitution Act, Section 35, affirmed existing Aboriginal rights (without defining them) and in describing “aboriginal peoples of Canada” included “the Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada” (Constitution Act Section 35, 1982). Yet, only in 2003 was a definition described for Métis to claim rights under Section 35(1) of the Constitution Act, 1982. Considered to be a victory by many Métis people, the Powley Decision has since affected a number of Métis Aboriginal rights cases, as it explained: “[t]he term ‘Métis’ in s. 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982 does not encompass all individuals with mixed Indian and European heritage; rather, it refers to distinctive peoples who, in addition to their mixed ancestry, developed their own customs, and recognizable group identity separate from their Indian or Inuit and European forebears” (*R. v. Powley* 2003, para.10). Furthermore, according to the Powley decision, “self-identification, ancestral connection, and community acceptance are factors which define Métis identity for the purpose of claiming Métis rights under s. 35” (para.12).

The Métis population has demonstrated unprecedented growth, often attributed to demographic factors, including an increasing trend for people to self-identify as Métis, especially since the affirmation that Métis possess rights within Section 35(1) of the Constitution (Andersen, 2014; Fast et al., 2017). For many prior generations, many Métis people have not openly identified themselves to their cultural identities due to racist backlash and family traumas resulting from oppressive colonial policies. As Richardson explains, for those who tactically hid their Métis identity, “[b]eing treated with dignity and respect took precedent over the need to be culturally visible” (2006, p. 61). Colonial and patriarchal systems of dispossession that aimed to “divide and conquer” Indigenous peoples, such as the numbered treaties, the Manitoba Act (1870), the scrip system, and the Indian Act (including Bill C-31 and Bill C-3), as well as more recent court rulings, have continued to impact how Métis people negotiate and express their identities (see Fiola, 2015).

Intersectional approaches to understanding Métis women’s identities have been particularly generative, such as work by Métis scholars Brenda Macdougall (2010), Maria Campbell (2012) and Kim Anderson (2016), who all describe the ways in which patriarchal imposition has displaced Indigenous women from traditional roles, communities (which were traditionally matrilineal), and positions of authority, dismantling sacred identities within a complex system of relations. However, there has also been an uptick in research focused on contemporary Métis identity developed in reaction to newly formed organisations in eastern Canada that claim Métis identity on the basis of

having an Indigenous ancestor (Andersen, 2014; Gaudry, 2015; Leroux, 2019). While the work of answering questions such as “Who can/should identify as Métis?” and “Why are people increasingly identifying as Métis?” are of vital importance, the question of “*How* do people identify as Métis?” remains unaddressed.

Although the term “identity” is used throughout this article, I recognise the importance of specificity, as the spectrum between self-understanding and official classification can be wide (Andersen, 2014). While external forces have had significant impacts on the development of the meanings of “Métis”, so too have internal language and social practices. Understanding the complexity of contemporary Indigenous identity politics requires a deep knowledge of the various influencing factors and theoretical ideas that have historically produced current circumstances. Indigenous perspectives of personhood diverge according to varying Indigenous contexts that differ from place to place. For many Indigenous peoples, identity development does not emphasise the self as an individual, but involves establishing connections and understanding oneself in relation to all of creation. As a result, communal structures shape personal and group identity in ways that differ from Western culture. This is often termed self-in-relation, as it is understood as “the expression of individual experience grounded in a particular community” (Kohl, as cited in Delpit, 1995, p. 15).

Framed as a case study to better understand identity, this article seeks to observe the mechanisms by which Métis People identify in British Columbia, Canada, namely through examining three hegemonic discourses of racial mixedness, cultural values centred on relationality, and nationhood. By understanding this subject of identity as constructed through structural processes situated within specific historical and geographic contexts, this discussion aims to move beyond racist framings of Métis as innate beings with universal attributes in order to focus on groups of Métis People who assert their own authority of *how* they identify with their ethnic identity beyond external definitions (including those determined through colonial institutions such as the Canadian judiciary).

Despite the Canadian public’s general interest in learning about Métis People, “basic knowledge about Métis issues is remarkably low” (Gaudry, 2015, p. 97). Understanding Métis identity and defining Métis identity have become contentious issues since the Métis cultural revival that began to take place in Canada since the 1960s (Peterson & Brown, 1985). Métis scholars, politicians, and community members would agree the questions of “Who is Métis?” and “What does ‘Métis’ mean?” are at the centre of contemporary Métis identity politics. These questions, and their answers, are embedded in a historical context marked by shifting colonial policies aimed at the conversion, assimilation, and erasure of Indigenous bodies.

The historic North-west, which includes Canada’s prairie provinces and parts of British Columbia, the Northwest Territories and Ontario are recognised by the Métis National Council (MNC) as the historic Métis Nation Homeland, but the contours of the homeland remain disputed (Narine, 2020; Voth & Loyer, 2020). While Métis People occupied these territories, they were also deeply connected through Indigenous kin relations to the land (Macdougall, 2010). As such, the land the historic Métis People interacted with was closely tied to their identity as Indigenous peoples. Unlike much of the historic North-west that engaged in treaty-making processes between the Crown and Indigenous peoples, 95% of British Columbia is on unceded traditional territory (Wilson, 2018; see Legault, 2021). While some Métis families migrated to British Columbia during the 19th century fur trade, several other waves of Métis People have since moved westward following the federal scrip program¹, seeking employment, and following family members. There are currently approximately 90,000 self-identified Métis People currently living in British Columbia,

over 20,000 of whom are citizens of the Métis Nation of British Columbia (MNBC), the official representative organisation for Métis People in British Columbia (MNBC, 2021).

Theoretical and methodological orientation

This research is framed by an Indigenous methodology based on relational accountability that employs frameworks of analysis from critical theory and critical race theory to provide a unique anti-essentialist lens through which Métis identity is examined (Wilson, 2008). Individual identity is not singular and has come to be understood by theorists who employ poststructuralist, constructionist, and postmodern ideas as a process that is continually reconstructed through an “internal-external dialectic” involving both self-definition and representation, and external definition and interpretation (Christou, 2006). The production of identities is understood to occur within a matrix of similarity and difference, causing identities to be incomplete, shifting, internally fractured and fragmented, and unstable (Barker & Galasiński, 2001; Hall, 1993). Subject positions personify particular forms of knowledge that are produced through discourse (Foucault, 1972; Hall, 2001). Discourses produce the possible subjectivities that can be taken up then comprise the unstable, temporal, shifting content of our subjectivities. Consequently, social interactions are given meaning through discourse and social reality is a product of discourse (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Discourse is then considered to be regulated ways of speaking and a practice that offer individuals subject positions while simultaneously subjecting them to the power of such discourses (Barker & Galasiński, 2001). Hegemonic or dominant discourses are understood as historically produced, temporally and spatially situated, and stabilised by dominant structures (and groups) to the degree that they are considered given or taken for granted (Wodak, 2002). Within the context of prevailing ideas regarding what it means to be Métis, the focus on hegemonic discourses allows for a critical unveiling of what lies beneath common misperceptions and stereotypes of Métis People and *how* Métis individuals identify themselves.

This study aimed to interrogate the relationship between power, social context, complexity, equality and social justice, and their impacts on participants’ multifaceted identities (Hancock, 2007; Collins & Bilge, 2016); yet, this study also held Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being as central to Métis People’s self-understanding, especially as it pertains to our interconnectedness, interdependence, and multidimensionality (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). Like the Métis participants of this project, my own identity is bound up in a web of intersecting and interconnected discourses and relations. I write from a particular position as a Métis cisgender woman from the region of Southwest Saskatchewan (near the former Métis settlement of Lac Pelletier) and trace my ancestry through my Mom’s grandmother, Julia Lamotte (née Fayant or Fagnant), via Métis families like the Laplantes, Desjarlais and Gagnons, who moved between Cypress Hills, Willow Bunch, Fort Qu’Appelle and the Red River Settlement.

Research methods

As a Métis scholar, I have carried out my research with ethical, respectful, critical, reflexive and humble considerations of Indigenous lived experiences (S. Wilson, 2008). This involved conducting semistructured interviews with 20 individuals who self-identify as Métis, to give voice to their experiences of identifying as Métis residing in the southern interior region of British Columbia. Individuals were invited to participate through community channels (namely Métis Community Services Society of British Columbia); informed consent was made on an individual basis; and permissions were sought repeatedly to ensure the words of participants were respectfully reproduced within this study.²

Participants were regarded as experts on their own stories, knowledge and experience, and interviewed with the central goal of understanding the ways in which Métis identity has been constructed, developed, maintained, represented and expressed. I transcribed their words and sent transcripts back to participants to be member-checked, and their names were retained and used with their consent, in alignment with Indigenous research practices, despite opposition from many post-secondary institutions' ethical research policies for anonymity and confidentiality (Cresswell & Miller, 2000; Evans, 2004; S. Wilson, 2008).

I coded interviews and examined the relationships between ideas and categories to determine relationships to particular cultural repertoires or discourses. It became clear through the initial coding and analysis process that several specific discourses were being repeatedly engaged with, reproduced, resisted, and drawn upon by participants. Transcripts were analysed twice: once, using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to identify dominant discourses; and then participant narratives were re-reviewed and re-analysed individually using narrative analysis (NA).

Understanding how language practices are shaped by and in turn shape power relations is crucial to CDA, with specific focus on understanding how everyday knowledge is bound up in power dynamics (Phillips & Hardy, 1995; Wodak, 2002). The choice to centre the analysis of Métis identity on three key discourses of racialised, ethno-cultural and political constructions of "Métis" noted earlier was based on what was suggested by my initial attempt at coding (Hollway, 2001). Prior to my second attempt to code the interview data, I examined these three discourses in detail as they related to Métis identity specifically, but also as they related to broader socio-cultural contexts. CDA was my primary method for tracing the historical construction of these discourses as they related to Métis identity, while narrative analysis (NA) was also employed to connect the words of interview participants to the dominant discourses.

NA assisted in understanding *how* and *why* self-identifying Métis People repeat certain language practices and rhetorical statements. This includes determining what kinds of statements are permissible, or considered taboo, or silenced altogether, and how certain narratives might subvert or resist dominant discourses associated with being Métis. Applying NA to study participant narratives involved close interpretation of texts, with attention paid to the ways in which cultural stories, representations, ideas and images were used to construct meanings pertaining to Métis identity and consequently, produce various collective beliefs regarding "Métisness". Examining not only how participants see themselves as Métis, but also how they understand who is and is not Métis, this study aimed to unravel the ideas that inform the identities that are projected by political and government organisational definitions and those of the interviewed Métis community members. The combination of these methods for studying identity is not a novel approach, as studying the kinds of stories people tell can assist in exploring everyday linguistic practices that contribute to identity claims (Barker & Galasiński, 2001; Defina, 2006). Similar to discourse analysts, narrative analysts understand identity to be constructed through the narratives we tell about ourselves and others (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Therefore, in the sections that follow, you will read the voices of Janet, Joanie, Laranna, Jean, Terry, Peter, Carlene, Maria, Val and Zach (among others), whose lived experiences give tangible evidence of *how* Métis identity is negotiated and constructed.³

Discourse 1: Métis as "mixed-blood"

The language of blood quantum was present throughout my conversations with participants, and for some, the experience of being what they called "mixed-blood" was at the heart of their reason for identifying as Métis. The colonial concept of blood quantum has its roots in biological notions of

race, which were used in attempts to determine differences between so-called “superior” (European) races from “inferior” ones. Participants spoke of blood quantum when discussing themselves and others, and in conversations regarding identity policing. For instance, Janet described her First Nation friends calling her “a teaspoon”, in reference to her comparatively small amount of “Indian blood”. For self-identifying Métis participant Carla, being Métis meant having “Native blood” and a “Native great-grandmother” indigenous to British Columbia, with no reference to a historic Métis culture. Such references to blood quantum result from racialised understandings of “Indianness” whereby blood is perceived as a vehicle for transmitting cultural characteristics (Garrouette, 2003), as opposed to political or cultural notions of Indigeneity. Often used interchangeably with ethnicity, racialised language and related concepts have been commonly accepted when describing and positioning Indigenous Peoples from a Eurocentric perspective, especially within colonial institutions such as the Canadian judiciary (Patzner, 2013).

As a result of dominant racialised scientific and ethnographic discourses during the 19th century, the Métis were often historically viewed as an unstable racial group, as opposed to a national or political collective (Ens & Sawchuk, 2016). Dominant rhetoric suggested “like the Indian, the mixed-blood was viewed as headed for extinction” (p. 22). It is from this concept that the notion of the Métis as a transitory race emerged. The racialisation of the category of “Métis” continues into contemporary times, as the word “Métis” has become the term of choice for many mixed-heritage Indigenous Peoples across Canada, partly due to its explicit inclusion in Section 35 (2) of the Constitution Act, 1982 and partly due to judicial findings over the last decade and a half in which “Métis” is the term of choice for people excluded from the Indian Act seeking to have their Aboriginal rights recognised (Dahl, 2013, p. 118). Differences in understanding over the term “Métis” persist among those who have ancestral roots that trace to the historic Métis Nation in Red River, those whose families were called “half-breeds” by outsiders (and at times by themselves), and those of mixed Indigenous ancestry with no ties to historic (or even contemporary) Métis communities (Gaudry, 2018; Leroux, 2019).

Métis scholar Gloria Bell (2013) suggests the conscious translation of terms such as “mixed-blood” and “half-breed” in documentary records into the politicised ‘Métis’ results in the implantation of Métis identities, political consciousness and communities into temporal and geographical contexts where they were previously nonexistent. Partly due to the interchangeable use of half-breed, mixed-blood and Métis, many people who self-identify as Métis, both with and without ties to the Historic Métis Nation, identify on the basis of their mixed heritage (Andersen, 2014).

For participants Joanie, Laranna, Jean and Terry, all of whom have family ties to the historic Métis Nation, being Métis centred on a shared experience of being of mixed Indigenous descent. While the racial categories used to describe people of mixed heritage are fictive and fluid, they have had a profound impact on understandings of Métis identity. Despite being recognised as a distinct socio-cultural and political entity, their origin as the offspring of their European fathers and Indigenous mothers remains a crucial component of discourses of Métis identity (Brown, 1983). A dominant discourse of racial mixedness permeates everyday talk about (and among) Métis People in legal, scholarly and governance realms. As a result, Métis can be understood by themselves and others as racially mixed on the basis of their diluted “Indian blood” (or more accurately, “Indian Act Blood”) and mixed biological ancestry (Green, 2009). Métis People internalise such racialised practices and have come to think of their mixedness as a central factor in their identification as Métis (Andersen, 2014). It is no surprise Métis People feel as if they are never Indigenous enough, or being Métis means they are “not pure”, as they are often asked about from which First Nation group their Indigeneity emerges. The language of racial mixedness permeates everyday speech acts as Métis often talk about “being caught in between the white and Indigenous world”, “having

one foot in both worlds”, or being “neither white, nor Indian”. Consequently, other Indigenous peoples have come to recognise the Métis as Indigenous because of their mixedness, and not because of their history as a precolonial nation with a distinct culture and way of life.

Discourse 2: Métis as a “style of life”

It was increasingly clear when speaking with participants that many urban Indigenous organisations, though often employing a Métis-as-mixed perspective, simultaneously forwarded cultural understandings of Métis. Cultural definitions can provide useful ways for understanding the socio-cultural qualities of Indigeneity, including shared language and spiritual beliefs and practices; however, social norms and relationships have been complicated by the ways in which cultural essentialism have permeated mainstream Canadian perspectives and more problematically, the Canadian judiciary. Within the Canadian legal system, Indigeneity has been equated to “Indianness”, which is defined in terms of perceptible difference to non-Indigenous people (Patzner, 2013). The maintenance of outmoded conceptions of Indigenous culture within Canadian legal institutions (whereby adaptation is equated to cultural erosion) coupled with an inability to accommodate the fluid reality of past and contemporary Indigenous communities is problematic for Métis People and especially the large population of Métis People living in urban spaces (Andersen, 2003). For those who have participated in urban Indigenous organisations, they have experienced identity policing from non-Métis organisation members in terms of their “Indianness”. For instance, Joanie describes multiple experiences of identity policing, where she was scrutinised for practising ceremonies such as smudging or activities such as drumming; practices she learnt at urban Indigenous organisations, but were not deemed “authentically Métis”.

An approach based in “re-traditionalisation”, which understands Métisness as a product of an underlying philosophy (as opposed to uninterrupted visible cultural practices), allows for the continuation of place-specific Métis cultural practices and collective identities, despite social changes due to evolving colonial contexts (Fiola, 2015). Thus, government and judicial attempts at developing definitions of Métis identity by focusing on external social and political processes that identify a community of individuals appear to have only undermined the efforts of Métis People, as such approaches neglect the cultural qualities of Métis identity (Peressini, 2001). As a response to the over-politicised nature of Métis collectivity, there has been a demonstrable shift within Métis communities as new groups and organisations have emerged that emphasise the cultural, spiritual and social factors of Métis identities, rather than political or legal issues and rights (Chrétien, 2005; Fiola, 2015). As such, returning to “traditional Métis values” was a concern for nearly all participants of this study.

Across the experiences shared with me, a powerful subdiscourse centred on relationality emerged. This aligns with the “traditional Métis values” participants described. Not a new concept, principles of relationality are deeply embedded in the Métis national narrative and described by Métis lawyer and author Jean Teillet as “the social glue” that historically bound Métis People together (2019, p. 16). She describes core Métis values as centering on notions of equality, liberty, and an ethic of sharing. Métis historian Brenda Macdougall contends that a specific set of Indigenous-based beliefs and attitudes towards social and family life contributed to the creation of a Métis socio-cultural identity.⁴ Macdougall (2006) describes the ways in which the Cree worldviews of Indigenous women trickled down into the lives of their Métis descendants to produce “a system of social obligation and mutual responsibility between related individuals—between members of a family—as the foundational relationship within communities” (p. 434). Macdougall (2010) employs the Cree cultural and theoretical concept of *wahkootowin*, a shared ontology and axiology that historically informed and continues to inform the perspectives of some Cree and Métis people who have been raised in this way and a “style of life” that she describes as follows:

Wahkotoowin has been translated by scholars of the Cree language as “relationship” or “relation”, but such a translation misses much of the meaning and sentiment that the term and its various derivatives actually express. As much as it is a worldview based on familial—especially interfamilial—connectedness, wahkootowin also conveys an idea about the virtues that an individual should personify as a family member. The values critical to family relationships—such as reciprocity, mutual support, decency, and order—in turn influence the behaviours, actions, and decision-making processes that shape all a community’s economic and political interactions. (p. 8)

Wahkootowin, as an “intersocietal norm” that emphasises familial and community obligation, was a recurring theme throughout conversations and often positioned in contrast to individualistic attempts of claiming Métis identities without contributing back to Métis communities. Community and family were synonymous, adoption (familial and fictive) was described as commonplace, and reciprocal obligations to community were strongly emphasised. Relationality deeply informed identity among Métis People. Similar to historic Métis, who, despite being defined by outsiders according to homogenising and racialised categories, defined their own identity according to kin networks (Bell, 2013), participants predominantly located their Métis identity within their family or community.

Similar to Macdougall’s (2010) description of Métis in Saskatchewan, many with whom I spoke, did not distinguish between immediate and extended family members, but described values based on obligations to their children, grandchildren, cousins, aunts, grandparents, fictive kin, and community. For instance, this “reciprocal family model” (Macdougall, 2010, p. 162) is illustrated throughout Greg’s narrative as he tells stories from his adolescence of sneaking out of his home to take care of his grandmother, his decision to move east with his father to take care of him, as well as multiple instances of sharing harvested meat with his family, neighbours and the local urban Indigenous community. Similarly, Peter states his parents’ primary objective in life was to “protect your family, make your family strong, and make sure that everybody can get to where they’re going and where they want to go”. Like Fiola’s (2015) study, multiple participants cited community participation or participation in Indigenous organisations as being integral to their understanding of Métisness and acting as an impetus for community recognition. For instance, Carlene describes her community as “where you live and breathe”. This sort of talk permeated discussions with many participants, but especially those who had been raised within families with a keen awareness of their Métis identity.

Not only was obligation to family highlighted, but the “reciprocal family model” extended to the broader Métis community. Zach used the language of community and family interchangeably: “I think first and foremost it [Métis identity] has to be a definition that emanates from community. And by community, I mean family. And to me that’s all really what a community is, a bunch of families. So, I think that if family or community recognises you as one of the family, well then, yeah, you’re a Métis.” Zach refers to a number of possible reciprocal obligations when he questions those who apply for provincial citizenship based on ancestry alone, including providing for elders and sharing harvested meat. Such comments suggest the values of wahkootowin have been effectively passed down through Métis families. Yet, among conversations, this discourse of relationality at times conflicted with antiquated discourses of racialised mixedness, the romanticised rhetoric of cultural essentialism, and state-based notions of nationalism.

Discourse 3: Métis as a nation

While nearly all interview participants referenced their ancestral and familial ties to the people, places and significant events of the historic Métis Nation, less than half expressed a clear

understanding of Métis nationalism. Pronational Métis scholars argue that a sense of collective Métis identity was established prior to colonial control throughout the historic North-west, which was repeatedly acknowledged by outsiders (Teillet, 2019). These moments of self and outsider acknowledgement have coalesced into a widely cited and repeated national story.

Historian and anthropologist Ens and Sawchuk (2016) argue a distinct shift occurred in the 1930s in Canada, whereby descriptions of Métis shifted from being racial to national. They attribute this shift particularly to historical writing about Métis, “which served to naturalize and essentialize the Métis Nation as an unproblematic idea of national progress providing the Métis with a story of national origins and the myth of a founding father” (p. 35). Works such as A.H. Trémaudan’s (1935) *Histoire de la nation métisse dans L’Ouest canadien*, which was commissioned by L’Union nationale métisse Saint-Joseph in an attempt to rehabilitate the reputation of Riel and promote the notion of a Métis Nation, was and continues to be widely read. Furthermore, later historical writings on the Métis, such as those by A.S. Morton (1939), Giraud (1986), W.L. Morton (1978), and Friesen (1984) stated Métis nationhood as fact.

The ritually repeated discourse of the Métis as *la nouvelle nation* suggests the Métis capacity for a collectively formed nation was not merely a creation of historical revisionists, but based on the solid foundation of an already existing ethnic identity (O’Toole, 2013). Shared values and history created a union in terms of Métis nationhood, and the political actions of the Métis Nation formed a common historical narrative that has been integral in the construction of Métis identity (Logan, 2008; Peterson & Brown, 1985). Such actions included resisting the colonial rule of the Hudson’s Bay Company and the Canadian nation-state, but also diplomatic relationships with unrelated Indigenous peoples (Andersen, 2014; Teillet, 2019).

Métis nationhood has been a highly political and politicised issue for Métis, resulting in significant divisions among communities and political representatives. The MNC has been accused of claiming to own the term “Métis”, based on its connection to the historic Métis Nation centred in Canada’s prairie provinces (Chartrand, 2001). In 2002, the MNC adopted the following definition of Métis: “‘Métis’ means a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, is of historic Métis Nation Ancestry and who is accepted by the Métis Nation” (MNC, 2021). The claim to Métis nationhood is often justified on the basis of military conflicts in the 1800s, customary laws established by Métis collectives under the leadership of Louis Riel, and Red River ancestry (Logan, 2008; Peressini, 2001).

Research participants who did express their identification as Métis on the basis of their tie to the historic Métis Nation (as opposed to their ancestry as partly Indigenous or their experience as mixed-blood persons) were currently or had been previously employed by Métis Nation British Columbia (MNBC), a Métis service agency, or worked directly with a MNBC local Chartered Community. During the course of participants’ engagement with such organisations, they became increasingly knowledgeable on the significance of nationhood as a path towards legal recognition and Indigenous rights. In contrast to the official stance of the MNC and MNBC citizenship criteria, several of these participants also contended Métis who descend from communities prior to and eastwards of the Red River Métis should also be considered Métis. Conversations on the topic of nationhood often centred on discussions of who should be allowed access to MNBC citizenship, motivation for applying for citizenship, and struggles with meeting the documentary requirements for citizenship.

One of the key reasons participants attributed to their lack of engagement with Métis nationalism was their general disenchantment with internal politics. Métis “politics” was consistently cited as

the cause for division among Métis People. For instance, Carlene, who was raised in a family conscious of their Métis identity and an active member of several urban Indigenous communities describes a common sentiment among participants:

I have no affinity or connection or sense of obligation to Métis politics. I find it really disheartening and I'm really sad about how problematic the politics are. You know conflict isn't a bad thing, conflict is a good thing I believe, but there seems to be a lot of conflict and a lot of infighting and a lot of backstabbing sort of things. I think we need to mature politically. And I mean it's kind of difficult because being Métis, politically you are representing such a diverse community, such a diverse community. So, how do you create a sense of cohesion? And I think that's difficult, but in that [sense] I don't think we stand firm enough in our values politically.

Participants discussed Métis Nation citizenship as well as local community membership and belonging in ways that were at times muddled and overlapping. Stories of cultural belonging and rejection intermingled with themes of legitimacy, justification, and contestation. Genealogical authority and connectedness through kin networks was a prominent form of legitimation and recognition; however, due to the diasporic nature of historical Métis People and their continued high levels of mobility, such networks have been interrupted, rendering those who are disconnected, unknowable and even illegitimate. This was the experience for participants such as Shelley, whose family was disconnected from their Métis community through the forcible adoption of her grandfather. For others such as Margaret, upon moving away from her Cree-Métis grandmother, the physical distances between them as well as their inability to communicate due to language barriers were significant obstacles in her connection to Métis culture. For many others, it was a matter of their Métis ancestry being hidden for years or even generations due to fear of racist treatment.

Among some who grew up identifying (or being identified by others) as half-breeds and/or Métis, there was a sentiment that those who had not been "raised that way" should not be representing Métis People. Janet, for instance, explains that those who now claim a Métis identity but "used to be something else" have a tendency to "take over from the people who have known that they've been Métis". For participants who were raised with awareness of their Métis identity (such as Janet), this issue contributed to their resistance against seeking provincial membership and their involvement with Métis political organisations. Their identity was not validated in any way by having their citizenship application accepted, but instead they perceived MNBC's citizenship registry as a form of government identification, similar to that which their relatives experienced when forcibly removed to attend Indian Residential Schools, and/or a colonial tactic to divide and conquer the Métis population. This suggests provincial citizenship registries are missing a percentage of the Métis population who are fearful of and opposed to being identified.

Participants expressed concerns over ethnic fraud, problems of political misrepresentation, divisive policies that exclude those who are accepted at community levels from citizenship, identity policing, and a sense of a lack of community obligation on behalf of those accessing citizenship. Underlying all conversations were implicit descriptions of the values that underlie being Métis, as well as varied references to group boundaries. For instance, Maria and Val both illustrated their perspectives on the ideal contours of the Métis population through comments such as Maria's that "we are not leftovers" (referring to the shoehorning of all nonstatus Indians into the catchall category Métis) and Val's explicit references to her ancestral connection to the historic Métis Nation. Such inferences of what it means to be Métis sometimes contradicted people's stances on citizenship and membership. For instance, those who advocated for a nation-based notion of Métis identity rejected ancestry-based citizenship criteria. Such contradictions highlight the ways in which "official" processes for qualifying for citizenship that have been largely determined by the

Canadian state in reaction to the Powley decision are inconsistent with some underlying collective values embedded in Métis culture.

While ancestry as a measurement for belonging may be an entry point into the Métis community, most participants regarded it as only marking the *beginning* of Métis identification. Some people were sceptical of those who were claiming a Métis community, without being *claimed by* community (beyond the bureaucratic process of printing a membership card for them), meanwhile having never experienced the racism associated with being a “half-breed”. Zach expressed that having a community-ratified identity “on paper” does not equate with being claimed or recognisable by a community of people. This was a meaningful point of contention for several participants who felt many of those seeking community membership cards were not actively participating in, learning about and/or contributing to the local Métis community. Participants like Val argued that Métis identification was a birthright, whereas Zach felt providing citizenship based on ancestry alone is problematic as “it feeds into that rhetoric where you get a bunch of extra benefits based on the luck of the draw of who you are descended from”. Regardless of their perspectives on ancestry, both agreed ancestry could be an entry point into the Métis community and were welcoming of those interested in learning about their Métis family history and participating in and contributing to their local community.

For those who have only recently begun to identify as Métis, such as Sarah and Barb, there were still many questions in their own minds about what it means to be Métis. Like others who locate their Métis identity based on shared experiences of being of mixed descent (even with ties to the historic Métis Nation), the ways in which Sarah identifies as Métis is tied to her involvement in the local urban Indigenous community (as opposed to a Métis-specific community). Meanwhile, many participants who were raised with the knowledge of their Métis identity, such as Zach, Carlene, and Peter, understand “Métis” less in the political sphere of citizenship and nationhood, but more specifically in the shared experiences of their families (and communities) and the values with which they were raised. Yet, they were also aware of the needs of Métis communities and interested in accessing harvesting rights and/or increasing Métis recognition. Reading narratives as a whole, it is clear the meaning of Métis remains fractured, uncertain, and subject to multiple iterations.

Conclusion

Overall, individuals privileged particular knowledges about what it means to be Métis when making their own truth claims about their identity as Métis. While people engage with multiple and often contradictory ideas drawn from the discourses of nationhood, citizenship, culture and racial mixedness, the political discourse of Métis nationhood was drawn on most frequently both directly and indirectly when employed by the MNBC. Even so, some participants continued to employ the rhetoric of racial mixedness, confirming Métis scholar Chris Andersen’s (2014) recognition that “those who should know better” continue to identify based on a racialised understanding of historic Métis identity. This discourse infiltrates everyday talk about the shared experiences of mixed-blood people, to the point where some people’s identification as Métis hinges almost exclusively on their mixed-blood ancestry.

Many Métis People have internalised colonialism and legitimised historic racism through the adoption of racial identities and terminologies. Society at large, other Indigenous people and Métis People themselves have come to recognise mixedness as a central factor of Métis identity, as opposed to the political standing of Métis as a precolonial nation with a distinct culture. Andersen (2014) contends the scholarly, legal and widespread preoccupation with race and cultural

essentialism at the expense of Indigeneity acts to further debilitate Métis rights, political struggles and people. Furthermore, the Métis-as-mixed approach “undermines the authenticity of their identity as Aboriginal people who established a culture intrinsically linked to their homeland” (Macdougall, 2010, p. 14).

Misunderstandings of Métis as racially mixed have resulted in significant challenges in terms of muddying the claims of culturally distinct and historically grounded Métis People; however, the result of such a longstanding racial understanding of Métis-as-mixed has also resulted in the historical inclusion of what would otherwise be considered “non-status Indians” in the Métis community (Teillet, 2019). This seemed especially apparent throughout the interview process for participants who were engaged in urban Indigenous organisations versus Métis-specific organisations. The “grandfathering in” of such “mixed-blood Métis” into contemporary Métis communities is well documented and even accepted by those who advocate for a distinct Métis Nation based on ancestral ties to the historic Métis Nation (Fiola, 2015). While the misrecognition of Métis as a racial category remains troubling, its effect on the composition of Métis communities cannot be understated.

In contrast, participants who describe themselves as “being raised Métis”, compared to those who began to identify as Métis later in life on the basis of their ancestral ties to the historic Métis Nation, primarily identified on the basis of a shared Métis philosophy of living in accordance to the principle of *wahkootowin*. The emphasis on “a Métis heart”, shared cultural philosophies, or ways of being suggest “being Métis” has more to do with “doing”/acting Métis, than something that is inherited. Focusing on the centrality of shared ways of being and cultural philosophies as opposed to the Métis as a “people-in-between”, re-centres Métis as “truly representative of a new, viable, Aboriginal culture” (Macdougall, 2006, p. 439). The outdated conceptual framework of Métis-as-mixed is replaced with the notion of Métis as distinct people whose cultural philosophy shaped their own communities, social identities, spiritual beliefs (including their relationships to the land), and relations with others.

While it seems the solution lies in claims that extend beyond racialised and culturally restricted definitions of “Métis” to collective political claims of Indigenous rights to autonomy, occupation, sovereignty and self-governance, in conversations with Métis participants, the political discourse of Métis nationhood took a backseat to the more emotive discourses that result from shared experiences of cultural ambiguity. For Métis who can tie themselves to the historical Métis Nation, the nation model has been effective for the purpose of gaining legitimacy and recognition, but has often been interpreted through a lens that emphasises a Western understanding of nationhood as equalling nation-state, which may not be appropriate for Indigenous communities (Champagne, 2007; Cornassel, 2003).

While particular discourses may produce the subject, they are active in disciplining subjects to conform to specific norms (Butler, 1990). Discourses can act on subjects as repressive, restricting behaviours and possible subject positions. Throughout conversations there were discussions of experiences of identities being policed, whereby the legitimacy of their identification as Métis is questioned. Métis People told stories about the authenticity of their indigeneity being questioned, which centred on outsiders perceiving them as non-Indigenous. What was deemed permissive by some was prohibited by others. The disciplining qualities of discourses impacted the ways in which Métis People felt they were allowed to behave and identify.

By drawing on dominant discourses, Métis People reproduce and reify what may be considered “normal” or even “stereotypical” descriptions of “a Métis subject”. The function of such social

norms persists without being questioned, as they are often difficult to discern and operate implicitly. The repetition of elements of the three dominant discourses is one of the key mechanisms through which naturalisation occurs, and that which may have once been visible becomes invisible and taken-for-granted. Drawing on certain conceptual repertoires influences specific constructions of identities while simultaneously strategically aiding in institutionalising particular patterns of resource distribution (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Thus, various approaches to Métis identity reflect the investments individuals and groups have in particular discourses (i.e., MNBC's investment in a nation-based discourse).

Through studying the discourses that inform Métis identity, we can assess their positive and negative effects, while locating opportunities to forge new opportunities for defining what it means to be Métis. Opportunities to strategically manoeuvre within discursive practices and negotiate identities hinges upon the positions available to subjects within the flow of social interaction (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Consciously claiming positions in alternative, less damaging discourses is one way individuals can actively resist positions of oppression, while the act of rethinking of the self can bring new subjects and social practices into being (Barker & Galasiński, 2001). Although one may not be able to stand outside of the power relations involved, by having knowledge about the damaging qualities of certain discourses, subjects can intentionally avoid drawing from them and instead choose to reproduce and reify more productive discourses when articulating their identities. For instance, if we want to avoid the problems associated with racialised definitions of Métis, then we need to avoid drawing on these discourses in our descriptions of ourselves and others. If Indigenous nationhood and sovereignty is our goal, then we need to be intentional in our conversations about inclusiveness so contemporary neoliberal values of individualism do not override the collective future of Métis People. By understanding the subject as co-constructed through structural processes, rather than innate beings with universal attributes, groups such as the Métis People can undermine the taken-for-granted authority of external definitions (including those determined through Canadian judiciary). Furthermore, through transcoding, dominant discourses can be transformed, added to, and even ignored. Any attempt at trying to control discourses and meaning will be met with difficulty, as discourses are "super-individual" and independent in that no single group or individual can determine the content or trajectory of a certain discourse as they result from historical processes, including the multiple strategic and situated narratives that subjects express (Jäger, 2001).

The challenge of determining the boundaries of Métis identity is deeply embedded in historical and political contexts marked by colonial and patriarchal underpinnings, as well as historical and contemporary discursively produced cultural repertoires. The homogenising of Métis identities post-1982 as a result of their inclusion in Section 35 of the Constitution (1982) remains problematic, as the experiences, needs and futures of various groups claiming to be Métis differ. The untangling of such differences must occur in order to address the varied needs of Métis People. Even within this small sample of participants, the needs and concerns of Métis People varied considerably: while harvesting rights were a significant concern for some, for others, having a local community to connect to for social support and to learn about and continue cultural practices was more important.⁵ Through thoughtful dialogue we can move beyond current understandings of Métis identity as "a policy category, or the place you go when you don't fit elsewhere" (Gaudry, 2015, p. 97) to an understanding of Métis through the lens of peoplehood, so the very real challenges and injustices Métis People face today can be addressed in a manner that is holistic and inclusive of Indigenous values, such as *wahkootowin*.

Perhaps more important than the ways in which Métis organisations are defining Métis are the ways in which Canadian legal bodies are regulating Indigenous identities, as Supreme Court

cases appear to be a driving force in the development of legally validated definitions of Métis. Though governing bodies seek to strategically define “Métis” through the reproduction, citation, and repetition of language and social practices, Métis individuals simultaneously contribute to the dominant discourses that construct “Métis”. The various narratives of Métis People living in British Columbia shed light on the *how* of Métis identity in terms of the ways in which Métis come to negotiate and situate their identities against Eurocentric perspectives embedded in and reinforced by colonial institutions. Through rendering taken-for-granted and invisible ideas regarding what constitutes Métis identity visible, stereotypical Métis narratives are effectively destabilised, with the knowledge that meaning cannot ever be finally fixed and that Métis identity and related discourses will continue to evolve over time.

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¹ From 1885 to 1923, the Canadian government issued scrip through various scrip commissions to extinguish Métis title to the land throughout the prairie provinces, so it could be used for incoming settlers.

² Note that university behavioural ethics board approval was also sought and attained (H13-00050).

³ For the extended narratives of all 20 participants, see Legault (2016).

⁴ In her study of 19th century Métis in Île à la Crosse, Saskatchewan, Macdougall reconstructed genealogies through the cross-referencing of scrip, fur trade, and census records to reveal the ways in which wahkootowin informed the social structure of family networks. She argues that “Aboriginal women – Cree, Dene, and then Métis – grounded their families in their homelands, creating for them a sense of belonging to the territory through a regionally defined matrilocal residency pattern and, therefore, female-centred family networks” (2010, p. 445). Consequently, the relationship that Métis People had to the land was defined by that of the women born of that land.

⁵ Though it was beyond the scope of this research, it may also be possible that individual identity definitions varied based on the age group of participants, as a result of exposure to differing discourses throughout particular generations. To investigate this possibility, a larger sample of participants would likely have been required.