

TRACES / RE-TRACED: RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY EXHIBITION

BY

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Traces Retraced: Reconstructing Identity  
Master of Fine Arts - Interdisciplinary Art Media and Design – 2018

#### ABSTRACT

“I am Métis/Anishinaabe” is a complicated statement to make in 2018. Determining the precise meaning behind the various terminology used to describe the Métis throughout Canadian history can be confusing – terms like Country-Born, Black-Scotts, Bois Brûlé and Half-breed, each possess their own distinction. I have resolved my use of the term Métis/Anishinaabe to self-identify, based on extensive genealogical, archival and qualitative research and through the personal relationships I’ve established since 1999. Recovering my Métis/Anishinaabe roots enabled me to develop a relationship with my Indigenous ancestral history and participate in the evolution of my culture today. By utilizing artifacts and stories of my own family’s history and interpreting the emergence of my identity through the processes of art making, I advance a methodology of *coming to know*. This thesis confronts contemporary issues around reconstructing identity and retracing the threads of my ancestry to recover what was left by the trail.

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## DEDICATION

To  
David, Emille, Celeste, Lucien  
and  
*“All Our Relations”*

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1999, my acceptance into the Indigenous community as a Métis citizen was nothing less than a seismic shift of identity for me, or maybe I should say that it was as if a final piece of a lifelong puzzle had finally fallen into place. There had always been a tradition of story telling about our ancestral Indigenous family connection when I was growing up. I remember overhearing whispers and quiet conversations in the corners of my grandma's kitchen during our family gatherings – I was captivated by the extraordinary details of our French ancestors who came to North America and married Indigenous women; occasionally I heard the word “Métis” but these incidents only occurred on the rare occasions we spent with my father's side of the family. I was always on the alert whenever I heard the subject arise and later as an adult, these memories became increasingly important to me in my search to recover the buried details of my family history. I was looking for a tangible starting point, a complete cultural identity to base my perspectives on and from which to create forms of expression, but most importantly, I was looking to discover my own sense of who I was as an Indigenous person.

When my family's Métis connection was indisputably established through genealogical records in the mid-1990s, I felt a deep sense of completion – I began to know consciously and fully, who I was from an objective, biological perspective. The legal definition was not everything I needed to establish my cultural connection, but was a significant milestone, because it empowered me to search deeper for more details about the families, communities and kinship-relations of which I am a descendant. As I did so, I soon realized that successfully uncovering this part of who I am would not only affect my sense of identity, but would also impact my relationships with family and life long friends who had always known me as “French”. Moreover, my stormy relationship with the Catholic Church was about to come to an end, which was a prospect I didn't expect to go over well with some family members. However, none of these consequences dissuaded me. I did not hesitate long. I felt like I did not have a choice; this was who I am, this was what I had to pursue to honour my past and understand myself as an Indigenous person, as well as to actualize who I would become as I moved towards the future.



Unexpectedly, this very personal journey has led me to directly confront many social and cultural issues that reach far beyond my singular concerns as a Métis/Anishinaabe person, issues that extend to the country as a whole – namely our collective and individual identities. I now use the term Métis/Anishinaabe to identify myself and do so after deep reflection. Although I identify primarily as Métis and have been registered as a citizen of the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) since 1999, I have also come to know and embrace my original Algonquin Anishinaabe ancestry as integral to my Métis identity. I now include Anishinaabe in my self identification as a recognition of my deeper roots, to convey my awareness, respect and connection to distant ancestors. But this is not necessarily a practice employed by all.

It is generally understood that Métis identity today is associated with specific Métis families who are descendants of the historic Métis Nation who settled in Northwest Canada in the early 1800s. They were concentrated mainly in the Red River Settlement (Winnipeg) area. This definition of Métis-ness is tied to place, kin, occupation, and timelines and is not just a catch-all term for those of mixed blood.

Since the repatriation of the Constitution Act under Pierre Trudeau in 1982, the Métis have been a recognized Indigenous people. Yet a debate around the fiduciary responsibilities of the government to “Indians” including the Métis, (within the meaning of the Indian Act of 1876) has raged on since and was only recently resolved in law, with the Supreme Court of Canada’s decision in *Canada v Daniels 2016*. This decision finally determined that the Métis are regarded as Indians within the meaning of the Indian Act of 1867 and fall under federal jurisdiction. But even the Daniels decision leaves many questions unanswered for Métis in the East.

Section 35 of the Constitution Act of 1982 provides that:

- (1) The existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed.
- (2) In this Act, “aboriginal peoples of Canada” includes the Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada.
- (3) For greater certainty, in subsection (1) “treaty rights” includes rights that now exist by way of land claims agreements or may be so acquired.
- (4) Notwithstanding any other provision of this Act, the aboriginal and treaty rights referred to in subsection (1) are guaranteed equally to male and female persons. (Constitution Act 1982)

Yet the debate around who is Métis and who is not has not abated but steadily intensified since 1982 (Gaudry 2017).

It may be impossible to define the moment when the Métis as a unified nation came to exist but most agree that the Métis Nation could not have been born until the Red River Settlement was established in the early 1800s, as the Métis were not aware of themselves as a unified body until this time.(Teillet 2005 , Gaudry 2017) The debate as to the timing of Métis ethnogenesis<sup>2</sup> continues, but academics and historians argue that the transformation of individual Métis groups to a collective identity as a nation required that they cross a threshold into active resistance against the Canadian government’s encroachment on their lands and resources. During this period Métis culture was coalescing and evolving in many distinct communities throughout the country, but did not yet see itself as a collective or a form of nationhood (Teillet 2010, Gaudry, Leroux 2016, Vowel, 2017). These circumstances are well described in historic records, but leave those who identify as Métis - but who do not have a direct family connection to the Red River Settlement - with several challenges and choices if they claim to be Métis – they must either dig deeper in search of a direct connection to the Red River; walk away and forget the whole thing; or consider themselves legitimately related to Indigenous ancestry as a *mixed blood person* and from there, establish a personal relationship to their history.

Métis legal scholars (Teillet-2005, Gaudry-2017, Madden-2001) assert that recent claims to Métis citizenship and identity (especially east of Ontario) fall outside the timeline required to identify as part of the Historic Métis Nation. They assert that, although there may be a biological connection between the early “métis” and the Red River Settlement, the true *Métis Nation* did not come into existence until the Métis as a collective unified group acted to resist the pressures brought by the Canadian colonial state. Chelsea Vowel explains that in French, ‘métis’ simply means “mixed” (Vowel 1128) without any further connotations, whereas “Métis”

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<sup>2</sup> **Ethnogenesis** – Métis were distributed across vast areas of Canada from the west to the Great Lakes and to the east, the Métis do not see themselves nor do they seek to organize as a nation. When the resistance began in the early 1800s this changed and kinship groups and settlements joined together to identify as a nation – declaring “Nous sommes la nation” for the first time. This is how ethnogenesis of the Métis is understood but no consensus has ever been reached as to the exact moment of ethnogenesis. St-Onge, Nicole and Carolyn Podruchny 2012.

is a distinct cultural term assigned to a distinct people. Although this point is still vigorously debated, most scholars agree that the term “Métis” as a distinct cultural designation does not come into its full meaning until the mid-1800s. (Vowel 1129)

One of the first recorded acts to validate the Métis as a nation is said to have occurred when a group of surveyors, sent from Ottawa in 1869 by William McDougall under the newly formed government of Sir John A. McDonald, were run off the Red River Settlement territories by Métis. This act of Métis sovereignty prevented newly-minted Dominion of Canada officials from surveying and squaring up land-lots for the proposed settlement planned by Lord Selkirk (Peterson 2012). And so the resistance began. The confrontation escalated to a full blown rebellion, which culminated in the Battle of Seven Oaks (also known as The Pemmican Wars) an often cited significant moment of Métis ethnogenesis or the formation and emergence of the ethnic group called the Métis. Nicole St. Onge and Carolyn Podruchny compare Métis ethnogenesis to a spider’s web;

Our metaphor for conceptualizing Metis ethnogenesis is a spider web, with finely spun connections of family, kin, and friendship obligations. Like spider webs, these connections were woven in surprising and complex patterns and multiple dimensions, could be hard to see, could be easily broken and re-spun, and yet were strong and durable.

St- Onge/Podruchny (2012)

It’s important to remember that many Métis were not consciously or intentionally seeking to create a national identity for themselves. Many of the categories that we have today for ethnic and cultural identity were not in use at the time and although there were networks of relationships, they were not seen in political terms.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Metis people were defined by their links to the fur trade; by networks of connectedness formed while working in the fur trade; by commonalities and relatedness formed in families; by inherited appreciation of family, kin, and clan structures; and by their mobility.

(St- Onge/Podruchny 2012)

The work I now do in education, community-building and in my art practice, is a manifestation of my recent and ongoing experiences of coming to know my Indigenous self through recovering and reclaiming my personal history. By embracing what I've learned through Indigenous teachings, by practicing a positive, balanced life and by assimilating new knowledge through the life I lead, I am guided towards actualizing my complete self. When I first set out to investigate my true heritage I found myself often coming back to language, and as I began to learn how Anishinaabe and Michif words and phrases usually represent complex ideas that relate to lived-experience, I found ideas in Anishinaabemowin and Michif-languages that describe my search more accurately than any English words I know. The words and phrases interspersed throughout this text express ideas that resonate especially well for me.

**mi-kwayn-daa-so-win** = *recalling or remembering that which was there before*  
(Anishinaabemowin)

The Anishinaabe word *mikwayndaasowin*, as described by Charlie Nelson, (Fiola pg.80) can also include knowledge of our past or our beginnings. Kovach 2009 (Fiola pg.78) explains it further: *Miskâsowin* can be translated as "going to the centre of yourself to find your own belonging." (Cree)

The words and the process of "going to the centre of yourself to find your own belonging." (Fiola pg. 179) were like teachings to me. Hearing them deepened my perspective and furthered my conviction to continue seeking my identity despite the discouragement or confusion I encountered along the way.

According to my family genealogy, my Indigenous ancestry dates back to the 1640s when an Anishinaabe woman, Marie Olivier Manitouabeoich, married a Frenchman; Martin Prevost (a Coureur des Bois) at Quebec City in 1644. Marie was the daughter of Roch Manitouabeoich and Outchibaha-Banoukoueou who were associated with Olivier La Tardif, the General Commissioner of The 100 Associates Co. (a precursor of the Hudson's Bay Co.)

Marie was converted/baptized into the Catholic Church and educated by Ursuline nuns. She was later introduced into French society, which provided her formal (European) education (Thwaites 1860). Although I was relieved to know who this distant Anishinaabe/Algonquin relative was, the story of her acculturation always saddened me.

Obtaining this genealogical roadmap to the past offered me some insights but I knew this was only the beginning of my search.

The following information was provided and verified by a registered genealogist in 2010 Suzette Leclair, Genealogist - Member of: SGCF; SFOHG; SGQ – there are several other established branches of our ancestry reaching back in various directions, but this one goes the farthest back in time.

Leroux Ancestry Descending from 1644 - Descendants of Marguerite COUC

(Pierre COUC & Marie MITEOUAMIGOUKOUÉ, Algonkin).

**1** Marie-Olivier Sylvestre MANITOUABE8ICH b: Abt. 1624 in Native American, Abenaki Tribe, Algonquin Nation of Indians d: Sep 10, 1665 in Québec Race: Algonkin (PRDH states Huronne?) + Martin PRÉVOST b: Jan 04, 1611 in Montreuil-sur-le-Bois-de-Vincennes, France m: Nov 03, 1644 in Notre-Dame du Québec, Québec d: Jan 27, 1691 in Beauport, Québec Occupation: VOYAGEUR, Coureur des Bois

**2** Jean-Baptiste PRÉVOST de Saint-François b: May 16, 1662 in Beauport, Québec d: May 11, 1737 in St-Augustin, Québec Race: MÉTIS + Geneviève SÉDILLOT dit MONTREUIL b: Abt. Aug 29, 1685 m: Feb 03, 1712 in Sainte-Foy, Québec d: Abt. Dec 16, 1745 in Sainte-Foy, Québec

**3** Jean-Baptiste PRÉVOST b: Aug 10, 1712 in Notre Dame Québec d: Feb 28, 1799 in St-Martin, Québec Race: MÉTIS  
+ Marie-Angélique BISSON dit BUISSON b: Unknown m: May 09, 1734 in Québec, Québec d: Dec 11, 1763 in Montréal, Québec

**4** Marie-Françoise PRÉVOST b: Apr 26, 1746 in Québec, Québec d: Deceased in As of yet undetermined Race: MÉTIS  
+ Jean-Baptiste VANDANDAIGUE dit GADBOIS b: Apr 07, 1723 in St-François-de-Sales (Île-Jésus), Québec m: Apr 11, 1768 in Pointeaux-Trembles, Québec d: Jul 07, 1784 in St-Eustache, Deux-Montagnes, Québec

**5** Joseph Amable VANDANDAIGUE dit GADBOIS b: Mar 23, 1769 in St-François-de-Sales (Île-Jésus), Québec d: Bet. 1832 - 1851 Race: MÉTIS Occupation: 1802 Journalier (day labourer) + Marie-Catherine COLIN dit LALIBERTÉ b: Apr 08, 1773 in St-Eustache, Deux-Montagnes, Québec m: Jan 26, 1795 St-Eustache, Deux-Montagnes, Québec d: Bet. 1823-1851

**6** François VANDANDAIGUE dit GADBOIS b: Dec 23, 1797 in St-Eustache, Deux-Montagnes, Québec d: 1889 in Charlottenburgh, Glengarry, Ontario Race: MÉTIS Occupation: 1825 Carpenter + Marie Josephe PARÉ b: Jul 02, 1806 in Indian Lands, Haut Canada (Glengarry County, Ontario) m: Abt. 1824 in In St-Regis, Huntingdon, Québec, or Stormont/Glengarry County, Ontario or possibly Massena, New York d: Apr 28, 1873 in Charlottenburgh, Glengarry County, Ontario

**7** Mary GADBOIS dit VANDANDAIGUE b: Feb 10, 1825 in Indian Lands of Glengarry County, (Front Charlottenburgh) Ontario d: Nov 10, 1912 in Cornwall, Glengarry County, Ontario Race: MÉTIS + Louis AMELL dit HAMEL b: Bet. 1813 - 1815 m: Sep 26, 1843 in St. Andrews West, Ontario, Canada d: Abt. Mar 30, 1901 Occupation: 1851 Farmer

**8** Adélaïde Adele AMELL dit HAMEL b: Apr 13, 1847 in St-Andrew's West, Glengarry County, Ontario d: Jul 11, 1913 in Williamstown, Glengarry County, Ontario Race: MÉTIS + Moïse LEROUX b: Abt. Sep 1844 in Langeault, USA m: Jul 10, 1865 in St-Andrew, St-Andrew's West, Stormont, Glengarry County, Ontario d: Deceased

**9** Louis LEROUX b: Abt. 1867 in Alexandria, Ontario d: Deceased Race: MÉTIS Occupation: 1892 Barber  
+ Marie Magdeleine Adiana SÉGUIN dit Ladéroute b: Jan 03, 1873 in Rigaud, Vaudreuil, Québec m: Jan 12, 1892 in Notre-Dame-des-Anges, Moose Creek, Stormont, Ontario d: Deceased Race: MÉTIS

**10** Olivier LEROUX b: Abt. 1901 in Valleyfield, Beauharnois, Québec d: Deceased Race: MÉTIS X 2 + Marie Emélie Juliette BAZINET b: Oct 02, 1900 in Hawkesbury, Prescott County, Ontario m: Aug 28, 1922 in St-Alphonse, Hawkesbury, Prescott-Russell County, Ontario d: Deceased

**11** Jacques LEROUX b: Apr 21, 1935 d: Jan 19 2015 Race: MÉTIS + Mary Carmel Nunner b: 1937 m: April 21, 1956 in North Bay, Ontario. (in 2010 became a member of the Mattawa / North Bay Algonquin First Nation)

**12** Bernard N Leroux b: Jan. 1, 1957 d: n/a Race MÉTIS + Johanne St. Louis b: Feb. 22, 1977 Race: French/Cnd m: Sept. 21, 2000 in Cannington Ontario.

## 1. THE SEARCH

I understood that *coming to know* for me, would extend far beyond genealogical charts. I began to retrace my history by pouring through old family albums and letters; I sparked up conversations with my brothers and cousins about the stories our aunties used to tell; I began to search through boxes and trunks, examining whatever I could find that had survived, and I spent many hours looking through genealogical charts and historic accounts online.

Uncovering my Anishinaabe and Métis roots through empirical research satisfied my conscious curiosity, but I was spurred on by something else that I couldn't identify. The decision to begin to self-identify as Métis/Anishinaabe was complicated and required much more than merely having validated records. I began to re-establish contacts with my past based on my relationships with other descendants of my family by attending family reunions in Cornwall Ontario and reaching out to the Métis community in Ontario. I discovered that many family members were engaged in a similar search and thus I formed many new relationships.

Relationships as I found out, took many different forms in my family's historical descent, some that embraced our deeper Indigenous roots and some that did not. From the original union of Marie Olivier Manitouabeoich and Martin Prevost, generations of individuals assumed French-settler identity and passed as French, while others who could not pass as French aligned with their Indigenous identity. This pattern is what Keith Widder describes as the *Americanization of the Métis*; who typically took one of two routes, that of Clerks or Traders, who identified as French Canadian and usually associated with the Roman Catholic church; or the Voyageurs, who adopted Indigenous ways, manners or practices. (Widder 1998/18).

I have recently begun to learn Anishinaabemowin, Michif and some Cree words, which I share throughout this paper. My growing relationship with these languages starts with an overarching concept that I have embraced on this journey, *mino-bimaadiziwin*, meaning a

good/balanced life (Anishinaabemowin), which signals a return to traditional spirituality as a form of agency in the unfolding The Seven Fires Prophecy. (Fiola 1-3) Chantal Fiola asserts that to *follow* a spiritual path is inadequate terminology, more accurately it means to give back through *the gifts you have*, for this path *is a way of life*. (Fiola 188)

**Neesh-wa-swi' ishkodaykwan** = The Seven Fires Prophecy (Anishinaabemowin)

The complete teaching of The Seven Fires Prophecy appears widely online or in books, but like most teachings is intended to be experienced first-hand. The context in which it is taught is vital to understanding the teachings. The contexts of where, when and who is teaching the prophesy all have an important role in learning this teaching. With respect, I refer to one aspect of the prophecy that relates to my own existential crisis.

The teaching speaks of the two paths humanity will have to choose between to proceed forward. We could say in contemporary terms that the choice is between the technological (materialist) path or the spiritual path.

**Me-ka-naynz** = path or pathway (Anishinaabemowin)

I was seeking to reconnect with my own history, but did not know how to do so beyond establishing myself with the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) Registry (the official list of Métis citizens) and taking my place as an MNO citizen. Having this certainty about my Indigenous background was an important moment of conscious comprehension, but simply qualifying for inclusion in the MNO didn't impart the sense of personal identity I was seeking. I still didn't know my own story and this left me with an uncomfortable sense of disconnection from my past.

I began to circulate through the MNO community, making many new friends and discovering extended family, but eventually I became lost in a perfect storm of political, cultural and social influences that diffused my own goals. These were the years leading up to and following the Powley case. [*R v Powley 2003* Supreme Court decision on Métis harvesting



rights.] 1998 – 2006 was a tumultuous time at the MNO, filled with excitement and the promise of building a “nation within a nation” (T. Belcourt 2000). I was fulfilled to the extent that I had connected and involved myself in my contemporary Métis community, but I still felt lost in it.

I continued to research my family and Métis culture, discovering different branches of my family tree - from the earliest traces of ancestors located in upstate New York, Syracuse and Skaneateles Lake, the New York Finger Lakes District, to others who had settled along the Ottawa River towards Mattawa years later. With growing assurance, I continued working with the MNO and individual MNO community councils. I was involved in building cultural and educational projects through my film and photography services and helped establish two regional Métis Councils, one in Haileybury; the Temiskaming Métis Community Council (TMCC) with Connie Boyd, former President of the Women of the Métis Nation of Ontario; and The Oshawa and Durham Region Métis Council (ODRMC) with Elder Olive Tiedema, a founding Senator of the MNO. I continued to explore my identity and engaged with other Métis I met around the province to establish an independent cultural group of Métis artists (not affiliated with MNO) known as the Métis Artists Collective (MAC) in Toronto in 2003.

The formation of MAC was significant in that it was my first foray outside the MNO, which had been all I had ever known as a community. But with many other Métis artists in the GTA and across Ontario, I recognized the need to form something new that did not involve a rights-based advocacy agenda. More important for me personally, it was a significant move back to my art practice. MAC was a Métis-specific arts organization built on an independent culturally-based agenda. The organization grew and established a number of annual events, curatorial projects, and hosted Indigenous programs and special initiatives. In 2008 MAC was acknowledged by the City of Toronto with a Human Rights award for raising Métis awareness within the GTA. MAC was a step in the right direction and served me well but I was still looking to connect with my own past.

**katipamsochik** =The People Who Own Themselves (Michif)

Through these community building processes, I began to feel like I belonged as a Métis, but these were communities of our own making in contemporary urban settings, not the

community of my Algonquin or Métis origins. This is not to diminish the work we did in those organizations. Many art careers were advanced, partnerships were developed, and the communities and circles of people with whom we partnered are still thriving today.

Being in a leadership role was key to developing and practicing my own sense of identity and understanding the realities of Indigenous people today. However, I found myself continually looking back to my roots while forging ahead with Métis community-building in Toronto and Durham Region. This dual directionality, which reminds me of the equal and opposite directions of the infinity symbol<sup>3</sup>, had me searching in both directions at the same time. As with the MNO, I soon became aware of how much I had diverged from my intended path and become increasingly preoccupied with the community's concerns. I had lost my path once again and hadn't found the foundational pieces I needed.

As time went on I extended my reach to begin working with First Nation organizations like the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, Aboriginal Healing Foundation and various others, as a way of gravitating to the worldview I sought. I began to spend increasingly more time with First Nations Elders, and assisted in many important communications projects. I had the good fortune to work with Elder Pauline Shirt (Saddle Lake Alberta), Elder Jim Dumont (Marten Clan), Elder Jan Longboat (Mohawk Turtle Clan of Six Nations of the Grand River) and many others during this time.

Through working with Native advisory centres, healing lodges, community service providers, friendship centres and schools, my understanding and relationships with Indigenous communities deepened. It was then that I witnessed for the first time an intersection of Indigenous ceremonial practice and corporate communications come together in a boardroom setting. I had been involved in corporate communications since the early 90s and had become very accustomed to participating in smudging ceremonies and prayers prior to the start of corporate board room meetings in the Indigenous community, but traditional spiritual ceremony as a methodology in the development of communications strategies was new to me.

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<sup>3</sup> The infinity symbol appears on the Métis flag symbolizing the joining of two cultures and the existence of a people forever - In a gift giving ceremony in 1814, North West Company partner Alexander MacDonnell presented the Métis with this flag and it soon became a trademark for the nation.

## **Kanawayhitowin – taking care of each others' spirits (Cree)**

Witnessing the practices of the corporate world and Indigenous ceremony come together to produce positive change was a revelation for me. It offered a sense of possibility I had never considered before. The projects we undertook provided tools to communities dealing with urgent issues such as the numerous cases of murdered and missing women and girls, suicide, domestic violence, addictions, the need to build cultural sensitivity and dismiss negative stereotypes. We provided visual and online tools for communities to utilize, as well as lectures and training programs for front-line workers; we published manuals and posters as well as broadcast TV and radio public service announcements; all aimed at alleviating deplorable conditions in remote Indigenous communities in Northern Ontario and urban centres alike.

In the context of this work, combining these two methodologies (corporate communications and spiritual ceremony) made the best possible sense and resulted in lasting, successful solutions. Most of the campaigns that were produced then are still in use today.

Being a part of these initiatives awakened me to some of our country's dark history of oppression towards Indigenous peoples. I began to push back on the social and political forces that had shaped my identity earlier in life. This signaled an important shift during which I began to re-construct my identity. Thinking about the difficult decisions my ancestors had had to make under the enormous pressure they'd experienced moved me to reclaim what was lost. It was time to take back what was hidden under the pressures of racism.

It's not difficult to imagine, when looking at the history of marginalization of Métis people, why many members of my family buried their Métis/Anishinaabe culture when they could and assimilated into white settler culture. It was not an advantage to reveal one's Métis roots, especially after the Battle of Batoche<sup>4</sup> in 1885, when the Métis Rebellion was put down and Louis Riel was convicted and hanged – to do so would severely limit a Métis family's opportunities and self-determination.

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<sup>4</sup> The Battle of Batoche: The loss by the Métis at the Battle of Batoche in 1885 was decisive – the Rebellion had been put down – Louis Riel surrendered days later and Gabriel Dumont, his general and strategist had to flee to the United States in exile.

For the most part, the Métis struggle for rights and recognition has been (up until the 1982 Constitution Act) virtually invisible to the State of Canada. What *being* Métis is, or why I would want to self-identify as Métis was a question that often confronted me. I was challenged and taunted at times by friends and even a few family members. But as I began to learn more about the culture of my ancestors from those around me, I noticed that in some ways I seemed to know more than I could account for through my conscious lived experience. This compelled me to deepen my search for my historic identity and greatly inspired my art practice. I recall how familiar each teaching felt and how it seemed like coming home - so I was drawn onward without hesitation and despite the discouragement I sometimes encountered.

### **Apihkopitum** = disentangle (Michif)

I share these experiences as a way to introduce myself through stories about my emergence in the Ontario Indigenous community.

## 2. WELCOMING IN

From the first years that I attended the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) gatherings, I met and spent invaluable time with elders including Marion Larkman, Earl Schofield, Olive Tiedema, Ruth Wagner and many other Métis Senators (my father, Jacques Leroux<sup>5</sup> among them) all of whom had their own way of conveying their deep appreciation for Métis culture to me. My father encouraged me to bring my technical and marketing skills to help the Métis cause and I willingly stepped up. This provided me with a meaningful role to play, to document a growing community through video and photography. It also provided a perfect way to introduce myself and get to know the community on a one-to-one basis.

I documented life around the campfires and kitchen tables in the following years; I was often regaled with Métis lore, tales of the physical endurance, ingenuity and *joie d’vive* that

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<sup>5</sup> Although my father Jacques Leroux, had not been raised in the Métis culture, he was warmly embraced by the MNO when he joined a couple of years earlier than I. He soon established himself as an outspoken and valued member of the MNO Senators.

seem to permeate every aspect of Métis history and mythology. There were many dark and more sinister stories I encountered as well. Our history of colonialism, marginalization and assimilation policies sounded hauntingly familiar to our Anishinaabe kin. For me, learning to appreciate the original unions of early French explorers and Anishinaabe women was central to my understanding of who I was as a Métis. Although I was less concerned with political perspectives when I entered the community, I soon found out that to be Métis or Indigenous, is to be political by circumstance.

Max Assinewai, who I am lucky to have encountered as my first teacher from a First Nation, came to the MNO from Sheguiandah First Nation in 2000 with his wife Shauna, to help establish what was termed a Nation-to-Nation relationship between the Métis and the Anishinaabe people. Max passed away in 2003 and is missed by many, but given the few short years I knew him before his passing, his influence and teachings had a profound and lasting effect on me. I was riveted by Max's stories of returning to the battlefields of Normandy to conduct Calling Home ceremonies for the Indigenous soldiers who lost their lives in WWII.

The year we met, Max was attending the MNO Annual General Assembly (AGA 2000) at Garden River First Nation, to conduct the *Passing of Sacred Fire* from the Anishinaabe to the Métis in ceremony. I soon gravitated to Max rather than following the regularly scheduled Annual General Assembly business that was being conducted in the main tent. I knew that what I was about to learn at Max's fire would have much deeper implications for me than debating the legalities of Métis harvesting rights.

*The seventh prophet that came to the people long ago was said to be different from the other prophets. He was young and had a strange light in his eyes. He said, "In the time of the Seventh Fire New People will emerge. They will retrace their steps to find what was left by the trail..."*

Edward Benton-Banai 1979

This passage reminds me of how I felt about the path I was about to take at the AGA that summer. I was certain that the Sacred Fire Ceremony was one of the things that had been *left by the trail* for me to find. And sure enough, the significance of the Passing of the Sacred Fire became evident to me as I helped Max and Shauna prepare for the sunrise ceremonies in

the days leading up to the main ceremony. It became apparent to me that this was a historic moment of reconnection between two distinct Indigenous peoples. The most striking fact, to my conditioned and colonized way of thinking, was that Canada (as a nation) had not been invited nor was involved in any way with this important event. Suddenly for the first time, I felt a sense of liberation from something that up until that moment I hadn't realized was even there. The colonial conditioning which I had always understood as the construct in which we live, had no place here. The State of Canada was not invited, because this had nothing to do with them.

*Decolonizing* wasn't a term I heard often at that time, but on reflection, my participation in the Passing of the Sacred Fire ceremony was one of my first acts of consciously decolonizing. I was following my instincts, listening and learning, and in doing so, for the first time I was empowered by being initiated into a ceremonial practice as Max's helper. I recognized something in me that I had felt deeply connected to for many years but hadn't been conscious of. The ceremonial practices that Max gifted to me provided a way for me to retain teachings that are conveyed through ritual. The stories, the social dynamics, the political relations were all embedded with lessons for me. The teachings I received, as Max assured me, were mine to use and share according to his instructions; they were offered as gifts for which I will always feel a responsibility and deep gratitude.

This first experience with Max and Shauna challenged my perceptions of the world and stirred me to reconsider the true basis of many decisions I had made in my life. I was activated by these experiences with Max and Shauna to question how my identity had formed and if it could change as a result of the reclamation process in which I was now engaged. I didn't find all the answers on that occasion, but I had no doubt that this experience marked a new starting point for me. I began to perceive differently and from that point forward, a part of my spirit was ignited by knowing I would never go back to being the same person.

In the early days of my membership in the Métis Nation of Ontario I didn't question how my awakening would affect my art practice. I was in a receptive mode and wanted to learn all I could. I imagined that the creative expression of this moment would come out in my work in due course. But since then, these experiences have manifested in my behaviour and

perceptions of the world and are increasingly emerging through my art work. *Traces Re-Traced* is the title of my thesis exhibition and represents my first body of work that traverses several mediums, some exploratory, some familiar, to address aspects of the transitional experiences I have described so far.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) describes, “*coming to know* the past as being part of a critical pedagogy of decolonization. To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges” (pg. 36). I’ve embraced my own *coming to know* methodology as central to my practice in this thesis and as a way to evolve, demystify, and actualize my Indigenous identity in a contemporary context. In order to engage viewers in a decolonizing practice and discourse through my studio work, *coming to know* as my chosen methodology represents an embodied journey of discovery. It provides a methodology with which I can share my discovered knowledge, interpretations and reflections on several levels - with what the materials have to reveal and how my mind and body react to their physicality, processes and the conditions of their making. The act of making becomes a vehicle for discovery in this work, investigating both the materials and the subjective nature of my explorations. What can be learned, conveyed and discovered through this approach is open to individual interpretation, but for *me* as the practitioner, the work itself is an embodied manifestation of the journey.

### 3. THESIS EXHIBITION

#### **TRACES RETRACED: RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY**

*“An autoethnography “... lets you use yourself to get to culture.”*

R.J. Pelias 2003

Autoethnography assumes its form through a wide range of creative processes such as narratives, autobiographies and other self-directed, practice-based approaches extending to works of literature, music, performance, installation or visual art forms and beyond. My thesis exhibition work utilizes autoethnography as a creative vehicle to retrace my history (my Anishinaabe and French family roots) and examine the ways in which I, and many of my ancestors, came to understand our identity. I am particularly interested in how my family found it necessary to in some cases conceal and in others embrace their origins as a survival mechanism. My thesis exhibition work is my interpretation and commentary of my own embodied experience of this search - and my experience within the materials and practices I employ.

According to the definition of *Practice-Based* research, “the work should lead to the production of an artifact that contributes to a body of knowledge...” (Linda Candy 2002). The practice-based research I employ is grounded in the disciplines of production, documentation, observation and presentation. To create conditions for a practiced-based system of working, I turned my attention for the first time to that which I might not have considered in the past, such as the location in which the work is created, the physical act of doing the work, as well as the subjectivity of the work itself, to inform and share a deeper meaning. The act of making, the subjective nature of the work and the physical properties of the materials, all reveal their own specific knowledge.

*“If the research doesn’t change you as a person, then you haven’t done it right...”*

*...Traditional Knowledge is not in the past; it’s still growing now”*

*Shawn Wilson 2008*



*Traces Retraced*, is an immersive multi-media exhibit exploring the emergence of my Indigenous Identity within my own consciousness over the past 20 years. It contemplates the evolution and determination of my Indigeneity in a decolonized context and explores, through my continuing embodied experience of decolonization and reclamation of identity, ways in which that identity is derived and then mediated by environmental forces including social, political and spiritual belief systems.

The memories, histories, concepts and experiences that come to the surface in the process of my exploration are interpreted through charcoal drawings, photography, re-animated sequential image projections, optical inversions, audio soundscapes, ink, paper and the use of burning as a transformative process.

Through these processes and materials, I conduct a subjective visual analysis and comment on perceptions of time, adaptation, and symbolic inversions to examine identity from individual and collective perspectives. The work positions me to comment on my own contemporary Indigenous life from the perspectives I have gained through my engagement with materials and the transitional experiences I have undergone since the late 1990s, empowered and inspired by Indigenous teachings, such as the Anishinaabe teaching of:

**niikaanigaana** = All my relations (Anishinaabemowin) (Fiola. Pg. 216)

“All my relations” – is a phrase I have heard often spoken or taught in Indigenous ceremonies and talking circles – an acknowledgment of the spirit that exists in everything around us. I explore the term *niikaanigaana* with the conviction that the concept of universal spirit embodiment is true and brings into consideration perspectives on all aspects of making including physical, metaphysical, subjective and objective. The phrase “All My Relations” teaches us how to have a relationship with everything spiritual or physical, it honors all creation and importantly, it helps us to know who we are in creation. (Fiola.192)

Elder Dan Longboat in a 2017 lecture from Dalhousie University in Halifax Nova Scotia, posits that our knowledge comes from a place of spirit and that all instructions come from nature. The early Elders, as Longboat explains, drew knowledge from each other, but also from other beings, animals, plants, and the environment and this knowledge evolved into many

forms including ceremony, practices, protocols and reciprocal relationships. Dan Longboat punctuates his point by declaring that *Nature has rights and I have responsibilities*. (Longboat 2017)

The concept that knowledge is passed through the generations along blood lines and is transferred at a cellular level has been speculated on for years in science, academia, art-practices and traditional teachings alike. Considering the relational implications of this concept and its potential to unlock or retrieve knowledge, I seek to reveal what can be known from physically doing the work of my art practice and observing the materials, with the goal of retrieving this embedded knowledge. I look to the materials and working through my body, to detect what may surface.

It's interesting to note that Western science is giving increasingly more creditability to the concept of spirit embodiment in recent years, (Lipton) although the scientific community may use very different terminology<sup>6</sup>.

I view the leap from spirit-embodiment to spirit as a form of energy or resonating vibration, or even to the biological epigenetic model, through the lens of "All My Relations" as a teaching. In my interpretation, I assign consciousness to everything, which requires me to heighten my own reception to become more aware and respectful of the world around me. It further reminds me of the responsibilities that come with heightened consciousness that requires me to observe and practice preservation and reciprocity.

Although scholars like Philip Goff, Professor of Philosophy at The Central European University in Budapest, Hungary, asserts that consciousness is a fundamental feature of physical matter, he stops short of assigning a *thinking consciousness* to what he refers to as inanimate objects. However, he argues that within the most minute particles of matter, there is an "unimaginably simple (Goff 2017) form of consciousness that when combined and aggregated with many other particles, can constitute more complex forms of consciousness. While science

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce Lipton – Power of the Unconscious Mind 2004: Lipton's groundbreaking work in stem-cell research ushers in the science of Epigenetics – an area of genetic research asserting that the effect of RNA markers; whose affect on DNA - can be passed through heredity and whose effects can be detected in subsequent generations.

is working this out, I have embraced the concept from an Indigenous viewpoint and proceed through my life and my art practice accordingly.

If knowledge can be passed through a teaching such as *Neesh-wa-swi' ishkodaykwan*, The Seventh Fire Prophecy, and if in understanding that teaching we find we are awakened to aspects of the world around us that we had never sensed before, is it possible that we could also be tuning into knowledge through a kind of consciousness or awareness at the cellular level? Similarly, Carl Jung's theory of the Collective Unconscious<sup>7</sup>, a theory stating that we are born with innate knowledge of archetypes through heredity, suggests that a kind of knowledge or consciousness is formed in our family's past and passed on to us at birth. Jung distinguishes *personal unconscious*, which as he explains is made of up past consciousness that has been suppressed, lost or forgotten, from *collective unconscious* which has never been conscious and thereby owes its existences entirely to heredity.

...there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents.

Carl Jung (Pg. 99)

Likewise, *Epigenetics* (Lipton 2004) in stem-cell research, now shows evidence to support the transfer of knowledge, influences and pre-dispositions, through a tag that is deposited on the surface of the DNA as a result of a wide range of environmental effects both positive and negative. (Lipton 2004) These markers don't change the DNA or affect its prime function of processing proteins, but these tags or markers can trigger DNA with profound results in subsequent generations. (Lipton 2004) The effects of trauma through stress, starvation or other extreme conditions including positive influences creates these tags<sup>8</sup>.

Considering the implications of how these effects may manifest as they descend

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<sup>7</sup> Carl Jung's theory of the Collective Unconscious presents a mode of unconscious knowledge that is common to all humans and is not acquired through environmental conditioning or conventional means. The theory refers to this knowledge as Archetypes.

through a family's genes, my studio work in this thesis seeks to reveal what can be known from physically doing the work and looks at how my mind and body react to making the work. I also look closely at the changes that the materials undergo as I engage with them and how those changes re-assign meaning and guide or affect my instinctual decisions through the making process.

I act on the principle that everyone evaluates the pragmatics of their own situation and accordingly decides what they can give. Actualizing my inner-activist, at least to the extent to which I can respectfully engage in the discourse around issues concerning Indigenous identity, requires me to evaluate my capacity to participate and maximize my effectiveness in commenting on issues of the day. As activists; "using our bodies may be the last thing we have left to do" according to Leanne Simpson<sup>8</sup>. Other forms of dissent, such as legal strategies or other state-sanctioned forms of dissent are ignored by the state, she adds. I use the same reasoning and motivations that Simpson describes when approaching the processes in my work to determine which interventions, disruptions, confrontations, mediations and statements within the scope of my search are appropriate for me to assert. The site or location of my work thus becomes clearer with each year. My hope is that the results I find and share will add to the discourse around identity politics and Indigeneity in meaningful and useful ways.

I believe that my continued desire to decolonize my self is encouraged and grows through the relationships I form. In many ways these relationships affirm my direction and inspire me to continue. The Indigenous scholars, elders, artists, visionaries and relatives that I've had the privilege to meet, photograph, or interview over the past two decades, have become my reality.

As Shawn Wilson asserts "...relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality."

I value highly my many relationships to contemporary Indigenous artists and their work - some of whom have influenced my direction significantly. Artists Cheryl L'Hirondelle, David Hannan, Tannis Nielsen and Greg Staats to mention a few, have produced works that speak to the trauma that Indigenous people have been and continue to be subject to. In each case there

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<sup>8</sup> Leanne Simpson. Betasamosake. Restoring Nationhood, Simon Fraser University B.C. On line lecture. 2014 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fH1QZQIUJlo>

is a search underway through their work. My exploration into each of these artists' work has had resonating effect for me.



Figure 1. Cheryl L'Hirondelle Invisible Cities - êkâya-pâhkaci (don't freeze up) 2005/08

Photo: Scott Benesiinaabandan

Cheryl L'Hirondelle speaks of working through our bodies with movement, language and song to find our centre and share experiences through an interdisciplinary range of expression that inspires the embodiment of an idea.

David Hannan's explorations in materials and form are, as he describes, never pre-conceived from the start but seem to emerge as he undertakes his investigations. I admire David's dedication to exploring physical form and the ways we perceived shape, material and light to evoke an endless string of questions that help us to unravel our own meaning in the realms of imagination that he presents.



Figure 2. David Hannan, Faunamorphic. 2009

David's courage to provide a space, in which the materials and the methods he employs speak back to him throughout the process of creation, is an approach I admire and emulate. In our interview of 2010, we discussed the body of work he refers to as "taxidermy hybrids" (i.e. Faunamorphic 2009) – in which he describes the way he observes transformations like drying times and the way materials age. David is quick to add that he does not necessarily know from the onset what those transformations will be, but like myself places an emphasis on the physical engagement of making - similar to the base-experiments I have conducted in making charcoal and burning colonial iconography.



Figure 3. Tannis Nielsen. *Terminus Terra Nullius - The ends of denial.* 2015

Photo: Tannis Nielsen

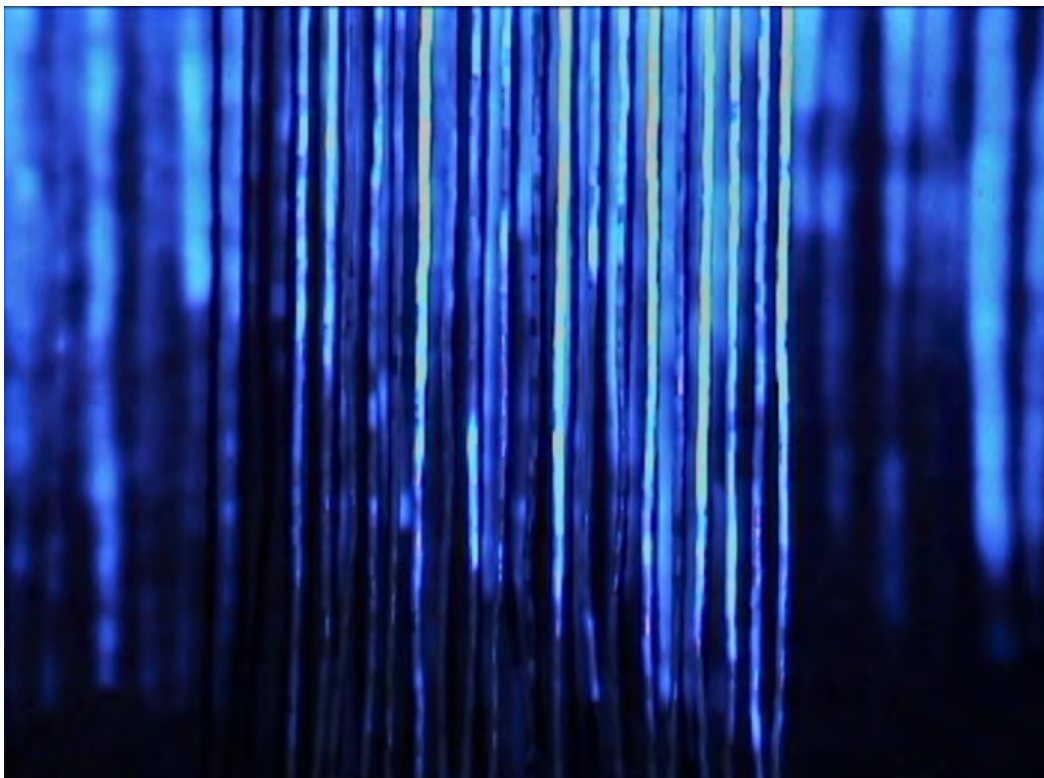


Figure 4. Greg Staats. *Transformer* - video and sound, 03:28;00, 2016.

Photo: Greg Staats

Both Tannis Nielsen and Greg Staats continued to inspire and influence me from an ideological perspective. In their work they set the terms of confrontation with the present and

the past in an un-apologetic confrontation with colonial mechanisms that are continuing to operate in our society today. These two contemporaries have awakened a sense of activism and engagement with difficult subjects around oppression, control and decolonization in my work. Importantly, their work speaks to resiliency and continuity of culture in the face of repression.

Other artists such as Rebecca Belmore, James Luna, Shelly Niro, Adrian Stimpson, Carl Beam, Norval Morrisseau and many more, have demonstrated how culture is alive and evolving in a contemporary context by challenging the notion of the historical stasis that many people perceive Indigenous cultures to be frozen in. As an Indigenous artist I am deeply grateful for the groundbreaking work these and many other contemporary Indigenous artists have created as a way to further elevate a decolonizing discourse. The studio work I do directly reflects my recent cultural evolution, which re-enforces my identity and encourages me to add my perspective to this important dialogue.

#### 4. MY PLUNGE INTO THE CHASM OF THE PAST



Figure 5. Screenshot from *"The Aunties"* from *Traces of the Bois Brûlé* 2017 – 3-minute video loop of hand-made charcoal drawings.



*The Aunties*, a piece I created in 2017, is the culmination of several exploratory elements of my practice (drawing, digital video, genealogical studies and sound engineering) layered together in digital video, to harken back to childhood memories of my father's sisters; all of whom have passed on, except for one. The video allows the viewer to see my hand at work on the drawing of the aunties while the moving landscapes and brooding skies in the background evoke a sense of mystery, suggesting a dark or unknown past. The three-minute sequence evolves beyond the image shown here to reveal snippets of memories retrieved from the time in my life when the aunties were alive. The work reveals my fractured memories from stories the aunties told, indications of how my family lived in generations previous to mine, and the erasure of our past through the external social forces that influenced them. I engage with the charcoal and erasures throughout the piece, leaving trace residual details on the page as the sequences progress that are analogous to the trace memories this work describes.

The studio work evoked by this thesis is less about objectively documenting my family's history or conveying it to the world, but is intended to situate my self in relation to the historical, societal, communal or individual events of my past family and kin.

This for me is a deprogramming process that extends to the studio work and allows me to see the materials and practices in a new context. It has brought me to a place where the material has meaning of its own to convey. Timelines (in working with animated motion and real-time footage) are liberated from conventional linear narratives in this work, reflecting the way I remember. The effect of fractured memories begins to emerge as layered representations moving at various speeds and frequencies independently from each other. Like human experience, sometimes recollection is synchronized with a memory and sometimes memories become altered or distorted in our recollections over a great distance and time.

The many layers in *The Aunties* are controlled and affected through manipulations of digital video but the work reaches outside conventional narrative filmic vernacular to allow random and unpredictable events to occur, as they often do in the course of our daily lives. I allow the viewer to witness the passage of real-time for minutes, when nothing except the continuation of time transpires, i.e. traveling down a road, or transfixing a gaze on an object as the light of the day passes over, or compressing a one-hour trip into just a few seconds. I see

these treatments as reclamation of a conceptual framing of time as we experience it, and in some cases how we remember.

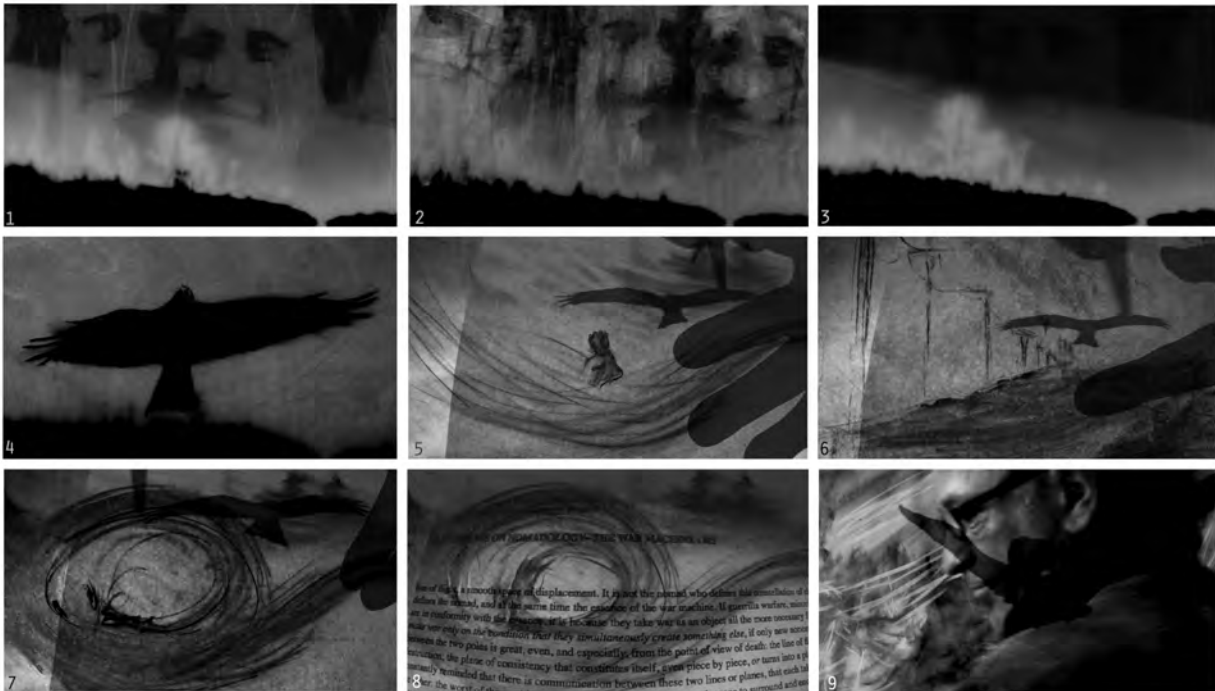


Figure 6. Sequence from *"The Aunties"* 2017 Bernard Leroux – 3-minute video loop of hand-made charcoal drawings.

By electing to break with the conventional use of material considerations and by using familiar materials in new ways, I reassign priorities to such notions as time, iconographic symbolism, transformation, travel, memory, and consciousness, thus allowing these notions to assume their own pace and representations. Through my methodological framework I can enter into a relational dynamic with the materials that allows me to abandon thinking consciously (as much as possible) and work primarily through my body and instinctual impulses.

I consider the act of making as an essential part of what my work means, as how it manifests physically. To assist in understanding this aspect of my work I document the making of it as much as possible. This practice of documenting myself doing the work has become analogous to the process of re-capturing knowledge from my family's historical ancestry. By incorporating this footage in the exhibit, I offer a form of reciprocity to the viewer by providing insight into my relationship with an approach to the materials and media and how the viewer may find their own associations in the outcomes.

## 5. THE CAMERA OBSCURA METAPHOR



Figure 7 - Occupation / reclamation of colonized spaces by camera obscura. Toronto City Hall 2018.

During 2016, my first term at OCADU, I wanted to explore new ways to work with materials I was already well-acquainted with and also introduce myself to new materials and media in an effort to expand my perspectives on making art work. Drawing with charcoal was primary among those familiar areas for me. What I did to re-assign properties and representations to charcoal in my drawings of *The Aunties*, was echoed in my *re-approach* to photography and film in this work. In both cases I made the decision to reboot my relationship to the media, as I was interested in seeing what kinds of information or knowledge the materials and media would reveal if I took them back to their most fundamental forms. It may be that I was re-enacting my search for *self* through my practice, hoping to find a clue to my own past through material processes that I believed had the potential to reveal something to me.

**Ba-wa-zi-gay-win** = dream (Anishinaabemowin)

When using optics and image-capture, I put aside my digital equipment as my primary tools and decided to strictly capture what I produced by hand only. I began to build simple box cameras (camera obscura) from black foam-core and tape, using light stands, dark cloth and ground glass on which to focus the image. These homemade cameras took on various proportions and utilized different lenses which I had stripped down from projectors, magnifying glasses, old cameras or telescopes. In making these box cameras, it felt good to return to an obsession with cameras and optics I've had since I was 18. The procedure of building them enlivened my work with old memories of my love of light and the capturing of decisive moments, re-imagining landscapes, portraiture, architecture and remembering how my

relationship with the camera began. I began to equate my return to the foundational elements of photography as a metaphor for my return to my original place.

My first camera obscura experiments involved capturing digital images from the ground glass of the box cameras using a digital camera. In this way I made images of the solar eclipse, landscapes, colonial architecture, portraits and sequences of travel. Some of these I later re-traced with charcoal and transformed into motion-drawings back at the studio.

For me, the images produced by these cameras evoked that same sense of looking backward and forward through time that I'd experienced in my early days in Métis organizations. The shallow depth of field and the critical focus of the lens, also harkened back to earlier, primitive cameras. I soon realized that the act of setting up these awkward, hand-made contraptions in public places, was a form of intervention. I found myself gravitating to government buildings, provincial parks, monuments and other subjects that spoke to the constructed histories of Canada. For me, this was a personalized version of *reversing the gaze*<sup>9</sup> and this simplified, lo-fi approach provided me with a visual vocabulary and a set of actions that I could apply to many subjects.

Some of my subjects were easier to acquire than others. In adapting to various situations however, it became apparent that the act of working with the camera obscura required me to contend with situations in which I was confronted by authorities inquiring as to the nature of my presence. Fortunately, no one was harmed in the creation of this project. But working in public and training a large black box on government architecture had implications of my re-occupation of colonial controlled spaces. It didn't take long to attract unwanted attention.

**tipaymishoohk** = autonomy (Michif)

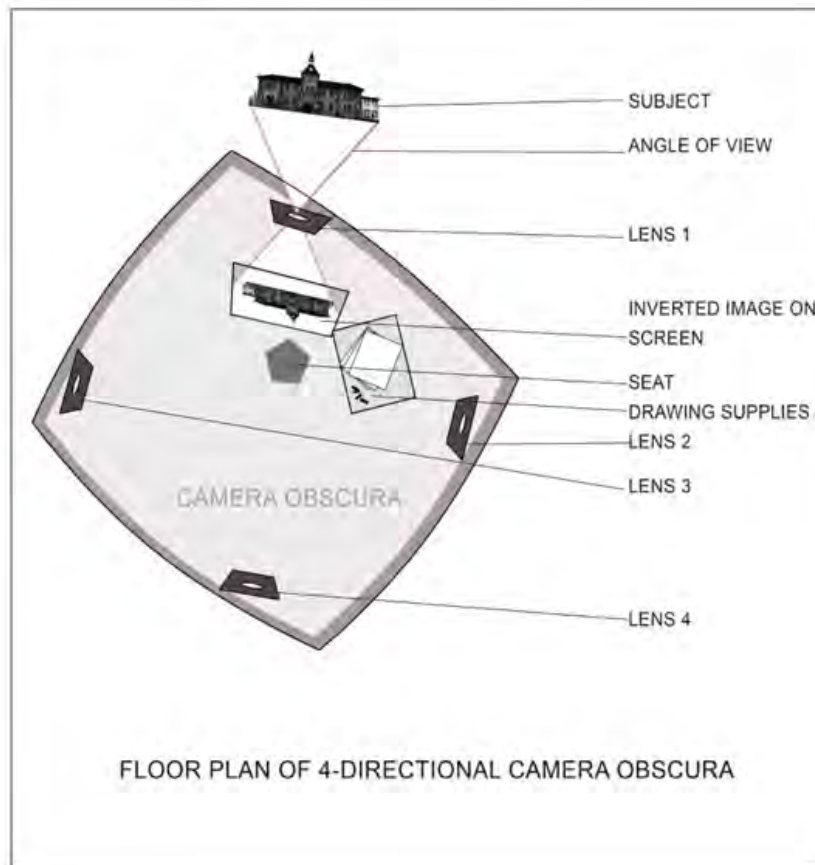
After researching the history of the camera obscura, I decided to scale up my contraptions to a larger size with which I could better interact and observe the material-processes of image capture.

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<sup>9</sup> Glen Sean Coulthard makes reference to the reverse gaze from an indigenous context in his book "Red Skin White Masks" adding Fanon's sentiments of feeling "walled-in" by the violating "gaze of another" Coulthard describes the act as "suffocating reification"



**Figure 8.** This (approx. 7x7x7 foot) mobile enclosure provides 4 angles of view serving as an image-acquisition device in field and projection-surface in the gallery.



**Figure 9.** Floor plan of camera obscura.

**wayn dah ni muk no di noon = four directions**

Scaling up allowed me to move directly from the projected image produced by the camera, to charcoal on paper. I constructed the version of the camera obscura pictured above, from a modular, spring-loaded shelter (fishing hut) and mounted a lens in one of its walls to project images of the surroundings into the oversized camera. The lens is attached to a square board that matches the size of the shelter's windows and can be removed and placed in any one of four directions once the camera is set in place. I am currently experimenting with a four-lens arrangement that will simultaneously converge projections from all four directions onto a 360-degree or four separate screens.

To make the individual charcoal drawings, I position a transparent surface (ground glass or Plexiglas-screen) upon which the outside views are projected. This allows me to overlay the projected image with paper and re-trace the scene repeatedly. The result is a time-based sequence of drawings which I take back to the studio and re-animate in digital video. Although I use digital technologies to activate the drawings, they are assembled in the same sequence in which they were captured and later adjusted for timing. Once the sequences are compiled and fully re-animated, they are output to digital files and are then ready for projection. When re-located to the gallery, the camera obscura acts as a three-dimensional projection screen upon which the drawn sequences are projected. The scaled-up camera obscura has several roles to play in this work:

1. It acts as a "capture" mechanism that functions as a camera that is able to view in any one of four directions.
2. "Capturing" images in the field acts as a metaphor for the reclamation of sites, occupation of land, disruption or challenge to power dynamics. Also travel, the hunt, and feeding the community.
3. The shape of the camera obscura itself references home, shelter, safety, womb, and renewal.

By projecting the photographed and redrawn sequences on the exterior of the camera obscura in the gallery, I evoke the reversed gaze as captured by the camera. The lens is focused

on burnt colonial objects that are installed in close proximity and can be observed on the screen.



Figure 10. Camera Obscura in gallery. Projection of drawing captured at Queens Park Toronto – Northwest Rebellion Monument.

## 6. MATERIALITY

My exploration of materials now goes far beyond working in charcoal. I have I begun to experiment with oil and inks on various surfaces (watercolor paper / tracing paper / cedar slabs / various printmaking papers / canvas / wood) and have trained my camera obscura lens on these works in progress, to animate my process of making. Documenting the process has produced some unintended results. Initially I aimed the camera directly at the work and cropped out everything else, but this became another study of the embodiment of my search - much like the charcoal drawings. Although I had not intended to be part of the image myself, with the gradual introduction of my physical presence in the periphery, the themes of searching, provisionality, and material investigation of self, became personified through the footage of me drawing. The intervention of my body and the notion of working through my body came together in the documentation and heightened the role and value of physicality in the work.

Although I plan much of the process before I begin a piece, such as the selection of

materials, the size and duration of an image-sequence, or other tangible elements, I intentionally allow much of the creation to happen on the surface of the paper, wood, or canvas during the process of making. The experience of making the work always reveals something new and my instinctual responses often produce something surprising and unexpected.

In this work, I include certain personal and cultural signifiers, but I also leave elements for the viewer to interpret as they wish; counting on the viewer's own powers of graphic recognition, references and lived experience, I leave it to them to draw meaning from the work.

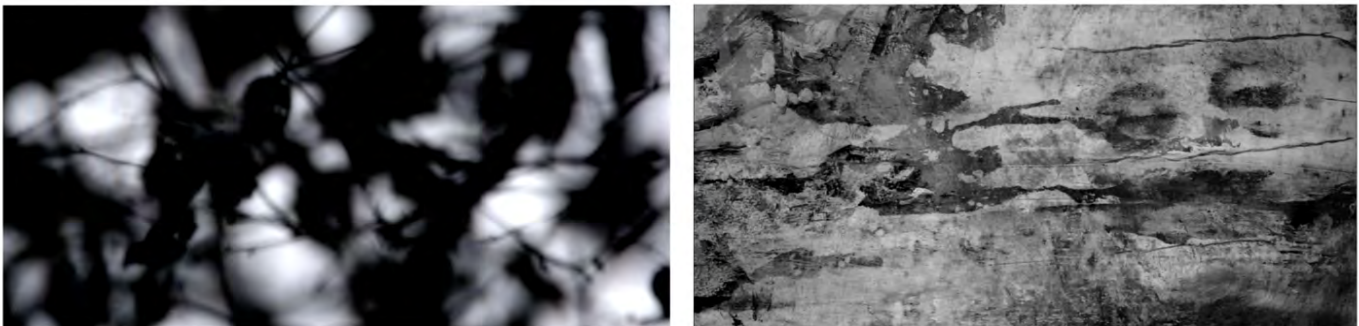


Figure 11. Screenshots from *Traces of the Bois Brûlé* 2017 – digital video. (Details of abstracted shadows and painting)

After many years of working in film and digital media, I made the decision to return to the origins of my practice (much like my return to the origins of my identity) as a way to reset my approach to making this body of work. Thus the materiality of the work takes on greater prominence and meaning and makes direct reference to my Métis cultural roots.

I am now looking to the work to tell me what it has to say. Creating that *provisionality* opens up my reception to perceptions and representations that may arrive by chance, enabling me to *think through the body*, as South African artist William Kentridge described when explaining his process. In my case, I've chosen *coming to know* from the onset. The many bodies of work Kentridge has created around identity politics and racial division i.e. *Refusal of Time* and his later operas, employ methods of installation, movement, dance and animated drawings all of which are derived from South Africa's colonial history and his own embodied act of drawing, then erasing, then drawing over again – leaving trace residuals of previous work behind. This dedication to the image and to the practice was an aspect of Kentridge's methodology that influenced me early on in this work. Although he is non-indigenous himself, his early involvement in social activism through the influence of his father [a prominent South



African lawyer who represented many black clients during the apartheid years] resonated in my perception of him and how I approached my own work.



Figure 12. Freeway 2016 Charcoal on Mylar – reanimated stills sequences.

## 7. BURNING TRANSITIONS: TRACING THE BOIS BRÛLÉ

My initial attempts to make charcoal were successful; I experimented with different kinds of wood and different burning/cooling durations and found willow to be my preferred choice for drawing material. Birch, maple, pine and spruce each have their own qualities, which are darker or more textural, and consistencies also vary according to pressure or the thickness of the materials. I use each in my work in various ways depending on what effect a particular piece requires.



Figure 13. Burnt-wood to Drawing Charcoal 2017 – various species and burning processes.

I have also adapted the practice of wood-burning and its direct reference to the term Bois Brûlé (which was used to refer to the Métis; meaning burnt wood) as a way to denote processes of inversion, transformation and purification. I put colonial symbols such as the crown, the coat of arms and colonial architectural pieces made of wood, through a violent process of burning, a symbolic act of an inversion of power in the current Indigenous/Colonial dynamic. The resulting burnt versions of these icons symbolize interventions in the status quo and a disruption in the popular perceptions of current political realities. By reversing the nature of colonial structures through the reference to the Bois Brûlé, I cast these structures in the same way the Colonial system has cast the Métis and have thus discovered another way to

*reverse the gaze*, a way as Franz Fanon explained, to reverse the racist gaze that defines him.

“...I am *fixed*. This being fixed under white eyes was already inscribed in the white’s cry, “Look, a Negro!” The fact of blackness was not created by the black, but was constructed by the white’s look, their gaze, as a trauma on the black.”

Franz Fanon 1952

For me, these pieces are not saying “lets burn down colonial-settler architecture” but they are asking us to re-imagine our pre-conditioned notions of power that are still alive and perpetuating the status quo. The burnt pieces are my way of asking; “What could that reversal look like visually, materially and feel like psychologically, if we lived in a world where our regard for these objects was drastically different than it is today?”



Figure 14. Colonial Inversions – Oak Clusters. Bernard Leroux 2017: Burnt-wood details evoking the term Bois Brûlé.



Figure 15. Colonial Inversions – The Crown. Bernard Leroux 2017: Burnt-wood details evoking the term Bois Brûlé.



Figure 16. Colonial Inversions – Bank Moldings. Bernard Leroux 2018. Burnt details evoking the term Bois Brûlé.

These object installations will be the focus of the camera obscura when situated in the gallery. Images of the burnt pieces will be projected into the interior of the shelter and will appear as inverted projections.

## 8. REVERSING THE IMAGE

My study and practice of inverting meaning within objects or images, has recently extended to mono-prints. In printmaking the one-to-one relationship between the materials and the act of making is intimate. The process represents a place where my nature is allowed to express itself freely. My wood-cut printing work entails spitting and sectioning wood and making mono-prints directly from the raw wood surfaces of various species of tree. The mono-prints pulled from raw wood using woodcut techniques are primarily aimed at revealing material knowledge derived from the wood itself.



Figure 17. DETAILS: *Violent Intervention* - 2017 ink on paper 20x24 inches and *Split #3* 2017 - Ink on paper 20x24inches.

I let the wood reveal what it has to share with me and I respond accordingly, sometimes intervening by hand and sometimes by preserving what I've found. The results are never entirely predictable and each print has its own form of knowledge to share.



Figure 18. Details: *Processed Wood Impressions* - 2017 ink on paper 20x24 inches and *Split #3* 2017

I've always believed that maintaining an element of the unknown, the uncontrolled or the unpredictable in my work will allow something special to happen that I could never have planned for. The cognitive mind and the perceptual mind are constantly confronting each other in this approach; one legitimizing the other, and the latter in turn offering alternatives to the former. Balancing these two realms comes down to a matter of one's receptiveness to learning and trusting one's mind, for the mind is a "flexible conceptual network of associative mechanisms and exploratory strategies" (*Boden 2004*).

Although there are many scientific, mythic or theoretical models for the mind, in my practice, trusting the mind is the key to success and involves creating a situation in which it can operate with minimal conscious interventions to create something I didn't "think" of. Arguably this is a predictive measure, but its material results are anything but predictable.



**Figure 19.** Into the Fire Circle – 2018, wood, copper and digital video projections from thesis exhibit *Traces Retraced: Reconstructing Identity*.



**Figure 20.** Detail: *Deconstructing the Canadian Coat of Arms* - Oil on board, gouged wood, oil paint, ink and mirrored prints on paper; for *Traces Retraces: Reconstructing Identity* thesis exhibit 2018.

## CONCLUSIONS

The studio work I've described in the chapters above was conducted with the purpose of revealing hidden knowledge by unlocking various intrinsic properties of the materials through explorative processes that I undertook in my search to retrace my identity. Unlocking the material-secrets of media and creating knowledge by working in this explorative mode is synonymous in my view to the experiences of *coming to know*, as described in some of the stories I've told above. In retrospect I now see how my work in the studio parallels my emergence in the Métis Nation of Ontario and my subsequent gravitation to the work of uncovering my Anishinaabe heritage.

Through my experiences and engagement with MNO and my work with other Métis and Indigenous organizations, I began to discover a community-based role for myself in actively engaging in the consolidation of contemporary urban Métis artists and addressing important issues in the Indigenous community. Although acting as an organizational leader at the Métis Artists Collective and facilitator at the MNO was a positive role for me, I eventually discovered that I have been increasingly pre-occupied with assisting others, and not doing what I longed to do for myself, namely to recover knowledge about my history through my art practice. I was losing sight of the personal goals that would help me achieve *mino-bimaadiziwin*, a good and balanced life. Navigating the complicated landscape of Métis politics and community-building became increasingly challenging for me, as it consumed all my time and creative energy and left little room to pursue anything else in life,

The disentanglement of my genealogical history was an important part of my emergence, but it represented the resolution of only one of the many factors that had a bearing on my self-perception, which was knowing the recorded historical facts of my ancestry.

I'd helped organize our local councils and local organizations, attended community consultations, debates and gatherings, and discussed strategies of how to support the Indigenous cause, but my hunger to understand who I was becoming was not abated by this political activity. I needed to develop new methodologies and forms of expression in my art-practice to address the deeper personal issues around identity with which I was grappling.

I began to question my own sense of self as a Métis when I saw conflicts repeatedly



arise between the traditional teachings of First Nation elders and how those teachings were adapted or ignored by many in the Métis organizations with which I was engaged. I regarded the Anishinaabe teachings as the core of my Métis identity and to my understanding, they were unequivocal and not to be modified or adapted in any way. But this was not the sentiment shared by most other Métis I met. I should say that the organizations with which I was associated did a wonderful job organizing Métis cultural events and providing Métis-specific education, but these were usually framed within the context of the MNO as a political body fighting for Métis-specific rights. For me, this position became more and more at odds with my understanding of how Métis identity ought to be grounded in Indigenous thinking, ways of knowing and Indigenous worldviews.

The Anishinaabe teachings that I first encountered through the MNO deeply influenced my perceptions and brought me in touch with the traditional sensibilities of the people from whom my Métis/Anishinaabe identity was derived. It became clear to me that if the Métis community I was a part of did not embrace the belief systems or practices of our Indigenous (and in my case specifically, Anishinaabe) ancestors, I would have to consider what my personal relationship to that history was and pursue it for myself. Reaching this crossroads influenced my work and my ongoing pursuit of clarity and certainty in my Indigenous identity in a way that made me more determined than ever to solidify who I am, regardless of political agendas. I have to keep reminding myself that I am an artist not a politician if I am to continue to work and associate with the Métis groups of which I've been a part.

I have continued to pursue Anishinaabe teachings and ceremonies, knowing that the sweat lodges and sacred fires I've attended have strengthened my awareness of and relationship to the culture, and brought forward-a sense of responsibility towards "*niikaanigaana/All My Relations*" within me.

In the years following my *active duty* at MNO and MAC, I continue to engage Anishinaabe elders, teachers and practitioners of storytelling, crafting and ceremony to draw nearer to my Anishinaabe culture. I practice what I have learned along the way and continue to seek the rest. The rest, (knowing all) I may never completely achieve, but the journey has developed into a methodology of *coming to know* that will continue throughout my life.

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## APPENDIX

### GLOSSARY

**Anishinaabemowin:** the language of the Anishinaabe [Ojibway] people.

**Apihkopitum:** In the language of the Métis [Michif] means to disentangle ones self.

**Ba-wa-zi-gay-win** means dream in Anishinaabemowin.

**Decolonizing:** a deprogramming regimen that resists forces and impacts of colonial structures, agendas, beliefs and power structures brought about by settler-populations over a previously sovereign nation. It implies a form of activism towards liberation of Indigenous people as part of its criteria.

**Ethnogenesis:** The process by which a social group comes to regard itself or be regarded as a distinct people.

**Epistemology** - A core branch of philosophy which deals with the aspect of procuring knowledge. this area of philosophy is concerned with the natural sources, scope and limits of knowledge aimed at discovering the true meaning of knowledge.

**Indian:** used when referring to specific doctrines or acts such as the Indian Act.

**Kanawayhitowin** – taking care of each others’ spirits is a Cree word encapsulating the idea of nurturing and healing through community care.

**katipamsochik** means The People Who Own Themselves in the Michif language. (Scofield 1996 55).

**Michif** – a term referring to the language spoken by the Métis which, depending on the location has several variations including combinations of Métis-French (a particular version of Canadian French) with Plains Cree, Saulteaux and Ojibway.

**Me-ka-naynz** connotes a path or pathway in Anishinaabemowin.

**Métis** – with a capital M and an accent on the “é” refers to the Métis as one of three (First Nation, Inuit and Métis) Indigenous people of Canada. Although consensus on the definition of Métis has not been reached, it is generally understood that the Métis originate before *effective control* of Canada by Britain and thereby possess rights as a distinct people. The word Métis is French meaning mixed race, however the early Europeans who intermarried Indigenous women, from which the unions of these marriages brought forth the ethnogenesis of the Métis, were also of Scottish, Scandinavian, Slavic or other European cultures.

**metis** – Without the capital M and accented “e” is a French word simply meaning mixed-race without any cultural or specificity attached. This could be used in French, to describe any mixed blood person anywhere

**Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO):** The name of the most prominent Métis organization in Ontario established in 1992. The MNO represents Métis who are verified and listed on a member's registry, the MNO is an affiliate member of the Métis National Council and represents Ontario at the national level.

**Métis National Council (MNC):** The name of the national governing body of Métis which includes all 5 affiliate organization from Ontario westward to British Columbia as well as The Women of the Métis Nation representing MNC affiliate members on women's issues.

**mi-kwayn-daa-so-win** means recalling or remembering that which was there before or re-discovery.

**Neesh-wa-swi' ishkodaykwan** means The Seven Fires Prophecy in Anishinaabemowin, a prophetic teaching cautioning about the loss of spirituality and warns of the consequences of not appreciating the natural world.

**niikaanigaana** means All my relations in Anishinaabemowin, a teaching that asserts that everything has a spirit. The assignment of consciousness to everything sets up a reciprocal dynamic between the individual and the universe.

**tipaymishoohk** means autonomy in Michif, a word that for Métis, represents independence, self-reliance and self determination.

**no di noon** indicates the four directions in Anishinaabemowin.

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