Re-storying Métis Spirit: Honouring lived experiences

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Re-Storying Métis Spirit: Honoring lived experiences

by

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A THESIS

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Abstract

The discussions that surround Métis identity are full of great complexities and conundrums as one begins to look at the diversity within the Métis population. These complexities can not only be understood on a macro societal scale, but also on a micro individual scale. In order to explore the nuances of Métis ways of knowing, this thesis specifically focuses on the personal narratives of four Métis individuals in order to find connections to, and evidence of Métis ways of knowing. Alongside the stories of the participants, I lace my own reflections and stories and create a narrative that ignites, reaffirms, and celebrates the Métis spirit.
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge those who walked with me on this journey and supported me in the best ways they knew how, and sometimes, without even knowing they were helping me achieve my potential.

Creator – Marsee for the beautiful gifts of life and purpose. I strive to make the best of those each day.

My son. Thank you for choosing me to be your mother on earth, one of the greatest gifts I have ever been given. Thank you for keeping me grounded and reminding me of the importance of love and laughter.

My brother and sister, Derek and Tresley Bouvier. Without your support, guidance, love, long distance chats, pep talks, and above all, belief in me, this would not have been possible. I am forever grateful to the both of you.

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To all of my friends and family that cheered me on from the sidelines, thank you.

All my relations - Marsee
I would like to dedicate this thesis to my late father Ephram Bouvier and late mother, Theresa Bouvier. Thank you for your love, it allowed me to be strong when I couldn’t be strong for myself.

This thesis is also dedicated to the participants who trusted me with their lived experiences and stories: Auntie Mary Langan, Uncle Jules Bouvier, Doreen Bergum, Art Cunningham.

Lastly, this is for all the Métis who have been dehumanized, silenced, invalidated and discriminated against; may the words in this thesis reignited your spirit, so that you may stand tall with unwavering pride.

Marsee
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“I think it's so important, because it's our culture, it's our ancestors that have fought to get us here, get this far, and [to] continue to, I guess to live in a country that never accepted us, and try to do away with us (laughs), no I think it's important to carry on our culture and ancestry. So the spirit of the Métis is still alive”. (Doreen Bergum, 2015)
CHAPTER 1: WHERE ARE THE MÉTIS VOICES?

Tanshi, Victoria Bouvier dishinikashoo. To begin this research story, it is only appropriate that I position myself in a Métis way. Whenever I am introduced in the Métis community, I am introduced by who my parents are, thus allowing the other person to place me within a specific context. Further, situating myself culturally, will allow you to know where I come from, and signal my authority to write this research story.

Thirty-six years ago, I was born to Ephram and Theresa Bouvier in Calgary, Alberta where I was raised and currently reside. My mother’s ancestors are of Scottish and German descent. The first ten years of my life was spent with my grandmother, Mrytle Wachtler, on my mother’s side. She owned a Christian book store, and I spent a great deal of time travelling with both my grandmother and mother to convents and parishes to sell books. Being young, I did not fully fathom the Christian faith, but I cherished the time spent with my grandmother as this allowed me to form a very close bond with her. When I was eleven, my grandmother passed away and my life path changed directions.

My father is Métis, my ancestors come from the St. Francis Xavier community of the Red River Settlement (modernly known as Winnipeg, Manitoba). Within my family, I come from a strong line of Métis families; Malaterre, Breland, Gervais, and Grant, to name a few. Many of my ancestors took scrip\(^1\) from the Canadian government during the years of 1875-1880. After dispersing from the Red River Settlement sometime after receiving scrip, we believe that my

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\(^1\) Scrip was implemented by the Canadian government in 1874 and was specifically designed to grant ‘half-breeds’ with either a parcel of land or the money equivalent. This implementation was a direct result of the Métis uprising in 1870 and the subsequent Manitoba Act of 1870 that acknowledged Métis claims to land (Dickason & Newbigging, 2010).

family moved to St. John, North Dakota, United States and subsequently travelled back up to settle in the Boggy Creek area around 1904. The family homestead is still maintained today.

I am privileged to have grown up always knowing I was Métis, and to having a connection to my Métis family homestead in Boggy Creek, Manitoba. Coinciding with the passing of my grandmother at the age of eleven, my father was newly elected to the political position of vice-president of the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3. With this, I began to accompany my father to political meetings and gatherings, as well as participating in a Métis youth group. Through watching my father advocate for the Métis within a provincial political context, I became impassioned with the struggles of the Métis, and knew that I wanted to follow in my father’s footsteps, in whatever form that may be. This passion has led me to work within the Calgary Aboriginal community since I was eighteen years old.

I am the second eldest child, and oldest daughter to my parents. Through both my mother and father, the value of family kinships was bestowed upon me, and the work that I take up strives to create a better future for my family, and to honor my late mother and father and the ancestors that have passed on to the spirit world. I took on this research project so that I could know myself more deeply and intimately as a Métis person, and my work exceeded this expectation. Personally, I have become more sure of who I am as a Métis woman, thus allowing me to be more strongly grounded and anchored into myself, family, community, and universe.

**Catalyst for this research**

On March 6th, 2011, the weather was becoming warmer as spring was on the horizon. My father, in his usual fashion, phoned me and invited me out for breakfast, something we often enjoyed. We meet up at Phil’s restaurant, my dad ordered his usual omelette dish and me my classic bacon, eggs and toast. We sat together in rhythmic small talk. I cannot remember how it
came up exactly, but he started speaking about his Métis community in Boggy Creek, Manitoba. My father spoke of the collective mindset that existed in the community when he was a boy, everyone helping each other and never letting a family go without the necessities. I can remember that day as if it was yesterday. I remember sitting in my vinyl seat, absorbing all that he had to say. It wasn’t very often he spoke of his childhood, or what it was like for him growing up. As I walked away from our breakfast, I had this uncanny sense that my father’s openness about his childhood was not happenstance. Sure enough, twenty-two days later, my father passed on to the spirit world. Consumed with grief and loss, I did not know at that time that my father’s passing would be the catalyst to pursue this work, and although it is academic in nature, it is also a deeply personal pursuit for meaning and purpose.

**Initial stirrings**

Louis Riel (1885), renowned Métis leader affirmed: “We must cherish our inheritance. We must preserve our nationality for the youth of our future. The story should be written down to pass on” (Manitoba Metis Federation Inc., 2016). As a Métis woman and mother of a young son in the sixth grade who has only just begun his educational journey in an urban school, I draw inspiration from the words spoken by Riel. There were days when I felt disheartened as I dropped my son off at school knowing that the curriculum being taught would likely not reflect his identity. In grade two especially, he and I struggled with the fact that our distinct Métis worldview was not acknowledged, and the subjects being taught rarely included his Métis ancestors. As I questioned the curriculum being taught to my son, I began reflecting on my own undergraduate studies and its similar shortcomings, and a pervasive question emerged: Where is Métis epistemology within academia?
Throughout the four years of my International Indigenous Studies degree, very rarely did I encounter literature or research from, or premised on, a Métis way of knowing. A plethora of resources could be found pertaining to an Indigenous or Aboriginal way of knowing, but rarely was any of this material specific. The lack of literature on Métis ways of knowing prompted me to look within my own life to reveal what I deemed as a Métis way of knowing. To my own disappointment, I was not able to clearly articulate what I would situate as Métis knowing. This conundrum, accompanied by the lack of literature and the passing of my father, was the catalyst to pursue this research project. I began searching for the answer internally and externally while asking myself the following questions: What encompasses Métis epistemologies? How do the Métis people express themselves through their epistemologies? I inherently knew that these were questions that needed to be confronted, for the sake of mine and my son’s identity, and our future generations.

Research uncovered

The discussions that surround Métis identity are full of great complexities and conundrums as one begins to look at the diversity within the Métis population. These complexities are not only felt on a societal scale, but also on an individual scale. I have felt these complexities as I try to define my own Métis identity in a society that does not necessarily understand what it means to be Métis. The complexities grow more saturated as most relevant literature pertaining to the Métis tends to be categorized under the general heading of ‘Aboriginal’ which I think promotes confusion on the specificities of Métis identity. Being absorbed under the term ‘Aboriginal’ is meant to be all encompassing and inclusive of the Métis, but realistically this kind of integration tends to diminish Métis worldviews and epistemologies due to the broadness of the category. Because there are distinct ways of knowing among the First
Nations, Inuit and Métis cultural groups, I think it is imperative that any research pertaining to, and preferably with, the Métis comes from a contextualized space, where Métis perspectives can express themselves as they have lived. The purpose of this thesis is to contribute to the literature and research that specifically focuses on the lived experiences of Métis individuals, in order to tell a story of Métis ways of knowing and being.

In order to come to understand the lived realities and experiences of Métis individuals, I relied on the personal narratives of four Métis participants, my own personal experiences and self-reflections as the sources of knowledge for my data collection. I interviewed them individually and each interview employed a research-as-conversation method that allowed the stories to flow in a natural organic manner (Kovach, 2010a). I formulated the following research questions to guide my research inquiries and analysis, while assisting the participants in understanding what the research project entailed:

1. What does it mean to be Métis?
2. How is being Métis made manifest in the lives of individuals?
3. How did/does being Métis inform how one lives/d their life?
4. What were some of the experiences growing up Métis?
5. What do the stories reveal about Métis ways of knowing?

Research process at a glance

The participant criteria for this study was as follows: those who self-identify as Métis, they are connected to a Métis community, and who are 55 years of age or older. I specifically used this criterion because I wanted to ensure that the participants identified as Métis, were connected to a Métis community, and were at such an age that enabled them to narrate lived experiences of growing up Métis. Prior to beginning this research project, I held relationships with all the participants to varying degrees. Four participants were interviewed: two males and
two females, with ages ranging between 60 and 90. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Upon completion of the transcription process, I proceeded to analyse each individual story framed by the initial research questions while allowing themes to emerge as they revealed themselves to me.

**Honouring the Stories**

The stories held within this thesis are important, principally because the history of the Métis people, narrated from their own voices and perspectives, has not been given the recognition and validation it deserves. My hope for this research narrative and the stories within it is: As Métis individuals and communities, that we can come to recognize, honour and manifest the inherent worth within ourselves, our communities and our place within Canadian society, so that we may ignite our healing processes, thus allowing us to revive and reaffirm our cultural stories, language and practices and ways of knowing.

This thesis is only one step in the process of healing for me, albeit, an important and crucial one. It includes five chapters. Succeeding this chapter where I outline my reasoning for conducting this research, chapter two reflects the scholarly literature that has informed this project and allowed me to conceptualize my research endeavours, chapter three illustrates my research process, specifically, the principles that ensured accountability and respect through the project and a description of how the research was conducted, chapter four begins the telling of the participants stories with my reflections on those stories, and, finally, chapter five hones in on five specific themes, gleaned from the stories, and that align them with themes in the current literature. The last chapter also identifies potential future research and my hopes for Métis people.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Growing up, I was fortunate to have my father instil in me an unwavering sense of pride in being Métis. I was also privileged to have my father hold a Métis political position for most of my life which provided me with the opportunity to observe the different points of colonial resistance and plights of Métis communities. Throughout my years of schooling, I was constantly questioned about what it meant to be Métis. The most commonly held assumption reflective of a societal misunderstanding was that I half native and half white; in order to take the easy way out, I agreed. However, I inherently knew that there was much more to me than simply being a hybrid, but being young, I was not equipped with the tools to suggest otherwise, and as I got older, there were times that I just didn’t have the energy to justify what being Métis really entailed. My feelings of exasperation towards other people’s ignorance were laced with an aggravation that grew from having to repeatedly explain my identity to those who did not want to, or could not understand. As I entered my third and fourth year of my undergraduate degree, I knew that I had to explore what this ‘much more’ entailed, not only for myself and my community, but for others that do not know who the Métis are, and are subverted by the assumptions and misconceptions that plague Canadian society. As you will see below, this work is not an attempt to gain societal approval in who we are as Métis people, but to exert our voices, so that it becomes clear that we are still here, and have stories to tell about who we are. The following chapter will explore the scholarship that encompasses the notions of recognition, coming to know the ‘self’, Métis identity, personal narratives as knowing, and the Métis lived experience, thus providing the conceptual framework that informs my research.
The importance of self-recognition

To be clear, I did not begin this work to articulate Métis lived experiences with the hope that our only source of recognition is derived from the government of Canada, or by Canadian society, rather I wanted to be recognized by the spirits of my ancestors, myself as a Métis woman, and my kinship alliances. In writing about recognition, Cillian McBride (2013) advances, “The struggle for recognition which we all experience, to some extent, in our lives centres on the ever-present possibility of a serious clash between how we recognize ourselves and how others recognize us” (p. 41). As I have pointed out in the opening of this chapter and throughout this thesis, the misperceptions of non-Métis about the Métis people has had an impact on my identity and those of the participants. Thus, this research project is a way in which I and the participants can affirm the ways we recognize ourselves, in relationship to our kinships and lived experiences. Further, this research project serves to provide a space wherein Métis experiences are validated sources of knowledge and can exemplify how we recognize ourselves thus lending non-Métis the opportunity to become increasingly aware of what constitutes Métis being.

As Joyce Green (2011) points out, since the passing of Bill C-3 in 2010, “the federal government proposes to study and regulate Métis identity. This aim of regulating Métis identity was conveyed through suggestions that, among other things, federal agencies examine different Métis organizations for consistency of membership criteria” (p. 166). This is undoubtedly problematic for two reasons: first, the type of recognition is stipulated by the oppressor and not by the community; and secondly, it puts forward a standardization of identity that perpetuates the assaults of continued colonial policies. Green (2011) argues against the federal government regulating Métis identity and asserts that this standardization of the Métis is not in the best
interest of communities; “Recognition by the state, or ‘status’, always has been a tool of the colonial government intended to identify a discrete community for policy attention – the ultimate objective of which was assimilation – and to limit the financial liability of the colonial state” (p. 166).

In critiquing Charles Taylor’s essay on The Politics of Recognition, Cillian McBride (2013) asserts three problems that the politics of recognition fails to address, “that particular recognition may turn out to be as abstract and oppressive as some forms of universalism; that particular recognition may itself be deeply disrespectful; and that the desire for recognition may itself be a product of unequal power relations” (p. 35). Within a Canadian Indigenous context, Glen Coulthard (2014) also critiques Taylor’s essay while suggesting that the politics of recognition, while appealing on the outside, neglects to take into account the inherent colonial relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, thus concluding that the emancipation of the oppressed cannot result from being recognized by the colonizer. To elaborate further, solely relying on the federal government, or external colonial institutions will not free the colonized from the grasps of colonization and it is only when we, as Métis, turn within our own communities and ways of knowing that we will be able to establish a proper sense of recognition through our own understandings.

As experienced vis-a-vis non-Métis, my Métis-ness is recognized via my ‘mixed’ ancestry which, in many cases, is thought to be validated and measured through the blood quantum of my Métis lineage (I can hear the question now, how much Métis are you?). Jennifer Adese (2014) speaks to the detriment that misrecognition causes when the engrained racialized definitions of the Métis are cast upon us, “Historiographical literatures...have cast Métis through reductive lenses that above all else fail to present a picture of Métis on our own terms and
through our own senses of self” (p. 49). To refer back to McBride (2013), the struggle for recognition occurs when the recognition by others does not align with the recognition of self thereby potentially causing harm to one’s identity, or at the least, confusion. In order to exert what it means to be Métis based on our own lived experiences and realities, the research work that I have undertaken strives to bury the false ideas that demarcate our identity of being dependent on our half white and half native ancestry, or that we are solely a product of the fur trade while remaining a remnant of the past.

As a Métis scholar who specializes in the study of Métis identity, Chris Andersen (2008) asserts that the continued mis-recognition of the Métis neglects the distinctiveness of such groups, “Canadians continue to think about and position race as though it was ‘real’, an essentialisation which has important consequences for how ‘Métis’ is imagined racially rather than nationally” (p. 352). He further posits that these tendencies uphold and perpetuate the inherent power imbalance that is embedded in the process of colonization. To illustrate his argument, Andersen (2008) criticizes the Canadian census in suggesting the survey questions solidify the racialization of Métis people and further, affirm the notion of a homogenous population. Collecting personal narratives of Métis lived realities and experiences will reposition the topic of Métis identity to extend beyond thinking of ourselves as a racial construct.

To find a way out of the politics of recognition Coulthard (2014) relies on the works of Fanon and Hegel and reaffirms “that those struggling against colonialism must ‘turn away’ from the colonial state and society and instead find their decolonial praxis [as] the source of their liberation” (p. 48). Colonization has tried to teach me to define Métis through the eyes of the colonizer, thus the decolonial praxis is imperative to recognize myself through my own cultural lens. The turning away from the colonial state, as I perceive within my own Métis context, can
be exemplified through my research project. Through interviewing Métis individuals and exploring their personal experiences, I am looking within my community to access sources of knowledge to more deeply understanding what it means to be Métis. In pulling these scholarly discourses into our current context, Coulthard (2014) posits that our own ‘self-recognition’ is predicated on “the understanding that our cultural practices have much to offer regarding the establishment of relationships within and between peoples and the natural world built on principles of reciprocity and respectful co-existence” (p. 48). The turning away from colonial structures and refocusing attention to our own cultural practices instead will begin to lead me to a liberated sense of self-recognition.

In this regard, Leanne Simpson (2011) advocates for our own ‘decolonial praxis’ which situates a cultural resurgence that “requires us to reclaim the very best practices of our traditional cultures, knowledge systems and life-ways in the dynamic, fluid, compassionate, respectful context within which they were originally generated” (p. 18). I believe it is through this process that I can open up the way to transform myself and my communities. Lischke and McNab (2007) affirm this notion when they stress:

We are still here. Métis people know that fact as a result of their own knowledge of their identities, family histories, and communities. It is no longer sufficient to allow non-Aboriginal academics to define who we are and where it is we are going. The old worn categories and academic debate on who are the Métis people must be challenged and transformed by the Métis voices themselves – Canada’s forgotten people (p. 1).

Upholding and validating Métis voices and experiences enables me to challenge colonial constructs of the self while exerting an identity on my own terms and my own concepts of the self.
Coming to know the ‘self’

How we conceptualize the self is important when considering a Métis way of knowing and being. In the search for theories that can provide insight into the development of self, I first began by looking at authors that have explored narrative identity. According to Dan McAdams and Kate McLean (2013), “Narrative identity reconstructs the autobiographical past and imagines the future in such a way as to provide a person’s life with some degree of unity, purpose, and meaning” (p. 233) and it is through this process of narrating one’s life that individuals project to themselves and to others who they are and who they may become in the future. McAdams (2013) in relation to narrative identity stipulates that it is through the deployment of “three different psychological standpoints: as actors, agents and authors” (p. 273) that we come to know who we are. Through our life, we begin as an actor and progress through each stage, thus over time we develop the ability and the skills, through the later stage of the “autobiographical author” (p. 273), to be able to derive meaning from our experiences and tell a life story of where we once were and where we are going. I agree with McAdam and Mclean (2013) on their premise that we reflect our past occurrences and tell of them to make meaning and imagine a future, but what I do not support McAdam’s (2013) conceptualization that we come to understand ourselves solely through a process of psychological reasoning. I believe coming to know the self encompasses something much more profound, especially from a Métis way of being.

Understanding the self through the works of McAdam’s, left me feeling unfulfilled and unable to anchor the story of a Métis construction of self. Instead, I turned to Paul Ricoeur (1992), who first donned the conceptualization of narrative identity, to further illuminate the construction of self. Ricoeur suggests that the self contains two notions of identity at the same
time: “idem-identity” and “ipse-identity” (p. 2-4). Idem identity is described as sameness, the unchanging self, “keeping one’s word” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 118). Goodson and Gill (2011) express Ricoeur’s notion of idem, “which includes genetic information and the self in terms of physical and metaphysical continuity” (p. 7). Ipse-identity is “selfhood” (p. 116), “character” (p. 118) which “designates the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized” (p. 121).

While reading the works of Ricoeur, I am brought back to the exchanging of intimate conversations with Cree/Métis integrative therapist, Kerrie Moore, where I am gently reminded that we are human beings striving to have a spiritual experience on this earth. Moreover, Kerrie Moore reinforced the importance of transcending humanness on a daily basis in order to re-connect with our spirit and be reminded of and affirm our purpose on earth (personal communication, September 3, 2015). With this recollection, I have come to understand Ricoeur’s theory of the self as this: idem is what I would deem as the ‘spirit’ in which we were gifted by the universe and came into this world already embodying; ipse is the human manifestation, or expression of our spirit within. As Ricoeur (1992) suggests, idem and ipse do not eclipse, but affirm and overlap one another,

This overlapping, however, does not abolish the difference separating the two problematics: precisely as second nature, my character is me, myself, *ipse*; but this *ipse* announces itself as *idem*. Each habit formed in this way, acquired and become a lasting disposition, constitutes a *trait* – a character trait, a distinctive sign by which a person is recognized, reidentified as the same – character being nothing other than a set of these distinctive signs (p. 121).

The acknowledgement of the ‘idem’ as Ricoeur (1992) posits, “relation and a relation of relations” better positions me to find parallels within a Métis way of being because it affirms that
the ‘ipse’ and ‘idem’ are not two different entities, but ‘one and the same’ (p. 116). As I read and digest Ricoeur’s work, I and find parallels to Indigenous scholarly works and their conceptualizations of the self.

The formulation of the self, according to Willie Ermine (1995), transpires when we explore and better understand our existence in relation to the whole of universe; “The idea of our progenitors was to try to gain understanding in many of the greatest mysteries of the universe. They sought to do this by exploring existence subjectively; that is, by placing themselves in the stream of consciousness” (p. 104). Ermine asserts subjectivity as making meaning of the outer realm by turning to our “inner space” (p. 103); the “universe of being within each person that is synonymous with the soul, the spirit, the self or the being” (p. 103) what Ricoeur (1992) avows, ‘idem’. Through the process of introspection, we embody deeper understandings of the great mysteries, thus invoking the ability to create meaning of the physical realm (Ermine, 1995).

For Ermine (1995), deriving meaning and constructing knowledge from externalities is illuminated “through the stream of the inner space in unison with all instruments of knowing and conditions that make individuals receptive to knowing” (p. 108). According to Lelani Holmes (2000), the avenues for making one receptive to knowing the self “are not based on the limits of one’s own physical senses and may include prayer, prescience, dreams, and messages from the dead” (p. 37). As you will see throughout this thesis, I did not limit myself to a way of knowing that was solely predicated on earthbound relationships; prayers, dreams, and messages from my ancestors have been crucial in the formation and affirmation of the self.

Cathy Richardson (2006) asserts, “Métis identity is created through a process of social interaction and dialogic relationships between the inner world and the external world. Relations of unequal power serve as foundational influences negotiated by Métis individuals in the creation
of ‘the sense of Métis self’ (p. 57). I do not disagree with Richardson’s assertion, but I believe that unequal power relations are not the sole way in which Métis people construct their identities. I believe Métis individuals are also heavily influenced by their language, relationship to the land and spiritual practices. Métis scholar, Fyre Graveline (1998), affirms this idea,

In Aboriginal traditional forms, the spiritual infuses a person’s entire existence within the world. A spiritual connection helps not only to integrate our self as a unified entity, but also to integrate the individual in the world as a whole (p. 55).

The coming to know of who I am was through a process of introspection which involves connecting to my inner space in order to understand my spirit in connection with all entities. Further, formulation of the ‘self’ also envelops understanding and making sense of my experiences within social situations, environments, and institutions.

**Being Métis: moving beyond mixed-ness**

Through their extensive review of written and published Métis history, Dorion and Prefontaine (2001) reveal that, “Today, the Métis experience still remains a ‘hidden’ history best expressed by the memories of Elders and other community people” (p. 13). Furthermore, the authors suggest the historiography of the Métis, written by non-Métis authors, was saturated with studies of the fur trade, Canadian politics, or the 1870 and 1885 Riel resistance. To this end, the rich oral histories of the Métis were not given any attention by the colonizers (Dorion & Prefontaine, 2001). The dismissal of oral traditions allowed for a predominance of copious amounts of literature that was premised on biased assumptions of Métis. For example, Jennifer Adese (2014) critiques the extensive work of Marcel Giraud on the Métis and how the latent biases within his writing have perpetuated a racialized idea of the Métis:
If one of the foundational texts in Métis historiography, and the oldest academic study to involve any kind of Métis community-based research, is entrenched in racial (il)logics and does not move beyond framing Métis racially, then it is no surprise few academics since its publication have sought to consider what makes Métis, as a distinct people, who we are (p. 50).

Moving beyond static historical accounts and racialized identities produced about the Métis by non-Métis authors, is necessary in order to create spaces for Métis individuals and communities to reclaim their inherent right to define who they are on their own terms.

As previously mentioned, during the course of my undergraduate degree, the engagement with literature that addressed Métis experiences and identity in terms of fur trade relics caused me personal angst. I feel that this portrayal is not a reflection of who I am as a Métis person. My work echoes Carole LeClair (2008) as she suggests, “any dry discussion of race as population genetics or contentious cultural category says nothing to me about the parts that spirit and tribal memories play in constructing our physical and social selves” (p. 64). Restricting Métis identity and experiences to race-based accounts hinders the ability of Métis individuals to create their own identity and culture.

Chris Andersen (2014a) suggests that creating a single narrative of Métis peoples’ history that is framed within a singular place and time reduces the Métis existence to a mere afterthought; “in mummifying Métis community in the strands of Canadian commemorative fabric, [this practice] shortchanges the complexity, resistance, adaptation, and resilience of indigenous nations and their communities” (p. 620). In order to rectify the “violence of historical abstraction” (p. 625), he suggests “future research must seek to better embed the experiences of Métis communities in twentieth-century events and experiences by situating them in light of
broad macrostructural changes occurring globally, nationally, provincially, and regionally, in both the interwar and post-WWII eras” (p. 629).

In his newly published book, “Métis”: Race, recognition, and the struggle for Indigenous peoplehood, Andersen (2014b) fervently opposes the use of racialization to define Métis people. He suggests, “being Métis (at least politically) is about peoplehood, and thus it is first and foremost about historical and contemporary political self-consciousness and struggles as – or at least, as part of – the Métis in their ability to produce formal, people-to-people relationships” (p. 199). The term self-consciousness becomes integral as it suggests that a Métis sense of self sprouted from the personal and collective experiences that transpired through struggling with the colonial government in trying to maintain land rights and a way of life. This idea debunks the notion that being Métis is stringently rested in being of mixed ancestry and outdated historical accounts of the fur trade while situating groups of individuals as manifesting their own self-consciousness and peoplehood based on how they recognized themselves and their inherent rights to land and culture. Andersen (2014b) situates Métis self-consciousness and peoplehood as directly manifesting from the ability to collectively organize and assert themselves in a political manner however, his theory does not address of the role of language and spiritual knowing in Métis identity formation, which I believe leaves a void in understanding Métis ways of knowing and being.

Judy Iseke (2013) affirms that Métis people’s identity is not hybridized with each part being delineated and static, but rather they draw “upon the strengths of both Nations in the production of an emergent and ever evolving National identity – the Métis people of Canada” (p. 106). She also asserts that individuals navigated their identity construction through the “strengths of two parent languages (and other Indigenous language influences)” (p. 106) which has proved
to be challenging for “mainstream scholars, linguists, and everyday citizens to navigate and accept” (p. 106). Perhaps the difficulty of others takes place in trying to make sense of this organic osmosis of cultures into a new identity and culture.

Prefontaine, Dorion, Young and Racette (2003) refer to Métis identity in a more nuanced fashion that consists of much more than just mixed heritage and historical reminisces:

The fact is that the Métis developed their sense of nationhood not because of European and Euro-Canadian civilization or the Northwest Company or even Louis Riel. Rather it was the natural expression of their own reality in the context of their own social development (p. 20).

Situating a Métis identity in terms of a natural expression of a lived reality resonates with me and affirms my experiences growing up. Visiting my family in Boggy Creek and attending numerous Métis cultural events and political meetings, created experiences for me to define being Métis.

According to the Métis National Council there are specificities that determine who is Métis; “a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, is of historic Métis Nation Ancestry and who is accepted by the Métis Nation” (Metis National Council, n.d.). Further they assert the Métis, as a collective, embody “their own unique culture, traditions, language (Michif), way of life, collective consciousness and nationhood” (Metis National Council, n.d.). The intertwining of these components as expressed in the daily life of individuals make defining who the Métis people are somewhat complex as there is diversity among individuals and communities. Gregory Lowan-Trudeau (2011) indicates, “While certain similarities in language patterns, spiritual beliefs, and other cultural markers can be identified, the diversity between and within Métis communities and people in Canada is greater than their commonalities” (p. 65). Although there is diversity between Métis individuals and communities,
I do not believe that the diversity is so great it out shines the ability to hold a collective identity. Furthermore, Lowan-Trudeau (2011) suggests that because of the broadness in Métis worldviews, reducing the epistemology or even experiences for that matter, to a general definition will not suffice. The diversity of Métis identity prompts us to pay closer attention to the plethora of experiences when trying to create a holistic picture of the Métis. The complexities of being Métis are both a strength and challenge in determining what constitutes being Métis because it lends opportunities to explore and give voice to the diversity within a large Métis population, but to also shed light on the cultural similarities that are shared.

Duke Redbird (2005) believes “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” (p. 116). Furthermore, Redbird (2005) suggests that the emancipation of the Métis consciousness can be accomplished through the “evolution of self-actualization by the Métis individual” (p. 116) in relationship to cultural entities.

**Affirming Métis lived experiences**

Although there has been, and continues to be a void in academic literature that exemplifies Métis lived experiences (Marmon, 2001; Andersen, 2014b), it is important to recognize the individuals and groups who have conducted research, thus subsequently providing spaces and making significant gains for Métis individuals to have a voice in scholarly works.

In 1991, the Manitoba Métis Federation began conducting interviews for their subsequently published book, *Métis Elders’ Conference: Past reflects the present*. To illustrate the traditional ways of Métis communities, group interviews were conducted with groups of Métis elders. The excerpts reveal two emergences that are pivotal to a Métis worldview; the
nature of respect in all areas of Métis life and the role of elders in peoples’ daily interactions. The discussions among the Métis elders’ revealed their experiences with discrimination and racism, being labelled Métis, Indian and half-breed, dwelling on the land, kinship relationships and being proud of their heritage. Although this book was published over twenty years ago, it is timeless and relevant within today’s context in informing my research and has proven to be paramount in creating a nuanced, in-depth snapshot of being Métis.

Of interest, the Métis Centre, within the National Aboriginal Health Organization, conducted a similar study that occurred over a four year period and brought “participants together to recognize, share, protect, affirm, use and revitalize traditional health knowledge and healing practices” (Edge & McCallum, 2006, p. 87). Through a series of gatherings, approximately twenty elders shared their “wisdom, knowledge, and experiences to enhance the Métis Centre’s understanding of factors that contribute to Métis health and wellness” (Edge & McCallum, 2006, p. 87). Themes that emerged from these gatherings included the importance of language, healing practices, relationships with the environment, cultural knowledge, women’s roles in community wellbeing as well as identity.

By weaving together the personal stories of three Métis woman and herself, Louise Legare (1996) creates a collective narrative that depicts being a Métis woman. Sprouting from the collective narratives, she reveals three central themes: identity, family and soul murder. Through her own reflections, she comes to situate identity as having come from a certain lineage, languages, stories and experiences through colonization. Her reflections on family illustrate that the family kinship system was responsible for the transfer of knowledge. Most often, the transfer of knowledge was enacted through oral storytelling and provided essential lessons on how to live
a good life. Moreover, it was through these stories that a woman learned the role of a mother and their place in creation. Soul murder, as Legare (1996) describes,

“is a term [she] use[s] in order to describe inequalities that exist in the lives of the four Métis women participants...The stories describe destruction, survival, and a challenge for all of us to learn how to function in an equitable way” (p. 124).

Capturing the individual stories and then creating a collective narrative, Legare (1996) illustrates here that the essence of social relationships of Métis women is critical in envisaging a Métis way of knowing and being.

Through her doctoral work, Cathy Richardson (2004) illustrates the process that participants undertook to construct a sense of a Métis self based on their own experiences. The personal experiences of racism, discrimination and oppression provided an incubator for the creation of tactical strategies to maintain, or diminish their identity and overcome adversity. Strategies included employing the ability to pass for being either white or First Nation and creating a third space to which Métis individuals could freely construct a sense of the self. Her participants included a spectrum of being raised white and not having any knowledge of their Métis ancestry to being raised Métis in a Métis environment. This aspect of her research is where our works depart and do not fall into alignment. My focus is solely on participants that belong to a Métis community and grew up within a Métis specific context. Furthermore, I am cautious when approaching this project because I strive to distance myself from invoking a sense of mixed-ness, or hybridity in identifying oneself as Métis or any notion that dissolves being Métis from specific cultural aspects. Throughout her dissertation, she employs the terms ‘hybridity’ and ‘mixed-race’ which can deny that Métis individuals and groups are nothing more than being half white and half native. Although Richardson’s (2004) work is noteworthy with respect to
illustrating personal experiences and exploring how individuals employed tactics when trying to come to terms with their mixed identity in the face of colonization, I am hesitant when utilizing her work within my own research project.

In her research project, Judy Iseke (2010) focuses on “work[ing] with Métis Elders as collaborators to examine stories, histories, and pedagogies shared by Métis Elders in storytelling sessions” (p. 86). Through her work, Iseke (2010) relies on the stories of four elders in order to illustrate the importance of Métis knowledge systems in healing communities. Her work reveals the importance of spirituality to the identity of the elders while promoting a healthy sense of self and the impetus of ceremonies in acknowledging one’s relationships, and “support[ing] a good life and help[ing] with the healing and wellbeing of people, families and communities, and nations” (p. 94). Through her weaving of scholarly literature and elder’s stories, she is able to paint a picture of the importance of Métis ways of knowing for healthy communities.

Located in the Alberta community of Fishing Lake Métis Settlement, Yvonne Poitras Pratt’s (2011) dissertation examines the use of digital storytelling to achieve decolonization through the process of community members’ telling of their own personal narratives and by way of their overall involvement in the project. Within her research project, eight stories were captured and digitally re-told to illustrate the lives of eight community members. Upon completion of the digital stories, Poitras Pratt (2011) analyzed the stories while considering how survival manifested in each telling. The research work taken up by Poitras Pratt (2011) is significant in creating spaces for the telling and validating of Métis lived experiences. She was not only able to capture and uphold individual Métis stories, but she also illustrated a collective narrative of survival and showcased how the use of digital storytelling can be used as a tool for decolonization.
Personal stories as sources of knowing

When exploring Métis lived experiences and epistemology, relying on oral traditions and storytelling is foundational. Prefontaine and Barkwell (2006) suggest, “The oral tradition is a constant in the rich culture of the Métis. Thus storytelling is important among the Métis both for education and for entertainment” (p. 8). As a child I recall visiting Boggy Creek and listening to my family visiting, playing cards and reminiscing of the days gone by. With this in mind, I am reminded of the integral role of storytelling in learning about the self, family, community, nature and cosmologies. The use of storytelling in Métis culture was foundational for traditional education while teaching learners about their kinships, histories, and identity (Prefontaine & Barkwell, 2006). When I reflect on my life, I can thread together a series of stories that intersect and overlap to create the person I am today. Utilizing the stories of lived experiences has the potential to create a rich tapestry of Métis identity and history.

The stories of my ancestors assist in forming my identity and impact how I come to know myself. Jennifer Adese (2014) informs readers of the important role of the older people,

As the keepers of Métis worldviews and as those responsible for passing along these worldviews to future generations, kihteyayak/lii viyeu are the first and best source of information about Métis. They carry our histories in their stories, our visions for the future, they are caretakers of the ways of knowing of how Métis are Métis (p. 50).

Sadly though, Adese (2014) points out, discrimination, racism and oppression have caused Métis individuals to suppress their identity, hide who they are and shy away from talking about it. Heather Devine (2011) affirms this idea:

Denial of heritage is a survival mechanism that has been used by marginalized groups since time immemorial to hide from enemies...For some families, it may mean making
specific decisions to keep hidden all material evidence of aboriginal identity (e.g. language, customs, artifacts, folklore) from outsiders (p. 34-35).

Personally, this is a hard reality to acknowledge and one that has caused emotional turmoil. I remember my father telling me that he was not allowed to speak his Michif language in school and his parents, aunts and uncles would only speak the language in seclusion because there would be repercussions if they spoke Michif in public. There is a sense of grief when I acknowledge that my family had to choose to hide who they were because their way was seen as not valuable. Although stories like my father’s are difficult to hear, they speak of who the Métis people are today.

Specifically looking at personal narratives within an educational research context, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggest, “The main claim for use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (p. 2). In addition, the authors state that narrative inquiry is predicated on acknowledging that individuals are continually living out their storied lives and are consistently reflecting and creating stories as they experience situations, “a person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). In this view, through the use of stories, individuals are constantly creating and re-creating their lived realities and consciousness of who they are.

Storytelling provokes a certain way of thinking; a worldview. Gregory Cajete (2000) speaks to this idea, “through the oral tradition, story becomes both a source of content, as well as a methodology. Story enables individual and community life and the life and process of the natural world to become primary vehicles for the transmission of Native culture” (p. 94). Stories of both communal and personal experience are very much a part of who we are and thus
embedded in how we see the world. Lenore Keeshig-Tobias (1991) writes “Stories are not just entertainment. Stories are power. They reflect the deepest most intimate perceptions, relationships and attitudes of a people. Stories show how a people, a culture thinks” (p. 64). Both Cajete’s (2000) and Keeshig-Tobias’ (1991) ideas suggest that because stories are so intricately entwined with identity, we cannot separate ourselves from our story. Thus, interpretations of a lived reality become pivotal in assisting an individual’s formed notions and understandings of who they are; hence the role of traditional and personal stories become crucial in the construction of the self.

The exploration and pursuit of knowledge within relationships is the basis for conducting Indigenous research (Wilson, 2008). Within an Indigenous context, research could be defined as such: “every individual is engaged in a lifelong personal search for ecological understanding, the standard of truth in Indigenous knowledge systems is personal experience” (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000, p. 45). Rightfully so, research then, is predicated on the assumption that personal experience is embedded in the coming to know process that involves journeying through a myriad of relationships and experiences to establish meaning, purpose and context (Cajete, 2000).

Through the telling and re-telling of Métis lived experiences, I will be able to create and affirm my own Métis consciousness and identity. Situating research within a storytelling, or narrative framework and capturing these stories will not only increase the literature on Métis people, but can provide an opportunity for Métis communities to define themselves according to their lived realities. Accessing and telling stories of personal lived experiences can lead to providing a breadth of literature on the Métis people and allow communities to define themselves based on their own lived realities.
Conclusion

Dispelling untruths of Métis people and telling of truths that illustrate a nuanced tapestry of Métis realities and ways of knowing is at the heart of my work. As you will see in Chapter four and five, the words that are being spoken by individuals who have gained knowledge living within and through a Métis worldview, have enabled me to form new patterns of pride and a renewed sense of self. From my perspective, the expression of Métis lived experiences is paramount in creating and affirming the Métis self and situating communities in a meaningful place in the storied history of Canada. With respect to my research project, honing in on Métis lived experiences to explore realities and ways of knowing is vital in coming to understand who I am as a Métis individual and can offer others the same respect by assisting in creating spaces to do so.
CHAPTER 3: FINDING MY WAY TO THE STORIES

Coming to understand my own theoretical perspective has proven to be a challenge, especially when striving to articulate a theoretical framework through and premised on my own Métis perspective. Because I do not situate myself solely from an Indigenous traditional perspective, nor from a specifically Western scientific paradigm, there has been a constant battle to find myself within the parameters of academia while still honoring my roots. I have felt the need to find a framework that does not subsume Métis knowledge, but rather upholds my own worldview.

Maori scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1998) speaks to the difficulty of grounding oneself in academia when the development of theories and methodologies premised within Indigenous paradigms is just beginning. She asserts that Indigenous scholars are taking up the work to create new ways of theorizing that are predicated on “a real sense of, and sensitivity towards, what it means to be an indigenous person” (p. 38). Smith (1998), however, does not reject western theories entirely, but advises that at moments there will have to be a “dialogue across the boundaries of opposition” (p. 39). The act of decolonization in research agendas, Smith (1998) postulates, occurs when there is a focalizing of “concerns and world views and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes” (p. 39). Although Smith’s (1998) ground-breaking work on Indigenous research was published sixteen years ago, her words are relevant to our current time and place. This confirms for me the importance of incorporating my own perspectives and worldviews into my research paradigm, while working alongside western science paradigms.

Articulating the idea of Indigenous research agendas, Angela Cavendar Wilson (2004) posits, “We must look at the truths within our forms of knowledge and bring them forward to the
modern world while simultaneously working to transform the modern world to create a society more in tune with our traditional values” (p. 75). She further asserts that the survival of Indigenous people is not premised on physicality, but on the recovery of knowledge systems. Taking Wilson’s words to heart, I look within my own life experiences, as a Métis woman, in order to come to understand the theory I will be using to conduct my research. Peter Cole (2006) confirms for me that one’s theoretical framework is already embedded in a person’s daily practices and ways of being:

you could argue (if you were of such the mind to) that we had theories of nomadism and seasonal variation migration initiation the practice was we inhumed ourselves in and with the white blanket of winter but this was not an academically strategized model it was practice it was survival it did not rise or otherwise spread from rationalist scientist occidental epistemologies. (p. 27)

Through the works of Smith (1998), Wilson (2004), and Cole (2006) I begin to explore my own Métis beliefs and practices in order to conceptualize a theoretical framework that honours my own worldview.

**Grounding Self in Relation**

After spending a great deal of time considering an epistemological stance contextualized within my Métis worldview, it seems most fitting that for the purposes of my research, I find guidance and direction through storytelling. Through my reflections of growing up Métis, the first experience that comes to mind is eating supper around the family dinner table with my parents and four siblings. At our dinner gatherings, there was never a dull moment, or a time when you wouldn’t hear someone say, ‘remember that time when’, and then a story would ensue. The stories that were told meandered between the past, present and future. Supper would not
have been supper without someone getting teased from having their ‘can’t live that one down’ story told. What escaped me until now was the realization that through our storytelling, our relationships with each other, and ourselves in relation to the world were being created, renewed, affirmed and validated; the essence of who we were was being told and retold.

The story of my family suppers can find parallels with Shawn Wilson’s (2008) ideas of Indigenous ontology, vis-a-vis reality and truth:

rather than the truth being something that is “out there” or external, reality is in the relationship that one has with the truth. Thus an object or thing is not as important as one’s relationships to it. This idea could be further expanded to say that reality is (italicized in original) relationships or sets of relationships. Thus there is no one definite reality but rather different sets of relationships that makeup an Indigenous ontology (p. 73).

He further elaborates in suggesting, “They thus include interpersonal, intrapersonal, environmental and spiritual relationships, and relationships with ideas....Indigenous epistemologies is our systems of knowledge in their context, or in relationship” (p. 74). To capitalize on the succinct words of Wilson (2008), “Relationality seems to sum up the whole Indigenous research paradigm” (p. 71). For the purpose of my research, I invoked a theoretical framework premised on respectful, ethical relationships, a positioning that should not be taken lightly.

Peter Cole (2006) advises me on the principle of respect when implementing a research framework:

a framework is not just an architect/ural or /tectonic manifestation of a blueprint/ing it is the enactment of a respectful relationship with the rest of creation which shares this earth
with us a framework is never a noun never simply a metaphor it cannot be captured thus as a part of speech a figuration it is more than any words which attempt to denotate it a framework is a journey/ing with (p. 27).

This advice is ever more important when facilitating research that includes personal narratives. As Cole (2006) points out, the framework, and in my case the stories of lived experiences, involve the act of journeying with others and as we journey together, I need to purposefully remember that the act of exchanging stories and sharing one’s life conjures up the enactment of respect.

At the very core of relationality and identity formation is the enactment of the self journeying within relationships. Willie Ermine (1995) discusses the formation of Indigenous knowledge through the exploration of self through inward revelations and personal development. The exploration of the self encompasses a circle of relations that starts with the self and moves outward to the family, community, earth and universe (Ermine, 1995). Similar to Ermine, Graveline (1998) describes a process of inward and outward reflexivity deemed as the “Self-In-Relation” (p. 57). The self-in-relation suggests a link between the actions of an individual and the impacts and effects it has on the whole community, thus we are responsible through relationships to our community, family, universe and self (Graveline, 1998).

The role of stories within my research project is not only a method, but also an epistemology (Kovach, 2010a), thus formulating the story as not only the teacher, but also the structure within which the teacher functions. As Margaret Kovach (2010a) states, “Stories remind us of who we are and of our belonging. Stories hold within them knowledges while simultaneously signifying relationships” (p. 94). Rounding back to Wilson’s (2008) discussion of
reality, stories offer a relational conceptual framework that guided my research process, lending me the tools to gather and analyze the data.

**Storytelling as knowing**

As previously mentioned, I was challenged with the task of finding both Indigenous and Western perspectives that can intersect with one another to create a functional methodology. Lana Ray’s (2012) concept of “convergence methodologies” provides an avenue and a way to address my challenges. She suggests, “The term convergence does not imply an amalgamation but instead makes reference to a junction or a place in which two things meet briefly, then carry on their separate paths” (p. 92). The convergence of methodologies allows me to utilize my own Métis ways of knowing through stories and certain Western narrative methods throughout my data collection process. Ray (2012) outlines for researchers that the use of convergence methods allows each method to stay bound to the particular paradigm they originated from while encasing their specific values and beliefs. In addition, the converging methods only maintain a relationship within the space in which they physically occupy during the time of use.

In referring to the deployment of research methods, Margaret Kovach (2010a) advises that the method of use is not necessarily the defining element of the methodology, but rather the “interplay (the relationship) between the method and the paradigm and the extent to which the method, itself, is congruent with an Indigenous worldview” (p. 40). In addition, she buttresses this notion by bringing attention to the adherence of protocols within Indigenous communities and the recognition that the ways in which processes manifest matter.

My research project employs the method of collecting personal narratives as the primary source of knowledge gathering. Gregory Cajete (2000) speaks to the importance of story,
Through the oral tradition, story becomes both a source of content, as well as a methodology. Story enables individual and community life and the life and process of the natural world to become primary vehicles for the transmission of Native culture. (p. 94) This description illustrates that stories are intricately woven with identity, thus human beings cannot separate themselves from story. By soliciting personal narratives to explore Métis ways of knowing, I am making the assumption that “story is one if not the fundamental unit that accounts for human experience” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 4), and in the case of my research, the Métis experience. Cathy Richardson (2004) affirms this notion, “Narrative permits the methodological space for the Métis experience to be told and woven together structurally, thematically, and chronically in ways that make sense for Métis people” (p. 80).

Throughout my life, I have been intrigued by the role of storytelling in constructing meaning, both as a conduit of knowledge, and as a way to formulate identity. Thus it is no surprise that I have come to envelop storytelling as a tool to relate to others, share life lessons, and ultimately create my identity. Lenora Keesig-Tobias (1997) stresses the power of stories, “Stories, you see, are not just entertainment. Stories are power. They reflect the deepest, the most intimate perceptions, relationships, and attitudes of a people. Stories show how a people, a culture thinks” (p. 71). Conveying a personal experience through story opens up the possibility for others to relate to that experience. Jo-ann Archibald (1997) states,

Acquiring knowledge and codes of behaviour, are of course essential and are embedded in cultural practices; one which plays a key role in the oral tradition is storytelling. Some stories remind us about being whole and healthy and remind us of traditional teachings that have relevance in our lives (p. 14).
The stories research participants have shared are crucial to the co-creation of knowledge. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) affirm that,

> When one engages in narrative inquiry the process becomes even more complex, for, as researchers, we become part of the process. The two narratives of participant and researcher become, in part, a shared narrative construction and reconstruction through the inquiry (p. 5).

In becoming part of the process through listening to the lived experiences of others, I am called upon to pay close attention to my own learning and reflections in order to create meaning.

**Selecting Participants**

In selecting individuals for my research study, I purposefully chose four participants because I wanted to provide the opportunity for a rich dialogue to transpire without being pressured for time to interview each participant. Within this research project, there are two male and two female participants with a range in ages between 60 and 90 years; two are from Alberta and two are from Manitoba. In addition, a small participant cohort was chosen to provide adequate time for stories to unravel which honors and validates the lived experiences of the participants. Further, the small number of participants supports the use of unstructured interviews, which are a form of research as conversation. Moving into a research conversation indicates that the individual feels comfortable, and in turn can engage in rich dialogue and personal storytelling.

**Preparing for stories**

I conducted conversational interviews with the four Métis participants that specifically honed in on the telling of their personal narratives of Métis experiences. Although I provided the participants with research questions, I aimed to employ the questions as a guide or a prompt
rather than a linear, structured process in order to allow for a dialogue to flow. Kovach (2010b) upholds the conversational method in Indigenous methodologies by suggesting, “it is a method of gathering knowledge based on oral storytelling tradition congruent with an Indigenous paradigm” (p. 40). She further suggests that this method is based on relationality due to its dialogical nature in the act of sharing stories. Legare (1996) in her research work with Métis women, allowed the data to flow from their conversations:

   Stories which are housed in conversations, gave me the data which I was seeking in order to uncover some of the social complexity which I was attempting to describe and reflect on. It has been my experience that these stories emerge in a natural way during the process of conversing with one another (p. 47).

   Similar to Legare (1996), Archibald (2008) conducted research within conversational flows rather than a formal structured interview, “Research as conversation is characterized as an open-ended interview with opportunity for both sides to engage in talk rather than only one party doing most of the talking” (p. 47). Research interviews can lead to conversation when a certain level of trust is formed between the researcher and the participants. The formation of trust is predicated on the focussing of building relationships through the research journey. Forming respectful, meaningful relationships is at the centre of my research, thus I considered unstructured conversational interviews to be an appropriate data-gathering method.

   When gathering stories of individual’s life experiences, listening is an integral component of the research process because it is the precursor to being reflexive and respectful. Jo-ann Archibald (2008) states that listening is predicated on the utilization of both ears and heart in order to truly hear the essence of the story. The importance of listening to stories rested in the ability to not only ‘hear’ cognitively, but also to listen, as Archibald (2008) suggests, with other
senses. Archibald describes listening with the heart, “Listening involves more than just using auditory sense. We must let our emotions surface” (p. 8). Emotions are imperative to the research process wherein they guide the researcher and provide signals that point to important teachings along the way. In utilizing our emotions we begin to ask ourselves questions: why are these feelings arising for me? What can these feelings tell me about my relationship to the participants and stories? What are these emotions telling me about my own coming to know process? By utilizing my heart in the research process, I open myself to hearing the teachings that are important to this process.

Kovach (2010a) suggests when listening to and interpreting a story, reflexivity should inherently be part of the process. “Through the reflexive story, there is opportunity to express the researcher’s inward knowing” (p. 100). Exploring personal narratives automatically invites the researcher to engage with the research as participant in order to co-create knowledge and uphold the relationships. The role of reflexivity within my research process situated me as learner and provoked a sense of humility wherein I was there to learn about the topic and me as a human being. Being reflexive involved journaling, meditating, praying, smudging, dreaming, asking questions, and de-briefing in order to come to know oneself and the stories more deeply. The role of reflexivity supports Graveline’s (1998) “Self-in-relation” and Willie Ermine’s (1995) “inward and outward revelations”, and enacts an ethical relationship that is predicated on the inherent responsibility to do good work on behalf of my physical and spiritual relatives.

**Collecting Stories**

The participants were selected based on the following criteria: self-identifying as Métis, connected to a Métis community, 55 years of age or older and, where possible, from my father’s side of our family. From the initial conception of my topic, my first priority was to interview my
father’s four remaining siblings in order to explore my family’s history however, if they were unable to participate, I would then recruit other participants. Before contacting any potential participants, I conducted a smudge and offered tobacco with my prayers for guidance, to bring the participants who were meant to be in the project forward, and to release any of my expectations of what the research would provide. Unfortunately, two of my family members were unable to participate, but I was honored to have my father’s sister and brother agree to participate in the study. In approaching the recruitment of the two remaining participants, I reached out to a female Métis elder and a male community member; both of whom I had been acquainted with for some time. They both happily agreed. I accommodated the participants to the extent possible by travelling to their homes or a place that best suited them. Three interviews were conducted in person, and one over the telephone. Each interview was audio recorded and spanned between 60 – 90 minutes in length. When feasible, and before the interviews began, I provided the prompt questions to the participants so they would be more familiar with the focus of our conversations. Although we did have the question guide on hand, each interview was more conversational in nature. After all the interviews were complete, I transcribed each interview yielding between 14 – 21 pages of transcript. Upon completion, I sent the transcripts to the individuals that wished to view them for accuracy and/or if they would like to clarify or elaborate from the original interview. Allowing the participants to review the transcripts before I moved forward with the analysis and research writing acknowledged that they are still the owners of their stories and I am merely the caregiver of their narratives. I also wanted to ensure that I did not misrepresent the participants or misunderstand their words in any way.
Being reflexive in my process, after each interview, I spent a great deal of time reflecting on the stories of each participant while completing journal entries as a way to understand what I had heard, seen and felt. I conducted my story-listening in the summer month of July and during that time, and a long period following, I found a great deal of emotions that arose in me, so I conducted many smudge ceremonies to move past the sadness I was feeling. Through this research project, I realized that listening to people’s experiences and being an active participant in the construction of meaning, required me to practice self-care as a way of maintaining well-being. Coupled with reflexivity, smudging helped me ensure that I was speaking with confidence about my emotional processes so that I could clear the debris and continue to conduct the research in a positive way.

Choosing threads of truth from the storytelling

The telling of my research story encompasses narrative life experiences of four Métis participants, intertwined with my own lived experiences and interpretations. To frame the analysis, I explored my own story, interlaced with the stories of two female and two male Métis individuals. The questions that framed my analysis were:

1. What does it mean to be Métis?
2. How is being Métis made manifest in the lives of individuals?
3. How did/does being Métis inform how one lives/d their life?
4. What were some of the experiences growing up Métis?
5. What do the stories reveal about Métis ways of knowing?

The analysis and presentation of the data is much like the Métis sash in that it is compiled of threads, all different and unique, but all woven together to form one garment. The threads are all individually sewn, but from time to time they intersect and reveal commonalities at certain junctures. In addition, the threads are interdependent, while creating a whole. This means that if one thread is pulled out, the whole of the sash will unravel, thus marking the indispensability of
each participants’ story. Barkwell, Dorion and Hourie (2006) describe the Métis sash as, “a finger-woven belt made of wool worn by the Métis for both traditional and ceremonial purposes” (p. 81). Traditionally, the sashes were woven by hand, and included a variety of symbolically representative colours: red, blue, green, white, red and yellow. In addition, the sashes were customized to display certain patterns and colors to reflect a certain family or community. Just as stories have a place in the telling of our lives, the sashes served as a practical means in the day-to-day lives of the Métis people.

As I approached the stories, I lent my ears, mind, heart, and spirit to the listening process (Archibald, 2008), as I have an equal obligation to the stories themselves as I do the participants. I also conducted a smudge beforehand to ensure that I cleansed myself of any negativity, and could proceed in a good way while praying for guidance with my analysis process. As I began my analysis and interpretation of the stories, it became clear that I was to proceed with caution and hesitancy. I became acutely aware that I did not want to codify and/or thematize the stories to the point where they would be indiscernible and detached from the participants. Kovach (2010a) speaks to this issue: “Interpreting data and presenting those interpretations is less congenial for many researchers. Thematic groupings conflict with making meaning holistically...If we choose to write our research findings, then we must find form and content that honours them” (p. 129). Being guided by this, the narrative themes that I uncovered emerged from the words and phrases that resonated deeply with me and prompted me to reflect on what the stories were trying to tell me in relation to the research questions. Kerrie Moore explains that my analysis process would reveal themes conveying particular information that would be necessary and specific to this research journey (personal communication, September 3, 2015). In
other words, “the insights rise up from the passion and toil of self-in-relation” (Kovach, 2010a, p. 129).

Intertwined with the stories of the participants, are my own experiences, reflections and, interpretations within this research process. Because I am engaged in a close relationship with my participants, my own experiences and interpretations are equally as important as theirs, and thus are a reflection of my own coming to know process (Kovach, 2010a). I do not assume an objective and distant stance; rather, in order to position myself in a cultural way, I become fully subjective, and lend just as much of myself to the research as do my participants.

In contemplating how to represent the stories respectfully, Linda Tuhwai Smith (1999) guides me:

Storytelling, oral histories, the perspectives of elders and of woman have become an integral part of all indigenous research. Each individual story is powerful. But the point about stories is not that they simply tell a story, or tell a story simply. These new stories contribute to a collective story in which every individual person has a place (emphasis added). (p. 144)

Keeping this in mind, I consciously provided each participant with an individual space within this research text. Although there were commonalities across the stories that allowed for the construction of a collective narrative (see Chapter five), in Chapter four, I set out to position each story within the participants own framing, thus upholding the respect and representation of the storyteller and their story. Legare (1996) maintains the integrity of the narratives she collected by keeping the women’s narratives intact within her thesis writing. Allowing the words of the women to remain whole provided a space for the Métis experience to be expressed and validated. In addition, representing each story individually allows me to illustrate my own relationship with
each participant. Margaret Kovach (2010a) states, “A researcher assumes a responsibility that the story shared will be treated with the respect it deserves in acknowledgement of the relationship from which it emerges” (p. 97). To further situate my work, it is imperative that I note that the stories need to be held within the “life context of the storyteller” (Kovach, 2010a, p. 131) as a means of validation. To decontextualize the stories would be to not only harm the interpretation, but also the stories themselves.

During the analysis, I wrestled with the need to affirm my participant stories with literature. I decided that for Chapter four, I would not attempt to validate the participant stories with other scholarly work. I make this concession because I believe that Métis experiences in and of themselves, are a way of validating who we are as Métis individuals in amongst a collective of people. As I sat trying to write, with the pervasive need to ‘cite’ others in order to validate my work, I chose to position my participant stories at the forefront of the chapter because I considered them to be the expert in their own life context. Linda Smith (1999) asserts,

Every issue has been approached by indigenous peoples with a view to rewriting and rerighting our position in history...[Telling stories] is not simply about giving an oral account or a genealogical naming of the land and the events raged over it, but a very powerful need to give testimony to and restore a spirit (emphasis added), to bring back into existence a world fragmented and dying (p. 28).

**Upholding respectful relations**

One of the fundamental ethical considerations within my research is ensuring that I enact ethical relationships. With this in mind, I considered the following questions: How will I approach and involve the research participants; How will I involve them in research process:
How will I interpret the participant’s stories: and, how do I ensure that the stories of my research participants are represented in an ethical and respectful manner?

Based on my already established relationships with the participant prior to the research project, I ensured that the proper protocol when approaching them was followed. After the interviews were conducted, I made an offering to each individual, in the form of gifting that was in alignment with their lived context, to express gratitude and to honor the giving of their stories. In the same spirit of providing the participants, who so wished, with the opportunity to provide further comments or corrections to the transcripts, I sent a completed thesis draft to Art and Doreen, so that they have the opportunity to read the chapters, specifically my analysis and interpretation, and to offer feedback on my interpretations of their stories. I invited Auntie Mary and Uncle Jules to participate in the feedback process, however, they declined the invitation. Upon reading the thesis, Art and Doreen both indicated that they were happy with and honored to be a part of this work. Lastly, upon completion of this thesis, I sent a copy to each of the participants along with a gift to thank them for their participation and for gifting me with their stories.
CHAPTER 4: RE-STORYING MÉTIS SPIRIT

When I speak
I choose the words gently
asking the whys
dangerous words
in the language of the newcomers
words releasing unspeakable grief
for all that is lost
dispelling lies in the retelling
I choose threads of truth
than in its telling cannot be hidden
and brings forward
old words that heal
moving to a place
where a new song begins
a new ceremony
through medicine eyes I glimpse a world
that cannot be stolen or lost
only shared
shaped by new words
joining precisely to form old patterns
a song of stars
glittering against an endless silence
(Jeanette Armstrong, 2005, p. 236)

I come bearing stories; not only the stories of four Métis individuals, but my own story as a Métis woman. The above excerpt taken from Jeanette Armstrong’s (2005) poem, Threads of Old Memory, truly encapsulates my research journey. I began this journey carrying within me an unspeakable amount of grief that at times rendered my ability to write about my research work. The grief that I speak of came from the recent loss of both my parents and was compounded by the generational loss of my grandparents, language and connection. I struggled to put words on pages and to form any cohesive stream of thought. In early September 2015, I had a conversation with Cree Métis integrative therapist, Kerrie Moore, and she gently reminded me that my research work is a ceremony. She explained that the writing phase of my research project was similar to the rounds of a sweat lodge ceremony, and as such, I was entering the fourth and final
round (personal communication, September 3, 2015). Regardless of the personal dilemmas I was encountering, I needed to journey forward in order to heal. Her words resonated as true to me, and I knew that irrespective of the limitations and restrictions that I had placed upon myself, I had to push through my pain in order to tell this story. Circling back to Jeanette Armstrong’s (2005) words, I purposely chose this excerpt to reflect my way forward:

I choose threads of truth than in its telling cannot be hidden and brings forward old words that heal moving to a place where a new song begins.
(p. 236)

For the purposes of this chapter, I will display the individual threads of personal narratives interlaced with my reflections of each story. I would like to acknowledge my participants’ courage in telling their stories; I could not have reached this point without their willingness to share them with me. Listening to and reflecting on the stories allowed me to heal, grow, laugh, transform, become more confident of my identity and to conceptualize a Métis way of knowing. I need to state explicitly: I do not wish to speak for my participants, but I do wish for you, as a reader, to be able to imagine that you are sitting with us as we journey together and explore Métis ways of living, being and experiencing.

**Longing for my grandmother**

March 29, 2011, the day after my father passed, I was filled with exhaustion and decided to take a nap. While I was napping, I was brought out of my sleep because I could feel someone waiting at my bedroom door. I rolled over and sat up to see who it may be. There in the doorframe, stood my father and my grandmother. Being exhausted, and not fully fathoming what I just saw, I went back to sleep. When I awoke, I began to comprehend what had taken place, and
tried to make sense of the visit from my father and grandmother. I equated the significance of that experience to my father letting me know that he was well, but it wasn’t until just recently that I realized that he was accompanied by my grandmother so that I could meet her. You see, my grandmother passed on to the spirit world in 1958; two decades before I was born. Growing up, I always longed to know her, to know if I was like her, to know how she lived her life as a Métis woman. Before meeting her on that March day, I didn’t fully understand that she was a part of me, and her knowledge was already embedded in me and contributed to who I am as a Métis woman. Leilani Holmes (2000) suggests that “knowledge is passed to others in the context of relationships and deep feelings of connection....Knowledge also passes through the generations; thus Hawaiians are united with the kupuna of generations past. [She] called this knowledge blood memory” (p. 46).

In July 2015, I travelled back to Boggy Creek, Manitoba, in order to attend the annual Shell River Métis Jamboree, and to interview my Aunt for this research project. The specific place where I would be spending a short, and not long enough spurt of time was where my father grew up, and where my grandmother had passed away. I inherently knew that the return to my family’s homestead was seeded with an overwhelming need to re-connect to something much greater than myself; I was searching for answers to the deep-seated questions of “who am I” and “where do I belong”.

Although I grew up in Calgary, Alberta I have a deep connection to the place where my family has resided for over a hundred years. I took with me a black and white picture of my grandmother sitting on a car; I wanted to use the picture as a way to invoke family stories. While I was showing the picture of our grandmother to my cousin, who still lives on the family homestead where she passed, he got excited and told me that he still had the grill from the very
car that she was sitting on in the picture. Needless to say I was surprised and excited! The next
day I went for a walk over to the homestead, and visited the spot where my cousin had placed the
grill against the tree in approximately the same place where she would have passed from a heart
attack while baking bread. As I placed my hand upon the grill, I became emotionally charged,
and I could feel her spirit radiating around me. There was an acknowledgement from deep within
me that my blood was remembering.

**Reflection: Letting go of longing; affirming blood memory**

These experiences that transpired before and during my research journey are pivotal
learning moments for me in relation to this project. The ability for me to speak about a Métis
way of knowing evaded me as I thought that my father was the bearer of Métis ways in which I
would look to gather my own identity. As one can imagine, the impact that his passing had on
my thoughts of identifying as Métis were damaging. However, it wasn’t until I met with my
grandmother on that day in July at the homestead that I recognized that who I was, as a Métis
person, was inside of me the whole time. This was an extremely freeing and affirming moment.
This revelation enabled me to envisage that all of the experiences in my life provides me with the
authority to speak about being Métis, a responsibility I never thought I was worthy of bearing.
My experience, and my spiritual, ancestral and community connections allow me to speak from
my own Métis perspective.

**Auntie Mary Langan (nee Bouvier)**

Auntie Mary is the oldest of ten children, a “young” and healthy lady of 89 years old, and
the elder sister to my father. She was born, raised and continues to reside in Boggy Creek,
Manitoba. Her first language is Michif, and although she does not speak the language fluently
anymore, she has a prevalent Michif accent. Seen in her stories below, I keep her voice intact and
reflective of her Michif accent. I use the term young because while I was visiting she made it clear that she didn’t see herself as old. In 2002, the Manitoba Métis Federation acknowledged her and deemed her an elder, but when asked if she saw herself as an elder, she responded by saying that an elder was a role for the older ones. My cousin and I chuckled because we weren’t sure if there were any ‘older’ Métis individuals in the community. She is small in stature, but her spirit and determination are not captured in her size; even at the age of 88 (at the time of the visit) she wanted to help assist carrying and stowing away tables at the end of the Métis Jamboree. I have known Auntie Mary for my entire life. Each summer, when we would make our annual trip back to Boggy Creek, we would always stay at Auntie’s house; she was an important part of my dad’s life and subsequently has become an important part of mine. When I first decided to take up this research project, I felt that it was very important that she be given the opportunity to participate. I am honored she agreed.

Our discussions began with the passing around of family photos, and reminiscing of a Métis life. I began by asking Auntie Mary what it was like growing up Métis:

Vicki: So do you remember families trying to get together a long time ago?
Mary: I don’t remember that there again, I was too young I guess, but they never bothered like, they didn’t hear anything about Métis, just now everybody’s trying to get their card
Vicki: So did you know you were Métis growing up, or what did you guys call yourselves?
Mary: Well we just, I don’t know, just like now, but long time, we didn’t know anything about it, nobody bothered

I was intrigued by this exchange because in that moment I wondered if it was less about people not knowing about being Métis, and more about people not needing to make claims to being Métis because it was just how they lived their life. From there, our conversation flowed naturally in to discussing entertainment and fun and segued into a humorous story:
Vicki: So did you guys have fiddle music and stuff growing up?
Mary: Well not too much just the ones that played them music like, we didn’t have all these, well we had no power in dem days, but we had batt’ry...we first got power, then we used to use lamps all the time we going down stairs in our udder house and she’d always come and visit us, Jules’ cousin, they used to always come visit us and we were going downstairs, kind of a stairs here and we had the light here, bulb it’s when we first got hydro she was trying to blow it and I couldn’t help but telling her that that was electricity in that
Vicki: Oh, she was trying to blow it out
Mary: She tried to blow it out she thought it was a lamp, a coal lamp, (laughs) boy we laughed
Vicki: How did you meet, your Jules, your husband?
Mary: I don’t remember how we met, probably at a dance some place, he was in the army
Vicki: At a dance? Was there lots of dances
Mary: Oh yea, had lots of house parties, just t’row the furniture out to dance (laughing)
Vicki: well that’s what dad said, dad said he remembers just clearing out houses and everybody would just dance
Mary: Til late in the morning, well I didn’t go to too many dances, don’t know how come
Vicki: Did grandma and grandpa have lots of those little house parties?
Mary: There weren’t too many at home, no. I guess too many kids too and we didn’t have too much room
Vicki: Would there be fiddle music at those dance parties?
Mary: Oh yea, they had the fiddle they used to call, call square dances, yuh
Vicki: In the house?
Mary: Yea

We both had a pleasant chuckle when she told the story of the light bulb. Previously seeing pictures of the log home that stood on the homestead, I could imagine the loud jigging steps on the floor boards as they danced to the caller’s instructions. Slowly we meandered our way through our conversation and arrived in a space that allowed us to talk about language:

Vicki: So do you wish that there was more people to speak Michif with you, or Cree?
Mary: Oh I wouldn’t mind, but I don’t talk it that much now
Vicki: Yea
Mary: I hardly talk, never talk Cree now. My kids, they tell me why don’t you talk Cree to us. Well nobody to talk with too.
Vicki: Yea...did they ever talk about starting lessons or anything at the Centre?
Mary: Once they did but they couldn’t get nobody to come and teach us
Vicki: Oh
Mary: Yea, or there wouldn’t be enough, I forget what it was...they had it in San Clara, a lady from Swan River, no not Swan River...but nobody was interested in too much of it nobody hardly talk Cree now
Vicki: Yea, is it, do think it’s because everybody just talks English now, do you think?
Mary: Yea I think so and the young generation’s all English now
Vicki: Yea
Mary: I don’t think they boddar
Vicki: What was it last night we had said, if English would have never been in the schools you probably would have just kept talking Cree, eh?
Mary: Yea, they probably would have kept, but everybody’s in English now
Vicki: Yea, was the schools run by priests and nuns or just Mort’s wife?
Mary: Teachers, yea the white teachers
Vicki: Just the English, or did they speak French too, or just English?
Mary: Just English. Cree, couldn’t talk Cree, couldn’t talk English
Vicki: Would you try to talk Cree in school at all?
Mary: They would talk...I don’t think I’ll go back to Cree now
Vicki: No, too many English speakers?
Mary: Yea, the young generation, well school too, I guess they have to go with English

This particular part of the interview invoked sorrow within me, because like my cousins, I wish that my dad would have taught me Michif. Hearing that Aunty wishes that she could have someone to converse with in Michif alarms me because I recognize those chances are limited and diminishing due to the lack of speakers. As we got further along in the conversation, the memories began to flow more readily. Without any prompts, Auntie tells me of what it was like for her growing up:

Mary: Well that's what's happened, we worked hard, not like today them kids boy, we used to get up early in the morning milk cows, separate the milk, do all the wash, wash clothes, put the tub and the wash board, it was like we enjoyed it, it never boddar us, wash the floors, it was all wooden floors, scrub them with the brush, we were short of a broom, like we couldn't buy a broom, they had the little, I don't know how you called them, willows, we used go cut, tie them together, we used to always white wash our house, we never had no paint. I don't know what else I could remember...We used to have pigs, chickens and then, my mom and dad when they used to go someplace, like in the wagon, used to go to Grandmas, Theresa and I would bake, one time we, bake and come and sell eggs here at Chip's here, we sold all our eggs, we had no eggs to bake. Them days we never locked the chickens we had them all over outside running. Theresa and I now before we baked no eggs, what the hell had to buy, was it raisins or something, brown sugar, or sugar, and we were short anyway. Took all our eggs and sold
them to Jim, after we had no eggs to bake. We started looking around the bush here there was a chicken with a bunch eggs. (laughs) We always had chickens and pigs, used to make gardens, it was a pretty good life like, had to work hard

Vicki: Had to go pick berries in the bush?
Mary: We used to go and pick berries, this bush here, this was all pin cherries here, cranberries, but we used to come and pick in the, sneak cause these people, Joe Johnson had this place here, by the lake over there they used to live, used to have a bunch of dogs, we were scared of dogs, come and sneak on their land and pick

Vicki: Did you guys make jams?
Mary: Yea, we used to make jam, and the people beside us there, used to come with them, they used to pick them pecans, big big bags full, oh we used to be so itchy, used to bang the bags on the ground and get them moist and peel them and they come off

Vicki: Break the shell?
Mary: Used to use our teeth, no wonder I guess we got false teeth today (laughs), or the hammer, with the hammer break them

Vicki: So lots of farming?
Mary: Well we didn't have too much to farm, we just had this little field here, I had broke the horse one time, a bunch of horses, six I think, or four...my dad was always sick like, well not only me, Jackie and Theresa, well Theresa not too much and Clara, we started the and we had to go to school yet, do all these chores and go to school in the morning that’s what I told you, we’d miss school like, not like today can’t miss school

Listening to my Aunt describe her day to day activities sprouted a deep appreciation for the hard work that my family undertook in order for me to have a good life; I tried to imagine the homestead bustling with vibrancy and life in order to ensure the survival of the family. Through talking about her school experience, the topic of baptism came about. I asked about the family’s participation in mass:

Vicki: So did grandma and grandpa go to church lots too?
Mary: Well we didn't go too much, my dad used to go to church, mom had the kids, all the kids. My grandma never missed church, didn't have far to go, she used to walk there from here to Armand's I guess

Vicki: Oh up top the hill?
Mary: She used to always wear a big dress in the summer time, I don’t know how she did it, and buttons all the way down...I used to go and stay, come and get me to go and stay over there, Uncle Arthur, used to look after her...I used to cry, used to be lonesome for home cause there was nobody else there, I remember that
I was quite surprised, actually, that my grandma and grandpa didn’t attend church more often. My Aunt attends mass regularly which I attributed to the routine attendance of my grandparents. As she spoke of my great grandmother, I recalled a story I heard once before so I asked Auntie if she was speaking about the woman that used to walk late at night; she replied with a chuckle, “no, no, Auntie Santoine, there’s another story again”:

Mary: My dad’s sister, used to live way on top of the hill, where that, go and live there Santoine, Bill LaPlante bought that after, but she used to come to the store, she was a night lady I’ll say, oh late at night and she’d just, she used to smoke lots and she’d just stand there and roll the cigarette, them days they didn’t have, and talk and talk she used to come walking at home, and then her too she, they, I don’t know why they send me to go and stay with her, I don’t know where her husband was gone, her husband and the boys, and Eva was never home, well I guess she was old enough already, she quite a bit older than me, well not quite a bit, anyway, went home with her no light at night, we used to go across here, where Wally is now straight up, had fences, she used to walk and I was scared at night.

Vicki: You had to walk with her?

Mary: That’s quite a ways from here and, and she’d go, bump the fence, they had gates there again she’d go, and then there was some people living down the valley there, McGregor’s, and they had a great big dog and I guess they were used to her though, boy soon as they, dem dogs would hear her come, they, dogs know a long ways, they hear them, here, the dog was barking, Auntie I said, I’m scared, don’t be scared she’d tell me and she and the dog was coming and barking and I was so scared just come and wiggle its tail, they knew her I guess, cause not the first time she walked and then we had to go across the bridge there wasn’t too strong like it, well vehicles used to go through there and then up the hill again where she lived then, we’d get home never mind looking for the cows, the cow bell, 12 o’clock at night I think it was, bell were to get the cows, they were out in the pasture but not too far from there I guess, we’d hear the bell, chase the cows home now to milk, separate the milk, and then go to bed, we’d eat before, I guess we never ate, we must of ate at home here, oh that’s a long time, and then we’d milk cows go to bed and again next morning we just, like the cows we let the cows go again we had to go and look for the cows, dinner time by the time they, laughing all the time, no worries.

Vicki: Busier life back then?

Mary: Harder life, yea, us, we used to milk early in the morning and let the cows go, used to milk after supper like, milk after supper, finish early, I don’t know why she was such a late lady? She was the only one like that, no worries, I guess she had worries, but to me just like she had no worries (laughs)
This story is quite amusing! There is a huge hill (we call it the Boggy Creek hill) that you have to travel in order to get to my Aunt’s house, so the fact that Aunt Santoine would travel that at night was awe-inspiring! I could imagine both of them on their excursion late at night in the dark and trying to make it back home. Hearing about the day-to-day happenings on the homestead, I inquired about the role of hunting, trapping and plant harvesting in relation to their livelihood:

Vicki: Was there any hunting or trapping, anybody hunt or trap in the family?
Mary: Oh yea, lot of people used to go hunt and trap, one day my dad wanted me to shoot a rabbit, I couldn't shoot it, it was looking at me, that rabbit, dad I said, I can't shoot. Lots of rabbits, my Aunt's in the valley, my great Aunt, used to kill lots of rabbits, they would buy the hides, lots of trouble to skin the hide.
Vicki: So small eh, did they used to get any deer or moose or anything?
Mary: And we used to go and dig roots there where all them spruce trees are, the dump there, but there was no spruce tree, used to go there every day to go and dig roots, hot weather, my grandma, my, my great aunt I guess and her two daughters.
Vicki: And what did you use the roots for?
Mary: Sell em, some use them for medicine, not too many, I think just, our neighbors here.
Vicki: They still go pick for roots, now? people around here?
Mary: Yea he still picks, he sells them for a good price, but their hard to get by the time you get to town, get a good price.
Vicki: So did you ever make anything with the rabbit fur?
Mary: They used to sell them, we never did, used get to, my dad used to set snares for them, but he wasn’t a hunter, my dad.
Vicki: Yea, did you guys make your own clothes?
Mary: Well sometimes, but not too much, my mom never, she had no time to sew I guess with a bunch of kids, and.
Mary: Well we didn't buy too many, sometimes we would wear the same clothes for a week, we didn't have much clothes I guess. Not like today boy, everyday you change.

When she mentioned having to wear the same clothes for a week, I remembered my dad telling us children that he would have to construct makeshift shoes out of materials in order to walk to school each day. We always thought he was pulling our leg and we would laugh it off; in
retrospect, I now suspect he was telling the truth. Thinking about coping with winters, I asked about the house during the cold:

Vicki: So did you guys have big stove in the house to keep warm in the winter?
Mary: We had a stove had to go out, used to cut the wood, my dad used to cut the wood, my mom used to help him and then, bulk it up and everything, all winters and summer in the winter time they used to cut it

My grandfather was born in North Dakota, United States and eventually moved to Manitoba with my relatives in the early 1900’s, to the best of my family’s speculation. In trying to find out more about how my family ended up in the United States and subsequently back to Canada, I asked my Aunt about this:

Mary: My dad was just coming this way, I forget now
Vicki: Yea, he didn’t say how he ever got to the States?
Mary: He never told us anything in em days, they never used to tell us, they used to move and everything, we would hear from other people more.
Vicki: Did they move a lot?
Mary: Not after they got here, they stayed right here, my dad stayed in the same place, well after, well he used to stay with Santoine and Auntie Florence, he used to stay all over, he stayed with us there for a while.

Unfortunately, not much was uncovered in terms of my family’s travels from the US to Canada. This may be a part of our history that I will not uncover. Listening to my Aunt divulge that her parents never spoke of the past, I asked if her grandparents, or parents ever told stories to the kids when they were growing up:

Vicki: Did your grandparents, your mom and dad ever tell you stories, lots of stories?
Mary: Too busy working I guess, never said, never told us, not too much
Vicki: No, even in the winter time when it was cold and everybody was in the house?
Mary: We had no time, but in the winter time we never used to milk too much cause just too cold, I guess we did milk, yea

Hearing this was not a surprise to me because growing up I didn’t hear very many stories about my father’s experiences or of his family memories. I recall feeling a sense of loss because I was not given stories that could connect me to my ancestors, and up until now, a void was present
in my identity. Emerging from a conversation about a New Year’s Eve celebration, I asked about
the community gatherings that were held:

Vicki: So they didn’t have any Métis gatherings like they have now, yea?
Mary: That’s what I said, there wasn’t hardly no Michif, I guess we were the Michif’s...I just live my life. We used to pick lots of berries in the summer time, we used to go with the wagon, one time Freda in the winter time she wanted to go pick Saskatoons, she cried, she wanted to go pick Saskatoons, it was too cold, oh it was so nice in them days
Vicki: You never took the kids out, Auntie? (jokingly)
Mary: Well we never did go out too much just to go and pick berries, hitch, oh yea, they used to have picnic once, on Sundays down the valley here, and my dad used to, we had to mix ice cream, mom used to sell ice cream, churn with this ice cream, put ice around and put milk and eggs when finish ice cream we all dressed up and we go and dad had, going down the boggy dad used to have to tie a rope with the wheels cause used to go too fast for the horses got there then little bushes and tied the horses there used to take em feed and they’d had, played ball there was there lots of people then there was three or four ladies that time, Mrs. Davie, Mrs. Parker, used to make ice cream, dollar a cone, twenty five cents a cone, no five cents a cone, I think it was.

Reflection: Power of stories to heal

Upon leaving Boggy Creek, I was filled with a sense of belonging, connectedness, fulfillment and happiness. Spending time with my relatives and hearing my Aunt tell of familial stories allowed my roots to grow and extend thus provoking a sense of grounding in relationship, experience and knowing. Below you will find the themes that spoke to me while I listened to her experiences.

Being Labelled ‘Métis’

Through the entire time that I visited with Auntie Mary, it became very apparent to me that growing up Métis for her was not something that was outwardly stated, but instead was enacted in one’s relationship to the family and community. There seemed to be no need to label oneself, as she indicated in her interview, one was not labeled as Michif, they simply just lived their life. Most of the people in Boggy Creek were Métis, so this would suggest there was no
need to call yourself Métis, because everyone knew who you were. At one point during my stay, I asked her when the term Métis became used as a term to describe themselves, and she indicated that it became prominent in the early 1990’s. This is timely because it aligns with the amendment to the 1982 Canadian Constitution section 35.2 in which the Métis were included under the definition of Aboriginal peoples of Canada, and could explain such a cause. I grew up using the term Métis to identify who I was, so I can’t help but wonder if taking on term Métis was strictly a political maneuver in order to position oneself in relationship to the government and other non-Métis, or was it an act of recognition?

A Way of life

My aunt indicated that growing up on the homestead was much harder than what the young people face today. The survival of the family and community fueled the hard-work that my aunt spoke of in her story. There was a deep reliance on the land where my family dwelled. Hunting, trapping, harvesting berries and roots, raising farm animals, and planting gardens was part of their everyday life. The importance of the homestead’s sustainability is evident in the children having to miss school in order to take care of all the chores. Auntie Mary remarked, at one point during my visit, that she was only able to complete school until grade five. This may be indicative of the view that in the daily life of the children, school-based education didn’t serve a necessary purpose. Nonetheless, she seemed to have no regrets, as she says, “it was like we enjoyed it, it never bother us”.

Humor and entertainment

The hard work endured on a daily and weekly basis was surely shaken off when house parties would ensue until the early hours of the morning. The furniture would all be thrown outside, and a space would be made for the fiddle music, jigging, and square dancing. Regardless
of the hardships that occurred, there always seemed to be time for entertainment and fun. Alongside the importance of music and dance in my aunt’s life, her stories were always laced with a sense of optimism and humor. She told me that after her first visit to the doctor (which I should note was not until the latter part of her life) she has been taking lots of pills for various things, and she just laughed it off indicating that as a result of her visit to the doctor, she was falling apart.

**Language**

Michif is my Aunt’s first language, and the only one spoken at home until the children started going to school. During my time with her, she indicated that once she started school, there was pressure from the teacher to only speak in English. While I was visiting, I learned that my aunt participated in another research study that solely focussed on Michif where she was recorded speaking fluently with another Michif speaker. I was surprised by this because I had never heard her speak more than a few words in Michif. After hearing this, I asked her if she wished to speak Michif more and she indicated she would not mind, but that there is no one to speak with. She indicated there were efforts to teach Michif in San Clara (a hamlet not far from Boggy Creek), but there was little interest, and nobody to teach the language. I wonder, if, as my aunt points out, the fact that “everybody just talks English now” contributes to the lack of interest for individuals to take up the revitalization of the language? I know there have been initiatives to revitalize Michif, but nothing on a large scale. In addition, the lack of Michif speakers also might contribute to the inability to teach the language. And for my own learning of the language, I wonder if my urban residence also contributes to my own challenges of taking up Michif?
Kinship

The role of kinship within the lived experience of my aunt permeated her stories. Even though she never verbally identified her kinship alliances outright, her stories indicate that her identity as a Métis woman was formulated through her relationships. Through the telling of stories, I soon realized that my Aunt has an invaluable breadth of knowledge on the community of Boggy Creek and San Clara. She could tell me who was who, and where everyone lived at one point or another. She revealed to me the communal nature of activity which could be seen through individuals cutting down trees and delivering logs to each family homestead, of people picking each other up to attend New Year’s eve mass, of calling on each other to help sow potatoes, milk cows, or provide someone else your war ration tickets so they could get the goods they needed. I especially found relevance in the story she told about my grandmother helping my grandfather split wood for the winter. Being equal in the household and the community was vital.

No stories to tell

From the outset of my Aunt agreeing to participate in the research project, I sensed a nonchalant attitude that suggested she did not feel or think that she had stories worth telling me about being Métis. This was evident even within her interview, where, at one point she remarked “well that’s what happened”, as if there was no weight or bearing to the experiences that she was telling. Her stance reminded me of my father and the lack of stories I was told about his experiences growing up; there was no information forthcoming. On a few occasions during the interview, Auntie Mary indicated that her grandparents and parents never spoke freely, or often of their experiences and circumstances. In trying to find out more information about how my family came to reside in Boggy Creek, my Aunt could not recall her parents telling of the family history. Upon reflection I contemplate: was this a survival mechanism that was employed after
the Riel Resistance of 1885 as a way to keep hidden the discrimination and fear that the Métis felt after being targeted by the government? Furthermore, because the Métis were subjected to colonial mentalities and othering, my family may have invoked a level of secrecy because they believed their stories were not worthy of telling.

**Uncle Jules Bouvier**

Uncle Jules is the seventh child born to my grandparents, and is 77 years old. He is the elder brother to my father by seven years. He was born and raised in Boggy Creek, Manitoba and left when he was 15 years old. To obtain work in various capacities, my uncle travelled to many places throughout Canada during his lifetime. In the early 80’s, he moved to Calgary to work for the city water works department. When I was young, I remember my father taking my siblings and I to visit my uncle in his downtown Calgary apartment. Because he lived in Calgary, we were able to visit him more often than my other relatives. I also remember Uncle Jules attending many of the Métis functions that my dad organized for the Calgary Métis. Like my Aunt, his first language is Michif, but he now converses solely in English; he also bears a strong Michif accent. Speaking with my uncle was especially moving because the way he speaks is very similar to my father. Because of the similarities in speech, during certain points of our interview there were times when it seemed as if I was speaking directly with my father. Even at the very end of my interview he concluded with “bye bye my girl” which is very much a Métis phrase, and also something my dad used to say to me. Although a small sentiment, it reminded me of my kinships connections, so that I am very honored to have been able to re-connect with my uncle and spend time interviewing him.

Our conversation began with talking about where he attended school in Boggy Creek and lead to discussing language:
Jules: Well yea, we were all Métis in that community there so we all went to the same school
Vicki: Ok, and you, before you went to school did you speak only Michif or did you speak a little bit of English before you went?
Jules: Well a little bit of Michif, and Cree, a little bit of French our, nationality was mixed up, French and Cree
Vicki: Oh
Jules: So we talked partly Cree and partly French there my dad talked French and my mother talked Cree, so
Vicki: So when, when you would go visiting would you talk in Cree and French or would it be English
Jules: Well, like when we went to school we talked in English you know most of the time, so we talked mostly English because we, we were brought up in school that way eh

From there, our conversation naturally flowed into me asking about the term “Métis”:

Vicki: What are some of the things that you did like growing up, were you ever told that you were Métis?
Jules: No, I never knew that. Nobody ever told me, no
Vicki: Did you ever think that you were different than like other communities, or?
Jules: No, not really. I thought like we were like because of the community we were all the same, we all spoke the same and it wasn't until we left home that we started to speak in English all the time
Vicki: So did you, when you had left home did you, um, did people accept that you were Métis, or was it a challenge to be Métis outside of Boggy Creek?
Jules: Well, not really because although I was Métis I was more or less, nobody noticed that I was Métis because of like I would say I was like more or less like on the white man side like you know
Vicki: And was that did you, was that by choice that you wanted to like try to be not Métis or?
Jules: No not really it’s just that I didn't know the difference, that's all. I just went along with whatever was there. Like you know what I mean, and people were Métis I went along with the Métis, if they were all white, I went along with white society, the English society, I guess, yea
Vicki: So at what age did you, did someone tell you were Métis, when did you sort of start saying that you were Métis?
Jules: Oh, probably around in my twenties I guess, thirties
Vicki: And where were you when you were like did you live in Calgary at that point, or where were you?
Jules: No, I lived in Manitoba, around the Swan River area, mostly

When I heard my uncle speak of the ability to go along with white society or the Métis, depending on the context, I remembered my elementary school experience in which I was able to
be friends with both the First Nations students and with the white students. Like my uncle, I had the ability to adapt to either situation, and like my uncle, I was not aware of it until recent years when I began to reflect on my own experiences growing up with mixed ancestry and its influences on my identity. Carrying on with our conversation, we began talking about growing up in Boggy Creek:

Vicki: So what was it like growing up in Boggy Creek? What sorts of things did you do?
Jules: Well, we did whatever we could, we done a little hunting and fishing and all that stuff there and those days, there was, not much of income coming in and so done mostly hunting and fishing and, whatever was available little work there was there, maybe work for a farmer, in the summertime or something like that and that's about it I guess
Vicki: What did you hunt, because Auntie said that you were the hunter, what did you hunt?
Jules: Oh, whatever I could get, like rabbits and get a deer or whatever, mostly rabbits and stuff
Vicki: I remember dad talking a lot about rabbit stew, did you guys have a lot of rabbit stew?
Jules: Yea, yea, we had, like in the summertime we, grew our own gardens and we had a lot of vegetables like we'd grow a lot of potatoes store them away for the winter and stuff like that cause there's not too much money available at that time,
Vicki: And so when you guys were growing up did you guys have any gatherings as a community?
Jules: Well not really, no because, the only way people got a round in those days was the horses with a team of horses and a buggy, there was no , like there was a community but there was no , like there was no meetings in the community or anything like that they just you know, it was just more surviving like, you know
Vicki: So when you guys did get together the odd time, what did you guys do?
Jules: Well what we most of the time we get together is when we went to church like we went to church, every Sunday you know, did what most kids do I guess, was just play ball, and, and, go sliding and all that stuff, that's about it I guess
Vicki: Where was the church at that point?
Jules: Oh well the church was in San Clara, was about 6 miles away from where we lived, 5 or 6 miles something like that and then the priest used to come at the school and, he'd have catechism once in a while there, once, twice a week
Vicki: So you remember going to church lots?
Jules: Well yea, at that time we used to try to go to church as often as possible, but it was kinda far away so it was mostly in the summertime that we went to church
Vicki: Oh ok. Was it both parents that went to church, or more so your mom or your dad?
Jules: Well mostly my dad went to church
Vicki: Ok, was your, how come your mom didn't go?
Jules: Well I don't know, I have no idea why she didn't go, but she would go once in a while like in the summertime when it was nice out she would go, but during the winter sometimes like Christmas, Christmas time or the midnight mass we used to go to church then

Similar to my Aunt’s interview, in hearing this, I was intrigued that my grandmother didn’t attend church more often. Growing up, and even until this day, whenever we visit Boggy Creek there is an unspoken rule that we go to church on Sunday. With this, I’ve always assumed that it was my grandmother that provoked this devotion, but I was wrong in this assumption and I can only speculate about her reasons for not attending church more regularly. The discussion continued on and we circled back once again to language:

Vicki: So you guys just obviously spoke a little bit of Cree and French and so obviously that you didn't, sort of, do you speak, can you speak it fluently now if somebody were to speak to you?
Jules: Well, like, the Cree we speak now like we used to speak at home and the Cree now is kind of a different slang and so it’s hard to speak to anybody else in Cree like, and French well it's just a few words here and there like you know it was hard to make, to speak a sentence in French it's just few words and then when people talk French you'd try to put together what they're talking about like, cause you didn't know all the words in French and you didn't know all the words in Cree but you knew like the words what should I say, to survive with at home like between mom and dad

This part of the interview was of particular interest because it challenged my assumptions about the Michif language, specifically in regards to me prescribing the language as a valid expression of a people’s culture. We carried on with the conversation and discussed what it means to him to be Métis:

Vicki: What do you think it means to be a Métis person, what does it mean to you?
Jules: Well it means, it means a lot to me, because, you know was born and raised in this nationality and I have no say whatever you are is what you are, you
just survive that way, you know what I mean, whatever comes, you deal with it and that's it

From talking about nationality, we meandered our way onward, I inquired into harvesting:

**Jules:** We picked, we went out in the fall time, went out picking blueberries, raspberries, and strawberries whatever was available there so that's where mostly our foods come from like, like you didn't sell them in the stores in those days cause, it was not too much refrigeration around eh, but yea we used to go out and pick berries that's what, that was our food for the winter months. Like mom used to can the berries so you like you know

**Vicki:** And if you guys were to get sick what did you guys use like did you guys use any medicines or if the kids needed something what would your mom and your dad do?

**Jules:** Well, as far as I can remember we didn't have too many medicines, we just, I guess a few plants that mom used to use but I didn't, I don't know what their names were or anything like that. But, we had, we had little bits of plants from the prairies there, the bush whatever you want to say

**Vicki:** And then that's what you guys used for medicines?

**Jules:** huh, yea, we used to take, seneca roots to sell them a little bit, mom used to boil them once in a while but we trying to get, we used to save for a little bit for medicine that's about it I guess

Through my uncles telling, my grandmother seemed to have some knowledge about the plants in the area and what they might be used for. I do remember my father mentioning a few medicinal plants, rat root for example, but I was not sure how he came to acquire that knowledge. When he would have a cold, I remember him chewing on the root for its medicinal properties. I now realize that this was a form of traditional knowledge.

From there, we went on to a conversation about the birth order of siblings and arrived at a conversation about his schooling:

**Vicki:** And what was the last grade you completed in school

**Jules:** Grade 5, I believe it was

**Vicki:** Did you like going to school?

**Jules:** Not really, because I used to get the scrap once in a while and I wasn't too happy about that
Vicki: Oh, did you, when you went to school, did you try to speak, the Cree and French or did you have to speak English?
Jules: Well, they were all English teachers so we had to speak English more or less
Vicki: Was it hard to learn English when you didn't speak English at home?
Jules: Well, yea it was kinda hard because, it was hard to understand what the teacher was trying to teach you because you know, they didn't understand all the words she was talking about
Vicki: And did they ever get upset that you didn't know English?
Jules: Oh, more or less, they just, didn't seem to understand that us kids were, didn't speak the full English language I guess you would say

Attending school and trying to learn without having the ability to use your first language must have been a challenge for my uncle, and I would further suggest, quite confusing.

Prohibiting a child to speak their language within a learning environment invalidates their meaning making processes and nullifies who they are. Continuing with a more optimistic tone, I asked uncle Jules what being Métis has taught him:

Vicki: What has being Métis taught you, like what do you think is important in life, in terms of what has being Métis taught you about what is important?
Jules: Well what's important in a Métis life is, get along with everybody and try to be a good communicator of some sort, you know, help one another out and , and try to get along the best way you know how, I guess
Vicki: Hmm, was there, when you were growing up was there a lot, like in the Métis community did everybody help out each other like if somebody needed help did somebody else go help out?
Jules: Well there was no problem that way because if they needed it, like if you were stuck and you needed something an' the neighbours or whoever would try to help because we were all poor at that time we had to do with what we had, like you know hmm mm
Vicki: How did they make money or how did they get the things that they needed then?
Jules: Well that, I imagine they got a little bit of family allowance and stuff, you know, they preserved food and , and grew their own vegetables and gardens and like I say we done a lot a’ hunting for to survive and, and , my dad my dad had a few pigs here he used to butcher them every fall so that's what we survived on mostly

When I heard my uncle talking about the communal nature of the Métis people in Boggy Creek, I remembered a conversation my father and I had shortly before he passed away. He told me that regardless of the circumstance a person was faced with, nobody ever went without. This
specifically reverberated with me because regardless of the poverty they faced, people were willing to support and share with each other so no one was less unfortunate than someone else.

Moving with the conversation, I asked him about the term ‘half-breed’:

Vicki: Were you ever, like did anybody use the term half breed or anything like that?
Jules: Oh in those days, people, like when I was younger yea they used to, we used to be called half breeds in those days but now they changed the name to Métis
Vicki: And where did you most experience the half breed name, was it more in the city or was it in the Boggy Creek area?
Jules: Well as far as I can remember it was pretty well all over I guess but mostly around Boggy Creek area. We used to call our, each other half breeds once in awhile just to joke around

I anticipated that my uncle would have encountered being called a half-breed during his lifetime. I also was not surprised to hear that they would tease each other with the term either.

Joking around in this manner is a way to acknowledge your relationship with someone, not to cause harm to them. We often said growing up that my dad’s use of teasing was a telltale sign that he approved of you and were welcome in his home. You could say that joking and teasing is a cultural way of accepting one another and affirming kinship. Rather fluidly, we began talking about fiddle music:

Vicki: Do you remember the fiddle music or anything like that growing up?
Jules: Yea there was fiddle music in those days well everybody had, music for entertainment was their biggest they'd have dances you know, once a week or something around the community there
Vicki: Where would the dances be?
Jules: Well we had a little, there was a hall there in Boggy Creek that one of the neighbours put up there used to have a dance once a week or something
Vicki: Do you ever remember people coming over to visit, like maybe not often, but sometimes?
Jules: Sometimes neighbours would come over, have a little party there play a little music and somebody would bring their fiddle or the guitar and they'd play a little music, dance a little bit and that's about it I guess
Vicki: Were those some good times, did you enjoy those time when people would come over and play some music and have a little party
Jules: Oh oh, yea well that was the main, the main, whatch you call it, the main way of getting together and having a little fun I guess could call it
Gatherings at people’s homes, or at make shift community centres seemed to be the main way in which they expressed and celebrated themselves through their music and dance. I can assume that much like today, a gathering of Métis people always includes a good fiddle tune. As our conversation began to slow, we circled back to chat briefly of language once again:

Vicki: Oh yea, well that's good and growing up and speaking Michif do you wish that you could speak it now, or does, how do you feel about the language now?
Jules: Well, the only thing that I wish is that I could speak, good enough Cree to talk to people in Cree and speak good enough French so I could understand and speak French, you know
Vicki: Hm mm
Jules: But, when your language is mixed up and you don't have the full knowledge of all the Cree of French words its hard to to communicate with in them languages. So now I mostly talk, English I guess because everybody talks English now
Vicki: Do you think it’s important that the young ones try to speak or learn Michif?
Jules: Well its a like the young ones they speak with what they're grown up with, you know, and it’s hard to teach them a different language, like, if you don't know the full words or the full like I was saying earlier that you speak half each, a little bit of each word, a little bit of each language that it’s hard to teach speak a language like

Reflection: Moving from surviving to thriving

Reconnecting with my uncle after not speaking with him for some time was unparalleled. Coupled with having the ability to interview my aunt, I felt further connected to my family and myself. Situated here are the themes that resonated with me while engaging with my uncle’s stories.

Identity

Early on in Uncle Jules’ life, there was no designation of self with the term ‘Métis’. He did suggest that the term ‘half-breed’ was used to identify the Métis, but aside from my family using it to tease each other, the term was asserted by outsiders and not used as a self-proclamation. However, although there was no distinguishing label, my uncle indicated that the
Michif language allowed for a distinction to be made. In an excerpt from the interview, he identified that our language was the anchor of what constitutes a Métis person; “Well I think it’s the language more than anything, you were brought up with the languages and you can’t speak, you can’t fully speak either one like you know what I mean...It’s just part French and part Cree and that’s the way it was then”.

Uncle Jules told of his ability to situate himself in both a Métis and white environment. The act of being able to adapt to various situations can be seen as a way in which one strives to find a place of survival in both cultures. I can certainly attest to this in my own life in having to find a place of belonging within my father’s Métis family and my mother’s European family. This is not to say though, that a place is found in solely a European or First Nations culture, but I have come to know that I am most accepted within my Métis community.

Language

The experiences that my uncle encountered in relation to Michif affected me deeply and caused some unsettling within me. He described the language as not being whole which could point to an underlying, but pervasive discriminatory societal bias that elicited a stigmatization of the language thus suggesting that because the language was not whole, either were the people that spoke it. This idea is very hard for me to digest and frankly, causes dissonance within me. There is potential that my uncle internalized the belief that the language was of no use because it was fragmented and I suspect the internalization of this view could position individuals to avoid speaking the language.

Surviving

Throughout the interview, survival seemed to be an undercurrent that impacted how my uncle constructed his Métis upbringing. He spoke of the language as a tool to survive at home
when communicating with my grandparents. Uncle Jules also references survival in the context of being born into your specific nationality, and accepting what you are and dealing with it as best as you can. Furthermore, he stated, “we just tried to live off the land as best we could and survive”. Survival within this context is suggestive of an atmosphere of struggle in which one has to persevere in order to make gains in their life. I reflected on this and wondered: at what point did Métis people move from surviving to thriving, or have we? More specifically, how would Métis people define thriving? Thinking of my uncle’s life, he no longer speaks his language nor lives off the land. Would this be considered thriving? Of course, this question is applicable to my own life, because I do not speak my language, nor carry on with the land-based activities of my ancestors, so as a Métis person, am I thriving?

**Doreen Bergum (nee Dumont)**

I had the great pleasure of meeting with Doreen on a July day at her home in Olds, Alberta. She had known my dad for many years and although I had seen Doreen at many Métis functions, this was the first time I was able to sit with Doreen and speak face-to-face. Having not spent any time with Doreen previously, there was a certain anticipation in the air: I was excited and eager to hear her stories and specifically, what being Métis meant to her. When I arrived, Doreen welcomed me with open arms, and it seemed that we were each delighted to be in each other’s company. She was dressed in her best Métis attire which imbued the interview with more meaning and importance. We listened to fiddle tunes while we conversed, and as she flipped through her photo album, stories rose up from her memory. Here, from the pictures, lay Doreen’s memories and stories.

Our conversation began with Doreen reading a story that she had written for another project she participated in and then I opened the way with a question:
Vicki: Is there any stories that pop up for you growing up Métis, did, yea, any stand out for you growing up?

Doreen: There was mainly our culture, our music, and our dance. Everyone just loved it and you could tell, you could feel it, you know they’re square dancing, they’re like they’re dancing all night, it was, that was, that was the Métis way.

From here, I asked if there was an acknowledgement in her family of being Métis:

Doreen: Yup, my dad was a hunter and with all those families living on that Bergen road in Sundre, um, we all shared, we shared if he shot a deer or moose and of course all the windows had to be covered when he was cutting up the moose, or cutting up the animal so the police wouldn't catch us cause that was considered poaching because the Métis weren't allowed to hunt freely. But it was also the only survival for our food um, and then they would share it, share it with all the families because we didn't have refrigerators then, we just had a, had the well, the water well and, my mom used to keep things cool in putting them in pail and um, into the well. So we couldn't keep the meat very long because we did have to share cause there was no way of preserving it and same with the berries, we all, we all had to go berry picking. I know mom, my mom used to can the berries, but, plants source, she did use different plants for medicine cause where we were, where we had our house on this land by the river there was seneca root and, they used to make tea with that and it was good for colds and I don't know, other things.

I reflected on the notion of ‘poaching’, and I tried to imagine what the Métis people must have felt when their way of life was deemed a criminal activity. What was once part of their everyday life, was stripped away and regulated by the Canadian government.

To press on, I asked about the lineage of her parents:

Vicki: Did your, so for your mom and your dad, were they both Métis, or what backgrounds did they come from?

Doreen: Yes, they were both Métis. My dad was a Dumont and my mother a Veness. My mom's grandfather and father were both interpreters on the Onion Lake reserve in Saskatchewan. So my mom got to live in a beautiful white house and my dad kinda grew up kinda rustic with the Métis way and they always fought over that because it was a class distinction, because during the depression they had flour and all the basics because my grandfather worked for the government. But she did manage to get a grade eight education which was probably grade 12 in the 50's, 40's, 50's.

Vicki: And so your mom's dad, did he, was he able to speak another language that allowed him to be an interpreter?

Doreen: He did, he spoke about 5 different First Nations languages and French and Michif.
Vicki: And so what language was your first language for your grandma?
Doreen: It was Cree and Michif, they spoke both English and, English, French and
Cree they mixed it all together
Vicki: Yea, and did your mom learn how to speak the language?
Doreen: Oh fluently yes, yea I do have a video of her, yea. so
Vicki: And do you remember growing up hearing the language a lot?
Doreen: Always, but it wasn't beneficial for them to teach us the language because of the
discrimination because they weren't allowed to speak the language. But she would
tell us how to make fire or quit fighting or do different chores around the house in
Michif. And um, then they would have deep conversations with each other and
maybe even fight and argue and (laughs) so we wouldn't know what was going on
but, we kind of figured things out. But every year we would go to Lac St. Anne.
That was our holiday, plus that was where they could all meet and, um gather with
relatives and friends and they could speak their language there as well as go to
church and they would trade fish and dried meat, berries and really have a good
visit at the same time going to church and looking after their spirits... So their
spirit is still there, all our relatives, the Letendre, and they've had land, strip land,
at Lac St. Anne and, my cousin is looking after it now. But they would all gather
there and especially during pilgrimage week, and they would have a good visit
and share and remember and so that's passed on to our generation now and we do
the same thing. Now that that generation is gone, we're it, now.

I remembered being inspired when she indicated that visiting Lac St. Anne and
participating in the activities of speaking the language, attending mass and trading foods enacted
caring for their spirit through cultural activities I found comfort in this sentiment as I considered
what I do to take care of my spirit and further, the importance that lays within the nurturing of
one’s self. We continued our conversation in talking about the role of youth for cultural
continuity:

Doreen: And but it was interesting, this next generation that's coming up they, they
just come for the gathering they didn't participate in the church, so I don't know
where that's going, whether we'll lose all that or what. There's a number of
families that gather there every year
Vicki: Why do you think that is, the younger generation, there's a pulling away from
that?
Doreen: I think it's just the times, you know with computers they're not sharing like we
had too and everybody's going their own direction it's all about self, not the
combination of a unit, family unit, so it will be interesting where it goes.
This intrigued me because I can relate to the generation that does not attend mass anymore. Growing up, I used to go to church regularly because my grandmother, on my mom’s side, owned a Christian book store and we would travel to convents and parishes to sell books. Because of this, I formed a deep relationship with my grandmother, but after she passed away when I was eleven, we stopped going and, as I grew up, I began making my own choices about my faith and spirituality, turning away from the church beliefs. Departing from our conversation of Lac St. Anne, I asked about the issue of being labelled.

Doreen: We were called half-breeds, or Indians, it didn't matter. Métis or not, you were always, usually called Indians, But, my mom and dad had full respect from the town of Sundre, they still talk about our parents to this day and how respected they were.

Vicki: And was it the calling of the Indian or half-breed was it by your own community or by the outsiders?

Doreen: The outsiders, but, that Bergen road used to be called Indian Meadows or I think is what they called it. I'm not too sure it was a derogatory name but it included us all as Indians.

We meandered our way through stories that emerged for Doreen as she looked at her family photo album. In remembering how her father transformed a school house into a family home I inquired about her school experiences.

Vicki: So, in speaking of school what was it like going to school, as a, well in those days, a Indian or half-breed because you guys had to go to, I'm assuming it was in a mixed school?

Doreen: Um, I think what made us really survive is cause there was so many of us, and we were kinda all hung together and, but we had discrimination, , but , of course we were all good in sports, and , basketball was my sport, I was the top scorer for County Mountainview, for my three years in high school, but we were pretty active and contributed to the community.

Vicki: Yea, do you ever hear stories from your mom and dad about what it was like growing up Métis?

Doreen: Um, not really, no but they had their discrimination as well, um, I don't know how to describe it because it's, cause we've all been through it in some way or another. But she used to get, clothes from it was called the Sally Anne at that time, the Salvation Army and we made clothes for all of us and, I was the
worst one to cloth cause I was so chubby (laughs) and I would chew on my cloths and I was so hard on my shoes. I used to chew holes in all my, I don't know if I was shy or nervous...there wasn’t that much discrimination at the younger ages, not until we got to be teenagers.

As a teenager they used to call us, a gang, cause, we all loved to go dancing and every Friday or Saturday night there was always a different community that had a dance and, I used to travel with my brothers and my mom thought that was safe, which she was wrong cause I'd be in the hall and they'd be outside. But it got to be, I think closer to when we were 18 or whatever, I know the, there was two fellows from Olds that were always against my brother, he was one of the darker ones and they would call him names and different things, so there was, there was a lot of fighting outside those dance halls.

Vicki: While you were dancing, they were fighting (laughs)
Doreen: Yea, protecting us I guess, from all that name calling and whatever.
Vicki: Was there at any point that your family, like your parents or your brothers tried to hide that they were Métis so that they wouldn't get in to fights or was it something that they just kept being proud of regardless of what they faced?
Doreen: Um, three of us, the youngest and my brother and my oldest sister they were all very proud, very dark and the rest of us were medium, medium brown. But they seemed to get the most discrimination cause when my, one of my brothers, my oldest brother first got married, my, little sister was the, flower girl and they tried to, the family it was a white family, they tried to, scrub the brown off of her, so she was, pretty upset about that.

Internalizing this excerpt fills me with sadness as I think about the racism and discrimination foisted upon Métis people, both historically and contemporarily. There is a dissonance that comes forward when I think about how Métis people were demonized for being considered ‘half-breeds’, for never reaching the status of being ‘whole’. Personally speaking, a perpetual exhaustion always exposes itself when I am asked if being Métis means I am ‘half and half’. Continuing one with our talk, I asked Doreen what it meant, for her, to be Métis.

Vicki: And what would you, for you as an individual what does it mean to you to be Métis?
Doreen: Now?
Vicki: Or has it changed, when maybe, and that's a good question, did it change, like when you were little, teenager and then in your adulthood has it changed?
Doreen: It's, it has changed um, I was the last telephone operator to leave Sundre, I worked there and they sent me to Red Deer to work and I must of been one of those maybe you couldn't see the Métis on me and, I got along that way and I
stayed there a year, got married and, went to work in Calgary in Woodwards. There was a bit of discrimination there but not much.

But my middle job, the fellow that hired me there he almost um, he always said or thought that somebody should pat him on the back for hiring me because I was Métis, for who I was, so I don't know if he was discrimin - you know had discrimination deep down inside him or he was proud of himself that I worked for him, but I don't know, I never did figure it out, yea, so, went through quite a discrimination in the oil patch.

Our exchange, here, identified the possibility that defining what it means to be Métis could potentially change. As she illustrates, there is a potential for individuals to internalize and act out how outsiders identify them and then as one begins to define who they are for themselves, in relation to community, there is a transition to embrace an old, but new identity.

We moved from talking about her career to participating in cultural activities.

Doreen: I never sat with my mom to bead and, always watched her but she made moccasins for every one of us, vest and my dad made belts...That’s why I’ve got to start getting rid of them, but, then I had to, this box of stuff and I thought I guess at that time it wasn't cool to be Métis, it wasn't cool to do all these crafts and stuff. And so I thought one day I'd, my mom took me to, one of the Métis functions when your dad was president, in 1999, and and that was another thing, I couldn't jig until there cause there was no place for me to jig so that's when I still had my feet and then I started winning some competitions there and then I thought well I'm gonna when mom passed we got all those beads I said I'm gonna join the Métis women's group and do all these crafts, the beading and so that's what I did and um, we did hide tanning and beading, and the fact I'm thinking of starting up that group again so we can share our culture.

And pass it on, cause then my daughter and my granddaughter, both have done everything made moccasins, capotes, drums and hide tanning so they’re the ones that'll carry it on for me

But, to keep it going it just, we have to make that time. Same with our dance, you know, so it was there that um, that I got back in to being Métis and, the more I got in there and I felt relaxed, I felt at home just within our own culture and of course all Métis love to laugh, and joke and tease. We've been through all of that and, and then Marlene and Joe made me the elder, 3 years ago, and I thought, oh my gosh, I don't even know how to pray right, so I had to start or speak in public, that was a big thing. So I've learned a lot about being a Métis and sharing my culture, about myself, about, speaking in public and getting up to dance or doing whatever whenever the need is there and, I just want to keep sharing our culture and now I'm very proud of who I am, being Métis and, what my parents taught us and, and we all have to travel these roads and bumps and lumps alongside our journey and I
guess this is where I am now. So my next, I'll be 70 in September and to finish my journey I will share our culture and get that out there and my biggest thing right now is I do call myself the sash police... so I think it's so important to wear your sash because our, for one, our ancestors fought for and, we're finally included in this country for being Métis let's continue to share it and as our um, children, grandchildren get educated get out there and share it cause that's what they fought for. And, like Louis Riel said, it is the artists that's gonna bring us back.

I could very much relate to Doreen in terms of using the passing of a parent as the catalyst to embrace your Métis culture and identity. When my father passed away, there was an urgency to ground myself more solidly within my own identity so that I could relay to my son what being Métis is, and to most certainly, be proud of it. Furthermore, as I found in Doreen’s story, with the passing of our parents we become responsible to find our own way in becoming who we are meant to be in order to ensure we can pass on that knowledge to the next generation. As we moved forward, we revisited the question of what it means to be Métis from a changed perspective.

Vicki: So how has your perspective changed on being a Métis, cause you had said that it has, so how is it different when you were little to now, or sort of growing up, how has it changed?
Doreen: I can be proud of it, of who I am cause I know where I came from and, no I think I can, I can walk the talk and I'm quite comfortable cause I was born a Métis and I'm gonna die a Métis and might as well, share my gifts and, the culture and the spirit of the Métis just to keep it going
Vicki: What would you say is the spirit of being Métis?
Doreen: Oh it comes from the heart
Vicki: Hmm
Doreen: Yea, it comes from the heart and, the hard work and their music and dance, you know, it's in our soul, it's in our hearts
Vicki: Yea
Doreen: that's something you can't hide
Vicki: Hmm mm this is true, especially when your leg gets going (laughs)
Doreen: And the fun and the laughter you know, and sharing, just living, yea cause I had a hard time talking, listening to that Red River jig
Vicki: Yea you want to get up and go
Doreen: Exactly
I was delighted to arrive in a place where Doreen was able to share with me her pride in being Métis. Trudging through the heaviness of racism and discrimination, it was affirming to discuss how one could move from once being ashamed of being Métis, to embracing and celebrating their identity. In speaking about celebrating her culture, Doreen relayed this story to me:

Doreen: I did go to the [Sundre] museum and I saw mom's moccasins there and I said, you know I think it's time to separate the Métis from the First Nations in your museum...so that was my challenge. So um, it took us a year and we made and we made capotes and, they gave us a time, I think your dad was still the president then when we had our opening and now we have a beautiful display in Sundre of the Métis, separated from the First Nations

Vicki: So why do you think it is so important to make the distinction?
Doreen: , because there is a difference, like a lot of people generalize and they think that, we're getting all this money from the government and we're looked after by the government, as you know, you know we all pay taxes and, I think it's so important because it's, it's our culture, it's our ancestors that have fought to get us here, get this far and, you know continue to, I guess to, live in a country that never accepted us and, try to do away with us (laughs), no I think it's important to carry on our culture and ancestry. So the spirit of the Métis is still alive.

I could feel Doreen’s passion as she spoke of ensuring that the Métis had their own space within the museum displays. I also found inspiration in her words as she reminded me that our ancestors made great sacrifices for us to be able to carry forward our Métis identity, so our Métis spirit could live on. As our conversations began to wind down, Doreen described the moment when she finally and wholeheartedly embraced her identity.

Doreen: Um, I think it was finally I could jig at, the Métis function that I could release the energy plus feel at home and comfortable in that environment. Cause really, working in the white environment, you had to be somebody else, you had to protect being Métis, you had to protect how you were raised, , you know cause you'd hear different people say well when I was this age I was you know, I did this, or did that, or my parents did this and, I would never, never include my stories, basically, probably ashamed of where I came from, or scared of the discrimination, so , it all boils down to discrimination and where you're comfortable in. Yea, my mom's always said, don't ever let anybody tell you that they are better than you are; always be proud of who you are. It's kinda hard to
describe, kinda living in the white world and, and then you come home and you can be yourself.

Vicki: Do you think our youth face that today?
Doreen: Um, sometimes I do, I can feel it. It’s in the feeling more than the saying now.

The moment when Doreen described her ability to “release the energy” I was profoundly moved by this articulation because that is precisely how I feel about my own identity construction process. Reflecting back on my own life, there were times when I felt lost, disconnected and even depressed because I was confused as to who I was and it was not until I started conducting the work for this research project that I could release energy that I had been harboring inside. Through others, I was able to reconnect and feel a sense of belonging. In concluding our conversation, I asked Doreen if there were any words she would like to leave me with:

Doreen: Well, it’s only been since I’ve been the Métis elder that I admitted saying, well I am the Métis elder for Southern Alberta, then people kinda either step back, or carry on a different conversation. But I'm proud of it, even myself I thought, oh my, how am I going to do this, how am I going to do this, they are calling me the Métis elder. Well it’s a, been a journey in itself and its brought me to this point of being proud to be Métis and, and I know I dressed like this in different functions and I'm sure people say, well who does she think she is, but no, I have this spirit of my mom and dad with me all the time. Whether their pushing me or not, um, this is what I'm doing, this is what I'm gonna do, you know, for the last 5 years, 10 years, 2 months, whatever I got left. And that, I think, whether you forget, or try to forget who they, I think they're always there trying to remind you of who you are. Well just like I said in my last remarks, my parents and my community taught us how to work with our hands, head and heart. And I encourage children even adults find your gift, practice it, share it, our Métis culture is worth it, it really is.

Reflection: Releasing the energy

Discrimination

The role of discrimination in Doreen’s life was a prominent thread that was woven throughout her stories. Although her family had the respect of the community of Sundre,
evidently, there was still racism and discrimination that was thrust upon their lives. As she explained, the darker color of her siblings skin evoked harsher treatment and name calling. Even within her place of employment, as well as her husband’s, her Métis identity affected how they were both treated. Through her stories, it became clear that being labelled by outsiders invoked a certain relationship that was grounded in power dynamics. As I reflect on Doreen’s lived experiences, I am reminded that when one is the oppressed within the dynamics of power, there is an ever-present need to fight for who you are, and perhaps more so, to be somebody.

**Birthright**

Coinciding with discrimination, birthright stood out for me as being of importance in Doreen’s stories. As she indicated in her interview, hunting was part of their livelihood, however, they were not allowed to hunt without a license or it was deemed poaching. Furthermore, the right to the transference of language was dismissed because it was not seen as useful for the preceding generations due to the discrimination her parents and grandparents faced. Being forced to disengage from hunting and harvesting and from speaking her language was detrimental to how she envisaged herself. Existing without one’s birthright, cuts people off from their spirit. and weaken their overall sense of belonging and identity. As seen in Doreen’s story, the oppressive messages she internalized resulted in her feeling ashamed of being Métis, and it took a number of years to she before she could to embrace who she was born to be.

**No longer pretending**

Revisiting Doreen’s transcript numerous times, it became quite apparent that her life story entailed moving from a place of shame to a place of pride. During the interview she talked of being too cool to be Métis, but then realized later in life and after her mother passed away that enacting the cultural aspects of being Métis were, at their very core, *cool*. I got the sense that she
finally allowed herself to ‘be’ Métis while dissolving the internalized constructs of the oppressed half-breed. Toward the end of the interview Doreen affirms,

I can walk the talk and I’m quite comfortable cause I was born a Métis and I’m gonna die a Métis and might as well, share my gifts and, the culture and the spirit of the Métis to keep it going.

**Releasing the energy**

The moment Doreen was able to release the energy from her past experiences that cast her Métis identity as shameful and then to embrace her heritage had a profound impact on her life. The ability to embrace her Métis identity provoked a sense of belonging and confidence in her that prompted her to carry on her parents’ legacy and to engage actively with her community. As I sit and contemplate ‘releasing energy’, I realize the importance of being immersed in one’s culture and community in order to detach oneself from the perils of colonization.

**Art Cunningham**

Art was born in Brooks, Alberta; his father was Métis and his mother, Danish. Art’s father was enrolled in the military and at the age of two they were deployed to Germany, but at the age of five, his family moved back to Alberta where he has spent his life. Through my own community work and my father’s political career, I have known the Cunningham family for quite some time and have been acquainted with Art for a number of years. To have Art participate in this research project, it seemed a natural fit.

Art: Well you know, I think my experience is, is bit of a transitional experience how I view, from my understanding, transitional experience from going where wasn't common to be called Métis. You know the terminology was a little foreign the terminology I first heard as a kid was half-breed, so, so your questions were around that, but we grew up really um, you know from my grandfather and the stories he told, he lined himself to be an Indian more than Métis because they’re viewed along the same lines from Western, or a more urban environment. You
know in, back in the early 50’s you weren’t identified as much from a Métis in your everyday life as much as you were an Indian.

My grandfather when I was called a half-breed for the first time, I was, can’t remember, six or seven I heard it being called in school and I was with my grandfather after and I asked him what that meant and, and he was always an optimist he says well it was somebody that can take advantage of two different cultures and they can play that role he says you through your mom and from family you are exposed to the white culture and through your family here and my family its Indian culture and so that was my first experience what um, is now Métis, so I think we lived a transition from where is wasn’t a common terminology recognition among the common , folk as opposed to half-breed or Indian. And so, in the urban environment...I never hear him use Métis until later on down in life

From the beginnings of our research conversation, it became apparent that Art viewed and described his experience as a transition from a rural to a more urban environment in where he never experienced the terminology of ‘Métis’ until later in his life. For myself, I grew up always identifying myself as Métis, so I tried to understand what the transition from being labelled an Indian to a Métis might have entailed. Furthermore, through listening to Art, I recognized that my own experience as a Métis person was held solely within an urban context which prompted me to further reflect on how my experience was different from, not only Art’s, but also my Métis ancestors, and how my urban environment has impacted my Métis identity.

Art disclosed the sense of pride that was instilled in him in being Aboriginal, and it wasn’t until later in his life that he began to realize how the community made an issue of their identity.

Art: They [grandfathers and uncles] lived as Indians as kids, like that’s what they’re raised as, so that was their experience, but they never dwelled on the fact that they were different cause other people other dwelled on the fact, you know, the early days that I find out for example; what my dad and mom went through, my dad was in Brooks when he met my mom and he had, they were dating, my grandfather, my mom's dad, was barred from the curling club because he was allowing his daughter to date an Indian. There was not half-breeds or um, Métis and, and, and they took my grandmother and my grandfather took a lot of um, how can I put it really bad behaviors from a lot of town folks in Brooks because they allowed their daughter to not only date but end marrying and then have a
baby and so um, again the family, my family background never, never talked about that. Actually they never talked experiences at all I hear from old family friends that share with me, as recently as a couple weeks ago, about what your grandfather and my mom and dad went through as young folks and, and about how their relating, so I believe, you know, the transition to the real urbanized, urbanization I guess of the Indian and half-breeds.

In hearing this story, I probed a bit further in questioning why the town’s people were adamant about who they thought Art’s father should marry to which Art explained that his mother was Danish and the town community believed that his father should have married his own kind. Although his parents faced terrible repercussions for getting married, he expressed that both pairs of his grandparents supported the decision regardless of what the community believed. I got the sense from Art that the move to an urban centre, even though fairly small, contributed to his realization that they were all of sudden ‘different’ and would be treated as such.

Art: You know, there was never, never a discussion about being full blood, this blood whatever, it was you're Indians and Indian descent. And so that was and that's when I started hearing half-breed that and, and Métis movements was, was really picking up steam in Alberta around being recognized to Métis who we're so it was, there's a growing is that transition from realizing um, ok I've always understand I was Indian or Aboriginal or whatever, but then really identifying that I'm Métis as the distinction goes as I grew, so, my dad I guess was in that real first transition in his realization and then of course myself very much so I aligned myself as a Métis and that's who I would speak well I am, I'm a Métis where as I never heard my grandfather claim himself that and it wasn't nothing, it wasn't because of a he didn't see himself that, he just seen himself as an Indian cause as he explained back when he trapped and that, they never distinguished between, between who they were and their grandfathers, so it was a transition I was, part of that generational transition to now we, we strike out with our own identity and who we are...it wasn't this thing until later on in my life until more young adult that you were identified as a Métis

When Art spoke of his grandfather never needing to distinguish himself apart from who his grandfathers were, I remember pausing and being affected by his words. Even now as I pause to decipher how this applies to my own life context, I recognize that this resonates with me
deeply because I believe there is a distinction between myself and my father, and even from my ancestors. Specifically, the inability to speak the Michif language is a demarcation that differentiates me from my father and my ancestors. Admittedly, there is a fear within me that there will come a time when the distinguishing factors will make me unrecognizable to my ancestors. From our discussion about being labelled Métis, Art then honed in on cultural aspects of being Métis.

Art: My grandfather worked as an interpreter, Cree interpreter. He was taught jiggin’ and square dancing and, and so, we really lived the cultural aspects through the music and, and the dancing. I remember our army quarters in Edmonton was every Saturday night my dad’s cousins, and they would bring fiddles over and they’d clean the floor and they’d be jigging all night. I was raised listening to that and did we, yea we linked it to our culture, who you are, but it wasn’t you know, we were, never said you are Métis go tell everybody, you are Métis, you just lived it and experienced it.

We always , always had a lot of humor being Métis, an Indian, always a lot of humor, you know, made fun ourselves, each other, everything and, but , we also weren’t exposed to a lot of the political growth of the Métis in as much in I can remember 12 years old and my dad taking me, in Calgary here, to a friendship centre, he was on the board of the start of the friendship centre in Calgary big strong movement...and um, and there were, and that's when I started hearing the word Métis and First Nations and the, the identification of the different classes or groups of Indians within an urban environment for example.

I had a visceral reaction when hearing Art emphasize that being Métis was embedded in the everyday lived experience. This outlook forces us to move beyond the colonial construct that identifies Métis people as being half European and half Indian. The experiences that come from living in the wholeness of both cultures while trying to navigate a colonial history gives way to a distinct identity and consciousness.

Art: He [Art’s grandfather] always focused on, I remember those words early when I was a kid, you have, you're nkay, he said you're nkay you get to take good advantage of being, understanding Indians and understanding white people and you can live in both worlds and he that's when I heard first heard both worlds
I think it'll really be diverse and different each story is quite different in how they feel, who they are, what they relate to them in their life and how much a profile it is in their life and again ours, our biggest linkage was through dance and music and, and laughter and humor of course.

For Art, his grandfather always affirmed the beauty in being from both cultures and taught him that it was a benefit, not a hindrance, to who he was as a human being. I too, am fortunate to have had my father instil in me from a young age that there was great pride in being Métis.

Vicki: And what was your first, your grandfather’s, and your dad’s first language, well even you said your mom, right?

Art: Well my grandfather, my grandfather spoke Cree for a lot of his life that’s where he could be an interpreter and then he taught my father to speak Cree, but my father was only nine, one of nine kids in the family that spoke Cree fluently. I don't think, I don't believe that we weren't taught Cree because of any, any um, any protection or any thought around that as opposed to and dad did share this belief with me, that you know, he really emphasized that for us again, his, for us to be able to do good in the world that we, we do we'd master English and we focus on that first. I, and he says before, his later part he does regret not teaching us Cree and I also regret that I didn't have that opportunity to speak it cause he, he was fluent and he said he would love to um, master his language better if he was able to teach it cause he was raised as a kid to speak Cree in the house.

As Art describes his grandfather’s view on the value of his Cree language, I reflect on the decisions of my own family with respect to the Michif language. I try to fathom how they must have felt to accept that the English language, at that time, had, and continues to have more of a benefit for their children than their mother tongue. Just recently, I was walking with my eleven-year-old son and I asked him if he thought speaking Ojibwa or Michif was important, and he said yes and no, so I probed further to ask why he thought no, and his response indicated that everyone spoke English so why learn his ancestral languages. Moving on from the topic of language, Art told of his first encounters with racism while attending school on the military base.

Art: The first time we actually felt it [racism] in school is being Indian was in Wainwright it was a school on base and my brother and I, my brother experienced
it more because it was his teacher, but it was, I also had this French-Canadian
teacher, but he was so hard on my poor brother because my brother was Indian
and he just hated it to the point where it become a such big issue for not only our
brother, but his friends in the class and the teachers, the other teachers, that they
ended up kicking him, him off base

Vicki: The teacher or?
Art: Yea, the teacher. It was such a big issue, but that was a real first in our face, why
am I being treated like this, you know it was even foreign to the kids, you know,why is this, why, you know. And then, dad had to sit down and explain to us that
this, that's when you started understanding the difference. Well I'm not real
Indian, I'm mom's, well no you, you know, that's, you started understanding
slowly around that other people would see you as an Indian and Indian's would
see you as white and that's the both worlds. And that's, oh that's what grandpa
was, that's what, that's what he was talking about you can always take the bad
part, but you can always live the best part. And so, I guess that's the first time that
dad had to sit down with us and talk about it with us.
The benefit was, a benefit if you want to look at it, against the experience, living
the experience, we didn't look it. My sister did, growing up, but we would pass as
any kid on the street and, so we wouldn't experience walking down the street, for
example, we never had that experience. And it's only when people found out that
if it was a negative side of it would come out.

I reflected on my own experience with discrimination, and like Art, I have light colored
skin, so I didn’t experience the same kind of racism that some of my other family members with
darker skin faced. However, when people found out that I was Métis, some of my relationships
were affected and people most certainly treated me differently. I specifically remember a time
when I was dating a fellow and his friends assumed, because of my skin color, that I was white.
As they got to know me more, they found out I was Métis and they made racist remarks to my
boyfriend about me. Although the comments were not made to me directly, I was shocked that
these people that I had spent time with, had completely changed their view of me once they
found out my identity. As we continued on with our conversation, Art described how situations
of discrimination and racism affected him and how he came to managed this challenge.

Art: We, you know, it was, we didn't dwell on the conversation, it didn't overwhelm
us, he just explained it, you know... And I said well why, well cause we never, he
said well they just don't like Indians because you're an Indian and then you start,
you know that's when you first wow, and then you see it more because my brother was the most quiet and meek and calmest person in school, I mean, he was he was quite different than me, but he was and for this teacher to severely pick on him, you know, were so bad, you know I wasn't in his class, but it was so bad that other kids were crying cause they were so upset and so, and he would take it and, and so, yea, it was you know that's when they, took the time to explain and that was I guess our first experience cause we as kids we didn't understand why, you know, didn't understand if they were going after me or my brother or something like this because we were the shitheads, but (laughs) and then you started understanding more, you started hearing, seeing more and the transition was when it became, the issue became more on the table, you started to hearing more and more about it.

You started understanding that there is a difference in a lot of elements in our communities, in society and, and, you start rationalize, you started, you know, I guess my first defense of it was, , when I had , it was funny, it was , I was living with a lady and that, had a couple of, she had a couple daughters and here her daughter come home really upset and said why are you upset she said well we were taught in school that Métis, her and my daughter, they cause they were friends, they were both upset, and they, they were being told in school and this was just in Calgary here, that Métis were liars, cheaters and thieves and dirty, unclean and, and, she, well your Me, ya I know I'm Métis, and my grandfather and my dad you know, and they were upset from what the teacher was teaching ‘em. Well that's when I blew a gasket and I walked into the school and I raised a big issue and that's exactly what the text was describing history of Métis people. And the first thing I said to the teacher, do I smell to you, do I, well no sir what's this about, no do I, do I smell, you said to my class to your class I do, what do you mean, well you told them that Métis smell, and I just want to know do I smell to you, yea and I was pissed off and, and, made a big issue out of it and, that was my first really anger over being recognized or being identified as a Métis. That's when I, they came home with that story and I made such a big issue that they didn't take the book out.

The incident that Art describes here has stayed with me ever since our interview. I acknowledged that racism toward Métis people was being perpetuated in Alberta curriculum as early as thirty years ago and continues on into current contexts. Misconceptions and biased assumptions of the Métis are were being taught and believed as truths and by countless numbers of students and those fallacies still impact how Métis are viewed and treated today. Pulling us back to the initial questions of my research I asked Art for his views on Métis ways of knowing.
Vicki: So, going to my original question that drives this work, do you think there is a Métis way of knowing, do you think that exists?

Art: Yea, because the uniqueness is, is the experience of growing up in both worlds. It's, it's a unique experience of carrying a culture that you're proud of, of carrying two cultures that you're proud of and sometimes their adverse with each other. You know, because, they say oh all way white men are like that, well hold on now, my grandfather was never like and my uncles, my cousins from that side are not like that they, they know they've always been very warm and, and so you're dealing with that conflict in those type of the battle or that going back and forth and that, I think that is a Métis of way life is living in that both positive and, and the negative side...you can relate, you can understand, you can, you can apply um, elements of the culture, elements of the spirituality to, both worlds and understand it better and, and better to feel more comfortable in a room, whatever room you are, so yea, there is a Métis way of life, I truly belief that, and it's unique to this country, North America.

Vicki: So how would for you in yourself and maybe defining it within your own parameters as an individual, but what would you define being Métis, if you, if someone were to stop you on the street, what does it mean to Métis?

Art: Well I guess you could say we're probably the most we're probably the first multi-cultured, cultural people in this country, you know, we were the, the born multicultural, but we also lived the positive aspects but we also exposed to the negative aspects where's your not accepted in white society as they see you as an Indian, and Indian society cause they see you as a white man, so that's a unique experience all by itself. That it is rare in Canada, its, its, you wouldn't see that between a German and a French family you wouldn't see them being identifies as half-breeds yet their cultures are quite different.

Vicki: So almost out of colonization, we, right?

Art: Yea, came Métis, sure I don't see how else we would have been able to have an identity cause we would have been engulfed.

Vicki: Which is a really weird thing to think about.

Art: Yea, but if you think about it rationally though, how would we be identified as that because there would be no differences they would look at us as being white and the white people would look at us being Indian cause we'd all be Canadian if it was.

Vicki: It's well cause it's interesting cause colonization has caused such harm and trauma but yet it gave a birth to.

Art: Our peoples.

Vicki: Right, so it's, it's like how do you negotiate that right, it's just something to like?

Art: Yea and maybe the question is why do you have to negotiate? Why do you have rationalize that, it's just the way it is.

Vicki: Hmmm

When I posed a question to Art regarding negotiating the interplay of colonization as a birthing mechanism, but also a detrimental force, I was moved by him pushing me to question
why we should negotiate our circumstance instead of accepting it for what it is and embrace who we are. In that moment I realized that I have been persistently negotiating my own identity vis-a-vis colonization and the fact that much of who I am stems from the implications of colonization has, at times, burdened me. In closing our interview, Art left me with much to reflect on and absorb.

Art: Does it mean that you need be less proud, no, not at all you can again it's I think just the opportunity be proud of Métis is just as opportunity to be proud of, a Cree Indian from Neepanik, or a Blackfoot Indian from Piikuni, or a Frenchman from France, we have the opportunity to be just as proud. Again it comes back to what we're, what we own. Do you I need you to recognize as that for me to be proud of it, no. And that's what my family gave me, that I didn't need anybody else to recognize who I am to be proud of who I am and so we take ownership of that and that's what makes living bein a Métis very easy because I am proud of who I am. I live to my own set of standards and values. My family sets the standards and values and I set them with my own family. And that's who I make, yea, so I don't need to, yea, I don't need to, that's what I learned

Reflection: Embracing identity through transition

Embracing Identity

Art exuded a sense of pride in being Métis; there was never a moment when he talked about his identity in a negative manner. Even though he and his family faced racism and discrimination throughout their lifetime, there was very much a sense of resiliency that permeated his story that allowed him to be proud of who he was as a Métis man. Art stated this about his identity, “it was always a happy upbeat flavor to my life early on, being recognized cause my dad took great pride being Aboriginal”. I was deeply inspired by the way his grandfather would assure him that there was beauty in being from both cultures and it was something to embrace rather than deny.
Labels

Art and I talked often about the use of terminology that was employed by either identity oneself, or having others try to facilitate the defining. For Art, the actions, values and experiences of an individual seemed to dissolved the use of labels. He asserted that there was no need to dwell on the terms others were using to define them because the dwelling did not serve a purpose in how they viewed themselves. There was a realization, it seemed, that living one’s life in accordance with their language, values and beliefs was enough to identify oneself.

Transition

The concept of transition was made quite apparent throughout Art’s entire interview and I took note that the concept of transition may be relevant in distinguishing the future generations of Métis people. For Art, the aspect of transitioning from a rural to an urban environment had a profound impact on how he viewed himself and the world. Transitioning from an environment where his grandparents lived off the land in northern Alberta to living in smaller urban communities in southern Alberta, and then the large city of Calgary, exposed Art to different labels for Aboriginal peoples, racism and discrimination and Métis political movements, all of which influenced his notions of what being Métis meant. Hearing Art describe his experiences as transitional, I began to reflect on my own experiences growing up solely in an urban environment and how my experiences were very different than those of my father and my grandparents. Unlike my father, I did not grow up on the land, nor did I learn to speak the Michif language, so reluctantly I was faced with a question: who am I then, if I am torn loose from the land and there are cultural gaps between me and my ancestors?
Finding myself through re-storying

I arrive here, with a storied sash of four participants and researcher, woven together in hopes that you have been able to journey with us and pick up on explicit illustrations of being Métis. Between all of our stories, there are commonalities, but also anomalies that were distinct to the individual; this is what sets Métis identity to be so complexing, but yet so beautiful.

In thinking of my own journey with these stories, Carol Le Clair (2001) affirms the relevance of coming to know self through others, “To preserve Métis time and place, to write outward from the centre of a Métis spirit/consciousness, I must know the stories of Métis peoples and make my own stories” (p. 5). After visiting with all of the participants, I remember feeling deeply connected, rooted and loved. Although I had and continue to have lingering questions, I feel accomplished, because I was not only able to come to know the four amazing individuals further, but know myself as well.

Through their stories, my aunt and uncle affirmed that my ancestors had a distinct language that expressed and identified them culturally. They taught me that my family had an intricate relationship with the land in order to survive and to sustain their livelihood. Family and community relationships were foundational to being a Métis individual as was humor, dance and music. Furthermore, I learned that our identity encompasses more than being thought of as half and half; the label ‘Métis’; is the enactment of being in accordance with your language, environment, kinship systems, and self that we were always and will always be.
CHAPTER 5: WEAVING TOGETHER, LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

That tongued belonging
Cree survives in the words
my niece offers her tearful daughter, “It’s O.K., my girl.”
“my girl,” that tender way of affirming kinship
“my girl,” that recognition of being called into
and belonging to Cree

all of this, in a few borrowed sounds of English
the nerve of Cree remains
in mouths that have tasted a foreign alphabet too long
frequently we sound too little of ourselves
and regret that we were not called
to that sweet place of fit
among our relatives

so that, now, when we’re among Cree speakers
who ask if we speak our language
and we respond in the negative
we are regarded
as if we are illegitimate children
in a single language hostel
and all we need
is to try harder
since we are a generation where
these same sounds
once forbidden
are now pronounced

and the echoes of a language
that would have spared us grief
(not to mention, alienation)
had our parents communicated to us
will continue to grow
like moss on our backs
and no matter which way
we turn to the light
on our cold side
and ache
like a phantom limb
(Dumont, that tongued belonging, 2007, pp. 1-2)
Métis stories matter. There is no room for contesting the fact. Marilyn Dumont’s (2007) poem, *the tongued belonging*, quoted above, illustrates the very reason why Métis stories matter. As I ingest this poem, I am reminded of my desire and longing to be called upon by my ancestors in our mother tongue so that I may have a sense of belonging and to be nestled in “that sweet place of fit among [my] relatives” (p. 1). As mentioned in my interview with Uncle Jules, his calling me by soliciting “my girl”, although in English, prompts a knowing of kinship that situates me as belonging to and within a set of relationships. With my family, we have not only borrowed the English language, but have come to master it so that we can connect to each other and continue to affirm our relationships. Although I am fluent in the English language I am ever cognizant of the Métis language and its efficacy for instilling a sense of being for my ancestors. But as Dumont (2007) beautifully articulates, there was, and continues to be, a disruption of relationships when the language of a people is no longer transferred and taken up by subsequent generations thus leading to an un-spared grief that permeates our sense of being. From the continual acts of colonization and oppression, Métis people have, for far too long, endured the pains of our ‘phantom limbs’ and have been perpetually silenced and disregarded. Our stories matter because they reveal a unique history and lived experiences that are distinct to our country, and in my case, the restoration of these stories can lead to healing and self-renewal.

**What do the stories say about Métis ways of knowing**

I set out on this research journey to find evidence of Métis ways of knowing by listening to the stories of Métis lived experiences. To be frank, up to this point, I avoided addressing my initial query in my writing because the Métis participants interviewed did not specifically explicate a Métis way of knowing within their narratives. I was hesitant, therefore to confirm that I found evidence of a Métis way of knowing, but at the same time, I did not want to deny myself
the claim either. Through thinking and reminding myself about the nature of stories, meanings
are often less explicit while remaining embedded within the stories themselves, thus forcing
individuals to find the teachings within the storied landscape. Sitting with this conundrum, I
decided to spend time contemplating the stories of the participants and myself in order to fortify
central common themes that could create a collective narrative and illustrate a Métis ways of
knowing.

Acknowledging this, I begin the writing for this chapter, by revisiting my initial questions
that prompted this research project then returning to all the stories and my self-reflections that
are embedded throughout this thesis. Upon revisiting the questions: How did/does being Métis
inform how one lives/d their life? What do the stories reveal about Métis ways of knowing, I
specifically took a closer examination of all the themes that emerged from the narratives
expressed in Chapter four in relation to the initial questions. I acknowledge that there are an
abundance of themes flowing from the narratives gathered in this thesis. However, for the
purposes of doing justice to what was expressed and locating evidence of a Métis way of
knowing, I chose five themes that were unifying threads among all our stories and signal a Métis
way of knowing: language, racism, kinship, land, and survival.

**Power of language to spare us grief**

Language was a common theme that occurred within each story, including my own. The
mother tongue of our Métis parents was either Michif or Cree, and it was fluently spoken in the
home environment. However, only my aunt and uncle learned their mother tongue and
unfortunately, they do not converse using the language today. I remember as a young girl my
father would use Michif words for everyday commands; “tansi kiya – hello, how are you”, or
“astam – come here”, but the sprinkling of words here and there was the extent to which I heard
the language. I remember when I asked him about the language he said that he didn’t know how to speak it, but when we would return to Boggy Creek or when we were at Métis events, I would hear him speak the language and always wondered why he said he did not know how. I can only wonder why he didn’t speak more freely with us, and perhaps, like my Aunt, he didn’t have anyone to converse with in the home because my mom was not Métis. However, after he passed away I received an audio recording of an interview that he participated in where he affirmed the importance of speaking the Michif language and stressed that we need to try anything in order to get the younger generations interested and speaking the language (Bouvier, 2009). As mentioned previously, the biggest sense of loss I feel is not being able to speak the Michif language. As Marilyn Dumont (2007) describes, there is a pervasive void that sits within me and the disconnection to my ancestors via the language that evades me.

Marie Battiste (2009) describes Aboriginal languages as such, “the basic media for the transmission and survival of Aboriginal consciousness, cultures, literatures, histories, religions, political institutions, and values. They provide distinctive perspectives on and understandings of the world” (p. 199). Further, Battiste (2009) asserts the sharing of a language allows Aboriginal people to form a mutual perspective of how the world functions and how one is to act, thus creating a collective epistemology. The Elder participants in the Métis elders’ gathering stated this about language,

So you have a totally different world view, when you speak an Aboriginal language than when you speak the English language. When you speak the English language, it is almost like you are apart from, yet when you speak an Aboriginal language, you are a part of. So that is a big difference that we have, we are related, that’s why we say we are related to the whole universe. That the importance of having and understanding and learning to
speak what we call Cree or an Aboriginal language” (Edge & McCallum, 2006, pp. 96-97).

Here, I turn my attention to the Michif language, because it is the language of my Métis ancestors and one that I want to explore further. According to the Manitoba Métis Federation Language Program (2004) Michif consists of:

verbs and associated grammar from Cree and its nouns and associated grammar from Michif-French. The Saulteaux language contributes some verbs, sounds and nouns to the combination. The Michif language is unique in world languages: it is syncretic, in that it is not classified as belonging to a single language family (p. 1).

In studying the Michif language, John Crawford (1985) reveals that during the formative period of Michif there were strong forces maintaining the full grammatical gender systems of both French and Cree...it must have required some sort of sympathetic co-existence or a balance (emphasis added) of prestige between Cree and French groups to produce Michif (p. 49).

The balance of the Cree and French language in creating Michif indicates that there was a syncretic relationship in which the two separate languages came together to create a new functional system. Judy Iseke (2013) identifies that, “Michif is a unique language expressing Métis understandings of the world in which they live in both the colonial and the Indigenous languages and was created in the homes and lives of the Métis peoples” (p. 96). She further postulates that although the Michif language contains French, it is not a colonial language because it was constructed by Indigenous people and taken up as part of their Métis identity. This is not to suggest however, that there is one homogenous Michif language, or that all Métis people solely speak Michif. Peter Bakker (2004) has pointed out that there are variations and
different dialects of Michif which are dependent on the locale and community of the speakers (Manitoba Metis Federation Michif Language Program, 2004, pp. 5-7).

Prior to conducting this research, I assumed that the Michif language was not transferred to subsequent generations because of the fear of discrimination. This reason cannot be ruled out as a factor in language loss, however, my research revealed the existence of a belief that the English language was more purposeful in ensuring the success of the children in school and mainstream society. Marie Battiste and James Youngblood Henderson (2000) speak to this issue when she describes the issue of “benign translatability” in which the Eurocentric response to conflicts between worldviews is embedded in the idea that worldviews can and should be translated into the English language (p. 79). Battiste and Henderson (2000) purport that the fallacy of translatability continues to legitimize the Eurocentric worldview while undermining and invalidating the Indigenous perspective, thus hindering the revitalization of Indigenous languages. Further, the misconception of benign translatability persuades parents and family members to believe that their language does not have value, which causes the parents to stop the transfer of language (Battiste & Henderson Youngblood, 2000). Whether the individuals faced discrimination when speaking the language was not stated explicitly in my research conversations, but there was the assumption that their languages were meaningless and would not be valuable in the future.

Judy Iseke (2013) addresses the role of globalization in weakening the relationship between Métis individuals and their languages in suggesting that globalization and the focus on English language dominance is an extension of colonization and continues to threaten Métis existence. Métis elder, Tom McCallum expresses the disengagement from a Métis worldview that is experienced when you speak the English language rather than Cree; because the language
envelops one’s worldview, you subsequently change the way you think when you speak English (Iseke, 2013). Only recently has there been a realization that the Michif language has value and ought to be regenerated in order to carry on Métis identity. In 2000, the Métis National Council declared Michif as the official language of the Métis Nation, which subsequently ignited a Michif language awareness campaign (Manitoba Metis Federation Michif Language Program, 2004). Since that declaration, there has been a resurgence of written and digital materials to encourage the revival of Michif (Manitoba Metis Federation Michif Language Program, 2004).

Regardless of the admirable efforts, the Michif language is still at great risk of becoming extinct. The Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures (2005) submitted a report titled, *Towards a new beginning: A Foundational Report for a Strategy to Revitalize First Nation, Inuit and Métis Languages and Cultures*, to the Minister of Canadian Heritage that outlined an endangered language as such; “Endangered languages are languages in which people of the older generation, or Elders, know and use the language, but in which parents of childbearing age by and large use a different language with their children, thus disrupting intergenerational transmission” (p. 34). The report further stresses that “less than one half of one percent of Métis people are able to speak Michif, the historical and official language of the Métis nation” (The Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, 2005, p. 36). Although there has been some efforts to establish learning materials and with only 640 speakers in all of Canada (Government of Canada, 2015), I fear that our language will not be transferred to future generations.

In 2004, Nicole Rosen submitted a report to the Louis Riel institute outlining relevant literature for language acquisition and best practices that would strengthen the efforts to revitalize the Michif language (Manitoba Metis Federation Michif Language Program). She identified multiple challenges to language acquisition; lack of literacy materials that will support
the learning, varying dialects of the Michif language, instability of funding and human resources in the application of programming, deficient plans for the longevity of instructional classes, and the absence of academically trained Michif language speakers to facilitate classes. In her report, she stresses the best mode of language acquisition is a home immersion program where the learner would spend lengthy amounts of time in the home of a fluent Michif speaker in order to be immersed in the language on a daily basis. With these challenges in mind and with the decline of speakers that may make the home immersion program seemingly difficult, it becomes apparent that the task of language revival will not be easy. Nonetheless, Métis elders affirm,

To return to that language, the language is never gone, the language is always here. It’s the people that have forgotten how to use that language. It’s inside of each and every one of us. ‘Cause we have that feeling, we have feeling inside of us already. Because it is genetic, and it is cellular. We have what you call ‘cellular memory.’ That’s inside of us. (Edge & McCallum, 2006, p. 100).

Is it because I have white skin?

Métis authors have taken to the page to assert their voices and speak of the oppression, racism and discrimination felt by Métis people (Campbell, 1973; Dumont, 1996; Richardson, 2006; Scofield, 2009). Art, Doreen, Jules, and I all recall witnessing a Métis family member experience racism because of their Métis identity. Métis author, Marilyn Dumont (1996), poignantly writes about her experiences in her poem, memoirs of a really good brown girl:

I don’t glisten with presence, confidence, glisten with the holiness of St. Anne whose statue I see every year at the pilgrimage, her skin translucent, as if the holy ghost is a light and it shines out through her fluorescent skin, as if a sinless life makes your skin a receptacle of light...My skin always gave me away. In grade one, I had started to forget
where I was when a group of us stood around the sink at the back of the class washing up after painting and a little white girl stared at the colour of my arms and exclaimed, ‘Are you ever brown!’ . I wanted to pull my sleeves down to my wrists and pretend that I hadn’t heard her, but she persisted, ‘Are you an Indian?’ . I wondered why she had chosen this ripe time to ask me and if this was the first she’d noticed (p. 14).

Like Dumont (1996), in the instances remembered by the participants, the dark skin color was the main factor that contributed to the racist behaviour they encountered. Each of us acknowledged that because we were light skinned, we had the ability to be seen as white until people found out of our identity then, in some instances, the circumstance changed and we were treated poorly by those who looked down upon Métis people.

Richardson (2006) states, “the term ‘passing’ refers to the act of appearing to assimilate into another culture, without being noticed as ‘different’” (p. 61). Further, through her research she uncovered that ‘passing’ as white was a way to ensure the safety and wellness of individuals and families, but being able to pass did not always shield one from feeling the trauma of witnessing family being subjected to racism. The participants in my study did not explicitly identify passing off as white to escape racism, but rather it was more of a natural consequence in having fair skin and the darker skinned family members were more readily targeted. During one summer visit to Manitoba, my family went to Wal-Mart to purchase a few things and my sister, the darker skinned of us, was being followed around by an employee and treated as though she was planning to shoplift. My sister immediately expressed her anger to my Aunt who addressed the situation with the employee; I remember there was a heated exchange and we left immediately.
Vulnerably, I acknowledge that during that moment and moments extending into today, I feel guilty because I have whiter skin and cannot share in my sister’s or ancestor’s experiences. My son has brown skin, and some people are surprised when they see us together because he is much darker than me. I have had people comment to me after meeting him; “Oh he really looks Native, eh”, which for me clearly indicates that brown skin is a marker for being ‘Native’, so if I have white skin, than I must not be ‘Native’ at all. After they acknowledge that my son is ‘Native’, I then am asked the question; “Are you white?”, and I respond and say; “No, I’m Métis”, thus beginning the questions of what is a Métis person. When I try to explain the complexities of my identity, I receive a bewildered look from individuals because they cannot understand that my identity encompasses more than just being half white and half Indian, nor do I have the brown skin to prove my ‘Aboriginalness’.

Chris Andersen (2011) speaks to the issue of having to continually cleave off the assertion of our mixedness; “Métis identity carries the freight of more than a century of official Canadian attempts to impose binary ‘truths’ (‘Indian or Canadian’) onto Indigenous social orders, the avenues of resistance such attempts have opened up (and closed off), and the ‘leakage’ of such racialization discourses into our perceptions of the world” (p. 164). During my interview with Art, he challenged me with a question: Why do we have to negotiate our identity? I re-framed the question to myself in asking: Why do I feel like I have to choose sides? This was monumental for me, and I accepted the challenge as a gift to deconstruct how I saw myself as a Métis individual. Going back to the introduction of my literature review, when people asked about my identity, I inherently knew I was not a hybrid, I was whole. Métis singer/songwriter Andrea Menard (2000), wrote a song titled Halfbreed Blues, to which I found inspiration to halt
the inner negotiations of my ancestral ties, and to instead utilize my inner knowing to affirm my Métis blood;

I was born the privileged skin and my eyes are light, light brown.
You’d never know there’s Métis blood raging underground.
Let me tell you a story about a revelation.
It’s not the color of a nation that holds the nation’s pride.
It’s imagination, it’s imagination inside.

**Relationships with the land**

“Traditionally, the Métis lived a lifestyle that was in harmony with nature” (Barkwell, Dorion, & Hourie, 2006, p. 134) which included “living in accordance with the seasons, [and] respecting the life cycles of those in the natural world” (Adese, 2014, p. 54). All four participants described a life where both the family and the community were dependent on the land and its population for survival. Hunting, trapping and harvesting berries and roots were at the forefront of how the participants maintained their livelihood. Living in harmony with the land signifies the interconnectedness of humans and all of creation for the Métis. N. Scott Momaday (1997) eloquently speaks of the relationship between the land and humans, “The Indian has been here a long time; he is at home here. That simple and obvious trust is one of the most important realities of the Indian world, and it is integral in the Indian mind and spirit” (p. 33). When I read these words by Momaday, I recall sitting with my Auntie Mary and listening to her tell stories about her knowledge of the Boggy Creek area. The breadth of her knowledge with respect to where to pick berries and roots impressed me, but also signalled an accordance, a relationship with the land that was only formed by her becoming attuned with the land and becoming a part of the environment. Momaday (2007) further articulates,

This comprehension of the earth and air is surely a matter of morality, for it brings into account not only man’s instinctive reaction to his environment but the full realization of
his humanity as well, the achievement of this intellectual and spiritual development as an individual and as a race (p. 35).

As I reflected on my Aunt’s stories of her life spent in Boggy Creek, I came away with this deep appreciation for her intellectual achievement that came from being embedded in the daily stirrings of the land. In studying the Western Apache relationship to place, Keith Basso (1996) posits,

For Indian men and women, the past lies embedded in features of the earth – in canyons and lakes, mountains and arroyos, rocks and vacant fields – which together endow their lands with multiple forms of significance that reach into their lives and shape the ways they think (p. 34).

Through this excerpt, I am reminded of the last moments that I spent with my father, and how he spoke of the communal nature of his Boggy Creek community and the value of sharing the food that was harvested from the land. How he described the sharing of food with the community indicates how their relationship to the land shaped how they related to each other, and how they carried out their daily lives, thus indicating the web of interconnectedness and reciprocity. The knowledge of the land signifies how one perceives the self, their place in the community, and larger order in creation, and ultimately, the confidence that one has in who they are as a human (Basso, 1996).

As was evidenced through the participant interviews and my own reflections, ones’ relationship and continuity with the land was affected in many ways. My ancestors were in the Red River Settlement as early as 1817, and my great grandfather was born in the Red River community of St. Francis Xavier in 1853. In 1894, my grandfather was born in St. John, North Dakota, USA, only nine years after the Riel Rebellion. My ancestors received scrip from the
Canadian government in the years of 1875-1876 which would suggest they were still in the country during that time. The reason why my family moved to North Dakota sometime between 1876 and 1894 is unknown, and I am left to speculate on the cause of my family having to uproot their lives and move into the United States. Was it related to the 1885 rebellion and hanging of Métis leader, Louis Riel? Heather Devine (2011) suggests that after the 1885 confrontation between the Canadian government and the Métis, the Métis people fled their homes to move to the United States, and moved more westward, in hopes of seeking safety, and to continue their livelihood.

In her interview, Doreen indicated that her family had to hide the butchering of deer and moose from the RCMP, because hunting animals was considered poaching and her father would be charged if he was caught. Under the 1930’s ban on subsistence hunting, Métis people were not granted rights to hunt or trap year round, and were only allowed to hunt within the provincial regulated seasons, thus disrupting their way of life and causing a decline in their well-being (Devine, 2011).

Uncle Jules spoke of his departure from Boggy Creek in order to seek employment in the surrounding towns. In our interview, he indicated that there was a lack of employment in the area, so he had to move in order to earn a financial income. Jennifer Adese (2014), through her researching the literary works of Elmer Ghostkeeper and Herb Belcourt, revealed that both men were pressured by the changes to the environment through industrialization and urbanization, and had to leave their communities in order to seek out various jobs, or to gain an education. Uncle Jules did not identify an increase in industry or urbanization in the area, however, the changing economy was a factor in the disruption of his relationship to the land.
For Art, urbanization did affect his upbringing, and his view of being Métis. He described his experience as transitional where he was the first generation to grow up and live in an urban environment. He viewed his experience differently than his grandparents and father, because they lived in relationship with the land in rural Alberta, whereas he grew up in urban centres. I identified with Art and found meaning in his story because my view of being Métis is heavily influenced by my urban experience. I too, like Art, am the first generation of my ancestors to live solely in a large urban centre while being disconnected from the land. Upon researching the written stories of Métis individuals to determine ecological knowing, Jennifer Adese (2014) summarizes her findings to suggest, “without our reciprocal relationship with environments, Métis can never be a truly healthy or prosperous people” (p. 65). This statement prompts me to question: how has my Métis urban upbringing shaped my relationship to the land and because I am urban raised, does it mean I cannot have a reciprocal relationship with Mother Earth?

“That sweet place of fit among relatives”

The role of kinship and community in constructing Métis identity was prevalent in all of the interviews. Each individual felt a sense of belonging and affirmation in who they were as a Métis individual in relation to their community. The close knit kinship systems that individuals were wrapped inside, mirrored back to them who they were. James Frideres (2008) affirms the notion that cultural identity is an investment in the collective; “Aboriginal people have always had a cultural identity but in the past it was largely taken for granted since it was anchored to groups and roles and it was not a matter of choice” (p. 325). The personal narratives of the participants revealed the power of being anchored in the collective, and the notion of taking cultural identity for granted by not needing to have to label themselves within the group. As
Frideres (1998) suggests, “When people live in an Aboriginal community, work with other Aboriginal people and socialize with other Aboriginal people, there is little need to be concerned with cultural identity except during conflict with other ethnic groups or government” (p. 325). This would affirm the participant stories, as they all indicated the use of the term ‘half-breed’ occurred from individuals outside of the community and the term ‘Métis’ became a label that was used to negotiate Métis rights when the provincial Métis organizations were forming. The research project conducted by the Manitoba Métis Federation (1997) identified that the term ‘half-breed’ was most common, and was used both internally and externally to the community (Manitoba Metis Federation Inc.). Further, the participants stated that the term ‘Métis’ was uncommon, and not utilized until the conception of the Manitoba Métis Federation in the early 1970’s.

In terms of gender relations, a research project conducted by the Métis Centre, within the National Aboriginal Health Organization, revealed that the most pertinent teaching the women received from their mothers and grandmothers was ‘the importance of family life’ (Edge & McCallum, 2006). They also shared that their familial relations encouraged them to do their best, never give up, and to be confident. Furthermore, echoing the experiences of Auntie Mary and Doreen, the women in the study expressed their sense of pride in contributing to the household chores as well as sewing (Edge & McCallum, 2006). Auntie Mary attested to the communal nature of Boggy Creek in assisting each other with homestead chores, weekly community picnics, attending church services, picture shows, and house gatherings. Art talked about the role his grandparents played in his upbringing and shared many of the teachings that his grandfather passed on to him. Doreen spoke of the feeling of being at home when she was with Métis people,
Same with our dance, you know, so it was there that I got back into being Métis and the more I got in there and I felt relaxed, I felt at home just within our own culture and of course all Métis love to laugh, and joke and tease.

Being connected to and spending time with people that have a shared identity, history and stories affirms one’s sense of belonging thus strengthening one’s identity.

Cathy Richardson (2006) advocates for the creation of a third space wherein mixed-race people can feel a sense of holism and celebration; “A third space offers an escape from Cartesian duality and polarized thinking, from being stuck between being a White person with some Indian blood or a Native person with some white ancestors” (p. 66). I have expressed, in my literature review, my hesitancies in aligning my work with Richardson, however Métis people have established their own communities, which allowed them to celebrate and maintain their identity. However, I would assert that the established spaces were specific to a certain prescribed group, and included individuals that adhered to and knew the collective values and customs. Specificities of communal identity could include: specific language, subsistence dwelling with the land, and communal gatherings that celebrate Métis fiddle music, dance and customary traditions. Whidden, Hourie, and Barkwell (2006) confirm, “Dancing is a favorite form of entertainment for the Métis. Their communities are close knit and dances are one means by which people come together to maintain their solidarity and kin and friend ties. Dance and music are inextricably intertwined in Métis culture” (p. 167). The community activities in which individuals participate reaffirms their relationality and their identity.

**Identity: surviving or thriving?**

Through the interviews, Auntie Mary, Uncle Jules, Doreen, and Art all spoke of themselves and their families enacting survival on a daily basis. This finding echoes the work of
Poitras Pratt (2011) as she too found evidence of survival embedded in the stories of her Métis participants, and more specifically, in their ability to adapt to their circumstances. Further, she articulates their ability to survive enabled “an enduring sense of commitment within [her] small Métis community to their families, communities and cultural traditions” (Poitras Pratt, 2011, pp. 198-199).

Within the context of my research, I was intrigued by how the participants referred to their survival, because it seemed that their references were in relation to poverty and income and not identity. The Oxford Dictionary (2010) defines survive as: “continue to live or exist, especially in spite of danger or hardship”. The hardship for my family in particular, as per the interview, was meeting their basic needs, and not identity per se. All four participants indicated that there was no need to label oneself as ‘Métis’ because it was embedded in their daily lives, therefore, identifying oneself as such was unnecessary because it was implied in their way of life. Métis activist, scholar and educator Fyre Jean Graveline (1998) discusses a traditional worldview before colonization: “Aboriginal systems of thought were incorporated into our daily lives. It was the dominant mode of consciousness. Patterned into our unconscious through stories, rituals and humour and enacted in everyday experiences” (p. 51-52). Although she refers to this process as having existed before the arrival of colonization, from the stories of the participants, I believe the embodiment of this consciousness persisted through the assault of colonization wherein they were attuned to their environment through their continual acts of daily rituals.

Tim Ingold (2000) refers to this consciousness as a “dwelling perspective, according to which the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of – and testimony to – the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within, and in doing so, have left there something of
themselves” (p. 189). Further, the perception of the landscape, according to Ingold (2000), “is therefore to carry out an act of remembrance, and remembering in not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perpetually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past” (p. 189). This is of particular importance to me when I am considering the survival of a people and the role of the individual that is manifested through the perpetual engagement with environment. Ingold (2000) asserts that landscapes hold a system of components that are enfolded “within its essence the totality of its relation with each and every other” (p. 191). This notion aligns with Graveline’s (1998) theory, “We believe that beings thrive where there is a web of interconnectedness between the individual and the community and between the community and nature” (p. 55). To explicate further, I turn again to the Oxford Dictionary (2010) to define thrive: “(of a child, animal, or plant) grow or develop well or vigorously”. This is of particular interest to reflect upon because from my standpoint, I would suggest that living in accordance with the land, speaking the Michif or Cree language, being immersed in community, embodying and perpetuating humor, dance, and music is indicative of ‘growing well’.

Reflecting more on the notion of surviving and thriving, it seems to me that the tables have turned, in reference to identity, in how my ancestors once thrived in their relationships, and how now I am surviving to maintain my connection to land, language and kinship. Living in a large urban centre, distanced from my relatives and ancestral home base in Manitoba, I struggle to maintain the resemblances of Métis identity respective to land, language and familial connections. This is not to suggest I do not resemble a Métis identity, rather that there seems to be the need for more diligent efforts to maintain my kinship connections. I have siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles that live many kilometres away and re-connecting happens less than
I’d like to admit. Just recently, my siblings and I gathered together for a long overdue reunion which was the first gathering in four years; in truth since the passing of my mother.

Graveline (1998) affirms this reflection, “Today, we represent a numerical minority: our worldview had been ravaged by colonialism. We now revitalize under pressure from a hostile environment” (p. 52). These words reverberate as I think back to the participant’s narratives, where they all told stories of how colonization pressured them to neglect the speaking of their language, to discontinue dwelling on the land, and to disconnect them from their community. This prompts me to wonder: in the face of colonization, how can we move from merely surviving (to maintain a cultural identity) to thriving as individuals with a strong sense of self? This question is especially applicable to my own life because I do not speak my language, nor carry on with the land-based activities of my ancestors, and I live in a large urban centre that poses challenges to engaging with my Métis community. The difficulty that permeates sustaining a way of life, it seems, is the question of how do we maintain the interconnectedness of the “Self in Relation” (p. 52) that Graveline (1998) prescribes. The beacon of light though, for me, is that against all odds and even after policies and protocols of colonization tried to annihilate us through racism, dislocation, and assimilation, the Métis people are still here, and we carry with us the stories of survival and I would argue of thriving as well. The fact that we still exist and have strong voices that are telling of our existence and our experiences indicate that we are readying ourselves to move into a place where thriving is no longer questioned and are recognized and affirmed as distinct communities that will no longer withstand to be pushed aside and disregarded.
Moving Forward: Future Research

Since 1985, the Michif language has been the target of research projects that address the importance of the language to the identity of the Métis people (Bakker, 1995; Crawford, 1985; Iseke 2010, 2013; Barkwell, Dorion, & Hourie, 2006). Although there seems to be an adequate amount of literature that validates the importance of the Michif language, there is still a lack of research that speaks to the validity and viability of programming in order to revive and sustain the language. Even in my home city, very few initiatives, have been organized and implemented for the acquisition of Michif. If we are to maintain our language, future research needs to explore the proper avenues for this to be taken up both on community and national levels.

One particular avenue of future research that is especially pertinent to me is that of the Métis urban experience. As articulated through my own personal narrative and as Art’s experiences reveal, there are generations of Métis that claim the urban experience as part of their identity, which I believe has lasting impressions on how we construct our Métis consciousness. I do not share in the experiences of my father, or my ancestors with respect to language or way of life; I grew up solely in a large urban environment and am disconnected to the way of life that they experienced of living with the land and within a close knit community. After I conducted the interviews and completed my analysis, I was left with a broad and lingering question: In what ways do Métis individuals, born to an urban-raised generation, construct and affirm their Métis identity in a contemporary context?

To explore the topic of urban identities, Ronald Laliberte (2013) conducted a research project in Saskatoon that specifically addressed Métis urban identity. Through his research, he uncovered, “Despite the high percentage of Canada’s Métis population residing in cities, there is almost no literature that discusses urban Métis identities” (p. 111). His findings suggest that
Métis urban identity is formed by historical communal, familial and kinship ties, being of mixed ancestry, and parental teachings thus being affirmed through access to local Aboriginal organizations, community gatherings that celebrate fiddle music, jigging and language (Laliberte, 2013). Laliberte affirms, “urban Métis identity is evolving as Métis people adapt and change to the realities of their urban experiences and existences” (p. 129).

Bontia Lawrence (2004) also conducted a research project on urban identities, but instead, she sought to understand “how mixed-blood urban Native people understand and negotiate their own identities in relation to community and how external definitions and controls of Indianness have impacted their identities” (p. 1). Although pertinent work, her research does not solely address Métis urban identity, but rather being of mixed ancestry which is inclusive of non-status Indians that have been disenfranchised or have been disconnected from their community through colonization. Lawrence (2004) reminds me that when I am considering Métis urban identity, one does not have to submerse themselves in a primordial lens while excluding the fluidity and adaptability of a culture’s ability to evolve and transform. Keeping this in mind, I further contemplate how Métis individuals living in urban centres still hold on to their ancestral knowledge and teachings, while adapting and creating an identity within an urban environment.

My hope is to conduct further research that explores the Métis urban lived experience because much of the research about Métis people comes from a historical perspective, and there is a lack of research that speaks to the current Métis experiences of living in an urban environment. This proposed research would involve both male and female participants that have lived solely in an urban environment, but have parents, grandparents or other relatives that grew up in rural Métis communities. This aspect is important for this proposed research project.
because in having relatives that grew up in a different manner, rich data reveals itself and awaits to be explored that can tell of how Métabis individuals are making the transition and adaptation to urban centres and potentially creating a new identity. In reflecting on my initial desire to exert Métabis voices and lived experiences that move us out of the fur trade era and into contemporary times, this work is equally as important in order to assert the reality that Métabis people did not cease to exist with the fur trade or the buffalo hunt, but remain and embody strong identities.

Thinking about this research project and future research to come, Lischke and McNab (2007) remind me of the necessity of the Métabis experience and voice in our current day context:

We are still here. Métabis people know that fact as a result of their own knowledge of their identities, family histories, and communities. It is no longer sufficient to allow non-Aboriginal academics to define who we are and where it is we are going. The old worn categories and academic debate on who are the Métabis people must be challenged and transformed by the Métabis voices themselves – Canada’s forgotten people (p. 1).

The Métabis people can no longer be relegated to beyond the margins and silenced; we have a rightful place within the Canadian narrative that can no longer be contained and ignored. My hope for this research project, and research initiatives to come, is that they ignite and provoke other Métabis individuals and communities to begin to tell their stories in order to validate their lived experiences that occurred through centuries of colonization.

The stories that are encapsulated in this thesis are restorying Métabis ways of knowing and being in such a way that recognizes our existence; our humanity in Canadian society. Our kinship systems, language, ways of life, means of survival, humor, music and dance, and what we call ourselves all embody what it means to be Métabis. The generalization of Métabis people only inflict harm and silence the colorful and beautiful nuances that are held in individual and
communal identities. As we journey forward we cannot neglect that we have heard these narratives because from the moment we bear witness to stories we are deemed responsible for what becomes of them and our actions thereafter. To affirm this stance, I leave you with a quote from Thomas King (2003) as he warns us of our obligation when listening to stories,

   Do with it what you will. Make it a topic of a discussion at a scholarly conference. Put it on the web. Forget it. But don’t say in years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You heard it now (p. 60).

All my relations, Marsee
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http://www.metismuseum.ca/resource.php/00726


