PAWAATAMIHK
JOURNAL OF MÉTIS THINKERS

Reconsidering L'espace de Louis Goulet

Benjamin Beauchemin

Vol. 2, Issue 1 (2025)

Voulez-vous écouter chanter
Une chanson de vérité?
— Pierre Falcon, "Chanson de la Grenouillère"

"This did not signify to me a stable identity: I came to understand that what kind of *Native* you are can shift."
— Deanna Reder, *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition: Cree and Métis âcimisowina*

In the field of Métis studies, scholars present, understand, and cite *L'espace de Louis Goulet* as a historical document—one whose claims are facts and whose statements are self-identical to their surface meanings. This understanding of *L'espace* deserves to be complicated. *L'espace* presents itself as the memoir of Métis citizen Louis Goulet, and it depicts Goulet's early life as he navigates one of the most fraught periods in Métis history: the era in which the buffalo went virtually extinct from the Prairies[2] and the North-West Resistance of 1885 concluded with the Métis forces defeated at Batoche and the public execution of Louis Riel. Growing up, Goulet and his family participated in the great buffalo hunts that defined life for so many Métis communities during the nineteenth century.[3] Within these spaces, the young Goulet spent his evenings listening to "[t]he old-timers who'd lived through the old days and the wars on the prairies…those old boys [who] really know how to cast a spell in the evening around a campfire…telling us their stories one after the other"[4] (Charette 42). It is in such spaces, the campgrounds of the buffalo-hunting brigades and the *hivernant* communities, that Goulet becomes a storyteller.

As an elderly man, Goulet shared his life story with Guillaume Charette—a prominent Métis lawyer, activist, and radio host—when he spent a winter at Charette's home in Saint Boniface sometime between 1932 and 1934 (Ellenwood "Voices of Louis Goulet" 108). Charette authored at least two different, full-length versions of Goulet's narrative, writing these works in the first person as "Louis Goulet." Emile Pelletier later discovered these writings in Charette's archives. Pelletier edited Charette's work, gave the narrative its title, and published it in 1977—fifteen years after Charette's death and forty-one years after the passing of Louis Goulet. Published as *L'espace de Louis Goulet*, Goulet's tale persists, memorialized in the printed word, well over a century after the buffalo were hunted to near-extinction.[5]

Treating *L'espace de Louis Goulet* as a history ignores its own authors'[6] description of what this work fundamentally *is*. In his introduction to the work, Charette makes the enigmatic claim that "the reader will not find one word of fiction in the following account. All the characters existed, all of them were known, but *the narrator denies writing history*. He simply wants to tell *a story*, nothing more" followed by the assertion that Goulet was "one of the most truthful[7] [storytellers]" ("Foreword" ix my emphasis). Charette's statement in the original French makes the distinction between "writing history" and "telling a story" more forcefully: "bien que le narrateur *refuse de faire de l'histoire*, il veut *raconter tout simplement* et c'est tout" (Charette "Avant-Propos" 11 my emphasis). The translation of "raconter" to "tell a story" is accurate, but the English phrase misses an important connotation associated with the verb *raconter*, which is that the story being told is exaggerated or even partly made up—more of a tall-tale than the true-to-life story typically associated with the memoir genre. Charette and Goulet ask us to accept as true what might otherwise be dismissed as exaggeration or fantasy. More importantly, they ask the reader to differentiate between the truth of a story and the truth of a historical document.

In conversation with a number of other thinkers, this essay builds a concept of "truth" that aligns with how this term is understood and articulated in *L'espace de Louis Goulet*. Ultimately, I argue that *L'espace* is less concerned with indexing historical facts and, instead, is more concerned with interrogating how, in categorically different ways, practices, circumstances, and environmental conditions enabled the Métis people to *be*. Goulet's narrative takes place during a time of extreme turmoil. As the Northwest undergoes a number of drastic changes, Goulet and his community navigate different ways to relate to, perceive, and exist within their environs. A claim about truth, in this work, is a claim about how life was lived and how reality was experienced. In stressing the contingency of truth, *L'espace* makes the claim that the extinction of the buffalo constituted an ontological rupture—one which engendered a change in Goulet's community on the level of their very being.

Métis Oral Tradition: Seeing Through Storytelling

We'll begin by looking at how "truth" and "fact" have been written about and understood within the Métis oral tradition. In her book, *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition*, Deanna Reder, citing H.C. Wolfart, defines "âcimowina" as "stories or accounts of daily life,

although, 'in this genre *the supernatural* is decidedly a part of the *factual* world.'" (6 my emphasis). In her glossary, Reder re-emphasizes the truth content of "âcimowin(a)" by defining the term as "*factual story* (stories)" (xi; my emphasis). The factual content of such narratives remains implied in Reder's definition of the term "âcimisowin(a)," which she describes as "story (stories) about oneself/autobiography (autobiographies)" (xi). Reder's repeated use of the term "factual" and her characterization of *âcimisowina* as a practice that "best allow[s] us to assert control over our identities, histories, and knowledge systems," invokes historiography (xi, 18). Thus, Reder explicates the practice of Métis storytelling in a manner categorically different from Charette and Goulet, who explicitly reject the notion that *L'espace de Louis Goulet* is a "history" (Charette ix). For Reder, *âcimisowina* allows for control over and preservation of Indigenous histories within a culture that neglects or tries to erase them (18, 97-110). Reder emphasizes the importance of this mode of historiography when she writes about the barriers to publishing that Métis activist, intellectual, and author James Brady faced when attempting to publish his manuscript about the Cree leader Chief Papasschayo.[8] Brady had sent his manuscript to anthropologist Charles Brant for feedback and submitted it to historian Hugh Dempsey for publication in the *Alberta Historical Review*. Brant rejected Brady's work as a work of scholarship based on the "occultist, supernaturalistic" elements of the text (Brant, quoted in Reder 101). Dempsey, for his part, rejected Brady's work on the grounds that what is documented in the text—the seizure of Chief Papasschayo's reserve land by white settlers—"do[es] not completely agree with the historical record" (quoted in Reder 101). In claiming that the designations of "fact" and "history" accurately describe the practice of Cree-Métis storytelling, Reder's work reappropriates both terms as an important corrective to the attitude that Indigenous histories are "deficient or *unbelievable*" (102 my emphasis).

In insisting on the truth of *L'espace* while maintaining its status as a *story* rather than a *history*, Goulet and Charette ask us to consider how different media—storytelling versus writing history—convey, communicate, and problematize different conceptions of "truth." Ray Ellenwood considers this provocation in the afterword to his translation of the text. Ellenwood notes that this work contains "a core of what we might call 'historical truth' to it" ("Translator's afterword" 169). After corroborating Goulet's presence at certain events with documents from the historical record, "the *Official Reports of the North-West Mounted Police"* and "the *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*," Ellenwood concludes by stating that "[i]n the final analysis, however, this book…is not a history but a story…[Goulet's] reminiscences go beyond the *limited truth of historical fact* into the realm of myth especially with their haunting themes of freedom and space and the loss of both" ("Translator's Afterword" 170 my emphasis). The themes of *L'espace* and the truths they convey about Goulet and his community's experience of this era cannot be apprehended by referencing documents such as the *Official Reports of the North-West Mounted Police.* In *L'espace*, these truths are found in the artistic properties of the text: the formal, descriptive, and thematic devices the work makes use of. In other words, we have to look at the aspects of the text that help us understand it *beyond* the literal statements made within the

work. This is what it means to approach *L'espace* as a story—that is, as an aesthetic object—rather than as a history.

Basil Johnston, in his 1991 article,[9] "Is That All There Is? Tribal Literature," argues that academic studies of Indigenous peoples[10] remain too committed to understanding Indigenous stories through their surface-level meanings. This hermeneutic, Johnston contends, has long limited the discipline of Indigenous studies: "Books still present Native peoples in terms of their physical existence, as if Indians were incapable of meditating upon or grasping the abstract" (4). Johnston continues, "[w]ithout knowing the spiritual and the intellectual, aesthetic sides of Indian culture," scholars are unable to understand Indigenous peoples (5). Regarding the analysis of Indigenous narratives, Johnston argues, surface-level readings completely miss the point of the works themselves, so much so that a narrative whose mythological meaning suggests "that love may bloom even in circumstances where it is least expected to flower and endure…has been presented as an explanation for the origin of pine trees" (10).

Johnston's essay is also relevant to our discussion because, within it, he presents a concept of truth that speaks to how a single statement can contain a depth of meanings:[11]

> When we say "w'daeb- awae," we mean he or she is telling the truth, is correct, is right. But the expression is not merely an affirmation of a speaker's veracity. It is as well a philosophical proposition, in the saying of which a speaker casts his words and his voice as far as his perception and his vocabulary will enable him or her; *it is a denial that there is such a thing as absolute truth*—that the best and most the speaker can achieve and a listener expect is the highest degree of accuracy. Somehow that one expression, w'daeb-awae, sets the limits to a single statement, as well as *setting limits to truth.* (6–7, my emphasis)

The concept of *w'daeb- awae* helps us understand how truth operates in *L'espace de Louis Goulet*. *W'daeb- awae* understands the truth *not* as an absolute fact, but as a mediated experience. One's subjectivity—"his perception and his vocabulary"—always shapes a truth claim. *L'espace de Louis Goulet* builds from a concept like *w'daeb- awae*. For, if *w'daeb- awae* sets the "limits to truth," *L'espace* investigates what those limits might be. That is, *L'espace* interrogates what conditions and circumstances produce the reality we experience as "true," and asks how new "truths" might emerge within different conditions.

L'espace most forcefully challenges the synonymity of "truth" with "historical fact" when depicting the supernatural. Through his encounters with the fantastic, Goulet presents the truth not only as subjective, but as mediated by cultural practices. Similarly, Kanien'keha:ka scholar Ki'en Debicki argues that "our sensual interpretation of the world expands or contracts depending on cultural foundations" (250). Debicki argues that different cultures will have different experiences of what is *real* or *truthful*: "Indigenous peoples' cultural knowledge leads to *a different experience of what is real—real to us is the aliveness and agency of the earth*, our mother, and all other beings in creation. We can perceive these things *empirically through our expanded cultural senses*" (250 my emphasis). For Goulet, the "cultural sense" of he and his community were "expanded" through oral tradition:

> And it wasn't just memories of the old days that the old-timers passed on in their stories. Most of all, these stories were embellished with superstitions, with sightings of ghosts, with Indian legends and who knows what else!…with tales of werewolves, magic flying canoes and a thousand other frightening things like that.
>
> That was *my first education*…By the time I was ten years old, I'd begun to believe that the bush and the forests were full of a fairly-tale world that constantly occupied my imagination. *For me*, *the night was filled with baleful shadows and other demons from the land of dreams.* (7 my emphasis)

Goulet presents oral tradition as the "education" through which fantastic and supernatural experiences were made apprehensible to him and his community. Goulet follows this statement with a number of stories depicting the Prairies as a supernatural space. The first of these stories takes place when Goulet is still a teenager,[13] "working for Father Ritchot as a farmhand" (8), and it begins thusly:

> A father had lost his eldest son. For some unknown reason, the son *refused to see the priest* at the moment of his death. No matter how much Father Ritchot pleaded, it did no good. After the young man died, the priest refused to bury him in sacred ground…His father was so upset he fell sick and died. On his deathbed *he also refused to see the priest*, out of resentment, and died without the sacraments. (8 my emphasis)

Shortly after these deaths, Goulet and a few other farmhands hear someone chopping at the frozen ground of the cemetery. The workers go outside to investigate. Despite the light of the full moon, no one or nothing is to be found. The workers are rattled, the assumption being that the father and son have returned as ghosts and are now attempting to dig their way into the sacred burial ground that had been denied to them. The commotion is settled when "Father Ritchot shouted down to us: 'What was it you heard? Let's say the rosary. I'll lead, you reply.' That's all there was to it" (8).

Admittedly, this is not a great ghost story. The tales that follow this one—including one wherein Goulet is visited by the apparition of a Sioux warrior whom he ends up killing the next day (9)—convey far more convincingly the concept of the Prairies as a supernatural space. However, this story highlights the important role that *sight* plays in establishing a truth claim within this work. The father and son both "refused to see" the priest on their deathbeds (7). In doing so, they denied themselves the experience of Catholicism by declining to acknowledge the representative of that faith visually. In the French, the connection between sight and reception is made more explicit: the son refuses to *see* the priest, "le fils *refusa de voir* le prêtre au moment de mourir," while the father refused to *receive* the priest, "il refusa à son tour, par dépit, *de recevoir* le prêtre" (Charette *L'espace* 22–23 my emphasis). In the French, an implicit connection is made between *seeing* someone and *receiving* them.

This refusal to receive Catholicism through sight gains thematic significance when we consider how Goulet, when recounting his experiences of the supernatural, appeals to his faculty of sight as the guarantor of the truth of said experiences: "Now then, what about these phenomena I've just been describing? Were they superstitions? Were they hallucinations, or

what? In my opinion, the *witnesses* were very trustworthy people. As for me, *I only know what I saw*. I'm only telling what I can swear *I saw with my own eyes*" (11 my emphasis) and "these three cases and others I've told you about during these reminiscences are only a *few facts* among hundreds *I witnessed*. Call it superstition or anything you like!" (156 my emphasis). Goulet leaves open the possibility that the "phenomena" he had been describing could be "hallucinations." Despite this possibility, he still asserts these episodes to be true. We can think again about *w'daeb- awae* and consider how, here, Goulet is claiming an experience to be "true" whilst allowing that they may not be what one could call "objective reality." For Goulet, truth takes on a decidedly subjective dimension in that what is "true" is what is witnessed by himself and his community.

In his descriptions of the buffalo hunt, Goulet emphasizes the importance of developing one's sense of sight. The scouts, whom Goulet refers to as "the eyes of the caravan" (22), not only located the whereabouts of the buffalo, but they also *always* had to keep an eye out for danger:

> In choosing our scouts, we always took care to team up an old hand with one who had little or no experience. It was a wise custom because that way everyone got training on the job…Every scout had to keep in mind, always, that the life of the whole caravan depended on him. It was crucial, therefore, that *he develop his powers of observation and absolutely never take anything for granted.* Everything that caught his eye had to be checked out. (22, my emphasis)

Seeing like a scout required a culturally specific land-based education. It was through this that one "develop[ed] his powers of observation." Only in seeing this way were the scouts able to respond to the ecosystem in a manner that ensured communal survival.

Oral tradition and the practice of buffalo hunting come together in Étienne Rivard's research on the "oral geographies" of the Prairies.[14] According to Rivard, an "oral geography" refers to "the connection between *spatial structures*—the material, political, and symbolic orderings of space—and *social structures* (e.g., cultural practices, norms, or institutions) inherent to oral cultures" (156 my emphasis). Rivard argues that Métis buffalo hunters accrued information about the prairie ecosystem through their buffalo hunts. These hunters passed on their knowledge of the landscape through stories about themselves and their experiences. They also created specific "place names" that communicated cultural and ecological information about a given site: "The place named *Tas d'Os* (Regina, Saskatchewan) was where Métis gathered to make pemmican, and the name was derived from the accumulation of buffalo bones" (Rivard 157). Through oral tradition, successive generations of hunters received environmental knowledge while also experiencing the cultural history of past hunting brigades—a cultural history inextricable from the prairie landscape.

Rivard describes how oral tradition shaped the subjectivities of Métis buffalo hunters through "[t]he concept of *territorialité*…both the process by which a people appropriate space and create territory through their identity markers, and the process by which they redefine, at least partially, their identity and sense of belonging in relation to that territory" (144). Blending the pedagogical

and the aesthetic, Métis oral tradition tangibly mediated how the prairies were apprehended by the community—an ecosystem experienced *as* narrative and cultural memory. Far more than being stories passed around the fire at night, these narratives were *inhabited* by the community.

The importance of the prairie ecosystem to this oral tradition asks that we consider how the land subtends the kinds of truth claims made in *L'espace de Louis Goulet*. The research of Elizabeth Povinelli, built from the philosophies of her Indigenous Australian colleagues, provides us with crucial insights. Povinelli's colleagues, Betty Bilawag and Gracie Binbin, understand truth *not* as a stable absolute, but rather, as something that persists under certain circumstances; these thinkers make "a claim about *the relationship between truth and the entanglements of substance*" (77–78 my emphasis). For Bilawag and Binbin, a "truth" is revealed to one who attends purposefully and intentionally to the "arrangement of existence," one finds oneself within (59). For these thinkers, "[t]ruth was not a set of abstract propositions but a *manner of attentiveness and proper behaviour to* the manifestations of a field of intervolved materials" (Povinelli 79). The land reveals truths about how an ecosystem is maintained; attending to what has been revealed in this manner enables the persistence of these truths and allows one to continue existing in the manner that has been facilitated by and through the landscape.

With this in mind, let us return to *L'espace*. In particular, I will focus on a passage in which Goulet articulates how a communal "superstition" enabled the continued maintenance of ecological conditions:

> When a flock of prairie chickens is dancing, the hens seem to lose all touch with their surroundings. You can walk right into their midst. Once in a while a hunter would come along while a dance was in progress and there'd be a slaughter before the birds had time to fly away, *but this didn't happen too often because the old-time Métis, like the Indians, had a taboo against taking advantage of a dance to kill prairie chickens*. It was supposed to be bad luck. Just *superstition*, you might say, but it was…more effective…protection than the conservation laws nowadays. (Charette 31)

What appears as "superstition" reflects a truth about how the lives of the Métis community were maintained within the prairie ecosystem. The logic underlying this "taboo" coheres with R. Grace Morgan's explanations of how certain Indigenous rituals and prohibitions bespeak environmental knowledge. Morgan's research asks why certain Woodlands Indigenous groups attended to the colonial marketplace's demands for beaver pelts while Plains Indigenous groups refused to partake in this lucrative opportunity. Morgan notes that, on the plains, the beaver plays a crucial role in conserving and stabilizing surface water—an important resource for the people and buffalo of the plains (10-11). As a result, "the value of beaver in conserving and maintaining a critical resource (surface water) would have far outweighed its value as food. Supernatural control was invoked [to prevent beaver hunting] through the mechanisms of story, ritual, and ceremony" (11). As such, Morgan argues, these "[r]eligious prohibitions were clearly related to ecological factors" (9). The same could be said for the "superstition" described above: "the old-

time Métis, like the Indians," recognized that a one-time wholesale slaughter of chickens was of less communal benefit than maintaining that population over time.

For Bilawag and Binbin, recognizing and attending to the networks that maintain one's way of being *is* how one discovers the truth about one's own reality and circumstances: "If it was true that the continual reinvolvement of substances would alter [one's milieu], *turning it toward* the humans *that it was making and being made by*, then the truth would be found in a certain obligated coresponsiveness to each other" (Povinelli 79 my emphasis). One could ignore such obligations, but doing so risked having the conditions that sustained your life turn away from you: "the alternative was that the world, as [it is] currently[…]*turned away* from your kind of existence and as a result, you turned into another kind of existence. You become, not what you are not, but what you are in a different arrangement of existence" (Povinelli 59 my emphasis).

For Bilawag and Binbin, questions of *how* we persist and *what* we persist *as* are central philosophical concerns; concerns which came to the fore during the era of Australian colonization. These changes so drastically changed the "arrangement[s] of existence" in Bilawag and Binbin's communities that they constituted an ontological disturbance—one in which new truths, different relationships, and other ways of being emerged (59).

Catholicism and Blindness

Concerns about *how* we survive and *what* we survive *as* lie at the heart of *L'espace de Louis Goulet*. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Goulet's narrative takes place during an era of expanded Anglo-Canadian colonization into the North West. With the expansion of the Canadian state came Treaty negotiations, the imposition of the Indian Act, the implementation of the reservation system and residential schools, the increasing conversion of Indigenous peoples to Christianity, the near-extinction of the buffalo, and the replacement of a hunting economy with an agricultural one—a series of interrelated events whose consequences had massive ramifications for the Métis people. The narrative of *L'espace* follows how these changes cause Goulet to be, not *not* himself, but, to borrow from Povinelli, himself "in a different arrangement of existence" (59). It is with the knowledge of these shifting circumstances and the radical changes they engendered that I interpret Goulet's ardent Catholicism at the work's conclusion.

Documenting all the transitions in the North-West far exceeds the scope of this essay. Instead, I want to focus on the replacement of the hunting economy with an agricultural one. Early in his narrative, Goulet notes how, "[e]ach day there were more and more people sowing small fields of wheat, barley and oats. The great hunts were disappearing to make way for grain farming" (13). Goulet frames the Catholic church as being supportive of this transition: "People knew the prairie soil was very rich, capable of feeding the larger population who would share it sooner or later. That was what the missionaries (*most of whom preached farming as much as the gospel*) were always predicting" (15 my emphasis). The association between Catholicism and agriculture is well documented. Chantal Fiola notes how the priests and missionaries at the Red River Settlement frequently condemned many Métis and First Nations peoples for "their refusal

to exchange their semi-nomadic lifestyle[s] for…agrarian one[s]" (39). While Gerhard J. Ens and Joe Sawchuck document the longstanding desire of both the Canadian government and the Catholic church to convince the Métis to embrace agriculture (249–54).

Beyond noting the Catholic church's support for agriculture, *L'espace* presents Catholicism as holding its own relationship to the prairie landscape. Early on in his narrative, Goulet recalls an episode in which Catholic prayer is understood by his community to effectuate an extinction event. Speaking of the now extinct passenger pigeon, Goulet notes that this species was once thought to be a threat to the Red River Settlement's nascent agricultural industry:

> th[e] [passenger pigeons] became so numerous in my time that people started to get worried about it…[the Métis community at the Red River Settlement] *remembered how the missionaries used to conjure things away* and they begged Bishop Taché to chase the passenger pigeons off *the same as he'd done for the grasshoppers*[15]…Bishop Taché was quite willing to humour the people. I can't say whether his prayer was the cause or not, but the passenger pigeons disappeared in the space of less than three years. In the autumn of 1878 they flew south to warmer climes, as usual, but they didn't come back the following spring. (35 my emphasis)

Here, too, we see how what could be understood as a superstition is subtended by a factual association between Catholicism and agriculture. Agriculture necessitated the large-scale "transformation of complex ecosystems to the comparative homogeneity of agricultural landscapes" (Barnard 383). Bishop Taché's prayer is understood as part of the process that deprived the complex prairie ecosystem of its various non-human inhabitants. This superstition speaks to a truth regarding the deleterious environmental impacts caused by the expanded agricultural infrastructure that the church helped usher into the North-West.

Recognizing and responding to the impacts of these various colonial forces was a matter of survival. In her study of the nineteenth-century writings by ardently Christian First Nations writers George Copway (Ojibwe) and James Settee (Cree), Reder notes how established literary criticism has framed these authors as having "reject[ed] [their Indigenous] culture as [they] embraced…Christianity" (35). Reder criticizes this interpretation on the basis that such arguments ignore how political, economic, and environmental circumstances foreclosed certain traditional modes of being once available to these men and their communities:

> like Copway, Settee was living in a near-apocalyptic moment; previous Indigenous economic and governance systems were undermined by the encroachment of settlers and the usurpation of land. Food systems were failing. People were traumatized at a time when alcohol was being used as a trade good and being pressed upon Indigenous people. *There was no way for Settee or other Cree people to choose "traditional heritage" that is separate from the invasion of the colonizers and separate from the economic and ecological destruction*. Settee did not choose between traditional Cree ways of living and European Christianized ways; instead, he rejected the toxicity of despair to find a way to continue (35 my emphasis).

Goulet too, lived "in a near-apocalyptic moment" for his people. His blindness and return to practising Catholicism—the faith he was raised with, but which he had effectively abandoned in his adulthood—both occur during the historical moment in which the Red River Métis were devastated ecologically, economically, and politically. After being released from prison for his small role in the North-West resistance,[16] Goulet connects the ecological *and* political devastation of the Métis people:

> I could feel the same mood slipping over me that had worried me a year earlier when I'd noticed the plains bereft of their herds of buffalo and seen radical changes in the whole economy of prairie life. That was the mood which had caused me to leave Batoche with my brother and eventually led me into the whirlwind of the uprising. (160)

Within these new circumstances, Goulet makes his way to Pincher Creek, Alberta. While there, Goulet finds work as a ranch hand, participating in the cattle industry that had answered the market demand for red meat and leather in the absence of the buffalo hunt (Barnard "The Bison and the Cow: Food, Empire, Extinction"). While at work, Goulet notices that he has lost sight in his right eye. After visiting a doctor, he is informed that his blindness is permanent and he will lose sight in his left eye shortly. Goulet contemplates suicide, when, "[s]uddenly, the thought of my mother came to mind and with it…a memory of Margeurite Bourbon's face, smiling sadly" (164). Enticed by his vision of these two devoutly Catholic women, Goulet seeks out Father Albert Lacombe, a missionary priest known for converting many Indigenous peoples to Catholicism. Goulet spends ten days with Lacombe, throughout which he confesses "all the details of my vagabond life" (165 Charette). After this, Lacombe absolves Goulet, an experience about which Goulet states:

> Oh! what I wouldn't give to be able to describe for you what was happening inside me. If I'd had to make a quick choice then between having a cure for my impending blindness and feeling the emotions sweeping me away at that moment, I'm sure I would have chosen the latter. *How true is it that happiness is a state of mind, not body*. (165 my emphasis)

Goulet turns to Catholicism in the midst of ecological devastation. This faith allows him to experience "happiness" in a manner completely detached from the material world, "a state of mind, not body." In other words, salvation entails a separation from his material circumstances. This separation is likewise dramatized by his blindness.

Louis Goulet's blindness is a historical fact. But if we consider how, thematically, *L'espace de Louis Goulet* establishes a relationship between sight and truth, we can understand Goulet's blindness as representative of the loss of all that he had come to know and experience through the buffalo hunt. As Ellenwood so eloquently puts it: "As the buffalo herds dwindle, the nomadic hunter's life dies away and the vast, open spaces of the prairie are measured into acres. Goulet grows anxious, a reflection of his world, and while it closes in around him, so does darkness" ("Translator's Afterword" 170). With the near-extinction of the buffalo, the land-based, prairie lifestyle of the nomadic Métis hunters likewise disappears, along with the various truths revealed and attended to through this practice.

Goulet's blindness dramatizes all that was lost to him and his community in the wake of the buffalo's near-extinction. Furthermore, his blindness is presented as a *necessary condition* for his acceptance of Catholicism: "It was a priest who made me see the light, with the help of God *who took away the use of my eyes so I could see clearly*!" (167 my emphasis). This statement only reinforces the connection between *sight* and *truth* within this work. It also speaks to what needed to be extinguished in order for Goulet to *accept* Catholic salvation. All that Goulet had formerly seen and experienced *as* truth—the myths, legends, ghosts, and other fantastic and supernatural denizens of the Northwest—has now vanished. It is only after these losses that Goulet can "see clearly" what is promised to him through the Catholic faith.[17]

We can contrast Goulet's blindness in Catholicism to the heightened sense of sight he receives after engaging in an Indigenous spiritual practice. Toward the end of his narrative, Goulet, William Gladu, and Andre Nault[18] are captured by a number of Cree warriors who mount their own resistance to Canadian colonialism in 1885. After escaping the Cree encampment in the middle of the night, the trio navigates their way back to Battleford through dense forest terrain in order to evade detection. Goulet credits his practice of Indigenous medicine with granting him the ability to navigate and survive in this environment:

> In my travels among the Indian tribes in Alberta, Montana and elsewhere I'd spent some time with various medicine men thinking that I might one day want to take up the art of Indian medicine. I'd learned the rudiments and each night I would try to put myself in touch with the spirits of the night so I could learn what the next day would bring. I was able to foresee a good part of the road I had to cover and anticipate the dangers waiting for me. *Thanks to that foresight more than my knowledge of the country*, I could adjust our bearings every time I risked taking a peek out of the forest (145–46, my emphasis)

Goulet turns to Indigenous medicine[19] when his survival is predicated on navigating the landscape of the Northwest. This practice gives him an enhanced form of vision, one that is in tune with the landscape. In his blindness, and in a world now dominated by farms, railways, and other colonial infrastructure, Goulet finds salvation in Catholicism. From these two examples, we see how place and circumstance inform the decisions Goulet makes about his spiritual practices. Goulet navigates the different "arrangements of existence" that come into being throughout the Northwest during this era (Povinelli 59). Such changes are even reflected in the Métis place-naming practice: "In many cases, the earlier Métis name [of a given site] was eventually replaced by the church name, indicating an important shift in the power of naming" (Rivard 161). By the end of the text, Goulet's salvation comes through a spiritual practice that conforms to the new world, one in which the "wide open spaces [of the prairies] with every kind of freedom and no restrictions at all" has been replaced by farms, railroads, churches, and other forms of colonial infrastructure (Charette 27–28).

The Narrative Voice

The deeply conflicted and ambiguous nature of the character, "Louis Goulet," is the final subject of this essay. This topic returns us to the narrative's roots in the oral tradition, the transcription and editing process that turned Goulet's story into text, and extinction. No passage better represents the self-conflicted and contradictory nature of the narrator of *L'espace* than the below-quoted one found at the narrative's midway point. After amassing a considerable amount of money working as a scout for the U.S. Army, Goulet considers becoming a farmer:

> I thought about the advice Father Ritchot gave us when we were at his little school in St. Norbert and I had a notion to pick out a section of good land and turn myself into a farmer. *I should have done it, that's for sure.* I'd be rich today and *maybe I even wouldn't have lost my eyesight,* who knows? On the other hand, *I might never have gone back to the religion of my childhood which I had abandoned, alas, in my low-life days among pagans and all sorts of people*. It's even possible I might have gone back to the ways of my Indian ancestors because at one time I fancied taking a Sioux woman for wife. (99 my emphasis)

Though hints of a racist disposition toward First Nations peoples are evident in this passage in English, the presentation of indigeneity as a lower form of existence is far more evident in Charette's drafts held in the archives at the Société Historique de Saint Boniface. In one of the archival versions of this work, the narrator states—regarding his Catholicism—that he had "l'abandonnée dans mes galvaudages au milieu des pains [*sic*] et de toutes sortes de gens," and, following this, the final sentence of the above-quoted passage appears thusly: "Il est même possible que j'aurais retourné à la sauvagerie car j'eus un moment aussi la velléité de prendre une femme souise" (MS 1/13/409). The phrase "galvaudages au milieu des pains [*sic*]" was translated to "low-life days among the pagans." This is an accurate translation; the term "low-life" denoting a more base, less dignified mode of living. However, "low-life" fails to capture the sense of *degradation* and *deterioration*—the *active decline* from a "regular" life to that of a "low-life"—that is associated with the word *galvaudages*.[20] This racist attitude is explicit in the final sentence, which is more literally translated to "It is even possible that I might have returned to savagery." Charette's archival drafts forcefully convey a decidedly racist opposition between indigeneity as a baser form of existence and Christianity as a more "human" mode of being.

The purpose of mentioning these changes is to highlight the conflicts and contradictions of this passage. For this racist understanding of First Nations peoples is also coupled with Goulet's statement evincing a clear sense of regret in having *not chosen* to live such a lifestyle: "I should have done it, that's for sure" (99). This statement, in turn, is counterbalanced by the above-quoted ones at the end of *L'espace* regarding his commitment to Catholicism: "It was a priest who made me see the light, with the help of God *who took away the use of my eyes so I could see clearly*!" (167 my emphasis). There is further conflict in this passage when we consider how it opposes Catholicism *to* agriculture. And, to remind us how strange this opposition is, the narrator mentions that it was Father Ritchot who encouraged Goulet to take up farming in the first place.

In his afterword, Ellenwood suggests that the conflicts and contradictions in this work reflect a Métis "society full of ambiguities and contradictions in a time of great social upheaval" ("Translator's Afterword" 170). There is no doubt that this work is intimately tied to the historical contexts it takes place within. But we should also consider the text's beginnings in the oral tradition when thinking about passages such as this. In particular, I want to draw our attention to the intimate connection between this tradition and the prairie ecosystem *and* consider the process of transcribing this work from an oral narrative to a written one.

In her book, *Dadibaajim: Returning Home Through Narrative,* Helen Agger explores oral tradition through interviews with various Anishinaabe[21] Elders. One of Agger's interviewees, Dedibaayaanimanook Sarah Keesick Olsen, speaks to the importance of land and the relationship the speaker holds to the land, regarding the truth of their narrative:

> the land underpins Anishinaabe understanding… *the land and its constituent parts set the standard for the highest order of truth*, not humans. Ultimately, the profoundest and *most encompassing of truths* reveal themselves to those who live in a balanced relationship with the natural world. (14 my emphasis)

The connection between land and truth begs us to consider the ecological circumstances that Goulet's narrative was composed within. For, if the land sets the standard for truth, then what becomes of truth within the context of an extinction event? If one's milieu is a devastated ecology perhaps the truth *cannot* exist as a "most encompassing" totality (Agger 14). Perhaps, for those in Goulet's situation, truths can only persist as fleeting, fractious, and conflicted impressions; experiences which convey a truth content through their sensory apprehension, but are not the "absolute truth" of a world in harmony with itself (Johnston 7). Though Goulet ends his narrative as a staunch Catholic, his story still contains within it the conflicts that arose from the breakdown in the prairie ecosystem.

Similarly, Goulet's separation from his ecology is also reflected in the form of his narrative as a textual (as opposed to spoken) object. As text, Goulet's narrative now persists as a materiality detached not only from the land, but also from his speaking body and the relationships with his community that are presupposed by oral tradition. In this way, the form of the work speaks to the extinction event that this narrative is oriented around, and the impact it had on Goulet and his community.[22]

The transmission of Goulet's narrative from the oral tradition to the written word was itself a conflicted process. Charette's archives do *not* contain any notes from his interactions with Goulet over the winter in which Goulet shared his story with him. Instead, two different, full-length versions of this work are the earliest available copies of the material. No date is assigned to either of these documents, though one version corresponds to a series of twenty-two newspaper articles published in 1949 (Ellenwood "Voices" 108). Though, as Ellenwood notes, these do not appear to be rough drafts ("Voices" 109), there still exists a gap of roughly fifteen years between when Goulet shared his story with Charette and when Charette crafted that narrative into the drafts that were eventually published as *L'espace*.

As Ellenwood has also noted, there is a difference in *language* between the two archival drafts, with one being written in more colloquial and another in more literary prose ("Voices" 111). This clearly conflicts with Charette's statement that the narrative in *L 'espace* is presented "just as it came from the lips of [Louis Goulet]" (ix). In editing this work, Pelletier negotiated between the stylistic registers of the two drafts, removed some of the more racist language, and also edited out roughly thirty pages of what he recognized as a speech of Charette's—presented *in* and *as* the voice of Goulet—regarding the Red River Métis Resistance movements (Ellenwood "Voices" 111). Though Pelletier edited this out of the published work, one has to consider the possibility that there are other aspects of the work that are distinctly *more* Charette than Goulet.

Considering this mode of composition may frustrate readings—against the wishes of Goulet and Charette—of this text *as* history. But when we consider this work as an aesthetic object, these compositional elements prove to be incredibly liberating: *L 'espace* can never be "mastered"[23] through analysis nor exhausted through interpretation. Writing on the aesthetic, Jean-Paul Ricco states that "sense operates via the incongruous: things in the world and our sense of them are not divided from the world but are immanent to it, yet in ways that are not congruous (mastered and known) but incongruous (received and sensed)" (160). With a work like *L 'espace*, there is no final authority to whom we can appeal to regarding its intended meaning. We will only be able to "receiv[e] and sens[e]" the text as it is given (Ricco 160).

My hope with this article is that it will inspire *new* readings of this work,[24] opening up aspects of the text that my own has ignored. If this is taken up, I anticipate a conflict of interpretations and perspectives. For, there is something about aesthetic analyses that align with Johnston's explanation of "w'daeb- awae," in that the scholar "casts his words and his voice as far as his perception and his vocabulary will enable him or her; it is a denial that there is such a thing as absolute truth" (6–7). Beginning from this denial of absolute truth, our own apprehensions of the work—necessarily subjective and partial—will engender novel engagements with one of the most impactful ecological events in modern North sAmerican history: the near-extinction of the buffalo and the transformation of the prairie ecosystem. Speaking to other Métis scholars, I believe that this text and other narratives from this era will bring us deeper into the conflicted, contradictory spaces that our Ancestors once navigated.

[1] There are cultural and racial understandings of what the term "Métis" denotes. A racial understanding refers to anyone with a mixture of First Nations and European heritage. In contrast, a cultural understanding refers to a specific group of people with a shared history and culture. My own usage of the term refers to the cultural understanding of what a Métis person is, articulated well by Chris Andersen here: "I use 'Métis' to refer to the history, events, leaders, territories, language, and culture associated with the growth of the buffalo hunting and trading Métis of the northern Plains, in particular during the period between the beginning of the Métis buffalo brigades in the early nineteenth century and the 1885 North West Uprising." (24)

[2] Throughout this work, I use the terms "the Prairies," "the plains," and "the North West" interchangeably to refer to the vast territory which Goulet and the other buffalo-hunting Métis of the nineteenth century traversed. These terms refer to a multitude of ecological zones which the Métis hunters traversed: "If many consider the prairie to be limited to grassland, a distinct landscape mostly of low-prairie vegetation (grasses, wild flowers, or mosses), and exclude the parkland, known as the ecological transition between grassland and woodland, the Métis narratives do not often make these distinctions. From the Métis narratives under scrutiny here [including *L'espace de Louis Goulet*], 'prairie' was defined as wherever the buffalo were. Some species of bison, such as the wood bison, occupied both parkland and woodland zones. Even the plains bison, the most economically significant type of bison, which generally ranged within the grassland, was often chased up to Edmonton, in the parkland, by Métis hunters." (Rivard 152)

[3] Scholarship on the importance of the buffalo hunt for the nineteenth century Red River Métis is well established. A few choice quotes on this subject include: "The buffalo hunt is what fully established the Métis Nation" (109 Teillet); that "the year-round pursuit of buffalo…gave a particular shape to Plains Metis communities" (17 Hogue); and that the buffalo-hunting brigades were "the actual foundation of *La Nation Métisse*" (31 Macdougall and St-Onge).

[4] Unless otherwise indicated, I will be citing the English-language translation of *L'espace de Louis Goulet*, titled *Vanishing Spaces: The Memoirs of Louis Goulet,* translated by Ray Ellenwood. When citing this work in French, I will make a distinction between the published version of the text (*L'espace*) and the manuscripts held in the archives at the Société Historique de St. Boniface (MS).

[5] As John Levi Barnard notes, "the bison exists in a state of what scientists call 'ecological extinction,' unable to perform its prior function in relation to its ecosystem and entirely dependent on human intervention for its survival" (378).

[6] For reasons that will be detailed toward the end of the essay, I consider both Guillaume Charette and Louis Goulet to be the authors of this text.

[7] Charette does say that Goulet's truthfulness derives from him being "objective" or, in the French "impersonnel." I wanted to note this qualifier here, in order to stay faithful to the text. However, I do believe that this description of Goulet (or the narrator presented as "Louis Goulet") as "impersonnel" is inaccurate. As we will see, the narrator of this work is deeply passionate about the story he tells. More importantly, the narrator constantly references his own subjective point of view—particularly when emphasizing the truthfulness of the work itself. The end of this paper concludes with a passage which, in my estimation, is rife with irresolvable contradictions and I believe this claim of objectivity made by Charette, when matched against the narrative voice of *L 'espace*, stands as another contradiction that the work does not resolve.

[8] Brady's manuscript is widely available thanks to the Gabriel Dumont Institute: https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/03831.wisdom.papasschayo.pdf

[9] The article cited in this work is a 2013 reprinting of Johnston's essay.

[10] From the names of the academics Johnston lists and the works he references, it is clear he is taking aim at the disciplines of history, anthropology, and sociology in particular.

[11] Johnston attributes this quality to Indigenous languages as such. For this reason, he advocates that anyone studying Indigenous peoples must learn Indigenous languages (6).

[12] The poly-vocal nature of the narrative voice of *L 'espace* will be examined more closely toward the conclusion of the essay. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the narrator of the work as "Goulet," because that is who the narrative voice presents itself as.

[13] Prior to recounting these stories, Goulet inscribes himself into the oral tradition by stating that he will be "spend[ing] a few minutes on some true-life examples" (8). The phrase "a few minutes" denotes an oral mode of delivery, for it is only in being spoken aloud that words on a page can exist in time. To convey to the reader the world opened up to him through oral tradition, the narrator positions himself as speaking within that same tradition. This important formal convention is returned to throughout the work.

[14] *L 'espace de Louis Goulet* is one of the texts that Rivard cites for his own research on this topic.

[15] Grasshoppers were responsible for the decimation of a number of harvests in the Red River Settlement between 1816 and 1870. (Sprenger, "The Métis Nation: Buffalo Hunting Versus Agriculture in the Red River Settlement, 1810–1870")

[16] Goulet had a very minor role in this resistance. Though he was present at the meeting in which Gabriel Dumont and others decided to travel to Montana to bring Louis Riel to Batoche, he refused to join them on this trip. Goulet refused because, "I'd just signed a contract to carry the mail for the surveyors in the Battle River area" and "I'd never liked Riel" (111, 113).

[17] It is worth re-stating here that this is *not* a statement on the *literal* extinguishment of Métis culture, folklore, or any other traditions that began in this era and continue today.

[18] I first presented this paper at the 2024 Mawachihitotaak Métis studies symposium on a panel with Andre Nault's descendent, Dr. Derrick Nault. Dr. Nault's presentation "A Case of Mistaken Identity: Guillmette, Tromage, 'Le Roc' and the Riel Group Portrait," also made mention of my great-great-great-grandfather André Beauchemin, who served in the First Provisional Métis Government with Louis Riel.

[19] It is unfortunate that the details of this practice are left unspecified. There is no elaboration of what this practice entailed beyond what I have quoted. It could be that Goulet learned medicine from a person or group who did not want the specifics of their practice to be disseminated. There is also the possibility that this episode is meant to be interpreted as an artistic device, meant to make us consider the relationship between place, circumstance, and different spiritual practices.

[20] As one anonymous reviewer has noted, *galvaudages* also carries the sense that one has sold out, or misused one's talents illicitly for personal gain. Though Goulet never expresses regret explicitly for his work for the U.S. Army, the reviewer noted how this word choice speaks to how Goulet might have come to regret that form of employment.

[21] There are important differences between how different nations practice oral tradition. The connection to landscape, however, proves Agger's work to be a relevant reference. Additionally, Agger herself notes commonalities between various Indigenous oral traditions—particularly Anishinaabe and Cree in Dedibaayaanimanook's narratives (Agger 13). Goulet spoke Cree and his First Nations heritage, from his mother's side, is Cree (Charette 9).

[22] The movement from the spoken word to the written text changes how the audience receives this work on a sensory level; a story that once had to be apprehended *audibly* must now be taken in *through sight*. This formal component again aligns sight with truth, especially if we are to consider this work as a truthful testimony on the part of Goulet.

[23] I have to credit this framing to my conversations with two Métis scholars par excellence: Mylène Gamache and Sarah Hourie, both of whom have greatly helped me with my own struggles interpreting this work.

[24] Regarding the interpretation of *L'espace* in this essay, I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers whose generous and generative feedback greatly improved every aspect of this paper. This paper, much like *L'espace*, was very much a collaborative effort.

Biography

Benjamin Beauchemin is a graduate student in York University's Interdisciplinary Studies Program where he is completing a Master's thesis titled *Living Through Extinction: The Métis Buffalo-Hunting Memoir*. His research is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). Benjamin was born in Winnipeg and raised in St.Vital—the district represented by his great-great-great grandfather André Beauchemin in the 1870 Provisional Government of the Métis Nation. He is of Michif (Red River Métis) and of mixed settler descent. Alongside other members of the 440 Collective, he has co-published "Gekinoomaadijig Mashkiki Gitigaaning Endazhi-Baakwaanaatigikaag: Restoring Land Relations Through Indigenous Leadership in an Urban Park" in *Refractions: A Journal of Postcolonial Cultural Criticism*. In the September of 2025, he will begin his PhD research at the University of Toronto's Centre for Comparative Literature.

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