

The Metis Interracial Marriage System: Exploring the Effects of French-Indigenous Marriage on Time, Space, and Exploration

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The European discovery of the *New World*, otherwise known as the Age of Exploration, began in the later fifteenth century, resulting in the vast creation of European colonies throughout North America. However, the discovery and colonization of Canada truly began in 1534, when French explorer Jacques Cartier led his crew through the Gulf of the St. Lawrence.¹ In 1535, Cartier and his crew advanced to the mainland, where they encountered members of the Huron Nation in Stadacona, present-day Quebec City.² The members led the Frenchmen to areas such as Hochelaga, now known as Montreal, and thus began the creation of not only French settlements in Canada, but also relations between French and Indigenous people.³ What followed was an increase in intimate relationships between French men and Indigenous women, resulting in interracial marriages – creating offspring known as Metis.⁴ The Metis population grew as they developed their own settlements, culture, and language. They also played a crucial role in the success of the fur trade throughout Canada. The Metis interracial marriages created new spaces in colonial Canada and altered previous conceptions of time while significantly expanding notions of exploration.

There is much speculation regarding the beginning of interracial marriages between the French and Indigenous populations, however, historians can assume that they began in the sixteenth century as the two had developed peaceful relations. The term ‘Metis’ was derived

¹ John L. Allen, “From Cabot to Cartier: The Early Exploration of Eastern North America, 1497-1543,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82, no. 3 (1992): 500–21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2563358>.

² Allen, “From Cabot to Cartier,” 516.

³ James Douglas, “The Consolidation of the Iroquois Confederacy: Or, What Happened on the St. Lawrence between the Times of Cartier and Champlain,” *Journal of the American Geographical Society of New York* 29, no. 1 (1897): 41–54. <https://doi.org/10.2307/196950>.

⁴ Patrick C. Douaud, “Canadian Metis Identity: A Pattern of Evolution,” *Anthropos* 78, no. 1/2 (1983): 71–88.

from the Latin word ‘mixtus,’ meaning ‘mixed,’ and was originally used to identify children born to interracial relationships.⁵ However, as time progressed, the term began to refer to anyone of Indigenous-European descent, predominantly those of Indigenous-French descent.⁶ The terminology has been altered in the twenty-first century in regards to the specific spelling of the word ‘Metis,’ as well as the understanding of the respective orthographies. Despite this, it is undeniable that the interracial marriages between the French and Indigenous people were incredibly significant as they created new marital and trading spaces throughout the colonization of Canada.

During European expansion into North America, interracial marriage was considered extremely taboo. In 1691, the British colony of Virginia established anti-miscegenation laws that prevented non-white individuals from marrying white individuals.⁷ European countries, such as France, had widespread bans on interracial marriages that were noticed in the later eighteenth century, especially between a white woman and a man of different colour.⁸ Furthermore, in Western Canada, The Hudson’s Bay Company had also initially prohibited interracial marriage between Indigenous and European persons in 1670. However, the outlaw did not last long due to the beneficial aspects of the union.⁹ The French phrase ‘Mariage à la façon du pay’ means marriage in the manner of the country, and it refers to the marriage between a French man and an Indigenous woman involved in the fur trade. Historian Sylvia Van Kirk describes these types of interracial marriages as following less of a European culture, stating, “the rituals of marriage à la

⁵ Douaud, “Canadian Metis Identity,” 71–88.

⁶ Jennifer S. H. Brown, “Métis, Halfbreeds, and Other Real People: Challenging Cultures and Categories,” *The History Teacher* 27, no. 1 (1993): 19–26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/494328>.

⁷ Francisco Macias, “Loving v. Virginia: ‘Banished’ For Love: In Custodia Legis,” The Library of Congress, June 12, 2017. Loving v. Virginia.

⁸ Jennifer Heuer, “The One-Drop Rule in Reverse? Interracial Marriages in Napoleonic and Restoration France,” *Law and History Review* 27, no. 3 (2009): 515–48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40646056>.

⁹ Sylvia Van Kirk, “From ‘Marrying-In’ to ‘Marrying-Out’: Changing Patterns of Aboriginal/Non-Aboriginal Marriage in Colonial Canada,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 23, no. 3 (2002): 1–11.

façon du pay conformed more to Indian custom than to European.”¹⁰ These marriages soon became a cultural norm in terms of interracial unions and were strongly reinforced by the special interests of tribe members due to their benefits towards the fur trade.¹¹

Mariage à la façon du pay connected French traders to the Indigenous tribe, ensuring positive trade relations that would keep both economically satisfied in exchange for both sexual and domestic rights to a woman of that kinship.¹² This created a new marital ‘space’ that was focused on alliances and economic prosperities between both parties. The notion of marriage for economic gain was not necessarily new; in medieval England, marriage was a political arrangement that established social and economic alliances between kingdoms.¹³ However, it was not a union between two individuals of different races, whereas mariage à la façon du pay relied on the interracial aspect that contradicted religious scriptures.¹⁴ It soon became a normalized practice in the French Canadian colonies, resulting in the creation of the Metis, whereas, in the British American colonies and Europe, it was still prohibited. Furthermore, the new marital space provided an opportunity for French traders to recreate a domestic life similar to life in France due to the lack of white French women in North America.¹⁵ As for the Indigenous population, interracial marriages expanded their tribes and territories, ensured peaceful relations between hostile groups, and further advanced their societies. The new marital space between French men and Indigenous women led to the creation of an entirely new concept

¹⁰ Sylvia Van Kirk, “The Role of Native Women in the Fur Trade Society of Western Canada, 1670-1830,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 7, no. 3 (1984): 9–13. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3346234>.

¹¹ Van Kirk, “The Role of Native Women,” 10.

¹² Van Kirk, “The Role of Native Women,” 9.

¹³ Christine Peters, “Gender, Sacrament and Ritual: The Making and Meaning of Marriage in Late Medieval and Early Modern England,” *Past & Present*, no. 169 (2000): 63–96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/651264>.

¹⁴ Van Kirk, “The Role of Native Women in the Fur Trade Society of Western Canada, 1670-1830,” 9–13.

¹⁵ Van Kirk, “The Role of Native Women,” 10.

of space that profoundly altered both Indigenous and European societies in colonial Canada – the fur trade.

The Metis people were often described as ‘children of the fur trade’ due to the concept of *mariage à la façon du pay* that the fur trade relied on. The Canadian fur trade was an extensive merchant enterprise that spanned throughout the newly chartered territories of colonial Canada that garnered both popularity and success quickly. As previously mentioned, the interracial union between male French settlers and female Indigenous tribe members was a crucial aspect in facilitating the commercial success of the fur trade that led to the creation of future fur trading companies. This was due to various factors, including Indigenous women’s contribution to the trade and the privileged access to goods supplied as a result of the marital union. Many French traders who arrived in colonial Canada relied on their Indigenous wives for their guidance and knowledge surrounding the land to better expedite the movement of goods, resulting in mass trade production.¹⁶ Indigenous women would provide more practical clothing and preserve sufficient food supplies for trade posts in the winter in order to continue trade despite brutal weather conditions.¹⁷ As mentioned above, interracial marriage connected the French traders to the Indigenous tribes directly. These unions ensured that Indigenous populations would have entitled access to European goods, and in exchange, French traders would have claim to animal pelts, resulting in the creation of a trade space that was not previously seen.

Furthermore, the Metis interracial marriage expanded the trade space as the emergence of joint-stock companies such as the Hudson Bay Company (HBC) began to increase, thus resulting in a trade space that existed on a larger scale. The HBC was an English company that originated from two French traders who sought to create an official trading company within colonial

¹⁶ Van Kirk, “The Role of Native Women,” 9–13.

¹⁷ Van Kirk, “The Role of Native Women,” 10–11.

Canada in the late seventeenth century.¹⁸ The Hudson's Bay Company was able to dominate the fur trade in the eighteenth century due to already positive trade relations created by Metis interracial marriages.¹⁹ Those relationships initially acted as intermediaries for HBC trade, resulting in the massive commercial trade space that is still known today. Both the marital and trading spaces that interracial marriages created proved to be reliant on one another. The fur trade would not have been remotely as successful if not for the peaceful relations maintained due to Metis interracial marriage, and *mariage à la façon du pay* would not have been normalized if not for the benefits of trade. Therefore, it created two new spaces, a marital space and a trading space that were considered foreign to both the Indigenous populace and French traders of colonial Canada.

Along with creating new concepts of space throughout Canada, the Metis interracial marriages altered previous perceptions of time through day-to-day activities. During European expansion into Canada, Indigenous tribes were either nomadic or sedentary hunter-gatherers, not necessarily following a 'work' schedule – they hunted as needed.²⁰ On the contrary, Europeans lived in cities and began working, following semi-industrial schedules.²¹ Colonization from the perspective of the Europeans was to 'modernize' the Indigenous populace.²² In some ways, the Europeans did modernize certain Indigenous tribes but also developed traits from the Indigenous

¹⁸ Irene M. Harper, "The First Complete Exploration of Hudson's Bay: Pierre Esprit Radisson and Medard Chouard Groseilliers," *Cambridge Historical Journal* 3, no. 1 (1929): 74–82. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3020647>.

¹⁹ Brenda MacDougall, "'The Comforts of Married Life': Metis Family Life, Labour, and the Hudson's Bay Company," *Labour / Le Travail* 61 (2008): 9–39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25149853>.

²⁰ Government of Canada; Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada. "First Nations in Canada," Government of Canada; Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, May 2, 2017. <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1307460755710/1536862806124>.

²¹ Beverly Lemire, "'Men of the World': British Mariners, Consumer Practice, and Material Culture in an Era of Global Trade, c. 1660–1800," *Journal of British Studies* 54, no. 2 (2015): 288–319. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24702040>.

²² Archana Ojha, "Trail of Tears: Looking at Indigenous History of Canada (17th to 19th Centuries)," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 64 (2003): 1272–80. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44145555>.

through the exploration of both cultures. For instance, the development of the fur trade contained aspects of both European and Indigenous culture, even when excluding the goods being exchanged. The development of trade posts and working on a timed schedule to hunt and create the pelts were aspects derived from European societies that were becoming increasingly more industrialized. The specific methods and tools used to hunt and gather in Canadian forests originated from the Indigenous tribes. The day-to-day life of both cultures were combined and contributed to the success of the fur trade.

Each person had specific duties and a schedule they had to follow, specifically Indigenous women of Metis interracial marriages.²³ The introduction of these new duties altered their previous perceptions of time. As previously mentioned, Metis wives' duties in the later eighteenth century included producing adequate clothing and preserving food for trading posts. Their schedule became similar to those of European men working in factories, as they became popular in the late eighteenth century.²⁴ As a result, the Indigenous perception of time became more industrialized, following a more modern work schedule, whereas previously, they followed non-linear time.²⁵ As for French men, it can be argued that their perception of time was also altered due to the notion that time is seasonal. Although they also took part in the industrialized scheduling, they also had to engage in the natural cycle of time, understanding the seasons in order to hunt specific animals. The French men relied on their Indigenous wives to provide knowledge regarding hunting seasons, and they began to learn that time was understood in

²³ Van Kirk, "The Role of Native Women," 9–13.

²⁴ Royal B. Way, "The United States Factory System for Trading with the Indians, 1796-1822," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 6, no. 2 (1919): 220–35. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1889430>.

²⁵ De Vos, Laura Maria De Vos, "View of Spiralic Time and Cultural Continuity for Indigenous Sovereignty: Idle No More and the Marrow Thieves: Transmotion," *View of Spiralic Time and Cultural Continuity for Indigenous Sovereignty: Idle No More and The Marrow Thieves | Transmotion*. <https://journals.kent.ac.uk/index.php/transmotion/article/view/807/1876>.

respect to seasons.²⁶ Both the European and Indigenous conceptions of time were being utilized in the fur trade as a result of the Metis intermarital space created. Additionally, the new spaces created along with perceptions of time being altered, expanded exploration of both land and culture.

Exploration is defined as the travel over new territory for the sake of discovery or adventure. Often, individuals perceive the word ‘territory’ as a physical object, however the territory being explored can be intangible. The Metis interracial marriages further advanced the exploration of both physical objects and non-physical concepts. The exploration of land represents the bodily travel over new territory that took place during the development of the fur trade as a result of the interracial marriages. As the Metis participated in the fur trade under joint-stock companies, they sought to venture further into uncharted lands in search of more valuable furs. This resulted in the establishment of vast trading posts and new trading routes throughout Canada, promoting further exploration.²⁷ The concept of the fur trade from the perspective of corporations such as the Hudson’s Bay Company was to further explore Canada to generate more profit. As previously stated, the interracial marriage between French settlers and Indigenous women saw the initial physical exploration of land to facilitate trade. Ultimately, it led to larger trade that sought further exploration into Canadian territories, resulting in hostile relations with other Indigenous populations.²⁸

In spite of the HBC furthering the physical exploration of the Canadian landscape, the Metis marriages also resulted in the exploration of non-physical concepts such as culture. The interracial union saw the combination of both French and Indigenous traits creating a specific

²⁶ Van Kirk, “The Role of Native Women,” 9–13..

²⁷ J. F. Crean, “Hats and the Fur Trade,” *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science / Revue Canadienne d’Economie et de Science Politique* 28, no. 3 (1962): 373–86. <https://doi.org/10.2307/139669>.

²⁸ Crean, “Hats and the Fur Trade,” 373–86.

culture. For instance, Metis had developed a specific language by the 1840s, known as Michif.²⁹ Michif is a combination of both French and Cree and as Linguist Peter Bakker described, the nouns in the language are derived from French and the verbs from Cree.³⁰ He further explains how that characterization is “[a] gross oversimplification.”³¹ Regardless, the creation of the Michif language was a result of cultural exploration. Furthermore, cultural aspects of both European and Indigenous life were adopted, such as clothing and religion. As previously described, Indigenous women would create clothing for their French husbands. Of the clothing articles produced, hand-beaded moccasin shoes remained the most popular.³² French traders began to wear moccasins due to the comfort and warmth, adopting an Indigenous cultural clothing artefact.³³

European religion was also incorporated in the interracial marriages. Many Indigenous women were exposed to Christianity through their French husbands. Many Metis embraced Christian values and combined them with the spiritual practices of the Indigenous tribes.³⁴ The blended elements of both beliefs created a new form that reflected on the exploration of the mixed heritage. For instance, Metis would provide tobacco as a thankful offering to the Creator or distribute holy water during intimidating thunderstorms.³⁵ Both of these examples display the combination of both Christian religion and Indigenous spirituality as well as the notion of cultural exploration. Metis interracial marriages was cultural exploration, resulting in the creation of new languages, clothing and religion that was a unique combination of both cultures.

²⁹ Anthony P. Grant. *Language in Society* 28, no. 1 (1999): 149–51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4168913>.

³⁰ Grant, *Language in Society*, 150.

³¹ Grant, *Language in Society*, 149.

³² Van Kirk. “The Role of Native Women,” 9–13.

³³ Van Kirk. “The Role of Native Women,” 10.

³⁴ University of Saskatchewan, “Métis Culture and Language,” Métis Culture and Language - Indigenous Saskatchewan Encyclopedia | University of Saskatchewan. Accessed April 9, 2024. https://teaching.usask.ca/indigenoussk/import/metis_culture_and_language.php.

³⁵ University of Saskatchewan, “Métis Culture and Language.”

The unions explored both physical landscapes as well as imaginative concepts that resulted in the creation of a unique culture ingrained in the history of the Metis.

The interracial marriages between French settlers and Indigenous women created the unique group known as the Metis. The unions between the two groups created new marital and trading spaces that led to the successful fur trade. Their perceptions of time were altered, following a more industrial view. The interracial marriages expanded the exploration of both tangible objects and intangible concepts. Territories of Canada were continuously becoming chartered and culture was being connected. The exploration of culture led to the creation of new identities that are associated specifically with the Metis people. The Metis interracial marriages defied cultural norms in terms of combining races, however it led to advancements in understanding concepts of time and space and furthering exploration of colonial Canada.

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