



The Reason We Gather: Métis-Specific Spaces

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Introduction¹

Taanshi. We are two Métis women who are also mothers, daughters, sisters, spouses, educators, and researchers, and our academic work aligns with our personal dreams and goals of empowering our community and creating opportunities for celebrating Métis peoples. This article articulates how one such opportunity, the Mawachihitotaak Métis Symposium, came to pass in May 2022 and its resulting impacts on community members who attended, as reported on a post-symposium survey.

We introduce ourselves to position ourselves within our research and adhere to Métis research positionality protocols (e.g., Acoose, 1995; Adese et al., 2017; LaRocque, 1975, 2015). Laura Forsythe d-ishinikaashon. My name is Laura Forsythe. Ma famii kawyesh Roostertown d-oshciwak. My family was from Rooster Town a long time ago. Anosh ma famii Winnipeg wikiwak. Today, my family lives in Winnipeg. Ma Parentii (my ancestors) are Huppe, Ward, Berard, Morin, Lavallee, and Cyr. Niya en Michif. I am Métis from the Red River Settlement and grew up in the heart of the Métis Homeland, like the generations of women before me. My maternal great-grandmother Nora Berard was born in Rooster Town on land known as lot 31, owned by my ancestor Jean Baptiste Berard, and my lineage includes Joseph Huppe, who fought in the Victory of Frog Plain.

Lucy Delgado d-ishinikaashon, Winnipeg d-oschin p dan Winnipeg ni-wiikin. En Michif niya. I am Lucy Delgado, a two-spirit Métis woman, born and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba. My family were Sinclairs, Cummings, Prudens, some of whom took scrip in St. Andrews and St. Johns, and I have other family and ancestors from Red River, Oxford House, Norway House, and Sioux Valley and settler ancestors from Ireland and the Orkney Islands. I am an academic and community organizer, with a research and teaching focus on Métis youth identity, Indigenous education, queer theory, and youth cultures.

¹ This article is a reprint of a chapter of the same title in Forsythe & Markides (Eds.), *Métis Coming Together: Sharing our Stories and Knowledges*, published in 2025 by Peter Lang. Reprinted with permission.

As we share the names and stories of our families, we pay tribute to the work they did and the lives they led, which allowed us to be here in these academic halls. We also name our ancestors and our homelands to build connections with each other and you, the reader, and invite you to think of your ancestors too.

To understand the significance of the Mawachihitotaak symposium, it is essential to understand the context in which it happened, which we provide by discussing Métis gatherings across the homelands more generally before telling the story of the Mawachihitotaak symposium, sharing the preliminary findings and themes of the post-symposium survey, and finally discussing what we see as the next steps for Métis gatherings across the homeland.

Past Métis Gatherings

Our examination of the history of Métis-specific gatherings in Canada between 1980 and 2022 found 40 such instances. Due to the exclusive nature of many Métis gatherings and shifts in promotion over the past 40 years, there are undoubtedly gaps yet to be filled. Nevertheless, the data collected provide an overview of the offerings of the past. The focus of the 40 Métis-specific gatherings from 1980 to 2022 were of four types: 1) politically driven gatherings offered by either specific Métis governing bodies or the Métis National Council (MNC), 2) culturally focused gatherings intended to educate the wider community and hosted by the Gabriel Dumont Institute (GDI), 3) language gatherings centered on Michif hosted by either the nation or the GDI, and 4) academic conferences.

In the first form, Métis governing bodies—the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF), Métis Nation Saskatchewan (MNS), Métis Nation of Alberta (MNA), Métis Nation British Columbia (MNBC), and Métis Nation Ontario (MNO)—have held Métis-specific gatherings outside their annual general assemblies. However, the majority were politically driven, with many centered on leadership, self-government, and identity. The gatherings covered a number of topics designed for citizens or members of the governing bodies. All five governing bodies have held youth gatherings centered on the nation's future leadership and designed as an opportunity to educate and consult, such as the MNS-hosted Kishkayta in 2021. There is a long history within the nation of hosting Elder conferences such as the MMF's Past reflects the Present: The Métis Elders' Conference in 1991, documented by Barkwell and Shore (1997). Elder gatherings across the homeland brought Elders together to share stories of Métis ways of being and knowing to inform future negotiations when asserting Métis rights. Prior to the fracturing of the governing bodies in 2021, with the MMF leaving the MNC, gatherings have included policy forums inviting representatives from all five governing bodies and an annual celebration at Batoche, all assertions of Métis rights and the need to preserve Métis ways of being.

Over the past four decades, the GDI has hosted a series of conferences mainly around education and sharing cultural understandings. In 1976, the Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan began to dream of a conference, which materialized in 1980 with the first GDI conference. In the early years, these annual conferences were inclusive of all nations, bringing in Métis speakers such as the scholars Rita Bouvier and Sherry Farrell Racette and Yvon Dumont, a former MMF president, while also welcoming First Nation speakers such as Elijah Harper (Oji-Cree politician), Verna Kirkness (Cree scholar), and Winona Wheeler

(Cree/Assiniboine/Saulteaux and English/Irish scholar) (GDI, 1991). Attendees in the early years included GDI students and a selective guest list. The themed gatherings featured language revitalization, culture, justice reform, identity, and self-governance. Recently, GDI celebrated the 40th anniversary of its culture conference with an event featuring 42 sessions on a wide range of topics from beading to genealogy and memoir writing. The celebration included scholars, politicians, and community members, with a limited number of the 320 attendees required to purchase a ticket.

In the 1980s, the governing bodies and institutes started to host Michif language conferences and gatherings. The movement started in the MMF with the creation of the Michif Language Committee in 1984 and the Michif Language Conference, featuring 70 delegates from Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and North Dakota (Louis Riel Institute, 2023). In 2019, Sakitawak Elders held the 20th Annual Michif Language Festival in Île-à-la-Crosse, Saskatchewan, which featured a celebration with music and speakers and culminated in the signing of a declaration to uphold Métis ways of being by all leaders in attendance. In addition, in the spring of 2023, the GDI held an invite-only National Michif Speakers Gathering to discuss promising practices around language revitalization (GDI, 2023).

There has also been an increase in Métis-specific conferences or symposia in a post-secondary setting over the past decade. For example, the University of Alberta, in partnership with the MNA and Rupertsland Institute, hosted two conferences dealing with Métis-specific content at the post-secondary institutional level: the Daniels Conference: In and Beyond Law (2017) and the Métis Land: Rights and Scrip Conference (2019). Both were open to the public and centered in the academy. Scholars nationwide were invited to present their research on Métis history, land claims, scrip, and rights.

During the pandemic, there was a surge in virtual gatherings hosted by the five governing bodies across the homeland, giving institutions a wider audience; geographical location was no longer a barrier to participation, and many events were free. Such gatherings included the MMF's Red River Métis Youth Conference on Identity, the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan's a tayr, la laang pi li rispay—Land, Language and Respect and The Exchange of Western and Traditional Knowledge, and the MNC's Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas and Métis Guardians.

It is essential to honor the work that has come before, which we have done by highlighting the four types of gatherings that played a role in keeping Métis ways of knowing and Métis understandings of self in community conversations. While these events may have been exclusive due to an attendance requirement of connection or affiliation with the governing bodies and/or institutes, acknowledgment of their role is essential to understanding the inclusive design of the Mawachihitotaak symposium.

Mawachihitotaak: Let's Get Together

Months before the Mawachihitotaak Métis Symposium was even a concept, a group of Métis scholars from across the homeland, called Li Rooñ por kaa-natonikeechik (The Circle for Those Who Research), began to meet on Zoom to share ideas, discuss

research, and build an academic community for Métis scholars. The 2021 conference season disheartened many Métis scholars in the group with a lack of inclusion of Métis-specific research and low Métis acceptance rates by non-Indigenous conference organizers. Scholarship exploring the lack of Métis-specific research and programming (Binn et al., 2021; Forsythe, 2023; Kumar et al., 2012; Logan, 2008; Monchalin, 2019; Scott, 2021) has documented this lived experience of Métis scholars and the toll that lack of representation takes. Through visiting in Li Rooñ por kaa-natonikeechik meetings, we decided to create our own academic Métis space. Reaching out to our community kinship ties, 32 Métis thinkers volunteered to create a Métis-centric conference in response to our collective need to see a space celebrating our research and community.

These 32 scholars who came together to bring this symposium to life came from 12 post-secondary institutions across Canada, the Louis Riel Institute, and the Prairies to Woodlands Indigenous Language Revitalization Circle. Those who sat to plan and execute the event ranged from language keepers and community members to undergraduate and graduate students and scholars at various stages in their academic careers. Their names and affiliations at the time of the symposium can be found in the appendix to this chapter.

The structure of the organizing committee differed from similar bodies on which planners had served in the past. Instead of a hierarchy, we decided to call our organizing group the Métis thinkers and approach the planning, fundraising, and organizing collectively. Several Métis thinkers were also planners of “Kwaata-nihtaawakihk—A Hard Birth,” an exhibit to be mounted at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in May 2022, and we were able to plan the conference in partnership with the exhibit.

It was essential to many of the Métis thinkers that attendees be able to join and learn without paying exorbitant fees, so funding became very important. Most funding for the conference came from the Métis scholars’ own SSHRC or start-up funds, as well as the funds from three Métis Canada Research Chairs. The University of Manitoba Métis University Students Association applied for a student luncheon through the Rising Youth grant, and several of the Métis thinkers received funding from the University of Manitoba Indigenous Initiatives Fund. The combination of these diverse funding sources enabled us to offer the conference at no cost to attendees.

As excitement grew for possibly being together again following the first two years of the pandemic, Elder Verna Demontigny gifted us with the name Mawachihitotaak, meaning “let’s get together” in Southern Michif. Momentum grew, and we began to call out to the community for those who would like to share their knowledge. We wanted academics and community members doing important work with and for Métis peoples to feel welcomed in this conference space. An overwhelming number of proposals came to us, and an even more overwhelming number of people wanted to witness the symposium.

We planned panels and workshops with the space at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in mind, but public health concerns changed some of these plans. A few months before the conference, the COVID-19 strain Omicron emerged, and the grandmothers shared that now was not the time to get together in person. While putting aside our dreams of spending time together after so much time apart was challenging, we were thankful for their wisdom and decided to move the conference to a virtual space. We had all been part of several years of virtual gatherings by that

point and were able to deploy these experiences in our planning. Being in a virtual space together meant that the flight delays that plagued summer 2022 did not impact conference attendance, and as pandemic numbers spiked again in the days leading up to the conference, we were again thankful to the grandmothers for the wisdom and words that kept us safe.

Mawachihitotaak took place from May 3–6, 2022, and brought together over 2000 attendees from all over Canada and the United States. Registration was open to all at no cost. In the opening keynote, Chris Andersen spoke to a large audience about Métis leadership in the academy. The conference featured 113 Métis scholars, knowledge holders, language speakers, community organizers, writers, art makers, students, and other community leaders who shared their knowledge and engaged in conversation. Sessions ranged from presentations, roundtable discussions, panels, workshops, artist talks, art interventions, film screenings, musical performances, and poetry, spoken word, and literature readings. Maria Campbell closed the conference with storytelling and teachings about walking forward. Many sessions were recorded and available to attendees for 10 days following the conclusion of the conference in an attempt to ensure that those with obligations like jobs or family would still have a chance to learn from Métis scholars and community members.

Themes and Discussion

Following the conference's conclusion, participants were given the link to a survey intended to gauge the impact of the conference, areas that could be improved for the next iteration, and the experiences of those who had attended. Out of over 2000 attendees, we received 126 responses to the survey. When examining the responses to the post-conference survey, three central themes arose: 1) learning, listening, and sharing through a Métis lens, 2) connecting to Métis identity, and 3) strengthening and connecting Métis community.

Many survey respondents explained that they had participated in the symposium out of interest in research and community work that spoke explicitly to Métis experiences and needs. One respondent reported attending to “learn about all the beautiful things Métis people are doing and working on, hearing stories from kin and digging deeper into our history and the ties that keep us woven together.” As noted above, there have not been many Métis community gatherings that have been open to the public, and survey respondents were excited to share their knowledge or work and to learn from others. Because of the opportunity to attend the symposium online at no cost, community members and students who might not have been able to pay travel or registration expenses were able to participate. Others were interested in bringing knowledge and research practices from the conference back into their work, whether in academia, government, or the private and third sectors. Respondents also noted the draw of some familiar names in Métis studies—either because of their own educational experiences with those scholars or the significance of their work in the field. Several respondents noted that the array of presenters was a draw and that senior scholars, emerging scholars,

and community members were not differentiated in terms of importance. Some had never been selected to present at a conference and felt honored to be accepted onto the program. Several respondents spoke about wanting to “learn more about Métis everything and hear Métis stories” and “craving more authentic first-hand conversation, not a regurgitated history lesson or patriarchal/hierarchical vision of history.” Another respondent noted that this conference was the first they had been to that acknowledged the “human-emotional-spiritual side of research and learning” and shared that this made it one of the best conferences they had ever attended.

The second theme that arose in the responses was connecting to Métis identity. This conference was uniquely Métis: the organizing team was entirely Métis, all presenters needed to be either Métis or presenting alongside Métis people, and 82% (n = 103) of attendees who responded to the survey were Métis. Many survey respondents shared that attending this symposium was a way to learn and connect to their own identity as Métis people. This learning varied, as some had not previously been connected to a Métis community and were learning things about their people for the first time, and others found their sense of self strengthened, as presentations for one respondent “reinforced so many experiences of what Métis peoplehood looks like and helped me to expand my own understanding.” Another respondent spoke about the ways in which and reasons why many Métis people need events like Mawachihitotaak to connect to their own identities, sharing that the active attempt to erase the existence of Métis people by colonial mainstream governments has driven so much of their culture underground and that most Métis doubt their own identities. Especially in the context of ongoing identity appropriation and reactionary identity policing, they may not feel comfortable claiming or inhabiting them. Métis-centered events reveal that familial traits as cultural and help identify and process shared trauma, create and maintain a community of accountability, and foster cultural resurgence.

Several other respondents also noted that their family histories included disconnection from Métis identity and culture and that participating in this conference had helped them learn more about themselves and “reinforced so many experiences of what Métis peoplehood looks like and helped me to expand my own understanding.” This multitude of experiences helped dismantle ideas of “not feeling Métis enough” to participate in Métis events, as one participant put it. Being surrounded by other Métis peoples with similar stories of identity and belonging (as was sure to be the case with so many attendees) meant that the symposium participants saw themselves reflected in scholarship and the community.

The third theme among respondents was the strengthening of connections to the Métis community. Many respondents expressed that in their own lives, they often felt isolated from the Métis community and culture for a variety of reasons, including the “diasporic nature of our people” and living away from the homelands, being the only Métis scholars in their areas or their institutions, and not having connections with other Métis peoples. One respondent said, “I am a Métis scholar and feel isolated. I wanted a sense of community to support and to receive support from.” Through attending this symposium, respondents felt less isolated, because of feeling more connected to the community (even if virtually), being able to visit, or hearing from and bearing witness to so many others sharing similar experiences. Respondents said that being able to be in community with other Métis people across the diaspora allowed them to “honor who we are as a distinct community” and “learn from one another and deepen together as community.” In the context of the academy, where so much of the focus is on Indigenization more broadly, this

symposium carved out a space for Métis knowledges, experiences, and realities to be showcased and reflected. If anything, this experience has shown the organizers the strength of the hunger within the community for similar events and reinforced the need to prioritize Métis scholarly spaces.

Conclusion

We conceived a Métis research symposium out of conversations in Li Rooñ por kaa-natonikeechik, the Métis research circle. We had come together in that space to share ideas, obtain feedback, and commiserate and celebrate with other Métis scholars, and it was clear we had the critical mass needed to support both organizing the conference and presenting the panels we had in mind. We knew this work was necessary because a limited number of Métis-specific gathering spaces had been open to the public in the past, and no gatherings that focused on Métis research were open to the public. As Métis scholars, we felt the same yearning for community, camaraderie, and allies in the often isolating world of academia. We asked how to foster a sense of belonging and a sense of worth in academia. Our response to this question was creating this conference as a first step in developing a community of Métis researchers dedicated to working with and for the nation and celebrating one another's work. We look to continue this work—although it is surely a labor of love—for Métis people by creating more Métis-specific opportunities: journals, symposiums, gatherings, workshops, and writing groups. Through this work, we attend to our community members' needs, dreams, and desires and hope to provide opportunities and support for our colleagues today and those coming after us. Building community and prioritizing relationships are central to our culture, and we continue to look to this work to feed the need in the community and in ourselves for reconnection and Métis ways of being.

Appendix

The Métis thinkers who contributed to designing and implementing the Mawachihitotaak Métis Symposium are listed below in alphabetical order, with their affiliations at the time.

Jennifer Adese, University of Toronto-Mississauga
Vicki Bouvier, Mount Royal University
Maria Campbell, University of Saskatchewan
Shirley Delorme Russell, Louis Riel Institute
Verna DeMontigny, Prairie to Woodlands Indigenous Language Revitalization
Circle
Chantal Fiola, University of Winnipeg
Lucy Fowler, University of Manitoba
Chelsea Gabel, McMaster University
Mylene Gamache, University of Manitoba
Paul Gareau, University of Alberta
Janice Cindy Gaudet, University of Alberta

Sharon Goulet, University of Manitoba
Nicki Ferland, University of Saskatchewan
Laura Forsythe, University of Winnipeg
Rob Hancock, University of Victoria
Sarah Hourie, University of Manitoba
Kiera Kowalski, University of Winnipeg
Melanie Lalonde, University of Manitoba
Amanda LaVallee, University of the Fraser Valley
Lynn Lavallée, Toronto Metropolitan University
Jennifer Markides, University of Calgary
Cathy Mattes, University of Winnipeg
Victoria May, Concordia University
Alexandra Nychuk, McMaster University
David Parent, University of Manitoba
Jeremy Patzer, University of Manitoba
Brielle Lucille Beaudin Reimer, University of Manitoba
Allyson Stevenson, University of Saskatchewan
Nicole Stonyk, University of Manitoba
Heather Souter, University of Manitoba
Cheryl Troupe, University of Saskatchewan
Angie Tucker, University of Alberta

Biographies

Laura Forsythe is a Michif Associate Professor at the University of Winnipeg in the Faculty of Education. Forsythe's research focus is Métis-specific contributions to the academy, Métis inclusion efforts, Métis research methodologies, and educational sovereignty. With six co-edited collections including *Around the Kitchen Table: Metis Aunties Scholarship*, the Metis Awareness Mondays Series, and the circle of editors of *Pawaatamihk: Journal of Metis Thinkers*, Forsythe has helped lift up Indigenous scholars' work for over a decade. She is a Manitoba Metis Federation citizen, the official democratic and self-governing political representation of the Red River Métis. Her kinship ties include the Huppe, Ward, Berard, Morin, Lavallee, and Cyr lines.

Lucy Delgado, PhD, is a Two-Spirit Métis woman, born and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Her family were Sinclairs, Cummings, Prudens, some of whom took scrip in St Andrews and St Johns, and she also has other family and ancestors from Red River, Oxford House, Norway House, adopted family from Sioux Valley Dakota Nation, and settler family from Ireland and the Orkney Islands. Lucy is a community organizer, involved in a variety of local and national groups, and is actively involved with the Two-Spirit Michif Local of the Manitoba Métis Federation. Lucy is one of the creators and part of the Circle of Editors of *Pawaatamihk: Journal of Métis Thinkers*, an open-access academic journal focusing on lifting up the voices of Métis scholars, artists, and community members. Lucy is the Canada Research Chair in Michif and Two-Spirit/Indigiqueer Education as Wellness and an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba.

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