Our Language is From the Land: la laange coshchi la tayr

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Abstract

This article documents how my cultural identity as a Métis woman is inherently linked to Michif words and phrases that originate from the land. Through the Michif language I continue to situate myself directly on the Saskatchewan prairie landscape. And it is because of the collective efforts of Michif speakers and Métis Old Ones who work tirelessly toward the rejuvenation of Michif language that I have been led toward working within the healing landscape which I now occupy.

Keywords: Métis land claim, Métis rights, Métis self-government, Métis Nation

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As Métis people, we have a unique history and culture, specific territorial land bases and we continue to contribute to the thriving and equitable economy within the colonial nation of Canada. The Métis are a remarkable Indigenous nation known for our distinctive language and art as well as for our significant political contribution to the settlement of Western Canada. All of this history, culture, landscape and economic contribution are reflected within our Michif language, which represents our continuing links to the land and our ongoing efforts to maintain our cultural identity (Bakker, 1997).

Historians like Daschuk (2013) and Teillet (2019) informed readers that the fur trade period was the only time when all three land-based partners—First Nations, Métis and European settlers/fur traders—established and maintained economic parity between themselves. Michif language was instrumental in facilitating this multicultural industry to literally break ground for generations of land speculation and land development, allowing for the thriving creation and growth of land-based and resource-based industries. Once those objectives were solidly entrenched within the young colony, the Métis and our Michif language were quickly sidelined to become Canada's "forgotten people." (Sealey & Lussier, 1975)

In this article, I document how my cultural identity as a Métis woman is inherently linked to Michif words and phrases that originate from the land. Through the Michif language I continue to situate myself directly on the Saskatchewan prairie landscape. And it is because of the collective efforts of Michif speakers and Métis Old Ones who work tirelessly toward the rejuvenation of Michif language that I have been led toward working within the healing landscape which I now occupy.

Michif Within My Family

The narrative of my Métis family history is based primarily on that of my father (Cardinal) and mother (Pelletier), my paternal and maternal grandfathers (Cardinal, Pelletier), my paternal grandmother (Racette-Cardinal), my great-grandparents (Cardinal, Racette, Peltier, Russell) and great-great grandparents (Cardinal, Racette, Peltier, Grant). The stories of my parental and maternal Métis families occur within specific periods of history and specific geographical areas of our province as well as within Manitoba and the northern American states of Minnesota, North Dakota and Montana, during the late 1700s to present day.

According to the oral history ("stories") told within my mother's Métis family, within the blink of an eye, within one generation of my mom's birth, the Michif language began to be lost. These stories, as told by aunts, uncles, and older cousins, tell me that Michif was spoken regularly by my Métis grandfather until he left the Qu'Appelle Valley in southern Saskatchewan around 1950 to live with his new wife in the urban setting of Regina. After that, the only time he used his Michif language—his birth language—was when he was in a face-to-face or telephone conversation with my great-grandmother, Lucy Peltier (nee Russell), who primarily spoke Michif and only reverted to English when she needed to. He also spoke Michif occasionally when visiting his oldest brother, James Peltier, but these were very rare occurrences. In his later years, my grandfather admitted that his goal was to assimilate into urban life and work; as such, he refused to speak Michif to his children or even talk to them about his Métis heritage and upbringing on the land in the Qu'Appelle Valley. But there is evidence, according to our family storytellers, that he had great pride because he was humble about his Métis family and their very early

accomplishments in entrepreneurship and the development of the Métis and settler communities at Katepwa Lake. The stories go like this:

> Near the mid-point of the Qu'Appelle River Valley there are three lakes which run together; they are known as Pasqua Lake, Mission Lake and Katepwa Lake. By the late 1800s, many Métis families were on the move west, out of the Red River region and White Horse Plains of modern-day Manitoba and into the fertile, relatively unsettled area now known as the Qu'Appelle Valley in Saskatchewan. In 1876 two young (and I might add handsome) Métis-American *(otipêyimisowak = "burnt wood people")* brothers, Clement and William Peltier arrived at Katepwa Lake along with a group of Métis and white settlers. They were quick to establish a small road allowance community at the eastern end of the lake. Farther upstream, at Lebret and Fort Qu'Appelle, there were already growing communities which were competing for the prime river bottom land upon which they had all come to stake their claim. Métis families were scattered all along the Qu'Appelle River Valley (*li tayrayn araa enn rivyayrin*) road allowance communities and by 1880 Clem Peltier had become a successful businessman and land owner (*ana li tayrayn ka tipayhtuhk*). Along with James Grant, son of the renowned Red River Métis leader Cuthbert Grant, Clem quickly acquired stock, machinery, land and capital. It is reported that these two entrepreneurs were very generous with their assets and supported many of the other new farmers in the area. (B. Cardinal, personal communication, January 2022)

As I recall and write these stories, I make instant connection to all the Métis values and traditions I have observed and learned since childhood: Generosity, humility, family, strong work ethic, community support, charity and collective well-being.

Figure 1

Peltier's (sic) Ferry Over Qu'Appelle River

Note: This is a photo of Clem Peltier with eldest son James at the turn of the 20th Century, transporting Mr. A. Leach, Postmaster, to deliver mail to Katepwa Post Office (ca. 1904) Retrieved from https://www.metismuseum.ca/resource.php/04727

In my mother's family, these stories are all told in English; any Michif translation has only recently occurred since my mother began a Michif language class just over 3 years ago. Our family's real introduction to Michif language was through my father's family—the Cardinals, Racettes, Fayants, and others. Both of my paternal grandparents spoke fluent Michif and English; they would easily move from one language to another depending on who they were speaking to, what they were speaking about, and their need to clearly communicate with one another, their 13 children, and their extended family members. My brother and I were introduced to our dad's family from infancy but when I think about it, I was about 3 or 4 years old when I first remember hearing the word "Métis" and conversations spoken in what I now know to be Michif.

My dad and his parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins all spoke Michif, some more fluently than others. My dad and his remaining siblings and cousins still occasionally speak in Michif, especially when they're talking about land and land-based activities such as fishing *kwaashkwaypichikay*, hunting *machiihk*, medicine *mooshahkinikew la michinn* and berry picking *mooshahkinikew enn grenn* and, of course, golf (*aen sport*)! However, every attempt my parents have made for my brother and I and my daughter to acquire the Michif language have been unsuccessful. So I ask myself, "Why is that?"

Michif as the Centre of the Nation: Métis Political and Community Aspirations

To articulate our Nation's "political" Métis connection to the land, it is important to understand some of the common terminology associated with contemporary discourse concerning Métis land issues. Some the terms people tend to be most familiar with are "Métis land claim," "Métis rights," "Métis self-government," and now, much more frequently, "Métis Nation."

Just as First Nation peoples of Canada describe themselves through the lens of individual Nations and specific languages, so do modern-day Métis people and our related organizations and institutions. It's 2022 and the Métis Nation collectively have legitimate claims to inherent rights to land and resources, as well as other rights based upon historical and present-day Treaties with the Crown. So, too, do Métis have legitimate rights based upon our significant historical contributions to the development of Canada—contributions largely unrecognized by mainstream society. While First Nation claims in Western Canada tended to be defined and disputed within the framework Treaty (Daschuk, 2013), Métis claims were more often based upon economic, political, and moral arguments. Only in specific instances were Métis claims made on purely legal grounds based on entrenched Constitutional rights (Teillet, 2019). The turning point in these inequitable political and nation-to-nation relationships finally came in 2016 with the Supreme Court of Canada's decision on *The Daniels Case* (Teillet, 2019). This decision directs the Federal Government to adhere to the language in Section 91.24 of the Canadian Constitution:

> (1) that Métis and non-status Indians are "Indians" under s. 91(24) of the *Constitution Act, 1867*; (2) that the federal Crown owes a fiduciary duty to Métis and non-status Indians; and (3) that Métis and non-status Indians have the right to be consulted and negotiated with. (Supreme Court of Canada, 2016)

From most appearances, this decision has had positive impacts on the social, financial, economic, health and well-being of Métis people as well as creating stability within Métis communities and families in Saskatchewan (Métis Nation Saskatchewan, n.d.). Most significantly, the outcomes have resulted in the establishment of a strong, influential Métis-led administration to oversee and manage these significant new resources and to ensure accountability to the Federal Government. Here in Saskatchewan, the Métis Nation and its communities and families are benefitting from

long overdue supports for Métis-specific housing, community infrastructure, post-secondary education and skill training, Métis-specific health, wellness and mental health programming, and cultural revitalization—with significant attention being paid to documentation, preservation, and transmittal of the Michif language.

Many ask, "Why is so much emphasis put on revitalizing the language?" and, for me, it is self-evident: Our language is unique in the world but if we are not enshrining it in every aspect of our lives as Métis people, the language will become extinct in less than one generation. As someone who has grown up around the Michif language but also someone who has not been completely immersed in the language, I clearly see the risk that language loss will have not only to my generation but also to my daughter's generation and to our connection to our culture and the land.

Iseke (2013) revealed how the loss of Michif language is a direct result of colonization and provides compelling rationale for the urgent need to reclaim and revitalize Michif in order to preserve authentic Métis culture:

> Métis traditionally were hunters and trappers and these Elders, in other places, discuss these historical practices (Iseke, 2009, 2011). These lifestyles kept them close to the land and communities of Michif speakers. But modern lifestyles including jobs for wages have created the conditions of a rapidly changing society, moving to urban lifestyles and moving away from the linguistic communities and thus linguistic conditions outlined by these Elders. The importance of continuing community contact in order to keep languages alive and in use is outlined by the Elders but in current decline. The global impacts on local cultures and the linguistic imperatives required to engage in the current global economic and political realities have been part of the linguistic shift under both colonization and subsequent globalization. (p. 106)

There should be hope as the Michif language education is now being promoted, revitalized and supported here in Saskatchewan in quite unique and tangible ways. This work really all began over 40 years ago with the creation of the Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research (GDINS). Once again, I turn to the stories of my Métis family—especially my mother, B. Cardinal (2022)—who was one of the original employees hired to work at GDINS in 1980:

> The late Allan Blakeney became Premier of Saskatchewan in 1971. I remember it clearly because it was the first time I could vote! Almost simultaneously the Métis Society of Saskatchewan (MSS) leadership had also changed and the new President, Jim Sinclair, was working his way across the province to establish a much larger presence for Métis people and the nation both at community level and with the federal and provincial government. This included changing the name of the MSS to the Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan (AMNSIS). AMNSIS leadership were brash and aggressive and I remember them holding rallies in communities and the big message was always about self-government, nation-to-nation relationships, land claims, and education. AMNSIS and the Blakeney government began having serious discussions about these three topics and by the late 70s, funds had been identified to establish GDINS as Canada's first Métis-specific post-secondary institution and academic research

centre of excellence for historical Métis research that would become the body of work that eventually formed the land claims and self-government claims.

It was an exciting yet scary time. AMNSIS knew that they would only have one crack at making GDINS a legitimate, successful model so they strategically recruited Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders, academics, researchers, community developers and educators to build the core structure. This successful model still exists today.

When I look back at the very first public relations document produced by GDINS, it's that document that truly drew me to the Institute. It was early, early days and the document was produced to promote the Institute at the annual Back to Batoche Days in July 1980. That's where I first became aware of this new, exciting place for our people. I applied for a job there and the rest is history! But when I look back at that document now, 42 years later, it is really quite revealing what they were mandated to do and to focus on—but also what they weren't paying much attention to at that time.

The two big gaps that stick in my mind are the fact that they never once used the words "Métis" or "Michif" in their promotion of the Institute and not once did they identify the need for Michif language revitalization and education in their early work or, in fact, for many years to come. I can only speculate on why that was: Was it because the word "Native" was more acceptable and implied inclusivity? Was it because the white consultants had no clue about the Michif language or concern that it was on the cusp of being completely lost? Was it because with so few Michif language speakers left in the province, assumptions were made that language revitalization was unattainable? Was it because the AMNSIS politicians and GDI board members were consumed with "getting the Institute off the ground and established" to meet their own political needs before they began to get really hard push-back from their communities about the intrinsic importance of language and cultural rejuvenation and recognition? Probably all of that and much, much more. But eventually, the mandate of GDINS did begin to shift toward prioritizing Métis-specific culture and Michif language—its collection, documentation, identification of different dialects, identifying speakers and teachers—all that goes in to preserving and revitalizing language for current and future generations. And thank Creator that they did prioritize Michif language and make it an indelible component of the Institutes' primary research and preservation. Eventually Michif was incorporated into the SUNTEP curriculum because there was enough hard evidence that without our language, we really would have little else to identify and solidify us as Métis people—people of the buffalo; people of the land"—to solidify us as a legitimate and distinct Nation.

It was really during my sixteen years off and on with the Institute, while your Dad and I were going down different paths toward our own cultural immersion and healing that the significance of what everyone was doing at GDI really crystallized for me. By 1982 the Devine government were making strenuous and aggressive efforts to close the Institute's doors, and there was an incredible community response and revolt to those attempts to close us down. This resulted in rallies and protests across the province led by influential and strong leaders such as

> Clifford Laroque, Jim Sinclair, Harry Daniels, Jim Durocher, Frank Tomkins, Grace Hatfield, Bernice Hammersmith, just to name a few, along with some extremely hard-line media coverage, and fierce lobbying by our communities and supporters. It all came to head in the national calling out of Devine as a racist by Sinclair at the First Ministers' Conference in 1987. Stunning and spectacular!
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> The Institute and its staff and board members and our Métis communities across the province continued to stand strong…and we survived! And now, today, GDI is the only Métis-owned, governed and managed research and post-secondary education and training institution of its kind in Canada. And you, my girl, and your brother and your beautiful daughter will all continue to benefit from the work they have done and continue to do—to keep the Michif language and our culture and our links to the land alive and thriving. (B. Cardinal, personal communication, January 15 & 16, 2022)

My brother and I literally grew up within the hallways of the Gabriel Dumont Institute. As urban Métis kids, we could very easily have been assimilated into the mainstream education system where we went to school and the urban landscape where we lived. By having direct access to Métis family—the very distinct urban Métis family of our maternal grandfather and the rural/small town family of our dad's traditional Métis community—we were provided with an understanding and pride in who we are as Métis people.

Michif as Our Direct Connection to the Land—Now and for Future Generations

For the past 25 years I have worked within the Regina Public School Division, in numerous elementary schools, many of which have high enrollments of First Nation and Métis children. It astonishes me that there are many First Nation children and families who can speak their traditional language—some with more proficiency than others. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Métis children and their family members. As part of my academic research toward my master's degree in Educational Psychology and now my studies toward my PhD in Education, I am driven to explore the impacts of intergenerational trauma on First Nation and Métis elementary school students. One of the Indigenous research methodologies I propose to use is to link the students to their understanding and comfort with the land. Although the full scope of my research and methodology has not yet been finalized, my early readings reveal to me that I may be on the right track. For example, over the years I have come to realize that what Teillet (2008) discovered about the interconnectedness of the Michif language and the Métis Nation being seen as a distinct people with distinct territory and land is undeniable (and an ongoing challenge): Métis culture and land are entwined, and it is the Michif language that solidifies this relationship:

> Another reason the Northwest Métis were not seen to be a distinct people is because it was thought that they had no unique language. Language is one of the most readily identifiable boundaries of a society. Unfortunately, the Métis kept their own language, *Michif,* hidden:
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> > …our grandpa and grandma and aunties…they were laughing and they were joking and…they were speaking Michif…not once did I ever hear them speak it outside of those walls…even to this day they won't speak it. Even though I have heard them in private speaking it, they, they just won't do it [in public] because of the stigmatism…

> I went to school for Grade One only. I liked school, but we had nothing to eat for lunch. And it was hard because at school they spoke English and we didn't speak English at home. All our family, all our relatives spoked Michif. I still speak Michif today with my brothers and sisters *(Affidavit of Clara Langan, sworn October 1998, paras 4-5).* (Teillet, 2008, p. 37)

In my parenting I have made it a practice and a tradition to take my daughter out on the land during every season. We are almost always accompanied by her *mooshum* (grandfather Rick Cardinal) because he grew up in a family that survived solely from their land-based knowledge, even though they lived in a prosperous town just east of Regina. He always uses Michif to describe what we're looking for—the medicines, the plants, the berries, the animals, fish, landmarks, golf balls—and over the years my daughter has begun to identify these elements in Michif as well. She now knows and speaks more Michif than I do and that is a very good thing!

For me these experiences and practices validate the critical importance of bringing back our traditional language and utilizing it to its fullest capacity. GDINS now does a remarkable job of achieving this goal; they have a complete publication department devoted to documenting, writing, illustrating and creating all types of written materials with the objective of emphasizing Michif within everyday Métis life (GDI, 2021).

Preserving and promoting Michif language—of which there are three distinct dialects Michif, Michif-French, and Northern Michif (GDINS Virtual Museum of Métis History and Culture, n.d.)—must remain a priority if Métis culture and traditions, use, respect and preservation of the land are to survive into the next generations. In 2022, we continue to occupy and use vast landscapes for hunting, trapping, fishing and harvesting medicines and plants, as well as for artistic inspiration. Our communities remain solidly rooted within historical geographic areas along Métis trade routes. We have always seen, and continue to see, ourselves, our families and our communities as a fulsome and unique Indigenous nation. Our Michif language captures and reflects this inherent alliance and it is up to us as members of our Métis nation to preserve this unique relationship. In 2022, we also occupy urban landscapes through our presence in our homes and neighbourhoods, schools, places of work and recreation, and within the economy. Michif may not always be spoken in these places and spaces but we walk proudly as Métis people because our language is being documented, taught and revitalized.

Teillet (2008) best described our fundamental relationship between our language and our landscapes in the following:

> Mobile peoples do not tread heavily on the earth and the Métis are one of these Peoples. Métis culture prized freedom first. They describe themselves as *otipêyimisowak* (the independent ones). They left few markings, built few monuments or permanent buildings, and their constant movement meant they could be over-looked by other cultures that invested more heavily in settlement, infrastructure and possessions. Their possessions of value were those that permitted and enhanced their mobility—their guns, tools, horses and their carts. To other more material cultures, this kind of mobile culture was largely invisible. But mobility has always been part of the Métis culture. *Ou je reste? Je ne peux pas te le dire … Je reste partout … Such is our course of life.* (p. 38)

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