

Coming Home Through Métis Research

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Throughout my life, there have been women who came alongside me at critical moments and taught me lessons necessary for my growth as a Métis woman and scholar.¹ This chapter honours the Métis women whose caring work in community, in the academy, and in social relationships are rebuilding communities through nurturing connections to home.² Their emotional labour, in addition to their professional and scholarly work, builds the next generation of scholars and community members. For many disconnected Métis, our connections to our ancestors are often found through archival research, often when seeking out genealogical connections for Métis citizenship.³ In other cases, it emerges from a desire to make sense of gaps, silences, and missing stories. My experiences of coming home through Métis research also speaks to the conditions where I, as a disconnected Métis youth, was able to gain access to Métis histories, literatures, artwork, Elders and ceremonies, and a community. The possibilities for Métis research, grounded in Métis worldview, enable us to put the pieces of our shattered lives and histories back together.⁴

My personal narrative articulates some of my formative experiences as an academic and as a Métis woman, while also illustrating some of the ways that Métis women's scholarly writing and community-building activities work together to form a core of Métis Studies today.⁵ Métis Studies, as a developing field of inquiry, is grounded in the storying of our histories as a people, whose lives are inflected by histories of resistance, colonial erasure, and a commitment to rebuilding our communities wherever we find ourselves.⁶ In telling our own stories, or storying our own lives, we can connect ourselves not only to a scholarly tradition, but also to a people who write ourselves back into the present. Our ethical commitment to positioning ourselves, our influences, and our experiences, enables others with whom we work to know us not only as scholars, but also as members of families and communities. My reflection also emerges from a feminist commitment to unmasking the illusion of the individual scholar unconnected to place or community, while also situating narratives of "coming home" as a core area of consideration in Métis Studies literatures and frameworks.

Coming home through Métis research was, for me, a personal experience, but I believe it has a larger significance to Métis Studies. Métis scholar and artist Gregory Scofield recounts his experience returning to Batoche in *Through My Veins: Memories of a Métis Childhood* in his chapter, "Pekwew, Pekewe" ("Come Home, Come Home"). Scofield recalls his first encounter with Métis culture and history at Back to Batoche Days, where he finally experienced a sense of belonging.⁷ I would not have seen my work from this perspective until I began to engage more deeply in Métis research from a Métis perspective and Indigenous Studies more broadly.⁸

Coming home through research is being able to claim your identity as a Métis person, ground yourself in a Métis worldview, understand where you belong in your family web of relations, identify the lands around you as the homeland, and finally, connect to the broader community to help to rebuild lost relationships.⁹ As an adoptee, this sense of connection, belonging, and most importantly, sense of home was something I was searching for. My academic work on Métis history, the Sixties Scoop, and finally, family connection has brought me home. As I have said elsewhere, various government policies, such as the criminal mismanagement of the scrip system, road allowance dispersals, and the Sixties Scoop, have severed connections to Métis historical consciousness, as well as kinship connections. Historical erasure and misrecognition have additionally contributed to intellectual and cultural confusion about who Métis people are more broadly, despite the recent flourishing of Métis research and artistic production.¹⁰ Métis Studies has an important role in offering a decolonized intellectual space for reconsidering our histories utilizing our own methodologies and theoretical approaches.¹¹

As Métis scholars have illustrated, storytelling and visiting constitute important methods for Métis scholars undertaking Métis-specific research.¹² Likewise, Métis women's social and familial relationships with each other can be considered a foundational element of being Métis, as illustrated by the work of Dr. Brenda Macdougall and Dr. Sherry Farrell Racette.¹³ In highlighting my own relationships with strong Métis women, I want to voice resilience, relationality, and the spiritual world of Métisness that brings meaning and connection to my work, carving a space for vulnerability. Anishinaabe writer Maya Doe'Amik Chacaby articulates the profound importance of home for contemporary Indigenous peoples:

So what is really missing? A place to come home to. Home is my language and the privilege of subjective agency as well as the necessary resources to find my sense of self in something other than what I have been subsumed by. This includes an unsettling of what we consider being human and having rights. Home is a network of Clan and kinship ties that allow safe passage through multiple spatial and conceptual territorialities; this is the definition of Anishinaabe Nationhood. Home is a social environment where Anishinaabe leadership, gender, life-cycle, and Clan responsibilities are imbued in everyday interactions. Home is the economic infrastructure to fulfill those responsibilities; this is our true measure of wealth. Home is ceremony, upliftment, and rites of passage through every life stage. Home is being celebrated, mentored, welcomed, and wanted. Home is my bundle.¹⁴

The absence of home, our longing for home, and its "missingness" in our lives for those who have experienced "life" outside our families and communities is not a problem of place or location, but rather the disconnection of a set of knowledges grounded in Indigenous sociality and disruption to collective histories and connections to storied territories. Being home, then, is the recuperating these knowledges, gaining a sense of ancestral embeddedness, and being restored to a web of relationality where your role as a future ancestor is present and directs actions. As a Métis woman who, at different stages of my life, was searching for my lost kinship connections and also a way to understand the experience of exile, there were two important junctures in my journey when Métis women came alongside me to teach me important values that have sustained me, and brought me into the circle of Métis women and community. Two stories illustrate these turning points that changed my life trajectory. I would not be where I am without them. There are also many other strong Métis women who are incredible sources of inspiration, support, and sisterhood work that reflect the women-centred family systems of Métis peoples.¹⁵

When I Was Gifted with My First Sash

Métis women have been at the forefront of engaging at the community level and at the academic level to preserve Métis culture and history while also building community organizations and educational spaces for our worldview to be passed on to the future generations.¹⁶ People like myself, who have been separated from family and culture have come to rely on these elder aunties whose work has enabled us to have spaces to come home to.

Much of the building of urban Indigenous organizations and community work in the 1960s and 1970s was undertaken by Indigenous women. In cities and towns across Turtle Island, Indigenous women worked to create political, cultural, and women's organizations to address the growing needs of urban Indigenous families.¹⁷ Métis-specific organizations likewise grew in this time. As Métis scholar Cheryl Troup argues, "Over time, the role of [A]boriginal women in urban organizations has evolved from working behind the scenes, to leading organizations, asserting their political will and creating organizations to meet their own needs."¹⁸ Métis women created organizations, such as the ones in Saskatoon that Troup examines, but also in smaller Prairie cities, such as the Marguerite Riel Centre in Melfort, Saskatchewan.

In 1998, when I married and returned to the community of my biological Métis family, I sought out the local urban Aboriginal organization in the small Prairie city of Melfort, Saskatchewan. The Canadian Métis Heritage Corporation and the Marguerite Riel Centre, named for the wife of Louis Riel, were operated by the late Executive Director, Debbie Edin. This is a personal example of the importance of such organizations and the way in which they can bring back those who have been removed back into the circle of the Métis community.

In my new home, married and finding a way to become a community member in rural Saskatchewan after living in larger centres, I was welcomed by the director Debbie Edin who, in the Métis way, was related to my mother-in-law. As Fidler descendants, they both were part of a large and extended Métis family. I was included in this extended family through my marriage, and also, as a Métis person (with Fidler ancestors also), welcomed and given a role. As an adoptee, without a very clear understanding of what it meant to be a Métis woman, connecting with the Centre and being mentored by Debbie was and is one of the most pivotal experiences in my journey coming home. To be accepted by the Métis community, given a role and responsibility, and a place to learn about our culture and history in a Métis environment provided a grounding in my culture that enables me to now walk with pride. Through my work in the Centre in editing residential school survivor stories, planning and helping put on cultural events, creating programming for the community and reaching out to community partners, the day-to-day activities for the community enabled me to see how our labour is part of a larger effort to rebuild our lost connections, and continue building our nations that have been impacted by settler colonial efforts to erase our presence.

Debbie Edin was a vibrant, beautiful, deeply engaged Métis mother and grandmother that was taken from the world all too soon. Her vision for the Centre was to create a dynamic space for Métis culture to flourish, while also providing critically needed programming for families impacted by the intergenerational traumas of colonization, whether Métis, First Nations, or non-status. While I was a young mother, undertaking my Master's studies in history from the University of Saskatchewan, Debbie was an auntie that not only employed me but was there to teach me about the importance of community, how to participate in cultural protocols, and gifted me with a sash, while also teaching me about the obligations that the sash would demand. This is an obligation I continue to reflect on, and which in part, I am fulfilling through this contribution. The strong Métis women in my life, like my "auntie" Debbie, put me on the path that I am now on today. She passed away in 2010.

Showing Indigenous Care

Strong Métis women building up others in the community is one critical aspect of how we decolonize and ensure that the next generation is taught the responsibilities and obligations of being a Métis community member. Our community includes the academic community more broadly, and strong Métis women have been instrumental in bringing us into this community as well. Senior Métis women academics faced a much more hostile institutional environment, and as those who broke trail, we are very indebted to their strength, perseverance, and determination to endure.¹⁹

Métis Studies has been deeply enriched by the critical contributions of scholars such as Sherry Farrell Racette and Emma Larocque as the foremothers of the current discipline. Without the critical interventions of these Métis women scholars in the areas of decolonial representations and women's artistic production, our discipline would be deeply impoverished.

Because my own training was in the discipline of Canadian history, by scholars who were non-Indigenous, I often sought out Indigenous scholars on my own. The work of Maria Campbell and Howard Adams resonated with me deeply because they engaged with the racism and economic exploitation of First Nations and Métis people on a deeply relational level.²⁰ While profoundly important, the traditional discipline of history has been challenged by Indigenous scholars for its reliance on documentary sources while failing to account for its complicity in the colonial project of dispossession.²¹ In 2007, I was accepted to a Doctoral program at the University of Saskatchewan in the Department of History. I was planning to undertake research into the transracial adoption of Aboriginal children in non-Aboriginal homes. Before entering the graduate program in September, I attended Congress, which happened to be held that year on the University of Saskatchewan Campus.

At the Canadian Historical Association Annual meeting, I attended the “Women's History as Public History” roundtable, where I sought to familiarize myself with women's history, one of my upcoming comprehensive fields of study. I first encountered Dr. Sherry Farrell Racette as she gave her presentation, “Don't Get me Started! Absence, Tokenism, and Missed Opportunities? Aboriginal Women and Public History in Canada.” She spoke of the importance of photos and visual images of the care given to Indigenous children. By drawing our attention to the carefully braided hair, tiny but beautifully crafted moccasins, and detailed finely rendered clothing, we were invited to consider the love and devotion that had been shown by the child's mother or grandmother. Dr. Farrell Racette's artists' eye translated for the audience the significance of the beadwork and the time and skill that went into dressing the child. As I listened to her speak, I connected the work I was about to undertake on the Sixties Scoop to the harm that I imagined would come as children were removed from families and communities, and the erasure of mothers and grandmothers. Her words and her presence in the room as one of the only Indigenous women historians I had encountered reflected the caring work of Indigenous women academics—she demonstrated the importance of showing care in our work and seeing care in the past.²²

Dr. Farrell Racette is a prolific artist, scholar, and strong Métis woman. I had the deep honour to work with her at the University of Regina, my first academic position. Her work has had a profound influence on me, and she had contributed greatly to the preservation of Métis culture and art in Canada. Her knowledge of Métis beadwork, art forms, history, and women's experiences is woven together in such a way that Métis women's strength, courage, and centrality to the nation are always evident.²³ Her work speaks to the deep connections between women's roles working, creating, caring, and holding families together through the hard times after 1885. As the flower beadwork people, women's artistic production has been a fundamental element in the emergence of the Métis people as a distinct people. Scholarship that explores Métis women's labour and art, caring work, and strength remains central to Métis studies, but frequently is unacknowledged.

Dr. Farrell Racette's talk encouraging scholars to situate children in the centre of research had a profound impact on me as I started my own research on the Sixties Scoop. Despite being an adoptee, my research was not intended to be a personal account or involve survivor experiences. Even as I approached my research on transracial adoption from the perspective of a policy history, I remained mindful that my work was primarily about Indigenous children—First Nations and Métis—that had been removed from families and communities, and also remained mindful of the families that were impacted. Inspired by Dr. Farrell Racette's work that centred women and children, my research sought to examine what I came to understand as the Sixties Scoop from the perspective of Indigenous kinship and resistance. The experiences of Métis communities and families in the twentieth century has rarely been documented, and this work sought to explore the origins of Indigenous child removals in twentieth century Saskatchewan.

The impact of the removals of First Nations and Métis children from families and communities is part of the larger continuum of colonial processes. As I became more deeply engaged in Indigenous decolonial research methods, I came to see the necessity of situating my own experiences of adoption in this larger colonial process. Again, it was strong Métis women who pressed me to engage in my own story. Dr. Tara Turner and Dr. Cheryl Troupe were instrumental in demonstrating the importance of our own family stories.²⁴ As a result of their encouragement, I undertook an extensive genealogical reconstruction of my Métis family tree, locating scrip documents from both Manitoba and Saskatchewan, as well as homestead records, and my great grandfather's WW I and WW II military records. While many Métis families share stories of their Métis culture and past, as an adoptee, I was disconnected from these stories. For me, coming home through Métis research revealed my own deep connections to the land on which I now live, my ancestors, as well as our family experiences of diaspora and resettlement and reconnection.

In reflecting on my journey as a Métis woman academic, I see it as a series of steps in a journey that has led me close to home. While the year 2020 and the pandemic have brought many stressful, challenging, and life-altering events to the fore, this time was also when I published my first monograph, *Intimate Integration*, and began a position as the Gabriel Dumont Chair in Métis Studies at the University of Saskatchewan. These professional accomplishments would not have been possible without the support of mentors and "aunties." In the years that followed the completion of my PhD, visiting across Turtle Island for my post-doctoral research on Indigenous women's activism brought me into the home of Dr. Kim Anderson. Invited to participate in a decolonial public history performance by Dr. Kim Anderson, Dr. Lianne Leddy, and Dr. Brittany Luby at the University of Guelph, we dressed in the clothing of our grannies to inscribe Indigenous women's presence onto the nation state. I donned a replica of my great-great-great-grandmother Nancy Bremner Fidler's (d. 1886) severe black ribbon skirt in an act of collective transgressive resistance through embodying my ancestral Métis grandmother.²⁵ The research necessary to enact my grandmother's presence at Confederation was another opportunity to come home. Strong Métis women's stories illustrate the importance of women to the nation who build connections, inspire younger generations, and keep alive the stories and values of sharing, culture, and strength. These women, in addition to many others, have been instrumental in my journey as a Métis woman academic. They also reveal, I would argue, the importance of the community, art, and women's experiences to Métis Studies in ways that have yet to be adequately recognized. Kim Anderson states in the concluding paragraphs of *Life Stages and Native Women*, "Rebuilding the circle in whatever context we find ourselves in is a work in progress, and we must be creative to find means of reinstating the position of women, connecting with all our relations and picking up those pieces that were scattered because of colonial interference."²⁶ Moving forward, within Métis Studies, it is imperative that Métis women's voices are amplified, and complex gendered experiences attended to meaningfully, while considering the full range of Métis embodied and interconnected positionalities.

Endnotes

- 1 It is an honour and a privilege to be included in such an important collection alongside these inspiring Métis women who have contributed to the field of Métis Studies. I am very grateful to editors Laura Forsythe and Jennifer Markides for inviting me to contribute to this important collection. Maarsi.
- 2 Scofield, *I Knew*.
- 3 Adese, “‘R’ Is for Métis.”
- 4 Maria Campbell uses the metaphor of a shattered puzzles to illustrate the impact of colonization on Indigenous kinship; see K. Anderson, *Life Stages*; Jesse Thistle draws on Campbell’s metaphor of the puzzle in “The Puzzle.”
- 5 K. Anderson, *A Recognition of Being* (2000 ed.); Troupe, “Métis Women”; Flaminio, Gaudet, and Dorion, “Métis Women Gathering”; Gaudet and Caron-Bourbonnais, “It’s in Our Blood”; Iseke and Desmoulins, “The Life and Work.”
- 6 Campbell, *Halfbreed* (2019 ed.); Adams, *Prison of Grass* (1975 ed.); Thistle, *From the Ashes*; Thistle, “The Puzzle”; Teillet, *The North-West*; LaRocque, *Defeathering*; LaRocque, *When the Other*; Oster and Lizee, *Stories*.
- 7 Scofield, *Thunder*, 166–67; I consider the very successful personal story of Jesse Thistle as also suitable for inclusion in this form of narrative; see Thistle, *From the Ashes*.
- 8 For those interested in Métis scholars reflecting on academic and personal connections to Métis research, see Lischke and McNab, *The Long Journey*.
- 9 For the importance of returning to community and families after disruptions due to the child welfare system among Métis peoples, see Carrière and Richardson, *Calling*.
- 10 Andersen, *Métis* discusses the racialization of the Métis people and the ongoing misrecognition of the Métis people as mixed.
- 11 Macdougall, *One of the Family*; Macdougall, Podruchny, and St-Onge, *Contours*; Gaudry, “Insurgent.”
- 12 K. Anderson, *Life Stages*; Troupe, “Mapping”; Flaminio, “‘Kiyokewin’”; Gaudet, “Keeoukaywin.”
- 13 Macdougall, *One of the Family*; Farrell Racette, “Sewing for a Living.”
- 14 Chacaby, “(The Missing Chapter) On Being Missing.”
- 15 Brown, “Woman as Centre”; Dorion, “Opikinawasowin.”
- 16 See, e.g., in Alberta, Iseke and Desmoulins, “The Life and Work,” and in Saskatchewan, Troupe, “Métis Women.”
- 17 In Saskatchewan, see Stevenson and Troupe, “From Kitchen Tables”; Valaskakis, Stout, and Guimond, *Restoring the Balance*; Howard-Bobiwash, “Women’s Class Strategies”; Janovicek, “‘Assisting Our Own’”; Krouse and Howard, *Keeping*; S. Maracle, “The Eagle”; Mihesuah, *Indigenous American Women*; George, “‘If I Didn’t.’”
- 18 Troupe, “Métis Women,” 131.
- 19 LaRocque, “The Colonization.”
- 20 Campbell, *Halfbreed* (1973 ed.); Adams, *Prison of Grass* (1989 ed.); Adams, *A Tortured People*.
- 21 Miller and Riding In, *Native Historians*.
- 22 Farrell Racette, “Showing Care.”
- 23 Robertson and Farrell Racette, *Clearing a Path*; Farrell Racette, “Sewing for a Living”; Farrell Racette, “Looking.”
- 24 At that time, Dr. Tara Turner was the Health Director of the MN-S; Cheryl Troupe also worked at the MN-S. I was working with the MN-S for my research on the Sixties Scoop.
- 25 K. Anderson, “Kika’ige Historical Society.”
- 26 K. Anderson, *Life Stages*, 178.

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