

Métis Research Ethics: Academic Freedom and Métis Government Accountability

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Abstract

The Métis author shares her experiences navigating relationships with the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF) across her research studies on Métis spirituality, especially relationships with traditional Indigenous ceremonies, underscoring ethical considerations. Recent efforts by the MMF to assert sovereignty as a safeguard against Métis identity fraud and subsequent impacts on Métis research and scholarship are also discussed. The argument proposed is that the academic freedom of Métis citizen scholars need not be pitted against Métis government efforts at sovereignty—rather than viewing these as mutually exclusive, they can co-exist to promote ethical Métis scholarship and self-determination.

Key words: Métis sovereignty and governance; Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF); Métis research ethics; Métis community-based research; academic freedom; authoritarianism; Métis spirituality; Indigenous identity fraud

Introduction

Boozhoo nindinawemagunidoog! Zaagaatekwe nindizhinikaaz, biizhew nidoodem, Michif ndaaw. Greetings, my relatives! I am Sunshine through the Clouds woman. I was ceremonially adopted by the late Charlie Nelson, Chief of the Minweyweywaan Midewiwin lodge of Roseau River First Nation, and therefore belong to the lynx clan. I am Michif and a citizen of the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF). My father is French Canadian; I am Métis through my mother, who was raised in St Laurent, which was established by our Michif ancestors before the confederation of Canada.

In May 2025, I participated in the Métis Ethics: Beyond OCAP and Towards Métis Sovereignty conference hosted at the University of Winnipeg (UW) with Métis scholars and community members from across the homeland. Such conferences are increasingly important as we witness an emboldening of authoritarianism, dismantling of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies, suspension of Indigenous Studies programs, censorship, and rising fascism at the provincial, national, and global levels. Métis citizens, scholars, and governing bodies across the homeland seek to protect our rights as a self-determining nation; unsurprisingly, we have diverse viewpoints on how this is best accomplished. Tensions are arising between Métis citizen

scholars¹ exercising academic freedom and Métis government actors attempting to assert jurisdiction over Métis ethics, research, publication, curricula, and hiring in universities.

The threat of Métis governmental interference in academia risks setting a dangerous precedent in its disregard for Métis scholars' academic freedom and universities' and funding agencies' ability to operate without undue pressure from external stakeholders. Such interference, especially under the guise of "Indigenous sovereignty and jurisdiction," can result in censorship and suppression of research to suit particular government agendas, including perpetuating a narrow and problematic Métis master narrative. These dynamics raise alarms about authoritarian Métis government control, the attempted curtailment of Métis citizen scholars' rights to academic freedom, and the dissemination of research that accurately reflects Métis realities.

Below, I share my experiences navigating relationships with the MMF across my research on Métis spirituality, underscoring ethical considerations. I also outline recent efforts by the MMF to assert sovereignty as a safeguard against Métis identity fraud, and how a distortion of this intent has resulted in subsequent attacks on Métis research and researchers. I argue that the academic freedom of Métis citizen scholars need *not* be pitted against the sovereignty of Métis government; these are not mutually exclusive and, in truth, can co-exist to promote ethical Métis self-determination *and* scholarship.²

Métis Spirituality and Religion

For over 16 years, I have studied Métis relationships with Indigenous spirituality and learned that Métis spirituality includes ceremonies and has always done so.³ Despite ongoing intergenerational colonial efforts to dispossess Indigenous people from these ways,⁴ Métis people are increasingly finding their way back to ceremonies.⁵ Currently, I am Project Director on the study "Expressions of Métis Spirituality and Religion across the Homeland,"⁶ which centres three historic Métis communities across the Prairies: St Laurent, Manitoba; Lebret, Saskatchewan; and St. Albert, Alberta. A cross-provincial Métis team oversees the project, including a Knowledge Carriers Council, community liaisons, graduate student research assistants, and provincial co-leads. The knowledge carriers and liaisons are well-respected Métis community members connected to these three communities through residence and/or kinship.

This Métis-led research team has steered the project since the beginning. We hosted two-day gatherings in each community, followed by one-day symposia at nearby universities (UWinnipeg, URegina, and UAlberta), engaging over 250 Métis community members in total. The gatherings facilitated cultural workshops on the Michif language, fish-filleting, Red River cart construction, beading, fiddling, jigging, medicine walks, community tours, and book launches by Métis residents and descendants of each community. We gathered data from participants through questionnaires, interviews, and talking circles.

¹ Métis citizen scholars or researchers hold (or are eligible for) valid citizenship with a Métis provincial governing body: MMF, Métis Nation-Saskatchewan (MN-S), Otipemisiwak Métis Government (OMG, formerly, Métis Nation of Alberta, MNA, and the Métis Settlements in Alberta), Métis Nation British Columbia (MNBC), or Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO).

² *Marsii* to the anonymous Métis reviewers who shared feedback on this article during the peer review process and ultimately strengthened it.

³ Lawrence Barkwell, Darren Préfontaine and Carrière-Acco, "Métis Spirituality"; Darren Préfontaine, Todd Paquin and Patrick Young, "Métis Spiritualism."

⁴ Pettipas, *Severing the Ties*.

⁵ See works by Fiola in the bibliography.

⁶ With funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), Manitoba Research Alliance, Rupertsland Centre for Métis Research, and the Universities of Winnipeg, Regina, and Alberta.

To prioritize Métis-specific interests, only Métis community residents could attend the community gatherings, while the university symposia were open to everyone, but only Métis could formally present. Topics included historic and contemporary Métis relationships with spirituality and religion, Métis Elders and knowledge carriers panels; Métis spirituality and religion and convergence with the education system, harvesting as ceremony, personal narrative journeys, and efforts at cultural and spiritual revitalization, including those undertaken in urban environments.

Spirituality and religion were incorporated throughout the study, beginning with my fasting at Sundance. Métis Kookum Barbara Bruce opened the inaugural community gathering with a pipe and eagle fan brushing ceremony in her home community of St. Laurent on the shore of Lake Manitoba. The next morning, Métis Catholic deacon and knowledge carrier Michael Thibert delivered a homily in the St. Laurent Catholic Church while wearing a Métis sash under his cassock, holding an eagle feather, and introducing himself with his spirit name. Medicines, smudge, sharing circles, feasts, prayer, and spirit dishes were respectfully incorporated into the overall offerings.

Project deliverables from this study include a co-edited scholarly book, a plain-language community pamphlet, a documentary (filmed with consent by local Métis film crews), and the creation of a university course. The study debunks harmful stereotypes such as the following: all Métis are Catholic; Métis do not participate in ceremonies; and Métis do not follow tobacco protocols. While these things may be true for some Métis, they are not so for *all* Métis, historically or today. The Métis are a heterogeneous people with an expansive homeland and much diversity, including faith traditions.

The study has engendered more fulsome understandings of Métis spirituality and religion grounded in local knowledges and experiences. By working to include all facets of our Métisness, we contribute to the resurgence and revitalization of Métis spirituality. We also encourage a return to Métis community relationships and visiting across colonial boundaries; just as our ancestors once traveled bison hunt trails from the Red River westward, our team traveled from St. Laurent and Winnipeg to Lebreton and Regina and then onto St Albert and Edmonton before returning home again.

Empowering Métis Individuals, Communities, and Scholarship through Research

I have increasingly involved Métis individuals and communities in my research to strengthen moves towards Métis self-determination. My doctoral research explored *individual* relationships with ceremony; I interviewed 18 Métis, mostly from Winnipeg, about family connections to religion and spirituality, personal spiritual journeys, and their relationships with ceremonies. I recognized them as experts regarding their own experiences and lifted up their voices and knowledge. From this came my first book, *Rekindling the Sacred Fire: Métis Ancestry and Anishinaabe Spirituality*.

Next, I examined Métis relationships with spirituality and ceremonies at the *community* level. I centred six Manitoba Métis communities predating Canadian confederation: Duck Bay, Camperville, St. Laurent, St. François-Xavier, Lorette, and Ste. Anne. With funding from SSHRC via the Manitoba Research Alliance, I hired six Métis community researchers connected to the communities via residence and/or kinship. We interviewed 32 Métis from these communities on topics similar to the first study. The findings were published in my second book, *Returning to Ceremony: Spirituality in Manitoba Metis Communities*.

In addition to a geographic expansion across the homeland (especially the Prairies), my present study goes from centring Indigenous spirituality to including institutionalized religion,

especially Catholicism. A Métis preference for syncretism—a weaving of Indigenous spirituality and Christianity—has emerged as a central theme throughout my studies.⁷

I have sought to increase a Métis-specific focus in my research. My doctoral research was heavily influenced by my ceremonial adoption into an Anishinaabe family and initiation into the Three Fires Midewiwin society.⁸ This is evident in my first book. Between that book and my second book, Indigenous identity fraud was exposed on a national scale.⁹ Using the “Métis equals mixed” stereotype, “Métis” identity is problematically being claimed by people with any mixed Indigenous ancestry¹⁰ and by individuals fabricating Indigenous identity.¹¹ Consequently, I shifted criteria for participation from “ancestry” in the first study to “identity” in subsequent studies. Now, I focus on the national criteria for Métis identity adopted in 2002 by the Métis National Council (MNC) and upheld by the five Métis provincial governing bodies.¹²

I have also sought to strengthen a Métis community-based methodology. In my studies, Métis participants can opt to review their interview transcripts for accuracy, retain their raw data, and decide whether I can retain a copy. In my second study, I underwent the MMF’s Manitoba Métis Community Research Ethics Protocol (MMCRep) and obtained their ethics approval before commencing fieldwork. As noted above, I also collaborated with six Métis community researchers across six Métis communities; some were graduate students, while others had no relationship with academia. I provided them with a group training session on consent, confidentiality, interviewing, and tobacco and smudge protocols, gifting each a smudge bundle with sage I had harvested. They also participated in data analysis and the presentation of findings in each community.

I increased my efforts in the third study via the cross-provincial Métis team; together, we are the decision makers for the project. We collaborated on research design, selection of methods, development of materials (including questionnaire, interview, and talking circle guides), fieldwork, organizing gatherings and symposia, selection of presenters and chapter contributors, delivering panel presentations, data analysis, and knowledge mobilization, including conferences and publication.

Member checking has been strengthened through follow-up community tea and bannock visits. Relationships grow through visiting, sharing food, and ongoing accountability. The first return visit will consist of a presentation of initial findings and a preliminary screening of the video, welcoming community input to validate findings as another layer of data analysis; feedback will also be shared with the film editor, who will edit accordingly. In a subsequent tea and bannock visit, we will deliver a final presentation and screening. The Métis communities remain engaged, confirm accuracy, contribute to messaging, and reaffirm consent. Participants decide whether to review and retain their raw data, share it with their communities and beyond, whether the researchers can retain a copy, and whether they wish to appear on film. To promote Métis community data sovereignty, each community will retain a copy of participant data (with consent) and final products (pamphlet, book, film, course syllabus), control access to these materials, and decide who can engage with them and how. Participants can also consent to have their data housed on the Rupertsland Centre for Métis Research website to increase accessibility to Métis (and others).

⁷ Fiola, *Rekindling*; Fiola, *Returning*.

⁸ A spiritual way of life and seasonal ceremonial cycle practiced mainly, but not exclusively, by the Anishinaabeg.

⁹ Leroux, *Distorted Descent*.

¹⁰ Andersen, “Métis;” Gaudry, “Communing with the Dead.”

¹¹ Leroux, *Distorted Descent*.

¹² “‘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”; see Métis National Council, “Citizenship.” The MNC is accused of granting citizenship that fail to meet these criteria.

Navigating Métis Governments, Research Partnerships, and Community Relationships

I approached ethics approval differently in each study. For my doctoral research, I obtained ethics approval from Trent University. In my second study, I obtained it from UWinnipeg and via the MMCREP. The MMF's Tri-Partite Self-Government Negotiation (TSN) Branch oversaw MMCREP; I was the third individual to undergo the protocol.¹³ I submitted my research proposal to TSN, which shared it with the vice-presidents of the regions where the six Métis communities in my study were located. We had an in-person meeting where the vice-presidents could ask questions, raise concerns, and make requests. I planned to consider Duck Bay and Camperville together since their history is inextricably joined and due to their proximity to each other; however, the MMF requested that I consider them separately. I was going to hire one Métis Community Researcher for both, but the MMF asked that each community have its own and suggested someone for the second community. Then, the TSN Director signed a letter of support and my ethics approval, and I began fieldwork.

Halfway through my fieldwork, TSN unexpectedly asked me to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), including requesting ownership over participant data. By then, most participants had signed a consent form and completed their interviews; retroactively seeking consent to give their data to the MMF would have been problematic at best. I explained to TSN the importance of sharing an MOU template in advance of fieldwork, as it would inform the development of the consent form, among other things. Their request was, from a formal research perspective, unreasonable.

The MOU mentioned terms of reference and appendices that did not exist or were not finalized (these were never shared with me, despite repeated requests) and employed terms inconsistently or interchangeably without providing definitions. The MOU granted the MMF authority to review the final report and approve, reject, or request revisions if something was not in line with MMF policy, principles, or *cultural integrity*. UWinnipeg's legal counsel helped me request modifications to the MOU, including specifying that the agreement was between the MMF and UWinnipeg (with me as Primary Investigator) and seeking clarification regarding intellectual property rights and how the MMF planned to determine "cultural integrity." We noted that the MMF could review and comment on a final report/manuscript before publication but that it ultimately did not have authority to censor the research. Academic freedom is the earned privilege of academic researchers. Therefore, we also requested a clear conflict resolution process. I would retain all intellectual property in respect of data and work products resulting from this study and all rights to publication, copyright, and distribution. The legal team and I expressed openness to co-drafting an agreement with the MMF regarding stewardship of collective data. The MMF requested a meeting; I agreed, noting that a UWinnipeg lawyer would accompany me. I requested that all documents mentioned in the MOU be provided beforehand. Over the next year, despite repeated attempts, the MMF stopped responding to my emails to schedule the meeting. Despite my efforts, an MOU was never signed; however, the TSN Director offered to write me a letter of support on behalf of the MMF. I reminded her that I had already received such a document more than a year prior.

The director acknowledged that I was experiencing firsthand MMCREP's growing pains. Recognizing my knowledge and expertise as an experienced researcher, she asked if I would help the MMF develop their Métis research ethics process. I agreed—that never materialized either. I continued providing updates to the director, including excerpts from my manuscript prior to publication and received her approval. TSN dissolved before I began my current study; however,

¹³ The first two were graduate student research studies; my study was multi-site with hired Métis community researchers and resulted in publication. To date, the MMCREP has only ever existed in working draft form.

the MMF still expects researchers undertaking fieldwork in Métis communities to obtain prior MMF approval.

In the current study, the cross-provincial Métis team made the difficult decision not to partner with or seek ethics approval from any Métis provincial governing bodies. Our first concern was MMF President David Chartrand's targeted erasure of Métis relationships with ceremony. Since the publication of *Returning to Ceremony*, Chartrand has been making public statements claiming that ceremonies have no place in Métis spirituality and implied that Métis who participate in ceremonies are committing Indigenous identity fraud.¹⁴ His messaging intensified during the MMF delegation's visit to the Vatican and Pope Francis's Canadian penitential pilgrimage; it accelerated to claiming that Métis have only ever been Catholic, asking the Pope to help revitalize Catholicism in Métis communities, and encouraging Métis to recommit to Catholicism. Speaking from his political pulpit, Chartrand claimed that Métis remain strong believers but then seemingly contradicted himself with a concern that "many of the churches in Métis communities are losing members."¹⁵ I responded in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, explaining that President Chartrand's statements do not reflect the lived reality of many Métis, historically or contemporarily.¹⁶ Chartrand has grown increasingly antagonistic in his views towards Métis who ceremony and imposes his own views upon Métis citizens.

At the 2023 MMF Annual General Assembly (AGA), in recognition of the fact that not all Métis are Christian, two Métis citizens brought forward a resolution to remove Christian prayer from official MMF meetings and gatherings and replace it with a secular moment of reflection. In a nearly eight-minute response, President Chartrand sermonized, sometimes angrily, and threatened to resign should the resolution pass. Then, the microphones were cut, and the vote was called; unsurprisingly, the resolution was defeated.¹⁷ This undemocratic behavior is more concerning now that the MMF refers to itself (and expects everyone else to) as the "National Government" of *all* Red River Métis. Such biased rhetoric risks silencing the Métis across our nation who ceremony.

The MMF now officially only recognizes Catholicism, including in a new timeline, "Red River Métis and the Catholic Church: Journey Forward—Reconciliation to Renewal."¹⁸ The timeline cites the 2011 National Household Survey, stating "more than two-thirds of Métis are Christian" and "more than 40% of Métis in the Prairie Provinces are Catholic."¹⁹ In the 2021 Canadian Census, these numbers decreased, with 50.5% of Métis identifying as Christian (31.6% of those reporting Catholic), 47.35% reporting *no religion and secular perspectives*, and 0.45% reporting Traditional (North American Indigenous) spirituality.²⁰ The total number of Métis who identify as secular or participate in ceremonies is greater than the number who identify as Catholic.²¹ My research findings similarly indicate a decline in Christianity and Catholicism

¹⁴ Chartrand, "President's Message," December 15, 2021.

¹⁵ Monkman, "Manitoba Métis Federation."

¹⁶ Fiola, "Métis Spirituality."

¹⁷ MMF, "2023 Annual General Assembly," Day 3: 6:56:44–7:04:22.

¹⁸ This timeline erases Métis participation in ceremony, including the MMF participation in it discussed below. No author or date appears on the English version of the timeline; the French version lists simply Wei Xie, 2022, "Les Métis."

¹⁹ MMF, "Red River Métis."

²⁰ Statistics Canada, "Religion."

²¹ In Canada, religious affiliation, participation in religious activities, and the importance placed on religious or spiritual beliefs have all been in decline for decades, explained primarily by younger generations having a different relationship to religion than older ones; see Cornelissen, "Religiosity." In the 2021 census, just over half the Canadian population (53.3%) reported a Christian religion; however, this is down from 67.3% in 2011 and 77.1% in 2001; more than one in three Canadians reported having no religious affiliation; see Statistics Canada, "The Canadian Census."

among the Métis and an increase in Métis participation in Indigenous ceremonies;²² I predict that both trends will continue. It is time to retire the stereotype that “all Métis are Catholic or Christian.”

The second reason our team decided against partnering with or seeking ethics approval from the provincial Métis governing bodies is because they were suing each other. In 2021, the MMF officially withdrew from the MNC, arguing that the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) continues to grant Métis citizenship to individuals who fail to meet the national criteria despite being suspended by the MNC until that it could prove that it was not doing so.²³ The MNO, MN-S, and MNA began referring to themselves as the “Tri-Council” in an effort to be recognized as the national representative of the Métis Nation; simultaneously, the MMF began referring to itself as the “national government of the Red River Métis.”²⁴ Soon thereafter, the MN-S and then the MNBC also withdrew from the MNC; only the MNA (now the OMG) and the MNO remain.²⁵

When the MMF left, the latter (with support from the MNA, MN-S, MNBC, and MNO) filed a multi-million dollar lawsuit against former MNC President Clément Chartier, MMF President and former MNC Vice-President and Minister of Finance, David Chartrand, the MMF, and others, claiming a “scorched earth policy” that involved withdrawing from the MNC “to financially harm the organization in order to better position the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF) to take its place on the national stage” as “the sole national voice and representative of the Métis Nation.”²⁶ In addition, the MNA (supported by the MN-S) sued the MMF and the federal government over the Métis self-government agreements each provincial Métis governing body signed, claiming that the MMF’s agreement gave them the ability to “poach” citizens from the other Métis governing bodies.²⁷

The 2019 MMF self-government agreement speaks only of the “Manitoba Métis”; clause 53 states that “Nothing in this Agreement affects, recognizes, or provides any rights under section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982* of any Indigenous people or collectivity other than the *Manitoba Métis*.”²⁸ However, from the MMF’s perspective, the 2021 agreement “provided immediate recognition of the MMF as the democratically elected Métis Government for the *Red River Métis*.”²⁹ At the 2022 MMF AGA, Resolution 3 was passed in order “To Amend the MMF Constitution to Add Reference to the Red River Métis.”³⁰ At the 2023 AGA, the MMF passed an amendment “To Amend the MMF Constitution with Respect to Adding a Definition of Red River Métis”: “‘Red River Métis’ means the Indigenous collectivity, *also known as the Manitoba Métis*” with four parts; also, the national definition and criteria for Métis were altered, including now referring to “*Red River Métis Citizens*.”³¹ On November 30, 2024, the MMF signed a self-government treaty with Canada (likewise replacing “Manitoba Métis” with *all* “Red River Métis”); the signatories are the “Red River Métis” and His Majesty the King in Right of Canada, and it refers to the MMF as the “National Government of the Red River Métis,” with a new

²² Fiola, *Rekindling*; Fiola, *Returning*.

²³ MMF, “MMF Withdraws;” Stranger, “Métis of Ontario.”

²⁴ “MNO, MNA, MNS Moving Forward;” MMF, “The National Government.”

²⁵ Forester, “Métis Nation-Saskatchewan;” Forester, “Métis Nation of Alberta;” MNBC, “Métis Nation British Columbia.”

²⁶ Howell, “Métis Nation of Alberta;” Narine, “Chartrand Says.” The lawsuit was dismissed—see, Chartrand, “President’s Message,” December 4, 2025.

²⁷ Forester, “Métis Nation of Alberta;” Narine, “Chartrand Says.”

²⁸ Government of Canada, “Manitoba Métis Self-Government.” Italics added.

²⁹ MMF, “The National Government.” Italics added.

³⁰ MMF, 2022 AGA Resolution 3.

³¹ Italics added. Marsii to Two-Spirit Michif Local Secretary, Sonja Stone, for emailing me this resolution, as I could not find it online. In October 2024, the MMF Constitution was updated to reflect these changes; see MMF, “Constitution,” p. 3.

MMF logo adopted to this effect.³² Section B of the Preamble states the following: “For over two centuries the Red River Métis, the Indigenous collectivity also known as the *Manitoba* Métis, and historically referred to as the New Nation or la Nouvelle Nation, has exercised its rights to self-determination and self-government by establishing governance structures, making and enforcing its laws, and following its traditions and customs, and it continues to do so today.”³³

The MMF website states that the “MMF is the only officially recognized Métis Government in Canada.”³⁴ The MMF’s *Beyond Borders Task Force* aims to connect with Métis citizens beyond Manitoba to “protect the Red River Métis beyond borders, throughout our homeland, and indeed wherever our Citizens live across Canada and beyond.”³⁵ The other Métis provincial governing bodies have accused the MMF of poaching their citizens during these efforts—the MMF has both denied³⁶ and confirmed this, with President Chartrand giving himself (not the MMF) authority over all Red River Métis” “My job as the president is to ensure that every citizen of Red River that has to move.... we need to make sure that their rights are protected and that *I have jurisdiction to ensure I provide services.*”³⁷ MNC citizenship guidelines state that individuals must apply for Métis citizenship in the affiliated province in which they live, but the MMF, having withdrawn from the MNC, is not beholden to that rule.³⁸ The MMF has not engaged with the other Métis provincial governing bodies or the MNC to discuss—let alone reach consensus—to refer to itself as the “National Government” of all Red River Métis across the homeland and beyond. For these reasons, our team decided it would be unwise and unsafe to engage the provincial Métis governing bodies for the present study;³⁹ nonetheless, we maintain the highest ethical standards throughout our project.

Given the MMF’s denial that Métis spirituality includes ceremonies, it was unreasonable to expect it to be able to identify members of the community who are respected ceremonial leaders to serve on the Knowledge Carriers Council.⁴⁰ Since the co-leads are relationally connected to the communities, we know these individuals and reached out directly.⁴¹ The cross-provincial Métis team helped oversee the study and ensure transparency and accountability to community. We obtained ethics approval from the UWinnipeg, URegina, and UAlberta and drafted an MOU stating that the Métis communities, via the knowledge carriers and liaisons, are the key decision makers alongside the co-leads. It outlines that non-Indigenous partners and non-community members play a supporting role—each university and the Rupertsland Centre for Métis Research signed. The core team has participated in decision making, from project design through to knowledge mobilization. Member checking and opportunities for community members to review findings, screen the film, and provide feedback to modify these outputs increases accountability, transparency, and community empowerment, as does the fact that data and final products will be retained by the communities. Ceremonies, traditional medicines, and

³² Government of Canada, “Manitoba Métis Federation;” Government of Canada, “Red River Métis.” Canada has not yet ratified the treaty.

³³ Government of Canada, “Red River Métis.” Italics added.

³⁴ MMF, “The National Government.”

³⁵ MMF, “Bringing Citizens Home;” MMF, “The National Government.”

³⁶ MMF, “Bringing Citizens Home.”

³⁷ Lilley, “Manitoba Métis Federation.” Italics added.

³⁸ Métis National Council, “Citizenship.”

³⁹ For more on the MMF’s stance regarding Métis who ceremony and the internecine legal battles between Métis governing bodies, see my upcoming publications: Fiola, “Evolution of a Métis Methodology,” and Fiola, “Papal Apology and Impacts.”

⁴⁰ During the Métis Ethics conference, an audience member asked who had the authority to interpret archival materials. For the reasons noted above, it would be problematic if, say, only the MMF had the authority to interpret archival letters of early priests in Manitoba commenting on Métis who ceremony.

⁴¹ I had already collaborated with one of the knowledge carriers in my previous study and other initiatives at her invitation.

petitions to spirit and ancestors guide our work (including via tobacco, feast, and spirit dishes, for example) and promote sacred accountability.

The research team and the communities are inextricable. The co-leads, knowledge carriers, liaisons, and research assistants are deeply connected to the communities—our relational accountability and obligations do not end when the study does. St. Laurent is my mother's community, and I am a descendant of it—I am known there as the granddaughter of Robert Normand and Dorothee Guiboche. Our sacred responsibility to remain accountable to our ancestors and relatives persists throughout our lives.

Métis Scholars' Academic Freedom *and* Métis Government Self-Determination

The ethical challenges our team has navigated relate mainly to Métis governing bodies rather than to Métis communities, universities, or funding bodies. We have received overwhelmingly positive reception and feedback from the Métis communities, including appreciation for illuminating a misunderstood and understudied but significant topic and for respecting Métis diversity. We heard Métis family members share differences in their relationships with spirituality and religion compared to their siblings, never mind within and across communities, or the Métis homeland.

As efforts to be recognized as self-determining Métis governing bodies, signing treaties with the Crown, and guarding against identity fraud have increased, so have Métis government efforts to control research, publication, curricula, and hiring. Resolution 8, passed in 2007 and re-circulated in 2024, outlines a framework for consultation and engagement with the MMF to be followed by government, industry, and organizations.⁴² “Resolution 3 Regarding Red River Métis Research,” from the 2024 MMF AGA states, “AND WHEREAS Academic freedom, and other research related laws, policies, and practices must be exercised in a reasonable and responsible manner while also ensuring the rights and freedoms of others are upheld, including Red River Métis as a rights-bearing Indigenous People.”⁴³ The resolution asserts that the MMF has the right to:

- a. maintain, control, protect and develop Red River Métis cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of Red River Métis sciences, technologies and cultures . . .
 - b. maintain, control, protect and develop Red River Métis intellectual property over cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions and material culture; and
2. Requests that the MMF Cabinet consider that the MMF take effective measures to protect the exercise of Red River Métis rights in research and determine the measures for protecting those rights, which may include the development of its own law and transparent research ethics policies and process [sic] which may ensure all parties who wish to conduct research involving Red River Métis, seek consent of the MMF and enter into formal agreements with the MMF prior to conducting research; and
3. Requests that the MMF Cabinet consider that the MMF take effective measures to protect Red River Métis rights in research, through communication and education related to approved resolutions, and established policies and processes to the following parties:
- a. Red River Métis Citizens, Locals, Regions, and MMF Affiliates and Departments; and
 - b. all external parties, which may include federal and provincial governments, industries, *universities*, and other organizations.⁴⁴

⁴² MMF, “Resolution 8.”

⁴³ MMF, “Resolution 3. AGA 2024, Day 3, 7:14:34–8:01:50.

⁴⁴ MMF, “Resolution 3. AGA 2024, Day 3, 7:14:34–8:01:50. Italics added.

At the AGA, citizens asked whether the resolution meant that Métis citizens who speak with their own family and then write a book about it would need MMF permission. A Minister said no, that it was not intended to impose a “strict regime” or “Soviet-era control” over Métis citizens but sought to protect against non-Métis researchers, Indigenous identity theft, exploitation, non-compensation, abuses, misrepresentation, and spreading falsehoods.⁴⁵ Another citizen echoed concern that the resolution does not distinguish between Métis and non-Métis researchers, noting that not all Red River Métis are MMF citizens; therefore, the MMF cannot speak for all Métis, and that no government can dictate or control research by their citizens. Yet another citizen asked to modify the resolution to explicitly note there will be a transparent, unbiased, arms-length body, separate from the MMF, to oversee Métis ethics and research given the conflicting agendas at play; this judicious request was declined by the Minister chairing the resolutions portion of the AGA.

Another citizen noted that the word “control” appeared frequently in the resolution and acknowledged that she is a Métis citizen researcher the MMF has labelled a “rogue researcher”; she raised concerns that the resolution disregarded academic freedom of Métis citizen researchers and disallowed their research with willing Métis participants without due or unreasonable interference. She shared that the MMF President had called her employer and university ethics board, and her project is now stalled. She noted that this occurred before this resolution passed and that she could only imagine what the MMF President and Cabinet would be empowered to do to Métis citizen researchers if it were to pass. President Chartrand took to the microphone to minimize the audience applause that ensued and expressed concern about including the MNO in Métis research and using the MMF logo on research posters.⁴⁶ He then digressed to criticize Métis who had come to vote on a resolution in support of Palestine, stating, “I’ll go out there and beat the shit out of anybody that comes and tries to threaten my people.”⁴⁷ He noted that Métis professors have *earned* the right to freedom of expression (and speech) but warned that if they say something “wrong against us,” the MMF will respond, “hold you accountable,” and “challenge you.”⁴⁸ Then, without naming me, he incorrectly said my research claims that Métis “lost their sweat lodges” and worried, unnecessarily, that I am teaching this in schools and harming the brains of young Métis and non-Métis.⁴⁹ He admitted that he is challenging curricula to ensure it is “*preaching* and teaching the *right* history” of the Métis. Another citizen raised concerns about the fact that MMF AGA delegates are only permitted to see the wording of resolutions when they hit the floor (except constitutional resolutions) and therefore do not have time to meaningfully consider them before a vote is called. A minister then admitted that the MMCREP was never formally adopted and acknowledged that the MMF needs

⁴⁵ MMF, “Resolution 3. AGA 2024, Day 3, 7:14:34–8:01:50.

⁴⁶ There are legitimate Métis with MNO citizenship. One way of including them would be to transparently isolate MNO data within a research study so it does not skew the overall data (and see what can be learned from both sets of data in communication with one another). Academic freedom protects this legitimate approach.

⁴⁷ MMF, “Resolution 3. AGA 2024, Day 3, 7:14:34–8:01:50.

⁴⁸ MMF, “Resolution 3. AGA 2024, Day 3, 7:14:34–8:01:50. The right to freedom of expression need not be “earned” because it is a constitutionally protected *right*—see Government of Canada, “*Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*: Section 2(b).” Academic freedom is specific to the profession, especially to tenured faculty members. There are four main elements: freedom to research and publish (without outside interference); freedom to teach (including pedagogical approach, choice of materials, and assessment); freedom of intramural expression (to engage in service to the institution, including criticizing the institution); and freedom of extramural expression (to engage in public commentary as a professor)—see Liddle, “Defending Academic Freedom.”

⁴⁹ MMF, “Resolution 3. AGA 2024, Day 3, 7:14:34–8:01:50. Rather, I said there have always been Métis who have participated in ceremonies, but colonial pressures have disconnected us from these—see Fiola, “Métis Spirituality,” and Pettipas, *Severing the Ties*.

to “go back to the drawing board” with it to consider the questions it was hearing from the AGA floor.⁵⁰

The threat of identity fraud and push for Métis self-determination are being used as excuses to become increasingly insular (despite *Beyond Borders* efforts) by expunging diversity within the Métis nation and as a smokescreen to censor *Métis citizen scholars’* research pursuits and disregard academic freedom and the ability of universities, publishing houses, and granting agencies to operate without undue interference from any Métis government. At the 2023 AGA, President Chartrand admitted the MMF is “creating a body . . . which will look at all of the books that are coming out and being taught in our schools . . . to see if it’s truly telling us the truth about our history”⁵¹ and issued a warning not to non-Indigenous scholars but to *Métis citizen scholars*: “For the Métis authors out there, be careful what you’re writing, be careful what you’re selling, be careful what you’re saying. . . . If it’s real, [MMF will] stamp it and say, ‘this is good history, you can teach it in the schools.’”⁵² Also at the 2023 AGA, a citizen cautioned against Métis scholars supposedly doing research “without us,” criticized Métis research uncontrolled by the MMF, and tried to discredit *Pawaatamihk: Journal of Métis Thinkers* for the same reasons, implying it contributes to “raceshifting.”⁵³ A member of the journal’s Circle of Editors who was in attendance clarified that the Circle of Editors have citizenship with western Métis governing bodies, that everyone who publishes in the journal must submit a community statement (indicating citizenship and other family and community connections), and that all peer reviewers and editors are also Métis.⁵⁴

In addition to the examples noted above, I have personally seen (and been informed by individuals and institutions directly impacted by)⁵⁵ MMF interference in Métis citizen scholars’ research studies and conference organizing—President Chartrand has contacted university presidents and presidents of national granting agencies demanding that their institutions withdraw all support for a Métis scholar’s research study or conference (as occurred with the Métis Ethics conference) and threatened to go to media if those demands were not met. As he warned in the 2023 and 2024 AGAs, the MMF is indeed advancing efforts to try to control Métis research, ethics, and curricula in universities. In response, individuals and institutions are sounding alarms over a flagrant disregard for academic freedom and the pressing need to protect institutional autonomy.

Finding an Ethical Balance

No responsible government can control research, publication, teaching, university hiring—or citizens’ spiritual/religious expression. Section 2(a) of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* constitutionally protects freedom of religion.⁵⁶ David Robinson, Executive Director of the Canadian Association for University Teachers (CAUT), cautions: “Political influence on universities creates a dangerous precedent of governments intervening directly in the affairs of institutions,” including academic freedom and institutional ability to set policies and guidelines; “Academic freedom cannot thrive without institutional autonomy.”⁵⁷ The Manitoba *Advanced Education Administration Act* protects against government interference and upholds academic

⁵⁰ For more on the MMF’s disregard for academic freedom of Métis citizen scholars, see my upcoming chapters: Fiola, “Papal Apology,” and Fiola, “Evolution of a Métis Methodology.”

⁵¹ MMF 2023 AGA. Day 1, 5:32:49.

⁵² MMF 2023 AGA. Day 1, 5:33:06 and 5:35:19.

⁵³ MMF 2023 AGA. Day 1, 5:25:50 to 5:28:53.

⁵⁴ MMF 2023 AGA. Day 1, 5:37:09 to 5:38:57. Disclosure: I am one of this journal’s Circle of Editors.

⁵⁵ Identities and details of additional examples withheld to safeguard against potential retaliation.

⁵⁶ Government of Canada, “*Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*: Section 2(a)—Freedom of religion.”

⁵⁷ Liddle, “Defending Academic Freedom.”

freedom as a foundational pillar of academia.⁵⁸ Governments with authoritarian control over religion that censor research, publication, teaching and curricula, and disregard academic freedom embody fascism which goes hand in hand with dictatorship wherein a charismatic leader claims to speak for the nation, suppresses dissent, and prioritizes national interests above individual freedoms.

The MMF desire to control and promote a narrowed narrative of the Métis suits their agenda—to assert Métis sovereignty and perpetuate a patriarchal and misogynistic understanding of the Métis. This occurs when only aspects of our culture learned through our paternal European nations are celebrated (i.e. famous Métis men, fiddling, jigging, Catholicism) and cultural/spiritual aspects learned from our maternal First Nation relatives are erased (e.g. ceremonies—even Gabriel Dumont carried spirit names, belonged to a clan, was a pipe carrier, a firekeeper, and built and participated in sweat lodges⁵⁹). This outdated narrative has never reflected reality among Métis people and communities.⁶⁰ Disregarding historic and contemporary Métis spiritual leaders and participation in ceremony distorts sacred truths of our nation.

To be clear, I absolutely support Métis Nation sovereignty and self-determination. Our Nation has a responsibility to protect our people, including from Indigenous identity fraud. I also agree that for most research projects that plan to engage Métis citizens in Métis communities on Métis lands, the researcher should seek prior ethics approval from the Métis government (for example, a local, regional, provincial, or national office). However, as TCPS 2 Chapter 9 indicates, this is not the only legitimate way to obtain ethics approval from Indigenous community⁶¹—including for Métis citizen researchers connected to Métis communities.

Most presentations at the Métis Ethics conference discussed Métis government self-determination and protecting our citizens and communities from extractive *settler* research. Halfway through the final day, I asked the 120 people in attendance uncomfortable but important questions: “Who holds Métis governments accountable? Especially when they harm Métis citizens, or segments of our population?” How can we ensure that Métis governments who create their own research ethics protocols are also respecting the academic freedom of Métis citizen researchers and not withholding ethics approval simply because they do not like the topic or it does not align with the government’s agenda (but is nonetheless sound, ethical research)?

I call on (Métis) scholars involved in the upcoming revisions to TCPS 2 to consider these important questions and to explicitly include them in any updated version. Sections 9.5, 9.6, and 9.7 must be expanded and made more robust with additional examples to forestall undue (Indigenous) government interference, censorship, and abuse of power. I call on Métis governing bodies to consider these questions as they design their own research ethics procedures and bodies. These bodies should be arms-length from Métis government, as with the Mi’kmaq Ethics Watch.⁶²

The academic freedom of Métis citizen scholars should not be pitted against Métis sovereignty; Métis government can establish fair and unbiased ethics policies and bodies that protect Métis citizens, communities, and the nation as a whole without restricting academic freedom. Unlike the approach taken to date, Métis scholars *with community-based research experience* must be involved in their design and implementation and serve on these bodies to

⁵⁸ Government of Manitoba, “*Advanced Education*.”

⁵⁹ Thompson, *Red Sun*; Belcourt, “Why Should.”

⁶⁰ Statistics Canada, “Religion.”

⁶¹ See TCPS 2, Chapter 9, sections 9.5, 9.6, and 9.7, for reasons for and alternatives to obtaining ethics approval beyond Indigenous governments.

⁶² “Union of Nova Scotia Mi’kmaq,” Mi’kmaq Ethics Watch has its administrative home at the University of Cape Breton but is autonomous from the institution and from Mi’kmaq government; it is overseen by expert Mi’kmaq (and other Indigenous) scholars.

evaluate research proposals via expertise and without bias. Many of us would be happy to help our nation in this way—some of us have offered!

When I asked for advice while initially trying to make my way through the MMF's MMCREP process, a Métis legal scholar and colleague reminded me: the MMF is in a relationship with me (as a researcher and MMF citizen) as much as I am in one with them. They need to be reciprocal as much as I do and *not treat me as an adversary*. My ability to be an effective scholar and researcher is predicated on being able to meet the demands of my academic duties and being responsible to my funders and to the Métis community; I have tenure but may seek promotion in the future, which relies, in part, on successful research and peer reviewed publications. Likewise, Métis governments' need for credible research is linked to the sound scholarship of (Métis) researchers, and *this requires academic freedom*. Métis governments gatekeeping Métis research hinders Métis sovereignty.

Métis who ceremony may be a minority within our nation, but we have always existed, and our numbers are increasing—we deserve recognition, respect, and support from our government(s). Recently, plans were underway for the 10th anniversary of the 2015 Painted Hand Ceremony held in Serpent River First Nation, Ontario. Such ceremonies recall an ancestral tradition whereby a hide glove is filled with tobacco, painted with red ochre, and then sent by a “runner” to communities inviting them together for a given purpose. This occurred in 1820, when Chief Many Eagle Set called together the Nêhiyaw Pwat (Iron Confederacy/Alliance) which comprised the Cree (Nêhiyaw), Assiniboiné (Nakota), Chippewa (Anishinaabe), Saulteaux (Anishinaabe), and Métis (Michif) for a “thirsty dance” (Sundance).⁶³ There, a “Unity of the People” song descended from the Thunders to strengthen the alliance and the people.

This Sundance song was gifted in ceremony to Tony Belcourt⁶⁴ to carry for the Métis Nation by Sundance leader Francis Eagleheart Cree, a descendant of Many Eagle Set. Many Métis people came to witness the transfer of that song, including Elders and leadership from the MNO—and the MMF. The 2015 Painted Hand Ceremony commemorated this song and the alliance, as was the plan for the 2025 ceremony. Belcourt notes that “colonial forces have discouraged the traditional cultural ways of our ancestors. In fact, laws used to exist to ban our ceremonies. So, it is not surprising that these ways have been lost or at least suppressed.”⁶⁵ According to Belcourt, ceremonies are also part of Métis culture, and many Métis attend ceremonies: “Métis people have eagle staffs. Métis people are carried by the pipe—Gabriel Dumont was carried by the pipe. . . . I do [too, so does Elder] Maria Campbell, and many others. . . . We inherit this spirituality, or we embrace this as our way of spirituality.”⁶⁶ Belcourt invited Métis to attend the Painted Hand ceremony and wisely reminded us that “sacred ceremony like this is not politics. You leave politics at the door. We are coming together for prayer.”⁶⁷

Diversity among the Métis should not be feared; it has always been our reality and one of the greatest strengths and gifts of our nation. Métis citizen scholars are not “rogue scholars” or enemies working at cross-purposes to our nation as some of us are being portrayed by our government. We are Métis citizens with kinship responsibilities dedicating our lives to uplifting

⁶³ Fiola, *Returning*.

⁶⁴ Belcourt, a Métis citizen from Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta, was vice-president of the Métis Association of Alberta (1969) and founding president of the Native Council of Canada (1971) and the (MNO, 1993), and is the father of famed Métis artist and advocate Christi Belcourt.

⁶⁵ See Belcourt, “Why Should.”

⁶⁶ See Belcourt, “Why Should.”

⁶⁷ Whether one agrees with Belcourt's stance on MNO citizenship, his own Métis identity is indisputable. It is possible to separate his personal views on MNO citizenship from the knowledge he carries regarding the Nêhiyaw Pwat and Métis who ceremony. Again, academic freedom and sound critical thinking and research enable such careful, logical, and legitimate considerations. I encourage readers not to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

our communities and nation. Our reputation in community means everything to us—nothing is more important than our community relationships and ensuring our efforts benefit our communities.

Biography

Chantal Fiola is Michif (Red River Métis) with family from St. Laurent, St. Vital, Ste. Anne, and Ste. Geneviève, MB. Her ancestors, Pierre “Bostonnais” Pangman Jr and Marie Wewejikabawik, were among four Michif families who established the historic Métis community of St. Laurent. Chantal is a registered citizen of the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF). She is an award-winning author, including *Returning to Ceremony: Spirituality in Manitoba Métis Communities*. Currently, with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Manitoba Research Alliance, she is Project Director on the research study, “Expressions of Métis Spirituality and Religion Across the Métis Homeland.” Dr Fiola is the Associate Vice-President, Indigenous Engagement at the University of Winnipeg, where she was the Distinguished Indigenous Scholar’s Chair (2021-2024), and maintains an appointment as Associate Professor in the Urban and Inner-City Studies Department. She is a founding member of the Two-Spirit Michif Local of the MMF and served on the Board of Directors for Two-Spirit Manitoba from 2018 to 2025. Chantal lives in Winnipeg with her wife and their daughter.

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