

māmawi-kiskinohamakosiwin: Coming to Understand Together

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Abstract: Colonial definitions of *scholar* and *scholarship* are narrow, elitist, and hierarchical. The Mawachihitotaak Symposium organizers intentionally invited presenters and attendees from both within and outside of academia as equals and kin. Highlighting this inclusive approach, the author invites Métis people to think expansively about who a scholar is and what constitutes scholarship, reminding us of our cultural values and perspectives on knowledge and learning and leading us from exclusionary colonial definitions toward holism and community appreciation. Discussing several presentations and incorporating nehiyawewin (the Cree language), drawing, and poetics, this article offers lessons from the brilliant Metis thinking at Mawachihitotaak 2024.

Keywords: expansive, knowledge, expert, expertise, scholar, scholarship, researcher, research, creation, arts-based research, nehiyawewin

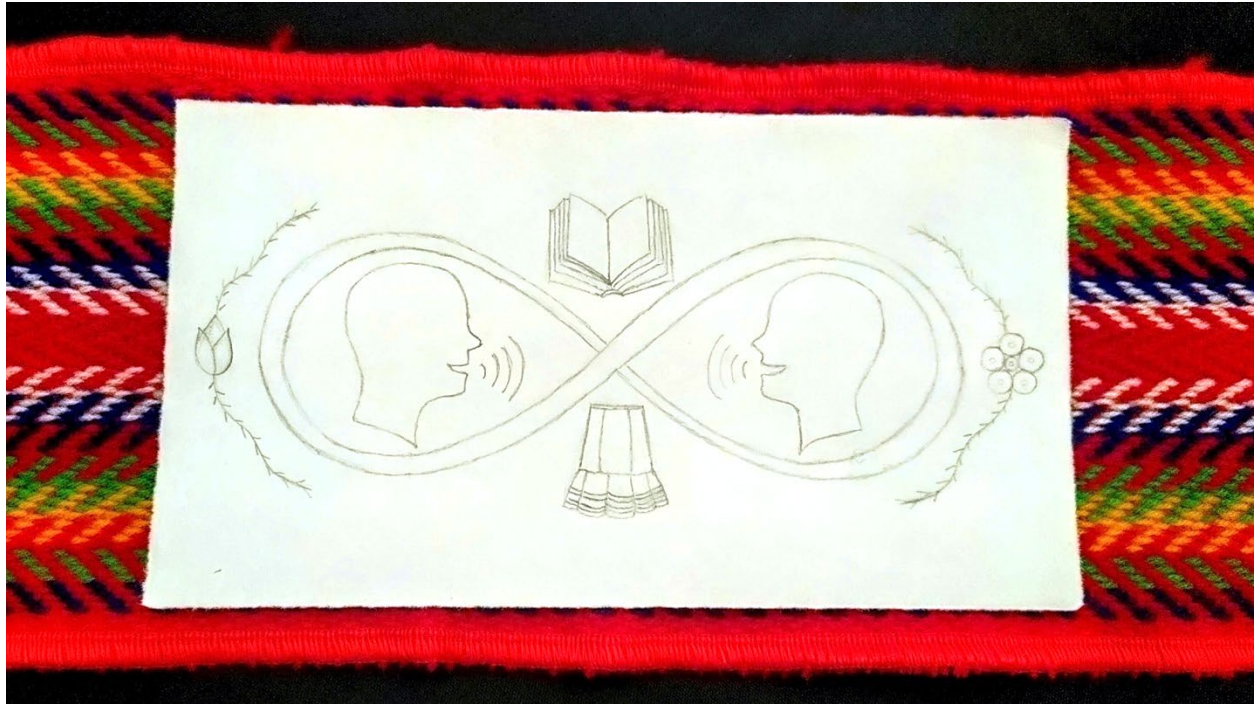


Figure 1. māmawi-kiskinohamakosiwin: Coming to Understand Together

Attending the Mawachihitotaak (Let's Get Together): Métis Symposium was joyous and inspiring for many reasons. One particular lesson became a central point of reflection that occupied my mind and the notebook I was given in my swag bag and inspired the thesis of this article. A great strength of the symposium was the inclusion of presentations from diverse speakers: students to faculty members, artists to community practitioners, Elders, youth, and Knowledge Holders with their own expertise. The first presentation I attended was "Observations of a Métis Artist on Métis Art" by renowned beadwork artist Krista Leddy (2024), who delivered an excellent, engaging, and informative talk. Krista included stories about her art pieces and her theories about what defines Métis art and its role in the reconnection journeys of Métis people who are returning to community. One thing that stood out to me was that Krista made the disclaimer in the introduction to her presentation that she is not an academic and that her work was not based on academic research. Later in the week, when I approached Krista about this, she

told me that this was partially a joke, but that yes, it also came from a place of feeling the need to preface her work. Later that day, I heard a relative say that they did not have a degree but that they were a student of the school of life. I began thinking about where those feelings of needing to make such disclaimers come from.

In my own life, I have been aware of the elitism that can accompany discussions of and attitudes toward education, and I have therefore tried to find ways to counter that elitism by expressing that *I am not better than anyone else!* I try to explain that being a PhD student does not mean that I am smarter than anyone else; academics are simply one skill set among a world of skills to be pursued. I am a good reader, writer, and speaker, but I am hopeless at knitting, geometry, hockey, and many other things. My Metis and mixed settler mother, Irene has her Master of Education and my Dutch immigrant father, Murk, has a Bachelor of Education. Now that I am a PhD student, am I smarter than my parents? I can already hear them saying, “absolutely not!” And do I ever learn more from them every day? And so, Krista may not be an academic, but didn’t I take thorough and extensive notes, full of ideas for my own research as I heard her speak? And didn’t I hear countless other pens and pencils scribbling away? As Cree and Métis people, we have been students of life as long as we have been part of creation; we have a word in *nehiyawewin* (the Cree language), *kiskinowâpiwin* (McLeod 2007), which roughly translates to English as learning through observation or through watching. Our Ancestors were enacting a refined and inherited tradition of observational science long before my anthropological ancestors articulated the research method of participant observation.

My thesis here, one of the teachings I am taking home from these conversations, is that

we must think expansively - a word that I am continually thinking about after reading Simpson's (2017) concept of expansive dispossession - about who is a scholar and researcher and what counts as scholarship and research. As Métis people, we have been deriving knowledge from all of creation since time immemorial.

Doesn't our knowledge come from the land, the waters, and the beings of creation?

Doesn't our knowledge come from the joys and pains of stitching and beading, hunting, and harvesting?

Doesn't our knowledge come from sharing stories and visiting with our relatives in living rooms and at kitchen tables?

Doesn't our knowledge come from ceremony, prayer, visions, and dreams?

Doesn't our knowledge come from caring for and giving care with plant and spirit medicines?

Doesn't our knowledge come from music and dance?

Doesn't our knowledge come from our children, our peers, and our Old Ones?

And yes, also from reading, coursework, lectures, and academic research.

In her presentation titled "Braiding a Rug of Oral Health Understanding: Reclaiming a Métis Method of Making Meaning," Paulette Dahlseide (2024a) described her innovative Métis research method of rug making inspired by the rug art of her family. Paulette shared about her mother and grandmother's expertise in rug making and described her grandmother, Millie Lacombe, as a researcher and a "pattern thinker." Grandmother Millie was always "on the

lookout” and was a “systematic thinker” who was always sourcing resources, testing materials, looking for patterns, gathering from and giving back to community, and creating knowledge. She was an accomplished artist and also a “scientist.” When we research using community-based methods like *kiyokewin* (Gaudet 2019) and rug making (Dahlseide 2024b), we are often gathering and co-creating knowledge with folks who are not academics; although we are the researchers, we are looking to community members for the lessons and knowledge we need for our projects. We also look to all the aforementioned sources of knowledge.

In my master’s thesis (Toorenburgh 2023), I put tobacco under my pillow and prayed for a song to come to me that would help me to reflect on and embody my learning. My prayers were answered and I received a song, and although the song was not included in the thesis paper, it guided my analysis, reflections, and dissemination strategies. At the conference, I was thrilled to see *nôhkom* (my grandmother) Pahan Pte San Win, who I had met this last summer at the Two-Spirit Sundance led by Sundance Chief and my beloved Métis *nôhkom* Charlotte Nolin and Sundance Council Elder and my dearest Métis *nôhkom* Barbara Bruce. I looked up to *nôhkom* Pahan as a *kêhtê-aya* (Elder) when I was dancing, and now I was looking up to her as a fellow Vanier scholar and PhD student. *nôhkom* Pahan presented her Master’s work (2023) in her talk, “In Relation: Research Design and Methodology Informed by a Metis Understanding of Sacredness” (2024). *nôhkom* described how she used ceremony, prayer, and the sewing of a ribbon skirt as research methodology, perfectly exemplifying my thinking: we can and must derive knowledge from all the richness of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual realms. After all...

Haven’t our people been pursuing, challenging, developing, refining, and passing on
knowledge for generations?

Haven't we been scholars and researchers before and during colonial occupation and the establishment of Western schools and post-secondary institutions?

Haven't we always shared our small pieces of understanding with each other to weave together a broader and richer understanding for the benefit of all our people?

Haven't we always looked to one another for help, teachings, lessons, stories, reflections, and inspiration?

My call is to encourage our people to recognize one another as the scholars and experts that we are, regardless of the level of Western education or credential attained. May we expand our concepts of who is a scholar and researcher and what is scholarship and research. Perhaps not everyone is an academic – defined as one who is trained and works in the framework of Western academia and academic institutions. Yet, we can all follow the circle teachings of holding hands: standing in circle as equals with left hand up so that we are always following and right hand down so we are always leading (Nolin 2023).

At the “Why We Gather Luncheon,” conference Aunties Lucy Delgado and Laura Forsythe told the origin story of the Mawachihitotaak gathering that will be shared publicly in their forthcoming chapter (Lang forthcoming). They said that the gathering was designed to be open to community and not only academics. The organizers wished to expand what is considered Métis knowledge and learning. This is one of the few scholarly conferences that welcomes presenters and attendees from both academia and community. This truly is one of the greatest strengths of Mawachihitotaak; but to contribute to, reinforce, support, and honour this intention, we should decolonize internalized Western elitist and hierarchical binaries of who practices and what is considered scholarship, who belongs, and who has something to contribute to scholarly

spaces, gatherings, and conversations. This is mirrored in the Pawaatamihk journal, in which the editors invite submissions from academics and community members, including peer-reviewed articles, community stories, poems, and visual art.

While reflecting on this *Notes from the Floor* piece for the Pawaatamihk journal, I started to draw a picture of my learning (Figure 1). It is called *māmawi-kiskinohamakosiwin: Coming to Understand Together*. It shows two relatives, two spirits, joyously exchanging knowledge, stories, jokes, and songs. The four sound waves they are singing/speaking represent our understanding drawn from the four aspects of the Medicine wheel: mind, emotion, body, and spirit. They are learning, teaching, sharing, and listening together. They are surrounded and brought together by the infinity symbol which represents different families and kin from different languages, backgrounds, and ways of thinking about and being in the world, coming together and united as one people. Continuously learning and sharing. Above is a book, representing our book-learning, writing, and the good work that our people are doing in academia, but also representing research and scholarship expansively defined. The ribbon skirt below is in the style of the Prairie Metis ribbon skirt (Johnson and Dorion 2021), inspired by *nôhkom* Pahan’s presentation. It represents our arts-based, hands-based, and spiritual knowledges as well as the beauty of our work and the importance of gendered analysis. The blooming flower on the right is based off the Mawachihitotaak logo designed by Brendon Ehinger and represents our full potential, our richness, and the celebration of our people and all that we have accomplished. On the left is a flower bud, representing the future, that which has yet to come, our children, and “research that feeds Native babies and community” as described by Sherry Farrell Racette in her keynote speech (2024). The mouse tracks are a nod to our aesthetics, but also represent the four-legged, those who swim, those who crawl, the winged ones, and the plants and other beings of

the land that are holding us; all of creation which gifts us with the learning, knowledge, love, and sustenance we need to thrive.

Let us reject colonial elitism, marginalization, binarism, and hierarchy.

Let us not laterally exert such narrow definitions of who counts as a scholar and what counts as scholarship on one another.

Let us not exert these exclusionary logics on ourselves and diminish our self-confidence and self-appreciation.

Experts like Krista and Grandmother Millie should not be relegated to margins nor be made to feel the need to make disclaimers or justifications for their right to present and share expertise and knowledge. Métis folks working in academia like Paulette and *nôhkom* Pahan should be celebrated for their work to bridge the worlds of the spiritual, artistic, and relational with the pursuit of academic rigour, a pursuit that Krista urged us to continue: “keep academic-y-ing!”

Let us acknowledge and celebrate one another as experts, teachers, philosophers, and students of life.

Let us continue our ancestral and contemporary culture of seeking, gathering, building, co-creating, and sharing knowledge drawn from the whole of creation and spirit.

As is our tradition, our gift, our responsibility, and our right.

ékosi.

Acknowledgements

I would like to say *tâpwê kinanâskomitinawaw* to the Mawachihitotaak Symposium organizers and all the amazing thinkers who attended—and we are all thinkers. I would like to say *kinanâskomitin* to my nehiyawewin mentor/uncle, Assistant Professor, and PhD student, Bill Cook. I want to say *kisâkihitanawaw* to my dear *nôhkomak*, Barbara, Charlotte, and Pahan as well as the other *kisê-ayak* who held this sacred space for us. I would like to say *hay-hay* to the Ancestors, the beings, and the *askiy* on which we gathered. *kinanâskomitinawaw* to the caterers and the volunteers. And if I have forgotten anyone, *kise-manitou*, please accept them in *nikakisimowina*.

A Note on Language

At times, I use the accent over the *e* of Métis and do not at other times; this is intentional to follow *nôhkom* Pahan's presentation title as written and my own family history as a Scotch and Anglo Metis. nehiyawewin terms are not capitalized as is my teaching, and is also explained by Jobin (2023).

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Author Biography

Lydia Toorenburgh (they/them) is a tastawiyiniyaw (Two-Spirit), Bungi Metis and mixed settler person living as a visitor on Lekwungen and W̱SÁNEĆ lands. Their Metis family origins are in the Red River, but their ancestors began moving west to Poplar Point, High Bluff, and Portage la Prairie. Lydia is a registered citizen of the Métis Nation of British Columbia and the chartered community of Greater Victoria. They hold an MA and BA (Hons) in Anthropology from the University of Victoria and have returned as a PhD student in Anthropology and Indigenous Nationhood, studying tastawiyiniwak otipemisiwak (Two-Spirit Métis) joy and wellness. Lydia is also a beader, regalia-maker, singer, and drag king.