



Let them be auntie

Claiming and Retaining a Gender-diverse Métis Auntiehood

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Abstract

For many Métis people, having aunties to go to for advice, support, and mentorship is essential to maintaining well-being and community and kinship belonging. From our positioning as Two-Spirit and gender-diverse Metis aunties (and sometimes uncles), we interrogate whether aunties are always *she* and what inclusion of diverse ways of auntying can provide our communities. Through the lenses of play, permeability, and *mamâhtawisiwin* (wonder), we argue for an expansive understanding of auntiehood, who can be an auntie, and the significant roles they play in the lives of relatives and community.

Keywords: Métis, auntie, Two-Spirit, gender, kinship, permeability, play

Let them be auntie: Claiming and retaining a gender-diverse Métis auntiehood

*Aunties are the ones I turn to
when I need a listening ear
that does not judge.*

*I did not choose my aunties
and they did not choose me.
They just are.*

*My aunties support me the way the wind
gently cradles a leaf
and brings it to the ground
once it lets go of the branch.*

A soft landing.

*She knows something, about everything.
Sometimes they have answers to questions
I did not know I needed to ask.*

*My aunties are the ones who I turn to
when I am learning to listen
with more than my ears.*

Positioning Ourselves

Reid: My nieces think I am their dad’s brother. Around our kitchen table, it is not uncommon to hear things like, “when auntie and daddy were little boys” and a range of pronouns being used interchangeably as they talk about me, but rarely *she*. I am their auntie, and I am not a woman. As a gender-diverse person, I have aligned my gender identity and expression in ways that are authentic for me, despite living outside the binary (and colonial) expectations of someone who is born female. If I change my name in the future, it will be because I want to, not because I feel I “should.” For similar reasons, I have retained my role as auntie rather than changing to the more traditionally masculine counterpart of uncle. Perhaps my feelings will change in the future, but I cannot ignore the fact that the roles of auntie and uncle differ substantially, not just in terms of gender but also in terms of relational accountability and essence. The role I have as an auntie brings significant meaning, value, and joy to my and my family’s lives, and although I am sure I am not the only gender-diverse Métis person to retain the title of auntie, I have rarely read or heard about that experience. My hope in co-writing this paper is to encourage a different way of thinking about auntiehood and gender.



Figure 1.
Reid and their nieces walking on the land.

My nieces have not yet learned the social norms and expectations that will undoubtedly shape how they see and experience gender in the future. At this point, our relationship is loving and special because I am their auntie, and they have no concept that to society this relational dynamic seems impossible. If there were a way to see or read peoples' thoughts when they hear my nieces call me "auntie Hol," I imagine there would be a big calculator above their head trying to do the gender math to figure out how I could be an auntie. To continue with this metaphor, I imagine the gender calculator would overheat, its battery would melt, or the screen would read "Error." Of course I am saying this with tongue in cheek, but there is confusion written all over peoples' faces when they try to conceptualize how I could embody auntiehood. But I come from a community of people who have always encouraged others to be who they truly are. This is a future I want for future generations so they can be their whole selves and not have to fit into binary colonial boxes and conform to cisheteronormative standards. It is far too limiting to attempt to do so, particularly when it comes to social relationships and connectedness to kin.

Toorenburgh: As a tastawiyiniw (Makokis, 2021) or in-between person (sometimes also called Two-Spirit in English), I move between community and gender roles. In my Métis family I often occupy the roles of daughter, granddaughter, and niece. As a cousin and sibling, I am more readily recognized as a gender-fluid person. A few years ago, I became a first cousin once removed—a concept that does not exist in Métis kinship systems—to my cousin’s child, the first câpan (great-grandchild) in our family. In nehiyawewin (the Cree language), câpan is not gendered and is used by both the great-grandparent and the great-grandchild to refer to each other because of their special relationship. My older male cousin, son of nikâwîs (my little mother, or aunt), is called nimis (my brother), and so we are thought of as siblings. His child is nitânis (my daughter). It is thought-provoking to use the nehiyawewin dictionary in this way to try to map out our kinship networks, which are defined in very different terms than those commonly used in English. I stress here that I am a beginner nehiyawewin learner, but I try my best as a challenge to reconfigure my thinking by reading and learning from more advanced language learners and speakers (for this paragraph I learned from Chelsea Vowel, âpihtawikosisân, 2011). I note here in particular the ways that our kinship terms are predicated on the relationships between matrilineal and patrilineal descent. So what does that mean for gender- and orientation-diverse community members?



Figure 2. Toorenburgh playing dolls with their niece.

When my niece was born, I encountered a dilemma: how would I want her to refer to me? How would I want to relate to her? When I am in the queer community I am mostly referred to as an uncle, whether I dress butch or femme and both in and out of king drag. It is as if the queer community recognizes that in the broader world, my gender-neutral pronouns are typically not respected and that my futchy (femme/butchy) appearance as an assigned female at birth (AFAB) means that I will mostly be perceived as a cis woman and sometimes assumed to be heterosexual; because they understand this, they offer me the recognition of my tastawiyiniw-ness by gendering me in male relationship terms: daddy, dad, uncle, brother, and so on. In this way, I have only ever been an uncle. What now? I was conflicted until the day my niece came for a family gathering at my parent’s house and was bored, so I brought out my Groovy Girls and Beanie Baby dolls from storage, all kept in a Barbie suitcase. Together, we played with the dolls I had as a child, and I felt

the anxiety of watching a child play with my precious dolls. Seeing her arrange them in a line to appreciate each one and then following my suggestion to pick a doll that represented each woman in the family including her stirred in me the auntie that had lain dormant. Could I be an auntie to her without dysphoria and be an uncle in other communities at the same time? I ask myself now whether I could be whoever she needs me to be at any given moment as she grows up? Maybe she will need to talk to me about sex and reproduction when she is too embarrassed to ask her mother? Maybe she will date a boy and need to understand his thinking and will need my boy-brain? Maybe she will want to wear a binder and will need mentorship on fitting and safety? I am deciding to apply nehiyaw (Cree) thinking in my own way: how we relate to each other over time will determine the role I need to occupy to best suit her at a given moment. Can I be an uncle, entle, and an auntie at different times, in different spaces, or all at once? There are as many possibilities as there are relationships.

Introduction

For many Métis people, having aunties to go to for advice, support, mentorship, and kitchen table visits (Forsythe & Markides, 2024) is essential to maintaining well-being and an assurance of community and kinship belonging. Aunties might be blood relatives though often are not. She might be someone in a family, community, workplace, school setting, healthcare clinic, or other space where her way of being offers a substantial positive contribution. She is strong, grounded in her experience as an Indigenous woman, and speaks her truth to others to listen and learn. She perhaps learned from her own aunties, mothers, and grandmothers. This is described by Métis scholar Laura Forsythe: “as Métis people, we seek knowledge and wisdom from our grandmothers and aunties, our teachers through history, and our teachers today” (2023, p. 1). Though learning takes shape across various contexts and is influenced by the many people in a Métis person’s life, aunties are often a major influence in teaching and educating others, particularly younger people. This may very well be true across generations, and many Métis families and communities where aunties are foundational to the way the community or family functions. However, we came to wonder whether auntie must always be *she*?

Perhaps what is useful in answering this question is for Métis people to invite curiosity and an eager interest in learning who, why, and how our relatives choose to become aunties, rather than spending time pontificating over what defines an auntie, lest we fall into traps of trying to create new, binary concepts of what an auntie as opposed to an uncle actually is. Many scholars will be familiar with idea generation using a collective word-cloud graphic. If employing this approach, what fruitful knowledge might be produced by gathering diverse Métis perspectives? While this may seem a simplistic example, it is significant because those who are not assumed to be fit for the auntie role, such as Two-Spirit, gender-diverse, and transmasculine people, have not been included in such knowledge gathering. Perhaps we will see no further need to differentiate between auntie and uncle, but there does seem to be a distinction in relational processes. So the question is how do we find and honor this distinction without reifying settler colonial cisheteropatriarchial binaries and without creating exclusionary criteria for who can and cannot be an uncle or auntie? Further, we must allow space for fluid movement and rejecting cisnormative standards by exploring who we are and the roles we fulfill regardless of gender. For instance, can a cisgender uncle and niece paint their nails together? The tensions that arise when considering how auntie and uncle are conceptualized and the relational expectations placed upon them due to

gender norms demands consideration. Further, some gender-diverse people may retain a sense of connection to a gendered way of being that they have transitioned away from, while others' transitions might include leaving that experience behind. Some gender-diverse people might choose to step into an in-between space where they can fluidly visit all aspects of their gendered selves. If we are to interrogate what is and who can be an auntie or uncle, then we must also acknowledge the dynamism that is offered by fluid and gender-diverse individuals.

Métis Genders and Auntying

The Métis nation [.1] has a complex relationship with gender. Many historical accounts of our nation's ethnogenesis and political organizing are credited to men, with women's contributions glossed over (Adese, 2021). Men have been acknowledged as skilled hunters and leaders in the buffalo hunt (Barkwell & Acco, 2012), while women's skills and essential role in those efforts have been left out (Adese, 2021). Even the very mechanism through which Métis people draw our kinship connections and seek formal recognition of our ancestry is through tracing patrilineal surnames (Kolopenuk, 2023). Further, our female ancestors have often been recorded under such meaningless names as Mary Indian (a woman in Toorenburgh's lineage whose name was obviously made up by the census official). This is not to disparage men; rather, the work of many feminist Métis scholars has been about renewing attention and respect for women who have been disproportionately impacted by colonialism (Green, 2017).

It has been argued that our ancestors inhabited symbiotic, balanced gender roles in the context of colonialism (Adese, 2021). While patriarchy was forced upon Indigenous peoples differentially across nations and communities, Métis people negotiated this new reality strategically. For example, as only men were permitted to pursue formal education, they interfaced with the government and took work that would provide compensation in money and goods (Adese, 2021). Women transmitted culture, language, and traditional knowledge while harvesting food and medicines and making clothing (Adese, 2021). In this way, we might think of an uncle role as one with access to and moving through spaces that are limited to men due to patriarchal pressures. Meanwhile, aunties use their knowledge to proliferate culture and support the nation through the application of their own skills. This conceptualization of the uncle and auntie roles are based on this reading of the past; however, we are not beholden to adhere uncritically to our history. In fact, concepts of tradition can be used to oppress our own people, and not all traditions are "axiomatically benevolent and must be considered as relations of power"; part of a healthy continuation of our people includes "contesting tradition" (Green, 2017, p. 13).

Métis women's deep knowledge of the land included a responsiveness to environmental change, and their role in storytelling included adaptability, with new stories and interpretations of old stories evolving (Kermoal & Altamirano-Jiménez, 2016[.2] [HR3]). As such, an ability to be flexible and responsive to change "is integral to a clear understanding of Métis cultural continuity" (p. 130). It follows that our ability to both observe and adapt tradition *is part of our tradition* and the transmission of our culture. Putting our past and present conditions in continual dialogue is part of our cultural maintenance. Considering the trajectory of our nation, Hancock (2021) argues for "neither strict continuity nor discontinuity" of the past into the present, especially considering the significant impacts of colonialism. To observe our value of wahkotowin, we ask ourselves, "how did our ancestors understand themselves, and how do we understand ourselves given what

we know about the past? How would our ancestors recognize us?” (p. 58). Such questions could guide our reflection on auntie and uncle roles.

In our nations, gendered roles or divisions of labour certainly existed; however, there remained acceptance of sexually and gender-diverse people to take up roles beyond what may be considered typical (Coburn & LaRocque, 2020). As otipemisiwak, *the people who own themselves*, our nation, community, and personal self-determination is part of our very way of being. For individuals, self-determination is about each person having “the freedom, the means or the capacity to make choices” for themselves (LaRocque, 2007, p. 61). Perhaps the most fundamental definition of auntie or uncle can be expressed as “who do you wish to sit with?” Gaudet and colleagues’ (2020) research into Métis auntiehood refers to Wilson’s (2008) idea of *a set of relationships* to articulate their intention for their project as *a set of women-centred relationships*, which included aunties and nieces. LaVallee and colleagues (2016) argue that Métis identity is fluid and complex and that there is thus not one single Métis identity. It follows that there is not one Métis auntie identity but rather a fluid and complex role negotiation when an individual decides—from moment to moment—on which *set of relationships* they wish to sit among.

Is Auntie Always “She”?

In her doctoral research, Forsythe explored the experiences of grandmothers and aunties in Métis scholarship and the academy (2023). There were three main pieces of advice that came from those who spoke with her: “1) disregard colonial pressures, 2) create connections, and 3) be empowered by who you are to thrive in the academy” (p. 2). While these important suggestions arose from exploring the ways that silencing and erasure is experienced by Métis women in scholarly institutions, we can obtain a better understanding of what types of advice Métis people could benefit from receiving, particularly from grandmothers and aunties. Looking more closely at the first piece of advice inspires further interrogation of how Métis people, particularly Métis women, are impacted by colonial pressures. We can question what is expected of Métis aunties and what could constitute a Métis auntiehood that is non-conforming, particularly to colonial pressures. Taking this further, it is crucial to call attention to what occurs when colonial pressures and erasure collide with colonial understandings of gender in the context of Métis auntiehood. It should be made explicit here that the voices, experiences, and nuanced positioning of Métis women must continue to be upheld and uplifted, and this paper aims to contribute to, not take away from, those conversations. By challenging the colonial pressures to conform to binary gender roles and through engaging a Two-Spirit critique to the notion of auntiehood, expanded understandings of Métis experiences are possible. Thus, the purpose of this paper, inspired by our own relationship with auntiehood as gender-diverse people and scholars, is to call attention to the importance of expanding our collective understanding of who Métis aunties are and the diverse ways of auntying. Having diverse representation of who an auntie is and what auntiehood can and does look like is crucial if we are to support Métis people in being who they are—whether cisgender, transgender, Two-Spirit, heterosexual, or queer. The future of Métis auntiehood must be one that accepts and celebrates Métis aunties, in all their relations, identities, and expressions.

Gendering of auntie

Prior to articulating the need for a diversified imagining of auntying and auntiehood, we can look to current examples that provide a clear positioning of who aunties are considered to be. They are nearly exclusively positioned, written about, and understood to be women, defined in various ways, including “grassroots women” who “provide social care at an informal, grassroots level, which often fill the gaps” both within communities and in larger social and health service delivery (Horn, 2005, p. 3). Other examples can be seen in Lussier’s (2025) work on the importance of Indigenous women as scholars, academics, and non-academic staff in educational institutions. Lussier defines these academic aunties as “Indigenous women scholars ... who provide loving and culturally informed mentorship and guidance within the academy” (p. 344). To gain a better understanding of the experiences of Métis women’s wellness, Flaminio and colleagues (2020) hosted and subsequently wrote about the experiences of local Métis women who attended a land-based gathering that discussed the importance of Métis aunties within communities. The authors describe a participant expressing that “learning and sharing her skills helps us remember our Métis moms, aunties, grandmothers and the importance of sharing our Métis stories and passing on these skills to our daughters” (p. 60). This is of course of utmost importance, and having strong women pass on knowledge and teachings to younger women is indisputably crucial to the upbringing of future Métis generations. What is missing here is what happens when gender-diverse Métis youth may not see themselves reflected in or represented by aunties or uncles in the binary construction of those roles.

As such, we suggest that gender-diverse, transgender, and Two-Spirit Métis youth would benefit greatly from diverse representation of who aunties are and the ways that kinship roles and relations can take shape. We of course acknowledge that there are limitations to language, and conceptualizations of who aunties are have become gendered through the Western lens of the male/female binary rather than in an effort to be intentionally exclusive. Changing the way we talk and write about aunties is a starting point that can lead to more expansive understandings and inclusion of who we are and what we do. Aunties are people who play a substantial role in the lives of others, and being a woman does not need to remain a primary criterion. In an exploration of Métis women’s knowledge in northwestern Saskatchewan, Hodgson-Smith and Kermoal (2016) described how “Métis medical knowledge—*lii michin*, “the medicines”—was often passed on from mother to daughter, grandmother to granddaughter, auntie to niece” (p. 122). Of course within the context of that research, it makes sense to position aunties as part of the community of women who engaged in the practices of carrying and enacting medical knowledge. Again, the critique is not of womanhood, or the vital role that Métis women play in families, communities, schools, workplaces and other institutions. Rather, given these ways of thinking about auntiehood as grounded in womanhood, we wonder how this leaves space for aunties who are not women but engage in auntying nonetheless. Can transgender, Two-Spirit, or gender-diverse people not also be aunties?

Engaging a subjectless critique of auntying and auntiehood

A subjectless critique requires a critical examination of the ideologies, discourses, and epistemological standpoints that position identities, rather than a critique of specific “subjects,” identities, or peoples themselves (Hames-García, 2013; Smith, 2010). Consider, for instance, how structures of power such as media and politics perpetuate discourses that position Indigenous Peoples as subjects being granted more rights while ignoring the ongoing violence

they experience, particularly women, girls, and Two-Spirit people (Pabla, 2021). Other examples can be seen when systems-level discourses strategically highlight stories of land acknowledgements being integrated into colonial institutions, or celebrating organizations where wearing an orange shirt one day of the year supposedly signals allyship. In these examples, the focus and criticism are shifted away from the structures that problematically marginalize Indigenous Peoples in the first place and instead deploys identity-based politics as a distraction. If we base arguments of normalization and acceptance using this line of thinking, we rely too heavily on identity-based discourses and miss an opportunity to critique power relations that maintain positions of advantage and disadvantage more broadly. Therefore, in the context of this work, a subjectless critique is applied to call into question heteropatriarchal and settler colonial systems of power that reinforce a gender binary, instead of solely examining who is and is not an auntie—or what constitutes appropriate ways of auntying. We must not overlook the importance of acknowledging unique intersectional experiences of those impacted by systems of power, which is certainly crucial to the development of works such as this article. We at times shift from a subjectless critique to draw on examples from our own experiences to maintain an active rather than passive voice, which is a risk when targeting large, seemingly immovable structures and discourses.

What we are proposing here is to question the ways in which labeling and categorizing identities has stripped people and communities of their rhetorical sovereignty. This term, rhetorical sovereignty, was intentionally chosen based on Watanabe's (2014) emphasis on its similarity to self-determination. In their work, Watanabe defines rhetorical sovereignty as Indigenous "communities' abilities to choose, despite external power differentials, collective courses of action that are in their own best interests—whether socially, politically, economically, or educationally—and then operationalize those choices for the highest benefit" (p. 155). It can thus be understood as the vehicle by which Indigenous Peoples' exercise the right to "make actionable decisions regarding the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public and/or academic discourses—as the more achievable goal" in comparison to ideological rhetoric that is much more elusive (p. 155). More specifically, Métis people can and should have the right to determine the language, identities, roles, and structures that shape and are shaped by their experiences.

Acceptance and integration of discourses is often accompanied by a collapse in curiosity, meaning that once a discourse has been adopted by a majority, there is no perceived need to consider alternative ideas or inventions of thought (Alexander, 2008). Thus, through operationalizing a subjectless critique of discourses surrounding aunties and auntiehood, we promote a re-examination of taken-for-granted norms and can reimagine the future of Métis auntiehood. One critical consideration is how new imaginings can inform discourses that are integrated into existing systems of power. What typically occurs when lived realities and cultures other than the dominant are explored is claiming a defined and "known" other, without any changes to the various institutions, workplaces, and disciplines that perpetuate discourses and rhetoric (Clark, 2015). This leads not only to continuous use of the same thought processes and tools but also fails to create any new conceptualizations that are respected, valued, and adopted (Clark, 2015). To move toward an expanded and reimagined vision for Métis auntiehood, we first apply a subjectless critique to the intersection of the heteropatriarchy and Métis womanhood.

Heteropatriarchy has historically shaped the education that Métis people received through the influence of Roman Catholicism, leading to a gendered set of curricula and the delivery of education segregated by gender divisions (Ferland, 2022). The ways in which heteropatriarchy shaped Métis upbringing and education has had long-lasting influences on the ways that Métis people connect to land, each other, and their own skills and knowledges. For instance, berry picking, sewing, and cooking were positioned as “women’s work,” while hunting, fishing, and horseback riding were taught to boys at a young age by their fathers and uncles (Ferland, 2022). This is simply one example among many whereby enforcing the gender binary ensured values of heteropatriarchy were upheld for the benefit of colonial institutions (religion, education, the labour market, etc.). It is thus crucial to note the lasting impact this has had on Métis communities and particularly Métis women, whose connectedness to land-based knowledge was significantly altered by heteropatriarchal structures of power. Further to this point, Métis women who had Indian status and married white men would lose their status, and their Métis family names were discarded, ignored, or removed from written records in favour of the patriarchal names. This too has had a lasting impact on Métis people, particularly when it comes to identifying family ancestry and who our relatives are.

Applying a Two-Spirit critique of heteropatriarchal relations with Métis women counters heterosexuality as the assumed norm, thus dismantling the entire construction of the colonial-settler history and disrupts the discourses that maintain the perceived inferiority of Métis women. This is further explored in the following question: “If Indigenous bodies matter as embodiment of the land ... how might we understand gender and sexuality, property and territoriality, consent and freedom differently, if the land itself is the source of fluidity, authority and groundedness outside the means of (re)production?” (Byrd, 2020, as quoted in Eng & Puar, 2020, p. 13). Thus, colonization requires the heteropatriarchy to function, as without male dominance and a binary understanding of lands and peoples, there would no longer be space for control over how people live. By bringing heteropatriarchal discourses into question, we can further explore how conceptualizations of gender are deeply woven into the ways that other systems of power continue to define who aunties are and acceptable of ways of auntying.

Diversifying Ways of Auntying

From a perspective grounded in what is emerging as critical auntie studies, Khubchandani (2022) recently articulated who aunties are and auntying as a way of doing, calling attention to “a flexibility that allows different kinds of people (queer men, stepmothers, non-biological relations) to engage in kin practices often not assumed of them” (p. 226). While this raises important considerations regarding who can engage in practices associated with being an auntie, the question of how gender-diverse people may claim and practice auntying remains. As queerness becomes part of the conversation about auntiehood, so too should gender, to mitigate the risk of silencing and erasing the perspectives of aunties who are not women or queer men. Further, Khubchandani (2022) proposes that “aunties are women, femme, and queer figures” and goes on to ask how aunties can serve to “recall and recalibrate systems of racialization, gender, kinship, violence and care” (p. 223). Here, it is clear that the vision of who

an auntie should be is intended to be a woman, or a feminine presenting person, or a cisgender queer person, though that may very well be a queer female figure. The challenge here—one that is crucial to the very need for this paper—is that transgender and Two-Spirit people are not included or suggested as aunties. To be explicit, transmasculine people (those assigned female at birth but who do not identify as women and express their gender as masculine) are not included in any of these articulations of auntie. Yet here we are, as transmasculine and Two-Spirit people engaging in auntying. Reid partakes in play, mentorship, counseling, advice giving, support, kitchen table visits, and other ways of doing auntiehood, just as women, femme and queer aunties do. Toorenburgh is an uncle to many 2S/LGBTQ+ youth and have been for many years, yet the moment of playing with dolls with their niece (Figure 2) called them to decide that (for the time being) they will be her auntie. Does masculinity create an automatic exclusion for who can be an auntie? In doing so, who benefits from this exclusion? It certainly is not beneficial to the auntie or the person they are in relation with. Thus, we propose the disruption and diversification of the understandings of what constitutes an auntie and expanding the vision for a relational experience not confined to by gendered language and colonial binaries. Future research is needed to explore and understand the experiences of trans, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse Métis aunties.

Articulating a diversified understanding of and perspective on Métis auntiehood expands the representation and futures of Métis people. We suggest understanding auntying as a way of being that is not confined to gender opens up the possibility for Métis people, particularly youth and those who are Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+, to have role models, kin, representation, and supportive adults who they may feel more aligned with. Countering the limits of “auntie as she” offers a more diverse repertoire of what auntying looks like and who can be sought as auntie mentors. We see the future of Métis auntiehood to be one that resists against essentialist notions that all aunties are women. The following sections propose three solutions to navigate a diverse approach to and perspective on auntiehood and auntying. This is visually represented in Figure 3, a trillium flower that Toorenburgh drew to elucidate how the elements of an embodied auntiehood come together.

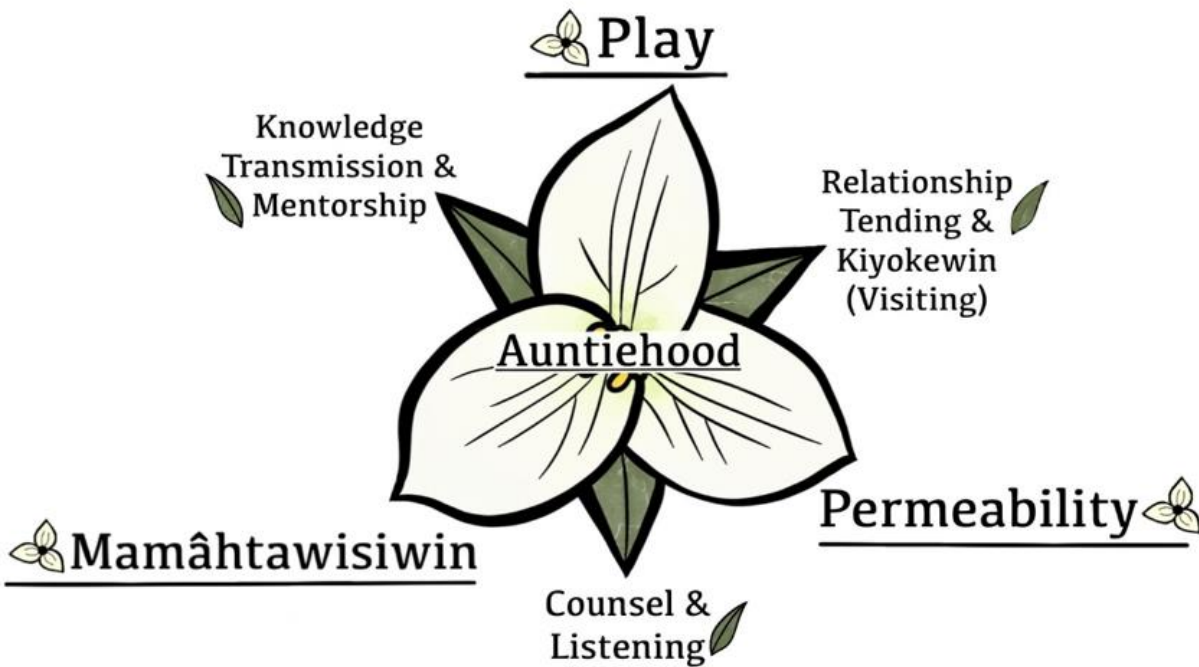


Figure 3.

Trillium flower representing auntiehood composed of three petals and three leaves.

Permeability

This paper does not argue for the dissolution of concepts of genders, gendered kinship roles, or community roles, especially the roles of women. Rather, the argument is to recognize, accommodate, and celebrate the possibility of plural auntieship. Discussing the life stages of women, Anderson (2011) describes a woman’s adulthood as being “much more defined by gender” (p. 97) than a child’s life in the early years. This raises the question of the ways in which gender- and orientation-diverse lives are defined by gender as well. In talking to Two-Spirit Métis Elder Blu Waters, Toorenburgh was told that when boys and girls grew up, they would be mentored in the different ways that men and women live; however, when a Two-Spirit child was born, they were mentored in the journey of self-determining the role they would fill in community (personal communication, 2023[.1] [HR2]). While Anderson cites Elders’ stories about the roles of Métis men and women in caring for community, she cautions against patriarchal readings of these stories. Although she does not name gender and orientation diversity in this statement, Anderson says that “there was flexibility in the work that needed to be done and who was available to do it” (p. 98). Gendered labour in Métis communities “was not always sharply marked” but could be altered in the interest of “expediency and individual preference” (Carter, 1996, p. 60). The discussion of permeability and flexibility of gender roles are typically discussed in the binary framework of men and women. While gender- and orientation-diverse people are not always explicitly identified, it follows that the rules for

women's and men's permeability applies to Two-Spirits, where it has always been possible for our people to "act and embody gendered possibilities beyond the usual" (Coburn & LaRocque, 2020, p. 105). This is witnessed in the common phenomenon of Two-Spirit men calling one another feminine terms such as she/her pronouns, kinship terms like sister, mother, and auntie, and participating in activities typically seen as feminine such as hosting visits and wearing ribbon skirts. When theorizing about Two-Spirit people, we discuss the historical and theoretical role of gender and orientation-diverse community members taking care of children whose parents are unable to do so; yet, we forget to recognize that this tradition continues today with many of those children referring to their caretakers in dynamic ways: mother in one moment, father in another. We forget that the connection between the nibling, niece, or nephew and their auntie, entle, or uncle is defined by the intimacies of their kinship, not by sex characteristics or outward gender appearance; nor is this imaginative kinship a static and unchanging dynamic.

Two-Spiritness is inherently about the fluidity of lifeways for all those who find their own ways. This includes binary trans people who move from one side of the gender divide in the sweat lodge to sit for the rest of their lives on the other. This also includes non-binary people who remain in the interstitial space between the men's and women's side of the lodge at the west door, and those fluid people who are welcome to sit anywhere they like for a round, a day, a year, or even more. Two-Spirit Métis drag queen and scholar KD King recalls the teaching from Two-Spirit nehiyô scholar and community organizer Harlan Pruden that Two-Spirit identity is "movement" (Tucker et al. 2025, p. 194). *Tastawiyiniwak* means in-betweenness, not as stasis but as opportunity and skill in moving across those delineations between gendered roles. This is a call for Métis communities to see auntying as an act and embodied gendered *possibility*. Let us not attack and deconstruct the vital role that aunties play and the gifts they contribute but rather see being an auntie as a possibility to be enacted and embodied in myriad ways. If there is someone called to that possibility, they should be encouraged to permeate the bounds of who is an auntie and how to be one.

Play

When it comes to describing ways of auntying, we are not intending to be prescriptive or limiting in what we are proposing. Rather, the intention is to introduce ideas that may be familiar in other contexts (e.g., parenting, coaching, teaching, friends, peers) but that take a particular shape and meaning when discussed in relation to auntiehood. The concept of play is an example of this, particularly in how it has been taken up and articulated within occupational science literature. Here, play is described as a series of transactions between the person and the environment, whereby it is the process of engaging itself that provides the purpose and enjoyment rather than a predetermined goal (Lynch & Moore, 2016). Further, while the focus is typically on children and their participation in play, the concepts of joy, fun, high or low intensity engagement, taking part, and feeling included (Lynch & Moore, 2016) are applicable across the lifespan. Looking then to experiences of adult play, Blanche and colleagues (2024) suggest five distinct play patterns: creativity-adventure, restoration, deep engagement, ludos, and mastery. When it comes to playfulness among adults, a qualitative study by Guitard and colleagues (2005) defined it as "an internal predisposition characterized by creativity, curiosity, pleasure, sense of humor, and spontaneity" (p. 9). Thus, overall, play and playfulness

can be understood as a concept that positively contributes to one's health and well-being through positive, joyful exploration of self, others, and the environment.

In drawing on this perspective, what we are suggesting is that auntiehood and the ways of auntying include playfulness as a means of inspiring curiosity, growth, and imagination among those with whom they are in relation. This can include being playful with how one chooses to dress in cultural regalia when it is appropriate and respectful to do so. For instance, it is becoming more common to see gay cisgender men wearing ribbon skirts to ceremony, lesbian cisgender women wearing ribbon shirts, and many gender-diverse people contributing to the developing regalia of ribbon pants. Taking a playful approach to this, are cis gay men who wear ribbon skirts aunties or femme uncles? Are lesbian women who wear ribbon shirts butch aunties or uncles? Are Two-Spirit people wearing ribbon pants banished from both roles? We prefer to leave the self-identification and definitions up to each person; however, it is this notion of questioning, imagining, and playing with conceptualizations of what makes someone an auntie that interests us. This lighthearted exploration can at times not feel so light, particularly when the world appears so interested in reaching a single, eternal definition of who someone is. Aunties are not definable in this way, and through employing playfulness perhaps we try out different pronouns, or we play with new terms altogether. We have heard of people using terms such as entie, untie, unckie, ancle, and entle among others and some that may not be understood or adequately translated to English.

Mamâhtawisiwin

Mamâhtawisiwin is a nehiyawewin word that teaches us about wonder—the wonder about all of creation with which each of us is born. It was used in *Mamâhtawisiwin: The Wonder We Are Born With – An Indigenous Education Policy Framework* by Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning (2022); however, we break from that association by speaking to the teachings on this word offered by Two-Spirit Métis kiteyak (Elders) Barbara Bruce and Charlotte Nolin. They speak to mamâhtawisiwin as our birthright, to bear witness to the awe-inspiring tapestry of creation, to want to learn all we can, to ask, to teach, to share. Non-directive teaching is common among many Indigenous Peoples, and we too do not wish to offer specific directions. The solutions we offer are provocations to thinking and doing in new (old?) ways. If we are to invite permeability and encourage play, we must centre mamâhtawisiwin. Consider not taking a reticent or braced orientation to change or an apathy or sense of loss about how to move forward; let us instead ground ourselves in wonderment. How lucky we are to be in a situation where play and permeability are possible. How lucky we are to have more aunties. What might a different kind of auntie contribute to the planning of a kitchen party? What might a gender- or orientation-diverse auntie be able to contribute to childrearing and community building? How many times have we, the authors, stubbornly responded to the call for “a couple strong boys to help stack the chairs” and at the next moment sat on the floor to participate in the kids tea party rather than the one for adults? We may debate whether those activities need to be gendered at all, but for now, they tend to be. We can make these gendered activities and gender roles both meaningful and decolonial by inviting anyone who feels called to that work to participate. Many of us will have experienced the phenomenon of chosen family. When one opts to have a non-blood relative to become an auntie rather than a mother, sister, or the like, that relative also chooses to step into the role of auntie. Ultimately, as we have argued, this kinship dynamic is completely predicated on the connection between the two relatives.

Permeability is an invitation to accommodate mobility and fluidity, but is not a directive as to where, how, and for what duration one must move. Play is an invitation to assume a joyous and imaginative orientation, but it does not prescribe a suggestion about how to play. Mamâhtawisiwin is also not a directive; it is an invitation to reroot ourselves in this teaching from the language. It is an encouragement of how to approach play and permeability. Wonder also teaches us to be open-minded in the humble knowledge that we will never fully understand all of creation. Perhaps we will never be finished discussing gender roles, and we will surely make mistakes. This is an essential teaching for discussing gendered roles and teachings and to help us avoid cancelling or turning our backs on community members who are capable and are actively investing in mamâhtawisiwin and miyo-kiskeyihtamowin (“good learning”). Wonder can be asking what work needs to be done, and who wants to take up that work. Auntying is a crucial role with life-saving work to do and clearly has an importance that has endured since time immemorial. What a wonder it is that such diverse people feel called to this role and have so many gifts to offer in it.

Bringing it all home

What draws us to the role of auntie is the way we wish to serve our communities and the relationships we are forging with the young ones in our families. From these lived experiences and as briefly shared in our self-locations, we extend three invitations for how we might consider how to expand and holistically reflect on the identity, role, and relationship of auntie. We stress that these approaches, roles, and relationships are likely not exclusive to auntying and that it will be exciting and important to turn our reflections to other community and family roles that have been limited to a gender-exclusive (or perhaps gender-defined) scope. Our invitation includes the three lenses of permeability, play, and mamâhtawisiwin, which emerged through our tea and coffee visits, where we brainstorm, reflect, and theorize through kiyokewin methodology (Flaminio et al., 2020; Gaudet, 2019; McDonald & Paul, 2021). These three orientations have guided our own auntie development and by using our stories of auntying as Two-Spirit and gender-diverse people, we demonstrate that an expanded discussion is worthwhile as gender-diverse auntying is an already occurring lifeway in our communities.

In Figure 3, we have conceptualized the gender-diverse auntiehood as a trillium flower where the three guiding orientations of permeability, play, and mamâhtawisiwin surround our personal auntie development. Within the three leaves, the following is written: knowledge transmission and mentorship; relationship tending and kiyokewin (visiting); and counsel and listening. Once again, while these are not community and relational services or gifts that are exclusive to aunties, these three leaves represent the main auntie jobs that have drawn us to assume this role within our families.

In our effort to offer knowledge transmission and mentorship, we share cultural, spiritual, and practical knowledge according to our own skills. Reid loves to share time outside with loved ones and their nieces, as they explore forests, beaches, and places that have significant value in their life. Toorenburgh looks forward to sharing language and ceremony with their niece. There is an important relationship between aunties and nieces that often includes transmitting “women-centred knowledge” (Gaudet et al., 2020). Perhaps it is the (still developing) gender of our nieces

that draws out the auntie role in us, as exemplified by Toorenburgh's experience of playing with their niece as she admired their childhood dolls. Perhaps if Toorenburgh's niece were to develop her gender differently, it might yet draw out the uncle in them in a relational response. It might be our niece's interests that draw out different sides of us; for example, Reid might assume a different kinship role or even flavour of auntie if their nieces develop an interest in hiking, one of Reid's favourite outdoor activities. Ultimately, we are prepared to share what we know and mentor our nieces responsively and responsibly according to what they need from us. This is about relationship tending and kiyokewin (visiting).

As aunties, we not only look after nieces and women but also do important work to look after our whole families and communities (Gaudet et al., 2020). We are in an intermediate stage of our lives where we can share with the young ones about how to live well in community while we are coming under more direct mentorship from the Old Ones. We have access to our own or our relatives' homes and kitchens to host visits and care for all our relatives, young and old. We are laughing with our peers, sharing knowledge, and helping one another in our work. We are developing the wisdom needed to become leaders and Knowledge Holders, and we are spending close time with the young ones who are also our teachers. By hosting, feeding, gift-giving, and laughing, we are building spaces where relationships are strengthened through visiting. Like Toorenburgh, we may not all be gifted cooks, but we know when someone needs a blanket, a quiet space, or help being brought into conversations that can sometimes be chaotic in the excitement of seeing one another. Through the mentorship we receive from adult peers, the Old Ones, and from our own lived experience, we are attuned to the experience of others and are drawn to support our relatives.

In our current position closer to the youth than the Old Ones, but with more time to sit with the Old Ones and expand our teachings through their mentorship, we find ourselves well positioned to listen deeply and provide counsel when asked. At times, a parent can be too close to a young person for either of them to feel comfortable speaking about certain topics. In these moments, an auntie is the perfect confidant, one who is also able to identify when problems need further support from other family, the community, or professionals. Dorion recalls the support her aunties have provided through "guidance, spiritual support, and teachings about how to carry out the various roles in my family system such as a cousin, Auntie, and mother" (Gaudet et al., 2020, p. 16). It is our lived experience of moving through life phases that provides us with the knowledge and skills we need to listen intently, compassionately, and deeply to provide thoughtful yet non-directive counsel when requested. This is a support we can provide the youth but also our adult peers and even Old Ones when we work as translators to explain emerging technologies, language, and issues that may not be readily understood. Our abilities as storytellers and deep listeners go hand in hand, and while we are listening and sometimes providing counsel, we are also teaching others about our cultural practices and values around story, listening, and counsel.

The leaves of the graphic in Figure 3 (knowledge transmission and mentorship; relationship tending and kiyokewin; and counsel and listening) represent the roles and responsibilities that draw us to auntying. The petals are the orientation of our auntying, the ways that we have been exploring our auntiehood, and finally the ways that we invite our people to consider gender-diverse auntiehood which may spur us to reflect on other community roles that

are yet highly gendered. To summarize in both visual and textual formats, Figure 3 and Table 1 outline our arguments regarding the importance of expanding our understanding of aunties and auntiehood.

Table 1.

Summary of solutions to advancing and expanding understandings of auntying and auntiehood.

Permeability	A flexible, open, and imaginative approach is required to create space for an expansive understanding of auntying and auntiehood. This may include the words that an auntie uses to define themselves and the relationships they have, ensuring that cultural, community, and spiritual practices have space for auntying in these diverse ways. Openness to possibility must be central in the efforts to include Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ Métis people as aunties.
Play	Playful exploration of self and what it means to be a Two-Spirit or LGBTQ+ Métis person with respect to relations across the lifespan is crucial to the advancement and development of more inclusive representations of auntiehood. Openness to creativity and a lightheartedness with respect to listening and learning about other peoples' lived realities can be prioritized over expectations of a serious, final, and static definition of self.
Mamâhtawisiwin	We are all born with a sense of wonder. Let us retain this appreciation of newness, openness to change, and acceptance of that which we previously did not know. Humble acknowledgement that we will never understand all of creation and that we do not need to understand something or someone in order to offer respect and love.

Conclusion

Colonialism has changed our physical landscape and social environments, leading to a privileging of kayas (“long ago”) Métis stories, but telling our contemporary stories helps us to appreciate the messy and inspiring ways that we have survived and the new ways we find to belong (Tucker et al., 2025). This is why we together are motivated to share our stories of auntiehood. Pyle (2025) writes a new, imagined Two-Spirit ancestor story told in an intergenerational telling where a grandmother passes the Two-Spirit story on to her adult grandson, who was assaulted for wearing a dress. The story acts as a salve for the pain of gender-

and orientation-based violence. If an auntie's role is to care for community, then we need to invite diverse aunties to offer the salves or stories, teachings, and laughter that diverse nibblings, nieces, and nephews will need. Ultimately, if we are to take wahkotowin seriously, then we must emphasize relationship over static binaries. There is a spiritual spark between relatives, where each person holds hands with the other. The conditions of that spark, of that meeting between spirits (pun intended) is where the kinship is determined. Gendered teachings, roles, and kinship terms are not where the harm lies; rather, it is found in the exclusions and trappings within impermeable gender boundaries. If we authors are already living joyously, playing with permeability, and centering mamâhtawisiwin, then our thesis is proven.

In order to promote a more nuanced and accurate understanding of what auntying is and who has access to auntiehood, we must pause and reflect on what is said to be known and true about the topic. The current framing of *auntie as she* is far too limiting when it comes to Two-Spirit and gender-diverse Métis peoples' experiences and relations. Rather, we can take time to appreciate the blossoming of an expanded auntiehood that centres permeability, play, and mamâhtawisiwin. From this vantage point, community and kinship becomes places of co-learning, appreciation of wonderment of all of creation, and coming to a different and more open understanding of who aunties are and the roles they can play in the lives of others.

Biography

Holly Reid (they/them) is an occupational therapist and PhD candidate of mixed Red River Métis and Scottish-settler ancestry, living on W̱SÁNEĆ territory. Reid takes a multipronged approach to their work, informed by their background in occupational therapy, experiential knowledge and research endeavors. Reid engages in community-driven research that meets community where they are at, draws on existing strengths and resources, and counters the tendency for institutional research to be top-down and deficit-focused. Outside of work and research, Reid spends time mountain biking through lush west coast forests, hiking into the woods, gardening and sharing laughs and meals with their friends and family. They currently live near their family on the lands of the W̱SÁNEĆ peoples in the community they grew up in.

Lydia Toorenburgh (they/them) is a *tastawiyiniw* (Two-Spirit), Bungi Métis and mixed-settler person living as a visitor on lək'wəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ lands in Victoria, BC. They hold an MA and an Honours in Anthropology and are now a PhD student in Anthropology and Indigenous Nationhood at the University of Victoria. Their training is in audio-visual, creative, participatory, and community-engaged research. In their doctoral research, they will be working with their *tastawiyiniwak otipemisiwak* kin from across the country to co-create audio-visual art to exhibit and celebrate our joy and wellness. Toorenburgh is also a beadworker, sewist, singer, and drag king.

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