

Understanding our past, reclaiming our culture: Métis resistance, resilience, and connection to land in the face of colonialism

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Abstract

The colonial legacy for Métis people has included the far-reaching impacts of residential and day schools, forced adoption, dislocation from the land, cultural oppression, and denial of existence. This qualitative study explores the complexity relationships with land, identity, and resilience for Métis people, within the context of colonialism. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 33 Métis community members living in British Columbia, Canada. This research highlights the impacts of assimilation on Métis identity and knowledge with stories that speak to shame, hidden identity, and loss of culture. Participants also clearly articulated the ways in which Métis people have been impacted from intergenerational trauma. Findings from this research also include Métis relationships with, and responsibilities to, the land. Despite the challenges that many Métis individuals, families, and communities have faced as a result of colonialism, resistance and resilience were thoroughly demonstrated, with stories of bravery, resistance, and gratitude. As a whole, experiences of oppression, survival and resilience have powerfully shaped who we are as Métis people.

Introduction

Colonialism has had profound effects on Métis people across Canada, through social and political means of marginalization, isolation, assimilation, and dislocation. This includes the removal of Métis children, re-location and disconnection from the land, and cultural oppression. These forces have had significant effects on Métis health, which continue through multi-generational loss and trauma, including challenges to Métis identity, loss of language, and interference with traditional hunting and harvesting practices. The loss of cultural identity has also been cited as a challenge across Métis communities in Canada (Loppie Reading & Wien, 2009; Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2013). However, through cultural resurgence in addition to unwavering resiliency, Métis people are asserting their individual and collective identity—which the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples (2013) has associated with decreased “stigma associated with being Métis” (p. 15). This research is part of a larger study

around Métis wellness and cultural continuity (Auger, 2017; Auger, 2019). Understanding that colonialism has acted as a persistent, yet insidious force in the lives of Métis people, this article aims to explore the complex relationships with land, identity, and resilience for Métis people living in British Columbia (BC), Canada.

The Discourse Surrounding Métis Identity

Métis people are one of three constitutionally recognized, distinct groups of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Métis people are descendants of early unions between First Nations women and European fur traders from the late 17th century to the mid-19th century (Bourassa, 2011; Chartrand, 2007). As noted in the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1996), the Métis involved with the fur trade possessed a unique set of skills and characteristics, rendering them “indispensable members of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal economic partnerships” (p. 186), a role that profoundly shaped Métis culture. With economic, political, and social motivations primarily fueling the initial intermarriages during the fur trade, Métis people developed a shared way of life (Chartrand, 2007; Richardson, 2006). Culture and kinship ties have been cited as core components of Métis identity, where “the determination of Métis identity... is not merely a question of genetics... family links are as deeply cherished as blood connections... ancestry is only one component of Métis identity. Cultural factors are significant, a people exist because of a common culture” (RCAP, 1996, p. 187). Similarly, Macdougall (2017) speaks about the importance of culture, stories, and kinship, as “Métis identities are nurtured and sustained by the stories, traditions and cultural practices taught by our grandmothers, grandfathers, and ancestors” (p. 5).

Despite a collective culture, Métis populations are also a heterogeneous group, to an extent that is comparable to the diversity across First Nations communities with different family histories, kinship affiliations, and concepts of identity (Hodgson-Smith & Kermoal, 2016; Peters, 2011). In speaking to this diversity, Leclair (2002) notes, “our cultural and linguistic differences divide us as surely as geographic distance” (p. 163). Similarly, while the term *Métis* has gathered wide usage and acceptability, cemented in the *Constitution Act* of 1982, terms used to refer to Métis people have largely varied over time and by place. Indeed, there are competing definitions in existence today, rooted in the complex concept of Métis identity (Bourassa, 2011). Definitions have also changed over time, as Logan (2015) notes, “Métis history is laden with attempts to create, redefine

and impose nominal definitions on Métis identity. Métis people at times adhere to or resist such definitions as well as efforts to specify their homes and historic ‘homelands’” (p. 433).

One of the most common misunderstandings of Métis identity by non-Métis people is that all people of mixed Indigenous ancestry—that is, some degree of First Nations and European blood—are inherently Métis. As Andersen (2014) argues, being Métis is not about being of mixed blood. Andersen (2014) also asserts that Métis people must be ancestrally rooted in the Red River, given its historical significance in shaping Métis nationhood and collective identity. Gaudry (2018) also critiques the increasing number of “newly self-identifying Métis” with a focus on communities in Eastern Canada (p. 164). There are concerns that the number of self-identifying Métis people in Eastern Canada, and elsewhere, are rapidly increasing as a result, in part, to DNA ancestry testing (Kolopenuk, 2018; Leroux, 2018).

Following the *Powley* decision¹ (2003), Métis people are nationally recognized as those who self-identify as Métis, are distinct from other Indigenous peoples, come from historic Métis Nation ancestry, and are accepted by a modern Métis community (Métis National Council, 2011). These criteria have been adopted by a number of provincial Métis Nations, including the Métis Nation of BC (MNBC; Barman & Evans, 2009; Bourassa, 2011), under Métis National Council’s (MNC) leadership. The *Powley Test* is also used as an ‘objectively’ verifiable way to establish Métis citizenship, with centralized registry processes housed within each of the provincial Métis Nations. Within this legal rhetoric, Tom Isaac (2016) stated:

Not every person of mixed European-Aboriginal ancestry is Métis for the purposes of Section 35. Rather it is the combination of self-identification as Métis, along with membership in larger distinct and historical Métis communities with their own unique culture, practices, traditions and languages that makes Métis distinct Aboriginal peoples and distinct from their European and other Aboriginal ancestors. (p. 6)

However, MNC’s definition of Métis people is often challenged—criticized for its narrow criteria. In particular, the MNC definition has been contested for its limited geographic boundaries (Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2013), with some disagreement between MNBC and MNC regarding the boundaries of the Métis Nation Homeland (Barman & Evans, 2009). As well, several writers have critiqued MNC for their specific focus on the Red River Métis

¹ The *Powley* decision was delivered on September 19, 2003 by the Supreme Court of Canada, following charges placed on a Métis father and son who were hunting for food in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. This ruling has served as a foundation for asserting Métis rights for individuals and communities (*R v. Powley*, 2003).

(Green, 2011; Richardson, 2016). As Barman and Evans (2009) note, “Red River remains a significant anchor point for the conceptualization of the Historic Métis Nation, a central feature of the MNC definition of a Métis person” (p. 65). This strong focus on Métis with Red River ancestry has contributed to the exclusion of ‘other’ Métis through manifestations of lateral violence², as “Métis originating from regions outside of Red River are concerned that their continued feelings of exclusion are now intensified by their own people” (Richardson, 2016, p. 13).

The focus on the Métis from Red River has impacted both Métis politics and research, as much of written Métis history has focused on the Red River Settlement and its people (Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2013). Macdougall has stated:

There has been a fixation on Red River as the source and centre of all things Métis and that does not necessarily reflect a true historical interpretation of who the Métis people were and who other 19th century and 18th century people understood them to be. I think we have only just begun scratching the surface of Métis research in Canada. (as cited in Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2013, p. 44)

Other definitions of Métis, such as that applied by the Métis settlements in Alberta, focus more heavily on self-identification, wherein a Métis person is someone with Aboriginal ancestry, who identifies with Métis culture and history (Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2013). Similarly, it is also important to note that health data for Métis populations are generally rooted in census statistics, which rely on self-identification processes rather than citizenship requirements. In this way, competing definitions of Métis ancestry and nationhood contribute barriers in obtaining Métis health data (Allard, 2007; Bourassa, 2011). Harry Daniels also shared and advocated for an inclusive notion of Métis nationhood that embraces people from across Canada who self-identify as Métis (Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2013). His son, Gabriel Daniels, continues his father’s work, publicly arguing for increased unity among the Métis during the 2017 *Daniels Conference: In and Beyond the Law* at the Rupertsland Centre for Métis Research, University of Alberta:

If we’re not focusing on uniting... the government does a good enough job of keeping us apart; we don’t need to do the work for them... if you’re not in it for all of us, if you’re not in it for the betterment of all of our people, then I don’t even want to know you. I don’t want to talk to you, I don’t want you to represent us.... To the critics and the politicians who don’t agree with my father’s vision... what I do want for my father is his rightful place

² Within Indigenous communities, lateral violence involves attacking one’s own people. It is a common manifestation of internalized colonialism, often combined with experiences of oppression, intergenerational trauma, and racism (Absolon, 2010).

to be up there alongside Louis [Riel]. And I guarantee you, if Harry and Louis were here with me they would agree, we are more than the Red River.

The historic *Daniels Decision* in 2016, which ruled that Métis and non-status Indians are Indians under the *Constitution Act, 1867*, found that there is no need to place a legal definition for the word Métis, given that “it is an ethnic and cultural label with no neat boundaries and can refer to Red River Métis or be used as ‘a general term for anyone with mixed European and Aboriginal heritage’” (Gagnon, 2016). Despite this, however, Métis leaders and scholars alike continue to argue for continual use of restrictive boundaries, contributing to ongoing issues with Métis identity politics. As Legault (2016) argues, Métis identity can be understood as a construct that is fluid and continually evolving.

Métis People in British Columbia

While Métis historians and legal scholars are further exploring the stories, records, and mobility patterns of Métis families in BC (Legault, 2015; Sloan, 2017), there remains relatively little written about Métis history in BC (Barman & Evans, 2009). The exception here is the Peace River Region (Treaty 8 Territory), as Barman and Evans (2009) note. This area is also home to the Kelly Lake Métis Settlement Society, located south of Dawson Creek, BC—the only Métis Settlement in BC. However, despite BC being home to some 90,000 self-identified Métis people (Statistics Canada, 2017)—including those with local roots and many others with kinship networks extending into the prairie provinces—BC has largely been constructed as a “place where no Métis have lived (or continue to live) (Legault, 2016, p. 229). Legault (2016) explains that this notion has resulted from “political, legal, and scholarly discourses centered on the expansion of colonialism through the fur trade, notions of cultural essentialism, and legal forms of recognition” (p. 229).

Métis Children in Residential and Church-run Schools

Métis children were forcibly removed from their families and communities to attend residential and church-run schools. Motivations for removing children were race-based, as Logan (2015) notes, “the problem they felt they were responding to was to attend to the ‘destitute Half-breeds’, often considered ‘worse off than Indians’, living in squatter homes and too ‘lazy and slow’ to be educated by the typical provincial schools” (p. 444). At the same time, Métis children who

phenotypically appeared to look more like their European ancestors, were not considered to be a priority for seats in residential schools, as Chartrand and colleagues (2006) note:

Métis with similar backgrounds and appearance to status Indians were also more likely to be ‘drafted’ by school authorities when room was available to continue receiving funding from Indian Affairs by fulfilling the school quota. Métis that identified more with their European relatives (French/Scottish) or did not appear ‘Indian’ enough were not as readily targeted by school authorities for admission. (p. 19)

Métis children who attended residential or church-run schools shared similar experiences with First Nations and Inuit children, including emotional, spiritual, physical, and sexual abuse (Richardson, 2016; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). Intergenerational trauma resulting from these horrific experiences has impacted the health and wellbeing of survivors and their descendants in far-reaching ways. For example, studies have shown that the impacts of residential schools on the health of Indigenous people are similar, whether they attended the schools themselves or are descended from someone who did (Bombay et al., 2014).

Métis children were prohibited from practicing their culture and speaking their language within residential and church-run schools; these strategies have had ongoing effects for survivors and their families. Elder Sophia Suvee, from Prince George, BC, spoke about the impact of residential schools for her grandmother; though her grandmother noted that she enjoyed her time at the schools, she carried much shame regarding her Métis spirituality and culture, following her time there (Evans et al., 1999).

While the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Report has garnered national attention, the Métis leaders have stated that the underrepresentation of Métis survivors’ experiences within the report has contributed to further marginalizing Métis people within Canada (Métis National Council, 2015). Despite the title of Volume 3 of *The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada being Canada’s Residential Schools: The Métis Experience* (2015), this 81-page chapter includes testimony from both Métis and non-Status Indians.

Colonial Impacts on Métis Identity

Colonial impacts on cultural identity have impacted Métis people at both an individual and collective level. In her research with Métis women in Manitoba, Bartlett (2003), found that “some women described a period of alienation from spirituality due to early life religious experience,

followed for some by confusion as to whether, as Métis, they could utilize indigenous historical ceremonial activities” (p. 110). This illustrates issues in sustaining Métis spirituality and traditional knowledge amidst hegemonic colonial forces (Bartlett 2003; Iseke 2010). Similarly, in the collection of stories of Métis Elders from Northern British Columbia, compiled by Evans and colleagues (1999), Elder Rose Bortolon speaks about carrying shame related to her Métis identity:

I knew I was a half-breed, but I never admitted it to anybody. I never spoke of my race at all. I just sort of stayed away from the subject. I said I was French until I got about eighteen or nineteen, and then I started saying I was a half-breed. But I really didn’t like to say that I was. I was ashamed of my race. I think probably the Indian part. I didn’t like to be Indian because there was so much prejudice against them. So I always said I was French. (p. 209).

Colonial violence against the Métis also includes a history of social control over interbreeding (Logan, 2015). Eugenic paradigms—rooted in the notion that Métis people were inauthentic forms of Indigenous people with diluted Indigenous blood—fueled the denial of existence of Métis people (Green, 2011). This rhetoric continued through to the “official” constitutional recognition in 1982 (Green, 2011). Euro-centric notions of blood quantum³ can also cloud personal and collective understandings of Métis identity, as Nelson (2011) reflects on her own process of strengthening her identity: “In exploring what a multicultural self is, I found myself swimming through a sea of racial beliefs – pure, full-blood Indian, pure, full-blood European; tainted mixed-blood diluted soul” (p. 272). Related to this othering of the Métis has also presented ongoing challenges for individuals and families, who are continually marginalized within the dominant Western culture (Richardson, 2016).⁴ These experiences of discrimination have resulted in common Métis perspectives of living between worlds, with a culture and worldview that is often felt to be incongruent within Western society (Richardson, 2006).

In recognition of the impact of isolation on Métis identity and wellness, Richardson (2016) identifies the need for Métis specific spaces: what she refers to as a ‘third space,’ within the context of challenges within Euro-Canadian worldviews and spaces specifically held by First Nations

³ Blood quantum refers to the percentage of “Indian blood” an individual holds, as a way of determining their authenticity as an Indigenous person. While blood quantum laws are used more obviously within state-based registries and policies in the United States, which in turn have been imposed on Native American communities (Tuck & Yang, 2012), the Indian Act has utilized similar, yet less obvious, framework for determining “Status.” While the Métis do not fall under the Indian Act, the notion of blood quantum has nevertheless shaped perspectives of Indigenous authenticity.

⁴ Browne, Smye and Varcoe (2005) define ‘othering’ as “the projection of assumed cultural characteristics, ‘differences,’ or identities onto members of particular groups” where these projects are rooted in “stereotyped identities” (p. 21).

people, both of which render Métis people as invisible. Richardson sees this Métis specific space as a “Métis psychological homeland and cultural space in a country where the geographical homeland has been usurped by the colonizer” (Richardson, 2016, p. 56). This notion of a third space connects to the importance of Métis community. Related to this, the importance of connection and relationships through community has been described as a core component of Métis wellness. Similarly, Métis culture was described as a means for bringing people together, for promoting belonging where Métis people may otherwise experience a sense of isolation. Chartrand (2007) speaks to the importance of belonging through establishing relationships with Métis community as a critical aspect of Métis identity:

Being Metis is not so much about who you are as an individual as it is about having kin or family relationships within a Metis community. It is not so much about your individual ancestry as it is about sharing in the common heritage of the people to which you belong. (p. 8).

Through these relationships Métis people can garner support in contextualizing their personal experiences (Richardson, 2016) while also gaining new opportunities for continued learning and strengthening connections to culture.

The Issue of Land

Past and ongoing assimilative strategies have served to disconnect, relocate, and displace Métis people from the land. Within a historical context, Métis people were moved to create space for European settlers with the vision of reaching Canada’s manifest destiny, as noted in a letter from Sir John A. MacDonald, where he noted, ““these impulsive half breeds have got spoilt by their émulate [riot] and must be kept down by a strong hand until they are swamped by the influx of settlers”” (as cited in Logan, 2015, p. 441). The Métis were also excommunicated from reserves (Barman & Evans, 2009); reflecting on his lived experience in his community, Dion (1979) writes:

At the Indian Agent’s first visit to our little schoolhouse he noted that it was bursting at the seams and I had to confess that a number of children came from Metis parents who were staying in the vicinity. The agent immediately ordered the removal of all half-breeds from the Indian reservation. (p. 159)

Métis identity has been challenged through the creation of provincial and territorial boundaries, with the deletion of pre-existing Indigenous geographies. The Métis have also been excluded from treaty processes, whereby “treaty commissioners repeatedly informed the Métis that they were not

empowered to deal with the collective rights of the Métis” (Teillet, 2009, p. 4). The Scrip system, which was used to parcel off small sections of agriculturally undesirable land in Manitoba to the Métis, further served to disconnect and displace Métis families and communities (Macdougall, 2017). The issue of land remains a complex issue for Métis people in BC, as the vast majority do not have a legal land base (Dyck, 2009). Métis people have also faced government-led challenges to their cultural identity and ways of being, including hunting and harvesting rights (*R. v. Powley*, 2003).

Access to land has been described as a key determinant of Métis health (Dyck, 2009), and land-based practices have contributed to the development and maintenance of intimate relationships between communities and their environments, through traditional harvesting practices and environmental stewardship (Kermoal, 2016; Loppie Reading & Wien, 2009). Relationships with the land are an integral component of identity and wellness for Métis people—interconnected with a sense of community and resilience. For many Métis women, as Monchalin, Smylie, and Bourgeois (2020) report, relationships to land remain strong despite challenges that arise when living in urban cities. Métis women have continually maintained their kinship networks across geographic places and spaces (Monchalin et al., 2020). Relationships with land are important, though the preservation of these relationships often comes with systemic challenges rooted in colonialism.

Research Approach

This research utilized an Indigenous research paradigm (Absolon, 2011; Hart, 2010) in order to privilege Métis voices, worldviews, and knowledge, as well as structural contexts that shape Métis people’s lives and experiences. This research primarily utilized western, qualitative methods within an Indigenous research paradigm, and the limitations of this approach are discussed below.

Indigenous research involves Indigenous people as investigators and/or partners in research, and it aims to “extend knowledge that is significant for Indigenous peoples and communities” (Castellano, 2008, p. 2). It challenges the notion that research must be objective or positivistic (where the researcher is cast as an expert, who is distant and unbiased) and that there is a single truth to be discovered (Absolon, 2011; Castellano, 2008). Instead, Indigenous research

values subjectivity. The foundation for this approach is self-location, so I begin by introducing myself as a Métis community member and researcher.

Self-location

Indigenous approaches to research often emphasize the importance of self-positioning (Absolon & Willett, 2005). Our positions, or locations, involve our lived experiences, identities, and perceptions—they frame how we see the world and inherently influence our approach to doing research. Social location has been described as one of the most fundamental principles of Indigenous research (Absolon & Willett, 2005), as it describes the lens in which we interpret and write about the stories that we hear in our work and the ways in which we should move forward.

Tansi, Monique dishinikhkaashoon. Niiyaanaan Michif. My name is Monique Auger, and I am Métis, with Haudenosaunee and Nisga'a ancestry. My family has lived on Vancouver Island for six generations as grateful, uninvited visitors on unceded Lək'ʷəŋən Territory and citizens of Métis Nation British Columbia (MNBC). While I do not believe that citizenship defines us as Métis, my connection to community at a grassroots level is through the Métis Nation Greater Victoria, our local chartered community. My relational accountability extends throughout my Métis community as well as to the Lək'ʷəŋən peoples whose territory I live and work on. Our roots, as uninvited guests on Lək'ʷəŋən Territory are complex, nuanced, and violent.

My ancestors were involved in the Fur Trade, as were many Métis, but rather than relocating to the Red River Valley my ancestor, Jean Baptiste Jollibois (Métis of Haudenosaunee and French ancestry), maintained his involvement in the industry working in forts across Western Canada. He married into the Nisga'a Nation in the early 1800s and started a family.⁵ Jean Baptiste was recruited to Fort Victoria to be part of the Victoria Voltigeurs—the first police force in what is now called British Columbia (Goulet & Goulet, 2009), and so he and his family relocated to Lək'ʷəŋən territory. James Douglas, who had also married a Métis woman, strategically recruited Métis men for this armed force (whom he referred to as “Half Whites”). Douglas believed that Métis men were best positioned for forcefully controlling Lək'ʷəŋən peoples and their neighbouring nations (Goulet & Goulet, 2009). My great-great-great-great grandfather has his name

⁵ It is with deep sadness that I note that I am not able to name my great-great-great grandmother. Colonialily, she was referred to as “Josephine Unknown” or “Josette,” but as the sister of Nis’akx (or “Martha McNeill”), a strong Nisga'a matriarch of the Laxgibuu Clan. Nis’akx also married a Métis man and moved to Victoria (Neylan, 2003).

commemorated in the bricks in Bastion Square in Downtown Victoria; it was that same square that he was very likely involved in carrying out horrible acts of colonial law against the Lək'ʷəŋən peoples. I have a great deal of work to do in terms of understanding this history and learning how to be a respectful guest on lands that are not mine.

I have been on a journey in coming to understand what being Métis means, as due to processes of colonization and their impacts on Métis and other Indigenous peoples, we did not have a strong foundation to stand on. It often feels that, as a result of assimilation, my family has suffered from their “poverty of stories” (Dion Stout, 2012). I have had ongoing struggles around imposter syndrome related to identity—not feeling “Indigenous enough” or “fully Métis.” This notion of not being enough has deep roots in colonialism, as colonial forces have effectively divided our nations through identity politics, the Indian Act and other “divide and conquer” policies. As I work to undo this damage and decolonize my own ways of thinking about my identity, I express my gratitude to Métis Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and community members who have graciously shared their knowledge with me.

As I learn about who I am and where I come from, I have the privilege of engaging in conversations with my family; through these conversations I have learned more about our family’s “secrets,” rooted in shame and protection from the destructive forces of colonization. Every person has a valued role in our communities; we are on an ongoing journey of (re)learning what our roles are. Part of my role in my family is to do intentional work of recovering and remembering our stories.

As a proud Métis woman, I am privileged to be conducting Métis research; to witness, understand, and transfer stories shared with me. I am honoured to have heard deeply personal stories that were shared with me from people in my community and I admire their openness in sharing. I am becoming increasingly aware of the ways that stories, which are in many ways similar to my own experiences, impact me in different ways. This process has also been incredibly valuable to re-affirming my identity and sharing my own experiences with community members.

This work is personal. I have been on a continual journey of strengthening my identity as a Métis woman: of owning my ancestry, learning where I come from, and shedding intergenerational layers of shame. This inherent shame that we have carried in my family is not unique, but is shared among many Métis people across this country as a direct result of assimilation against our people. When I learned of my ancestry in my adolescent years, it felt as though a

missing piece of my life had been retrieved and I have maintained a feeling that there is more to discover, understand, and share. I am so grateful that this process of research and the people that I have spoken to, both participants and supporters, have lifted me up and affirmed my identity, while also sharing their own struggles within this context. We have shared lived experiences in wellness and growth, as well as struggles with cultural disconnection. This experience has been empowering and enhanced my own sense of belonging as a Métis woman, and has gifted me with the strength to talk more openly about my own experiences.

Research is often centred on the “creation of new knowledge”—but what Indigenous research often involves is remembering what we have always known and sharing knowledge that has existed in our communities for many generations. In this research, I was, and still am, engaged in a process of searching for Métis knowledges; in a similar way, Kovach and colleagues (2013) speak about Indigenous research as “going home.”

Participants

Métis participants were reached through recruitment with help from Métis communities and organizations via social media, email listservs, hard copy poster distribution, and word of mouth. A diverse group of Métis youth, adults, and Elders from across British Columbia (BC) shared their stories in this research, with a total of 33 people participating (Table 1). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 84 years old (average: 46 years old).

Table 1

Number of participants by age group and gender

Age	Gender		Total
	Female	Male	
Youth (19-29)	8	3	11
Adults (30-59)	11	4	15
Seniors and Elders (60 and older)	4	3	7
Total	23	10	33

Relationship Building, Story Sharing, and Analysis

This research involved Métis community members across BC, including people that I had long-standing relationships with and those whom I met through the process of conducting this research. It was very important for me to build and strengthen relationships over the process of

this research, and beyond. I had multiple conversations with each participant over the course of several months. Often, the research relationship involved an introductory phone call or in-person visit, with introductions and self-location, explanations around the journey and roots of the research, and ethical considerations. When there was opportunity and interest to meet in person, I happily met in a location that was suitable for the participant; this included a series of several visits with each of four of my Elders; I met with them either in their homes or at a restaurant so that I could offer them a meal. I gifted them with tobacco and a small offering, as I was guided through this protocol after consulting Knowledge Keepers in my community.

Where there was interest in participating in a follow-up conversation (or “interview”), I sent the formal consent form, resources for support (including free and low-cost counselling specific to the participant’s local area), and the questions that were intended to guide our conversations.

The conversations were predominantly conducted over the phone (due to location) and lasted on average for an hour (ranging from 20 to 130 minutes). Conversation-style questions were posed to each participant, including: (1) “In your opinion, what does it mean to be Métis?” (2) “What role, if any, do you think that colonization has played in your mental health and wellness?” and (3) “How would you describe your relationship with the land?”

Each interview was recorded and transcribed by a hired Métis transcriptionist. To ensure that participants were comfortable with their contributions to the research project, each participant’s transcript was shared back with them. Any changes requested were made to the transcripts without question. This practice aligns both with Western processes of member checking for enhanced validation of qualitative data (Creswell, 2009), and with individual operationalizations of the Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP) Principles (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014) by way of respecting each participant’s ownership over their personal stories and experiences. After an initial process of thematic analysis, using a constant comparison analysis method, a draft Métis community report, which was shared in confidential draft form with each of the participants. Following a period of feedback from participants, the community report was revised, finalized and shared more broadly. The research findings were also shared with Métis youth in BC at a provincial youth event, which invited further informal conversation and networking.

Ethics

This research was approved by the Research Ethics Board at Simon Fraser University. Aligning with the Chapter 9 of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Research Involving First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples of Canada, this work was ethically guided by the importance of community engagement, the protection of Métis Knowledge, and the role of open and transparent communication throughout the entire process.

This research was also guided by an Indigenous Working Group, made up of First Nations and Métis research consultants whom I worked with at the time of this research. My colleagues volunteered several hours of their time to ensure that the research is ethically and culturally grounded.

Learnings and Critique

Through a process of (re)learning research methods and aiming to do this work in a good way with my community, I have come through this research with several lessons learned and self-reflexive critiques. I aimed to utilize methods that I had learned in my graduate studies—which were dominated by Western theories, methods, and frameworks—within the context of Métis research. I leaned on frameworks that I had learned about in my personal research, but also hoped to blend methodologies and worldviews. In retrospect, there were several limitations in this approach; given that Western framework are so inherently dominant in society, they can take over the entire research process.

Indigenous research scholars Castellano (2008) and Kovach (2009) teach us that we can conduct Indigenous research without using Indigenous Methodologies—this was the path that I took in graduate school, due to concerns about time, scope and (lack of) funding for research costs. While this approach did not shift the way that I approached the research—with authenticity and transparency in terms of who I am and where I come from—it did result in what I would consider to be methodological limitations. Given Western dominated discourses around mental health, I did not offer to assign ownership to participants' over their stories, leaning on the importance of confidentiality due to issues like stigma around mental health. Ownership over stories and knowledge, while nuanced, is very important within Indigenous research (Wilson, 2008) and this oversight is significant. Further, the language that I use is undoubtedly colonial and I am constantly

engaged in a mindful process of (re)learning how I think about Indigenous research and how I communicate these thoughts with others.

Results

In conversations with Métis community members in BC, the importance of (re)connecting, strengthening, and sharing Métis culture was often discussed within the context of colonialism in Canada. In addition to discussing the detrimental, systemic impacts that colonialism has had on Métis people, these conversations also highlight Métis resistance and resilience, and the resurgence of cultural identity and relationships with the land.

Colonialism and its Impacts on Métis Identity

Through dismantling our governance structures, outlawing our cultural practices and language, and denying our existence as a people, colonialism has had profound impacts for Métis people. Participants spoke about the impacts of colonialism on identity and traditional knowledge:

I think in those days, people did not tend to publicly identify as Métis and celebrate Métis culture if they could, kind of, pass for white. And I think that's a horrible racist concept, but you have to understand in the context, people were just trying to survive. (Female Youth)

On the spectrum of Métis families who were relatively assimilated, and to those who suffered the most because they weren't assimilated and then went to residential school and the foster care system, and all that, ours was one of the best off. But despite that, I still feel that the oppression of our identity has really had an impact. (Female Adult)

Many participants also spoke about a ‘dark period’ related to Métis identity within their families. While not defined by a specific time frame, the ‘dark period’ was described as a past time that was characterized by significant challenges to Métis peoples’ identities. They spoke about family histories when Métis identity was hidden for protection; this was often connected to experiences with racism and colonization: “*We're almost ashamed of who we are or what our potential is. And I know my grandmother must have felt like this too because she really didn't give me much information and that's where you get shaming from*” (Female Adult). Similarly, others spoke about a sense of shame associated with Métis identity as a direct result of colonization:

When I was growing up, there was lots of shame and association of Métis identity with experiences of trauma because of racism and poverty. The experiences of racism that my father experienced and witnessing those experiences together, there was an attachment of

shame around Métis identity, so those experiences of oppression definitely influenced the shaping of self-concept about myself. (Female Adult)

I can't believe how many people I've known who are Métis who walk with their head down, myself included. I don't so much anymore but I used to, and to me I think that colonization told us that we were not good enough. (Female Senior/Elder)

Participants spoke about specific memories that they have of family members trying to protect them; their actions were often rooted for fear of the negative impacts associated with identifying as Métis people:

It's a sensitive thing. It's only like maybe 20 years ago that we got our great uncle to admit that there was any Native in the family, and he said, 'You know, that you have to understand I come from a time and a place where it was to your benefit for no one to know that.' (Male Adult)

[My grandfather] never admitted that he was Métis: 'He was French'. He always was French. But it didn't occur to me until later in life when I became educated in it that I realized how come that was. It was for protection. It was what they had to do to survive. And they also had scrips so there was that whole sense of racism going on and colonization going on at that time. They did what they had to do to survive. (Male Senior/Elder)

In addition to sharing their experiences of denial, shame, and protection associated with being Métis, participants also spoke specifically about the loss of language as a result of colonization. Despite these experiences, participants also shared that they are reclaiming and strengthening their identity as Métis people; we are in diverse places in these journeys and for some families, younger generations may be more open to asserting their cultural identities:

When I talk to my dad about it, for example, he's in kind of a different place with his identity, I think, than I am. I'm happy, I'm proud, I'm confident in who I am, but for him, it wasn't something that he really ever thought about too much. It wasn't like something that he'd necessarily be proud of. It's just who he was, and now I'm lucky to be in a place where I still have my family around, like my grandparents and stuff, to tell me their stories. I'm proud of them. (Male Youth)

Intergenerational Trauma

Participants spoke about their families' experiences with trauma, and they emphasized the overall need for understanding that trauma is passed down intergenerationally:

I think people need to understand how trauma is passed down intergenerationally, both socially as well as genetically.... So you know to me a big part of this is that the past isn't just the past. The past is directly connected to the present and these things that apparently

happened so long ago that have nothing to do with today; we are direct products of it, and when you think about how difficult change is and how difficult cycles are to break, and how much resilience and resources and privilege that takes, you know, it's no wonder that we're still dealing with these things. (Male Adult)

The history, the experiences that our families have had in the past and even in the recent past obviously are passed down and so we're struggling with that, and then there's this ongoing systemic oppression that unless people experience it, I don't think they're aware of it. (Female Adult)

Some people also described how intergenerational trauma has been a root of many mental health and addiction issues:

I have a history of depression in my family but the reality is that every single one of our generations so far back are living with ongoing trauma of colonization, and it's not just about inheriting some genetic disposition. It's the real life situations that we're dealing with. (Female Youth)

Many of the conversations around colonial impacts on mental health and wellness also included discussion around the intergenerational impacts of residential schools and day schools. Specifically, residential and day schools have had inter-generational impacts for Métis people. They also spoke about the silence and denial around these issues. Some described their direct experiences in residential school; others spoke about the impacts that the removal of children had on entire communities:

I see my family as being quite heavily impacted by residential school, both residential schools and the day school system... and a lot of kind of the support that I think I needed as a child and as a youth, my parents weren't able to give me. I think that I really do see that as... Even now, I still see a lot of the kind of impacts of residential school in my very immediate family and that's really, really frustrating... it's very easy to feel down or hopeless because there's so much intergenerational trauma in our community. (Female Youth)

Unfortunately, they often noted that there is often silence around these issues and the history of Métis children in residential schools and church-run schools, both in terms of national recognition and within families:

With the residential schools, that doesn't help and then no one wants to talk about things, and then you lose the connection and that causes more problems because you don't know what or who you are, and you don't want to talk about it for fear of hatred. (Male Youth)

Participants also spoke about the intergenerational impacts that their families have experienced as a result of residential and church-run schools:

It's the traumatic things, like my mom going to residential school. And she was a good mom, up until when I turned the age that she was when she went to residential school, and then she didn't know quite what to do with me... after I turned 13, she treated me really differently and that I attribute completely to residential school. She calls it boarding school and she doesn't talk about anything from there. And she says it was fine. But she drinks all the time. (Female Adult)

Connection to Land

Stories describing the importance of land were integral to discussions around cultural continuity and wellness. However, discussions about the land, included both strengths and challenges related to Métis rights and responsibilities. Participants often described how the lack of a Métis land base has created challenges to practicing and passing on Métis culture, which has also had a profound impact on our identity as Métis people. For example, one person noted:

The loss of land, I think, alone... just not being able to have the connection to a place and to have land in that way alone just destroyed an important part of who we are, of our identity, of what makes us Métis people... (Male Youth)

Thus, to support the transmission of culture and to support strong identities, Métis people emphasized the need for a Métis land base:

The culture and language work hand in hand, and that land base: we are still striving for that. Hopefully one day we can have something set aside for the Métis people to be able to have a foundation to build culture and identity in a very strong way. So my hopes are always there for the younger generations.... Without land, our culture is weak; with land, it is strong because you can practice your language there. That is what will make it strong again. (Male Senior/Elder)

Participants often spoke about having connections to particular places. They also spoke about the challenges that they face, as people who live in urban spaces. For many people, they must be very intentional about making time to connect with the land. Living in BC also presented unique challenges for some of the Métis participants. They spoke about feeling a stronger, spiritual connection to the land at 'home,' often speaking about specific areas of the prairies, where their ancestors lived:

When I'm back at home in Saskatchewan... I feel it in my body, in my mind, and in my spirit. I've had those experiences where you know in your body that you're home... but on an ongoing basis, I would say – as an urban person – it's had to be an ongoing, conscious choice to try to maintain the connection outside of our traditional territories. We're guests here so I think that definitely impacts my consciousness around land connection. (Female Adult)

Similarly, some people spoke about the complex combination of having both privilege and traditional responsibilities, that comes with being Métis and living on a land that is not part of their territory.

Participants also shared their perspectives around the connection between the land and their health. They spoke about the importance of being close to the water and the land, where the land is healing and grounding, contributing to positive mental wellness: “*It just kind of helps me to centre myself, I guess, and that's really good when you're feeling disassociated with yourself, it's nice to be able to do something that centres you in yourself*” (Male Youth). Similarly, participants often spoke about the way that being on the land can help to release negative energy. Many people also described how the health of the land is interconnected with our health, as people who are a part of the land:

We're connected to the land. We're connected to the water. We're connected to the air. If we mess with turning over the land in ways that are going to be potential damaging now, seven generations ahead of where I am at in this point in history, I think we should not be making those decisions. (Male Adult)

Through discussing kinship relationships and responsibilities between people and the land, participants described the interconnectedness of all living things, and the importance of reciprocity in promoting wellness.

Métis Resistance and Resilience

Despite the challenges that many of our people, families, and communities have faced as a direct result of colonialism, the stories shared in this research illustrate the resilience of Métis people. In fact, participants were clear that experiences of oppression, survival and resilience have strongly influenced who we are as Métis people:

I am a Métis. I have always been a Métis. I carry it and wear and speak it every day. My life has been powerfully shaped by it. There are some specific experiences of oppression, unique racism..., and passion and pride in our resilience to overcome; to be powerful, to be strong, to laugh even when things are bleakest, to know that we will survive and feel it in our bodies, to visit our ancestral places and feel the power when we are there, and have a true knowing of our connection to the land, to experience our grandmothers' and grandfathers' presence in sometimes spiritual and supernatural ways. (Female Adult).

There's a sense of who I am and where I come from, being connected to my Métis family and understanding their ancestral practices and the experiences they've had, and how all of those things kind of shape and contribute to who I am today, just in terms of how I view

the world, who I am in the world, the struggles that I experience too, and also I just feel like I've inherited a lot of resiliency from that too. (Female Adult)

This resilience among the Métis, was further described by one Métis youth as an illustration of strength and bravery:

Métis for me is a lot about inner strength and bravery, and the courage to kind of stand up to the status quo and stuff because being Métis isn't easy... because we're known as the invisible people and it takes a lot of bravery and courage and inner strength. (Male Youth)

Participants also spoke about the gratitude that they have for our ancestors—those that came before us, who paved the way for our ability to strengthen our identities, as one participant said, “*I'm proud of my grandmothers for being survivors, and making choices that maybe wouldn't look like survival... but actually they created a life where I can be me now and I can reclaim my identity*” (Female Adult). It is also important to note, as one youth explained, that our stories have survived:

I'm very aware the teachings and the stories, that I'm so lucky to have access to today, are only there for me because our ancestors worked so tirelessly and bravely, and really resisted so many different forces in their lives that were trying to, I guess, mute our Métis identity or community or existence really. So I really try as much as I can to incorporate what I've been lucky enough to have had shared with me into the way I live my life, but also, I think that our community is always changing and evolving and growing and it's kind of like a way that I look kind of into the past but also forward because people are really inspired by youth, and are really inspired by our Métis children, and I look kind of just as much to them to kind of give me inspiration and make me really proud to be a Métis person. (Female Youth)

Discussion

Across the findings and the literature, there is clear evidence that Métis people are survivors of colonial attempts at assimilation. While colonization has, and continues to, disrupt the foundations and maintenance of Métis culture, individuals, families, and communities have continually demonstrated their resilience despite challenges. Cultural continuity is shaped by structural factors, including colonialism, intergenerational trauma, and racism (Auger, 2016). The colonial legacy for Métis peoples has included the far-reaching impacts of residential and day schools, forced adoption, dislocation from the land, cultural oppression, and denial of existence (Edge & McCallum, 2006). Not surprisingly, this research highlights the impacts of colonialism on Métis identity and traditional knowledge—through stories that speak to shame, hidden identity, and loss of culture and language as direct impacts of colonization and racism.

The findings from this research specifically emphasize the intergenerational impacts of residential schools, day schools, and other church-run (non-federally funded) mission schools, while also highlighting the intergenerational strength and resistance within Métis families. Further, silence and denial within Métis families around these issues were also noted as a pervasive issue that perpetuates trauma through denial of the need for healing. This is compounded by a lack of national recognition for many Métis survivors and their families. This is a complex issue for many Métis families with mixed cases of Métis admission into residential schools, given conflicting priorities for the federal government. While the state aimed to assimilate Métis culture through removing children from their communities, there was a fear that funding Métis ‘education’ would set a precedence for additional fiduciary responsibilities (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). To this end, many survivors of church-run schools have not received acknowledgement or support, further contributing to the issue of unaddressed trauma and lack of supports for Métis survivors and their families (Métis National Council, 2010).

Journeys of learning about our identities are complex. In speaking about the first time they knew that they were Métis, participants often spoke about their beginnings, describing the ways that they were raised. Many participants told stories in which they did not use or understand the term ‘Métis’ growing up, but knew they were Indigenous. Others noted that they were not raised with being Métis. In this sense, many participants noted that they did not self-identify as Métis until they were adults. Given that Métis ancestry and family stories are commonly hidden for protection and other reasons, Richardson (2006) also speaks to identity epiphanies, when Métis people first discover who they are, despite always knowing on a deeper level who they are. While these experiences are not solely owned by Métis people, our histories and experiences with colonization, combined with our unique strategies for protecting our families, have created shared stories of survival throughout a ‘dark period’ of invisibility (Logan, 2015).

Teillet (2009) describes the Métis population as being largely invisible to non-Métis people; she describes several key challenges to Métis identity related to this ‘invisibility.’ Historically, Indigenous identity options in Canada were dichotomous, consisting of either ‘White’ or ‘Indian,’ due to the denial of existence for mixed race people. Further, given that the Métis population is not phenotypically distinct, it is hard to distinguish Métis people from either First Nations people or non-Indigenous people. In turn, non-Métis people often assume that the Métis have assimilated into either Euro-Canadian or First Nations culture (Teillet, 2009).

Land

The findings also speak to the importance of land as an integral component of cultural continuity and Métis wellness; yet, barriers to accessing land and disconnection from historic Métis places, has commonly challenged cultural continuity for Métis people in BC. The issue of land for Métis people today is commonly recognized as a complex issue, given the lack of a legal land base for the vast majority of Métis people across Canada (Dyck, 2009). Yet, Métis people continue to recognize the importance of their relationships with the land as an integral component of wholistic wellness and take ongoing measures to access the land, as Kermoal (2016) writes, “despite this history of displacement, Métis people have maintained a very strong connection to the land and, more generally, to the Northwest, carrying with them knowledge systems integral to their culture” (p. 115). Similarly, participants identified that spending time outdoors, despite restrictions, was noted to contribute to positive mental wellness for Métis people in this study and should be supported through increased support for Métis land-based practices.

Participants described land as both a key determinant of Métis health and a complex issue within the context of displacement, clearly stating the need for increased supports for Métis land-based practices in BC. Land-based practices have allowed communities to form intimate relationships with their environment, through traditional harvesting practices and environmental stewardship (Loppie Reading & Wien, 2009). Métis people also face challenges in connecting to the land that come with living in cities. Yet while the stories from Métis people within this present research spoke to several challenges that Métis city-dwellers face in connecting to the land, Métis people remain adaptable and determined to find creative ways of connecting with the natural environment. In this sense, urban Métis participants often spoke about being cognizant in finding ways to connect with the land. This has been described in contemporary research as the relationship between place and health, where the health of the land and health of communities are interconnected. In this way, land has been central to the spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional wellness of many Métis people; as Hodgson-Smith and Kermoal (2016) note that for Métis people, land is life: it shapes our epistemologies, ontologies, and ways of being.

Limitations

Within the context of this research, specific to Métis people in BC, these findings may have limited generalizability to Métis people living in other areas of the country, and of course to other Indigenous peoples. It is also important to understand that due to the study recruitment and sampling methods, participants were limited to Métis people who held an interest in the subject matter of the study: primarily wellness and culture. Given the focus on culture and colonialism in this research, those who do not have a strong connection with their culture and history, may have been less likely to participate.

Conclusion

The findings from this research highlight the overwhelming effects of assimilative policies and practices on Métis identity, culture, and traditional knowledge, through Métis stories that speak to shame, loss of culture and language, and hidden identities. This is further descriptive evidence that colonialism is both ongoing and dynamic, impacting Métis individuals, families, and communities. Yet, Métis people in BC also have an immense amount of resiliency, as demonstrated throughout the stories shared. While these stories have survived for hundreds of years, it is clear that many Métis people in our communities have only recently began to feel more comfortable in openly sharing their stories. It is integral that opportunities are continually made available—through research and other public platforms—for privileging Métis voices, voices that historically have been systematically silenced.

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