

The Métis Nation Registry: Exploring Identity, Meaning, and Culture

by

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We accept the thesis as conforming to the required standard

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### ABSTRACT

In 2004, Métis Nation offices began to register and issue identification cards to Métis citizens who met certain criteria. While many Métis people did register, and are registering, there are many who have not, and will not. As a result, some question the validity of the registry because it is unclear how it can reflect an accurate picture of the culture when not all Métis are represented.

Through in-depth, unstructured interviews, my reflexive ethnography traces the accounts of six Métis citizens in southern Saskatchewan. I explore their stories about their Métis-ness, and their experiences with the registry. I also explore my own experiences with the registry and my journey to un/discover my own Métis-ness.

The findings are presented in a creative non-fiction essay. The conclusions suggest that identification cards cannot grant someone admission to a culture; rather, cultural identity requires time, effort, intent, active participation, and meaningful connection with others.

**Keywords:** Métis identity; Métis registry; identification cards; ethnography; cultural identity

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Marci.

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In 2003, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the term ‘Métis’ “refers to distinctive peoples who... developed their own customs, and recognizable group identity separate from their Indian or Inuit and European forebears” (R. v. Powley, 2003). Further, the Court stated that the “difficulty of identifying members of the Métis community should not be exaggerated so as to defeat constitutional [aboriginal] rights” (R. v. Powley, 2003). This ruling was a major turning point for the Métis who have been struggling for political autonomy since 1870 when their Indian title and Métis land rights were extinguished, resulting in the diaspora of the Métis people and the dissemination of their culture (Barkwell, Dorion & Préfontaine, 2001; Devine, 2004; Farrell Racette, 2004; Weinstein, 2007). After the Supreme Court ruling and beginning in 2004, the Canadian government, through provincial Métis Nation offices, began to register and issue official identification to members of the Métis community (Métis National Council, 2011a). Those applying must meet three criteria, as defined by the Métis National Council: they must self-identify as Métis, have historical ancestry connected to the Métis community, and be accepted by the Métis community (Métis National Council, 2011a). While many Métis people applied for their identification, there are also many who haven’t – and who may not – because they do not have the resources or ability to attain the “verifiably objective” documentation that is required. While many Métis see this registry process as a means to protect the culture, some see it as a threat because it is unclear how the registry process can reflect an accurate picture of the culture when not all Métis are able to register. I am intrigued by these different views within the community on the registry process and the implications this process has on contemporary and future visions of the culture.

My research draws upon and contributes to indigenous ways of being and knowing (Cardinal, 2001; Steinhauer, 2001; Wilson, 2008; Wilson, 2001) in order to explore the connections between Métis identity and the government issued identification cards. I sought to reveal how identity is constructed and communicated through the Métis Nation official documentation. The objective of my research was two-fold: (a) to explore contemporary Métis culture and its connections to the registry process through creative, reflexive and collaborative methods; and, (b) to help identify other possibilities for the registration process that are more inclusive for all Métis. The theory that guided my research is based on indigenous methodology (Cardinal, 2001; Steinhauer, 2001; Wilson, 2008; Wilson, 2001) and critical theory that explores questions of fairness and justice to suggest what might be possible (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

The greater goal of my research was to gain insights that will hopefully contribute to a greater understanding of contemporary Métis culture and its challenges with the current registry process in the hope of opening up registration possibilities that are more inclusive. It is through the telling of our stories that we can transcend oppression (Richardson, 2006, p. 64). Further, it was my wish to provide a rich and detailed account of contemporary lived experiences of Métis people in order to engage readers in understanding who we are and the issues we face. I intended to accomplish this goal through the gathering of ethnographic data and my own autoethnographic experience as a Métis citizen connected to my community.

### **Literature Review**

Historical research on the birth and early years of the Métis Nation describe a complicated relationship with the process of identification. These studies show that the Métis were initially considered Indians and granted the same rights as Indians, but when the

government realized that the Métis were growing outspoken and rebellious of the inadequacy of the rights they were ‘granted’ (i.e., land without resources to survive on it), the government separated the Métis from the Indians (Barkwell, Dorion & Préfontaine, 2001; Devine, 2004; Farrell Racette, 2004; Weinstein, 2007). In doing so, the Métis were given scrip in exchange for their Indian rights and their territorial rights were extinguished (Barkwell, Dorion, Préfontaine, 2001; Devine, 2004; Farrell Racette, 2004; Gilbert, 1996; Weinstein, 2007). This revocation resulted in the diaspora of the Métis people and, without land and a common place to live, the Métis culture has been disseminated.

Today, this is changing. Métis people across the nation are mobilizing and unifying, and this development has been bolstered by the result of the 2003 Powley case in which the Supreme Court recognized the Métis as a distinct Aboriginal population with Aboriginal rights. This recognition has significant implications for the Métis and the Canadian government (Weinstein, 2007). In order to grant someone rights as a Métis person, however, people must first know who is Métis. To address this issue, the Métis Nation Council of Canada consulted with the Government of Canada to determine the criteria for identifying members (Métis National Council, 2011b) in order to register and issue official Métis Nation ID cards to Métis citizens. In a sense, the Métis Nation has come full circle regarding identification – the initial experience with the process almost destroyed the culture, while today it’s an attempt to protect the culture. The existing literature indicates that identification of a culture’s members via ID cards is both needed and dangerous.

## **Benefits of Identification**

Identifying people as members of certain groups satisfies a deep human need – to make sense of the world. Bowker and Star (1999) have argued succinctly that “to classify is human” (p. 1). And humans have a long history of using written documentation to do such. Classifying and identifying cultural and ethnic groups meet practical needs and social needs, and in meeting those needs, we create order and knowledge (Kelly, 2009, p, 91), and escape uncertainty (Bauman, 1996, p. 19).

The need to classify and identify certain groups of people is sometimes driven by practicality. Identification simplifies our interactions with government in terms of accessing information and benefits (Lyon, 2009, p. 48), and it also assists in addressing certain needs that a population may require. For the Métis, identification is particularly important today because the World Health Organization has determined that the Métis have different and specific health concerns than other ethnic populations, but there’s a great challenge in meeting the health needs of Métis people because there is a significant lack of accurate information regarding exact Métis population figures (Clark et al, 2010).

Two social needs are met by classifying and identifying members of a culture: the need to belong, and the need for diversity. “Seeking and protecting one’s identity is a personal and very human aspiration” (Gilbert, 1996, p. iii). Goffman (1959) argued that information is a form of self-expression and contributes to identity formation; therefore, ID cards contribute to a person’s understanding of themselves and provide a sense of belonging (Bennett & Lyon, 2008, p. 14). Belonging is very important for Aboriginal people because culture is a primary source of strength for them (Nadeau & Young, 2006, p. 88). A sense of belonging is the reason why the

national ID cards in India were embraced by many citizens – they saw the card as a symbolic reward of citizenship and that the acknowledgement of their citizenship gave them meaning (Mehmood, 2008). The need for diversity is an increasing one today due to globalization. The modern world is experiencing a general anxiety and fear regarding identity because there's the notion that with increasing exposure to multiple cultures, cultural difference and diversity is disappearing (Bayart, 2005; Boli & Elliott, 2008; Jensen, 2011). The championing of diversity through identification of cultures and assertion of their irreducible differences addresses this fear and contributes to the unity of the world (Bayart, 2005; Jensen, 2011).

### **Risks of Identification**

Determining who belongs to a group and who does not also poses risks. Bowker & Star (1999) argued that by valorizing some point of view and silencing others, identification can be dangerous (p. 5), especially because it's conducted for the purposes of differential treatment (Bennett & Lyon, p. 12). Identification and ID documents can be used as tools of power and sources of fear, and they can create tensions with identity.

#### **Power and uncertainty.**

In Meyer's (2008) study on the passport, he noted that this written form of ID has been used by both autocracies and democracies to “close gates to unwanted aliens, to limit freedoms of their own citizens, or exact financial or political tribute” (p. 72). Lyon (2009) argued further that all ID documents give the state “an instrument for discriminating among its subjects in terms of rights and privileges” (p. 26). The tragedies of the Holocaust, Rwanda, and South Africa's apartheid are potent examples. In South Africa, in order for apartheid to function, people had to be “unambiguously categorized by race” (Bowker & Star, 1999, p. 196); however, many people

did not conform to the categories, and additionally, different aspects of apartheid law could classify the same person differently (Bowker & Star, 1999, p. 203). As a result, families were torn apart when some members were classified differently than their own kin, forcing them to move to other designated areas for their newly assigned race. Some were reclassified several times. Similarly, Kelly (2006) noted that laws governing ID cards in Israel and Palestine were often incoherent, causing uncertainty and fear in its citizens. In Australia, the national ID card marginalized some populations of its citizens – Aboriginal people were lumped together with terrorists under the ‘high risk’ category of the cards, entrenching categories of exclusion for the Aboriginals (D. Wilson, 2008). Proposals were even made to specially mark Aboriginal ID cards in order to monitor social security payments (D. Wilson, 2008, p. 183). When identification is used to make distinctions between classes of citizens – to advantage some at the expense of others – these registry processes and systems become sites of political and social struggles (Bowker & Star, 1999; Lyon, 2009).

### **Identification versus identity.**

Stuart Hall (1996) wrote that identification is the recognition that an individual shares a common origin or shared characteristic with another person or group; therefore, it’s a construction that’s never complete and always ‘in process’. Similarly, Grossman (1996) argued that because identity is *in relation* to others, it is always temporary, unstable and multiple (p. 89). Because identity is then both constructed and co-constructed, “people never easily fit any categories” (Bowker & Star, 1999, p. 28). Tension consequently develops with the issuance of ID cards because ID cards are a permanent, static representation of an individual. Tension is further created because ID cards hang identity on “registrable facts” and not on those things that

a person may consider part of their identity, such as relationships, stories, or private, intimate details (Lyon, 2009, p. 9). Additionally, because an ID card is issued to the individual, it can foster a sense of individualism rather than a collective identity (Bennett & Lyon, 2008, p. 10; Boli & Elliott, 2008, p. 554), which is especially important to consider when identifying groups of people, such as a cultural group.

While the Métis Nation may be creating unity and a sense of belonging for some of its citizens and promoting diversity on the global stage through its registry process, there is a danger that the process may also be creating uncertainty, internal tensions, and power struggles. These are some of the themes I intend to examine.

### **Method**

I used an indigenous methodological approach to this research. Indigenous methodology is not restricted to one paradigm; rather, it employs various interpretive strategies that require a sense of personal integrity and responsibility (Weber-Pillwax, 2001), are community-oriented (Cardinal, 2001), and are guided by three elements: respect, reciprocity and relationality (Cardinal, 2001; Steinhauer, 2001; Wilson, 2008; Wilson 2001). I collected data through personal reflection and introspection on my own experiences using autoethnography (Ellis, 2004) and narrative interviews (Bochner, 2001). I conducted primary research with Métis individuals I am connected to personally through the Métis community in southern Saskatchewan (after I received approval from the Ethics Board at Royal Roads University).

I interviewed 12 Métis individuals of varying ages and genders; however, six of these individuals provided the majority of the data through lengthier (and, in some cases, multiple), in-depth interviews. Interviews took place at a location determined by the participant, and each one

was audio recorded. I took notes depending on the comfort level of the participant and myself at the time. The interviews were informal and unstructured to encourage meaningful and natural conversation. I did ask some open-ended questions, including: What does being Métis mean to you? How has this meaning contributed to your decision to apply/not apply for the Métis Nation identification card? Why do you believe is it important/not important for Métis citizens to register? I also shared my own thoughts and reflections on my Métis-ness and my decision to register in order to honour the relationship with my fellow Métis participants and the research/knowledge we discovered together (Smith, 2008; Steinhauer, 2001).

After each interview, I listened to the recordings several times to absorb the information they contained, and took notes accordingly. I then interpreted and organized the data using a relational style of analysis that looks for meaning in connections (Wilson, 2008). Rather than using a linear logic to code and organize the data, I employed intuitive logic (Wilson, 2008) and decided which stories and reflections to include based on the ones that continually rose to the surface and demanded attention.

I presented my thesis in a written essay that is layered with my experiences and the experiences of my co-researchers. The essay was written in a creative non-fiction form intended to appeal to those who contributed to the research, and to anyone who is interested in or curious about contemporary Métis culture and its (dis)connections to the Métis registry process. Through an intuitive, evocative, and collaborative approach, I hope that readers will connect to the stories that I and my co-researchers shared, and come to understand Métis identity today in a new light.

### **Hair on Fire**

Electric and wild, the car engine hums as I head east on the Trans-Canada. It's late August, and the wind bashes against the car in waves. Always the wind on the prairie. It makes me feel energized, alive. Especially today. Today, I am heading back home to Regina, Saskatchewan. And I'm heading home a different person.

Earlier, I was at the Métis local #160 in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. While there, I had my picture taken, swore an oath, and was registered as a member of the Métis Nation – Saskatchewan. It's 2010, the Year of the Métis in Canada, and at 35, I have a new identity. I am now an Aboriginal Canadian. Rushing home in the car, I wonder what my life will be like from now on. I wonder who I am about to become. I sense change, prickly and persistent. The highway stretches out long and far in front of me.

\*

A dead bull moose lay in the frosty grass near Old Goulais Bay Road in southwestern Ontario. It was October 22, 1993, and the leaves were changing colour. Red, gold, rust, some a dusty brown. One fell onto the carcass of the moose where there was a bullet lodged inside. The bullet had come from Steve Powley's gun. Powley and his son had gone hunting that day to store up meat for the winter. They tagged their prey with a Métis card. A week later, the two were charged for hunting without a licence and being in unlawful possession of a moose according to Ontario law.

Backed by the Métis Nation of Ontario and the Métis National Council, the Powleys challenged the charges. The trial judge ruled in favour of the Powleys, stating that as Métis they had an aboriginal right to hunt under Section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*. The Crown

appealed the ruling all the way to the Supreme Court and on September 19, 2003, another fall day in Ontario, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled in favour of the Powleys, declaring that the term “Métis” “refers to distinctive peoples who... developed their own customs, and recognizable group identity separate from their Indian or Inuit and European forebears.” Pictures were snapped of Steve Powley on that day in September. A Métis sash snug around his waist, a thumb raised in victory. His whole face a smile.

This ruling is one of the most important legal cases for Métis citizens in Canadian history. But while the Powleys’ case is resolved, another question rises – who is Métis? While individual Métis locals (i.e., organizations for specific communities similar to constituencies) and provincial Métis offices have kept memberships over the decades, there’s never been a single membership registration process for all Métis, regardless of local or province. This is how the latest Métis registry process begins. After the Powley case, and with funding from the federal government, the Métis National Council and its five member organizations in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario, develop a new registration system and begin to register Métis citizens in 2004. Those applying must meet three criteria: they must self-identify as Métis, have “verifiably objective” historical ancestry connected to the “historic Métis homeland,” and be accepted by the Métis community.

When these events happen – the killing of the moose in 1993, the ruling in 2003, the creation of the registry in 2004 – I am not aware of them. In 1993, I graduate high school in Winnipeg, Manitoba; I move in with a boyfriend in 2003 in Vancouver, B.C.; the following year, nothing significant happens. My life unfolds at a distance, removed.

\*

“What’s she going to get with that?” my uncle asks, on the phone with my aunt. He’s just learned that I am registered as a Métis and he called my aunt right away.

I hear about this phone call from my mom, who lives a block away from my aunt. My mom doesn’t tell me outright, but I suspect my uncle is annoyed. Maybe even angry. I brush it off. I have little contact with him so it shouldn’t bother me. But that phone call buries in, gets stuck. And another question, beneath my uncle’s, takes root. *Why did I do it?*

\*

I grew up in Fort Qu’Appelle, Saskatchewan. As kids, my brother and I would tell people we were French. We didn’t speak the language but it accounted for our last name. “Far back,” we would say, “our ancestors were French.” I don’t know where this came from, but I didn’t question it and neither did anyone else. I was excited to be related to people who knew something different than our prairie town in the Qu’Appelle Valley. Dry and dirty in the summer; grey and empty in the winter. In Grade 7, I took my first French class and learned about accents. My brother and I began to add an *accent aigu* to the first ‘e’ in our last name in an attempt to get closer to our French ancestors. Perhaps in a way, it was also an attempt to set things right.

A couple of years before the *accent aigu*, I had been fixated on something else: my grandfather’s appearance. He had thick, kinky black hair, and skin that turned dark when he worked outdoors. He looked different from my grandmother, and different than my friends’ parents and grandparents. Although I had never seen one in real life at the time, I had wondered if my grandpa was a black man. I didn’t ask anyone though, because no one else talked about it. It seemed best to keep silent things silent.

\*

My mother has a green binder. It was given to her by my grandfather's brother but I don't remember when. Inside the binder are photocopies of historical documents. Birth certificates, marriage licences and census records, even photos and handwritten letters. Our family's history back to the mid-1800s encased in green plastic, a product of my great uncle's retirement years. The binder contains the "verifiably objective" information that my ancestors were Métis; I have a copy of government records which indicate they signed an affidavit for scrip as Halfbreeds on July 15, 1870 in St. Francois Xavier, Manitoba, and received scrip on August 21, 1876. Scrip was essentially a certificate redeemable for land or money issued by the federal government to the Métis in exchange for their Aboriginal rights. The government created scrip as a way to clear the land of Indigenous peoples in order to settle it in the government's favour. For those Métis who chose land, the land given them was often uninhabitable, and in other cases, the land was never given at all. I copy these documents and include them with my application as required. One of the three criteria checked off.

\*

*Why did I do it?* Maybe it's because I want to set things right. But I'm also breaking the silence.

\*

A few weeks after my trip to Moose Jaw, I return home from work and find my identification card in the mail. The background is purple and there's an outline of a buffalo that changes colour in the light, like oil in a puddle. In the photo my hair almost encloses my face, covering, but I still recognize myself. Across the top in white letters: Métis Nation – Saskatchewan. There it is: proof. No one can say I'm not. Not even my uncle. I place it in my

wallet so that the right edge that reads *Métis Citizen* sticks out from pocket which holds it. I will see those words every time I open my wallet. I put the wallet in my purse and head into the kitchen to make dinner, satisfied. It's all done now. Complete.

For a while, I am fine. But soon, the satisfaction fades and that stupid question keeps coming at me. Weeks, then months pass. Full-time work and full-time graduate studies allow me to ignore the things I want to. Then I hear in the news that the fastest growing population in Saskatchewan is the Métis population. Statistics indicate that it doubled between 1996 and 2006. This growth is attributed in part to people discovering their Métis heritage after a time in which it had been buried or forgotten. I think about all these people like me who have just discovered or acknowledged their Métis history. And then I think about all those people who have lived their entire lives as Métis. What do they think of people like me? People like me who hardly know a thing about Métis history and culture are now being officially counted. We are changing the geography of the culture. I realize that my decision does not only affect me or my immediate family.

I talk about this with my mother, who also registered, and my brother Shad, who has started to fill out his application. We talk about how little we know of the culture we now identify with. As a child, I can't remember ever hearing the term Métis. I had heard the term Halfbreed, but I never really understood what it meant. All I knew was it was an insult and something I never wanted to be called myself. As a family, we decide to learn more and in July 2011, we head to the International Métisfest in the Turtle Mountains, an area that stretches through southern Manitoba and a north-central section of North Dakota. It's a place with a long

history of Métis homesteads and settlements. My brother's wife, Michelle, and their two sons, Mikhail, three, and Jaxon, four weeks, also come.

The first thing we see when we arrive are several tents set up along one side of the parking lot. From one tent, fiddle music plays and several people are gathered around, feet tapping, heads bobbing. The other tents are filled with kiosks. Tables and tables of jewellery, Métis sashes, T-shirts, and moccasins. There's an information table about Cuthbert Grant, a prominent Métis leader from the fur trading days. Up the hill, there's a cafeteria where they're selling bullets and bangs, or *boulettes et beignes*, a traditional Métis meal which is a broth with meatballs (the bullets), and served with fry bread or bannock (the bangs).

Over the weekend, my family and I explore the rest of the festival. A local community theatre group puts on a play about Louis Riel. We visit teepees that are like museums inside and contain collections of North West Mounted Police items and displays of traditional Métis beadwork and sewing. Mikhail is particularly interested in one tent that's selling handcrafted, wooden pop guns. My mom buys him one and he pretends to shoot the bear skin that's hanging just outside the tent. Later, we visit the hall where there's more fiddle playing and jigging. I've never seen jigging before and think it looks a lot like square dancing. Mikhail watches too and then grabs one of my mom's hands, one of my hands, and shuffles his feet, hopping, kicking, and tapping as we walk around. He has no idea what he's doing but he's having fun.

On our last night at the B&B where we're staying, I lie in bed for a while before turning out the light. I am happy to have spent time with my family but I wonder if this is really what being Métis is. Am I Métis now that I've seen jigging and bought a sash? I understand that because of my relatives – whom I biologically came from – I am Métis. I know that in my head,

but how do I feel it inside? In my blood, my heart, my whole being? How does someone really belong to a culture? I noticed over the weekend the groups of people who gathered together: friends and families who knew one another. The third criterion for receiving Métis Nation identification – the applicant must be recognized and accepted by a Métis community or local. No one in the Métis community where I live knows who I am and I don't know them. I shouldn't have been granted my identification. If I want to belong to the Métis culture, I can't do so in isolation.

It's dark and the stars outside the window are up high, far away. Next to me in the same room, my mother is already asleep. In the room beside us, Shad, Michelle and the boys are all sharing a bed. I think about Mikhail, his dancing, his total involvement and excitement about the events over the weekend. He's three years old and he knows the word Métis. I close my eyes, ready for sleep.

\*

I hear about the Wiichihwayshinawn Foundation through social media. It's a new organization in Regina formed by three Métis women. The name of the organization was given to the three founding members by a Métis Knowledge Keeper and it is Michif, the language of the Métis, for 'we are helpers.' The goal of the Foundation is to empower, preserve and develop Métis community and culture by recognizing the achievements of Métis community members within Saskatchewan. The organization hopes to achieve this goal by providing educational workshops, creating a scholarship program, and hosting an annual awards celebration in which Métis citizens are acknowledged for their contributions to the community. On February 2, 2012, the Foundation hosts its first community engagement meeting and I attend.

There is a large turnout and Ashley Norton, Samantha Racette and Jenn McGillis, the founding members, serve us all bullets and bangs before the meeting begins. After the meal, each person takes a turn to introduce themselves and talk about why they're here. The women in the room share stories of their proud Métis heritage and their desire to finally celebrate it in new ways. I leave the meeting wanting to know more. More about these women's experiences growing up as Métis, and about the experiences of others in the community. I grew up near some of the women in the room, in the Qu'Appelle Valley which has a long Métis history, and yet, I didn't know anything about it. It's strange what one family will celebrate and honour, and another will bury away.

\*

It's just before 8:00 a.m. and I'm driving to work when I catch my breath. The sun has already started to rise behind me, but it's the moon I'm watching. It's monstrous in the sky. I've seen the moon fat before and I've always taken note, but this is the fattest moon ever. And it's pink. I slow the car, pull it towards the curb to take a moment. Wild, intense and meaningful in a way that's just out of grasp.

That evening, I knock on Ashley Norton's door. Her youngest son, Sean, who's barely a toddler, greets me and shows off his finger wrapped in a cartoon Band-Aid. He takes my hand and leads me straight to the living room to play with his toys. He reminds me of my nephew. Sean's older brother Dontae joins us and together we take turns smashing Hot Wheels into each other and trying on sunglasses and Ninja masks. I look around the room. Missing baseboards, couches piled with laundry in various stages of being cleaned, the two boys with big smiles and

big hearts. This house knows what's important. I want to push some of the laundry off a section of a couch and curl up. For a long while.

Ashley invites me to the kitchen where she makes us tea with honey. She asks the boys to keep themselves occupied elsewhere, or to stay with us quietly at the table while we talk. They do both – at times they head off to another room for a while and play, then they come back for some tea and milk, action figures in hand, polite and hushed.

Ashley's 29 and very striking. It's her eyes; her sons have gotten theirs from her. And there's a certain confidence about her; it's natural, not forced. Ashley was raised knowing she was Métis. Both her parents were involved in the Métis locals and often took Ashley to meetings and gatherings. She grew up going to the yearly Back to Batoche festival to celebrate Métis life and commemorate those who fought in the 1885 Northwest Resistance. She participated in jigging lessons, and at 19, was elected to be the Saskatchewan representative for the National Aboriginal Youth Council, a position she held for about six years. Today, she works for Eagle Moon Health Office, a project of the local health authority that takes a holistic approach to serving their First Nations and Métis clients by caring for their mental, physical, spiritual and emotional well-being. And now it's her sons who attend jigging lessons and have posters of Métis historical figures on their bedroom walls. What's interesting is that her sons' father is First Nations and both Dontae and Sean have treaty status, not Métis. But she's determined that they will be proud of their Métis heritage regardless of their inability to vote in Métis Nation elections. It's more interesting still that Ashley is not registered with the Métis Nation, either, even though she's involved in the Regina Riel Métis Council and even does volunteer work for the Métis Nation – Saskatchewan (she worked at the voting station during the last round of elections).

I ask her why she's not registered. She's so clearly devoted to her Métis-ness both politically and culturally.

"I've filled out the application," she says, "but I'm reluctant to send it in." Part of her feels that she doesn't need anyone telling her she's Métis, another part of her is not happy with the fact that it's a non-Métis person at Métis Nation – Saskatchewan who authorizes the application forms. Additionally, her sense of loyalty to her family holds her back.

"I'm not sure the Norton side of my family would qualify for Métis status." Ashley's grandmother was Dene First Nation and her grandfather was English. "Even though they grew up as Métis, lived traditional Métis lives, and were accepted by the Métis community, they don't have the genealogical connection. So are they Métis or non-status Indians?"

The genealogical connection Ashley refers to is the connection to the Red River Settlement. The current Métis registry process requires that applicants have an ancestral connection to the historic homeland, which includes Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia and parts of the northern United States. It does not include Quebec, the Maritime provinces, or the vast majority of the Yukon, the Northwest Territories or Nunavut. Generally, there must be an ancestral connection to the Métis who had lived in the Red River Settlement in southern Manitoba in the late 1800s. The homeland extends beyond that Red River area because in 1869, the Hudson's Bay Company sold the land the Métis resided on to the government and the Métis were forced to leave. Records indicate they dispersed further west. Because the Norton side of Ashley's family are Dene and their traditional territory is in the north, not Red River, they probably wouldn't qualify. The other side of her family, however, does have ancestral connection to Red River, but Ashley still questions sending in her application.

“If my whole family can’t register, why should I?”

There’s also a possibility Ashley could regain treaty status through her First Nations heritage like some of her relatives have, but she hasn’t examined that possibility in depth yet, and while she identifies as Métis/Dene, it’s her Métis-ness that takes centre stage. She attended the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP) at the University of Regina, a program with the goal of ensuring that people of Métis ancestry are well prepared to fill teaching positions and are educated to be sensitive to the individual educational needs of all students, and in particular, those of Métis and First Nations ancestry. Ashley’s passion for her heritage grew while at SUNTEP and she was known on campus for always wearing emblems of the Métis – pins of the flag, Métis satchels, the sash. And she still does.

“I don’t care if people think it’s too much or whatever. I do it because we’re always invisible.”

I think about this. The invisibility of the Métis. It’s true on many levels. Métis people come in all different shades and hair colour; you can’t tell just by looking at someone. Aside from small pockets of areas, which include programs like SUNTEP and the First Nations and Métis Education component within the Regina public school system, Métis history is largely absent from education and cultural institutions. I made a recent trip to the Royal Saskatchewan Museum with my nephews. There were books in the gift store about the Métis but I saw nothing in the exhibitions or displays that mention anything about the involvement of the Métis in the province’s history.

“I’m getting impatient,” Ashley says. “The Powley case was huge and important, but nothing’s really happened since then. It’s time to do something.” Many people thought that the

Powley case was just the beginning, that it would lead to other rights being recognized, with the most paramount one being land. But nearly 10 years have passed since that renowned ruling. She confesses that she and her family want to speed things up. Desperate for further action, she and her relatives in the north have contemplated going on a hunt. A massive hunt with more than a hundred relatives. They would go during off-season and intend to be arrested and charged.

“At least there’d be another court case, but it’d be huge this time. We’d raise more awareness.”

Ashley finds that the political battles can be exhausting and lengthy, sometimes with no end in sight, which is why she wanted to create the Wiichihwayshinawn Foundation with Samantha and Jenn.

“We wanted to do something for the community. We want to give back in a way that’s not political. We want to give the community something to be proud of.”

Over two hours have passed and the boys have already been put to bed. It’s a week night and both Ashley and I have to work in the morning, but I don’t want to go. I know I’m lingering and keep coming up with more questions. But it’s time.

It’s mid-February and freezing. I start the car and sit for a while, waiting for it to warm up. In my head, Ashley’s voice echoes. *We’re always invisible*. I think about this. How I’m just coming to understand something about my own history. How Ashley’s doing so much to change the public’s knowledge about Métis history and culture on small and large scales. That big fat moon is in the sky again. This time, glowing gold and lighting up the streets.

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At work, my cell phone rings. I grab my purse from the desk drawer and answer.

“Yeah, I saw your posting online,” the woman’s voice announces. “I’m interested in speaking with you about my experiences as a Métis woman. And listen, I’ve got lots to tell you because I was Métis before it was even cool.”

I pause for a moment, then reach for a pen and paper.

We set up a day and time for the following week. Over the next few days, I worry about the meeting. I presume she doesn’t approve of people like me who have come to acknowledge their Métis-ness at a time when Métis are being recognized on a national scale. I picture our future meeting. I see her on the couch, shaking her head at me. Laughing at my ignorance. I take a deep breath, then block the image out.

When I really do arrive at her house, she answers the door in a robe, her hair’s a tangle of knots. She’s startled to see me and speaks into the cordless phone at her ear. “Hold on.”

I remind her why I’m there. She didn’t write my name in her calendar and forgot all about it, but she can’t meet with me anyway because a friend of hers had a heart attack the evening before. There’s a frantic look in her eye; I can tell she’s scared. She says she’ll call me in a few days to reschedule. She doesn’t. And I don’t call her back either. I have my own fears.

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Someone posts a question on the Wiichihwayshinawn’s Facebook page: what does being Métis mean to you? In a matter of days, several members respond.

“Being Métis means pride! Pride in culture and well-being and FAMILY! Close knit, respect for each other and we appreciate what we have.”

“Maybe you should run. Strong Métis woman...sense of responsibility to future generations, yup!!”

“Nope no interest, old and retired and that is how I like it. Besides I would have to fill out forms to have the Métis Nation – Saskatchewan TELL me I a Métis person that would be the fucking day!”

“I'm a Métis, Status, Treaty Indian and I'm part White too... My Métis family have mixed feelings about me & my brothers taking our Indian Status back because we already had status as Métis, but I am proud of all of my inherent states of being...”

“You shouldn't have to choose. The government has created these definitions for us and then expects us to live by them. Divide and conquer at its finest. For me being Métis is what is in my heart - period.”

“As long as the Métis Nation removes members from their membership lists the government wins...we used to have lifetime membership cards...who took them away and why?”

“Powley took it away... If the Métis are the result of our relationships of love and commerce with our First Nations brothers and sisters, why would the Métis people ask for us to divide our own families! The hallmark of nation-ness is one's ability to decide who its citizens are! That is self-government and that is not something we are given it's something we DO! If only 700 alleged citizens applied under the Powley initiative but the citizenry is much greater than that I say election reform and Powley are a massive failure...”

“The Powley decision was the basis of the return of hunting rights...Prior to that my understanding was that there was an abuse of the cards...they were being sold to non-natives and the government refused to allow the Métis to issue any more cards and hunting & fishing rights were denied for several years...Until the Powleys... They won a Supreme Court decision and now

Hunting and Fishing rights are supposed to be secured for Métis again... please correct me if I'm wrong anyone..."

"Only when a person, accepted by the Métis community, can prove they belong to a historic AND contemporary Métis community to be considered 'legally' able to exercise those rights... Powley became an important tool for the provincial crown to determine the nature and extent of how and who is consulted and for the purpose of determining who can hunt on the right. Without roots to both historic and contemporary Métis community, a person is not eligible for registration and therefore legally unable to exercise rights and I would argue citizenship – not according to our views but as the province, Métis Nation – Saskatchewan and feds see it. There are lots of historic and contemporary Métis communities north of Prince Albert however an interesting lack of research for southern communities."

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"If the oldest, truest Métis members of my family won't or can't register themselves, then who am I to register myself." I hear the frustration in Daniel's voice. There's a sadness, too. "Until the process is made easier for them, I won't. I can't. I'd feel almost as if I'm betraying them."

Daniel Parenteau is an instructor at a Métis educational institute in Regina. He asks for a pseudonym because of the institute's ties to the Métis Nation – Saskatchewan. Daniel's real name comes up over and over again as I ask around the community and search the internet for information on Métis culture. He's generously agreed to speak with me. For some reason, I expected someone much older, but at only 33, Daniel's still quite boyish looking. He was a student of this same educational institute where he's been teaching for the last six years.

At the start of our meeting, I briefly tell Daniel why I've come to talk with him. I start off by telling him I'm registered, thinking that will give me credit but Daniel informs me, like Ashley, he's not registered either. I pause. He's known in the community as a leader, this is why I'm here, but it seems so many well-known Métis community members are not registered.

“Don't get me wrong, counting us is a good thing because you can't have a discussion around rights until you know how many of us there are. And I advocate for the registry in my classes – it's important. But the registry process itself is what I have issue with – it's a very white, bureaucratic process. It's as if a white judge has come along and said, 'I know what's good for you.' There was and is very little consultation with the community; it's a voiceless process.”

Voiceless. I catch on this word. It sticks in my head the same as *invisible* has. In a process that is supposed to identify Métis people and recognize them, there are many who seem to be left out. Daniel's frustration with the process is the amount of work required to fill out the application and to gather the documentation required. I think about that green binder of my mother's. If that paperwork hadn't been neatly collected for me already, would I have applied?

Daniel grew up in Abernethy, Saskatchewan in a traditional Métis community. His family were members of the Road Allowance people in that area. Road Allowance communities developed beginning in the late 1800s when Métis people lost their land or were never granted the land they were promised and, with nowhere else to go, settled on crown lands which were set aside for roads. In Abernethy, Daniel grew up with jigging, bannock, and sashes. While most people of Daniel's generation were never taught to speak fluent Michif by their parents and grandparents for fear of discrimination, Daniel absorbed some of the language and the accent as a young boy.

“But when I started school, I had to speak English only” and he eventually lost any Michif words he once knew. His teachers even put him in speech therapy lessons because they thought he had a speech impediment. When Daniel was older, he realized that his teachers didn’t understand he was speaking with a Michif accent and not an impairment.

“We didn’t call ourselves Métis, though,” Daniel says. “I knew we were different from others but we didn’t name it.” This makes sense to me. You wouldn’t need to name something when you were living it.

Daniel has a clear understanding of what his culture’s values are to him. Family and a strong work ethic are at the top. And he has hopes for the future of the Métis, “You can’t separate the land or our sense of independence from our culture – self-government and a land base have to be the end goals for us.” He says this with force and certitude.

If I want to call myself Métis, do I now need to fight for these things as well? Can you be a part of a culture without taking on its political battles? I glance around at Daniel’s office. His shelves and walls are filled with Métis history and knowledge – a collection of sashes, posters depicting Métis history, and books and journals. The desk between us is decorated with images of Métis leaders. Riel, Dumont, Grant... The desk is large and I stare at these images of men, strangers.

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On November 15, 2011, the City of Regina raised a Métis flag on its grounds. For the first time in history, a Métis flag hangs permanently outside a major municipal government building. I was in Victoria, B.C. at the time and wasn’t able to attend, but later I watch a video of the event on YouTube and see Ashley, Daniel and other Métis community members I’ve met.

Capotes and sashes wrapped around them. Over a hundred people attend. After the flag is up, Métis fiddler, John Arcand, plays a tune and a mass of bodies gathered start jigging, each doing a different steps but all moving in time. There's a still photo of Ashley teaching the city mayor a particular step. For Ashley, that was a big day, a long-awaited and important moment of recognition. There was one person who did not attend the flag raising, even though Ashley personally invited him.

“Why would I?” says Calvin Racette, a formidable man in his fifties, author of the 1987 book *Flags of the Métis*, and Aboriginal Consultant for the Regina Public Schools. “That’s a political event and I want nothing to do with politics.” We’re in Calvin’s office. He avoids sitting behind his desk and sits instead in a chair near me, but leans it back on its two hind legs and bobs it precariously against the wall behind him, hunched a bit to keep balance. A mischievous schoolboy.

When I first asked Calvin if he would be interested in meeting with me to talk about his Métis-ness and the registry, I send him an email. His response is short: “How interesting. I have lots to say about the Métis Nation and their political structure and registration process. Most of it isn’t very complimentary.” I was prepared for this – many people in the community had already informed me that Calvin has strong opinions about the Métis Nation and voiced them freely. And it’s for this very reason I wanted to speak with him – I want to know as many sides as I can.

Like Daniel and Ashley, Calvin grew up knowing he was Métis. He spent his early years living in the Qu’Appelle Valley with his grandmother, who was First Nations but lost her status when she married a Métis man. He spoke Michif as a child. Then, at school age, he moved to

Indian Head, Saskatchewan with his mother and joined his Irish father, and upon entering school, lost his Michif language.

“I was very knowledgeable and secure in the fact that I was Métis.” In Indian Head, however, they lived in the white part of town. “But I didn’t fit in with them. I spent most of my time in the Métis part of town. I hung out there and then went home. There was a sense in town that we were the inferior and so while I was very comfortable with who I was, I was also two different people – someone at home and someone in the community.” There were no Indians in town at that time because “they were confined to residential schools and reserves.”

When Calvin was 12, his mother became ill then died when he was 13. “After she passed, my father tried to convert us to Irish Protestants but my sisters and I wouldn’t go for it.” Calvin simply spent more time with his Métis friends. He finished school and graduated, then worked in construction with the other Métis men from the community, some of them were his uncles and other relatives. While many of them could read blueprints, they couldn’t read manuals or do the necessary paperwork; Calvin managed all of that for them for a couple of years. Then, at 28, with three children of his own, he realized he could do more. He wanted to do more.

“I went to SUNTEP. And it was then that I became involved in the social and political aspects of what was then called the Métis Society of Saskatchewan. We promoted and lobbied for more things for the Métis and we knocked down a lot of doors.” He also started to work with the Gabriel Dumont Institute, an institute dedicated to renewing and developing Métis culture. Calvin was with the Institute for several years researching and writing. He was also the CEO for three, during which time he helped to establish its publishing department.

During his entire time there, Calvin was never able to secure a Métis identification card and was not allowed to vote in the elections. He says it was because of his apparent conflicts with the elected officials of the Métis Nation – Saskatchewan who would strike his name off the voter’s list. At first this bothered him, but as he read and wrote and researched, he began to understand things differently. “I could see how the definition of Métis required for identification changed over the years. In the beginning, it meant you had a White father and Indian mother. Then in 1938 in Alberta, they developed a different definition within the Métis Nation Betterment Act. In the sixties, seventies and eighties, there was the north-south split, and eventually the Red River Settlement idea came into being, but that’s left the northern Métis out.” And in 1988, with the creation of the Métis Nation – Saskatchewan (the Métis Society of Saskatchewan now defunct), the non-status Indians were excluded, whereas before, the Métis and non-status Indians worked together. Seeing how the identification criteria had morphed and evolved over time left Calvin feeling uncomfortable. He recognized the political nature of the Métis Nation – Saskatchewan and freely expressed that the decisions the organization made were about power and control, not right and wrong. In my own mind, I don’t understand how someone like him could not be considered Métis, even by those in political power. But he doesn’t want to be bothered with that.

“After all that, I refuse to get a card. They don’t need me; I don’t need them.”

On January 31, 2011, the federal Bill C-3 came into effect. This Bill allows for any grandchild of an Indian woman, who lost Indian status for marrying a non-Indian man, like Calvin’s, to regain status under the *Indian Act*. Some people who had grown up Métis and identified as Métis all their lives, were able to “regain” Indian status and register as First Nations.

This situation is baffling to many people in the Métis community. Calvin could fall into this category, but he doesn't want any identification or label. He doesn't even like to refer to himself as Métis anymore.

“I call myself brown. Métis, First Nations, Aboriginal – those are political terms created by government. Aboriginal is in my job title, but I don't consider myself that or any of those terms. I'm not those. I'm brown.” His feelings about Bill C-3, and the Métis registry are clear: “I don't need a stamp on my ass to tell me who I am.”

He pauses. “Besides,” he says, “identity doesn't come from a political structure; it comes from the heart.”

He looks back at his involvement in those political pursuits, not with regret, but with a different point of view. “I consider all that stuff propoganda now.” He also thinks it's a mistake to be asking the government for anything. For rights, or for land. Asking for something from the government creates a mindset that Calvin doesn't agree with. This kind of relationship doesn't benefit the community, either. From his perspective, those who are advocating for the Métis and have organized politically to get some funding from the government don't share it with the community. It's not the way, Calvin's certain about that.

I ask him, what is the way? What is his vision for the future of Métis people?

“The community members have to give back to the community members,” he says. “When those Métis citizens who become successful share their success with other Métis citizens, then there will be true progress. When we don't have our hands out in front of the government but are doing it ourselves, then we will have progress.” His vision includes those Métis members who have successful careers, as actors, artists, or in any other profession, turnaround and use

some of their money to create scholarships or educational programs, or stimulate Métis employment. I think of Ashley, Jenn, and Samantha and the Wiichiwayshinawn Foundation.

“I don’t experience that social and political identity that I used to, and I’m not involved in the Métis local or with the basket socials, but I am involved in other areas. I’m involved in ceremonies with Elders. I have my own pipe, my own drum. I attend dances and feasts.” And Calvin gives back through his current role with the public school board – he develops cultural educational programming for the students, and supports the teachers who deliver that programming. Elementary students today are learning the history that was never taught when I was in school.

I get the sense that this isn’t just a job for Calvin and I tell him so.

He pauses a moment, bobs up against the wall a couple of times. “Friday afternoons, I can’t wait to get home for the weekend, but every Monday morning I wake up with my hair on fire.” His passion is palpable. I imagine sparks snapping from his head. Red and bright orange.

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After my meeting with Calvin, I come back to a single image over and over: a ceremony. Calvin told me that five years ago he had met a First Nations Elder, and after she learned that he had lost his own mother at a young age, she adopted him. He described the ceremony for me and this is how I imagine it.

It’s a winter night. Dark, cold. A fire crackles, the only source of heat. Beside the fire, Calvin crouches on his hands and knees. The Elder approaches, speaks a prayer in her own tongue. Calvin doesn’t understand the language but he listens. The Elder, draped in many layers against the chill, reaches into a bag slung over her shoulder and pulls out a jar of bear grease.

With her bare hand, she reaches into the jar for a fistful of the salve. Smears it on Calvin's face. He shivers. The grease has a smell so thick it sticks to the back of his throat. He tastes it.

“You are my son,” she tells him and speaks his new name. “Your Indian name is in Michif. I got it from your grandmother.”

There's the blackness of the night around them, small breezes of heat from the fire. The Elder chants some more and Calvin closes his eyes.

She has given him a new name, a new part of himself to step into and inhabit. It wasn't given through a piece of paper or plastic. It was given through ritual, relationship. Deep care and connection. There's an ache inside of me.

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I sit in the waiting area of an office. It's the end of the workday and I'm about to meet with a respected Knowledge Keeper in the community. She's asked me not to use her real name because she also has strong opinions about the Métis Nation – Saskatchewan but wants her opinions to remain private – she has connections to the organization through her involvement in the community and her professional life. I will call her Jean Desjarlais.

I have heard so much about Jean from others I have already met in the community. Most people speak about her with a certain reverence, almost a weighty tone in their voice. Based on this tone, I developed a certain image or impression of Jean, but when I finally do see her for the first time, all of those perceptions recede. In her sixties, Jean's short, grey-haired, and there's something about her that reminds me of a tomboy on the playground. Self-admittedly, she's stubborn. Scrappy and gutsy also come to mind. She greets me and we move into an empty meeting room.

Jean was born when her family lived in one of the Road Allowance communities in the Qu'Appelle Valley and spoke Michif before she spoke English. When her grandfather fell ill with tuberculosis, they moved into Fort Qu'Appelle while he was being treated at the sanatorium. And growing up she always knew she was Métis.

“Except we never used the word Métis,” she says, “we called ourselves Halfbreeds, or sometimes, Le Michif, but mostly Halfbreeds, and there was no shame in that.”

Jean recognized that there was a difference between her family and the white families, and between the Indian families. “There was a time when Halfbreeds couldn't go to the white school because we weren't white, and we couldn't go to school with the Indians because we weren't Indians. We were left out. Unless you lied, of course, and a lot of people did. Said they were French.” I think about my brother and I and our *accent aigu*.

I ask if there was ever a time when she felt conflicted.

“No, it never occurred to us to lie and say we weren't Halfbreeds,” Jean says, “because that's who we were.” Sure and proud. But there is one memory that sticks with her.

“The meat market folks,” she says, then stops. Hesitates about whether to continue. “A bunch of hunters came up from the States one time and killed about five hundred ducks. The people who worked at the meat market told the hunters our family would clean the ducks for them. I don't know why they said that but for some reason my grandmother agreed so we did. We cleaned those bloody ducks until we were practically ducks ourselves. And those hunters, instead of leaving us twenty bucks or something, they left us forty ducks. We didn't even have electricity, what we were going to do with forty ducks?” her voice rises. Jean and her family were clearly taken advantage of. Jean shakes her head, shaking it off.

When she turned seven, Jean was invited to attend school. Teachers came to Jean's house to tell her mother and grandparents that they would have to start speaking English in the home so Jean could learn proper English herself. They complied, recognizing that education was an important opportunity, one that no one before Jean had had beyond Grade 3 in a country school. Although difficult at times, Jean made it through school sometimes relying on the assistance of other Halfbreeds and she eventually graduated. She went to do some postsecondary education and then started teaching Métis awareness courses (now that Métis was the widely used term because of its inclusion in the 1982 Constitution). She taught at various locals, police colleges and other training schools. Today, she's still involved in Métis education and is working towards taking the Michif language that's in her head and putting it on paper to preserve it.

Jean's another prominent Métis community member that's not registered. And there are many reasons.

"I've got five cards now that say I'm a Métis person," she says. "I'm sick and tired of having to prove that I'm a Halfbreed. And for what reason? So that I can be counted? I'm counted every time there's a Census because I always classify myself as a Métis whenever I can."

Jean tells me that each time the Métis Nation decides to issue a new card, there's always a different process, but this one is the worst to her. "It's cumbersome, it's invasive, it's degrading. The process is flawed." The sheer amount of paperwork that's required takes time to track down, and it costs money. "Older people don't have a clue how to start. My mother wouldn't know how and she's been a Halfbreed all her life." Additionally, Jean feels there's very little help from the staff at the Métis Nation – Saskatchewan office. "They send someone down here on an

occasional Saturday for a few hours and that's it." That may help some people, but Jean drives back to the Qu'Appelle Valley every weekend to be with her ailing mother and that's her priority.

I ask her if she thinks there's any value to the registry.

"It's important to know how many of us there are, it's important to be counted. I just don't like the way the current leadership is going about it. It seems they don't trust each other so they don't trust you. I fit the criteria – I live as a Métis person, I am a Métis person, so why do I have to go through this big process?" She pauses. "There used to be a time when those in power at the Métis Nation consulted with the community, we were told when meetings were held, we were invited to meetings. They used to do things for the community." Jean tells me that Métis Nation – Saskatchewan used to have an office in Regina and they would arrange for jigging classes and offer programs and social gatherings, but now that Métis Nation – Saskatchewan is up in Saskatoon, it's up to the locals to provide those important cultural opportunities. "There used to be a real grassroots approach. I long for that."

I wait, let the moment linger. "Do you still have all of your cards?"

"Yes, I do."

"Do you remember the first one you got?" She nods. "Did it mean anything to you?"

"I can't say that it did. I was in my late teens at the time and my mother came home from some meeting with cards for all of us. That's how easy it was. She told me, 'They wanted to count us and it might be important fifty years from now.'" Almost fifty years have now passed. New cards, more counting.

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It's Easter weekend and my boyfriend's visiting from Vancouver. I decide to make bannock for the first time. Ashley generously gave me some books and one of them is cookbook with traditional Métis recipes. There are three for bannock; I choose the one that looks the easiest.

A year and a half ago, over our first lunch date together at a Greek restaurant in Victoria, my boyfriend and I, sharing stories and information, both tell each other we're Métis. A point of connection.

Now, in my kitchen kneading the dough, I think about all that I've learned since then. About how, before Powley and the registry, anyone with mixed European and First Nations blood could call themselves Métis. In fact, some use what's known as big 'M' and little 'm' métis. Big 'M' Métis refers to those descended from Red River; little 'm' métis refers to anyone with mixed blood not from Red River. These terms are not so common anymore; however, and I suspect it's precisely because of Powley and the registry. My boyfriend's ancestors are from the Mi'kmaq First Nations on the East Coast, not Red River.

I decide to bake half of the dough and fry the other half and do a taste test. He prefers the baked; I prefer the batch cooked in loads of butter and oil. We drink strong black tea with our bannock and I think about how there have been times lately when I've wanted to turn to my boyfriend and tell him, 'You know, you're not Métis.' I know this is wrong. *Divide and conquer at its finest.* Even when there's love between.

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One of my favourite songs drifts from a portable CD player, "Walk the Line." I listen quietly to the first few verses while Joanna stands nearby, watching me.

"Recognize that voice singing? Do you know who it is?" she asks me.

“Johnny Cash.”

She shakes her head and laughs, delighted that I'm wrong. Waits a moment, then: “It’s my son. No one ever tells the difference.”

About an hour earlier, I met Joanna Potyondi at the Robin’s Donuts in Melville, Saskatchewan. Wearing a soft pink capote she had made after her sister was diagnosed with cancer, she pulled me into a tight hug, no hesitation. Her round cheeks crinkled when she smiled. Wanting me to see her shop, I followed her in my own car from Melville to a house in Fenwood, 20 kilometres away. The drive should probably have taken 15 minutes, but Joanna drove fast, familiar with every curve and bump. In her late seventies, she hasn’t slowed at all.

The house is old and worn, in the only way that houses can be old and worn on the prairie. There is no sign in front, no markers to say this is a place of business and not a home. She leaves the porch door open so people will know she’s here if they drive by. Inside, the room is stuffed full. Wool blankets folded on chairs, strewn over tables, awaiting to be transformed into capotes. Métis satchels in various stages of completion lay like misplaced doilies everywhere. Against one wall is a tall bookshelf, its shelves stacked with Hudson Bay blankets folded into squares. A sheet of sheer plastic hangs like a curtain over the shelf.

Joanna is another Knowledge Keeper in the community. She grew up in a community near Estevan, Saskatchewan, born a Blondeau but now living with her common-law husband. (“He once said to me, ‘Joanna, I think we should get married.’ And I said, ‘But who’d have us?’”). Joanna doesn’t remember being treated differently than the others within the community. Most of the others in the community were newly landed immigrants from the Ukraine, Ireland,

Hungary, and other places who came over so the men could work in the coalmine nearby. All from the same working class and shades didn't matter.

“There were no differences between us. We all got along.” They would sometimes have communal meals together, and during these meals when others would be in her home, Joanna's family never hid the bannock. “Well, sometimes we did, but that was only so the others wouldn't eat it all,” she laughs. “And it wasn't until I was older that I realized perogies weren't Métis food.”

But even though she never doubted the pride she felt in being Métis, she did recognize that there were differences in town.

“My father went off to fight in the second World War and when he came back, he still wasn't allowed in the bar in town.” I must look stunned because she says, “It's true. Most people don't know that happened here. But it did.” She sees me shake my head. “That's how most of the young recruits react, too.” Joanna's referring to the RCMP recruits. She has dedicated her life to preserving Métis history by giving seminars and educational sessions, and she's often invited to speak with those newly signed to the RCMP. She pulls out two suitcases, bulging and seams stretched. These are what she carries with her to the seminars. Inside are photos, pamphlets and booklets published by the Gabriel Dumont Institute in Saskatoon and the Louis Riel Institute in Winnipeg. She has traditional Métis beadwork, sashes, jigging costumes. Like a Mary Poppins carpet bag, more and more items are brought out. From the smaller suitcase she pulls out some books.

“If you want to know what it was like for the Métis back when, read these.” She hands me some paperbacks with images of fur traders on the cover. They look somewhat Harlequin-y.

*Caesars of the Wilderness*, by Peter C. Newman, is one of them. I scribble down the titles in my notebook, not sure if I'll find what I'm looking for in them.

Joanna also pulls out some photo albums and we sit close together, perched on stools side by side at a table. She tells me stories as we flip through pictures. The pictures aren't in chronological order so the stories are snippets from here and there. A first child; her daughter in her fifties with a ribbon from a horse competition; a dog who steals shoes for treats; her grown son hunting in a capote she made; a granddaughter making bannock; Joanna in black and white with a beehive.

Two hours pass filled with stories. Joanna shares so much and I come to understand, in a small way, what being Métis means to her. And I am grateful for her generosity. But her stories are hers alone. They're what make her Métis, not me. What makes me Métis, if anything at all, is not here in this house, inside the suitcases, on these shelves. But still, I don't want to leave. I want to curl onto the couch against the wall. Pull heavy wool blanket after heavy wool blanket over top of me so my chest is crushed. Until I can't breathe. A song ends and another Johnny Cash ballad begins. That deep, raspy voice, lulling me...

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At the end of March 2012, I pack my car up full and drive across the province to spend a week at the Wallace Stegner House in Eastend, Saskatchewan. The house, a childhood home of the American author, is now a residency for artists and writers. The small town is tucked into the southeast corner of the Cypress Hills. Due to the timing, I will miss several events happening in the Métis community in Regina, including jigging lessons, meetings for the Wiichihwayshinawn Foundation, and the Annual General Meeting for the Regina Riel Métis Council. I'm most

disappointed about the latter because I haven't yet been to one of the Council's events and I know I'd meet so many more people. But I'm also thankful to get out of Regina. And if I'm really honest, I am looking forward to escaping, to having several days alone where I can shed the responsibility of interacting with other people and of searching for answers.

The first few days are wonderful. I am totally and completely alone. Nothing to take care of except myself. I spend my time reading, mostly about Métis political history and trying to understand it all. But after four books my head's so full of names, organizations and dates that I can't keep anything straight. It's important information, and I can't retain any of it. Our family's Métis history was buried for so long, perhaps it was wrong to unearth it. I think about cutting up my card. I decide to take a break and head out for a walk.

A tourist brochure of the town tells me that at the west end of town there's a road that will take me to the Trans Canada Trail, which is actually a network of trails that extend across the entire country. I can't find the road so turn around and head back to town and into a shop where several locals tell me they don't know where the trail is either. They do know, however, that there's a road on the east end of town that will take me out to Chimney Coulee, a historical site that was once a Hudson's Bay Trading Post and a Métis settlement. So much for a break. I know I have to go. A part of me even thinks maybe I will find something out there in the Coulee that I can't find in the books. I find the gravel road easily and even though the sign says it's six kilometres away and I'm on foot, I begin the long hike.

Field after field, chicken wire stretched around each one. I climb up, and clomp down the hills. Each one steeper than the previous. The Cypress Hills loom on the horizon. A hawk soars

above, then lands on a fence and scans the landscape. Rusted vehicles rest in overgrown grasses and bushes. I walk further and further from town and from those books.

Over an hour and half later, sticky with sweat and hope, I arrive at the site. The monument tells me it's called Chimney Coulee because the Métis who settled there in the late 1880s built stone chimneys. I also learn that Isaac Cowie had set up an Hudson Bay Company trading post here in 1871 but left for the Qu'Appelle Valley a year later because of fighting between the First Nations, mostly the Blackfoot and Nakota. I stand on the prairie a moment; the land has remained the same, but the world is so different from the one they lived in. I turn and head down into the coulee.

There's still snow on the ground down here, the tall firs haven't let the sun in to melt it. The monument said the last chimney tumbled in 1915 but there are still remnants. I expect to find the bases of at least a few of the chimneys, some stones fallen down around it. But instead, there are just mounds of dirt like graves. Remains.

There are no clues here.

I scramble back up the edge of the coulee to the top and head back. The wind is stronger now as I tread back to town. It whips fiercely from different directions, confused about where it should go. And angry about it.

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“Honour your partner, and your neighbour, too,” Wilfred Burton says, the instructor of the jigging lessons I'm attending. In his fifties, Wilfred's tall, lanky, and has an infectious grin. Wilfred's an instructor with the Regina Public Schools, a member of the Regina Riel Métis Council, and a co-author of three children's books about jigging.

Today, more than enough people have shown up so that Wilfred is able to guide the class from the edges of the circle rather than partner up himself, and another person who isn't up for dancing but wanted the social experience, works the music on the stereo. Wilfred hosts the jigging lessons at the Native Healing Centre in the Pasqua Hospital. The room is a circle with a stone tiled floor, and warm wood benches all along the wall. At the apex of the ceiling is a skylight. He offers these classes for free for a few months in the late winter and early spring of 2012 and I attend some of them. After we bow, we *allemande* by taking our neighbour's left hand with ours, then circling around until we're back facing our partner. "Now *grand chain* until you reach your partner," says Wilfred. Once I reach my partner, we *promenade* back to our home position.

When I arrived for the first class, I assumed I would sit on the side and watch for a while, maybe join in the circle the following week, but Wilfred invited me to partner up right away. "You're here to learn and it's just for fun."

Wilfred grew up north of Glaslyn, Saskatchewan near Midnight Lake and, like Daniel and Jean, never used the word Métis until he was much older. Wilfred's mother raised him and his siblings to be proud of who they were, but there were moments that were challenging. One of those moments happened when Wilfred was in elementary school. I picture Wilfred as a young boy, rail-thin and wide-eyed. He climbs off the yellow bus and heads towards the school's front doors when another boy sidles up to him and pushes him.

"Your mother's a squaw," he says and moves off inside, leaving Wilfred stunned. Not knowing at all what squaw meant, but feeling the shame plant itself anyway.

As Wilfred grew older, he also noticed that their meals of poached eggs and bannock are wrapped in towels and put in the pantry when people from ‘outside’ visit. No one talks about it, but the silence is loud.

“As Métis, we’re taught to hate ourselves from early on.” In Wilfred’s opinion, that’s why many within the Métis community can be cannibalistic. “We can’t stand ourselves and others like us so we eat each other.” And it’s because of this tendency that there are so many troubles within the political realm.

Wilfred applied for his identification card from the Métis Nation – Saskatchewan three years ago when the organization had set up a table set up at that year’s Back to Batoche festival. Métis Nation – Saskatchewan had representatives there who Wilfred really respected, including Maria Campbell, an award-winning writer and Elder.

“But because I still had mistrust,” he said, referring in part, to the 2004 Métis Nation – Saskatchewan election scandal when ballots were forged and people charged, “I did two things: I photocopied my entire application and sent it in registered mail.” Time passed, then he received a letter explaining that we was missing three or four items. “I called them back and said, ‘No, I sent those items to you.’ They looked again, and sure enough, they found them.”

But Wilfred still does not have his identification card.

“Each time I call, there’s a different excuse. About three weeks ago they told me it was returned to them in the mail and they would send it out again. I’m still waiting.”

I’ve heard this scenario from other people as well. Stories about how Métis Nation – Saskatchewan lost applications, about missing papers and cards being mailed but never arriving at their destination. Is it poor administration?

“Every time there’s a new group in power, they decide who belongs to the membership so they can stay in power.” Wilfred explains that in Saskatchewan, there’s a quite a difference between the north and south. The home of Métis Nation – Saskatchewan is currently in Saskatoon, the north; those in Regina and surrounding area are in the south. “If those in the north want to stay in power, they want those in the north to be able to vote. That’s a very cynical view but I think it’s an honest one.”

And that’s exactly why Wilfred wants his identification. “The card doesn’t give me my identity. You only need a card if you want to receive educational funding or if you want to vote. If you don’t want either of those things, then who gives a shit? But I want the recognition because I want to have a say in who becomes president, vice president and treasurer, just like I do in Canadian politics, provincial politics, municipal politics. I want to exercise my right to vote.”

I ask Wilfred what his hopes for the future of Métis people are.

“We’re so fragmented that we’re losing our identity as a people. There are pockets of us here and there, but we’re fractured.” His hope is that the Métis will grow to become a unified people, and this is why he wants this card to vote. “I am forever hopeful that we will find someone who will help us to move forward together.”

I understand Wilfred’s position. Métis Nation identification cards do not give someone their identity, yet they are issued based on a person’s connection to a distinct culture, and culture contributes to a person’s identity. These cards also allow people to participate in their culture. But so many people who are undeniably Métis are unable to secure these cards, and so many

people – like me – are able to attain them with very little connection to the culture aside from biological. And culture is not just biological.

In early 2011, presumably after recognizing that there are issues with the registry process, the federal government attempted to hire the Canadian Standards Association to review and develop a strategy for verifying the registry process. The government, however, did not consult with the Métis National Council or any of the provincial organizations first and when it came to light, there was outrage. David Chartrand, president of the Manitoba Métis Federation, was concerned that the government's plan might undo all the work that has been done on the registry so far, and further, that it would complicate and dilute what's already in progress. The verification system has not transpired.

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Almost two years have passed since I got my card from the Métis Nation – Saskatchewan, and I think back on my uncle's question. What have I gotten from it? The first thing it gave me was a sense of responsibility. To learn and discover and contribute to the community I wanted to claim to be a part of. Through that sense of responsibility came a greater understanding of Canadian history, and my connection to that history. I know the names of my Métis ancestors, John Pritchard and Marie "Sauvagesse," William Pritchard and Marie Fleury, Joseph LaRose and Josephite Pritchard, William Gereau and Catherine LaRose, Clarence Gereau and Winnifred Gabriel, Donald Tyman and Sharon Gereaux. These names are important. They are who I am and why I am. I understand some of the issues facing Métis people today. Their struggles and battles. Also their success and achievements. I've also gotten new people in my life. Calvin, Joanna, Wilfred, Daniel, Ashley, Jean, and others who are not included here. These people shared

personal, intimate stories with me. They shared their time and knowledge. I have had my own ceremonies.

When I combine all of these things together to answer my uncle's question, my answer is this: I've gotten meaning. I didn't become a new person like I thought might happen when I first received my identification, but I have learned new things which have changed and will continue to change my views and my thoughts. I'm not a new person, but I have a new way of being in the world.

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Back in jigging class, we take a break for water. I'm out of breath, sweating. I've stepped on toes, headed in the wrong direction and messed up the entire group, forgot who my partner was, but everyone just laughed it off, expecting that I would fumble here and there and ready to guide me or talk me back to the right position. One time, we had to dance with our partners and move about in a big circle but, being the woman, I was supposed to move backwards while my partner dances forwards. It was too complicated for me and Wilfred, who was my male partner at the time, switched roles and danced backwards for me. "You'll get the hang of it," he said, "it just takes time."

I guzzle down some water. My hair, thick and damp, sticks to the back of my neck. I pull it back with my hands to cool off. I close my eyes, and my breath slows. Wilfred calls us back to the circle for more jigging and the music starts. I take my partner's hand, step in time to the music. I listen for Wilfred's instructions, and know that I don't have to be perfect because I can't be right away. It takes time to figure things out, to understand the rhythm so that it's intuitive and you never have to think about it but just feel it. The music is at a faster pace now as we dance the

Snake in the Grass and I'm heating up again. The room is boiling. My partner swings me twice and I whirl around, my hair trailing behind me, hot and heavy. One day, it might even catch on fire.

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