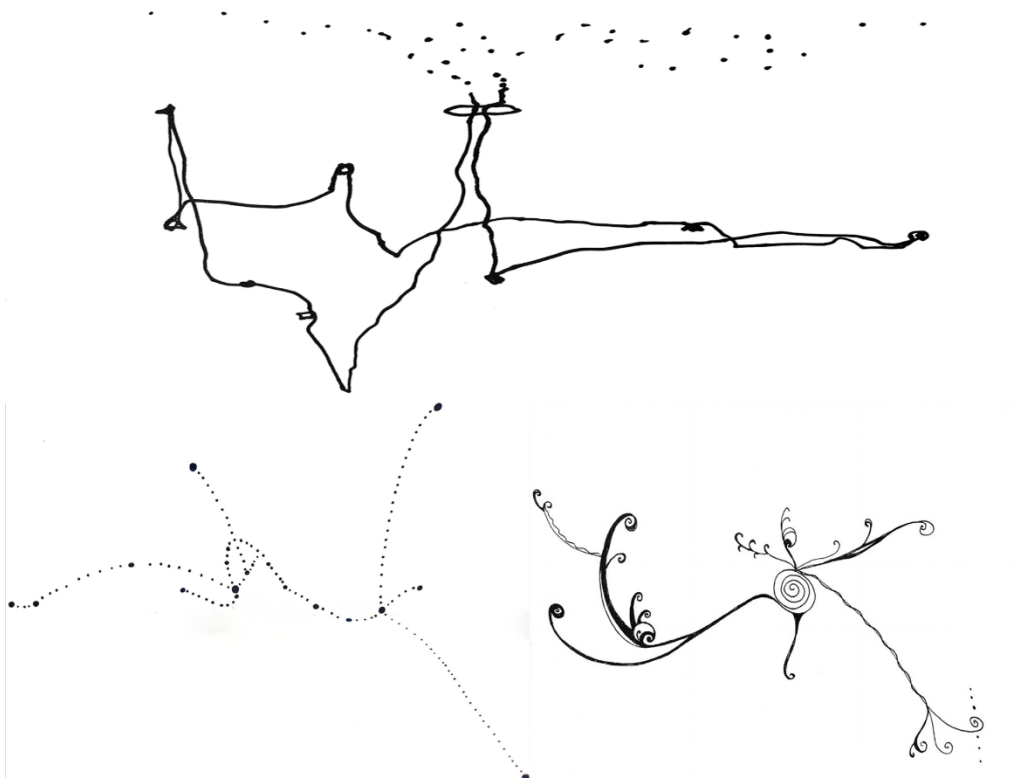


# Making Family (Famii) and Building our Nation in the Diaspora: Red River Métis Experiences in Québec

Michelle Smith, Sidney Leggett, & Mel Lefebvre

Vol. 2, Issue 1 (2025)



## **Making Family (Famii) and Building our Nation in the Diaspora: Red River Métis Experiences in Québec**

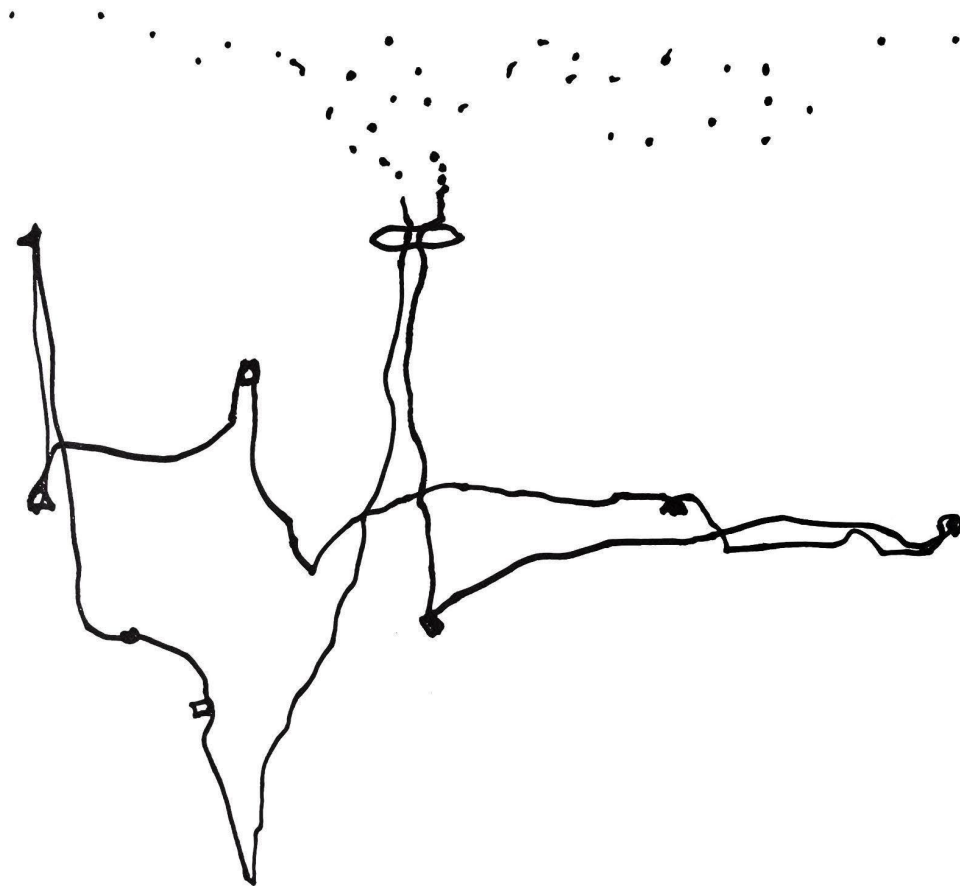
It was exciting to be at Mawachihitotaak in person last September, visiting with fierce, brilliant, and creative Métis in the heart of Red River. I met relatives I never knew I had, spent time with family, saw old friends, and made new ones. I learned from Métis who, like me, lived outside of the homeland, and admired their gentle footsteps on territories long cared for—and often still fought for—by First Nations relatives. As part of the “diaspora,” we share common experiences—striving to live as good neighbours and fulfill our responsibilities as guests, living our values and relationality with the people, lands, and waters where we find ourselves. Together with Sidney, Mel, and Victoria May on Zoom, we shared our own experiences living in the east for the panel: *Making Family (Famii) where we are: Red River Métis experiences living in Québec*. We had come together as a group last summer, as Métis people who, at some point in time, have made Montréal home. We built an understanding that we feel deep similarities in our experiences, but also have unique and personal journeys that have guided our decisions and feelings.

In each of our unique paths, we recognize that a part of each of our stories is that of diaspora, that piece of being a population scattered from its origin. Mel, Sidney, and I decided to share some more thoughts here and add to our discussion of diaspora in the east through our map of collective mobilities.

Coming together as Red River Métis people in what is known as Tio'tiá:ke / Mooniyang / Montréal, Québec, we find ourselves in a microcosm of the broader settler context of so-called Canada—the same—but different. The self-isolation of Québec as a “unique” province within the settler state has created many challenges for Indigenous Peoples, not the least of which is that

Red River Métis rights and nationhood are not recognized on this territory. Furthermore, with Québec being a primarily francophone province, and Montréal being a hub for people globally, many are confused about who Red River Métis are as a people. We see a frequent disconnect between Red River Métis and the French words *métis*, *métisse*, or *métissé*, meaning mixed. Yet within this particular context, as diaspora, we find ways to come back to ourselves. A resistant people, we make family—*lii famii*—no matter where we are, bridging Nations. Maybe most importantly, we demonstrate how to be good visitors.

*With that, we will give our tellings on this experience:*



## Diaspora, Return, and Ancestral Skin Marking

**My name is Mel Lefebvre.** I am Two Spirit (2S). My pronouns are she/they. I am a Michif, Nehiyaw, French, and Irish mother, ancestral skin marker, community worker, and scholar. I am a citizen of the Manitoba Métis Federation and a descendant of many Red River Michif, Nehiyaw, Nakoda, Saulteaux, and French families on my father's side, including Desjardins, Delorme, and Guiboche. On my mother's side, we are Irish of the Doyle, Griffin, and MacDonald families from Limerick, Ireland. Some of the places my Michif relations are from include Fisher Branch, Saint Francois Xavier, St. Vital, and Carman, Manitoba; La Ronge, Saskatchewan; and Pembina, North Dakota.

My practice is focused on ancestral skin marking as a mode of healing and reconnection for urban Indigenous people, particularly 2SLGBTQ+ and Indigenous women, as well as uncovering, (re)claiming, and creating skin markings in contemporary and future contexts. As a Michif and Irish person, diaspora is not a foreign concept to my family. Diaspora is in my blood. I feel far from the homelands and I long for connection. Where I am situated, in Tio'tia:ke / Mooniyang / Montréal, there are multitudes of diasporic peoples coming from other lands where there is often the experience of war, injustice, death, famine, discrimination, and genocide.

Caribbean Canadian writer Dionne Brand speaks longingly and frankly about the logistics of return in her book *A Map to the Door of No Return, Notes to Belonging*. Through my experience as an ancestral skin marker, the many personal stories shared with me around connection and belonging, and the work of thinkers like Brand, I contemplate how one is able to return when they have no knowledge of family names, territories, or connections of any kind. Some folks were taken from their homelands so young or their ancestors were generations ago, and the result is that they don't even know where their homes are. I am reminded of those who

suffered through and survived the Sixties Scoop, the Indian Residential School (prison) system, forced adoptions, child welfare, and incarceration. I am also reminded of those who did not survive, but who are survived by their families. Within all of these experiences, how do we return?

My map tells the story of us as star beings, dust, energy. Coming down through the hole in the sky/*pakone kisik*, as Wilfred Buck tells us (2022) with the help of Grandmother spider, Achakos Iskwew (Star Woman) was lowered down gently on Grandmother's web to earth. Born from star magic, we have the power to find our way home. We all go back to the stars.

Living in the diaspora, I often think about how it manifests as being far from territory, far from family and community, not simply in distance but in relation, in relationships, since some of those relational ties were broken and in need of mending or reweaving. I also think, feel, and experience diaspora as an internal state of being. As Two-Spirit people, Trans people, gender-expansive people (*tastawâyihk iyiniwak*), we sometimes need to hide ourselves deep within in order to be welcomed into community, ceremony, church, and relationships—wherever we are looking for belonging and acceptance. And I wonder what kind of formulations that internal diaspora takes and the energies that are then exuded because of that sense of shame or fear or hesitation.

And so, I wonder: How do we return?

I have come to understand skin marking as a mode of return. We can experience an ancestral practice, learn the protocols and ceremonies our Ancestors performed before, during, and after a skin marking, and we can make new...new meanings, new practices, and new protocols, as contemporary peoples. Skin marking is a way for us to find belonging and

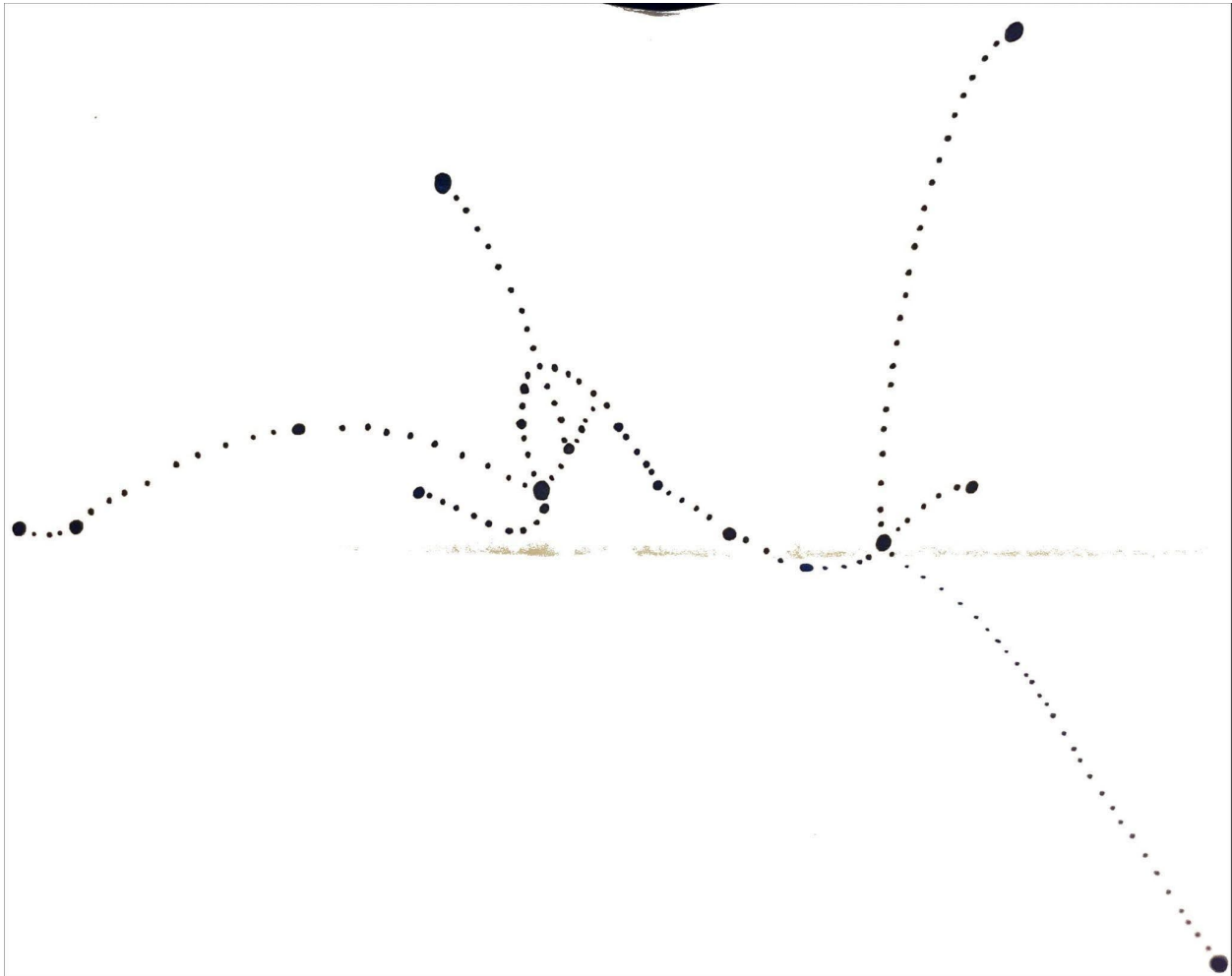
acceptance within ourselves, in our own skins. It is a way for us to recognize each other on our long journeys home.

The triangle is one of the symbols that I have developed over the past six years of practice as a new Michif and Nehiyaw skin marking methodology. It is a universal shape, but reimagined and grounded in and inspired by the existing Michif and Nehiyaw ways of being of *kiyôkêwin* (visiting), *wâhkôhtowin* (relational ethics), *kitimahkinawow* (pity and compassion), and *tâpwêwin* (truth telling). Among other symbols that I tattoo, the triangle has been revisited and infused with specific meanings and purposes that align with Michif and Nehiyaw cultural ways. The triangle is a celebration of two-spirit, Trans, and gender-expansive brilliance. As a three-sided shape, it is inherently beyond the two-sided colonial binary. Found in the cultural designs of Plains Indigenous Peoples, the triangle is the shape of our quillwork, symbolic of the cloud with ties to thunderbird Medicine governing the thundering skies, lightning, and rain. In Michif and Nehiyaw communities, it is a tree, mountain, rock, tipi, and fire. It is the arrow, direction, motivation, and purpose. The triangle marking is a connection to our star creation stories, the sky world, and star beings. The triangle is an opportunity, an opening, and a portal, allowing for release and letting go. The triangle grants us access to our gender-bending kin, what Two-Spirit Métis and Sault Ste. Marie Nishnaabe writer Kai Pyle brilliantly names \*trans temporal kinship.

The triangle, then, has the power to direct and welcome you home.

To counteract colonial disruptions, we can reconnect and celebrate our multitudes of genders and sexualities through the triangle, a marking that reaches out to the brilliant echoing phantasm of who we could have been as gender-expansive Indigenous Peoples if colonization never was, and we can manifest it in the now.

The Return is now. The portal is open △



### **Zhaakihikaashon: I Am Loved (Here and Away)**

**My name is Sidney Leggett**, and I am Michif through my maternal line with settler ancestry (English, Polish, and Icelandic). I descend from Scottish halfbreeds and French Michif with family names including Bruce, Lamirande, and others. My lines are from and lived in the Kildonan Settlement, St Norbert, St Vital, Grand Rapids, and Selkirk. I was born and raised in the north side of Winnipeg, near the Kildonan Settlement where my ancestor Patrick Bruce was born and raised. My Grandfather is Cree/ Michif and grew up in Grand Rapids, Manitoba; he is

the son of Rose Mercredi who was a Cree speaker. I grew up on stories of how much fish he ate as a child and how tough he was. My Grandma is Michif, with the family name Bruce; she was born and raised in Selkirk, Manitoba where she spent most of her life, until she moved to Winnipeg with my Grandpa to live closer to my brother and me. She taught me so much about family, knowing what's going on in town, and that we are all just people who go through highs and lows in this world.

I hadn't ever considered diaspora or being scattered from my home until I moved to Montréal. Through all my previous journeys, travels, and moves, I had felt a consistent, tangible emotion but never knew how to name it. When I first moved to Montréal, I felt away from my community and many things that made me happy. I felt closed in by the sheer size of the city, and I struggled with the new language and the overall disconnect from land. I knew I needed to search out my Michif kin and learn from those whose land I was living on at the time. My previous journeys have taught me the necessity of this practice to ground myself and live a life that feels balanced. In having conversations with my kin, I started to understand that what I felt moving to the city, and that same feeling I have felt each time I have left my home, is the experience of the Michif diaspora.

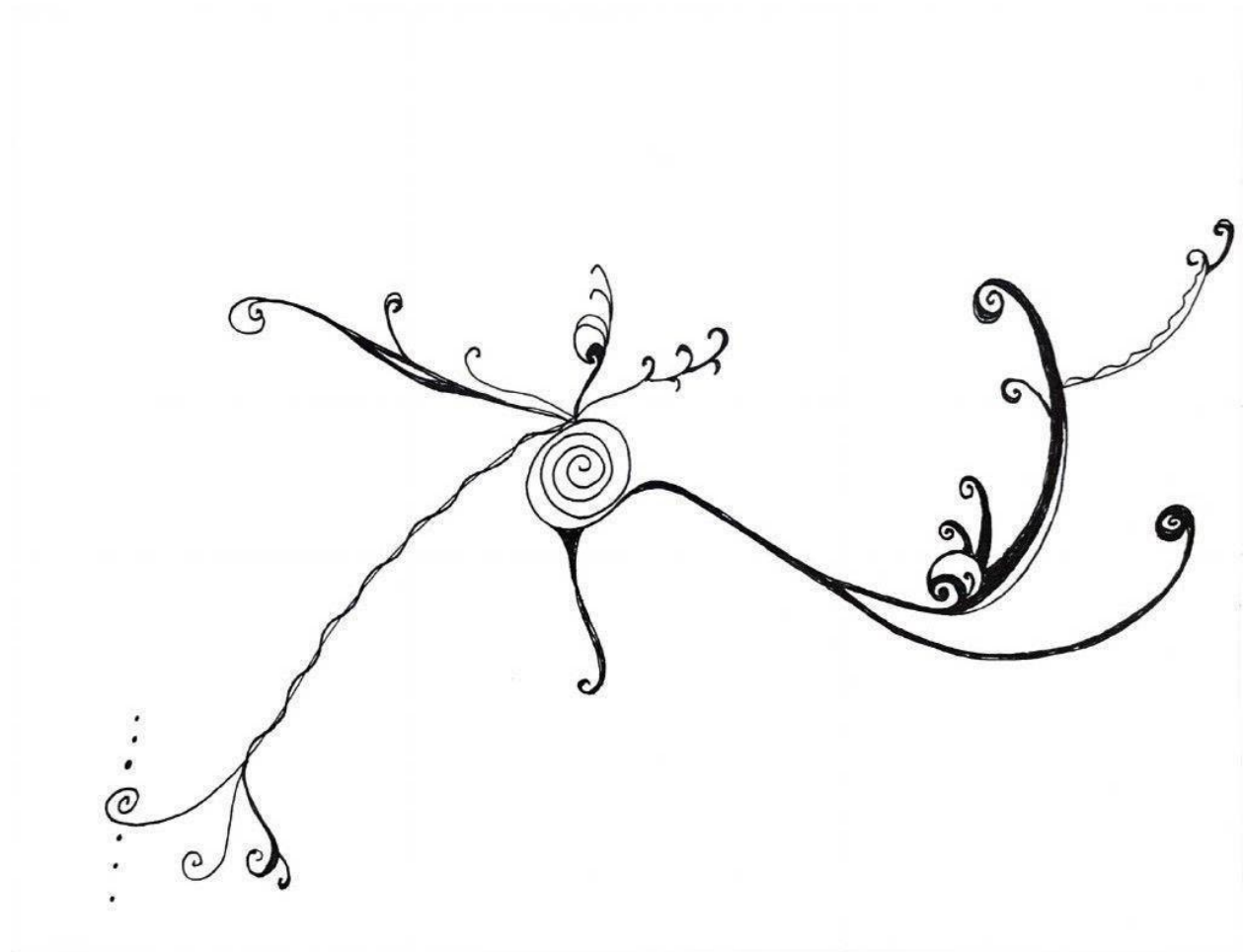
Reflecting on my life journey, I always start at my birthplace. It is Winnipeg, Manitoba, a place that has taken me a long time to understand but has always clearly been very me. As I grew up playing, biking, and learning near the Kildonan Settlement, I felt a big sense of peace as I learned more about my Ancestors and saw that some of my Michif lines were also from here. It became a grounding feeling for me in my search for belonging both in myself and in the world around me that I was meant to be here. That my people and the long lines of my kin existed here, and it is okay that I do, too.



As I write this, I am presently located back in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Still central after all this time. It has been a place I have been called back to, to set roots in and build toward what I look at as adulthood. Turning twenty-five this year, I felt the calling back to this place, as I enter the often-called “quarter-life crisis.” Or, feeling like my brain is finally fully formed, I felt the need to stop running.

When I look at my map, it tells a story of growth, and how to visit with others. I see a girl who has travelled looking for her place in the world. I think about the time I spent away at eighteen years old, desperate to become an adult and to have control over my life. How that left me spinning out, having moments of feeling more lost than ever, but it built a path of understanding toward the power of gratitude and the importance of centering that in my life. I became so incredibly grateful for home, for my mother, for sitting on the stool in our kitchen as my mom cooks and talking away. I am grateful for the feeling I get when my father brings up how much I talk and that the chatter fills the home, for getting to see my little brother grow and learn and adapt and laugh. I deeply missed being streets away from my grandparents, missed nights of watching my grandma play bingo, making my brother and me Hamburger Helper, mashed potatoes, and canned corn, and the sounds of my grandpa flicking through the TV channels. This practice of gratitude allowed me to feel okay with “giving up” and moving back home at the end of that year. It grew a strength and comfort in me that allowed me to leave again, whether it was something small like visiting friends, or something big like the decision to move to Montréal for school. This gratitude left me okay and confident in my abilities to decide to move back home again after my time in Montréal. I see my journey developing in the future to follow my ancestor’s blood in me: making friends, receiving and giving knowledge, sharing tea

with someone new, and going to new places outside of my homeland, but having that comfort that I always get to come back to my family that is so deeply ingrained in this place.



### **Rooted/Routed Continuities in Métis Diasporas**

**My name is Michelle Smith.** I am Red River Métis and a Manitoba Métis Federation citizen. On my mother's side I descend from Scottish halfbreeds and French Métis kin, including McMillan's, Bruce's, Dease's, Perrault's, Belisle's, Cadotte's, Desrochers', and Ducharme's with origins in Northwest Territories, Rivière Qu'appelle, Ila à la Crosse, and Pembina as well as St. Boniface and St. Charles. I also have English, Irish, and Dutch Ancestors, immigrants to what is now Winnipeg in the mid-1800s to early 1900s, working-class people who joined collective

struggles with the One Big Union and the like. I grew up in our Métis homeland and Treaty 1 territory, in St. James, Manitoba. The first home where I lived bordered what had been our McMillan relatives' river lot sixteen, where buffalo hunter and steersman William McMillan received scrip. It's not clear how our family lost title to this land, although records of land speculation during the "Great Winnipeg Boom" of 1881–82 give us some idea. My mother shared many stories of spending summers with Métis family at "Strathcona farm," located adjacent to former lot sixteen, where robber baron Donald Smith had his palatial Silver Heights mansion. My maternal grandfather was raised by his grandmother, Virginie McMillan, who was born Virginie Bruce in St Boniface to Jean Baptiste Bruce, brother of John Bruce. My Grandfather spoke Michif, but it wasn't passed down to us. I recognize distinctly Métis ways of being growing up—visiting and responsibility to family, knowing through doing, connection to and respect for land, art making, humour, and music—but my family didn't talk a lot about their identity and culture. I know about the discrimination my relatives faced and the challenges of living in a place that many Métis fled during the reign of terror.

I left Winnipeg over thirty years ago. I think it took me leaving the homeland and having my own child to rebuild *lîi famii* and return to the Métis kitchen table. Today I live in Tiohtiá:ke or Mooniyang, otherwise known as Montréal. I am a mother, partner, sister, teacher, scholar, filmmaker, artist, mentor, advocate, thinker, and idealist. I use she/they pronouns. I am a guest on unceded territory here in the east. I honour this place and have deep respect and gratitude for the custodians of this territory, Kanien'kehá:ka and Anishinaabe peoples, and the many nations that call this place home.

I only learned a year or two ago that I was part of the Red River Métis "diaspora." I was both comforted and perplexed by this term; comforted because it presumed my connection with

the homeland, and that I am part of the origin story; perplexed because it suggests an inside and outside, a centre and a periphery. I am connected, but outside. The meaning and scope of diaspora for Red River Métis have implications for our nationhood and identity as we resurge and revitalize, often adjacent to or in close relation to Indigenous people of other nations. My learning journey, my process of “becoming human” has been shaped by my experiences in our homeland, *and* those in the east, with the support of many generous teachers: Elders, scholars, friends, the lands and waters. Through relationships, I have learned responsibility and care, independence and accountability.

My map starts in the Red River, in St. James, now Winnipeg, where I was born and lived until age seventeen. It spirals out to the vicinity of Lake Winnipeg. I have the best memories of spending summers barefoot and free at Grand Beach, eating saskatoons from the bushes on my grandma’s tiny cabin lot, climbing rocks, swimming, fishing for pickerel, blueberry picking, and listening to stories over card games late into the night. The spirals and eddies reflect movement through water, honouring my Ancestors’ navigation through the lakes and rivers of this land. My grandfather, Jean Baptiste Bruce, was part of the La Loche Brigade; other relatives plied the waters of what is now North America. My journey has taken me in multiple directions. I am a traveller, a mover. I get antsy when I stay in one place for too long. My lines are thick in the east and swirl at the eastern door, moving north to and through Anishinaabe, Atikamekw and Cree territories. My work as a filmmaker, researcher, and now academic has taken me to the US, Europe, Asia and the Middle East, Australia and New Zealand. The destinations are fronds unfurling. In these places, I am always becoming, always learning. I try to bring Métis, Inuit, and First Nations youth on these journeys to meet and share with Indigenous Peoples from around the world, exchanging stories and experiences, strategizing and scheming across territories and

waters. The northeast of my map represents travels to Nunavik, the Inuit territory of what's known as northern Québec. Over the last decade, I have developed close ties with Nunavimmiut, collaborating on many shared education and film projects. These relationships began in my early days of college teaching and I am grateful for the privilege to be in the north, to visit with that magnificent land, that ice, those waters. To taste the sweetest, tiniest blueberries.

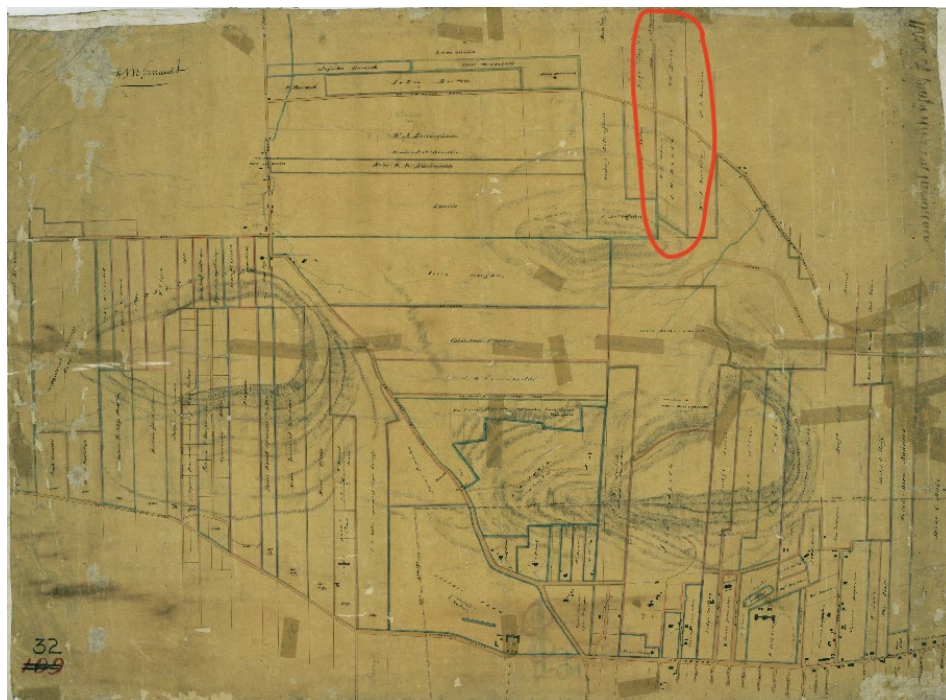
In this movement, in these meetings and collaborations across nations, I see continuity with the lives and trajectories of our Ancestors. We have always been a people on the move—rolling across the Prairies and paddling the waters to hunt and trap, harvest, meet, gather, negotiate, love and exchange. We moved for family and livelihood. We moved when we had to—pushed or removed from our lands by colonial thievery, violence, and settlement. We also moved to advocate and to lead, asserting our nationhood outside the homeland. During the long days of COVID-19 I would do genealogical and family research while eating the cakes that my partner developed a habit of baking in that period of isolation. We moved apartments just as the lockdown began, “renovicted” by our former rental property owner, and landed further west in Montréal’s Outremont borough, near Côte Ste Catherine Street. According to family records, one of my Métis relatives, Peter Warren Dease, a Hudson’s Bay Company officer, lived the last twenty years of his life with his wife Elizabeth Chouinard and sons in *Côte Ste Catherine* near Montréal.<sup>1</sup> Digging through websites and online archives, I found a map of the “Parish of Montréal (Cote St. Catherine)” at Library and Archives Canada.<sup>2</sup> Surveyed by H.M. Perrault on July 28, 1874, the map contained lot boundaries, dimensions, and owners’ names, including *P.W. Dease*. After comparing the “cadastral plan” with today’s maps as well as landmarks and historic

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/13779.Peter%20Warren%20Dease.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?idnumber=4137884&app=FonAndCol>

buildings, I discovered that my pandemic apartment was situated on the northern end of what was once the Dease lot. I had been walking the length of what was his former property at least a few times a week at that time. In conversations at Mawachihitotaak, I learned that a number of fur trade and Métis families lived in what is now Montréal in the 1700–1800s, many gathering around a church on Saint Gabriel street. So it would seem we have been building community in this place for well over a century. The nature of that community, and past Métis relations with the original custodians of this territory in particular, needs further research. This knowing is important as we strive to practice accountability to our hosts and fulfill our responsibilities as respectful guests and here today.



Parish of Montreal (Cote St. Catherine) 1847

Knowledge of Métis mobilities and diaspora throughout Turtle Island and beyond also informs our understanding of who we are and where we want to go. At the Native American and

Indigenous Studies Association Conference in Norway last June, I attended a session led by Chris Anderson to trace Métis “presences” in colonial London, including the steps of Métis teacher and lawyer Alexander Isbister. Isbister travelled across the Atlantic in 1842 to canvas the British government regarding the “HBC’s neglect of First Nations and Métis.”<sup>3</sup> Bringing this to light challenges the one-way empire-to-colony narrative while offering new ways to think about Métis nationhood and nationalism. Anderson suggests that traditionally, the birth of Métis nationalism is rooted in place, the Red River heart of the homeland, for instance. By following Isbister’s advocacy and the trajectories of other Métis people in London, he considers our “nationness,” not only through a “traditional focus on *roots*” but in relation to “*routes* of five centuries of global colonial economic circuits.”<sup>4</sup> Who we are and where we want to be in the future—nation building—happens where we are, where we go, and even in relation to those who are not us.

Today, our routes continue beyond the homeland, beyond the places of our birth. We connect back to a terrestrial home when return is possible or find and make new routes/roots, meeting at spiritual or geographical intersections— like here in Québec. We always find each other, and we walk with care as we nurture *lii famii*, holding each other accountable in diasporic but rooted Red River Métis community/ies.

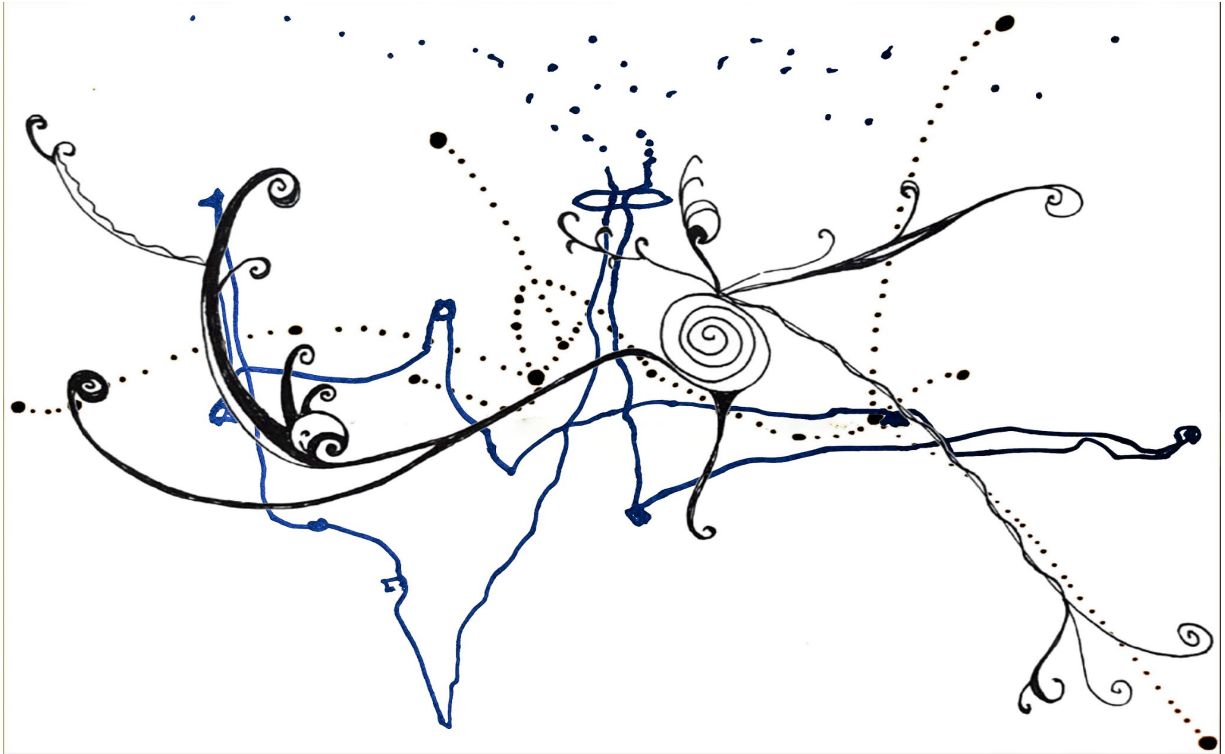
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<sup>3</sup> <https://naisa2024.exordo.com/programme/presentation/143>

<sup>4</sup> <https://naisa2024.exordo.com/programme/presentation/143>





Buck, W. (2022, October). An Evening of Indigenous Astronomy with Wilfred Buck. Montreal; Concordia University.



## **Michelle Smith**

PhD (c) is a Red River Michif educator and filmmaker and member of the MMF. She was born and raised in St. James, Manitoba and now lives in Tiohtiá:ke/Mooniyang (Montreal), unceded Kanien'kehá:ka territory with her partner and son. She has worked in Indigenous education for over a decade as a teacher, advocate, researcher, mentor and program developer at Quebec colleges and in community. She draws from Métis values in relationship-building across nations, and continues to learn about our ancestral ways of collaboration and engagement with First Nation relatives. She is a Vanier scholar and Assistant Professor in the Department of Education & Counselling Psychology at McGill.

## **Sidney Leggett**

is a Red River Métis citizen with the Manitoba Métis Federation from Winnipeg, Manitoba, Treaty One Territory. She is currently a McCall MacBain Scholar completing her MSc Epidemiology at McGill University. Previously Sidney has completed a BSc Hons. Applied Computer Science and Data Analysis at the University of Winnipeg. She has worked for the Government of Manitoba as a Junior Epidemiologist, Waterway Recreation as their Systems Administrator, and First Nations Health and Social Secretariat as a Statistical Analyst. She hopes to become an Indigenous Health Researcher, and find ways to foster and grow Indigenous epidemiology.

## **Dr. Mel Lefebvre**

(she/they) is a Two-Spirit Michif, Nehiyaw, French, Irish mother, traditional tattoo practitioner, scholar, artist, and community worker based in Tiohtiá:ke /Montreal. A citizen of the MMF, Mel's grandmother's family came from Fisher Branch, Manitoba to Quebec in the early 1900s. Some of her Michif family names include Delorme,

Desjardins, and Guiboche. Her practice is focused on traditional tattooing as a mode of healing and reconnection for Indigenous people with a particular focus on 2SLGBTQIA+ and Indigenous women as well as reclaiming and imagining traditional tattoos in contemporary and future contexts. Working closely with the Native Women's Shelter of Montreal, Mel is vice president of the board, advocating for the safety of Indigenous people as well as Indigenous representation, education, and employment.