

The Red River Jig Family Network: Music-Dance-Story as Métis Re-search Methodology

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Vol. 1, Issue 2 (2024)

Abstract

In this article, we introduce the Red River Jig Family Network project and invite readers to join us in our conversations about Métis dance and music. We ask, what can a Métis-led and Métis-centred re-search project about Métis music and dance look like? And more specifically, what does the Red River Jig teach us about Métis approaches to re-search with and about Métis people and/or practices? In so doing, we are adding to a growing body of re-search that examines what it means to do re-search from a Métis perspective. We have selected the Red River Jig fiddle tune and dance as a starting place to explore possibilities for new ways of understanding the interrelatedness of our music, dance, gatherings, and stories. Instead of findings, we share early observations related to methodologies and our next re-search steps. In this way, this article acts as a wayfinding tool rather than a map, an experiential story for others who would like to find a path to the Métis-specific methodologies that fit their own re-search.

Introduction

It was faith and the fiddle that kept us going through all those hard years.
—Al Wiseman (Michif Elder), Choteau, Montana, June 2023

As a predominantly Métis re-search¹ group, we recognize that research about Métis music and dance has been dominated by non-Métis researchers and academics primarily using Western and European research epistemologies. We believe that it is important to create academic approaches to studying Métis music and dance—both vital to Métis identities and flourishing—that draw upon and reflect Métis perspectives and values. We understand that re-search by and for Métis re-searchers and communities offers essential perspectives, knowledge sets, and outcomes currently missing from Métis music and dance research. In our re-search, we have chosen to focus on the Red River Jig, understanding it to be the centre of a Red River cart wheel from which the spokes of our re-search will extend and travel. Carrying attributes of the Métis peoples' Indigenous and European provenance (through marriages of the fur trade,

¹ The Anishinaabek scholar, Kathleen Absolon, writes: “I commonly use the words search and gather in lieu of research. I now hyphenate re-search, meaning to look again. To search again from *our own* [italics added] location and to search again using our own ways” (2011, 21). In this article, we distinguish between research (from non-Métis perspectives) and re-search drawing on Absolon’s framing of the hyphenated word.

historically), the Red River Jig is a popular dance, fiddle tune, and story that has been called the anthem of the Métis people. The circular (i.e., blurred, or indefinite, endings) and “crooked” rhythms (i.e., asymmetric phrases that are not divisible by four or eight) of the tune have been associated with Plains Indigenous music, and although its melody is perhaps traceable to Quebec, it follows the cascading downward melodic arc that is commonly used within Plains Indigenous song (Browner 2002, 69, 80, 133; see also Diamond, Cronk, and von Rosen 1994, 31; and see appendix for a transcription). Similarly, the dance steps have been associated with both European and European-derived step-dancing and Plains Indigenous footwork. Yet the Red River Jig, like the Métis peoples themselves, must be viewed as something else unto itself—that is, something other than mixed—as indeed, the Métis peoples are peoples unto themselves.

In this article, we introduce the Red River Jig Family Network project and invite readers to visit with us as we continue to build and shape the project.¹ We ask, what can a Métis-led and Métis-centred re-search project about Métis music and dance look like? And more specifically, what does the Red River Jig teach us about Métis approaches to re-search with and about Métis peoples and/or practices? In so doing, we are adding to a growing body of re-search that examines what it means to do re-search from a Métis perspective and, more specifically, from an arts-based Métis perspective. The project began in 2022, with several online gatherings that guided its creation. These gatherings involved Métis ways of visiting adapted to an online context. We found that these gatherings were a successful community-engaged methodology that supported the sharing, archiving, continuation, and renewal of Métis music and dance traditions. Furthermore, we found that they allowed for community-led co-creation of the project from its very beginning. While these gatherings thus represented an exploration of the possibilities for a project centring Métis music and dance, we found a number of ideas and practices to guide our future re-search. We offer these learnings and experiences as tools for other re-searchers looking for culturally responsive approaches to Métis topics. In this way, this article acts as a wayfinding tool rather than a map, an experiential story or guide for others who would like to find pathways to the Métis-specific methodologies that fit their own re-search.

The first section of this article describes the circumstances that led to the emergence of this project and introduces the lead re-searchers. Next, we consider the importance of gathering and visiting—and the centrality of both to this project—and describe a year of visits. The two re-search assistants (RAs) who worked on this project also introduce themselves. In the final section, rather than offering conclusions, we offer observations about our methodologies and consider what next steps will look like. We predict the pathways this project will follow over the next few years, having identified four approaches to re-search within the interconnected arenas of music, dance, and story that emerged during the first year: 1) the Red River Jig as ancestral voice and descendant; 2) the Red River Jig as a guide or navigator; 3) the Red River Jig as river channels of kinship and archive; and 4) the Red River Jig as compass, gathering, and home. In these four approaches, we understand music-dance-story as kin and, in doing so, make space for traditions and history as well as newer and contemporary contexts, all the while pointing our re-search in the direction of the future and the good life (drawing on the teaching of *miyopimatisiwin*, a Cree word meaning the good life). We interpret music-dance-story as both re-search process and a re-search outcome. Alongside this, we understand music and dance as both nouns and verbs, that they are both *wahkotowin* (kin with related kinship responsibilities) and *kiyokewin* (the practice of visiting that creates the kinship). Our community-engaged methodology supported our commitment to community-led project co-creation at every stage, including the beginning.

¹ The re-search team would like to thank the anonymous reviewers who contributed to the writing of this article, and to the project, through their clear and helpful suggestions.

The Red River Jig Family Network Project

The seeds of this project were planted in 2021, as COVID-19 restrictions dragged on and virtual gatherings became a viable, long-term, and ongoing way to connect across great distances. Ethnomusicologist and fiddler, Monique Giroux, had organized several gatherings through a loose affiliation of scholars and community members known as the Métis Music and Dance Research Network (or MMDRN), bringing together people interested in research (broadly defined) with Métis music-dance (the hyphen here recognizing the inseparable nature of Métis music and dance, including the way the musicians often follow the dancers' rhythms just as the dancers follow the musicians). During these early gatherings of MMDRN, we (Drs. Suzanne Steele, Michelle Porter, and Monique Giroux) connected in our shared interest not only in Métis music-dance, the general focus of MMDRN, but in our desire to find a more "Métis" way to work with and connect to not just Métis music-dance but also music-dance-story. We furthermore saw the need for an in-depth, cross-disciplinary (or possibly trans- or non-disciplinary, as discussed later) inquiry into the cultural and historic importance of the Red River Jig to the Métis peoples.

A year later, in early 2022, we officially joined together to begin this project, which we titled, *La danse di la Rivyairre Rooj, Oâyache Mannin: A Cultural Inquiry into Dance, Music, and Song, as Practiced by the Red River Jig Family Network*, or, "The Red River Jig Family Network" (RRJFN). The term family network in the project's title interacts with concepts of "kinship teachings" and materialities as laid out by Lindsay Nixon in her study titled *Prairie Families: Cree-Métis-Saulteaux Materialities as Indigenous Feminist Materialist Record of Kinship-Based Selfhood* (2018). In this, Nixon writes of our belongings as "having come to life within complex kinship webs that existed precolonization, and finding continuance among Indigenous peoples who exist in a continued settler-colonial state" (2018, 80). The terms family or kinship networks therefore help us define the complexities and influences inherent in the "non-object" (i.e., the Red River Jig), which is a piece of music-dance-story passed through generations of musicians and dancers of multiple cultures, and yet has a life of its own (as discussed in more detail later) specifically in relation to Métis peoples.

The project to date (post-MMDRN) has consisted of numerous team visits (in various configurations of two to five team members) and three virtual gatherings of between ten and twenty people. At each of these, hosts and invited guests introduced themselves, positioning their identities in relation to these Métis kinship networks. (The term hosts refers to the re-search team, while guests refers to the invited Knowledge-Keepers who received an honorarium and small gift in recognition of their time and knowledge. Community refers to others who joined the online gatherings to listen and ask questions. Finally, the term visitors refers to everyone present, acknowledging that all participants shaped the gathering.) To do so offered an opportunity to create connection and accountability. Following this approach and with a desire to adhere to this visiting method in the text of this article, Drs. Steele, Porter, and Giroux will introduce themselves. Later, the RAs, who joined about four months into the project (in time for the second visit), will introduce themselves. It is worth noting that this article, this story, is polyvocal, a collaboration of scholars and artist-practitioners, each coming from a wide variety of disciplines and points of view; thus, the tenor of the prose may vary.

Dr. Suzanne Steele

Maarsi for entering the story of this re-search with us. Pour a cup of tea, grab a piece of li gallette, and enjoy our story of re-searching for cultural connections and meanings through the music-dance-story of our Prairie peoples. Searching is something I have done all my life. I am a Gaudry/Fayant/Ducharme (and more) on my mother's Michif side and belong to a long line of crusty Scots on my father's. I have spent most of my life explaining that I am not Portuguese,

Spanish, Persian, Egyptian, Italian, Palestinian, Afghan...any peoples with soft brown complexions. Indeed, because my grandmother hid her Michifness with pink face powder and staying out of the sun, lest she brown too deeply in a “white” land, we didn’t learn who we were until I was pulled aside at a writer’s reception by Dr. Cathy Richardson who sent me to one of our genealogists, who in turn sent me fourteen generations of family history; I learned that I am Métis, Michif, Red River Métis, a person of Assiniboia.

The first Gaudry’s arrived with the first 100 in “New France,” and like Dr. Giroux (who describes her family line below), I have a number of soldiers of the Carignan-Salières Regiment and *filles du roi* in that history. I have Anishinaabek, Sarcee, and, I believe, Lakota family as well (there’s a story). What I do know for certain is that our once prosperous family from St. Vital, St. François Xavier, and Willowbunch was scattered like wildflower seeds across the Prairie into diaspora and poverty; it has taken 150+ years for us to begin to recover. It is the loss of our culture, severed from itself or “dismembered” (Absolon 2011, 21), erased (an act of spiritual and cultural violence) of its Michifness, that compels me to do this work and my other work as a librettist and storyteller. This re-search reflects my will to reconnect us and our kinship networks through the intriguing Red River Jig and her fabulous and meandering story (for surely the RRJ is a she!!).

Dr. Michelle Porter

Hello, and maarsi to you for joining our story. My name is Michelle Porter and I’m a writer originally from the Métis Prairie Homeland, though I’ve found myself teaching creative writing at Memorial University in Newfoundland. I’m the descendant of a long line of Métis storytellers (the Goulet family), most of whom told their stories with music but, as I like to say, I continue that tradition using words. My first novel, *A Grandmother Begins the Story*, was published in May 2023, and I’m also the author of two non-fiction books, *Approaching Fire* and *Scratching River*, and one book of poetry, *Inquiries*.

My most recent research-creation work focused on the activities of my family’s historical musical band called *The Red River Echoes*, which played and performed between the 1930s and 1950s in Manitoba. My interest in traditional Métis music is the result of this work, and I continue to look for the stories that are told behind, alongside, and within the music. In my fiction, I use an arts-based re-search process to explore contemporary stories about the relationships Métis/Michif have created, still create, and can create with bison, focusing on bison return to land efforts.

Dr. Monique Giroux

Welcome, and thank you for joining us. My name is Monique Giroux, and I am a settler with French Canadian and Scottish ancestry. My father’s family can be traced back to some of the earliest French immigrants to Quebec, including (like Steele) both soldiers from the Carignan-Salières Regiment and *filles du roi*. My paternal grandparents moved into Saskatchewan in the early 1900s as Canada pushed westward. Though they were by no means rich, they benefited from Indigenous lands (Očhéthi Šakówiŋ territory and the Métis Homeland), carving out a living near the small French-Quebecois settlement of Montmartre. I know less about my mom’s side of the family, but I know that they moved between Michigan and Southern Ontario—Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee territory—for several generations. After my parents met, they moved to southern Manitoba and eventually bought a hobby farm near the tiny town of Rathwell (Assiniboine, Očhéthi Šakówiŋ, Cree, and Oji-Cree territory, and the Métis Homeland). This is where I spent the first eighteen years of my life.

During my childhood, I quickly developed an affinity for and love of the fiddle—I begged my parents to let me start, and they promised I could as soon as I turned five. I grew up playing in the family band—*Les Gilets*—and competing in fiddle contests where I met many Métis fiddlers (in particular, I want to acknowledge Garry Lepine, Patti Kusturok, Mel Bedard, and John Arcand, though there are many others who influenced me over the years). As an adult,

I have dedicated my professional and much of my personal life to Métis music, earning a degree in ethnomusicology (a discipline that addresses music in or as culture) in 2013, and an academic position at the University of Lethbridge in 2017, where I continue to work. As a settler, I am grateful every day for being able to connect with a music tradition that brings joy and healing to individuals and communities, and for the opportunity to visit with Drs. Steele and Porter, and with other Métis creators.

These distinct backgrounds, but common interests, led us (Drs. Steele, Porter, and Giroux) to decide we would be good partners on a project working with Métis music-dance-story. Though interested in all forms of Métis music-dance-story—from traditional to contemporary practices—we decided that the project should centre on the Red River Jig (“La danse di la Rivyairre Rooj” or “Oayâche Mannin”) because it reflects the relational pathways with which we aimed to engage. We proposed that the “Red River Jig” could be conceptualized as being at the centre of the Métis music-dance-story tradition, functioning as a cultural hub, cohesive as the centre of the wheel of a Red River cart—one of the Métis traditional modes of transportation. At the same time, it reaches outward in relationship with other expressions of being and with other peoples that may be described, as Louis Riel articulates, as “the people of Assiniboia,”¹ or as Lindsay Nixon writes, “Prairie families” (2018).² This wheel (and spokes) of relationships and geography, radiating from the centre, is the “network” central to this study. We are calling it the Red River Jig Family Network.

Come Gather, Visit, Dream

V’ni! Dream with us: it is the late 1800s, and we are in a winter cabin along the Red River in the heart of the Métis Homeland. There might be a wood floor, but maybe it is dirt, and if so, when everyone starts dancing, the dust will rise. It is a gathering of Métis hibernants, kin, and fellow sojourners of many nations. Everyone has travelled a long distance from their allotments along or near the Red River, or their traplines, or even from over the seas, to spend the cold season visiting in this cabin in what will become a province in what will be known as Canada or in a northern state in what is now known as the United States. The evening gathering begins with a feast—perhaps li gallette and li boulettes—then, someone shouts, “v’ni dansi!!” (it’s time to dance).

This scene is set by Louis Goulet (1859–1936) in his memoirs, *Vanishing Spaces*. In it, there is no fiddle, but there is a drum. Goulet is recorded saying: “I often think the Red River Jig (Oayâche Mannin) was invented on evenings like this where the only instrument was an Indian drum” (Charette 1976, 43). Did the fiddle tune come first, as is often imagined by ethnomusicologists (e.g., see Gibbons 1980), or was it the dance and drum as suggested by Goulet? And how does our understanding of the Red River Jig’s genealogy change when we begin with the dance and drum?

With this story, we invite you to come along with us as we visit with the Red River Jig, a dance and a fiddle tune that has travelled the breadth of the Métis Homeland; that has changed into as many versions as there are players; and that is as much a part of our past as it is part of our future. With this story, we will tell you what we are thinking as academics following a foundational first year of discussions and visits. This has been a year of dreaming about what makes home and a year that has set the stage for a larger re-search collaboration that investigates

¹ This term is used in the List of Rights articulated by Riel’s Provisional Government of 1869.

² Describing these Prairie families, Nixon writes: “Kinship is the framework needed to account for the mixedness, and simultaneous unity, of mixed Cree-Métis-Saulteaux communities who lived in communal bands in Manitoba during the 1800s, creating mixed offspring, kinship webs, and descendants” (2018, 22).

the meaning of Métis music-dance-story to Métis people today. From this beginning, we will demonstrate the centrality of the jig and dance to the Métis peoples and how it might be understood as Métis methodology.

When the Red River Jig Joins Us

As we began our work in early 2022, we understood the Red River Jig to be much more than a tune or dance; we understood it as a story and also a visitor. We (through Louis Goulet) have already introduced the Red River Jig—or rather, the Red River Jig introduced our project and began our story—but there is much more that could be said about this tune and dance. Known by some as the Métis national anthem, the Red River Jig is a fiddle tune and a jig (i.e., a dance) that is widely danced/played at contemporary Métis cultural and political events, functioning as celebration, competition, connection, diplomacy, an act of catharsis and well-being (Duffee 2022), and a prayer or expression of spirituality. As such, it is central to this nation of Indigenous peoples at the heart of the North American continent, historically cast into diaspora, and survivors of attempted erasure following the dissolution of their de facto nation, post-1885.

Though central to the Métis and their identity, many of those who play and dance the Red River Jig are First Nations peoples—Cree, Anishinaabe, or Dene (Quick 2015, 49)—or Inuit,¹ while others are of Franco-Manitoban, Fransaskois, or Scottish Canadian ancestry (Quick 2008; Dueck 2013, 35–7; Lederman 1986). The dance and tune are, therefore, embedded in networks of kinship that extend beyond Métis Nation citizenship, a network (the Red River Jig Family Network) that emerged as part of the historic fur trade. That the Red River Jig has been played for centuries, and continues to be played extensively across cultures and kinship webs, attests to how even through music, the Métis people’s very existence continues to disrupt Canada’s “seemingly clear categories of ‘Indian’ and White” (Hayter 2017, ii).

In designing the project, we asked, “How can a relational understanding of the Red River Jig be embedded in everything that we do, from our objectives, to how we engage with community, to how we disseminate the re-search?” We aimed to use this project as the first step toward an answer to this question. We are only at the beginning of a project that we’d like to expand to allow us to describe and co-create a Métis music-dance-story methodology steeped in community, collaboration, visiting, storytelling, and listening (Campbell 2019; Flaminio, Gaudet and Dorion 2020) while gaining a deeper understanding of the importance of music-dance-story within community and kinship networks. While we are pointed in that direction, this initial project is limited to an early exploration of possibilities, asking what Métis-led and Métis-centred re-search about Métis music and dance could look like. How do gathering and visiting online impact music and dance communities, and what kinds of stories emerge during the process?

During early discussions of this project, the co-investigators also noted the importance of cross/trans-disciplinary approaches as a cornerstone of Indigenous re-search methodologies. Here we understand cross-disciplinary as work that emerges when two or more distinct disciplines (with their distinct methods, literatures, and assumptions) are brought together. In contrast, we understand trans-disciplinary approaches as those that attempt to work beyond those disciplinary divides, creating a new space that is not disciplined. These approaches (especially the latter) are important because, as pointed out above, the “Red River Jig” crosses boundaries among music, dance, politics, history, spirituality, and well-being, while also reaching from the past, to present, to future across a vast Homeland and beyond. Yet, to date, researchers working within Western institutions have largely viewed it from the lens of music and dance. (Giroux acknowledges that this music-dance lens has been her primary approach since beginning research with Métis music in 2009.)

¹ Colin Adjun was, for example, known for playing the Red River Jig.

Because the Red River Jig crosses these boundaries, the team quickly realized that the project is complex and, as a result of this complexity, each participant and visitor might envision the project in distinct but complementary ways. As a starting point to better understand and discuss these complementary approaches, Drs. Steele and Giroux visualized the project (see figures 2 and 3). These illustrations point to the unique starting points of view of two team members while providing an overview of the many overlapping themes and ideas that the Red River Jig—and the project—bring together.

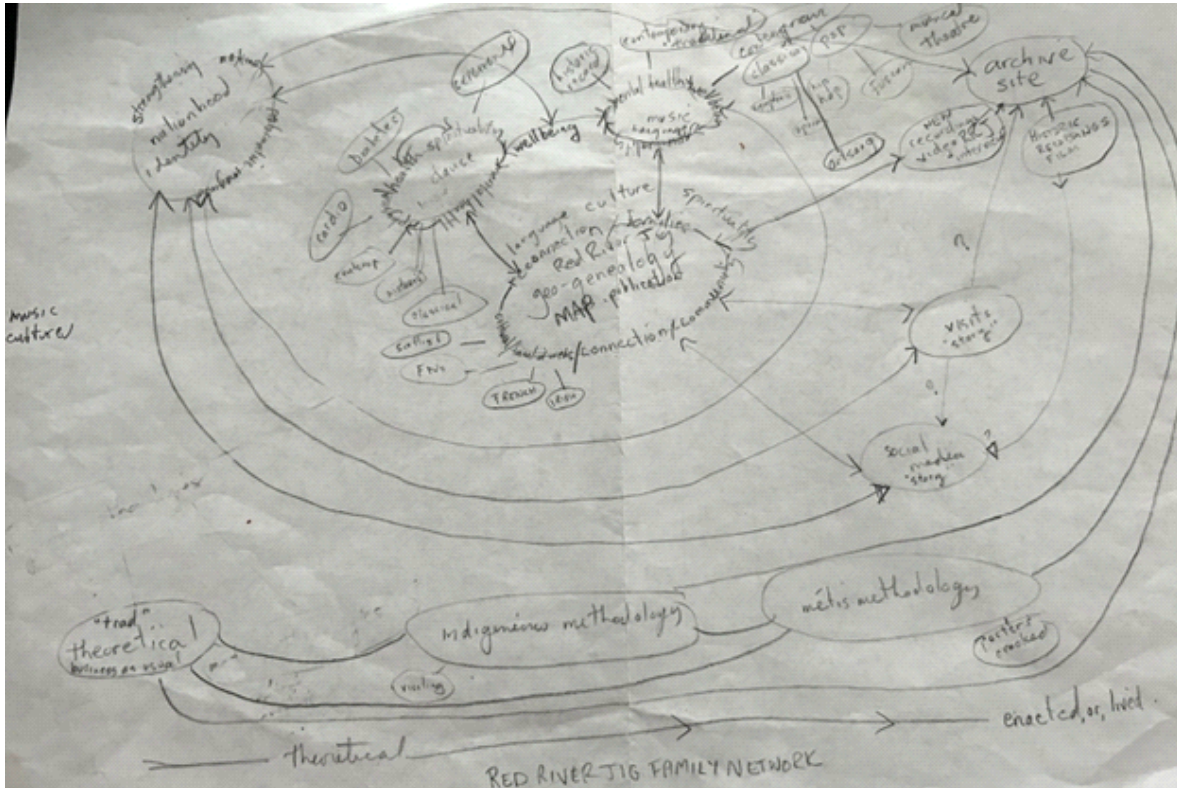


Figure 1: Dr. Steele’s visualization of the project. This is an early visualization of the project that fundamentally reflects how interconnected all aspects of the Red River Jig Family Network are. At the centre, one can see the interconnection of music, dance, language, and geo-genealogy with all the relationships that either feed or develop from each. The next ring could be identified as the potential implications of the RRJFN, and finally, the theoretical underpinnings may be observed at the bottom. All are interconnected.

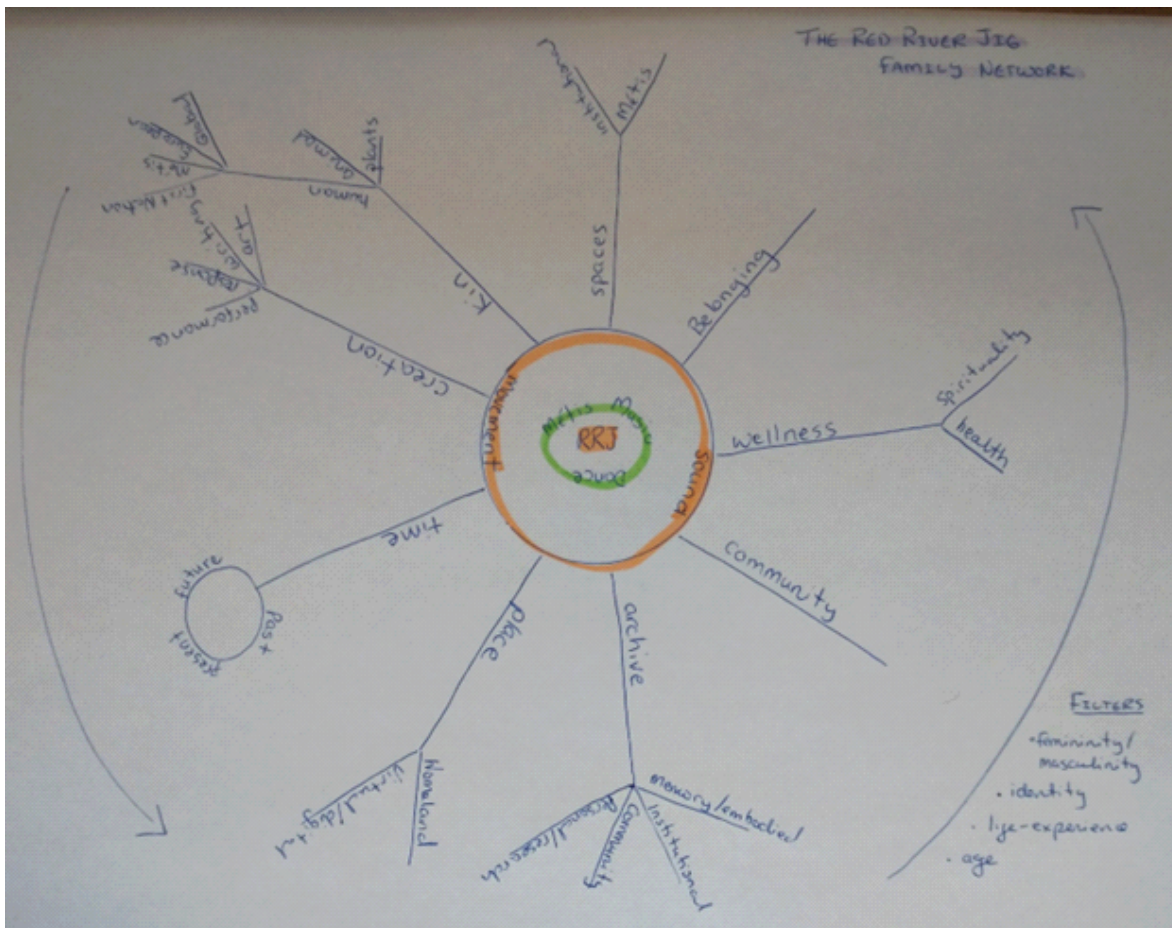


Figure 2: Dr. Giroux’s visualization of the project, beginning with the Red River Jig and considering the varied pathways/directions through which it leads us. The “filters” (of which there are many more than those listed) represent how each pathway is interpreted through our identities and experiences.

In September of 2022, after receiving a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) impact award, two research assistants, Dillon Apsassin (Blueberry River First Nation) and Lily Overacker (Métis—Whitford, Anderson, Gaudry/Beaudry, Fraser/Lennie), joined the project. Apsassin’s task was to support the project by compiling a major annotated bibliography and examining theoretical approaches and methodologies with which to frame the re-search. From this, Apsassin created a resource that will be attached to the project website, accessible to community members and scholars with interests in the many fields in which the Red River Jig intersects. Overacker’s task was to provide communications support for the project, including through social media and the development of a website, and to investigate ways of connecting and disseminating cultural provenances using digital mapping technologies. We invite Apsassin and Overacker to introduce themselves.

Dillon Apsassin

My family comes from Blueberry River First Nation. I started with the Red River Jig Family Network in September 2022. My earlier research was on the topic of powwow as understood through the lens of physical culture studies. With this, I sought to construct a fluid view of Indigenous dancers, instrumentalists, vocalists, art creators/producers/designers, and visionaries that produce many diverse perspectives in an effort to best acknowledge and develop how the

physical body moves, becomes represented, has meanings attached to it, and becomes permeated with power (Silk and Andrews 2011, 6). I previously explored the wellness continuum as illustrated by Fahey, Insel, Roth, and Wong (2016). These scholars provided a definition of spiritual wellness as a process of guiding beliefs, principles, or values that give meaning and purpose to one's life, especially during difficult times. Next, I came to understand that the definition of environmental wellness is determined by the habitability of one's surroundings. I found that the Red River Jig, when positioned next to powwow, allowed for the imagining of the experiences and demonstrated the ability to produce the same outcomes for spiritual and environmental well-being through layers of participation. One of these layers was revealed to me during our third visit when our conversation turned to "pulse," a phenomenon that occurs when the music of the instrument harmonizes with the jigger while gathering those in attendance to perform through body movements that are coordinated with the rhythm. With this context, I invite participants to connect their knowledge as their source of illumination to make visible the multiple layers that accompany Métis people when participating in the Red River Jig.

Lily Overacker

Tansi and hello, my name is Lily Overacker, and my background is an eclectic mix of Métis and settler ancestry. My Métis ancestry comes from my dad's side of the family, which is primarily Métis, Norwegian, and German, while my mom's side of the family is European Canadian with prominent Norwegian and Finnish ancestry. I am a descendant of Nancy Beaudry/Gaudry and Colin Fraser, who ran Jasper House for many years, as well as the Whitford and Anderson families from the Red River area, who eventually migrated west to what is now Saskatchewan and Alberta. Throughout the generations, my family has always been very mobile, putting down roots in Beaver Hill Lake, Tofield, Pakan, and Athabasca. However, I grew up in a small town in central Alberta called Blackfalds and moved to Lethbridge in 2020 to pursue my undergraduate degree in Anthropology and History. My connection to my Métis heritage and relations has been heavily shaped by my great-grandmother (Gram) who is now 101 years old and still sharing many stories of her life and her ancestors' lives. Her stories and beadwork inspired me to start beading myself as well as further understand the ways Métis oral history and tradition shaped the way my grandfather, father, and I grew up. For my family, our familial and cultural practices were never framed as "the Métis way" but rather as "Gram's way," as the oldest living relative who provided knowledge and guidance. Her knowledge is what inspired me to learn more about the everyday history and lives of Métis people, which led to me apply to become part of this project as a research assistant.

Porter, Apsassin, and Overacker created visualizations toward the end of the first year, as shown in figures 3, 4, and 5.



Figure 3: Dr. Porter's visualization of the project. The river carries the music, dance, and story. On the banks of the river grow the Métis people and culture.



Figure 4: Dillon Apsassin's visualization of the project. The web shown above is used to "capture" the ideas. Central is the circular nature of our project: Métis music, dance, and story, Métis networking, and the Red River Jig Family Network's visiting methodology, in turn, produced thematic expressions in our methods. Expressed between visits, our team came to conceptualize the Red River Jig: Métis ways of being, the concept of a Métis digital fiddle, Métis artists, community, and kinships webs; then, the Red River Jig as an ancestor that travels vast landscapes; last, interpreting the Red River Jig (drawing on the perspective of our guests) to help develop our visiting methodology through a Métis perspective.



Figure 5: Lily Overacker's visualization of the project. The idea was to represent how the Red River Jig Network can interact and build relationships with different spaces and places of knowledge and community while also showing that these ideas and spaces have the capacity to interact and speak back to us and/or through us.

Methodology: A Year of Visits

Métis scholars today identify the need for developing varied Métis re-search methodologies, noting the scarcity of these approaches in academia until relatively recently (Davey 2023; Gaudet et al. 2020; Kovach 2005, 2009). Health researchers have been exploring Métis approaches to studying patient outcomes in different contexts, including relational and Métis community-based re-search (Ginn et al. 2021; LaVallee et al. 2016). Although still emerging, Davey (2023) noted that re-searchers have been articulating Métis approaches in a variety of ways, including methodologies specific to re-search by and with Métis women (Flaminio, Gaudet and Doiron 2020) and re-search that centres gathering, visiting, and Métis kitchen table methodology (Agger, 2017; Farrell Racette, 2017; Flaminio, 2018; Flaminio et al. 2020; Gaudet, 2017). We also look to the work of Brenda Macdougall (2010), who brought Métis re-search approaches to the discipline of geography by bringing the Métis concept of wahkohtowin to her investigation of Métis families in Northwestern Saskatchewan. This list is not comprehensive and yet it already makes apparent the idea that there is not one all-encompassing Métis methodology, and, as noted by Davey (2023), there is not one “correct” approach to Indigenous re-search. Indeed, diverse methodologies are not only required for different situations, but sharing these re-search experiences contributes to the growth of new approaches that fit unique re-search contexts and situations. In recognition, this project explores the unique forms that are possible when Métis re-search engages with music, dance, and story. Just as health, geographical, and pedagogical (and other) re-search approaches have each found their own Métis-specific approaches using the concepts of wahkohtowin and kiyokewin as guides, we are learning from others’ re-search stories to build our own.

Visiting as a re-search methodology emerges from re-search on relationality, which is now recognized as central to Indigenous approaches to re-search (Kovach 2010; Simpson 2014; Smith 2012; Wilson 2008). As Métis scholar Cindy Gaudet writes, “For Indigenous peoples, visiting creates and fortifies connections that unify and build community from the ground up. It is how humour, silence, news, concerns, pain, knowledge, ideas, and arguments are disseminated at a grassroots/ground level” (2019, 53). She further points out that “visiting may seem on the surface to be a passive and apolitical activity, but it is, in fact, political, re-centring authority in a way of relating that is itself rooted in a cultural, spiritual, and social context” (Gaudet 2019, 53). The visiting way thus addresses the hoarding or extraction of Indigenous knowledge by institutions and insists on combining re-search and dissemination by building a knowledge-sharing community. Music-dance-story was, and continues to be, a key aspect of visiting within Métis culture; traditionally, the fiddle was pulled out and played as visitors gathered, with songs sung to give the fiddlers a break or to mark special occasions. Furniture was often cleared from the house, creating an informal dance floor. Music-dance-story thus facilitated the visiting, creating a sense of community and connection through sound and movement.

Honouring visiting as a Métis methodology, the first year of this project centred on many visits, sometimes with just two or three team members, sometimes with the entire team, and sometimes with guest visitors. Drs. Steele and Giroux met weekly and biweekly with Dillon and Lily. Dr. Porter joined our visits about once a month. While these visits were all over Zoom, Lily and Dillon met in person on a biweekly basis (occasionally with Giroux joining). These meetings were opportunities to build strong relationships among team members and discuss emergent themes and ideas. In early June 2023, Steele and Giroux travelled to Choteau, Montana, where they visited with Elders and community members of the Michif diaspora (including Al Wiseman, whose words begin this essay) and invited them to participate in this re-search.

Three virtual visits featuring two to three invited participants at each visit were the cornerstone of our first year’s work. These visits were planned as a first step toward building a Métis music-dance-story-centred knowledge-sharing community. One of the anticipated outcomes of these visits was the participation of the visitors (hosts, guests, and community) in shaping the project. The invited guests were carefully selected to facilitate the cross/trans-disciplinary approach described above, drawing on the knowledge, experience, and artistic practices of diverse Métis artists and re-searchers. A list of potential guests was drawn up, intentionally encompassing the range of influences, connections, and approaches that are part of the Red River Jig Family Network. Once the invited guests were confirmed, the re-search team prepared guiding questions based on the experiences and expertise of the guests, though we found that the visits quickly became free-flowing conversations and the prepared questions were only very loosely followed, or not used at all. The visits were held online to facilitate public engagement. Virtual engagement was and is important because of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic and because Métis live and work across the large Métis Homeland and beyond.

The first visit was arranged and held on June 20, 2022, with the Knowledge-Keeper of dance and choreographer, Yvonne Chartrand, the founder of Vn’i Dansi and the Louis Riel Dancers. Other guests included fiddler, activist, 2022 Indspire Award winner, and advocate for youth well-being, Tristan Durocher, and spoken word artist and multi-media musician, Moe Clark. Our next visit was held on November 30, 2022, and included the jigger/Irish dancer and teacher, Danielle Enblom of Minneapolis, and the dancer/teacher and leader of the Métis dance troupe, the Edmonton Métis Traditional Dancers, Lyle Donald. A final visit of our first year of virtual visits was held on February 28, 2023, with fiddler, Brianna Lizotte, and fiddler/composer, Alex Kusturok, both of whom accompanied Métis Elders to the Vatican (in March 2022) as fiddlers.



Figure 8: Word cloud of our visit with Kusturok and Lizotte

Findings: Thinking with the Red River Jig

During our first year of re-search, we kept coming back to the importance of story. Story has always been part of this project, but over the past year, it has increasingly come to the forefront as we think with the Red River Jig and converse with our visitors who often referenced story. As Alex Kusturok shared during a workshop at the 2023 Hills Are Alive Music and Dance Cultural Festival, the fiddle is about stories, and the stories are just as important as the tunes. As the camp ended, Kusturok reminded participants to keep telling the stories—about the music, the camp, the tunes, the people, and more. Story is central to the four approaches to re-searching Métis music-dance-story that have emerged during this project’s first year. We understand story as a rich and layered way of passing ideas and knowledge on to future generations (Dorris 1979, 156–7), and a way to “recogniz[e] and refornc[e] webs of relationship” (Howe 2002, 163). We are especially interested in how story connects us with the Red River Jig, not as object but as actor within a storied web. As noted earlier, we expect that our approaches to re-searching Métis music-dance-story will shift and develop in the coming years (just as they did over the past year) as we think more deeply with the Red River Jig as methodology. However, we offer these interconnected approaches now, early in the project, as an invitation to join us and to think with us and with the Red River Jig as the project continues.

Red River Jig as Ancestral Voice and Descendant

The Red River Jig might be described as a tune and dance—a set of steps, rhythmic patterns, and notes. This is not inaccurate, but it is inadequate; descriptions with this focus turn the Red River Jig into an object, something that can become contained (and, in fact, is contained through descriptive musical notation) and detached from community. As we engaged in visits, it became clear that the Red River Jig is much more than just an easily containable tune/dance; it is also a feeling, a connection, and something in the blood. That is, it carries relationships and might even be understood as a relation. The relevance and importance of genetic, genealogical, and kin connections were evident in all our visits during the first year of this project.

Themes in this vein are evident in the above word clouds, which include (among other possibly related words and ideas) the concepts of descendant, future, tradition, kinship, genealogy, genetic memory, family archive, and “feel[ing] it in the blood” (see figure 8).

In *Vanishing Spaces*, the gathering, dance, and drum (the connection to First Nations ancestors) came first. As such, Goulet’s story shows us that the Red River Jig is more than a set of notes and rhythms; it carries knowledge, stories, relationships, and ways of doing and being together. Each version—and there are many—is both unique and connected to all the other versions; as such, it holds place- and kin-specific knowledge, stories, and relationships even as it unifies. It moves through and among community (i.e., it is not an object or something that can be pinned down on a staff¹), even as it gathers community (and indeed is often at the centre of Métis visiting). Having moved across a vast Homeland, it furthermore carries the relationships with land and shows us (Métis) pathways down rivers and across the Prairies. In contemporary times, it is also moving in and through virtual spaces. In this sense, the Red River Jig has agency. It is an ancestral voice that was here long before we (the re-search team) were here, and if cared for, it will be here long after we are gone. As this project progresses, we are interested in further understanding the subjectivity of the Red River Jig, not as a cultural object but as a living entity.

Red River Jig as Guide or Navigator

Earlier, we suggested that Métis music-dance-story is a key aspect of Métis visiting. However, music-dance-story and visiting are not interchangeable as the former does work that is distinct from other forms of visiting; it can perhaps be understood as a specific type of visiting. Working with the Jig as a guide or navigator is a relational approach and is not the same as interpreting the Jig as a map or directions in which the relationship is mostly one-way, prescribed, and finished once the single destination is reached. When we learn how to move through spaces with a guide or navigator, we do not objectify them; we build relationships with them. In order to expand on the visiting way in the coming years, we aim to better understand music-dance-story as Métis methodology. Music, dance, and story are unique because of the ways in which they travel through time and space. They are portable and reflect Métis culture both in the past and in the contemporary context. They are also creative practices, allowing for the expression of Elder/traditional and youth/contemporary responses to current conditions within the same dance and tune.² The Métis music-dance-story methodology that we aim to describe and co-create would honour the creativity of music, dance, and storying in all their potentialities, including how they constitute relationships with and among people(s), and with animals, flora, the land, and the non-human. There is potential, then, for this methodology to “engage human and more-than-human beings in the acts of tending to, enlivening, and mobilizing relationships which support the well-being and self-determination of humans and more-than-humans through time and space” (Todd 2018, 65).

¹ See Dylan Robinson’s critique of capturing music on a staff (2020, 149). Jaakola and Powell’s article on repatriating Ojibwe recordings is also relevant. The authors argue that the recordings gathered by Francis Densmore are misdescribed within their archival context as objects (wax cylinders from 1907 to 1910) “rather than living spiritual beings.” They suggest that “these living spiritual beings [the songs] possess the power of shape-shifting—that is to say they may manifest themselves as wax cylinders or cassettes or digital objects, but these forms do not define their *being*” (2018, 580).

² This builds on Porter’s earlier work on *Crooked Methodology* which centres an artistic approach to knowledge related to historic and contemporary dance and fiddle traditions (2022). It also builds on Steele’s concept of *Geo-genealogical Inquiry* (which she developed during this first year of study). *Geo-genealogical Inquiry* traces the geographic/genealogical, familial, and cultural webs of the Métis nation through analyses of story, music, and dance to uncover community migration and to reconnect links. Finally, it builds on Giroux’s work on alliance studies, which urges ethnomusicologists to move beyond the constraints of identity studies to centre performance as relationship (2018).

In essence, we have come to understand the Red River Jig as a way of being in the world. The Red River Jig is a teacher, showing us a way to navigate complex Métis spaces. It shows us how to be trans-disciplinary (not disciplined in the sense of being pushed into narrow categories, or even cross-disciplinary, trying to work within frames that were created for something other than the Red River Jig). It is woven into every aspect of life, in contexts of sociality, economics, politics, wellness, and spirituality. It weaves itself into unexpected places (e.g., as celebration in the midst of pain). It is important to note that the Red River Jig is both individual—with fiddlers playing their own versions—and collective—as it remains the Red River Jig even in this difference and invites people to join in through dance. For this reason, it shows us how we can connect across multiple generations and spaces, being together as a people, even in our difference. During the first year of our re-search, the Red River Jig has taught us a great deal about Métis approaches to music-dance-story as well as Métis approaches to re-search. In the coming years, we anticipate engaging further with the Red River Jig as navigator and guide through the complex terrain of (re)developing Métis approaches to re-search.

Red River Jig as River Channels of Kinship and Archive

Many Indigenous peoples have a complex and spiritual relationship with water. Cultural teachings involving water often include a metaphorical focus on the cycles of life and learning that connect the past with the future (Todd et al. 2023). In this way, among others, rivers can be said to carry and share knowledge. Rivers have a central place in Métis history. The Métis became a Nation alongside these rivers, and our dance-music-story began there too. Our peoples traditionally travelled the great waterways of North America. The Red River remains a symbolic and physical gathering place for Métis today. In this way the Red River is always flowing with the past, present, and future. (Re)building relationships with rivers—both real and metaphorical—is another pathway we anticipate following. As traditional roadways, rivers have always connected Métis to each other (as evident in the Métis river lot system) and to other peoples. Rivers are always moving and changing over time as they respond to the world around them. The stories rivers bear witness to turn them into archives and teachers to learn from and interact with, as they gather and share their journeys. The Red River Jig, in many ways, acts as a river connecting Métis and other Indigenous communities together through tangible and intangible streams of knowledge and relationality that are elicited by music-dance-story. It evokes feelings that flow through and between people, communities, and objects in a way that impacts how the Métis and the wider Indigenous community connect with each other in local contexts and in diaspora. As Steele articulated during a visit, the Red River Jig “creates the space, claims the space, makes the space” for connection, creation, and so much more.

Over the past year, we have worked to further support and extend these river spaces and flows through visits and other digital means, including the RRJFN’s website and social media accounts.¹ Just as rivers change and evolve, so do the ways people connect with each other and share culture. Taking on the metaphor of river as time, including past, present, and future, we borrow from Chelsea Vowel’s articulation of what Métis Futurism means to her when she wrote: “Métis futurism allows me to envision a number of potential futures rooted in my history, community, and worldview...to get us to where no Michif has been before and sometimes reimagining where we have already been” (Vowel 2022, 19–20). The realities of dispersal and diaspora mean digital spaces are vital for reaching and connecting with Métis people and community. Our website and social media accounts act as a digital archive of past visits and connections made through the project, but also create paths for future connections. Social media allows us to connect with people from a variety of experiences and backgrounds and to new streams of knowledge that perhaps we would not have found otherwise. Through the network and our shared experiences with the Red River Jig, social media adds to the creation of spaces to access and to share open-source knowledge. We have been able to reach and connect with hundreds of people through the use of digital spaces as a way to gather and share the ideas that come from visiting as a team and a wider community.

¹ Please visit www.redriverjig.com.

In the coming years, we aim to expand this digital presence by creating an interactive and collaborative map that is meant, as is this article, to act as a wayfinding tool for others looking for traditional knowledge in the Red River Jig. The focus of a wayfinding tool is to offer the tools necessary for others to find their way and not the way or the one correct way. We expect that this map will trace the people, places, ancestors, and objects that the Red River Jig has touched, lived through, and with which it continues to coincide. We anticipate that, through mapping, we will better understand some of the different ways the Red River Jig flows through and lives across place and time, teaching us ways to grow and adapt as Métis communities. This map of the Red River Jig might be viewed as bringing together a new river of knowledge and connection—or perhaps bringing to the foreground a river of understanding and connection that already exists but that has faded with time. Based on the team’s initial work in this area, we know that mapping will be a slow and challenging process, raising questions about what, how, who, and why we map certain connections or relations and inevitably leave out others. Like a river, we have found that the work of mapping can be unruly and unpredictable, but even as they are unpredictable and unruly, rivers are also strong and resilient. This work must be done with intentionality and care, but we expect the rewards to be significant. In particular, the ability to find ways to gather, archive, and share knowledge across digital terrain and across mediums will support the renewed understanding of the Red River Jig as more than sound and movement.

Red River Jig as Compass, Gathering, Home

Our visits—

Home comes up in so many ways:

Gatherings of multiple:

home as in bringing the river with you wherever you went

mobile home—originally, moving around, bringing the river with them

home as in identity,

home as in feeling the pulse of the music.

—Porter’s notes following a team visit

Home is an important site for decolonial work. Recently, home scholars have argued that home is a normative concept based in European values (although Europeans and their descendants very much experience home in mobile geographies and entanglements) (Blunt and Dowling 2006). These ideas of home shaped the way Canada was formed and continue to shape the way we understand cultural claims to land and homelands. They also shape the way we imagine possible futures. A small but growing number of academics are examining connections between home and decolonization. Although written about the Australian context, it is also true of Canada that “since colonisation the nation state has attempted through an array of social, legal, economic and cultural practices to break Indigenous people’s ontological connections to land, and to cast them as homeless in the ‘modern’ world” (Slater 2007). Alison Blunt’s work on Anglo-Indian domesticities clearly demonstrates the role home and ideas of home played in the expansion of the British empire (2005). Porter has written that home can be understood through the notion of gathering(s) as opposed to stasis and/or ownership and that this is a decolonial intervention to scholarly understandings of home that have often excluded Métis and other Indigenous ways of living (forthcoming).

Gathering is related to the land on which the gatherings occur and the kinds of relationships the gathering creates with that land. Gathering builds mobile relationships between the land and home in that home is created across a changing landscape of gatherings (for hunting, for music and other cultural events, for visiting, etc.). Gathering relates to a non-linear understanding of time in that gatherings pull on threads of the past and future, just as the Red River Jig does by holding space for traditional dance steps while also making space for new steps. Further, Porter suggests that Métis arts practices and research-creation practices are themselves “imaginative gatherings that create, re-create, and sustain past, present and future Métis home/land(s) in

stories and literature” (forthcoming). Re-considering home through the lens of gathering is, in part, a response to what Adese and Andersen wrote about the nation—one kind of home—describing it as “the broad relations of Indigenous diplomacy that tied together Indigenous collectives in storied relationships of time and place” (2021, 9). We suggest that music-dance-story is a gathering that ties together Métis collectivities in sound-and-movement-based relationships with time and place. In the coming years, we aim to understand how the Red River Jig itself is a gathering that is used to reclaim, decolonize, and reconstitute notions of home, kinship, and identity, acting as medicine and creating home wherever and whenever it is played and danced.

Limitations to Our Re-search

Like all re-search, this project has limitations. We did not conduct quantitative re-search, and as such, our experience is not replicable. As is the nature of visiting, each visit was unique and responded to the people and dynamics that were present and did not impose a pre-determined format or set of questions. While this represents a limitation in terms of providing a framework that could be exactly repeated, this project does not make that kind of claim. In offering our experience, we are sharing one of the ways possible for other Métis re-searchers to work with a project’s methodologies and adapt them to a Métis context. The purpose of the project was to bring community members together to visit in kinship with music-dance-story and explore what future re-search on this topic could look like. Our decision to start our visits online had both limitations and benefits. We decided to meet online in response to COVID-19–related travel restrictions and shutdowns. Clearly, this meant that in-person visiting did not happen. However, because we did not need to travel to one place for the same date, we could arrange visits with people who would not be able to meet in person otherwise, and the kinds of conversations that happened would not have happened. Additionally, people who would have been too busy to fit travel into their schedules attended. However, we do want to include in-person visiting at the next stage of our project in order to benefit from the kind of kinship energy that occurs in person. As this article is written to describe what we are doing at a very early stage in the project it is currently incomplete, but we will provide further context, analysis and details as the project moves along and we document different stages.

Dreaming the Future: Some Thoughts on Continuing to Dance and Visit with the Red River Jig

On March 26, 2023, Métis fiddler and co-composer of the opera *Li Keur, Riel’s Heart of the North* (2023), Alex Kusturok, posted a video on his Facebook page titled “The Red River Jig (Different Versions I’ve Heard Over the Years).”¹ In the video, Kusturok, a Grand North American Grand Champion (2013) fiddler, composer, and performer who plays commercially and at Métis events, sits beside a fireplace playing numerous versions of the Red River Jig. Accompanying his fiddle, his feet beat out a strong and familiar (to the Métis) rhythmic, almost galloping, pattern on the 2' x 2' piece of plywood he travels with (along with a microphone for his feet). Attached to the post of the recording, he writes:

There’s a certain power to this piece of music. When I play it for a jigger, or square dance group, in that moment I’m a part of something that is so much bigger than me. If the dancer and fiddler are locked in together, we are connected on a spiritual level that’s bigger than either of us. Such a beautiful feeling. The jig and the dance isn’t something we do as Metis people. It’s who we are, and something that needs to be carried, passed on, and learned about in depth. These versions I demonstrated in this video from this concert are different versions I’ve heard various old timers play over the years. No matter the different notes, each one has the same pulse. The pulse of the Metis people.

¹ Alex Kusturok. “The Red River Jig (Different Versions I’ve Heard Over the Years),” Facebook, text and video, March 26, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/profile/100007973762748/search/?q=Red%20River%20Jig>.

The fifty variations of the Red River Jig that Kusturok knows, his words, and indeed his life's work as a Métis fiddler as the son of fiddler Patti Kusturok—both of whom have served the Métis nation for decades—neatly sums up the ethos and central themes that this project endeavours to identify and (re)connect. These themes include strength, identity, drive, connection, spirituality, responsibility, creativity, and above all, respect for those who have come before us. This paper illustrates one team of predominantly Métis re-searchers' efforts to link together a nation in diaspora through a single piece of music-dance-story.

In dreaming the future with this project, we asked for a song and a dance to lead us and we were not disappointed with what we encountered. What we have now are not findings so much as navigation guides that will lead us through the next steps; we offer these to further broaden understandings of the possibilities of Métis re-search. We approached music-dance-story as kin and, in doing so, made space for the traditions and history as well as newer and contemporary contexts, all the while pointing our re-search in the direction of *miyo-pimatisiwin*. We interpreted music-dance-story as both re-search process and a re-search outcome. Alongside this, it was important that we explicitly understand music and dance as both nouns and verbs, that it is both *wahkotowin* (kin with related kinship responsibilities) and *kiyokewin* (the practice of visiting that creates the kinship). In this closing section, we offer some of the methodological strategies we arrived at during the course of this project. In this way, this article acts as a wayfinding tool rather than a map and an experiential story or guide for others who would like to find the path to the Métis-specific methodologies that fit their own re-search.

First, the online kitchen table is a place to begin but not a final place for this project. That's why our next steps will include in-person gatherings. Second, the gathering approach we started with led to a successful community-engaged methodology that supported the sharing, archiving, continuation, and renewal of Métis music and dance traditions. Furthermore, this approach supports the commitment to community-led co-creation of the project at every stage, including the beginning. Third, because there is no meeting of Métis without diversity of thought and disagreement, it is important to allow room for conflicting ideas, recognizing that there is no one right way to gather, to story, and to make music and dance. Fourth, when we let stories lead the way, the meetings held to their own storied agenda without much guidance from the re-searchers. The invitation to let the story lead includes following the metaphor-rich engagement with the Red River Jig that we described here; letting stories lead includes being open to understandings that are not direct and are as intangible as metaphor often is. And fifth, because dance and music are stories in and of themselves, we want to learn how to let dance and music lead the way for our next in-person meetings. That will be exciting. We are at the beginning and will report back as we move ahead.

Appendix

Recorded by Richard Johnston
Red River Jig
Jimmy Pelletier, Lebret, Sask., 1957

(♩ = 110) A Part

(1)

12 (2)

22 B Part

32

41

D \flat on tape. Tune a halfstep (or 100 cents) down to match the tape.

Begins with two open A double stops.

(1) Second time through, Johnston adds this beat.

(2) Second time through, Johnston adds these two beats.

Transcription by Life Yulo-Tamana and Monique Giroux.

Notice how the first notes are high on the staff (high E), while the final notes are low on the staff (low A and E). Many versions can be heard on YouTube.

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Knowledge, ideas, stories, and inspiration come from much more than we can cite in a conventional bibliography. They show up in our quick conversations with family and friends, the long drives across the Prairies as we stare out the window, and the five minutes we spend sitting at our desks before a Zoom meeting starts. Each person who has contributed to this project has a personal bibliography and life story of experiences that adds to and extends past the books, journal articles, and other important work within this project's bibliography. It is important to acknowledge relations among people, places, and past that have shaped this project far beyond what is captured in a bibliography and hold space for these relations as part of the academic process.

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