



Embracing our Brilliance

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Abstract

An attendee of the Mawachihitotaak writes this note from the field from attending Mawachihitotaak: Métis Research Symposium 2024, which reminds us of the impact Métis-centred gatherings can have. The note posits personal anecdotes of their life and how they experienced an academic symposium in Métis-led *keeoukaywin* (the visiting way), which offers insights into how self-guided attendance and participation in the gathering space was, how easily relationships form, the appreciation of fashions from gathering-goers, and the Michif brilliance the attendee felt and witnessed in the environment. The attendee concludes with hope for future academic experiences and the possibilities they can hold.

Keywords: Métis; Michif; gathering; brilliance; keeoukaywin; visiting; kinship

Called Back Home

Returning to my homeland always leaves me with more than what I came with. In this case, it meant building a community that extends beyond the limits of my family and immediate relations to kinship across the lands now called Canada, whose Ancestors trace their lineage to

the Red River. Michif Elders, leaders, community members, matriarchs, and all those who gathered both in-person and virtually at Mawachihitotaak: Métis Research Symposium (Mawachihitotaak), held in Winnipeg, Manitoba, at the University of Manitoba from September 25–28, 2024, knew our purpose. It was to gather and celebrate our collective brilliance.

Each session I attended pulled at my emotions, seeing myself and my family weaved within each conversation. I felt seen, embraced, and strong, and I remained curious to learn more throughout the gathering. I was particularly motivated by the guidance of Elder Charlotte Nolin, who began our gathering with sentiments of love: love for the community, our space, our families, our Ancestors, and, primarily, for ourselves. Elder Charlotte asked us to proclaim together, “*I love you!*” (2024). It is through honouring the self-proclaimed love that will guide our actions in service of our communities. To love ourselves, we ought to be proud of who we are and the gifts we carry, and this conference celebrated our collective brilliance. To define brilliance in this note from the field: it speaks to our intelligence, political will, care of our homelands, fashion, food, and even the way we speak, and sheds light upon who we are and the connections we make. Most of all, it acknowledges our compassion and dedication to each other as we engage in *keeoukaywin* (Gaudet, 2019; Gaudet et al., 2020). I visited with those around me with curiosity in my mind and my heart on my sleeve. As such, I am proud to have attended Mawachihitotaak to love myself, my family, and my community more fiercely than before.

To speak about love and love of oneself, I must share more about who I am. I was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba and lived nearby in St. Norbert, where my ancestor Norbert Larence took Scrip. In 2005, my family and I moved to southern Alberta for my father’s work. Living on Treaty 7 taught me more about myself, my communities of kinship, and how to completely love myself no matter the adversity that was set in my path. As I completed my Bachelor of Education

in 2019, I knew I had more work to do in the field of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis education. I applied to my Master of Education program and moved to Ottawa, Ontario later in 2019, and then applied again in 2022 to complete my PhD in Education. During this time, my mother and brother moved back to Winnipeg. I, alongside my partner, have been able to visit them and our family still residing in Calgary a couple of times a year since.

When I attended Mawachihitotaak, I needed to secure time with my loved ones. My time with them is just as precious as learning is to me. Compared to other kinds of structured academic conferences, I felt no guilt, no regret, and no fear of consequences if I were to miss a session or two. Further, we were encouraged to take time and space for ourselves throughout the gathering by going to the Elder space and quiet rooms. Throughout my graduate studies, I have been strong in exercising my boundaries and critically considering my relational spaces (McCracken, 2024). Therefore, I felt support and care in visiting my loved ones, which has been a different experience compared to other forms of structured academic conferences. I must admit, I prefer this framework: community-based and relationally focused. I was well taken care of by the conference organizers to the point where I brought my mom and brother to the Kitchen Party, held on the last day of the gathering. To reiterate, this experience was different from other types of conferences or symposiums I have attended in the past, and it makes me hopeful for the possibilities and continued brilliance of Indigenous and especially Métis-led academic gatherings in the future. To affirm, brilliance, in this case, was being able to have dictation over my schedule and prioritize what was important to me.

Following the Florals

One of my most cherished nicknames is Sweet Pea, given to me by my uncle when I was a toddler. My favourite scent is lavender, and when I think of my family, I reminisce about sunflowers (McCracken, 2024). I have always held a deep-rooted connection to florals. Recently, I have learned a thing or two about Michif flower beadwork and the fabrics we wear, which are multi-coloured flowers filled with dotted-of-the-earth designs. We are inspired by the natural world and our ecological underpinnings and are vibrantly proud to showcase our connectedness to our homelands (Macdougall, 2014), our geographic locations, and Mother Earth. Fashion is a part of our collective identity, and it acts as resistance (Farrell Racette, 2011). Through our resistance, we are vibrant as Peoples and deeply creative.

Symposium goers wore florals, scarves, ribbon shirts, skirts, and pants. Some wore beaded blazers, and of course, many wore Métis sashes. The earrings many of us wore were made by kin across the homeland or by other First Nations and Inuit artists we sought to uplift. With everything I wore, I made sure to infuse bright colours with fun earrings, beaded accessories, or wearing ribbon in some way. Our fashion is connected, and our brilliance is woven in every thread and beaded in every stone. When we wear florals and ribbons, we see ourselves, our Ancestors, and our future generations to come; we are seen, we are whole, and we are brilliantly fabulous.

Between the Spaces

When I was in the Elders' visiting room, beginning a new embroidered project (set to be gifted to my mom), I made a new relationship with Danielle Marie Bitz, one that I am grateful for. Danielle has given me consent to share the following quotation they shared with me: "Some of

the best learning we do at conferences happens in the spaces between the sessions: Elders rooms, food lines, sitting outside in the sunshine...” (Bitz, 2024). Danielle had no idea how much these words sat with me since they uttered them (until now). Their sentiment has offered me the ability to reimagine academic gatherings and their Métis-specific possibilities.

These possibilities, alongside visiting my family and community at the gathering, remind me to consider *keeoukaywin* (the visiting way), as previously mentioned (Gaudet, 2019; Gaudet et al., 2020). Gaudet (2019) dedicates that we can engage in *wâhkôhtowin* (kinship) and *kiyokewin* (visiting) through passing down “knowledge, teachings, dreams, and stories” (p. 60). Gaudet’s (2019) and Gaudet et al.’s (2020) collective envisioning demonstrate that the time we spend together talking about our families and communities and doing activities together, among other community-based sensibilities, are ways to enact *keeoukaywin*. Kinship and visiting are impactful renderings of what it means to be Michif. When we have met someone special, we are bound to them in inexplicable ways. The formulation of our interconnections distinguishes our collective brilliance. This is the sentiment I felt when I met Danielle and many others at the gathering, and I am grateful for these foreseeably long-lasting relationships.

This note from the field is a dedication to the brilliant Michif thinkers, educators, researchers, community members, volunteers, and Elders who attended the gathering. To Dr. Lucy Delgado and Dr. Laura Forsythe as the symposium organizers for 2024, your reimagining has created a space filled with inter-community connection and Michif brilliance. This brilliance seeps into loving every aspect of the way we visit, what we wear, how we connect, what we learn, and how we love ourselves. Mawachihitotaak, therefore, serves as a reminder of the brilliance of coming home.

Brilliant Possibilities

I want to see more Métis-led collective imaginings become reality.

I want more academic in-person experiences to be Indigenized.

I want spaces where I see myself woven within its framework; I want to feel safe, celebrated, and
seen.

I want to laugh, cry, and be unashamed for expressing myself freely, with every emotion bared in
every interaction I find myself in.

I want to see myself and the expressions of others woven or beaded in every thread of our
clothing.

I want to continue to take time for myself to visit the place I travel to and truly get to know it for
its past, present, and future.

I want to speak and learn in rooms or outdoors where I will not only be seen but be heard.

We are what it means to be Métis, and I will continue to be brilliantly me.



Biography

Madelaine McCracken (She/Her) is Red River Métis but due to significant time living in southern Alberta, she holds Otipemisiwak Métis Government citizenship. She is currently located on the unsundered and unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg Nation, where she is a PhD candidate and part-time professor at the University of Ottawa's Faculty of Education and is Indspire's Métis Youth Award Laureate for 2025. Madelaine is passionate about researching Truth Before Reconciliation Education and how First Nations, Métis, and Inuit rights, perspectives, and stories can be respectfully and truthfully shared through teacher education and curricula expectations across Canada. Madelaine also hosts a podcast called *Research Time* which aims to make educational research more accessible, one conversation at a time.

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