

Finding Home on the Way: Naming the Métis

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ABSTRACT. This article follows changes in the naming, and hence the identity, of the Canadian mixed-blood Aboriginal population. With the conclusion that Métisness both uses and defies racial signifiers, that a physical and psychological home both does and does not exist, the theory of liminality is introduced to explain the complexities of Métisness, but proves too racially polarized. In response, the article interprets less theoretically the term Half-breed in its harsh social and political context. It then questions the ambivalence of the Half-breed identity through theory on mimicry, and addresses these questions by considering contemporary definitions of Métisness in legal discourse and fictional texts. This exploration deepens by considering the function of passing as a tool of resistance and oppression, and ultimately as a rough guide towards the Métis' post-colonial position. It is concluded that the Métis' strongest trait is their ability to resist definition and adjust to changing historical, political, and racial contexts.

SOMMAIRE. Le présent article suit les changements dans l'appellation, et donc l'identité, de la population autochtone métisse canadienne. Avec pour conclusion le fait que la métissité utilise mais aussi défie les signifiants raciaux, et que le domicile physique et psychologique à la fois existe et n'existe pas, la théorie de la liminalité est présentée afin d'expliquer les complexités de la métissité; mais elle montre trop de polarisation raciale. En réponse, cet article interprète le terme *métis* de façon moins théorique, dans son âpre contexte social et politique; il met ensuite en question l'ambivalence de l'identité métisse par l'intermédiaire de la théorie de l'imitation, et se penche sur les définitions contemporaines de métissité dans le discours légal et les textes de fiction. On approfondit cette exploration en considérant la fonction du passage comme outil de résistance et d'oppression, et finalement comme guide approximatif de la position post-coloniale des Métis. Il en ressort que la caractéristique principale des Métis est leur aptitude à résister aux définitions et à s'adapter aux changements de contextes historiques, politiques et raciaux.

When I was 12, my father told me that I was an Indian. He told me that I was part Indian ... I was Métis. What a strange word. More confusing than this word was the dilemma around how I was going to fit the word into my identity that was already half French-Canadian, half Italian, all white. Despite the confusion, I embraced the word and its contradictions to my whiteness. I began to understand that it was more than a name when fellow students and family members laughed when I told them I was Métis; when, in their eyes, I was obviously white; when, in Grade 8, my class learned about the injustices borne upon Louis Riel and his people; when I learned of these injustices again in my Ontario Academic Credits history class; when my father was appointed as a Métis representative on the Federal Board of Aboriginal Economic Development; and when I began this project. Surely, I often think after experiences like these, "Métis" is more than just a name. I've been searching for what lives behind it for years now, searching for a sense of identity.

There are times when I cannot pass as an Aboriginal. In the second year of my undergraduate degree at the University of Guelph, I was awarded a sum of money from the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation (NAAF). In my application for this award, it was required that I send a financial plan for the next year, my resume, my Métis card (photocopied, both sides), and a recent picture of myself. I was overjoyed when I received the award because it served as a vindication of my Métisness and my inclusion in the Aboriginal community. I reapplied the next year. Months after I sent the application away, in a mandatory phone interview with one of the Foundation's representatives, I discovered that I was required to prove my Aboriginal ancestry and my "living connection" to the Aboriginal community by submitting a heritage portfolio from my Ontario Métis Association branch in Sault Ste. Marie. I wondered why they needed more documents. Wasn't my Métis status card enough? I began to think about that card and the photocopy of my face, distorted by the transfer from the original to the pixilated, blurry image that I sent off to the NAAF.

A short time after I submitted my heritage profile, I received a letter that apologized for my unsuccessful attempt at garnering funds, and explained that because I have no living grandparents on a reserve and my Aboriginal ancestors are so far removed from my family, my status was not acceptable by the Foundation's standards, and that I would not be eligible to apply to the NAAF again. I thought about the inadequacy of the blood in my veins. I felt like a fake. The justification of my Métis identity that I felt when I received the award a year before seemed unwarranted given my new, ineligible status. I wondered if my skin colour tipped them off. Maybe I sounded too white.

The truth of the matter is that the NAAF had changed their policies, as there were many non-Aboriginals who were forging documents in order to receive funding (was I one of them?); and they were receiving many more applications than they had ever before. They had to be more restrictive as to who they were funding. Interestingly, their decisions were based on one's percentage of Aboriginal blood and one's "living connection" to the community, not on governmental definitions of status Métis. I don't blame them: the NAAF has many sponsors to cater to.

About a month later, the NAAF contacted my sister Lee Shawn. She had received a large amount of funding to attend the Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College. They asked her to speak as a representative scholar of the NAAF to Aboriginal youth at a conference in Toronto. Knowing my situation and the conditions of my ineligibility, she politely asked the NAAF representative, "Am I Aboriginal enough?" Her question was of course an act of rhetoric, but there were, and remain, some deeply rooted implications to her words. My sister and I continue to question our positioning within the framework of Métisness and how our appearance and our ability to pass affect that positioning.

Two factors influenced Lee Shawn's ability and my inability to pass through the NAAF. First, Lee Shawn has darker skin, eyes, and hair than I; both strangers and friends have asked her if she is Aboriginal. My hair is light brown, my eyes hazelnut, and my skin relatively pale. Secondly, Lee Shawn received thirty times the amount of funding that I did. Surely, the second factor is the most influential in the NAAF's decision to call upon Lee Shawn to speak on their behalf: after investing so much into her, it only makes sense that they would want her voice to represent them. Yet, I cannot deny feeling that the NAAF's decision was also influenced by her appearance: she can *play* the part; I can't. I was denied support from the NAAF because of my whiteness and

because my scholarship was relatively small in comparison to Lee Shawn's. By making this comparison, and stating my opinion about the reasons behind the different allowances between my sister and me, I am not suggesting that the NAAF should view me with the same eyes as they do my sister; I recognize the difference in our levels of achievement.

However, if the NAAF refused to support me in any capacity because of my appearance, whiteness, and living connection to the Aboriginal community, then the NAAF's continued reliance on Lee Shawn as a representative figure of Aboriginal scholarship is a contradiction, one that will paradoxically lead us towards a sense of Métis identity. The discrepancies between our abilities to pass and the consequent contradiction of the NAAF's support are indicative of the essence of Métisness, that is, its ability to change and consequently to survive. What survives is not a coherent identity, but a willingness to adjust to governmental policy, legal discourse, cultural trends, and institutional imperatives that, as in the case of the NAAF's treatment of my sister and me, are so intent on capturing the Métis in their grips. In the eyes of the NAAF, Métisness lies squarely in the appearance of the student; in the "living connection" the student has to the Aboriginal community, be it a matter of family members on reserves or engagement in cultural and social activities; and in the amount of capital they have funneled into a given student's education. In the case of the NAAF's funding of my sister and me, Métisness emerges as a product of skin color, cultural experience, and economics. Métis is more than a name. I will follow the career of this name in order to illustrate the Métis reflection, which shines off of the glass of institutional, historical, cultural, and economic realities. With the use of the theory of liminality and passing, and through the analysis of fictional pieces largely written by and concerning Métis women, I will trace the image of Métisness as it finds itself along the journey home.

Let us explore the path towards identity by considering the writing of Beth Brant, a mixed-blood writer of Mohawk descent with a biting ability to point out the moments of contact between colonial history and Aboriginal identity. She writes in "The Good Red Road" (1994) of how "mixed-blood writers ... have been pushed and pulled into accepting the lies told about our Indian selves" (20); the liars belong to the "dominant culture" (21). She continues, "mixed blood writers find those sacred places in the blood that courses through our bodies, whispering, 'come home, come home'" (20). Where is home? Brant believes that, although our "grandmothers' bodies were appropriated by the conquerors," we have never left home (21). Then home is here: It is the place where the Métis can see the contradictions in their identity, where their sense of themselves is maybe not content, maybe not restless, but acknowledged and always changing.

By following Aboriginal narratives that reappropriate colonial names we can ask more questions about the Métis' ability to rewrite identity. Thomas King's *The One About Coyote Going West* (1996) tells a story of how Indians were named:

Everyone knows who found us Indians. Eric the Lucky and that Christopher Cartier and that Jacques Columbus come along later. Those ones get lost... So we got to find them. Help them out. Feed them. Show them around. Boy, I says. Bad mistake that one. (234)

The narrator's rearrangement of the names Christopher Columbus and Jacques Cartier into "Christopher Cartier" and "Jacques Columbus" is an act of resistance to the colonial mission and to the naming of Indians. The narration resists the colonization of

Aboriginal identity by harnessing a similar kind of postcolonial agency that the Europeans used to find, name, and thereby appropriate the identity of the indigenous population, or "Indians." The idea of the postcolonial is problematic in the history of its practice and in its very conception: in his essay "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial" (1997), King writes, "I cannot let post-colonial stand—particularly as a term for, at its heart, it is an act of imagination and an act of imperialism that demands that I imagine myself as something I did not choose to be" (248). What shall the Métis imagine themselves as? What does the agency King acquires through the reinvention of the Aboriginal through story-telling and the channeling of colonial agency contribute to an understanding of Aboriginality, and moreover, Métisness? This agency is a testament to the ability of mixed blood writers, and quite possibly to the ability of any marginalized voice, to rewrite the identities which have been mapped upon them—maybe not to find a common place or voice, but to lay markers on the path they have already tread, so they might travel into new territories of self-identification.

In searching out this territory, the Métis find themselves enmeshed in the discourse of the colonizer and colonized, but able to move beyond it. Métis, for example, is a French word that means people with mixed blood. The very act of naming the mixed blood population with the language of the French colonists is indicative of the same sort of postcolonial problematic that King points out; it requires that the Métis imagine themselves as something they "did not choose to be." But as the Métis imagine themselves as postcolonial subjects, they can also imagine themselves beyond the postcolonial by working within its grips. The Métis *are* postcolonial subjects, and their identity is inexorably linked to the landing of "Jacques Columbus" *and* to the indigenous population. They are able to either accept or reject their European heritage and their Aboriginal heritage. They can choose to and choose not to *be*. The paradox of Métisness, the ability to exist within and outside of racial essentialisms and to rewrite identity as King does, is the place where we will find our path home. However, there are obstacles along this path: "We trust easy oppositions," King writes, "we are suspicious of complexities, distrustful of contradictions, fearful of enigmas" (2003: 25). Ann McCredden (1996) recognizes the "urgent need to reach beyond such oversimplifications" as binaries like "black/white, them/us, primitive/cultured, [and] victim/perpetrator" (13). Métisness, then, is about the process of moving through these oversimplifications and denying trust in "easy oppositions." To adopt the words of Brant, home exists along the very road that leads us there: "Our 'muse' is *us*" (1994: 10).

In walking this winding path, let us consider the usefulness and inappropriateness of Victor Turner's (1969) liminality: he asserts that "liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (95). In a sense, the Métis are liminal entities because they exist "betwixt and between" the racial categorizations of white and Aboriginal, both of which are indeed "assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial." However, the idea that liminal entities like the Métis are in an intermediary position "betwixt and between" whiteness and Aboriginality suggests fixedness, as though the liminal entity were stuck in the middle, immobile. Moreover, these words connote that the existence of liminal beings is neither one nor the other—and in the case of the Métis, it is neither white nor Aboriginal. How do I trace an emerging identity through the layers of a past that "is frequently linked to death ... to invisibility, to darkness" (1969: 95)?

I must pause again on Turner's liminality, and question its ability to explain Métisness by more deeply exploring its essentialist leanings. Liminality, although offering a vague sense of Métisness, cannot account for the complexity of Métis identity because it strives to place the subject strictly between categories. This act strips the subject of its humanity and leaves behind its skeleton, an object. The Métis does not exist only in-between, but rather on both sides of the spectrum and on neither side of the spectrum. Turner also asserts that the history of the liminal is often associated with death, invisibility, and darkness: he may be correct, but in terms of the Métis, this conclusion is overborne. It is difficult to believe that the Métis could have even been linked to invisibility or death when their image has always been intangible and their life has never been proven to have existed in the same way that the Aboriginal (have they existed either?) and white population have. In other words, Métisness does not register on the scale of race because it defies the essentialisms that the idea of race insists upon. As an extension to the definition of liminality, Métisness is indeed between, but not only between because it exists on the margins of essentialist racial definitions: Métisness is not dead for it has not lived, and it is not always invisible because its specter sometimes shows itself then disappears just as quickly. This expansion of Turner's definition of liminality is a movement from an essentialist conception of mixed race as a polarized phenomenon in which whiteness holds the west, everything else holds the east (or the south or the north), and mixedness tightly straddles the middle, towards an understanding of mixed race as an often unequal mixture of power and oppression, a confusion of colour, and a bleeding of the past into the present. The Métis are not only between, but also *among* racial categorizations: if they were fixed in space like truly liminal entities, straddling the line between white and red, it would be easy to capture them. But they are not fixed in space; they roam from white to red, red to white, intangible, like ghosts.

Theorist Homi K. Bhabha (1994), in his writing on Franz Fanon, conjures up the "time-lag of cultural difference" (237) that can interpolate this discussion of emerging Métis identity. A transposition of Bhabha's theory onto this paper's examination of Canadian Aboriginal identity supposes that there is a Métis identity that is held back by a lack of postcolonial agency, but is emerging. Bhabha asserts that "Fanon writes from that temporal caesura, the time-lag of cultural difference, in a space between the symbolization of the social and the 'sign' of its representation of subjects and agencies" (237). Mourning Dove's character Cogewea in *Cogewea, The Half-Blood* (1981), although neither a Canadian nor a Métis, figuratively locates this gap through her identity confusion in the present and her concern for her place in the future:

The sun dipped lower, as Cogewea, gazing out over the undulating hills to the west, dreamed on. What had the future in store for her? What would it bring ... regarded with suspicion by the Indian, shunned by the Caucasian; where was there any place for the despised breed! (17)

Cogewea finds herself in the time-lag: her desire to be a subject, to be recognized as something more than the "despised breed" in Western eyes is indicated by both her dreaming, as though she were imagining herself into existence, and by her staring off longingly into the "hills to the west." However, she lacks the agency to become this subject, as is evident in how she is "regarded with suspicion by the Indian [and] shunned by the Caucasian" and ultimately deemed the "despised breed." Now that we have located

the gap, where do we go? Bhabha's theory calls into question Cogewea's representation as a liminal figure; but moreover, it calls into question the notion of identity. "Where" indeed can we locate the place of the despised breed in the framework of identity, when the definition of identity itself insists upon stasis? In terms of identity, something either is or isn't; in Cogewea's case, she finds the problem in trying to negotiate "Indian" and "Caucasian" identities, and her only solution is to look west and wonder. Neither Bhabha's cultural time-lag nor Cogewea can tell us *where* Métis identity is (are we on the path home?).

Bhabha can be read as an attempt to answer the *where* question by suggesting that intersubjectivity is the answer to agency; but this answer leads only towards more questions about the nature of identity. He writes in "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern" (1994):

The process of reinscription and negotiation—the insertion or intervention of something that takes on new meaning—happens in the temporal break in-between the sign, deprived of subjectivity, in the realm of the intersubjective. Through this time-lag—the temporal break in representation—emerges the process of agency. (191)

In the space of deprived subjectivity, the temporal break between now and then, Cogewea harnesses agency through her ability to gauge her situation. She recognizes her oppressor, the "Caucasian," she understands that she is the "despised breed," and through the recognition of herself in the reflection of racial difference, through her gazing with wonder into the hills, and into the future, she *becomes an agent*. Bhabha's "process of agency" also calls into question the relationship between agency and identity. Does Cogewea's agency give her an identity? On the one hand, her ability to wonder and to act on the impulses that being in the time-lag provoke, like the questions she raises about her identity, might contribute to her gaining a sense of self. Yet, her ability to question does not necessarily mean that she has an identity. What is identity? Can agency account for its existence, or is identity a concept that extends itself beyond the ability to think, to hope, and to act?

Let us further question the relationship between agency and identity by examining the places at which they overlap. The narrator follows Cogewea's crisis: "Could she fill any sphere of usefulness...? She had struggled hard to equip herself for a useful career, but seemingly there was but one trail for her—that of mediocrity and obscurity" (Dove, 1981: 17). "Usefulness" and "useful" can be read here as both the rhetoric of agency and identity because the useful person *acts* in a useful way and *identifies* as a useful being. What would she become through her usefulness or uselessness? Would she, "like the race she had inherited, be brushed aside, crushed and defeated by the cold dictates of 'superior' earth-lords" (17), or would she shed her "racial hue" (17) and emerge triumphant over these dictates? What does Cogewea's usefulness or lack thereof mean to her "race?" Let us consider these possibly unanswerable questions in terms of the racial signifier Half-blood. They illustrate how the name *is* and *is not* an indication of Cogewea's ability to act and identify. The name "Half-blood" is ambiguous, like Cogewea's agency and identity, because of the vagueness of the terms "half" and "blood." Also contributing to this ambiguity is the fact that the name is not linked to a nation in the same way that "Indian" and "Caucasian" are: it is a vague, nationless signifier. As such, Cogewea is unsure about

how to act and what to be because she is surrounded by racial essentialisms that are tied to nationhood. She roams between agency and identity, walking the path home, wondering all the while where she is headed.

Moving on from this discussion of the “Half-blood,” let us redirect our attention to the more Canadian term *Half-breed*. The question we should be asking of the Half-blood, Half-breed, and Métis political, cultural, and historical text, to adopt Diana Fuss’ (1989) words, “is not ‘is this text essentialist (and therefore ‘bad’)?’ but rather, if this text is essentialist, *what motivates its deployment?*” (xi)? What has influenced the deployment of terms like “chicot, bois-brule,” (Teillet, 2004: 4) Half-breed, and Métis? Jean Teillet writes briefly of the history of the legal and historical imperatives influencing the creation and use of the word Half-breed in a governmentally sponsored document called *Métis Law Summary 2004*. He writes evasively: “Throughout the world there is a practice of outside naming. This is recognition by others of the existence of a people who are different.” He continues, “The use of the term Half-breeds reflects this concept of outside naming by English-speaking historians, lawyers and settlers” (4). Teillet touches upon the reality of colonial naming and locates groups, like historians, lawyers, and settlers, who were instrumental in the naming of Half-breeds. However, there is a distance between his involvement with the name Half-breed in that his vague language of “other” and “different” refuses to name the other or the difference. Furthermore, he normalizes the unique naming of the mixed blood population in Canada by blankly comparing it to similar naming processes “throughout the world.” Teillet indirectly addresses the origin of the word Half-breed in his ensuing historical account of Métis existence in Canada by using this term to invoke voices from the past: “most of the cases are about the non-Métis purchasers trying to realize on the scrip they had acquired from half-breeds” (14).

His discursive distance from the term Half-breed and his treatment of it as an historical artifact are evidence of the current political and cultural impetrative, possibly enforced by both the Métis and the Canadian government, to use the term “Métis” in place of the less politically correct “Half-breed.” One can trace the motivation behind this imperative to the empowerment of Aboriginal peoples through the Native rights movement in the seventies, which saw the creation of seven provincial and national Aboriginal representative groups like the Quebec Métis and Non-Status Indian Association and the Native Council of Canada (Redbird, 1980: 31). Also influential in the name change was the drive towards the establishment of a Métis community and identity that the Native Movement initiated. The constitutional alteration of *Half-breed* to *Métis* attempts to confirm a sense of community: in a legal sense through the changing of the name on paper; in a national sense in that the change means a recognition of the Métis on a federal level; and in a cultural sense as the change in legalistic and nationalistic discourse contributes to a solidification of a Métis community and a confirmed Métis identity.

The little information that Teillet provides to us on this change from *Half-breed* to *Métis* prompts further questioning of the reasons for the deployment and renaming of the “mixed Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal” population (Teillet, 2004: 4). He writes: “in the late 1960’s and the early 1970’s, as the public became more sensitized to the language of naming, the term Half-breed fell into disuse and ‘Métis’ became the new term” (4–5) until an official change whereupon the “constitutional use of the term ‘Métis’ in 1982 replaces the previous term ‘half-breeds’ in English legal language” (4). What remains

unsaid in this statement is why the “public became more sensitized to the language of naming.” What is the difference between the Half-breed and the Métis? How might we trace this movement in a constructivist way through a concern “with the production and *organization* of differences” (3)? Can we locate the Métis as a group engaged, maybe not in an “idealism which seeks to locate and to contain the subject within a fixed set of differences” (Fuss, 1989: xii), but as a group following a path of identity reinvention, a path home?

In exploring this path, I would like to pause upon Maria Campbell’s (1973) groundbreaking memoir, *Halfbreed*, and examine the oppressive dimensions of the term “Halfbreed.” Campbell gives us insight into what life was like for a Half-breed when writing of her middle childhood: she speaks of when her family and the caravan with whom they traveled would sell the berries and roots they had harvested to “whites” in foreign towns:

The townspeople would stand on the sidewalks and hurl insults at us. Some would say, ‘Halfbreeds are in town, hide your valuables’... They [the Half-breeds] were happy and proud until we drove into town, then everyone became quiet and looked different. The men walked in front looking straight ahead, their wives behind, and, I can never forget this, they had their heads down and never looked up. (36)

Campbell is sensitive to the racial tension in the townspeople’s voices, the oppression of her people, and the moments at which these things come face to face. The use of the racially charged word “Halfbreeds” at the beginning of the quotation indicates that Campbell’s people are first and foremost racial hybrids, and that the charge that they are thieves (“hide your valuables”) is dependent on this initial identification. Here begins a path along which we will follow the production and organization of difference: the name “Halfbreed” makes it easier for the townsfolk to call Campbell’s family and friends thieves because it implies that Campbell’s people are *half* not only in terms of their percentage of white and red blood, but in their very being. As such, they are a threat to the *wholeness* of the townsfolk.

This threat is a connection, and one that extends itself into the history of the displacement of the Half-breed population, between the signifiers *Half-breed* and *thief*. Before Campbell recalls her experience in the town, she briefly follows the history of the Métis people, ending her first chapter with the hanging of Louis Riel in 1885 for high treason, and continuing shortly after with the history of her family and their flight from Manitoba to Spring River, Saskatchewan (1973: 12). Many of the Half-breed homesteads, which the government required to be made into farms in three years, were more often than not “reclaimed by the authorities [Land Improvement District Authorities] and offered to the immigrants” (13) because they were not up to standards due to a lack of farming knowledge and technology. Campbell writes:

The Half-breeds then became squatters on their land and were eventually run off by the new owners. One by one they drifted back to the road lines and crown lands where they built cabins and barns and from then on were known as “Road Allowance people.” (13)

Road Allowance land was “crown land on either side of road lines and roads” (13). The displacement of these people upon Crown land is a source of tension between the

townsfolk and the Half-breeds, and contributes to the racism of and the naming of these people as Half-breeds. The townsfolk are racially signified as "white" (36) and as owners of private, non-governmental property, whereas the Half-breeds are transients who own no land of their own: in Bhabha's words, they are a "partial presence" (1994: 86). There are also economic tensions that arise from the Half-breeds attempting to trade with the townspeople and consequently harness financial agency. The tensions manifest themselves in the harassment of the Half-breeds as they are an affront to the government's land rights, they are a threat to the economic agency of the townsfolk, and, as is always a current running underneath these tensions, they defy racial essentialisms. As Bhabha might assert, their partial presence "alienates the modality and normality of those dominant discourses in which they emerge as 'inappropriate' colonial subjects" (1994: 88). The threat of the Half-breeds is that they might steal land, money, and identity. They are Half-breeds because they are marginal figures, and as such this essentialism, although not right or good, is useful in exploring their identity.

Yet, Half-breeds and townsfolk are inexorably linked to one another, whether they perceive this link or not. What Fuss has not considered in her statement about the arrangement of differences is the "*production and organization*" of similarities. The Half-breeds and the townsfolk share, to an extent, the same continent, the same blood, and even the same language. Points of connection exist in the economic relationship of trade between the townsfolk and the Half-breeds; in the necessity of a linguistic relationship between these groups, specifically the sharing of the English language and the mutual use of the term "Halfbreed" (even if "Halfbreed" is deemed politically incorrect by today's standards); and in the relationship between author and reader which Campbell initiates. These groups bleed into one another. This is not to say that there are no differences between whites and Métis: however, I think it is necessary to highlight the points of contact between these individuals and cultures because without doing so we might destroy our ability to read Campbell's text in all of its discursive complexity, and moreover pass by the image of the powerful Half-breed, one which trades and communicates.

In a further discussion of similarity, let us highlight how Campbell's mimicry expresses resistance to oppressive power. Campbell speaks of the systemic types of oppression she faced, most notably in her employment as a government researcher in her own, impoverished communities, and in her subsequent labeling as a scab for having a hand in inaccurately portraying what the press called "The anatomy of a sick Reserve called Cattle Lake" (1973: 153). Campbell eerily emulates the power of her oppressor: "I had never in my life felt so important... I was on the biggest ego and power trip any human being could be on." Campbell becomes, as Bhabha asserts, "a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing history" (Bhabha, 1994: 91) by camouflaging herself as a government worker (90). Furthermore, she illustrates "the *menace* of mimicry" by becoming this "authorized version of otherness" (88). In a very literal way, her otherness is authorized by her government position, and yet she retains her position as *other* at the same time: that she is still an other in an authorized position is what menaces the authority of the government. She figuratively articulates "a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them" (89) by being a Métis woman in a white role that is "almost the same but not white" (89).

Mimicry, which is "constructed around an ambivalence" (86), calls into question Campbell's looking back on the experience with "bitterness" (Campbell, 1973: 153). She

writes: "Marie and I had been manipulated and divided just as my father and those leaders from my childhood had been" (153). Why did she not quit the job? She writes honestly about her motive to complete the project, saying that she "liked the feeling" of being so important (153). On the one hand, Campbell can be read as embracing the mimicry insisted upon by her role as a government worker. On the other hand, her decision to "shut up and finish the work" (153) can be read as an attempt to negotiate her situation, as she was "caught right in the middle, with loyalty to Marie [who quit because she disagreed with the impetus of the position] on the one side, and a big concern to save face for all of us in the community and do a good job on another" (153). She retained the position not because she was trying to act as a menace, but because she adapted to such situational factors as the impact a poorly written report would have on the people of Saddle Lake, and the five hundred dollars a month she would be paid (152). She writes: "I've stopped being the idealistically shiny-eyed young woman I once was" (156). It would be idealistic of this paper to purport that Campbell consciously attempts to menace or resist the government through mimicry. It is more true to say that she mimics the figure of the government worker in order to accurately represent the lives of the Saddle Lake residents (153) (even though the report tarnishes them in the end), to make a living, and to allow herself to feel "important."

Campbell's action is evidence of her ability to recognize how she is oppressed and how she must rewrite herself in order to survive: "Change will come because this time we won't give up" (157). Her reflection upon the situation, her bitter look back, is indicative of the process of coming to terms with her identity or lack of it. Campbell's narrative as a government worker illuminates how mimicry acts as menace to authority, fuels the ego of the mime, ensures or tarnishes the lives of the people whom the mime represents, and is both saviour and traitor. In other words, we can read mimicry as a means to call into question the contradictions of Campbell's existence and the process through which she comes to understand her identity. She writes: "the years of searching, loneliness and pain are over for me" (157). The crucial part of this statement is its sensitivity to process, those years that Campbell and many other Half-breeds (and Métis) live in order to develop a sense of themselves.

The lack of mimicry, that is, the absence of the name "Halfbreed," in the last chapter of the novel also highlights the process of identity formation. One can read the title "Halfbreed" as, although maybe not intentional on Campbell's part, mimicry of authorities that would use the term as a tool of oppression. What does the absence of this mimicry in the last chapter mean? She writes: "I have brothers and sisters, all over the country. I no longer need my blanket to survive" (157). This blanket can be read as the name which both oppresses her and gives her access to a community. The throwing away of this blanket leads to more questions of identity: Does the absence of "Halfbreed" indicate that Campbell is rejecting inclusion in a community of Half-breeds, refusing to be oppressed any longer, or refusing to resist oppression? Does the absence of the name mean that Campbell is rejecting her identity and community, or does it mean that she has more fully accepted these things and developed as an individual? Is "Halfbreed" part of this identity, or is it a precursor to the identity she comes to understand? As a means of addressing these questions, I will examine the relationship between the name *Métis* and the concept of identity.

Jean Teillet (2004) writes that the “constitutional use of the term Métis” replaced the term “half-breeds’ in English legal language” in 1982, 97 years after the hanging of Louis Riel (4). The lessons of a history of change, those of Riel’s rebellion and death, of the renaming of Halfbreed Métis, have not thwarted attempts to hang the idea of the Métis in mid-air, as though it were tangible and consequently forgettable. Teillet poses a bold question, and he responds with an equally bold answer that illustrates this attempt:

Who are the Métis? There appear to be three answers to this question:

1. Métis are individuals with mixed European and Aboriginal blood; or
2. Métis are an Aboriginal people; or
3. Métis are those who describe themselves as such in order to claim the protection of s. 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982. (7)

Teillet’s use of the word “or” suggests that there is some fluctuation between identifications of Métisness, but more importantly the “or” in this case also suggests that there is one kind of Métis or the other. In Teillet’s words, Métis cannot have European and Aboriginal blood *and* be Aboriginal. In addition, if a Métis identifies as an Aboriginal person or part of “an Aboriginal people,” she or he cannot claim the protection of section thirty-five of the Constitution Act, 1982. Teillet’s definition cements the Métis into a single slot of identification. Why do Teillet and the legal system resist the notion that the Métis are liminal entities who can roam among these definitions? Are they trying to quell another rebellion, or are they merely responding to the public’s desire, including the desire of the Métis themselves, to identify the Métis as a cohesive group with similar goals, living standards, and geographic locations? One thing is certain: the Métis appear instantaneously in documents like these and subsequently disappear just as quickly.

Teillet’s essentialist definitions, which are largely adopted from government law and precedence-setting cases, contradict the notion of Métis’ ability to change their identity; and it is within this legal fog that we can catch a glimpse of the Métis’ passing image. Teillet cites “The Supreme Court of Canada in *Powley*.” “A Métis community can be defined as a group of Métis with a distinctive collective identity, living together in the same geographic area and sharing a common way of life” (2004: 8). This statement is indicative of how the Supreme Court and Teillet want to fix the Métis in space and forget that they are a changing people. In trying to situate the Métis, Teillet and the Supreme Court shoot them further out into space, where, as Redbird asserts, they become a *marginal, forgotten people* (52). In particular, the *Powley* statement shoots the Métis out into the nothingness of legal and financial discourse. It is not valid to envision the Métis as a cohesive group because they are shattered in legal terms, they live in every conceivable space across this country and continent, and they are not a wholly or partially traditional people. Rather, they are a group of people engaged in moving, I dare not say forward, but somewhere, along the ever-changing direction of governmental initiatives, road allowance lines, academic and literary vogue, and the path home. To embrace the identity of the Métis is to embrace its lack of identity and its tendency to travel.

Yet, even the Métis have difficulty imagining themselves outside of monistic colonial terms. Duke Redbird (1980) writes with a dangerous nationalism and a colonial tone in his book *We Are Métis*: “THE MÉTIS ARE THE ONLY ETHNIC GROUP INDIGENOUS TO THE CONTINENT,” his logic being that Europeans and Aboriginals came from somewhere else, whereas the Métis were created in Canada. Redbird attempts to

work within the discourse of community building through the garnering of place within a postcolonial discourse, specifically through the mapping-out of an exclusive place and identity with words and phrases like “ONLY,” “GROUP,” and “INDIGENOUS TO THE CONTINENT.” However, this type of discourse has no place in a de-essentialized Métisness because, firstly, his assertion is overborne as there have been many other racially hybrid communities conceived in Canada; and secondly his nationalistic tone, which could be taken as a patriotic gesture towards the Métis Nation or the nation of Canada, attempts to define the Métis in the very colonial practice it purports to resist. The Métis are not blessed for being the “ONLY ETHNIC GROUP INDIGENOUS TO THE CONTINENT.” The instigation of nationalistic fervor and the claiming of land (the “CONTINENT”) or ownership of a certain psychic or political place, whether it is in the name of the Queen or of “indigenoussness,” are problematic because, just as legal discourse attempts to do, they seriously disrupt the Métis’ ability to adapt and survive.

Redbird’s work is useful in pointing out the places where we might step away from trying to define the Métis: we can use his attempts to illuminate a sense of Métis consciousness as a way of considering a less essentialized Métis consciousness. Redbird speaks of the Métis as a people who, for many years, “remained a distinct ethnic group identified specifically with western Canada,” (1980: 2) until the hanging of Louis Riel by Orange Ontario. The Métis were “dispersed and submerged—both as a nation and a race” (27) due to the subsequent settling of the west, the re-surveying of Métis land, and their general assimilation into mainstream white culture (25). He suggests that the continued suppression of a Métis consciousness is the result of the Canadian government’s redirection of cultural and economic capital from social initiatives into the First and Second world wars, as well as into the energy crisis in the 1970s (we can also read the Native rights movement as a response to the government’s ignorance of the Aboriginal community in these cases). In his final chapter, entitled “Modern Métis Consciousness,” he suggests that there is a reemerging Métis identity whose leadership is “plagued by an artificial division between political activism and cultural or artistic expression” (47). Aside from the split leadership of the Métis, Redbird asserts that a Métis consciousness, once appropriately self-identified, will emerge:

As the Métis become more aware of themselves as a unique cultural entity, they will evolve broader social, artistic, and eventually political expressions that accurately reflect the role of Métis consciousness in Canadian life... Through an increased awareness of his heritage, an understanding of his [the Métis] role in modern Canada will emerge. (48)

It is important to take note of the phrase “will emerge” as it indicates that Redbird sees the Métis’ role in Canada as one that has not yet emerged and that despite the efforts of Riel, Dumont, and Redbird himself the Métis remain an invisible, “forgotten people” (52). To analyze this statement further, Redbird believes that there will be a moment, or set of moments, in the future which will act as catalysts to the assuming of a Métis consciousness. He believes that the Métis are not here yet, but that they will arrive someday, “fully aware of themselves” as expressive political agents, and able to “reflect the role of Métis consciousness in Canadian life.” One would think that Redbird’s notion that the Métis “will emerge” under these conditions is an overstatement because the Métis are always emerging and being suppressed, are both here and

not here, are ghosts who sometimes catch the eye. Indeed, the terms “role,” “Canadian life,” and “Métis consciousness” themselves are essentialisms that, like his claims to land and origin, disrupt the Métis’ ability to adapt because these terms attempt to capture Métisness. That the Métis are a changing people should be obvious to Redbird, because, in order to come to the conclusion that their consciousness will somehow emerge a fully formed entity ready to show itself to the world, he had first to trace the long history of the Métis and cite the places—like the building of nation and its disintegration, Riel’s rebellion and its execution, and the current divisions in our artistic and political imperatives—which clearly illustrate a Métis identity in constant negotiation with itself and its national and political environment. The Métis will not emerge: rather, they will be emerging. They follow the path home, maybe never to find it, but searching all the while nonetheless.

Passing is a site through which one can trace an emerging Métis identity as it walks the path, flanked on either side with the restraints of colonialism, and allows us to trace the situational and cultural reasons why the colonial subject passes. To adopt the definition from studies of African-American criticism, passing is “the dissembling of one race (usually black) as another (usually white),” and these “narratives of passing” are “frequently rich with epistemological questions about race” (Bennet, 1998: 1). In the case of the Métis, the dissembling of redness as whiteness opens up a place for questions about the racial identity of Métis. Let us consider Beatrice Culleton Mosionier’s light-skinned Métis character April, in her text *April Raintree* (1999): as Michael Creal explains, once April is in her second foster home, and she has begun to accept her parents’ alcoholism and to realize the mistreatment that her and other Métis endure from whites, “she gradually came to a decision. Because she was light skinned and could pass as white, she decided that she was going to be white and reject everything that had to do with being Métis” (Creal, 1999: 252–53). This decision is also influenced by her aversion to associate with the political and racial figuring of Louis Riel; she says,

I knew all about Riel. He was a Rebel who had been hanged for treason. Worse, he had been a crazy half-breed ... so anything to do with Indians, I despised. And here, I was supposed to be part Indian. (42)

In summary, her rejection of Indianness and her decision to pass as white is influenced by personal factors such as her parents alcoholism, historical factors such as her disassociation from Riel, local factors such as her bullying at school, and legal factors such as her removal from her home and her (dis)placement in a number of foster homes. It seems as though she takes a step back from identifying with her Métis heritage through her decision to pass as white. Or, as Brant would agree, she takes a step away from home.

Yet, April’s rejection of her Indianness is the essence of Métisness, that is, the drive and necessity to reinvent identity. For April, to reject her redness is to embrace her ability to do so. She must cross borders and embrace contradictions to survive; her step away from home might find her on the path towards home. April’s ability to pass (which is a function of her rejection of her redness) and her sister’s inability to pass are means through which she comes to accept a Métis identity. Racial constructs that embrace Métisness are, as Gale Wald (2000) asserts, “important sites of negotiation and struggle in a society that vests enormous power in the fictions of race and in the notion of stable, embroidered racial difference” (viii). The identity negotiation that passing insists

upon challenges the boundaries that colonial history and practice have firmly erected. April does not remain alienated from her Métisness: in fact, by the end of the story she embraces it. However, this acceptance does not come without her first passing as white and her subsequent understanding of her dark-skinned sister's inability to pass as white. She writes: "if you inherit brown skin like my sister Cheryl did, you identify with the Indian people more" (143).

Passing and the inability to pass open up spaces in which one can trace the oppressive and liberating factors which, in April's situation, allow her to embrace her Métis identity, and in Cheryl's, end in tragedy: April's passing as white and her sister's denial from white privilege and consequent suicide are stepping stones upon which she approaches an acceptance of a Métis identity. On the last page of the novel, April remembers that in her dream she "had used the words 'MY PEOPLE, OUR PEOPLE' and meant them." She continues: "the denial had been lifted from my spirit. It was tragic that it had taken Cheryl's death to bring me to accept my identity" (207). For April, the possibility of surviving the oppressive factors that brought her sister to commit suicide is greater because of her skin colour. Is Mosionier privileging whiteness or, more probably, is she citing the reality of white privilege and the necessity to do what one must in order to overcome oppression? The liminal identity that Métisness enforces and that passing carries is the result of situational factors such as skin colour. In this sense, April's and Cheryl's identity are dependent on the organization of racial difference not only through the mode of skin colour, but through the reorganization of racial positioning involved in being Métis.

Passing can illuminate the racial imperatives that influence April's and Cheryl's identities, and as I will now demonstrate it can also speak as the voice of desire for those who pass. An argument between April, who lives a "white" life with the rich Radcliffe family, and Cheryl, who lives a more Aboriginal lifestyle and is devoted to Native people, can tell us more about the complexities of passing:

Cheryl, get off my case, will you? I don't ask you to live my kind of life. I know why you're doing this. You want me to take up your glorious cause. Well, I'm happy here. I love the parties, and I love the kind of people I meet. I love this kind of life, and I have no intention of changing it. So go home, and live by what you believe in. (109)

Both Cheryl and April are in their respective homes, both living by what they believe in. It is here that we can trace the desire of the passing subject; most interesting though is the fact that these lifestyles are at odds. The whiteness of April's lifestyle is in conflict with the redness of Cheryl's, and in this conflict these women map out their desire. April likes the "white" lifestyle she lives, whereas for Cheryl, the Aboriginal "cause" is of more importance. These women are embracing their Métisness by passing, and ultimately by being what they want to be: "So go home, and live by what you believe in."

Passing is also useful as a way of opening up discussion about transgressing essentialist arguments for identity. Pandora L. Leong (2002) asserts that "passing is dangerous because inherent in denying our identities, we allow presumptions to stand uncontested" (334). Leong's construction of danger defends essentialist notions of identity because it discourages the denial of exclusive identifications, as is evident in her use of the term "our." She assumes that the figure that passes already has an identity and a community

which he or she can deny: Does the Métis have such a community? The *danger* for Leong is *change*. In April's case, it would have been more dangerous for her if she had not let "presumptions to stand uncontested" because, if she had rejected her ability to pass as white, then she may have faced the same kinds of oppression that eventually destroyed Cheryl. The danger that leads to Cheryl's death, one that Leong would fail to see, is how she holds on to the "'truth' about her people" and the "picture of her parents she created," which "contained nothing that could sustain a positive sense of her Métis identity" (Creal, 1999: 256). The real danger then is to ignore passing's usefulness as a means of fulfilling the wants and needs of those who pass.

Conclusion

If passing is useful, and so integral to a sense of Métisness, then how useful is the name "Métis?" Is it an appropriate name for a people who defy what it is to be named? Questions like these are at the very indefinable essence of Métisness. The Métis' home then, is the path upon which they walk as they search for home. Liminality fuels this search: the Métis are not only "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial," but roam from place to place, red to white, white to red, visibility to invisibility. Particularly, Cogewea's liminality calls into question the relationship between agency and identity and asks *where* Métis identity is, only to find itself confronted with more questions. Campbell, the "Halfbreed," finds herself in a similar identity conundrum between the history of land ownership and her people's displacement. In her position as a government worker, she figuratively menaces authority through mimicry, but also mimics because she feels she must, and consequently develops a sense of self on this journey home.

For all Métis, the path has many obstructions, including essentialist definitions like the ones that Teillet, the Supreme Court, and Redbird validate. However, from their attempts to solidify a notion of Métisness, we can see the historical influence of the Native rights movement, the political imperatives of the government, the cultural desires of the Métis, and the relics of colonial discourse as factors that attempt to knock the Métis off of the path home. Similarly, an examination of passing opens up discussion about the factors that affect April and Cheryl Raintree: it illuminates the personal histories of oppression, the realities of skin colour, and the needs and desires of the passing subject. In addition, it poses a challenge, as Métisness does, to essentialist notions of identity. Métisness cannot be defined; but it can be characterized by its desire to travel from one essentialism to the next, and its ability to illuminate the process of identity formation that occurs along this journey. Métis identity is a ghostly figure that presents itself for a moment, then is gone. But in its wake it leaves us with lessons about how we identify, or do not identify, with our surroundings, our relations, and ourselves.

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