

Welcoming a Complicated Conversation: Teaching About Métis Identity While Upholding
Learner Wellness

by

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Abstract

This thesis addresses how to handle teaching environments that involve Métis identity and status. I argue that discussions on Métis identities in Canada need to be conducted carefully and with attention to the mental health needs of learners in relation to their identity positions. The term Métis, and the rights that surround it, has been a subject of intense debate for many years now; legally in both settler colonial and Indigenous systems of law, academically, and in the public domain. This thesis examined the historical and contemporary definitions of Métis status in Canada, with an emphasis on Ontario, in order to illuminate how to approach teaching this content in a sensitive and generative way. This research is meant to act as a balanced, research-informed resource providing content and pedagogical guidance for educators in Canada who are teaching about Métis identity and status. The contribution of this research is in its attention to the mental health and emotional dimensions of such teaching and learning. This research focuses on providing concrete approaches to teaching this sensitive topic that attends to the mental health of people closely affected by the unclear definition of Métis. We should not overlook the emotional challenges that can result from this identity and status debate, including the focus on Western vs. Eastern Métis (also known as the Red River Colony Métis vs. not). Teachers cannot carefully teach about such a complex topic without resources, guidance, and access to a range of perspectives local to their communities. In summary, this research offers a review of policies, literature, and pedagogical materials to shape a historical, legal, and chronological picture as to how this term has changed over the years and how to carefully teach about it now.

Acknowledgements

Before my personal acknowledgements, I do want to acknowledge that the report by the Métis Nation of Ontario, mentioned at the end of chapter 1, was released on April 10th, 2025. Since that was the day before I defended my thesis, that report was not referenced in this work. This is a reality of this thesis, mentioned in the limitations section; it will act as a time capsule of sorts from when it was written.

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Autobiographical Signature

As I believe it is important to explain one's position in terms of any Indigenous-related research, and because I also have a personal connection to this topic, I begin with a brief statement on my personal positionality. I was raised being told that my family is Métis; through my French, paternal grandmother's side. However, I did not grow up with connections to this identity such as cultural knowledge, ceremonies, relationships with elders, or other traditional practices. It was not until my third year in my undergraduate degree at McMaster University, when, as a result of becoming more involved in the Indigenous Studies program, I was pushed by some colleagues to begin openly identifying as Métis. I immediately received much negative criticism to this, including from people that I highly respected. I then focused the remainder of my time at McMaster on learning about Métis status. This research culminated in an independent study that involved deep academic analysis as well as research into my own lineage.

I learned that I had become involved in a volatile academic debate over Métis status and identity. I also learned that, even though in 2016 McMaster University's definition of Métis did indeed include my situation, many people and scholars did not consider it legitimate. During my time at McMaster, I researched and confirmed one Algonquin ancestor from the 1800s. Much more recently, in the last two years, I was told about another, Innu ancestor. For the purpose of this research, I spent a week deeply researching this and recently confirmed my connection to her as well. That means that I do have two Indigenous ancestors from my paternal side, one Algonquin and one Innu, both born in 1828. I share these details to provide full clarity about those ancestors; knowledge that I did not always possess in my younger years.

I currently identify as a non-Indigenous male, with some Indigenous ancestry. This means that I do not identify as Indigenous, and therefore, Métis, on job applications or any University

grants. For example, I applied for and was accepted into this master's program at Queen's University as non-Indigenous; this is something that I think is important to make clear. This also means that I am not trying to use my ancestry as a platform to speak on behalf of any community or people, nor to accrue material benefits on the basis of identity, nor to place myself with those who have been marginalized or subject to structural racism, such as Indigenous people. I simply mention it to tell a bit of my own story and give context to who I am, and to tell the story of how I got into this field.

It has taken me a while to land on this exact positionality, and even though I have been identifying this way for over three years, it was certainly a journey to get here. This topic is close to my own heart because of the mental hardships that I faced during this journey of positionality, including from outside influences, but also internally. I'm also drawn to this research due to the negative mental health impacts that I have seen this debate and topic have on others, including those descended from the historic Métis Nation who feel that their identity is being threatened. I sincerely hope to give this important topic and research the justice that it deserves.

Terminology

There are also a few things to note in terms of terminology that need explanation for this paper. First is the difference between “big-M Métis” and “little-m métis” (Vowel, 2016, p. 38) as mentioned in the first paragraph of the introduction section of this paper. This is touched on several more times throughout this paper, and it should be explained briefly in more detail here. I am aware that some people consider referring to a group using the lower-case version of métis disrespectful, and I want to state that disrespect is not my intention. Consistent with Métis scholar Chelsea Vowel’s explanation, the difference in written form for the upper- and lower-case version of this term is used on purpose to easily distinguish which group I am referring to. It should be noted that even though this section will reference two different definitions (Métis vs métis), that does not mean that there are only two specific understanding of this identity.

The “big-M Métis” refers to those who are directly descended from the Red River Colony (Vowel, 2016, p. 38). This is the historic community that participated in the Red River Rebellion under Louis Riel. The Red River Colony was also situated in what is now Winnipeg. As Métis author Jean Teillet puts it, to be part of this group: “one must prove, with documentary evidence, a direct ancestral connection to a member of the historic Métis Nation” (Teillet, 2019, p.478) as well as self-identifying as Métis “and not as a subset of some other Indigenous group” (Teillet, 2019, p.478).

The “little-m métis”, hereafter simply referred to as “métis”, are different, as author Vowel describes them as “neither fully First-Nations nor fully non-Indigenous” (Vowel, 2016, p. 38). The idea of being métis is that someone has a mixed background of Indigenous and non-Indigenous ancestry without connection to the historic Red River Colony, as well as without Indian status under the *Indian Act*. For example, my French side of the family would have

believed they were métis, as they had a mix of Algonquin, Innu, and French bloodlines; yet none of their ancestors lived west of Northern Ontario. Furthermore, when some individuals talk about métis, they mean to refer to Eastern métis. Eastern métis are communities that some scholars claim existed before the Red River Colony, and came as a result of descendants of the first French settlers of New France, and their “Native American wives” (Malette et al, 2016, p.26). Sometimes, métis has also been a term applied to non-status First Nations people, which has added further complexity to this conversation. It is important to note that some scholars believe that calling anyone Métis or métis who is not descended from the historic Red River Colony “is an insult/undermines those descended from” that colony (Gaudry & Leroux, 2017). You will see this difference in capitalizing “Métis” vs a lowercase “métis throughout this paper. This is intentional and is meant to represent the conversation around western vs eastern Métis/métis.

It is also important to note that while this thesis mentions Métis status, it is rather the absence of status that is the focus. This is directly in comparison with the *Indian Act*, which lays out the legal definition and guidelines for a status “Indian” in the Canadian state. So, knowing that there is not an official Métis status, much of this Thesis focuses on Métis identity. However, as more Métis organizations attempt to define what exactly gives an individual Métis identity, we see the shift focus to membership. Though membership with a Métis organization gets closer to defining Métis identity, and so, closer to the idea of status, there is still the issue that not every Métis organization has the same definition of membership and identity.

You will see a variety of sources that mention a number of different terms, including: Indian, Native, Aboriginal, First Nations, Indigenous, Inuit, and Métis. At times, these terms were mixed around with one another, which is where the confusion around this conversation comes from. Some terms are simply outdated, as “Indian” is only used in the legal sense (status

or non-status) for First Nations people. Indian, Native, and Aboriginal are all terms that have been used to refer to all Indigenous people; Indigenous being the current term that means First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people.

Methodology

My research was conducted through review and analysis of a variety of sources, including: policies, Supreme Court of Canada (SCC) decisions, academic articles, academic books, government websites, other theses, and other relevant written sources that relate to the topics of: Métis identity and the concept of status, Indigenous identity in relation to mental health, and teaching about difficult topics in a learning environment. I include the works of many authors who focus on the concept of Métis status and identity, such as: Dr. Brenda Macdougall, Jean Teillet, Dr. Chelsea Vowel, Dr. Sebastian Malette, Dr. Daryl Leroux, and more. The Government of Canada and Métis Nation of Ontario websites were referenced in-depth to analyze trends and gaps in the definition of Métis, and the same is true for the CBC news website. In terms of policies and SCC decisions, I focused heavily on *The Indian Act* (1876), *The Constitution Act - specifically section 35* (1982), *R. v. Powley* (2003), and *The Daniel's Decision* (2016). These policies and SCC decisions create a chronological timeline, and each has had a significant influence on public opinion and academic writings, as shown in chapter 1.

My interest and research into the topic of Métis identity, and the concept of status, began during my undergraduate degree at McMaster University (2017). This interest culminated in 2019 with a semester-long independent study on the topic of Métis status and identity. Since 2019, I have been reading all sources I have found that are relevant to Métis status and identity, as well as the other research topics of this Thesis: identity and mental health for Indigenous people, and teaching difficult topics in an educational setting. My understanding of this topic has only expanded throughout my course-based master's studies at Queen's University, which began in 2021 and has enabled the writing of this Thesis.

During the research phase of this work, I contacted several Queen's University librarians to have conversations about relevant sources. As a result, summer of 2023 placed me in the fortunate position to meet with each of the following on separate dates to discuss this research: the Head Education Librarian at Queen's, a Law Librarian at Queen's, and a Policy Librarian at Queen's. During each of these sessions, I discussed this research and research methods. The results of each discussion were fruitful, resulting in new sources to include in this work.

The limited research conducted regarding Métis status and identity leaves anyone investigating this topic, myself included, in an unenviable position. The only time sources were excluded from this research was when they were not sufficiently relevant. Therefore, this work does not favour a particular opinion, and did not intend to present a certain author or perspective more favourably than any other. While some authors are featured more often than others, this was simply a result of those authors having published more content that I deemed relevant to the conversation surrounding Métis status and the concept of identity.

As this is a Faculty of Education degree, this thesis is meant to show no bias towards any specific argument, but instead to present the fact that there has historically been a myriad of understandings of the term Métis and no clear consensus on a definition exists today, in 2025. This honest attempt at neutrality may not be what many would prefer, as Métis people have been questioned and marginalized for so many years. Regardless, chapter 1's chronological timeline is meant to show that some understandings appear directly influenced by the time period in which they were formed. As a result, some may have a definition of Métis that is stuck in time; either from when they went to school, when certain legal decisions were made (even though legal precedence continues to change), or from an educator who has a personal bias informed by their own education, experience, or identity. When discussing Metis identity, many have found

themselves forced to respond to attacks against knowledge that they believed to have come from a learned source. Hearing the stories of those personally involved in this conversation has driven my desire to develop a resource that outlines the landscape of this topic and its various arguments and perspectives in a balanced way. The goal with this work is to act as such a resource and to show educators the nuances, complexity, and differing opinions that have existed, and still exist, regarding Métis identity.

While this may not be considered a traditional research-gathering method, I have also included academic sources that emerged through discussion with others. These discussions occurred in a range of settings, with a variety of individuals: interactions with university classmates, professional conversations, conference presentations, and discussions with work supervisors to name a few. When discussing these topics, I have found that many are quick to suggest sources to research and examine. While not every recommendation has been helpful, most have, and I have found this to be another helpful way to gather research. Of particular relevance has been the conversations had while working as a Teaching Assistant and Research Assistant / Associate at McMaster University, Western University, and Queen's University. At these schools, I received many helpful recommendations from professors and other academics.

In gathering knowledge and sources, I was trying to answer my research questions at all times, which are:

1. What were the legal and social definitions of Métis identity historically, and what are they currently in Ontario (including federal and Indigenous sources)?
2. What does research into the connection between identity and mental health tell us about the effect of the lack of clarity around Métis identity?

3. What resources, narratives, and educational approaches can be used by educators in Ontario when trying to respectfully teach about Métis identity, with full consideration of the mental health dynamics at play?

To answer my research questions, I sorted literature and policies relevant to this topic into the following four categories:

- a) Métis identity
- b) Indigenous identity and mental health
- c) How to teach about knowledge that is controversial and sensitive in educational settings
- d) Métis identity in *Ontario* specifically

During the writing process, categories a) and d) were combined to give a comprehensive history of the different understandings of Métis.

Limitations

I have identified four limitations that the reader must consider regarding this research and the methods it employed. One limitation is the lack of unique qualitative data that directly describes the perspectives of those affected and involved in this topic. Initially, when designing this research project, I had considered including qualitative interviews with diverse individuals connected to this issue. Examples of considered interview participants include individuals who identify as status Western Métis, non-status Eastern métis, status First Nations, non-status First Nations, and Indigenous from a band that is not federally recognized in Canada.

I chose not to gather new qualitative data as doing so alongside the extensive document and literature review that I was already performing would threaten to be too much for a master's thesis level of work. Additionally, including qualitative interviews would potentially compromise the entire goal of this work, as it may shift focus to Indigenous status and identity in Canada overall, and so, away from Métis identity in relation to mental health.

Another limitation is that some sources and policies retrieved when I first began researching this topic (2016) do not exist anymore. Since 2016, some sources and webpages discussing Métis identity have been deleted or edited, and so, cannot be referenced. McMaster University's website, in 2016, had a section on Indigenous status that defined Métis people as "anyone with mixed Indigenous and European ancestry". In 2016, the Government of Canada website defined Métis people in essentially the same manner as McMaster University. I did try to find these old webpages using the Wayback Machine Internet Archive but was unsuccessful. Both of these webpages influenced my decision to start to identify as Métis at that time; however, as they no longer exist, they cannot be referenced in this work. Of course, anecdotal

memories cannot be used as academic source material. This limitation is important, not only because those sources would add valuable context to this work, but also because of their significance in my own story.

The third limitation is that I will not be implementing any of the ideas shared in practical educational material that can be widely shared. For example, I will not be creating workshops, lesson plans, PowerPoints, or other teaching tools that can be utilized in a classroom. Again, the limits of what is feasible for a master's level thesis affects the scope of this work; perhaps developing educational materials can be a subject for future research and focus.

The final limitation I have identified is that the topic of this work continues to be hotly debated, and perspectives are likely to continue to shift as the years progress. For example, a new piece of legislation or SCC decision might completely change the conversation again, as has occurred in the past. All of the contemporary research I have conducted may become outdated. In a sense, I do not know how this work will mature, so to speak. As a result, the hope is that, if significant changes occur within the conversation around Métis identity, this research can still be appreciated as a piece that reflects the time in which it was written; similar to how the story of the Métis conversation told in this thesis uses older sources based around important policies and Supreme Court decisions,

Chapter 1: Introduction - Métis Identity and The Debate Around Status: A chronological timeline, a focus on the province of Ontario specifically, and realities of the problem

Introduction

This thesis addresses how to handle teaching environments that involve Métis status and identity. I argue that discussions on Métis identities in Canada need to be conducted carefully and with attention to the mental health needs of learners in relation to their identity positions. The term Métis, and the status that surrounds it, has been a subject of intense debate for many years now; legally in both settler colonial and Indigenous systems of law, academically, and in the public domain. This thesis examined the historical and contemporary definitions of Métis status in Canada, with an emphasis on Ontario, in order to illuminate how to approach teaching this content in a sensitive and generative way. For example, to many, the identity debate is explained by the distinction of “Big M” and “little m” Métis/métis people in Canada, a designation that can sometimes be explained as a geographical difference in historic community, Western vs. Eastern Canada (Vowel, 2016, p. 38). This research is meant to act as a balanced, research-informed resource providing content and pedagogical guidance for educators in Canada who are teaching about Métis status and identity. The contribution of this research is in its attention to the mental health and emotional dimensions of such teaching and learning.

The Métis status debate has been the subject of several Supreme Court of Canada decisions and federal government policies in the last two decades. The aim of these decisions and policies were to make the definition of Métis status and identity more clear, due to the increasing importance of the benefits that may come with this legal designation. Unfortunately, however, many of these decisions and policies have only made Métis status and identity more unclear for

many involved. This thesis discusses the tensions raised through litigation under section 35 of the *Constitution Act* (1982) including the benefits to Métis status/identity as defined in *Powley v. Canada* (2003), and the perceived benefits defined in the 2016 *Daniels* decision. Many academics, and other people, including those involved in Indigenous communities, but also those not related to an Indigenous community hold differing opinions of understanding and definition of what Métis status means. The Federal Government has recently set the onus of responsibility for definition on provincial/territorial Métis organizations, those definitions are still vague and unclear (Métis Nation of Ontario Website, 2022 and 2019). The focus of this thesis then is to illuminate why these discrepancies exist, including reconciling the historic and current definitions of Métis as a legal and social term, especially in Ontario, for the purpose of use by educators in a range of contexts including with children, youth, and adults. The definitions examined will include those from the Canadian government, and from different Métis organizations that have existed over the years, some of which still exist today.

Further, this study focuses on providing concrete approaches to teaching this sensitive topic that attends to the mental health of people closely affected by the unclear definition of Métis. We should not overlook the emotional challenges that can result from this identity and status debate, including the focus on Western vs. Eastern Métis (also known as the Red River Colony Métis vs. not). Indigenous peoples have disproportionately lower health indicators in comparison to their non-Indigenous peers (Whalen et al, 2016, p.2). For Indigenous people, mental health and suicide rates can be closely connected to cultural continuity and a sense of self (Chandler and Lalonde, 2008, p.237). Further, many Indigenous students face racism in school settings, which negatively affects many of their educational experiences and outcomes (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011, p.106). Considering these challenging wellness discrepancies, this thesis research

examines the literature linking identity uncertainty and mental health to draw out correlations and implications into this conversation.

I use existing research on possible impacts that uncertainty around identity for Indigenous community members could be having, and how this might inform future research into addressing Métis identity in educational spaces with a focus on Métis peoples' wellbeing (as well as those involved in this debate who may not legally be considered Métis). I strongly believe that having one's own identity thrust into question, or being discredited, by a person in a perceived position of power such as a teacher, may have terrible mental health results for those involved. This is especially important when we have seen new legal tests develop over the last 20 years with guidelines on what exactly being Métis means. In *R v Powley* (2003) the Supreme Court of Canada made this determination in relation to Métis hunting rights. Teachers cannot carefully teach about such a complex topic without resources, guidance, and access to a range of perspectives local to their communities. In summary, this research offers a review of policies, literature, and pedagogical materials to shape a historical, legal, and chronological picture as to how this status has changed over the years and how to carefully teach about it now.

To fully understand how this topic affects mental health and teaching environments, one must understand its history. This chapter will focus on identity, and how the word Métis has been understood throughout Canadian history, with a special emphasis on Ontario. Discussion will highlight the many ways Métis identity and the concept of status has legally shifted, evolved, and changed over time. To show the journey of Métis identity and the concept of status over the years, a timeline is presented. The aim of this timeline is to show, chronologically, policies and Supreme Court decisions that have directly affected the social opinions, and legal realities, of what the term Métis means.

There are several reputable historical sources that cover the topic of Métis identity and status; many of which are listed in the references section of this paper. As this topic is often a source of debate and conversation, the historical sources used were selected to represent a diversity of opinions on Métis identity and status. A few examples of these sources include: *Métis-Crown Relations: Rights, identity, jurisdiction, and governance* (2008) compiled by editors Frederica Wilson and Melanie Mallet, *The Northwest is Our Mother* (2019) by author Jean Teillet, *Distorted Descent: White claims to Indigenous identity* (2019) by author Daryl Leroux, and *Songs Upon the Rivers: The buried history of the French-speaking Canadiens and Métis from the Great Lakes and the Mississippi across to the Pacific* (2016) by authors Michel Bouchard, Robert Foxcurran, and Sébastien Malette. This chapter leaves the history of the Métis to the historians, and instead discusses a variety of sources, grouped by a period of years, that show broader trends in how the term Métis was/is spoken about; especially in terms of identity, and the concept of status. Precisely how sources were identified for inclusion is covered in detail in the methodology section. That said, sources were retrieved from academic literature, media stories, Supreme Court decisions, and Canadian federal government policies in an effort to include all potentially relevant sources.

As there is still much debate around who exactly qualifies as a Métis individual, this thesis is meant to fill a current educational gap. Nearly every source reviewed during the writing of this thesis was trying to prove a point, one way or the other. Inherent biases are nearly unavoidable in academia, and this may be especially true for intellectuals that are trying to protect the identity of themselves, friends, and loved ones. A source that simply shows the conversation and debate around the topic of Métis identity, and the idea of status, without taking

an argumentative side, is something academic literature is currently lacking. The hope is that this thesis fills that gap, and provides a valuable resource for educators of all types and levels.

It is important to note that while this chapter covers the concept of Métis identity, it is also covering the concept of Métis status. The word “concept” is used here, as it is up for debate whether a status for Métis people exists or not. Currently, the closest thing to status is membership with a Métis organization. The debate around which Métis organizations are legitimate or not is heavily covered in this chapter, as different historical Métis organizations have held different definitions of Métis identity and status. Still, in 2025, a consensus is lacking among the provincial organizations currently recognized by the Canadian federal government regarding the definition of who is Métis.

The word status, then, should be viewed in direct contrast with “Indian” status, as defined in the *Indian Act* (1876). The *Indian Act* will be covered in more detail in this chapter, but it can be summed up as the current government policy that sets out which First Nations individuals have, or do not have, status and any associated rights. What this Thesis covers is the lack of clarity that comes as a result of there being no such act for Métis people. A lack of clarity is problematic as, among other reasons, Métis people can be awarded certain rights (e.g. hunting, fishing, educational grants). The question needs to be asked, then, whether the Canadian federal government should be the right body to define who exactly has Métis identity, and therefore, status. That question will be covered in the takeaways chapter (chapter 4).

The goal with this chapter is to show how Canadian government policy and Supreme Court of Canada (SCC) decisions have directly impacted the conversation surrounding Métis identity and, as a result, the concept of Métis status. This chapter aims to demonstrate that the

effects of these decisions and policies can be recognized in academic writings from, or about, those times. Crucial to understanding these academic writings is the fact that not every person was aware of all relevant policies, legislations, and SCC decisions at the times that they were decided/implemented. Therefore, the opinions presented in the sources described below may not have been fully informed by these factors. This chapter sorts these sources into four sections to give the reader a sense of the changing social and political climate surrounding Métis identity and status over time. A central focus of this chapter is the significant role these policies and SCC decisions have played in shaping academic and social conversation around Métis identity.

The timeline presented below is guided by four major Canadian government policies and SCC decisions. Research on the topic of Métis identity and status reveals a major shift in the writings surrounding this topic based on each of these policies/SCC decisions. The four items of focus are:

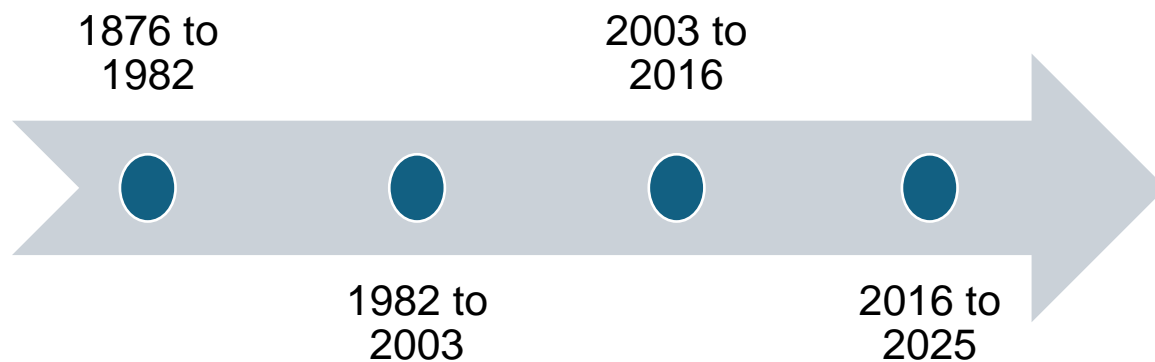
- The Indian Act (1876),
- The Constitution Act, specifically section 35 (1982),
- R. v. Powley (2003), and
- The Daniels decision (2016)

As a result, the chronological timeline used to sort this research on Métis identity and status is broken down into four sections, as illustrated in Figure 1:

- -1876 to 1982
- -1982 to 2003
- -2003 to 2016

- -2016 to current day (2025 as of the writing of this thesis)

Visual Representation of Chronological Timeline



As mentioned, this chapter does not present a full examination of these policies and SCC decisions, but instead, aims to show how the conversation about Métis identity and status was affected by these important moments in Canadian legal history. The sources are organized into the above four chronological sections based on what year each source was published, with a few exceptions when explaining the thinking of the time-period discussed requires including sources from a later date.

Following the chronological timeline of Métis identity and status in Canada is a focused discussion on Métis identity and status in the province of Ontario specifically. This focus is due to the relevance that Ontario has to the author personally, as well as the fact that the institution

this paper is being written under is based in Ontario (Queen’s University). Further, Ontario is the focus of extreme debate in current discussions of Métis identity and status. Métis identity is a complex and nuanced topic, for example, most sources teaching about Red River Métis have no mention of Ontario, if any mention at all. As stated above, educators, teachers, and instructors are currently left without a resource that shows the entire view of the conversation about Métis identity. This thesis aims to display the entire conversation surrounding the Métis identity debate, providing educators of all types with a needed resource.

Finally, this chapter ends with an explanation on why exactly the topic of Métis identity and status is such an important one. This explanation focuses on benefits that go with identity and membership, and the lack of an official status for Métis individuals in direct contrast to Indian status under the *Indian Act*. Furthermore, the contemporary issue of “race-shifting” or “pretendian-ism” is discussed, as well as how this phenomenon relates to conversations around Métis identity and status.

a) 1876 - 1982

While Indigenous identity in different parts of Canada and for different Indigenous peoples emerges from origin stories and place-based histories that are deep, diverse, and textured, colonization forced viewing identity through a legal lens. In the 1876 *Indian Act*, the Canadian state laid out a framework for defining First Nations status. There is a lot that can, and should, be criticized about the *Indian Act*, but at the very least it provides guidelines and definitions on status for First Nations people. When it comes to Métis people, what is important is not what’s included in the *Indian Act*, but instead, what is omitted. For example, the *Indian Act* defined the term “Indian” in 1876 (a legal designation still used for status First Nations people in 2025) as: “The term ‘Indian’ means, *First*. Any male person of Indian blood reputed to belong to

a particular band; *Secondly*. And child of such a person; *Thirdly*. Any woman who is or was lawfully married to such person” (Federal Government of Canada, 1876, p. 43-44). There are more details in the *Indian Act*, and the Act has been amended many times since 1876, but the focus for this thesis is the lack of a similar policy for Métis people.

The *Indian Act* was introduced seven years after the Red River Resistance of 1869, and nine years before the Northwest Resistance of 1885, two major events of Métis resistance against the Canadian federal government; the latter of which led to the execution of Métis leader Louis Riel (Hamon, 2019, p. ix). The Resistances in 1869 and 1885 were major movements in which the Métis of the Red River Colony were trying to protect their unique ways of living and their distinct culture. However, even after 1885, nine years after the introduction of the *Indian Act*, no piece of similar legislation was created for Métis people.

A crucial element of the *Indian Act* to note when considering Métis people is whether they can be said “to belong to a particular band”. It was understood at the time that the *Indian Act* was written, Métis people were not members of a specific band in the same manner as one would belong to a First Nation band. This is well-represented in a source that quotes Alexander Morris, Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba in 1880, when speaking about the Métis people in that province. Please excuse the outdated and inappropriate language in this next section (and in any other sections in this chapter), as it is a direct quote.

There is another class of the population of the North-West whose position I desire to bring under the notice of the privy Council. I refer to the wandering Half-breeds of the plains, who are chiefly of French descent and live the life of the Indians. There are a few who

are identified with the Indians, but there is a large class of Métis who live by the hunt of the buffalo and have no settled homes. (Devine, 2004, p. 143)

Morries' words show that the Métis, often referred to as "Half-breeds" in this time, were already being recognized as a group of people distinct from other First Nations bands. Morries is likely talking about the Plains Métis here, who migrated back and forth between the United States and Canada (Hogue, 2015, p. 5). Morries also mentions that the Métis he is talking about were mainly descended from French settlers as well, something important to note for later discussions in this chapter.

In Barry Karp's 1980 "The Métis", he claims that Metis people existed as a distinct people and nation well-before the writings of Morries in 1880. Karp even claims that the Metis Nation existed well-before the *Indian Act* was created in 1867, even though the *Indian Act* includes no mention of Métis people. Karp wrote that "In the year 1816, the Métis people called a meeting to talk about how they were going to protect their freedom and their lands. The people elected leaders and designed their own flag. The Métis nation was born" (Karp, 1980, p. 16). The electing of leaders and designation of a Métis flag in 1816 shows the formation of a nation by the Red River Métis, which would signify the formation of an identity.

Several years after the 1880 writings of Morries, are the writings from Thomas White, a Canadian journalist and politician who was known to be a close friend of Sir John A. MacDonald (the first Prime Minister of Canada) and commented on the land holdings of the Métis. White's work comes from a journal about the Northwest Rebellion, the violent clash in 1885 between the Canadian government and a large group of Métis people from the Red River Colony (modern-day Winnipeg). White (1887) speaks about this conflict, and the aftermath, which included "the

granting to the Half-breeds of the lands upon which they were settled” (p. 2). Again, we see White calling the Métis “half-breeds”, just as Morris did 7 years prior. This is important, as it is different from “Indians” - the term used to describe First Nations people at the time.

What we can take from this quote is two-fold, but subtle. Firstly, “Half-breed” being capitalized, just as in Morris’ writings seven years before, suggests a possible recognition of the Métis as a distinct group of people. Secondly, and more directly, we see the discussion of land being given to the “Half-breed” (Métis) population “on which they were settled”, which shows a recognition of a physical, Métis-specific community. From this, it seems that even at this early stage in Canadian history, there is a concept of Métis identity, even though there is no mention of Métis individuals or status in the *Indian Act*, or any other Canadian federal government policy.

As shown, Métis people were recognized before the *Indian Act* was created, but not in a legal manner that defined or issued status. The *Manitoba Act*, which brought Manitoba into Confederation in 1870, allocated 1.4 million acres for “children of half-breed heads of family residing in Manitoba” (Gerhard & Sawchuk, 2015, p. 131). Gerhard and Sawchuk claim that the *Manitoba Act* was the beginning of Métis status (Gerhard & Sawchuk, 2015, p. 131). However, giving lands to Métis people does not necessarily grant those peoples a unique status. Furthermore, there is still no actual definition of what it meant to be Métis, or what rights a Métis person holds, and both elements would be solidified with formal Métis status. Even the land granted to Métis people at this time did not properly solidify the land title itself in a satisfactory manner. If it had, the Métis people of the Red River would not have expressed such worry about keeping their land, feelings that began the events leading up to the Red River Rebellion in 1885.

There is a large chronological gap in sources between White's writings in 1887, and the next important source featured: Stanley's 1963 text. Extensive searching revealed limited sources mentioning Métis people during this period. Author D. Bruce Sealey explains a possible reason for this, writing: "Why isn't there more about the Métis in our school history books?... For a long time the history books told only the story of the French and English. All other minority groups were ignored" (Sealey, 1973, p. 8). In the 20th century, Métis people were seldom mentioned in school history classes, or, they may have been wrongfully lumped in as "Indians", instead of being distinctly identified in academic writings. The lack of focus between the 1880s and 1960s may be a reflection of social opinions around Métis people; Métis people simply were not being given the respect they deserved by non-Indigenous academics during the time between 1887 and 1960.

Looking forward nearly 80 years from the writings of Morris and White, author George F.G. Stanley's commentary in 1963 defines Métis in a manner that is nearly unchanged. This is interesting to note as, even though much time had passed, the definitions from 1880 and 1963 are so close to one another. Stanley (1963) wrote that "The Métis were mixed-blood descendants of the French-Canadians who served the explorers and fur traders and contracted marital alliances with the Indian women in the regions through which they travelled." (p. 4). The important parts of Métis identity described by Stanley are consistent with the writings from the 1870-80s, as the Métis are still presented as a distinct group of individuals descended from French-Canadian settlers and fur traders and "Indian" (First Nations) people. Crucially, Stanley does not mention any sort of geographic boundaries within his definition, and the relevance of this omission is revisited later in this chapter. Another important piece to glean from Stanley's writings is that there is no mention of status for Métis people, only group identity.

This lack of legal status for Métis people, in stark contrast with status for First Nations people that was set out in the *Indian Act* in 1876, was almost certainly a topic of conversation during this time. As the Canadian federal government had not legally defined Métis status, some Métis individuals took this matter into their own hands. Author Brenda Macdougall explains how, in the 1930s, a sort of political movement began. She writes:

As in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, Métis were organizing politically in the 1930s. In Saskatchewan, the Métis Society of Saskatchewan was created and, by the 1960s, it became the Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians. Métis people in northern Manitoba created the Northern Half-breed Association to represent a series of northern Métis communities all focused on gaining title to their settlements (something that never happened). It was another 30 years before similar organizations and political activity emerged in Ontario and British Columbia, with the Ontario Métis and Non-Status Indian Association (OMNSIA) and Lake Nipigon Métis Association forming, along with the British Columbia Association of non-Status Indians. (Macdougall, 2017, p. 22)

With the void left by the Canadian government around legal status for Métis peoples, provincial Métis political organizations began forming to define Métis status. During the 1960s, Métis and non-Status Indians were included as part of the same organizations. The pairing of Métis and non-Status Indians together in a fight for rights became a source of future conflict.

In the 1960s, the issue of Métis status was increasingly entering the forefront of social and political discussions. This seems to be especially true in the Western-Central provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. Macdougall also discusses that this movement of political organization took place in the provinces of Ontario and British Columbia, but about 30 years

later (Macdougall, 2017, p. 22). The difference in provincial legal activity is something important to keep in mind for future discussions in this chapter.

Before proceeding to the next chronological period, it is important to note a divide that Macdougall states took place in the years before the 1982 *Constitution Act*. She writes that “despite their years of working together towards a common goal, by the 1970s-80s, Métis and non-status Indians began pursuing different agendas to restore their well-being. The latter sought Indian status while the former continued building a rights-based agenda” (Macdougall, 2017, p. 22). There are several important things to note from this quote that all have important implications for future conversations involving Métis identity and status.

As Macdougall states, Métis and non-status Indians, though having worked together in some situations for fifty or so years, began to separate and pursue separate goals in the 1970s and 1980s. This suggests that those two groups may have felt some sort of kinship in relation to identity and legal status at one time, but then began to doubt that relationship, and so, separated politically. This political separation was likely felt socially as well. Another thing to note is that non-status Indians began pursuing Indian status, while Métis people were pursuing a “rights-based agenda” instead. This strongly suggests that Métis people did not consider themselves status Indians, and so, were pursuing some other type of legal designation. The third thing revealed by the Macdougall quote is the mention that the separation between non-status Indians and Métis people came with the goal of “restoring their well-being”. The fact that the separation of these two groups is being framed as a move to improve the well-being, which includes mental health, of the individuals involved speaks to the important connection between Indigenous identity and mental health outcomes. The connection between Indigenous identity and mental health is the focus of chapter 3.

In 1973, Bruce Sealey discussed the difference in legal designation between First Nations and Métis people from the lens of the Canadian federal government. He writes:

Aren't Métis and Indians the same? No. They are not. Indians are people who through agreements with the Government of Canada made many years ago, have special rights and privileges. The Métis do not have special rights. Although they do not have special rights they are a special people (1973, p. 1).

Sealey wrote these words in a document published by the Manitoba Métis Federation, an organization established in 1967 that claims to be the “only officially recognized Métis Government in Canada” (Manitoba Métis Federation Website, 2024). Sealey’s words speak of the lack of special rights and privileges for Métis people in comparison with First Nations people. One may interpret Sealey’s description of the Métis as a “special people” as a desire for the Canadian federal government to recognize the Métis legally; a desire that was, to some, fulfilled in 1982 in the *Constitution Act*.

Before proceeding, it is important to include a perspective from just before the 1982 *Constitution Act*. Barry Karp defines Métis people and their history in 1980, saying that:

Very shortly after the first Europeans set foot in Canada, the Métis were born. They are descendants of both Europeans and Indians. Europeans often married Indians when they moved to North America. Almost all of the Europeans who settled in the remote parts of Canada were men. So the first Métis children often had European fathers and Indian mothers. Today we refer to all person of mixed White and Indian blood and who are not classified as ‘Indians’ by the government as Métis. There are Métis all over Canada, but

it was only the Western Métis who emerged as a nation of people with a history and culture of their own (p. 2).

There are several points in the above quote that speak directly to issues surrounding the Métis identity and status debate that came up often in the years following 1980; some of which are still at the forefront of this conversation today. The first important point is that, even though Karp claims in an earlier quote above that the Métis nation was created in 1816, here he explains that Métis people had been around since “the first Europeans set foot in Canada”; suggesting a much earlier time-period of existence, potentially as early as the 1490s. Karp also does not claim that Métis are only the result of French and Indigenous individuals having children together, but instead uses terms like “European” and “White”. This suggests that he considered the definition of Métis bloodlines to be wider than a single European nation. The last thing to note is the final line, where Karp claims that “There are Métis all over Canada, but it was only the Western Métis who emerged as a nation of people with a history and culture of their own”. Western Métis being distinct from other notions of Métis identity may be the most critical concept to keep in mind as this chapter progresses

b) 1982 – 2003

In the process of developing the wording of the *Constitution Act*, the issue of Métis identity clearly became important. In *section 35* of the *Constitution Act*, to some, Canada “affirmed the rights of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples: Inuit, Métis, and Indians” (Bell, 2008, p. 95). Métis people were finally recognized as Indigenous people living within Canada, who were, at this time, called “Aboriginal”. Chartrand (2008) states that the *Constitution Act* was well-timed, as:

After the military and political subjugation of the Métis in the late 19th century, a new era of political and constitutional reform in Canada resulted in the constitutional recognition and affirmation of the rights of all Aboriginal peoples, including the Métis, in the *Constitution Act*, 1982. By this time, federal policy and legislation, largely based on the anachronistic and illegitimate recognition policies of the 1876 *Indian Act*, had substantially abandoned recognition of the Métis and their rights (p. 28)

This was a great moment in Métis history regarding legal recognition and group identity. However, what *The Constitution Act* failed to do was twofold: set out exactly what rights Métis people held and what exactly defines a Métis person. These two failures stoked the metaphorical fire in debates surrounding Métis identity and status. As Leroux (2019) puts it: “Since section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982, recognized and affirmed Aboriginal Métis, debates about Métis peoplehood have periodically erupted nationally” (p. 21). The confusion around who exactly is recognized by the state as Métis only increased after 1982, and, as a result, conversation on Métis identity intensified. The question that began to be asked, more and more often, was: “what exactly makes someone a Métis?” For example, Louis Riel, leader of the Red River Rebellion, had a “paternal grandmother [that] was a mixed-blood, all his other ancestors being French Canadian” (Siggins, 1994, p. 1). This, of course, means that Louis Riel did not have enough First Nations blood to be a status Indian under *The Indian Act*.

As we saw in section a), some scholars believed Métis people could be descended from European nations other than just the French. Sawchuk wrote in 1998, when discussing the Alberta Métis, that “there are records of both Scottish and British individuals who had mixed-blood quantum and other qualifiers with Indigenous peoples” (Sawchuck, 1998, p. 20).

Definitions of Métis people that aren't limited to French and Indigenous coupling widens the scope for what different people could believe defined Métis identity.

Another factor that likely increased social and political volatility regarding Métis identity and status after 1982 was the fact that some non-Status Indians began to identify as Métis.

Though quite long, here is a quote from Nicks in 1985, three years after *The Constitution Act*, that gives a narration on this phenomenon:

Authors have generally borrowed the term Métis for all populations sharing an Indian and European biological heritage, citing as a reason that the term is commonly used in the literature – which is not surprising considering that most of the literature is about Red River Métis. A second reason, though often unstated, is to avoid the use of terms such as “half breed” which have acquired derogatory overtones in the twentieth century.

Unfortunately, the tendency has been to borrow the terms Métis not only for its biological connotation, but also to attribute a Red River ancestry and culture to the other groups as well. This erroneous attribution of a Red River cultural heritage is being further compounded as non-status peoples seek recognition as aboriginal peoples under the new provisions of the Canadian constitution. (p. 105)

For an individual that may no longer have the blood-quantum to be a status “Indian” under the *Indian Act*, it is possible that they may have been trying to understand where exactly they stood as an Aboriginal person under the *Constitution Act*. It seemed that, at this time, some, or many, non-Status Indians were beginning to identify as Métis, understanding it simply as a mixed European-First Nations individual.

Identifying as Métis could have been done for social reasons and feelings of identity, but as shown later in this chapter, there may have been rights-related reasons as well. In fact, there is research to show a direct shift in how some individuals identified before and after 1982, suggesting that this change in identity was directly affected by the *Constitution Act*. One source wrote that:

...the 1981 Canadian Census showed the individuals across Canada, many of whom did not originally call themselves 'Métis', identified with that term of the Census questionnaire [in 1983] (Statistics Canada, 1983:7). Nicks (1985) documents that process of changing self-identification, showing how a young craftsperson changed her identity from 'Cree' to 'Métis'. She (1985:103) suggests that this case describes a more general trend (Peters et al, 1991, p. 71).

The trend of non-status Indians beginning to identify as Métis after 1982 is a trend that has continued into today. This trend has been a talking point at the forefront of conversations surrounding Métis identity for over 40 years in scholarly writings. Métis status still lacks a legal designation from the Federal Government of Canada, and without a government definition, many still understand Métis simply to mean mixed.

Another important aspect of the Métis identity and status conversation has to do specifically with geography. The focus on geography also began to gain more traction in academic writing after 1982, as author Nicks writes again in 1985 that:

Research is now beginning to focus on native populations of Indian and European ancestry that developed in the Maritimes, the central and western subarctic, and the Great Lakes region, to cite a few examples. Some of these populations predate Red River,

others were contemporaneous, but were culturally and geographically isolated from the Manitoba community. (Nicks, 1985, p. 105).

What Nicks outlined in the above quote is a critical dividing factor for many modern scholars on the Metis identity and status conversation. Specifically, there is considerable division regarding the idea that Métis communities existed outside of, and even possibly before than, the historic Red River community. Sawchuk goes so far as to claim that “halfbreeds existed long before the Red River was founded” (1998, p. 21) and that “the Acadians were the first Métis” (1998, p. 20). The concept of an older, geographically eastern, population of mixed European and Indigenous peoples has brought questions around the idea of a single Métis identity in some academic spaces.

The *Constitution Act*'s lack of definition of Métis identity and/or status caused much tension and debate. This tension is reflected in terminology used by academics when discussing Métis people, as author Chretien (2008) writes:

Also, during the 1980s, there was a noticeable shift in writing practices surrounding Métis. Many scholars began to take a Derridian (Derrida 1983: 108) approach, marking the *différance* [sic] of the ‘Other Métis’ by using a capital ‘M’ to indicate Métis. Similarly, the term ‘historical Métis’ was coined to refer to those belonging to the ‘imagined community’ of The Métis Nation (Anderson, 1994). Towards the end of the 1980s, the term ‘Real/Riel’ Métis began to surface. By the late 1990s, the ‘Other Métis’ was officially inscribed by politicians and scholars alike as a separate category altogether. (p. 91)

These differentiated terms emerged in the 1980s, and some are still being used today. For example, the “Big M” and “little m” grouping of Métis/métis is still being used in academic discussions and literature today more than (Vowel, 2016, p. 38).

In the early 2000s, the lack of a definition of Métis identity and status continued to cause much confusion. As an attempted remedy, Métis provincial organizations began attempts to create such a definition. As Métis author Jean Teillet wrote (2002), in the Métis Nation there were four criteria to be met:

In 2002 the Métis Nation arrived at a new definition. “Métis” means a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, is of historic Métis Nation ancestry and who is accepted by the Métis Nation... The first part of this definition requires an individual to voluntarily self-identify as Métis and not as a subset of some other Indigenous group. The second requirement is that the applicant be of historic Métis Nation ancestry. This means that it is not enough to have some ever-so-great Indian grandmother. One must prove, with documentary evidence, a direct ancestral connection to a member of the historic Métis Nation. Since the Métis nation only came into existence in 1816, references to ever-so-great Indian grandmothers prior to this date and outside of the geographical territory of the Métis Nation are insufficient. Only when accepted by the Métis Nation can that individual say he or she is a citizen of the Métis Nation. (2019, p. 478)

This definition given by the Métis Nation in 2002 is clearly aimed to address some non-Status Indian people with the references to an “ever-so-great Indian grandmother”; although this could also speak to “race-shifting”, covered in section f) of this chapter. However, this statement

does not come close to speaking to every case of a non-status Indian person. What remains to be determined from this definition are three questions: what exactly is the Métis Nation, what exactly is the geographical territory of the Métis Nation, and what are the rights of a person once they are confirmed to be Métis and so, a member of the Métis Nation? In 2003, some of those questions began to be answered.

c) 2003 – 2016

The *R. v. Powley* Supreme Court of Canada (SCC) decision was a turning point in the conversation around Métis identity and status, and to many, “defined the nature of the Aboriginal rights of the Métis people” (Bell, 2008, p. 98). This SCC decision surrounded the claims of hunting rights for a man from Sault Ste. Marie Ontario who claimed to be Métis. This case began when

In 1993, Steve and Roddy Powley, two Métis men, were charged with hunting contrary to Ontario law after killing a moose. The case was appealed up to the Supreme Court of Canada, where it was argued that Section 35 of the *Constitution Act*, 1982 protects the rights of Métis to hunt for food (Government of Canada Website, 2022, *Métis Rights*).

From the SCC decision itself, the decision was that this man was “acquitted of unlawfully hunting a moose without a hunting license” and that “the trial judge found that the members of the Métis community in and around Sault Ste. Marie, have, under s.35(1) of the Constitution Act, 1982, an aboriginal right to hunt for food” (Supreme Court of Canada, 2003, *R. v. Powley*). This decision had broad implications for hunting rights for all Métis people, and greatly affected the conversation around Métis people and communities in Ontario, the focus of section e) of this chapter.

Part of the *Powley* decision tried to address a topic that had been debated for years by 2003: “what exactly defines a Métis person?”. This question also was being asked while a growing number of people were beginning to argue that Métis was simply a term for anyone of mixed First Nations and European ancestry, regardless of blood quantum and other qualifiers. The SCC’s statement in *Powley* was this:

The term ‘Métis in s.35 of the Constitution Act, 1982, does not encompass all individuals with mixed Indian and European heritage; rather, it refers to distinctive peoples who, in addition to their mixed ancestry, developed their own customs, and recognizable group identity separate from their Indian or Inuit and European forebears (Supreme Court of Canada, 2003, R. v. Powley).

While this statement by the SCC may be possibly seen as an exact definition at first glance, there is a lot of opportunity for interpretation here. No specific European, or even First Nations, heritage is mentioned, but there is also no mention of the 2002 Métis Nation definition. The Métis Nations definition did not come from the Canadian federal government or SCC, which means there is no precedence in the Canadian legal system for it in comparison to *Powley*. People began to wonder, when looking at the SCC definition of Métis, what exactly a “distinctive peoples” truly meant. These two words, distinctive people, began to become a major focus of the conversation surrounding Métis identity and status.

Some scholars around this time began to adhere to different definitions of Métis. The definitions could change in length and have minor or major differences from each other. For example, when Richardson (2006) describes the Métis people, they write that: “This culture evolved and crystallized after the Métis lived together for generations, mixing and mingling with

other Métis of both English and French-speaking origins” (p. 56). Another writer, Heather Devine, wrote a book in 2004, and chose to cite a much longer definition of Métis. This definition is as follows:

Foster argued that the origins of the western Plains Métis in the latter quarter of the eighteenth century were a function of ‘wintering’ in the Montreal-based fur trade. Wintering laid the basis for relationships that, with the emergence of the freeman, would establish the ‘enculturation circumstance’ necessary for some Native children to be raised apart from residential Indian bands. When these children married amongst themselves and established their own family units apart from Indian and Euro-Canadian communities, the Métis emerged as a distinct people. Foster argued that three critical relationships had to be established in the context of wintering before Métis ethnogenesis could take place. These relationships were (1) the country marriage between an outsider adult male and an Indian woman of the band; (2) an alliance between the outsider male and the woman’s extended male kin; and (3) friendships that bound outsider males in an economic and social relationship. Step (2) involved the outsider male making a conscious decision to go free – to separate himself from the trading establishment and separate his wife from the Indian band. This enabled the enculturation of the freemen’s children in an environment separate from both the trading establishment and the band. Although wintering was also practiced by ethnic British or American traders and clerks, it was the Canadian and Iroquois engages, by and large, who chose to end their employment in the direct service of these trading companies and live independently. It is these labouring-class groups from which most Métis populations are derived. (Foster, 1994 found in Devine, 2004, p. 4-5).

The above definition, while very informative and detailed, focuses on the Plains Métis specifically, but does not outrightly deny existence of any Métis community in a much more Eastern-Central part of Canada; specifically, Ontario, where the *Powley* case was focused.

One of the reasons *Powley* is such an important decision for this topic is that it touches on one of the biggest social, political, and legal flashpoints around this conversation: geography. In a recent academic work, authors write the following regarding this decision: “In the *Powley* court case, the Crown... believed that no Métis community existed in Sault Ste. Marie. Yet evidence presented by expert witnesses for the *Powley* case has convincingly shown in the area adapted to these cultural pressures” (Bouchard et al, 2020, p. 57). Accordingly, the SCC had deemed that there was a distinct Métis community and population in Ontario, but that the size of that community seemed to be much smaller than that of the Red River Colony. This same source goes on to say that: “According to the evidence presented at trial, the Powley family did integrate into reserves, while other Métis families were dispersed. Only a small number stayed put, becoming a tiny minority in a growing Euro-Canadian community” (p. 58). This recognition of a historic, Ontario-based, Métis community had extreme effects on the Métis identity and status debate in Ontario; something that is a topic of hot debate in 2025. Again, this will be covered in more detail in section e) of this chapter.

Yet again, the question was raised by many: what defines a distinctive people as stated under the *Powley* decision? Some scholars stated that Louis Riel’s actions against the Canadian federal government could have been the major shift for the Métis becoming a distinctive people. One scholar claimed that this was intentional, as Riel believed military action was the only way to make changes when faced with a suppressive government body (Reid, 2012, p. 192). However, *Powley* goes against this notion, as it recognizes a historic Métis population in Ontario

with no history of military action. This opened up many more conversations around the possibility that Métis people existed outside of the Red River colony and the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta.

A theme that will be revisited later on in this chapter, specifically in section e), is a focus on the Métis identity and status debate in Ontario. Since *Powley* is grounded in an Ontario Métis community, however, the Ontario debate will be discussed here as well. For example, Bell wrote in 2014 that “People of Indian (Cree, Iroquois, Ojibwa) and European (English, French, Irish, Scottish) heritage, métis have existed in the Great Lakes region for several centuries, yet their identities have oscillated over time” (p. 3). Bell’s writings make the use of the lower-case “métis”, which she uses purposely instead of the upper-case “Métis”; a trend that emerged earlier in this chapter. Bell’s words also notably mention specific First Nations and European Nations that could all combine to make métis people. This includes not only French, but also English and Scottish as seen in previously discussed sources, as well as Irish.

Bell explains, in her opinion, why the people she speaks of do not have the same recognition as the western Métis:

While there are no existing written records by métis within the Great Lakes area, their material culture (sashes, beadwork and quillwork on coats, bags, leggings) evidences how their identities shifted depending on employment, kin networks and trade relations. As I will argue, identities in the nineteenth century for métis within the Great Lakes area were not conceived of on a nationalistic scale (p. 4).

As is the case with many First Nations’ history, Bell claims that the Great Lakes métis people have no written legal records. Essentially, Bell is arguing that métis people in the Great Lakes

region were a distinctive people. Without written history, how can a Métis or métis community outside of the Red River be federally recognized? Well, *Powley* set the stage for answering questions such as this.

To reiterate an important point, *Powley* was an extremely positive moment in time for Métis people because it gave legal recognition of their identity in a more detailed context than the *Constitution Act*, and it began to lay out specific rights that Métis people were entitled to. Peach (2014) writes that “Only with *Powley* has Canadian jurisprudence turned the corner to recognize Métis as having a history and culture distinct from both First Nations and settlers and capable of being the source of its own, *sui generis* [of its own kind/ unique] regime of Aboriginal rights.” (p. 280). The problem, again, is without a singular definition by the federal Canadian government, this identity was still up for interpretation.

This time-period would start the process of a legal test to see who, and which communities, exactly qualified as Métis under this legal decision. Peach explains this by saying, in *Powley*, “The Court then went on to state that ‘A Métis community can be defined as a group of Métis with a distinctive collective identity, living together in the same geographic area and sharing a common way of life.’” (p. 286). Communities began to emerge to try to prove that they fit the above definition of a Métis community, a process that quickly became known as the *Powley* test. As author Anderson puts it, after *R. v. Powley*, many of “the collective entities through which Métis litigants can claim s. 35 protection for hunting or fishing rights have [had] been largely narrowed to settlements (see Anderson 2012, *R. vs. Powley* 2003).” (2016, pg. 10).

The *Powley* test, which may potentially seem simple to some, led to many situations of extreme nuance and complexity. One example was a 2006 case in the Newfoundland and

Labrador Supreme Court (NLSC) on the Labrador Métis Nation (LMN). Peach tells us about this case, saying that, when going through the *Powley* test, the NLSC found that:

Whether the present day LMN communities are the result of an ethnogenesis of a new culture of aboriginal peoples, that arose between the period of contact with Europeans and the date of the effective imposition of European control, is not yet established, although it is possible that such an ethnogenesis occurred. If so, the members of the LMN communities could be, in law, constitutional Métis. However, it is also possible that the LMN communities are simply the present-day manifestation of the historic Inuit communities of south and central Labrador that were present in the area prior to contact with the Europeans. The Court of Appeal therefore concluded that ... the trial judge did not have enough evidence before him to conclude that Métis ethnogenesis occurred (Peach, 2014, p. 291)

There are details on this decision that need to be broken down and isolated. The NLSC decided that there was not enough information to confirm that the LMN could be defined as Métis by using the *Powley* test, and so, the LMN would not be given Métis gathering rights. It is also important, however, that this decision does not say that the LMN is not a Métis community, just that there is not enough information to confirm that they are. This is a confusing stance for the NLSC to have taken, as it does not outwardly deny Métis identity for the LMN but denies the rights that would come with having a sort of Métis status.

In academia, there were already many conversations by 2014 that discussed standing up to the perception of “the Métis and their histories through racialized understandings of ‘mixedness’” (Wildcat et al, 2014, p. 6). This spoke to the social and political belief held by

many at this time that Métis simply meant anyone of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry. This definition does not consider blood quantum and other qualifiers, and is not dependent on where anyone, and/or their family, hailed from geographically. This is a point that the reader will see a lot of debate around in the next section of this chapter.

Conversations occurring shortly before 2016 were not limited to determining who was, and was not, Métis. People were also wondering, can you be a non-status métis, rather than a status Métis, based on where your ancestors are from? What is the difference between Métis and métis? When does an individual begin to be a non-status métis rather than a non-status Indian? What are the differences between those two terms? When are you simply non-Indigenous, with some Indigenous ancestry?

As one source says, “If editing this book has taught us anything, it is that the group of communities in Canada subsumed by the term ‘Métis’ is remarkably diverse” (Adams et al, 2014, p. 491). I have a personal connection to this time period, as 2014 is when I began my studies at McMaster University, and it was near the beginning of my brief time identifying as Métis (which I later found out, was the lower-case métis) at my school. This was also my journey into the mental health side of this topic, as these conversations are stressful; something that will be covered in chapter 2 of this thesis. It is of note that the way I decided to identify in 2014 is not how I identify now (non-Indigenous, with some Indigenous ancestry), nor have for years. That alone is a good example of the complexity of this conversation.

d) 2016 – current (2025 as of the writing of this thesis)

It took 13 years after *R. v. Powley* for another major legal designation to come from the Canadian state regarding Métis identity and status. In a 2016 case, the SCC declared that “Métis

and non-status Indians are ‘Indians’ for the purpose of federal Parliament’s law-making jurisdiction under subsection 91(24) of the *Constitution Act, 1867*” (Government of Canada Website, 2024, *The CAP/Daniels Decision – Frequently asked questions*). This case, *Daniels v. Canada*, is known by most as the Daniels decision. The above text regarding the decision has been interpreted in many different ways, and to some, the Daniels decision “is likely one of the most misunderstood decisions ever released by the Supreme Court of Canada” (First Peoples Law Website, 2016, *What Does The Daniels decision Mean?*). Since 2016, the Daniels decision has significantly influenced the conversation around Métis identity and status, a conversation that has become more of a heated debate than a respectful dialogue.

One of the most straightforward interpretations of the Daniels decision comes from a group of legal scholars who state that *Daniels v. Canada* affirmed that “The Crown is in a fiduciary relationship with all Aboriginal peoples, including, Métis and non-status Indians” and that the Crown has “the duty to negotiate with Métis and Non-Status Indians” (Madden et al, 2016, p. 6). On a personal note, I remember some family members reading about the Daniels decision in 2016 and telling me that it meant that all Métis/métis people (in this context, the idea of any mixed status being Métis) now had the same rights as First Nations people. Evidently, these family members were incorrect as the Government of Canada website, when discussing the Daniels decision, states that “The ruling does not impact on Métis and non-Status Indians eligibility for programs and services currently targeted to Status Indians” (Government of Canada Website, 2024, *The CAP/Daniels Decision – Frequently asked questions*).

Chealsea Vowel and Daryl Leroux (2016), scholars who closely follow Métis writings, including those concerned with Métis identity, wrote that the *Daniels Decision* had “been seized upon by self-declared Métis organizations: Métis can refer to the historic Métis community in

Manitoba's Red River Settlement or it can be used as a general term for anyone with mixed European and Aboriginal heritage" (p. 33). They go on to say that, in 2016, the SCC decided that Métis and Inuit people are considered Aboriginal under the *Indian Act*, but this does not mean that Métis are now considered status Indians. Instead, the case made the terms Aboriginal and Indian interchangeable (Vowel & Leroux, 2016). Even with this explanation from Vowel and Leroux, the decision still may seem confusing. An important outcome of their commentary is that even though Aboriginal (now Indigenous) and Indian can be legally seen as the same term - with Métis, Inuit, and non-status First Nations (or, again, non-status Indians) being considered under this legal umbrella - this does not mean that all Indians are status Indians under the *Indian Act*.

What makes the interpretation of these already confusing cases and writings more difficult to understand is the use of interchangeable terms. "Indian" is outdated but is still a legal term. "Aboriginal" and "Indigenous" are now interchangeable, but "Aboriginal" was used more often in 2016. Further, many older sources use the term "Native" when meaning "Aboriginal" or "Indigenous". To understand the nuance of the Daniels Decision, people likely need a comprehensive understanding of Indian status, and the rights that go along with this, in comparison with Métis identity and the concept of status, and the rights that go along with that. The problem is, if this chapter has shown anything up to this point, there is still a large amount of confusion for many as to what exactly makes someone a Métis, and also, the rights that go with having Métis identity or status.

What this chapter has aimed to do is focus on some of the most important legal documents and Supreme Court of Canada decisions that have affected Métis identity and status. The goal has not been to record the history of Métis people, but instead to show the shifting

social understandings of Métis throughout the years. This is to speak to how Métis identity is being understood by many, and how that understanding affects the idea of Métis status, and therefore, potentially, someone's sense of self (the second chapter focuses more on this specifically). To further support the reader's understanding, here is another scholar's 2016 interpretation of the *Daniels Decision*:

The Supreme Court of Canada in *Daniels v. Canada* (2016) ruled comprehensively that Canada has misinterpreted the meaning of 'Indians' in the Constitution since confederation in 1867; it held that the constitutional term 'Indians' applies to non-status Indians and Metis. It held that Canada had denied Indian status to more than 600,000 people. These people have a right to negotiate with Canada for federal benefits consistent with those applied to status Indian on reserves. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court did not help clear up any questions surrounding how to determine constitutional identity, rather, Justice Abella preferred a case-by-case analysis stating that 'cultural and ethnic labels do not lend themselves to neat boundaries' (par.17). (Battiste, 2016, p. 296-297)

It is exactly the statement that "the Supreme Court did not help clear up any questions surrounding how to determine constitutional identity" that makes this decision so influential, and potentially problematic, and so, the focus of this section of the chapter.

Another source, which includes a writer that will be revisited later in this section, Sebastian Mallette, responded to the *Daniels Decision* by proposing "a new historical narrative with an alternative model for the emergence of a Métis national identity, one that seeks to place the Métis in a continental framework" (Malette et al, 2016, p. 32). This group of scholars goes on to touch on two points covered earlier on in this chapter: the possibilities of Métis people and

communities outside of the Red River Colony, and the idea of “Big-M Métis” vs. “little-m métis”. They explain:

Considerable research examining the origins of the Métis identity has been published. One controversial point is whether any Métis identities existed outside the confines of the Red River Valley. An offshoot is whether “Métis” should be capitalized when referring to the mixed-ancestry populations found elsewhere in North America, notably the Great Lakes region, but also beyond. This historical research, though appreciated, ignores a crucial element: the older *Canadien* identity has been oddly left out of most discussions of the origins of the Métis or the ethnogenesis – in some instances, the term *Canadien* is dropped into the discussion with little explanation provided as to the origins of *Canadien* in relation to Métis identity (Dickason, 1985; Edmunds, 1985; Murphy, 2012; Peterson, 1985; Spry, 1985). (p. 47)

Malette and his colleagues are essentially stating that they reject the notion that Métis people have only ever lived within the region of the Red River and geographically proximal communities. They state that Métis people existed in older times historically and separate from this nation; something we have seen at times from other sources in this chapter. Finally, this group writes that:

Over the generations, though, this history of mixing would largely be forgotten – even buried – by contemporary political voices aiming at limiting “Métis identity” to some Western-based communities in order to circumscribe the privileges with its recent constitutional recognition in Canada since 1982 (p. 55).

The above is a potentially volatile political statement to some, as it claims that some contemporary voices are trying to limit the rights that come with Métis status to western-based communities. As we will see in the next paragraph, this idea of western vs. eastern Métis, or Métis vs. métis people, is one of the largest sources of debate surrounding the topic of Métis identity and status.

In 2016, researcher Daryl Leroux stated that he believed the Daniels decision was being misinterpreted. Leroux explained this thought process in 2017, together with Chelsea Vowel, when discussing how some were defining Métis identity and status after this decision in 2016. He wrote that “using a mixed-race understanding of Métis... denies the more explicit peoplehood of the Métis Nation” and that many people descended from the Red River were being disrespected by the inclusion of Eastern métis (Gaudry & Leroux, 2017). These two scholars went on to state that anyone claiming to be métis outside of heritage related to the Red River Colony “were not the result of a distinct peoples” (Gaudry & Leroux, 2017). This is in direct contrast to the referenced 2016 writing of Malette’s group.

In direct response to some of the writings of Leroux, Mallette wrote a piece about the above claims. In terms of the definition of the word Métis itself, Malette wrote:

It’s [Métis] a name that means mixed. Until now it has served to designate the race question of mixed-bloods between Europeans and Natives, but it is equally viable in its usage to designate a race of man, recruited from all types of mixtures of blood between them, and who, passing through the French-Canadian mold, retain their memory of their heritage and call themselves Métis. The label of Métis is one most find agreeable, because it is not exclusive and it has the advantage of recognizing, in the most convenient

way possible, the contingent that derives from each nation to create this new group of people (Malette, 2017, pg. 7)

Malette mentions only the mixing of French people to be involved with Métis, though there are mentions in earlier writings of the inclusion of other European nations, specifically British, but also Scottish, and even Irish. Overall, Malette's writings in 2017 reject Leroux's statements, which Malette interprets as meaning that "Prairie Métis would be the only 'true' Métis" (Malette, 2017, p. 6).

Though some of Leroux's writings and points are on people identifying as Métis/métis, he also discusses the potential of fraudulent métis organizations. Leroux goes as far as claiming that these organizations are forming with the sole focus on sabotaging First Nations communities (Gaudry & Leroux, 2017; Leroux, 2018; Leroux, 2019). One of Leroux's publications highlights a statement from an organization called the *Métis Nation of the Rising Sun* that "the 'Quebecois Métis' are the only remaining Indigenous people in Quebec" (Gaudry & Leroux, 2017). This statement is, of course, completely inaccurate and if truly made, would be attempting to deny the existence of many First Nations and other Indigenous people in Quebec; including a number of Inuit individuals residing in Northern Quebec.

In another publication, Leroux stated that the *Gaspe Peninsula, Lower St-Lawrence, Magdalen Islands Métis Aboriginal Nation* was a group of White hunters that who were "trying to limit the amount of moose being killed" by the Mi'kmaq in the area (Leroux, 2018). Here, Leroux is giving an example of individuals trying to use Métis status and rights to directly block the traditional rights of First Nations people. This is, of course, extremely problematic if true. This is an example of "race-shifting", non-Indigenous people trying to shift to an Indigenous

identity and status. In this case, Leroux is presenting a story where race-shifting is occurring with the direct goal of undermining Indigenous hunting rights through identification as métis.

In her 2019 book “The Northwest is Our Mother”, Jean Teillet addresses the issue of who exactly she believes should be considered Métis. In terms of Métis history, Teillet says “it can be traced to the voyageurs – not all the voyageurs, the men of the north who married First Nation women and then ‘went free’ in the Canadian North-West with their new families. This is where we find the social glue that created the Métis Nation” (Teillet, 2019, p. 10). She also comments on the subject of which European bloodlines were involved, saying that there were both “English Métis and French Métis” (Teillet, 2019, p. 192) and does not mention any Scottish or Irish descended Métis.

Teillet goes beyond discussing who she believes to be Métis and directly addresses the idea of ‘race-shifters’ in the same sense that Leroux discusses it, saying that:

A new adversary has recently appeared on the horizon: race-shifters, individuals in eastern Canada asserting a new identity as “Métis”. Some are claiming the Métis Nation extends to Quebec and the Maritimes and are appropriating Métis symbols. These individuals assert that a single drop of Indigenous ancestry, sometimes originating three hundred years in the past, is enough to recast themselves as a Métis culture. (Teillet, 2019, p. xx).

Here, Teillet is directly addressing the geographical section of the Métis identity and status conversation, something that will be covered in more detail in the next paragraph. However, the most recently used quote by Teillet does raise some similar questions as earlier sections: how much Indigenous ancestry does one need to be considered Métis? Does the amount of ancestry

matter, or is the community a person is from more important when deciding whether an individual should be considered Métis? This is extremely important when thinking about geography, which Teillet has strong opinions on.

Though I believe the writings of Teillet referenced in the following paragraphs are meant to set firm boundaries of the historic Métis Nation, I find them to be less clear than I believe she intended. First, Teillet says that:

The historic boundaries of the Métis Nation extended from its most eastern community in Rainy Lake/Lake of the Woods to the Rockies in the West, from the Plains in what is now the United States to the boreal forests of northern Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Alberta. It was never defined and the people over the centuries used the various parts of their motherland in concentrations that shifted with time, the economy, politics and weather (p. 479).

The issue with this statement is that if the Métis Nation's eastern-most point was Rainy Lake/Lake of the Woods, then the Sault Ste. Marie Métis community identified in *R. v. Powley* would not fall within Teillet's boundaries of the Métis Nation.

Was Teillet, then, directly trying to challenge the SCC's ruling on *Powley*? In the same book where Teillet outlines seemingly firm boundaries, she also states that "The boundaries of the Métis Nation have always been more social than geographic" (Teillet, 2019, p. 478). These two quotes from Teillet's book may seem to nearly contradict one another, as she explains that the boundaries of the Métis Nation were not necessarily geographic on one page, and then on the (literal) next page attempts to draw clear geographic boundaries for where the Métis Nation existed. What may be happening here is an example of the disconnect between the Métis

National Council and the Métis Nation of Ontario; something that will be covered in *Section e)* of this chapter.

The last focus on Teillet for this section is when she directly addresses the topic of Métis people in Quebec and eastern Canada. Teillet states that: “to date, the Métis Nation has repeatedly stated that its boundaries have never included Quebec and eastern Canada, that these eastern groups are not part of the Métis Nation, and that they should not be appropriating the symbols of the Métis Nation.” (Teillet, 2019, p. 484). As we have seen consistently during this chapter, Teillet’s statement does not mean that this is an accepted opinion by all academics. In 2020, for example, a group of academics, including Sebastian Mallette, published an entire book on the untold story of the Métis of western Quebec (Boucard, Mallette, and Guillaume, 2020).

Six years after the Daniels Decision, in 2020, scholars and academics continued to struggle to agree on definition of Métis status in 2020. A 2020 paper was published on the mental health findings related to identity (more on the topic of Métis identity and mental health in chapter 2 of this paper) for 11 Métis women. When looking through some of the quoted responses from the women, it is clear that “Métis” still had a broad definition to these researchers.

One participant stated that her cousins were all “Lawyers and teachers at the U of M, sort of real activists on the Prairies for Métis stuff” (Monchalín, Smylie, & Bourgeois, 2020), suggesting family ties to the Western Métis Nation. Meanwhile, another participant had a much different understanding of Métis, one that does not even speak to the connection to a possible Prairie Métis community. She stated that: ““My sister accidentally told me we were Métis... and she had found out 10 years before I knew but didn’t tell me... She just took one look at me rather

disparagingly and said ‘Did no one ever tell you that papa’s grandmother was a native?’ And I went, ‘No!’ She said we’re all Métis” (Monchalin, Smylie, & Bourgeois, 2020). This individual’s definition speaks much more to the idea of a non-status Indian, or simply a non-Indigenous individual with some Indigenous ancestry. This lack of consistency in this study, and the inclusion of participants with such different definitions of Métis, goes to show that the definition of Métis by many, including academic researchers, was still not completely clear in the year 2020.

In 2021, Suzanne Keptwo had writings that directly defended the idea of Métis people and communities that existed outside of the Red River Colony. Keptwo writes that “The Métis National Council’s registration process requires proof of an ancestral link to Louis Riel’s people” and “If one can prove they have a ‘half-breed’ (who hung out with Louis Riel) in the family lineage going back up to six generations, they’re in” (p. 165). She rejects this definition of Métis people, identifying as a “Métis from Quebec” (p. 167). Keptwo explains that the reason that there is a lack of Métis communities in Eastern Canada today is actually due to the Anglo-Franco conflict during the formation of Canada as a nation. She claims that “the community didn’t disappear – it was disrupted and dispersed during the Acadian Expulsion” (Keptwo, p. 171 from Daphne Williamson, the source of whom is not cited). This sentiment is the same as Joe Sawchuk’s writings from 1998 that the Acadians were the first Métis, from section b). Keptwo even goes as far as to say that “the word Métis has been claimed by a strong, much younger community in the west” (Keptwo, 2021, p. 208-209). When these sorts of conversations are taking place, it is easy to see how negative emotions can easily arise. These are academics who are fundamentally disagreeing on a large issue, which also makes things tough for individuals in

educational settings. Without a clear definition on Métis identity from the Canadian federal government to refer to, there is simply too much room for interpretation and debate.

As mentioned above, the lack of a definition provided by the Canadian federal government for who is Métis has caused a major gap in this conversation. I have been monitoring the Canadian federal government website for years, and since 2021, there have only been minor changes. There is still no definition of Métis identity or status. Instead, five provincial organizations are listed: Métis Nation of Alberta, Manitoba Métis Federation, Métis Nation of Saskatchewan, Métis Nation British Columbia, and Métis Nation of Ontario; this has remained unchanged since 2021 (Government of Canada Website, 2021-2025, *Métis*). Notably, there are no organizations listed for Quebec or the maritime provinces. However, the Métis National Council is listed, perhaps, as a “catch-all” for all provinces and territories without a specific organization listed; this has also remained unchanged since 2021 (Government of Canada Website, 2021-2025, *Métis*).

In November 2022, the government of Canada updated a webpage on *Métis Rights*. This webpage, under the heading “*Métis membership*”, explains section 35 of the *Constitution Act* (1982) and then links to the five Métis provincial organizations mentioned in the previous paragraph (Government of Canada Website, 2022, *Métis Rights*). The government of Canada *Métis Rights* webpage then goes on to include subheadings on “*the Daniels Decision*”, “*the Powley decision*”, “*the Powley test*”, “*the Powley decision and Métis Hunting rights*”, and “*Canada’s response to the Powley decision*” (Government of Canada Website, 2022, *Métis Rights*). Under these headings, the website, and so, the federal government of Canada, still fail to give real explanations or definitions of Métis identity and status. Instead, the website continues to simply redirect and defer to Provincial Métis organizations (Government of Canada Website,

2022, *Métis Rights*). This seems to be a figurative, and in the case of *Powley* and other hunting cases, potentially literal, passing of the buck. It is possible that the federal government of Canada is resisting stating a definition of Métis identity or status due to the fact that they do not want to cause any more harm or enact control over Indigenous people. Regardless of the reason, this lack of a definition means that the conversation continues, many times in negative ways, as many individuals still disagree on who, exactly, is Métis.

What is new, as of January 2024, is that the *Métis* webpage from the Government of Canada now has a link titled “Métis: Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada” that redirects to a “Canadian Geographic: Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada” webpage titled “Identity”, with the subheading “Métis” (Government of Canada Website, 2024, *Métis*; Canadian Geographic: Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada website, 2024, *Métis: Identity*). This webpage is quoted in its near entirety here:

Within non-Indigenous society, there are two competing ideas of what being Métis means. The first, when spelled with a lowercase ‘m’ (métis), means individuals or people having mixed-race parents and ancestries, e.g., North American Indigenous and European/Euro-Canadian/Euro-American. It is a racial categorization. This is the oldest meaning of Métis and is based on the French verb *métisser*, to mix races of ethnicities... The second meaning of being Métis, and the one that is embraced by the Métis Nation, relates to a self-defining people with a distinct history in a specific region (Western Canada’s prairies) with some spillover into British Columbia, Ontario, North Dakota, Montana and Northwest Territories. In this case, the term Métis is spelled with an uppercase ‘M’... Being a big ‘M’ Métis relies on having a political-cultural definition of Métis because – while it recognizes that being Métis is not just about having ancestry that

is Indigenous (usually Cree, Saulteaux, and Dene) and European/Euro-Canadian (usually French-Canadian, Scots and Orcadian) – it relates to a community of people who self-identify as Métis and recognizes that their ancestors made a political decision to identify as Métis based on shared histories and culture. To proponents of Métis identity, being Métis means more than just having mixed Indigenous-European ancestry. If that were the case, virtually all First Nations in Canada and French-Canadians and Acadians would be Métis as a result of genetic and cultural mixing in the earlier colonial period. However, in each of these cases, First Nations, French-Canadians and Acadians recognize that their various ancestors contributed to the ‘stew’ of their various ethnicities, and their ancestors made a conscious decision to self-identify as distinct nations of people and not as mixed-race nations. Being Métis in this sense is about making a conscious decision to identify with a community of other like-minded people. The historic Métis had a distinct culture and lifeways, were recognized as being their own people and were given distinct names by Indigenous nations and by the European fur traders, such as Otipemisiwak, Apeetogosan, gens libres and Bois-brûlés. Big ‘M’ Métis identity focuses on the following criteria: the Métis developed during the fur trade in what is now Western Canada and part of northwest Ontario; they have roots in the Red River Settlement of in fur trade communities in the northern reaches of the Prairie provinces; they received land grants or scrip to address their Aboriginal title (through the Manitoba Act and the Dominion Lands Act); and they were recognized as a distinct Indigenous nation by other Indigenous nations, by Europeans and Euro-Canadians, and by colonial (U.K.) and settler governments (Canada). This community of people had a political will to create their identity and formed the historic Métis Nation. In time, this identity developed into the

modern Métis Nation, which includes all their descendants who self-identify as being Métis and are recognized as such by other community members. They are tied to their ancestors by living in traditional Métis lands, self-identifying as Métis, practising their culture and, when possible, speaking Michif and other languages. Métis ‘peoplehood’ or big ‘M’ Métis identity is complicated by the fact that many Métis moved to other parts of Canada and the United States as a part of the Métis diaspora after 1885 and to find better employment opportunities later on. Much of the core membership of the Métis Nation British Columbia and the Métis Nation of Ontario are descendants of Prairie Métis who moved out to these places for better economic opportunities. Modern Métis Political Identity [subheading]: Métis identity has evolved in more recent times. In the 1960s, the old names used by the various historical Métis communities to describe themselves (such as Half-breeds or ‘Michifs’) gave way to ‘Métis’ and the creation of a pan-Métis identity. Around the same time, there was a recognition that both non-status Indians and Métis had a great deal in common as unrecognized Indigenous peoples. As a result, non-status Indians and Métis shared common political lobbying organizations through the 1970s and the early 1980s. The Native Council of Canada was founded in 1971 by Métis political organizations from the three Prairie provinces as a national lobbying organization. It soon expanded to include non-status and ‘other’ Métis groups from across the country. In time, the Métis political bodies on the Prairies would have many other non-status members, and this unity of non-rights holding Indigenous people was reflected in the name Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan. By the early 1980s, the Métis from the three Prairie provinces left the Native Council of Canada (whose national leadership was almost exclusively non-status and Status Indians) to create the Métis

National Council (MNC) in 1983. The new MNC was dedicated exclusively to advocacy for the rights of the Métis Nation. While the Manitoba Métis Federation and the Métis Association of Alberta became Métis only, the Métis Society of Saskatchewan was not established until 1988 when the provincial membership voted to establish a Métis-only political body. Many non-status Indians would later acquire their status via Bill C-31 and would leave Métis political organizations. The MNC represents Métis in the four western provinces in Ontario. It does not include Métis communities in the Northwest Territories that are part of the Métis Nation, but have their own rights process with the federal government that they do not wish to jeopardize. The MNC represents the big 'M' Métis and adopted the following definition of being Métis in 2002: *'Métis means a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, is of historic Métis Nation Ancestry and who is accepted by the Métis Nation.* (Canadian Geographic: Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada website, 2024, *Métis: Identity*).

I have included so much of the above quote, nearly all of it, because it is one of the most modern and comprehensive definitions of Métis identity and status that I have come across in my years of research on this topic; this is especially important as it is linked from the government of Canada's webpage. It is of note that this definition does not mention any Métis people or communities existing in Quebec or the eastern provinces of Canada. One has to wonder, has the government of Canada linked this website and definition because they agree with it? If that is so, would there be some sort of formal law or declaration forthcoming soon to match the definition given above? Perhaps the government of Canada is hesitant to define Métis in a policy or act, as some may view this as an act of control and/or violence from a colonial state. Chapter 4 covers the possibility that Canada may be unable to create such a legal definition with the adopted of the

United Nations Declaration of Indigenous People. It is interesting to note that the definition above does mention the “little-m” métis, and even describes it as a “racial category”.

The problem, of course, is that even if the Canadian federal government links to the webpage that gives the above comprehensive definition of Métis identity and status, this definition has no legal implications at this time. Effectively, then, the federal government remains without a singular legal definition of Métis identity and status in Canada, and so, debates around this topic continue. Perhaps the answer is to simply endorse the definition of a provincial Métis organization, rather than have the federal government step in to do so; this could be a supporting act of Indigenous self-determination. However, this is also potentially problematic. The next section of this thesis will show that not every provincial Métis organization agrees on a definition of Métis. For that reason, the federal government could be hesitant to favour one organization over the other, at least for the time being.

e) Métis identity and status in Ontario specifically

The conversations surrounding Métis identity and status have involved the province of Ontario in a unique way. All scholars seem to recognize the Plains Métis and the people of the Red River Colony, and only a few seem to claim a historical Métis community in Quebec, Ontario or other parts of eastern Canada. However, whether or not Ontario has historic Métis communities, and where exactly those communities may have been or are, still remains a hot topic of debate today. Ontario is of the most commonly debated topic of the current Métis identity and status conversation. This conversation is something that leads directly into the mental health effects that will be discussed in chapter 2. Due to my personal experiences with the topic of Métis identity and status in Ontario, and this Thesis being written at an Ontario

university (Queen's University), this next section will focus on how this topic relates to the province of Ontario specifically.

As we saw in section a) of this chapter, Nicks (1985) wrote, just after the *Constitution Act*, that:

Research is now beginning to focus on native populations of Indian and European ancestry that developed in the Maritimes, the central and western subarctic, and the Great Lakes region, to cite a few examples. Some of these populations predate Red River, others were contemporaneous, but were culturally and geographically isolated from the Manitoba community. (p. 105).

Author Anne Chretien agreed with the idea of the existence of historical Métis communities outside of the Red River colony. Chretien has been a lecturer at Wilfrid Laurier University since 2004 and completed her Ph.D. at York University in 2006 with a focus on Ontario Métis identities. When Chretien (1996) was writing her own master's Thesis, she claimed that it was a myth that "Métis culture was developed and still only exists in Western Canada." (p. xxii). She goes on to explain this further in a chapter dedicated specifically to Métis people in Canada, writing:

Borders can create boundaries. Many different types of boundaries. This has been especially the case for the Ontario Métis. These boundaries have been defined by legal, geographic, historical, cultural, and even psychological parameters, and are neither fixed nor stationary. Indeed, the borders themselves have changed over time. (Chretien, 1996, p. 59)

The mention of borders is very important, as geographical borders have become increasingly at the forefront of the Métis debate. Where exactly the border of Métis people ends, and mixed ancestry peoples cease to be a distinctive people is the main point of debate. As we will see in this section, the geographical historic borders of the Métis people is a source of major disagreement between provincial Métis organizations.

Chretien continued writing on Ontario Métis after finishing her Ph.D., writing about an earlier time period:

The 1980s and '90s was a period of intense socio-political development for Canadian Métis, especially those in Ontario, much of which was sparking by important events surrounding the definition of Métis identities. The rise of many new Métis political organizations such as the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO), the Canadian Métis Council (CMC), and the Métis Women's Circle marked the general *malaise* many Ontario Métis felt with existing definitions and political leadership. This increasing political diversification was often motivated by profound ideological differences among factions, and represented important shifts in the process of self-definition for Métis people in general, and Ontario Métis in particular (Chretien, 2008, p. 90).

The emergence of new Métis political organizations was important, but also in some cases, potentially problematic. It showed that there was disagreement among Métis-identifying individuals on who exactly qualified as Métis. This is extremely notable, as being accepted by one of these Métis organizations would give an individual membership; the closest thing to status in comparison with the *Indian Act*.

Finally, we see Chretien speak a bit more on the focus of these new Métis political organizations:

The first noticeable shift in Métis socio-political development is that new organizations focused on cultural, spiritual, and social factors as their ideological underpinnings instead of political agendas aimed at legal issues, such as Métis Aboriginal rights. A second noticeable ideological shift is in how new groups began to emphasize the Ontario Métis experience, and history of colonialism. Finally, the ‘battle for recognition’ was transformed into the ‘battle of definition,’ shifting the discourse of Métis identities from the ‘Other Natives’ to the ‘Other Métis.’ And, the new battleground is Ontario. (Chretien, 2008, p. 91)

Chretien covers three important points in the above quote: focusing on identity rather than legal status/political agendas, a focus on the Ontario Métis experience historically, and the shifting language when discussing Métis issues including the Big-M Métis vs. little-m métis that we have discussed earlier in this chapter.

Chretien’s above writings came after 2003 (in 2008), meaning that she would have been very aware of the *Powley* decision and how this impacted people claiming to be Métis in Ontario. Bell, another scholar writing about the Métis, comments on the important connection that *Powley* had in Ontario specifically, saying that:

Indeed, the *Powley* case, a significant legal victory for the Métis of Ontario, was based on a similar argument that a distinct métis community had existed in Sault Ste. Marie. The case was won in 2003 and allows Métis in Ontario and other provinces their harvesting

rights. Significantly, there is a rapidly growing number of individuals registering as Métis Citizens with the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) and across Canada. (2014, p. 6)

One thing that is extremely important to note here is the claim by Bell that a growing number of individuals were registering as Métis in Ontario. Also noteworthy is the use of the lower-case m when describing the community in Sault Ste. Marie. This could possibly mean that the Sault Ste. Marie community was separate from the Métis Nation. The implications of this are quite large, as it would mean that the SCC was officially recognizing métis individuals that were not connected to the historic Métis nation. This recognition means an allowance of legal hunting and fishing rights, rights that bring the conversation back to a concept similar to legal status.

When it comes to the Métis Nation of Ontario, it seems that measurable steps were being taken to address the prospect of more and more individuals trying to be registered as Métis.

Anderson writes on this, saying that

In Ontario – the geographical location of Sault Ste. Marie, the community at issue in *Powley* – the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) and Ontario’s Ministry of National Resources entered into a harvesting agreement in 2004 in which no more than 1,250 cards would be issued annually to MNO citizens. While the government of Ontario attempted to limit the geographical scope of the agreement, subsequent litigation ruled in favour of MNO cardholders (Anderson, 2016, p. 69).

With attempts to limit the number of people who would gain Métis status, and so, harvesting rights in Ontario, focus on who exactly qualified as Métis would understandably rise. Some claims to Métis identity and status were becoming increasingly problematic, and so, some organizations were starting to face more scrutiny.

One of the Métis organizations that has not been brought up yet in this section, but one that I have been personally aware of (though admittedly, unclear of the history behind) was the Ontario Métis Aboriginal Association (OMAA). Authors Gerhard and Sawchuk share some of their opinions on the history of the OMAA and compare it to the MNO.

From 1994 to 2007, there have been two major but separate organizations with two diametrically opposed strategies for self-identification in Ontario. One approach, represented by the Ontario Métis Aboriginal Association (OMAA), attempted to create and represent a population with a unique Ontario mixed-blood ancestry; the “Métis Indians” or the “Woodland Métis Tribe. The OMAA was forced to close its doors in 2007. In its heyday, it and its preceding organization, the Ontario Métis and Non-Status Indian Association (OMNSIA), represented the population that, at least before the 1960s, did not necessarily identify itself as Métis, but was identified by itself and others as “half-breed.” It also included many non-status Indians and off-reserve Indians. Its national affiliation was with the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP). CAP is now represented in Ontario by the Ontario Coalition of Aboriginal Peoples (OCAP). Although OMAA has officially disbanded, it still maintains a website that declares that “the Woodland Métis Tribe is alive and well and our dedicated members feel that it is our solemn duty to rebuild our organization.” It promises to rebuild the organization without recourse to federal or provincial funding, and a video created by its former president optimistically exhorts interested parties to keep checking the website for further developments.

(Gerhard & Sawchuk, 2015, p. 420)

In contrast to the OMAA, these two authors (Gerhard and Sawchuk) go on to say that “The other approach to Métis identification is represented by the Métis Nation of Ontario... It explicitly opts

for an alliance or amalgamation with the ‘Red River’ or western Métis of the historic Métis Nation” (2015, p. 420). So, the interpretation is that the MNO was trying to represent capital-M western Métis people. In contrast, the OMAA may have been trying to vouch for the rights of lowercase-m eastern métis people, and also possibly non-Indigenous individuals with some Indigenous ancestry.

There are several things to note about the writings of Gerhard and Sawchuk regarding the OMAA and MNO. The first is their claims that the OMAA was much more focused on people of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry, including non-status Indians, and was a fraudulent organization that was shut down in 2007. The second is that they present the MNO, in direct contrast with the OMAA, as opting “for amalgamation with the ‘Red River’”. This statement on the MNO, is, I believe, much too simplified, and possibly outright incorrect, as we will see when we focus on issues with the MNO that arose in 2024.

As seen earlier in this chapter, the conversation around Métis identity and status grew considerably after the 1982 *Constitution Act*. Teillet wrote about this important time-period in relation to Métis identity, saying that:

Until the constitutional negotiations in the 1980s and early 1990s, the Métis Nation had never attempted a national definition.... The “Métis Nation” was defined as the collective of the individuals and those they accepted. The definition created a core group that would determine whether and on what terms it would accept others. (Teillet, 2019, p. 477).

This timing lines up with the Métis Nation of Ontario, whose website claims that their registry, the only provincial registry for Métis people in Ontario according to their website, was established in 1994 (Métis Nation of Ontario Website, *Métis Registry & Citizenship*). During this time, we begin to see growing differences between the Western Métis Nation that Teillet

represents, and the Métis Nation of Ontario. This is in contrast to the above writings of Gerhard and Sawchuk, which claims that the MNO and the Métis Nation are in an alliance.

Teillet also writes on the potential threat of *Powley* to the western Métis Nation in relation to Métis in Ontario (MNO) - she states:

The Métis rights cases in the courts in the early 2000s forced further definitional changes. The Métis Nation of Ontario was successful in pushing the first Métis rights case through to the Supreme Court of Canada. It confirmed the existence of a regional Métis community in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. As the *Powley* case moved up the chain of courts, the Métis Nation grew concerned that the courts would take the definition out of its hand, thus undermining their right of self-determination. They began to hold assemblies across the Métis Nation where they debated a definition. (Teillet, 2019, p. 277)

Teillet attributing the *Powley* case to the MNO, rather than the *Powley* family themselves, says a lot. She identifies a clear divide between the MNO and the “Métis Nation”, which suggests that the MNO is not a part of the Métis Nation. Teillet’s writings come from 2019, but this divide has increased as the years go on, something that will be shown later in this chapter. Her statement that the power of defining identity would undermine self-determination may be a reason why the government of Canada has not come out with a legal definition of Métis.

Having a historic Métis community in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, does seem problematic to Teillet, as she writes this later in the book quoted above:

The Métis Nation accepts these provincial political boundaries for its three Prairie organizations but rejects them for Ontario and British Columbia. Thus the modern Métis

Nation geographic boundaries are a unique combination determined by modern political realities and by historic use and occupation. (Teillet, 2019, p. 480)

Again highlighted is the focus is on geographical boundaries for who constitutes as a Métis individual. This suggests that, for Teillet, simply being a member of a mixed-race distinct society would not be enough for an individual to qualify as Métis. For her, these societies would have to be within specific geographical boundaries.

The idea of the historic geographical boundaries of the Métis Nation not including Ontario began to become a major focus for Métis identity and status, one that would grow in ferocity over the years. In 2020, one publication stated:

At the 2018 Métis National General Assembly, the Métis National Council (MNC) adopted the Homeland Map Resolution, explicitly stating that there were no Métis communities east of Rainy Lake in western Ontario, and released a map of the historical homeland of the Métis Nation to that effect. The MNC categorically denied that six historical communities identified by the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) were legitimately part of the Métis Nation. (Bouchard et al, p. 5).

We begin to see the issues between the Métis National Council and the Métis Nation of Ontario in terms of geographic boundaries. These two organizations are both listed on the federal government of Canada's website for Métis, but clearly do not fully agree with one another. This was the beginning of a massive rift between the Métis National Council and the MNO, as: "Citing the 2002 definition of citizenship, the MNC placed the MNO on probation for failing to remove these other Métis groups from their membership list" (Bouchard et al, 2020, p. 5). This means that the governing body for Métis identity and status for all of Canada was officially singling out and punishing the MNO. The MNO's different understanding of which geographic

communities were considered Métis was clearly something that the MNC was no longer willing to tolerate.

It would be useful, then, to now focus on what the Métis Nation of Ontario uses to define Métis identity. One document named *Researching your Métis Ancestors in Ontario*, linked from the MNO website, accessed in 2022 and created in 2014, stated that the Métis homelands “stretch from the lakes and rivers of Ontario; cross the wide prairies; traverse the mountains into British Columbia and into the far reaches of the Northwest Territories” (Métis Nation of Ontario, 2014, pg. 6). Contrast this definition with one from a webpage on the same site, created in 2022 and titled *Citizenship*, which states that the “Historic Métis Homeland means the area of land in west central North America” (Métis Nation of Ontario Website, 2022, Section 1.3 Under “National Definition of Métis” Subheading in the “Citizenship” page). These two definitions are at odds with one another, as the Great Lakes of Ontario, the mountains of British Columbia, and of course, the far reaches of the Northwest Territories are not what I, nor most, would consider to be “west central North America”. These inconsistencies in geographical definition on the MNO website would obviously cause confusion for anyone looking for a concrete answer, as I was.

In terms of registry for the Métis Nation of Ontario, a very important difference emerged on the MNO’s website between 2022 and 2024. In both years, I accessed the website in June, and so, that’s when these notes were taken. This information was then checked again in March 2025. In 2022, there was a title called *MNO Registry Update* from the year 2019 with the following text: “all registry functions including processing citizenship application... Renewals, and cards will be provided by an independent third-party organization, Know History Inc.” (Métis Nation of Ontario, 2019, Under “Métis Nation of Ontario Registry Update” subheading in the “MNO Registry Update” page). There was a completely different update under the same heading, and on

the same webpage, for the MNO in 2024, a statement that read: “On June 17th, 2023, the MNO Special Assembly passed *resolution #SGA230612-01*, approving amendments to the MNO Bylaws and MNO Registry Policy to allow for the removal of citizens from the MNO Registry whose files do not meet the current requirements for MNO citizenship.” (Métis Nation of Ontario Website, 2023, *Métis Registry & Citizenship: Update*). Both of these statements speak to the MNO focusing on more critical analysis of who exactly should receive membership, and so, status (and in relation, confirmation on identity). One could assume that the MNO was feeling immense pressure, both internally and externally, to create strict barriers on membership.

It seems that the decision made in 2023 has larger repercussions, however, than noticed at first glance. These repercussions exist in terms of membership definition, but also in terms of self-determination and governance. For membership, *resolution #SGA230612-01* states that:

A person shall be registered as a citizen of MNO who: (a) has provided sufficient documentation to the satisfaction of the Registrar that they are Métis within the meaning of 4(a) of these Bylaws based on the requirements for citizenship as set out in the MNO Registry Policy, as adopted by the General Assembly and as amended from time to time; (b) is not enrolled on any other Aboriginal registry; and (c) applied for admission as a citizen and has been approved through the Registry process of the MNO as amended from time to time (Métis Nation of Ontario, 2023, p. 2).

The MNO had attempted to define a more specific scope of who exactly qualified to be a member, and so, had Métis identity (and the rights that come along with this). However, it seems that other Indigenous people and organizations were not satisfied with the MNO’s work.

The above document, *resolution #SGA230612-01*, written on June 17th, 2023, came exactly 4 days before the House of Commons released Bill C-53. This act, Bill C-53, was apparently intended to respect “the recognition of certain Métis governments in Alberta, Ontario and Saskatchewan, to give effect to treaties with those governments and to make consequential amendments to other Acts.” (House of Commons of Canada, 2023, *Bill C-53*). This Bill was immediately a subject of intense controversy in Ontario, as nearly all of the First Nations in Ontario spoke out in opposition of this bill (Anderson, 2023). Apparently many First Nations saw Bill C-53 as a threat to the rights of First Nations peoples in Ontario; which seemed to be exactly the opposite of what the bill was intended for.

In terms of the purpose of Bill C-53, here is a direct quote of the supposed intention:

“The purposes of this Act are to

- (a) advance, through government-to-government relationships, the recognition of the distinct identities, cultures and governance structures of the Métis;
- (b) advance the recognition of the right to self-determination, including the inherent right of self-government recognized and affirmed by section 35 of the *Constitution Act 1982*, of certain Métis collectivities and the recognition of the authority of Métis governments to act on behalf of those collectivities;
- (c) provide a framework for the implementation of treaties entered into by Métis governments and His Majesty in right of Canada; and
- (d) contribute to the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.” (House of Commons of Canada, 2023, *Bill C-53 under “Purposes”*)

If the purpose of Bill C-53 was to recognize the identities, cultures, and governance structures of the Métis, then why were First Nations communities in Ontario opposing it? The answer comes, partly at least, back to the Métis National Council, disagreements around geographic borders, and who exactly is Métis.

Recently, in 2024, this conversation has only continued to increase in volatility. At the Indigenous Identity Fraud Summit in Winnipeg, “delegates from co-host organizations Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF) and Chiefs of Ontario called the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) race shifters who lack connection to the historic Métis Nation of the Prairies.” (Forester, 2024). This is a bold claim, as this would completely discredit the MNO if true. The MNO leaders denied “identity theft allegations made at the Indigenous Identity Fraud Summit in Winnipeg last week, accusing opponents of politicizing Métis identity, flip-flopping on past positions and circulating falsehoods.” (Forester, 2024). It is tough to see a solution from a policy standpoint: The federal government is being told that defining this status would be an act against Indigenous self-determination, and so, leave it up to the provincial Métis organizations. When these organizations do not agree, how does one understand what Métis identity truly is? It is this type of complexity that makes conversations about Métis identity so difficult. Most individuals have not done vast amounts of research on this topic, and so, there are gaps in the story for many. Even for those who have extensively researched this topic, clarity is elusive.

This divide has likely been building for years, as “The MMF broke from the Métis National Council in 2021 following years of factionalism and turmoil fuelled largely but not solely by controversy over six disputed MNO communities” (Forester, 2024). The MMF, the Manitoba Métis Federation, is the provincial organization that represents Manitoba on the federal government’s website. At this conference, the

Leaders of the MNO “said it's not for MMF to unilaterally decide whether the Métis Nation homeland encompasses the Ontario communities in the province's eastern reaches. MNO tasked an expert panel in 2021 to review the six communities, plus the court affirmed seventh in Sault Ste. Marie, through the lens of the Métis National Council's official citizenship definition. A report is scheduled for August 2024. (Forester, 2024)

In September 2024, the report mentioned above was still not available, but it seems to be on its way. In a recap report of the Provisional Council of the Métis Nation of Ontario (PCMNO) held on September 24th, 2024, it was mentioned that this report is expected to be ready in October 2024 (Métis Nation of Ontario, PCMNO Meeting Recap Report Sept 24 - 25 2004). As of March 2025, no report has yet been released by the MNO. It seems clear that, despite the number of years, different pieces of legislation by the Canadian federal government, and Supreme Court decisions, there is still a divide as to what exactly constitutes Métis identity and status. Even in 2024, the political organizations identified by the federal government as the most important voices are fighting with one another about this issue, and Ontario remains the centre of the debate. The conversation of Métis identity still has a large lack of clarity.

f) Why this lack of clarity is so problematic

There are three reasons why the issue of who has Métis identity, and membership with provincial Métis organizations, can potentially be so problematic. The first is that, as seen with the *Powley* decision, there are certain rights (e.g. hunting/harvesting rights) that come with being Métis and having Métis membership. The second reason surrounds relative clarity regarding status for First Nations (Indian status). Though there are many issues with Indian status, there are at least clear guidelines on who qualifies for it. In contrast, the lack of clarity around Métis

identity and membership may be disproportionately predisposing people involved in the Métis identity conversation to negative mental health outcomes. Identity is important for one's sense of self, which has powerful mental health implications; this is especially true for Indigenous people (more on this in chapter 2). The third reason is that this conversation touches on another high-stakes controversy: the concept of someone faking Indigenous identity and status.

Faking an Indigenous identity is something that has happened for many years. Author Philip Deloria claimed that the first time someone faked an Indigenous identity for personal gain may have been as early as 1773 (Deloria, 1998, p. 1). When faking an Indigenous identity, an individual may be able to access opportunities that they would normally not qualify for. These opportunities could be financial, such as bursaries, grants, and scholarships that are only available for Indigenous students or grants/loans for Indigenous business owners. Faking an Indigenous identity could also allow someone to apply for a job or degree pathway that may be Indigenous-specific, and so, unavailable for non-Indigenous applicants. An individual's reason for faking an Indigenous identity could even be social, to fit into another group, for one reason or another.

Regardless of the reason that someone may fake an Indigenous identity, there is research that shows that it has become a growing trend over the years. In her work "Becoming Indian: The struggle over Cherokee identity in the twenty-first Century", Circe Sturm (2010) explains that:

According to U.S. census figures taken between 1960 and 2000, the Native American population has grown at a phenomenal rate – from 551,700 to 2,476,000, an increase of 349 percent. If we also include multiracial individuals from the 2000 census, people who

identified as American Indian and at least one other race, then the total American Indian population jumps to 4,119,300, representing a startling growth of 647 percent over the same forty-year period. Demographers say that such rapid growth is impossible. (p. 5)

Sturm's work in 2010 was groundbreaking in that it even inspired a new term, "race-shifting". The idea behind race-shifting is simple: someone who may have identified their entire life, as, for example, non-Indigenous, has now shifted to openly identifying as an Indigenous person.

There are extremely important legal implications to race-shifting, as Sturm explains:

When race shifters reject their Whiteness and reclaim their Cherokeeeness, it often goes beyond the realm of the spirit and into the street, as it were. Indigenous reclamation is also a political act – one that is backed by American notions of biological race and genealogical belonging. Some race shifters are aware that, once they begin to identify themselves as Cherokees and to create new Cherokee tribes, their actions have profound political implications across the United States, both locally and nationally. (p. 87)

Now, for what it's worth, I should say that I personally think a lot of the issues that we've seen with Métis identity are due to the lack of clarity surrounding the term Métis. As demonstrated earlier in this chapter, Métis identity has been misunderstood for years, and there still is not one universally accepted definition. That being said, the idea of someone shifting their race for political reasons has come up before in this chapter; specifically mentioned by Daryl Leroux in section d).

Teillet wrote a report titled "Indigenous Identity Fraud" in 2022 to directly address the trend of race-shifting. She explains how this phenomenon relates to the self-identification we've seen in the past with some Métis organizations. Teillet even mentions a specific organization of

the Rising Sun, the same organization that Leroux identified as highly problematic. Teillet writes:

As we have seen, putting too much stock into self-declaration encourages questionable claims. Many of these organizations come into existence to take advantage of what they perceive to be Aboriginal rights. This is exactly what happened in Nova Scotia after the Supreme Court of Canada recognized a Mi'kmaq treaty right to trade in the products of its traditional fishing (Marshall, 1999). Almost immediately, organizations sprang up that issued cards granting membership. The new groups included the Acadian Métis-Indian Nation, the East Coast First People Alliance, and the Rising Sun Community Restigouche West/Communauté Soleil Levant. (p. 24)

As we can see in Teillet's writings, it is the misuse of Indigenous rights in Canada that has gained the most traction surrounding the fake identity conversation, understandably so.

As a non-Indigenous person, I cannot begin to fathom the depths of negativity that an Indigenous person would feel when they find someone falsely identifying as their culture for their own gain. This is made so much worse, in my opinion, when the culture being faked, and history being claimed, is that of an Indigenous person in North America; peoples that have had to go through some of the worst hardships that I have ever personally heard of. While doing this research, I have come to understand some of the extreme negativity I faced when identifying as métis years ago (though this was due to a different understanding of the term métis, not to try to fake an identity or claim any associated rights). To have someone face none of the hardships that you and your ancestors have faced, only to then be able to reap the hard-fought rights of your culture and peoples, must be devastating. This is especially true in modern times, when identifying as Indigenous may not receive the same sort of violence or social isolation as it may

have, say, 50 years ago. In the 2020s, a new term has come out for people faking an Indigenous identity: “pretendian”.

As one CBC article explains, simply, “The term ‘pretendian’ is used to describe someone who claims to be Indigenous, but isn’t” (Lewis, 2023). Lewis explains that “A pretendian might claim their great-great-great-grandmother was a Cherokee princess. They might broadly say they’re Indigenous... but are unable to be more specific as to how” (Lewis, 2023). This article then gives examples of several high-profile public figures in Canada that have been outed as “pretendians” in recent years. I have chosen not to name those individuals in this thesis paper, as this is not the focus of my work. The reason that I mention the article is simply to notify the reader that the phenomena of false claims of Indigenous identity has only seemed to grow throughout the years.

While much of this thesis paper has covered the topic of Métis identity and the concept of status, I wanted to take a moment to honour how this issue affects First Nations people in Canada. As we have seen throughout this paper, at times, non-status Indians have been lumped in with Métis/métis people, and even worked with Métis people to fight for their own rights. This is, I believe, due to the tight limitations on who qualifies for Indian status under the *Indian Act* in Canada. Author Chelsea Vowel explains how easy it is to lose Indian status:

Two generations of out-marriage. That is all it takes to completely lose status. It does not matter if you raise your grandchildren in your Native culture. It does not matter if they speak your language and know your customs. If you married someone without status, and your grandchildren have a non-status parent, your grandchildren are no longer considered an Indian; legally. (Vowel, 2016, pg. 30).

One can certainly understand that with the stringent limitations on who can be considered a status Indian, or First Nations person, in Canada, there would (and should) be intense focus on who qualifies as Métis as well.

g) Examples Through Stories

Stories are used as powerful teaching tools for many Indigenous peoples, and while I am not Indigenous, it could also be a powerful tool to give real-life examples of how this identity and status debate negatively affects people. I hope to do these stories justice, as I have seen many of them in my own life and read about countless others. I also sincerely hope not to disrespect anyone when telling these stories, as all the characters are made up, and my intention is actually to bring respect to these potential realities.

i)

Steven is from Sudbury, and even though the people at University of Guelph would consider this Northern Ontario, he knows that his family in Fort Albany would completely disagree with this notion. Steven is white-passing - he uses the suffix “passing” because he is Métis. Well, not fully Métis... His mother’s side is Scottish and English, and his paternal grandfather is Irish, but his paternal grandmother is from Fort Albany First Nation. He loves all of his grandparents, but his grandmother holds a special place in his heart. She’s quick to smile, and loves teaching him words in Cree. She explains to him that her mother was actually Mi’kmaq, as she was from the east coast. Steven’s grandmother also told him that because her father was only half-Indigenous, she’s technically a Métis herself, because she never received status. Steven doesn’t understand the nuances of Indian status (he always thought Indian was supposed to be an outdated word), but he knows his grandmother always told him to be proud of

his Métis identity. She taught him how to forage for mushrooms, which ones were good to eat, which ones were dangerous, and other medicinal plants including some of their names in Cree. He's always been proud of this knowledge and liked to impress his high school friends with his Indigenous roots. Steven loved this knowledge so much that he entered the Forest Ecosystems program at University of Guelph (UofG) to learn more about nature, hoping that his traditional ecological knowledge will give him a leg-up. Steven is, however, really nervous about moving so far away from his family, as he's always been really close with them and, really, has always felt like more of an introvert.

True to his fears, Steven has a really hard time adjusting to life in a new city at UofG and can't stand his tiny dorm room (especially with his loud roommates always hogging the kitchen). Steven's loneliness was becoming so bad that at times he considered dropping out of school and moving back home. About a month and half into the school year, when Steven mentions his loneliness to another student, they, remembering Steven telling him the Cree name for a pine tree, responds with "aren't you Indigenous? There's an Indigenous Student Centre (ISC) where they have programming and stuff, maybe you should check it out!". Steven decides to venture over to one of the coffee chats that the ISC is hosting and is excited to meet many other younger Indigenous people that are also looking to make new friends. To be honest, he did notice a few interesting looks from people when he first walked in, but when he mentioned that he was Métis, everyone seemed so accepting and friendly! Steven began to grow closer with two other students, Michael and Sarah, who are also Métis. They approached Steven at lunch one day and mentioned how excited they were to meet another Métis student. Steven began coming closer and closer to Michael and Sarah, and as they introduce him to others in the ISC community, he feels his loneliness fade away.

As the year goes on, the ISC becomes Steven's happy place. He hangs out there to study, and never misses a day when free lunch or soup is being served, partially due to the free meal and a student's budget, but mostly to avoid his roommates in the kitchen. Steven feels accepted by the community and has great chats with the other students about topics like honouring plant life, respect for all things, and how tough it is to be an Indigenous student living away from home. However, Steven starts noticing Michael and Sarah exchange glances more and more often when he speaks in the group.

Finally, after lunch one day, Michael approaches Steven and asks if he could chat before they both leave for class. Michael looks really serious, which makes Steven nervous and concerned. Steven accepts, and Michael takes Steven over to a study room where Sarah is already waiting. Michael says, "Steven, I was wondering, you keep saying that you're Métis, but you said that your grandmother is Cree and Mi'kmaq, what's your connection to the Red River?". Steven has no idea what the Red River is, but not wanting to sound stupid, he confidently responds "My grandmother's from Fort Albany! She's the one who got me into all this traditional stuff!". To his surprise, Michael scoffs and rolls his eyes, looking over at Sarah.

Shocked, Steven looks between the two of them, where Sarah, looking guilty, but slightly angry, says "Steven, you're not Métis, you're a non-status First Nations person. It's really disrespectful for you to keep claiming you're Métis when it's obvious you're not descended from the Métis Nation, like Michael and I are." Steven doesn't appreciate Sarah's tone, or the way Michael is glaring, so he answers hotly "I think my grandmother knows what she is." Michael begins to storm out, and says "He's not Indigenous at all, he said himself his grandmother doesn't even have status, he's just another white guy trying to play off our rights". Before Steven can say anything else, Michael and Sarah leave the room together.

Steven is shocked, and incredibly hurt by his treatment by Michael and Sarah. So, he decides to do his own research. He finds a UofG definition that states that a Métis person is someone with mixed European and Indigenous ancestry, just like he thought. Steven even contacts the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO), and the woman on the phone, Carla, tells him that she's had the same problem lately, and confirms that he's Métis. As they talk on the phone, Carla asks more about his university studies. It turns out that the MNO has a summer student position with their forestry team, something that would be perfect for Steven's resume. Validated and armed with a new summer position, Steven decides to forget about Michael and Sarah, and, overall, starts hanging out at the ISC less and less. However, without Michael and Sarah, Steven feels a gap in his life. He misses them more and more everyday, and feels his loneliness creeping back in.

Steven graduates from UofG in four years and spends his summers working at the MNO. Though he attended the odd ISC event, he never spoke much to Michael and Sarah after their disagreement, and never felt as welcomed in that space as he once did. However, Steven felt validated by his work with the MNO and learned more traditional Indigenous ecological knowledge. He even received a position at the City of Sudbury, in the parks division, moved home, and began to start a family. Life is good, although... Steven still thinks about Michael's anger every now and then, especially when he hears more and more conversations about who "is" Métis and who "isn't".

One day, Carla, Steven's old contact from the MNO, calls Steven out of the blue, years after his graduation from the UofG. She's in tears. She tells Steven that she was just at the Métis Nation of Ontario Assembly, and that they've eliminated the status of 34% of their entire membership. She states that her membership has been eliminated, and that Steven's likely has as

well. She explains that to remain Métis, they need to be connected to a historic Métis community, not to just be of mixed First Nations and European ancestry. Carla's final words made Steven feel cold inside, as they sound exactly like what Michael and Sarah had said to him that day, over ten years ago.

When he hangs up, distraught, he does his own research on the case, and finds many mentions of the "Métis Nation"... just like Michael and Sarah had said years earlier. Finally, Steven checks his Facebook, and sees he has a message from Michael, who he hasn't spoken to in years. Michael's message states that he tried to tell Steven that "having a mixed ancestry grandmother doesn't make you Métis" and that "he needs to stop identifying as Métis, or he'll be outed as a pretendian". Steven is distraught: He only ever identified as Indigenous to be more connected to his Indigenous ancestry and his grandmother. The more Steven reads about pretendians (a term he had never heard before today), the more scared he becomes.

ii)

Michael is a young Métis man from Winnipeg, Manitoba. His family is proud to live in the geographic territory of the historic Red River colony, which they are descended from, and they are very grounded in their Métis knowledge. He has grown up around traditional dancing (jigging) and fiddle playing - and always wears his sash to major life events. After high school, Michael was unsure exactly what he wanted to do. His parents encouraged him to take his time and found him work through a family friend with the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF).

In his position at the MMF, Michael mostly does administration work, but also learns more and more about Métis culture. One of the things he kept hearing about was people incorrectly identifying as Métis. As his parents and coworkers explained to him, many

individuals were finding a long-lost ancestor, or had a mixed ancestry grandparent, and thought that Métis simply meant anyone of mixed race. His parents explained to him that this was extremely problematic for the Métis community, because people were receiving funding that they were not eligible for, which was taking away from Métis students who actually deserved the funds. They also explained that everyone misidentifying was skewing health data, which was problematic, because research on Métis was tough enough to find as it is.

Finally, Michael ended up applying to University of Guelph as an undeclared Arts student. He wanted to try getting away from home and heard that Guelph's campus was less urban than many other schools. After living in urban Winnipeg for his entire life, Michael liked that idea more than moving to York University, where he also was accepted. At Guelph, Michael could avoid the metropolis of Toronto and have a quieter university experience. Knowing that he was a couple of years older than most other incoming first year students, Michael opted not to stay in residence, and was a bit worried about making new friends.

Before leaving home, Michael's contacts at the MMF told him that Guelph had an Indigenous Student Centre where he could meet other Indigenous students. This helped Michael relax and feel hopeful as he got ready to move to school. Michael planned his move-in date to be a few days before an "Indigenous student welcoming night" that the ISC was hosting a few days after he would arrive.

Though moving to a one-bedroom apartment was tough, Michael immediately loved the ISC's warm community. There were about a dozen other first-year students, and the first couple get-togethers were pretty great, with the exception of a few students. Michael didn't know everyone at the ISC by name yet, but he did know Aaron. In short, Aaron was very loud, very

funny, and very popular. Michael liked him, but he didn't seem to get the same feelings back from Aaron. In fact, Michael felt like Aaron had a serious problem with him. Aaron had a few other friends that had come from the same reserve, and they all hung out together; in fact, they went everywhere together. Initially, Michael assumed that Aaron was standoffish because he already had other friends and wasn't interested in making many more. This didn't seem to make sense though, as Aaron seemed open with pretty much everyone else who came into the ISC.

One day, Michael came in for lunch, and they were having some delicious corn soup that one of the faculty members made. The staff member had made the soup before, and it was so popular that it had almost run out last time. Michael, having remembered this, showed up a little bit early, and was happy to see that he was fourth in line. As Michael was about to get his bowl of soup, Aaron walked in with his friends, flushed and obviously annoyed at being late for lunch. The line was quite long now, and Michael was just thinking how happy he was that he'd thought to show up early, as Aaron and his friends might not be able to get any of the small batch of soup. Aaron must have realized the exact same thing and, to Michael's surprise, angrily exclaimed that "they should let the actual Indigenous people eat first, this is bullshit", while pointing at Michael. Michael was shocked and had no idea how to respond.

To Michael's surprise, one of the people behind him, a girl named Sarah, responded "I **am** Indigenous, Aaron, I'm sick of you making that comment". Aaron, who seemed egged on by the challenging response, and the attention, responded loudly "you're not Indigenous, you're *Métis*", in a mocking tone, "anyone can be *Métis*, heck, you're all registering in the thousands to steal our fishing rights, and you can't stop there eh?... Now you're stealing our soup too". All of Aaron's buddies laughed, and a few others in the room chuckled, including some ISC staff. Michael, shocked and angered by this, said "Aaron, anyone can't be *Métis*, that's a myth, do you

not know our history?”. “Yeah right”, Aaron spat back, “every single person that comes to fish at the lake back home is ‘Métis’, just a bunch of white people trying to take whatever we have left”. Aaron’s friends laughed again, more awkwardly this time, and they all went to the back of the line.

Irate, Michael approached Sarah, who he hadn’t said much to before, and asked her if she was doing okay. He noticed that she must have been crying, and she told him that Aaron had been making comments about Métis people since the first day. Initially it had seemed harmless, she said, but there seemed to be some edge behind the jokes, because his friends always seemed to laugh and make angry-sounding comments afterwards. She admitted that she didn’t talk about being Métis for that reason, because she didn’t want to become the target of Aaron’s comments and jokes, but she had felt that she didn’t have a choice when Aaron called her out in the soup line. Michael explained that he was pretty sure Aaron was pointing to himself, but expressed that he was so angry that none of the staff members stood up and stopped the hateful things that Aaron said about Métis people. Some of the staff members had even laughed along.

Together, Sarah and Michael booked a private meeting with Rick, head of the ISC. When Michael and Sarah explained how insensitive and hurtful Aaron’s comments were that day, Rick admitted that he didn’t actually know much about Métis people but said that some of the staff did talk about how unfair it was that so many people now qualified as Métis. With every passing moment, Michael felt angrier and angrier. This was supposed to be an academic institution, and he couldn’t believe that he was hearing these untrue generalizations about Métis people that he had been warned about back home. Michael angrily explained that everyone of mixed ancestry was **not** Métis, and told him how awful that scene with Aaron made him and Sarah feel. They, the Métis, were a distinct people with an important history. He didn’t understand how someone

like Rick could not know that. Rick, who had always been compassionate, agreed to talk to Aaron about it, and to work on his own learning. Michael and Sarah were never told how that conversation went, but he noticed that Aaron never showed up at the ISC again.

About a month after school started, another student, Steven, started coming to some of the ISC events and lunches. He seemed pretty shy, but Michael took a liking to him, and got excited when Steven explained that he was Métis. However, Michael soon began to suspect more and more that Steven was not really Métis. First, during a coffee session, he heard Steven talking about all of his non-Indigenous family members. Even when Steven discussed his Indigenous grandmother, who he had previously said was Cree, Michael overheard him mention her Mi'kmaq roots. Michael was certain that no Mi'kmaq people were Métis. He had never heard of that in his time working at the MMF. Finally, Michael decided to test Steven, making a joke about being crazy like Louis Riel. Steven laughed, but then hesitated, and gave Michael a quizzical look, and asked "who?". That was the last straw for Michael.

Michael felt like he wanted to snap on Steven and tell him to stop trying to appropriate a culture, and that one mixed ancestor didn't make him Métis. He was still so angry about the Aaron incident; it was people like Steven that made people like Aaron disrespect the Métis. Sarah suggested a calmer approach, saying that they should have a talk with Steven first. Michael was already angry, tired of Steven flashing some Cree words to seem Indigenous, which, in Michael's opinion, just muddied the water about Métis culture even further.

When Michael and Sarah finally talked to Steven, Michael's anger continued to grow as he saw how defensive Steven was getting. While Sarah began explaining to Steven that he wasn't Métis, instead of listening and learning, Steven tried to explain to *them* that he knew

better, and Michael finally snapped. He called Steven “just another white guy”, made a statement very similar to the one Aaron had joked about at the soup lunch, and stormed out. Later, when Sarah tried to point out how similar Michael’s behaviour had been to Aaron’s, he ignored it, knowing that he was justified. He saw Steven around less and less after that but could never stand him pretending to be something he was not. Every time Michael thought about the Métis identity issue, he thought about Aaron and Steven, and it always made him angry and frustrated.

Michael tried not to let Steven bother him, but he couldn’t help watching Steven’s Facebook updates. Michael thought it was fitting that Steven worked for the Métis Nation of Ontario, as his coworkers at the MMF told him about all the issues with that organization, including the amount of non-Métis people that they were giving status to, many of whom have no connection to the Red River Métis.

Overall, this issue always weighed heavy on Michael’s mind, and it was one of the reasons he decided to major in Political Science. He wanted to be as involved as he could in these conversations in the future, so the identities of the Métis people stopped being watered down by everyone who had a distant Indigenous ancestor. When Michael finally heard about the MNO’s decision, years later, to revoke Métis status from all the pretendians, he sent Steven a message to tell him to stop identifying at once. Steven may not have been a bad guy, but every day he mis-identified as Métis was another day he was doing harm to Michael’s people.

iii)

Aaron is a non-status Indian under the *Indian Act*, and a man very proud of his Indigenous roots. Aaron’s grandfather was a Mohawk warrior who took part in some of the most hardcore First Nations rights movements in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. His grandfather used to

tell Aaron all about his activism when Aaron was young. Aaron's favourite was his grandfather's retelling of the Oka Crisis. Even though his grandfather would have been quite old at that time, Aaron could easily imagine him with a gun, scaring the Canadian military boys and making them shake in their boots. He was always proud of his grandfather for standing up for the rights of First Nations People.

What always bothered Aaron, however, is that legally, he didn't receive any of those rights. He didn't quite understand the reason, but his grandfather said it was because "Aaron didn't have enough Indigenous blood quantum". Aaron's grandmother (married to his Mohawk grandfather) was Black, and Aaron's mom was South-Asian. This combination of ancestry made Aaron "look very Native anyways", as his friends put it. Aaron looking very Indigenous was something he was thankful for when playing for his local lacrosse team. Aaron was a strong lacrosse player and noticed the ribbing that the white-passing teammates got. He even joined in with the ribbing himself. Aaron was loud, and the guys seemed to like him. He gave it especially hard to the actual white guys that joined the team. That's what you get when you join the lax team on the reservation, and really, it was well-deserved, he thought. Besides, he really didn't hate anyone, it was all in good fun.

What did make Aaron feel angry, though, were the times that his lack of Indian status came up. For example, Aaron didn't get a Gas card, and so wasn't able to save tax on gas and had to pay the non-Native price on the reserve. One time, when he was driving some teammates to practice, his friends realized Aaron didn't have a gas card, something that got around the locker room. Later, a white teammate made fun of Aaron for this in front of everyone, saying: "hey Aaron, how does it feel that we pay the same prices in gas? You're pretty much as white as me!". The entire room erupted, and even though Aaron tried to play it off like he didn't care, he

was pissed, and frankly, embarrassed. He never drove any of the guys to practice again, just on the off chance it ever came up again.

The gas issue also struck Aaron's nerves a bit because it meant he was losing money. Aaron was always thinking about money, and he liked to think he was pretty good at understanding how money worked. He wasn't just interested in his own money either, but how money really controlled the world overall. It was this that got Aaron interested in Economics in high school, a class that he got outstanding marks in. Aaron decided that he wanted to go to university for Economics, but he also wanted to play lacrosse.

He wanted to play for a good team, but probably couldn't go D1 in the States. He also didn't feel like living in St. Catherines or London, or moving to Montreal and learning to speak French, so Brock, Western, and McGill were all out. He'd heard that the University of Guelph's (UofG) team was getting a bit better, and a few of his buddies back home were going there. After taking a tour of the campus, Aaron was convinced, and he subsequently applied, and got into UofG for Economics.

One thing that had always relaxed Aaron was hunting and fishing. However, he had no idea how a non-status Indian dealt with hunting and fishing rights. It had never been a big deal, he was either with a family member or friend when out doing either activity, so they could always take the claim for the kill or catch if anyone ever asked. Still, it bothered Aaron that he couldn't claim the kills and catches himself. In Aaron's mind, the whole thing was a bit embarrassing, and he didn't like thinking about it. He lived on the reserve and was very involved in his culture; he'd even been going to longhouse for years. No one asked him about his status

there, and he didn't want to have to deal with a bunch of forestry and fishery applications to exercise his traditional rights.

What *really* upset him, though, was when he heard that métis people were awarded the right to hunt and fish, the same as status card holders. Aaron couldn't believe this, he heard that Métis people were just anyone with a First Nations ancestor, no matter the blood quantum and other qualifiers. When Aaron asked his grandfather if he himself was considered Métis, his grandfather responded, calmly, that no, Aaron was a First Nations man, and he should be proud of that, no matter what the colonial government tried to say.

Still, Aaron couldn't help but notice more and more white people showing up at the lake during the summer before he went to school. It seemed like there were more every day, and when Aaron asked his buddy at the docks what was going on, and why so many white people were fishing in the lake of the Rez, his friend simply said "they're all Métis right? Comes down from that court decision". Aaron couldn't understand this, and it made him terribly upset and hurt. What gives those people the right to fish in these waters? How can a single ancestor from the 1600s give them more rights than him? To Aaron, it was just another example of the government spitting in his face.

Aaron didn't consider himself an angry guy. He was fierce in a lacrosse game, but that was different. He was told that he was loud, but mostly people said it sheepishly from the other room. Overall, people laughed at his jokes, and he felt popular socially. But when Aaron saw the tuition letter come in a month before he was supposed to head off to school, he got angry. Everyone, including his family, had told him that he was supposed to receive free tuition; a slight repayment for the suffering First Nations people had endured at the hands of the colonial

government. However, this letter said that not only was he supposed to pay full tuition, but he had been denied for all of the grants and scholarships that he had applied to. When Aaron called the university, they said that a status card number was needed for the grants and scholarship applications to go through. When he called his band office, they said they weren't sure what they could do, as he didn't have Indian status. They assured him that they would probably be able to do something, but that they wouldn't be able to get back to him for a couple of months as it was an extremely busy time coordinating school costs for all the other Nation members. Aarons anger, growing over the years with each fill-up on gas, each unclaimed fish or moose or deer, and the so-called métis harvesting in his lake, finally came to a head. He was furious, and felt, as he travelled to campus early for lacrosse training camp, like a black cloud of anger was sitting over top of him.

A few of the guys from Aaron's reserve were also on the lacrosse team, and that, plus exercising every day, made Aaron start to feel really good about starting university. His friends took him to the Indigenous Student Centre, where we met some other Indigenous students and staff. One girl named Sarah, who seemed nice enough, introduced herself as Métis. Aaron, without even thinking, made a joke that he "thought the ISC was for actual Indigenous students". Due to Aarons loud voice, a bunch of other people seemed to hear, but his tone was light, and everyone laughed. Aaron could tell Sarah didn't like the joke, but he didn't really care very much, as he had been meeting a bunch of new people and Sarah probably qualified for a bunch of free money that he deserved. Later on, Aaron heard another person, Michael, talking in depth about Métis people, but Aaron was passing through, and didn't want to let it bother him. He was really enjoying university and was finding his classes interesting and engaging. He wasn't going to let Métis people bring him down.

Unfortunately, Aaron took a hard hit to the head in a lacrosse game when he stepped in front of a player's shot. It was harder than he'd ever been hit in the head, and when it happened, he saw stars. He had a splitting headache and was told by the trainer that he had a pretty bad concussion. All of a sudden, Aaron wasn't able to do any of the things he enjoyed. He had to skip practice, wasn't able to go to class because the lights made his head hurt, and he couldn't even watch TV. He was feeling pretty down overall, and some of his anger from past frustrations started to boil up.

To cheer him up, Aaron's teammate from home called him and told him that it was soup day in the ISC. A staff member who had made corn soup last time had supplied the food again, and they needed to get there before the food ran out. Aaron was about to walk out the door, but he got a call from his Band Office, asking if he could fill out about 20 pages of forms so they could "look into his eligibility for funding". Aaron answered a bunch of pointless questions and, when he finally hung up, was extremely annoyed. Why did he have to fill out this information when they already knew all the details, and why did they still not know if he could get any money?

He had a feeling those two Métis kids weren't having any issues with funding, they probably got tons of new handouts that he deserved! To make it even worse, the phone call made him late, and his friends were upset when he arrived. "Aaron! We're not going to get any now, come on!" one said. Aaron's head was pounding, and he was feeling bad for making the others late, so when he opened the door, and saw Michael grabbing a bowl for soup, he made a loud comment and pointed at him. He couldn't even remember what he said, his headache was splitting! As he said it, he heard the room laugh, and saw Sarah turn.

He immediately felt bad, he could tell she was upset, and he hadn't meant to say anything to her... He could tell she was getting tired of his Métis jokes. She fired back at him, and he let the anger take over. Micheal stepped in, and Aaron got even angrier. Who were either of them to tell him anything? They had no idea the bullshit he had to go through, and they had what, one Indigenous ancestor from the 1600s? They shouldn't even be here. He went to the back of the line after the exchange, but was too heated, and ended up storming off.

Later, Rick, who ran the ISC, called Aaron into his office. Aaron didn't like Rick's tone and didn't appreciate being sat down like a child either. Rick explained that what Aaron said was insensitive, and that he needed to apologize to Michael and Sarah. Aaron snapped back that Rick had laughed at his joke, and that he'd seen him. Rick looked sheepish and said in a hurried tone that maybe he had more to learn about Métis people himself. Regardless, he said, Aaron had to apologize. Aaron didn't even let him finish before he slammed the door. No one had any idea what he had to go through, not even having status, and now these Métis people (more like white people) were taking everything *he* and his people deserved? He didn't need them or the ISC, and he was never going back.

Context

In the age of artificial intelligence, it is important to explain how I came up with these three stories. I have experienced and learned about several Indigenous Student Centres over the years at multiple different universities. This includes my time at McMaster University, as the Indigenous Studies Program had many events, classes, and meetings at the ISC, as did a student committee that I sat on during my fifth year. In my role as a research assistant at Western University, I researched the experiences of Indigenous students at Western over the decades. This also included interviewing Indigenous Western alumni, and the Western University ISC

always came up. I was also lucky enough in that position, and during my master's studies at Queen's University, to physically travel to the ISCs at each of those universities and sit with/meet the staff.

The issues and conflicts in these stories also come from years of studying and speaking about the Métis identity conversation, especially in terms of rights and the concept of status. I have witnessed, been directly involved in, or heard about many similar types of situations and conflicts as those described in my stories. No situation is a replication of a real-life event, but instead the stories are a patchwork of different details from different real events. The Supreme Court decisions, and the large reduction in the number of MNO members, are of course a reference to actual events.

Some of the details in the stories are vague, and that was intentional. The lack of clarity around the exact heritage of Steven's grandmother is a sentiment known all too well by many Indigenous people. This was included not out of malice, quite the opposite. This is to highlight that the weapons of colonization were directly targeted to make Indigenous individuals unsure of their exact background and culture. The different understanding of Métis vs. métis vs. non-status Indians is also purposeful. These stories aim to show that these issues are confusing, and upsetting, and many people have different views on what they consider the truth.

As a white, non-Indigenous man, I also understand that it's potentially problematic to describe Steven as "white-passing" and Aaron as "looking very Indigenous". I considered not keeping those details in, as to not offend anyone. The reason these descriptions were included is because I truly believe that humans do, at least initially, judge a book by its cover. The difference

in treatment and experiences that I have heard people have had based on their appearance was too important to leave out in these stories.

Steven, Michael, Aaron, and even Sarah and Rick do not represent any real people that I know, have met, or have heard about. These stories are meant to represent the journeys of three young men, similar in age, who attend the same university, at the same time, dealing with some of the same stresses of moving away from home. All three of these young men consider themselves Indigenous, something which they are all proud of. Based on the lack of clarity around Métis identity, each of these young men are in conflicts that drive them apart. There is no reason other than the different understandings of Métis to blame for them not getting along and supporting each other through many of their shared struggles. This conversation making so many people who should be friends, into enemies, is the overarching story that I have heard when discussing Métis identity. It truly saddens me that the Métis conversation has affected so many people in such a negative manner.

h) Conclusion

The issue of Métis status is a very unique one. I have studied several other examples of colonized Nations, Indigenous peoples, and Indigenous statuses within those Nations, but I have never come across a status, or at the very least a rights-bearing identity group, resulting from the mixing of Indigenous and European ancestors. For example, in New Zealand, there are “descendants of European fathers, and Maorie [sic] mothers, commonly called ‘half casts’ (Colvin-McCluskey, 2008, p. 1) that some people consider a “half-breed racial entity” (p. 3), but this group does not have unique rights under the New Zealand government. I have not found any status similar to Métis in Australia or the United States, which are also nations colonized by the British.

Many individuals who are new to this topic, and indeed, many who are very well-versed in it, may wonder: why has the Canadian federal government not stepped in and defined Métis identity and status? This will be discussed in the takeaways chapter (chapter 4). Until then, the reader must accept that many individuals believe that a colonial government is in no position to define the term Métis. One scholar, when writing on this topic, believes that this is purposeful. They state that, in terms of Indigenous issues in Canada, “there is only so much Land and money to go around. Divide and conquer” (Keptwo, 2021, p. 191). Whether or not it’s true that the lack of a definition of Métis identity was purposeful, there is no doubt that this gap has caused many negative conversations and outcomes.

As a result of the lack of clarity on the definition of Métis, I have seen so much conflict, and so many people that should be working together, people with shared interests and struggles, be completely torn apart. If the stories in this chapter show anything, it should show that Steven, Michael, and Aaron were all at odds with each other over the same issue; different interpretations of the term Métis. If that issue didn’t exist, there’s no reason to suggest that those three young men couldn’t have gotten along. Those types of situations and interactions happen constantly, and are likely to continue to happen, when Métis identity and status are being discussed, and sometimes, are very detrimental to the mental health of those involved. Mental health in relation to the status issue is precisely the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 2: Identity and Mental Health: Indigenous identity, Métis identity, and how the lack of clarity affects individuals in a negative manner

This next chapter will discuss the effect of the conversation around Métis identity on the mental health of those individuals involved. As stated in chapter 1, the Canadian federal government has provided no legal definition for Métis. This lack of a definition has led to a variety of understandings as to who exactly qualifies as Métis; this has been understood in many ways by different people and communities. Even in contemporary times, provincial Métis organizations lack consensus on a definition (Forester, 2024; The Canadian Press, 2024).

What has come as a result of this inconclusiveness is that there are many cases where individuals have had their identity brought into question by others. Some individuals have understood Métis to simply be any person of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry; something that is difficult for members of the Métis nation as it is in direct contrast to the idea of them being a distinct people. Beyond ancestry, others disagree about which geographic Métis communities are legitimate members of the Métis nation. Perceptions change depending on the year and source that has been consulted when researching who exactly is Métis. As shown in chapter 1, many individuals and scholars may have different understandings of the term based on their own educators, personal stories, current policies, Supreme Court decisions, and more. Difficult conversations often come because of the different perceptions of the term Métis. I personally have been a witness to many charged conversations of this type.

At times, non-status Indians (First Nations people) and Métis groups have worked together to pursue legal rights. However, Macdougall wrote in 2017 that: “despite their years of working together towards a common goal, by the 1970s-80s, Métis and non-status Indians began pursuing different agendas to restore their well-being. The latter sought Indian status while the

former continued a rights-based agenda” (p. 22). Macdougall’s claims that this separation between non-status Indians and Métis people was linked to the restoration of well-being is very telling. Clearly, working together was beginning to affect those involved in a negative manner, and so, a change had to be made.

Health data is information related to health conditions and outcomes and can be used to create important interventions that can improve or save lives. When looking at Indigenous health data, it is clear that “having a clear Native [Indigenous] identity is part of attaining and maintaining mental health” (Stewart, 2008, p. 5). Stewart is saying that, for Indigenous people, feeling strongly connected to their Indigenous identity is an extremely positive factor for mental health outcomes.

There is relatively limited data on Métis identity specifically in relation to mental health, but this is beginning to change. Recent research is on the rise, and in that research, we see that for Métis individuals, “Health, spirituality and well-being were all connected to Métis identity” (Ginn et al, 2021, E456). The connection that Métis individuals have to identity is a complex conversation, especially when viewed with the context of the lack of clarity around Métis identity demonstrated in chapter 1.

This chapter will be split into three sections, with concluding thoughts afterwards. The first section will speak broadly to the positive effects of a strong sense of identity for Indigenous people. The next section will highlight research on Métis identity and mental health, including explaining why there is less research on Métis health overall in comparison to First Nations peoples. The third section will revisit Steven, Michael, and Aaron; using stories to demonstrate how these issues affect people.

As the focus of this thesis is to provide a resource to show the lack of clarity around Métis status, chapter 2 will be much shorter than chapter 1. This is not at all to suggest that the content of this chapter is not important, as nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, this difference illustrates that the importance of identity for Métis mental health is an area of considerably less academic debate than the definition of Métis.

A disclaimer before reading this chapter: there may be some upsetting and/or triggering subjects covered in the research cited. When individuals are experiencing poor mental health, serious negative outcomes can occur. Please do not read this section if you are feeling like any of this research may trigger negative feelings for you. If you are feeling mentally unwell or overwhelmed, support can be accessed from the Crisis Support Hotline in Canada by calling 1-833-456-4566 or by texting 45645. Canada also has a new helpline for anyone who is thinking about suicide or who is worried about someone they know; simply call 988. If you are reading this from outside Canada, please know there are supports for you as well that can be easily found with a Google search. Please always remember that you are not alone, and that you matter.

a) Indigenous Identity and Mental Health

Health for Indigenous people is a topic that must be handled seriously, as “Indigenous communities have some of the worst health outcomes within their larger societies. This is true across the world, for example, in Australia and New Zealand, Latin America, Canada, and the United States” (Whalen et al, 2016, p. 2). Overall (holistic) health for Indigenous people and communities is a concern that needs to be addressed. Of particular focus for this thesis is mental health. In Canada, “Indigenous mental health promotion is viewed by government service policy from the perspective of a mental health crisis” (Stewart, 2008, p. 6). The unfortunate reality is that many Indigenous people in Canada, and worldwide, are suffering with poor mental health.

Often, the answer for Indigenous people is not as easy as simply asking for help. As author Westerman (2004) put it, there can be service gaps due to “the extent of the cultural difference between the client and the practitioner.” (p. 4). Even when Indigenous individuals seek mental health assistance, the help offered may not align with the treatment they require. This gap may be due to the increased importance of a connection with culture for the mental health of Indigenous people. Scholars Chandler and Lalonde (1998) wrote that, for Indigenous people, cultural continuity can be a protective factor against suicide. (p. 2). In 2008, Chandler and Lalonde also found that, for Indigenous people “suicide rates were largely unrelated to measures of poverty and isolation” and instead are “strongly related to measures of cultural continuity” (p. 237). Chandler and Lalonde’s findings are that Indigenous communities who were actively preserving and rehabilitating their culture, and identity, experienced drastically improved mental health than communities who lacked such cultural continuity.

Positive mental health can show itself in many forms, including improved educational outcomes. In a 2023 article by Fetter and Thompson, it was found that:

The protective role of ethnic identity has also been associated with critical educational outcomes. In one study of NA [Native American and Native Alaskan] adolescents, the negative relationship between stereotype threat and academic achievement was mitigated for those with a strong ethnic identity. (p.6)

For educators especially, it is important to know that a strong sense of identity is a positive factor for Indigenous learners. A strong sense of identity and improved educational outcomes are both going to contribute positively to the mental health of Indigenous students.

In another study, we can see the consequences a disrupted sense of identity has on mental health. Author Lewis (2022) writes that:

Alaska Natives have lost their land, cultural values, and traditional spiritual spaces. These losses have resulted in negative self-perception, diminished sense of pride, and the development of maladaptive behaviours (drinking, violence, depression, suicide) used to numb the pain of their lost identity (p. 181)

Lewis writes that both negative emotions and destructive behaviours have resulted from a lack of connection to identity; however, he also shows the hope that can be found for Indigenous people when reconnecting to their culture, specifically with Elders. He writes:

Reconnecting to Indigenous identity, sharing that journey, and seeing their experiences helping others overcome challenges and find meaning in life, as well as engaging in cultural activities, gives Indigenous Elders their generative acts and behaviours, and thus they attain Eldership. This knowledge can guide development of culture-specific mental health treatment approaches, and more broadly, prevention strategies for all ages. This intergenerational healing can result in pride and improved mental health for Indigenous Peoples of all ages. (p. 192)

Lewis' words show both the profound positive effects of reconnecting to identity for Indigenous people, and also demonstrates that it's never too late to heal oneself mentally. This work is not the only study that connects a strong sense of identity for Indigenous people with lowered drug and alcohol use (Harris & Joyce, 2000; Currie et al, 2013); and so, better mental health outcomes.

b) Mental Health in Relation to Métis Identity

Although there is considerable research on the relationship between Indigenous identity and mental health, research focusing specifically on Métis identity and mental health is limited. This is likely due to the confusion around Métis identity that has already been identified previously. Macdougall explains this well:

Yet the prevalent belief among Canada and its citizens today is that Métis people have no history, culture, society, or language, but are instead a collection of individuals with Indian ancestry. This has created an environment where Métis identity is regularly challenged and their overall sense of self, peoplehood, and nationhood is diminished. The denial of Métis peoples' Indigeneity remains one of the most impactful social determinants of Métis health, well-being, and cultural safety. The processes that have led to current health challenges facing the Métis must therefore be understood within the context of their own history as well as Canada's colonial reality. (2017, p.5)

It is reasonable to assume that the lack of clarity and the ongoing debate around Métis identity have had a limiting effect on Métis health research. In fact, "it was only in 1996 that Métis health and wellness measures were included in Statistics Canada" (Valin, 2024, p. 4).

Research and data on Métis health and wellbeing may take some time to catch up with other Indigenous health research. The good news is that this type of research is finally starting to happen. Valin Délani, a Métis scholar, wrote a master's Thesis in April of 2024 that focuses on the therapeutic relationship between mental health counsellors and Métis clients in British Columbia. Délani points out the gap in Métis health as a major issue in her Thesis, writing that "Métis people comprise 35 percent of the Indigenous population in Canada (Statistics Canada,

2022) but are still largely excluded from studies regarding Indigenous health” (Valin, 2024, p. 44). For such a large percentage of the Indigenous population to have such a small amount of health data is stunning. Again, though, this may be largely attributed to the lack of clarity around Métis identity.

The fact that there still isn’t a complete and definitive definition of Métis identity is doing immense harm to conversations and research around Métis health. Author and researcher Gmitroski wrote in in a literature review of Métis-specific health literature (2023) that:

“Métis populations continually face jurisdictional gaps in Canada, with many funded programs for Indigenous Peoples specifically including First Nations groups and excluding Métis” and that “Most of the literature available on Indigenous health aggregates health outcomes among First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples into a homogenous group” (p. 1). This gap in health research and data may affect more at-risk groups in greater ways. Gmitroski also tells us that “No articles sought the perspectives of Métis youth, although youth aged 15-24 years make up 16% of the Métis population in Canada. Similarly, no literature explored the perspectives of Métis Elders, Métis identifying as part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ communities or Métis people with disabilities.” (p. 5). Not having a single research article on the perspectives of Métis youth, Elders, 2SLGBTQIA+ people, or people with disabilities is a staggering gap in health data. This gap in data alone, and its associated lack of direct recognition in health research, can cause negative mental health effects.

Unfortunately, many Indigenous youth are suffering from serious mental health outcomes. For Métis youth especially, relying on a strong sense of identity is challenging given the conversation surrounding the definition of Métis. Another master’s thesis from a different

Métis scholar in 2022 tells us that “Youth identity crises can potentially become aggravated, heightened and (sic) severity if they are prolonged, causing a heightened identity confusion” (Belcourt, p. 12). The length of time that the conversation and debate around Métis has taken place is surely a negative factor for Métis individual’s mental health. Similarly, the shifting definitions of Métis over time have surely had a negative effect on the mental health of individuals who believed themselves to be Métis at one point but were later told that they are simply of mixed ancestry. Having one’s identity in question is extremely difficult, and for many involved in the Métis identity conversation, that question may feel constant.

Perhaps in response to the gap described previously, recent years have seen a rise in research on Métis identity and health. One study in 2019 documented a community-based physical therapy practicum in a Métis community. This research took place in Île-à-la-Crosse which is claimed to be the “second oldest [Métis] community in Saskatchewan.” (Oosamn et al, p. 148). Even in this study setting, the lack of clarity around Métis identity emerges. Researchers wrote that not every individual knew their own culture’s stories, and that:

Such observations may also suggest that the participants recognized their lack of knowledge of Métis culture and the value of spending time with Elders to learn more about what it means to be Métis in this community. This recognition of not knowing everything about a topic – in this case, Métis culture – is a practice in humility” (p. 150)

This research also highlights the point that, even if someone is First Nations, or Métis, and tied to their community, that does not guarantee that they know everything about their own culture(s). Unfortunately, those seeking to learn more about their Métis culture and identity may face contradictory opinions, even from within the same community.

Whether or not the Canadian federal government should be the body to define Métis identity is up for debate. A study on Métis mental health from 2021 found that:

Participants identified intergenerational effects of trauma on individual and community healing and wholeness, with much emphasis on breaking cycles of addiction and violence. Participants wrote about hopelessness being replaced with healing and wholeness through connection with culture, language, spirituality, religion and self-governance at the individual and community level.” (Ginn et al, p. E456)

Self-governance at the individual and community level is important to focus on when discussing who should be defining Métis identity. If the Canadian state creates this definition, they are directly undermining Métis self-determination. However, Métis provincial organizations currently disagree on a definition, and so, none officially exists. The conversation remains a complex and confusing one for many.

From the research around Métis mental health, it seems that there are many similarities with Indigenous mental health overall; a gap between service providers and individuals. This is explained by another study from 2020 here:

While Métis People are unlikely to engage in health services that do not value their cultural identities, they are often left using mainstream options. These gaps in health services are problematic given the severe disparities in health determinants and outcomes that Métis Peoples experience compared to the non-Indigenous Canadian population.” (Monchalin, Smylie, & Borgeois, p. 323)

A hesitation to use mental health services that are not culturally appropriate is a consistent factor when discussing Indigenous and Métis persons and mental health. Author Langan (2024), who identifies as Métis, reinforces this notion, saying:

Traditional Indigenous perspectives on mental health often encompass a holistic view, considering the individual and their connection to the community, ancestors and the land. Many mainstream mental health services focus primarily on the individual, sometimes overlooking these broader yet crucial cultural and spiritual elements. This disparity can leave Indigenous youth feeling misunderstood and alienated. (Langan, 2024)

Unless mainstream mental health services can find a way to better serve Indigenous and Métis individuals, those individuals will only have three options. To use services that they find culturally insensitive (and so, potentially negative), to not access any services at all, or to try to find culturally appropriate services through their Band Office, Nation, or Community. The latter option would be unavailable for individuals who have identified as Métis for years and have since been told that their identity (or membership) is now illegitimate. It is easy to imagine the damage this would do to someone experiencing a mental health crisis and seeking culturally appropriate support.

As some of the challenges related to Métis mental health are similar to those seen with Indigenous mental health, the same is true for some of the solutions. Author Auger (2021) explains that: “Métis identity, language, teachings and histories, culture, and ceremony – contributes to positive mental health outcomes and must be supported and passed on through intergenerational knowledge transmissions.” (p. 81). Connection to culture and identity is still a

positive factor for mental health outcomes for Métis individuals. The issue, again, is who exactly qualifies as Métis.

Before moving on to the next section of this chapter, I wanted to include a quote that provides important context on Métis identity and mental health. The following is from a study participant, a self-identified Métis woman:

I think every Indigenous person goes through a lot of struggle with their identity, no matter who they are just based on what society's expectations are versus... all the colonial... laws that exist around identity and kind of searching for that connection and I just think that I was really lucky to have... very strong older Métis women around me... even if nobody else outside of the community understood or... was dismissive of Métis culture and identity, I had these older women who were really clear about who they were and that I was a part of them. And so that really was very big.” (Monchalin, Smylie, & Borgeois, 2020, p.326)

The lack of a definition of Métis identity has clearly caused, as this participant puts it, some dismissal and disrespect of the Métis. I have personally witnessed, and heard about, many cases of this; both socially and in academia.

At all times when engaged in the conversation surrounding Métis status, I am hyper focused on an individual's definition of Métis. It is never my intention to police someone's identity; rather, this focus comes from an interest, as this thesis demonstrates, in the many definitions of Métis that exist. This thesis exists solely to point out these many interpretation(s) of Métis identity that still exist in 2024. For example, one of the Monchalin et al study participants is quoted as saying the following:

My sister accidentally told me we were Métis... And she had found out 10 years before I knew but didn't tell me... She said to me, "[My son] has applied for a Métis and engineering scholarship." And I had no idea because I'm thinking what kind of engineering is that? Because I'm expecting chemical or... some sort of industrial engineering... And she just took one look at me rather disparagingly and said, "Did no one ever tell you that papa's grandmother was a native?" And I went, "No!" She said we're all Métis. I went, "What?" (p. 326)

The words "did no one ever tell you that papa's grandmother was a native" suggests an understanding of Métis identity to simply mean mixed, in the sense that having a distant First Nations ancestor makes one Métis. One must then ask how exactly the researchers would define Métis identity. Does the inclusion of the above quoted individual mean that the authors agree that to be Métis is to be of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry? Even in academic research papers, questions arise.

When reading the research by Auger in 2021, the self-identification section raises other questions about the understanding of Métis identity. Auger identifies as:

Métis, with Haudenosaunee and Nisga'a ancestry. My family has lived on Vancouver Island for six generations as grateful but uninvited visitors on the unceded lands of the Lək'wəḡən-speaking Peoples. I am a member of the Métis Nation Greater Victoria, one of the local chartered communities within Métis Nation British Columbia. (p. 73)

Does Auger have Métis roots from the Red River, as well as Haudenosaunee and Nisga'a ancestry? This could be the case. It may also be another case of an academic believing in the

little-m métis of mixed race. It is apparent in this thesis work that there are still many interpretations of the term Métis, including in academia.

I wanted to end this section with a quote from Gregory Cajete in 1994. When discussing Indigenous culture, he wrote:

Culture is an environment subject to the same ecological principles and truths as a physical environment. Culture is a dynamic human creation that is always in process at one or several levels simultaneously. Each generation of a People *is* their culture. Just as the life of a person can't be frozen in time, so it is true of living cultures. As individuals and groups of people in a culture reassess, revitalize, reaffirm, and recreate themselves, the culture as a whole transforms. It is an active and perpetually creative process. Living cultures cannot be put under glass, and Indian people, individually and collectively, must learn how to apply this active ecological principle of their cultures to empower themselves. Learning this and applying it with deepened understanding is a first step for Indian people in liberating themselves from themselves and the response patterns of victimization, apathy, abuse, fear, anger, alienation, powerlessness, and despair. By doing this, we cease to perpetuate the hostage syndrome in the perception of ourselves and in our communities. This is a powerful communal act that cuts to the heart of self-determination and expression of Tribal sovereignty. It is more than a political act; it is an act of the soul! (p. 191-2)

Cajete's statement that culture is constantly shaping and evolving is certainly true in Canada. The Métis/métis identity debate, though being about culture, is also about special rights and privileges. Without a government body to define exactly who gets those rights and privileges, a

gap continues to remain. All that is apparent is that the lack of clarity around Métis identity is a negative mental health factor for all involved in the conversation. How can an individual have a strong connection to their identity, when the definition of that identity is constantly debated?

c) Examples Through Stories

The stories section in this chapter will see the reader reunited with the tales of Steven, Michael, and Aaron. To restate something important: these characters are purely fictional. The stories are a creation from my own mind that borrows elements from countless actual, real-life situations.

i)

Steven had to face it, ever since Michael's Facebook message a month ago, his entire world has felt like one big negative spiral. At 28 years old, he had spent his whole life feeling connected to his Indigenous identity. His grandmother had passed away last year, and being métis was one of the things that made him feel the most connected to her. Having to face the idea that he might never have been métis at all makes him feel... an array of different emotions, none of them positive. He felt disconnected from his entire sense of self. The way that he's walked the earth since he was a child has, according to Michael, been a complete falsehood. Reading about the pretendian issue was simply an awful exercise. People were irate at these individuals, these pretendians, and some of the comments at the bottom of the news stories were both vile and promoted violence. Is that how people thought about him? Did Michael, Sarah, and other people who went to the Indigenous Student Centre (ISC) think he should be thrown in jail?

Steven started to think about all the different interactions he had with people over the years. Being a member of the ISC, working at the Métis Nation of Ontario, talking to Indigenous

colleagues at the City of Sudbury, and going to the yearly powwow at the Nipissing First Nation. Two memories now stood out to him. Once, at the powwow, he had tried chatting with a group of male dancers in line for food. They were initially warm and receptive, but when he mentioned his ancestry, they cut the conversation off and walked away. He thought about a work colleague, Martin, who, more recently, went visibly stone-faced when Steven mentioned his ancestry. Martin had completely stopped communicating with Steven since then, which was bizarre as they were supposed to be working on a project together. He then remembered an impromptu meeting that had just been put in his calendar by HR for next week, something that had never happened before. With articles about pretendians all over his screen, Steven felt an uncontrollable feeling of fear and panic rise up in him. He started to physically sweat, and within seconds his shirt was soaked.

Steven didn't partake in too many vices, but a good cigar always calmed him down. He stepped outside into the cool night air, lit up a Cuban, and immediately began to relax. He thought about his time at the ISC. He'd always been thankful for the community and felt like it really helped him get through his undergrad when living away from home. He'd never been able to shake, however, a feeling the ISC could have been more for him. He'd never forgotten his conversation with Sarah and Michael, and as Michael always seemed to be around, Steven used to only slip into the ISC sparingly afterwards. He couldn't help but wonder, should he have even gone there at all? That didn't seem to make sense though, many non-Indigenous people had been welcomed at the ISC. Was it just how he identified that was the problem?

After he came back inside, Steven searched online for several hours, late into the night, about Métis identity. After some time, Steven finally forced himself to shut his computer off - his head was spinning. If anything, his research left him more confused about his identity. He found

several articles from professors that completely disagreed with one another. The only thing that Steven felt more sure about was that he didn't consider himself to be a "pretendian", as he hadn't faked his identity or his heritage. Still, he had a feeling of intense anxiety that he couldn't shake.

With these issues still on his mind, Steven flew to a conference in Montreal on forestry and environmental assessment. One part of the conference was actually a case study, almost like a field trip, to one of the surrounding First Nations to study a nature project there. Given the current situation, Steven now felt much less excited about this than he did when initially requesting to attend the conference.

Because the case study had been outside, Steven had worn one of his old University of Guelph sweaters and was now stopping at a grocery store before heading back to the hotel. Steven was walking through the aisle when he noticed the unmistakable Guelph gryphon on another man's sweatshirt. Noticing that he had looked at him, the man wearing it looked up, saw Steven's sweater, and smiled. He walked over and said, "Hey man! Don't see a lot of U of G shirts around here". The man seemed kind, and around Steven's age, so Steven happily responded, "A nice surprise for me too, which years were you there?". As it turned out, they had gone to school at the exact same time as each other. Curious, and unable to help himself, as the man was clearly Indigenous, Steven asked "did you ever go to the ISC?". The instant he said it, he wished he hadn't. The man looked visibly upset. "Sorry" Steven quickly said. "No, no" the man said, a ghost of a smile coming back to his face, "it's alright, yeah, I went there a couple times, did you? Are you Indigenous?".

Thinking about Michael's email, remembering the powwow dancers and Martin from work, Steven began to feel panicked again. He said, "Honestly, I don't know, I thought I was

métis, but I don't know". The man was looking at him, but not unkindly, so Steven went on: "I thought I was métis, but maybe I'm not... I... I don't know". The man had a strange look in his eye. He was silent to the point where Steven was unsure if he was going to speak. Steven was just thinking about making an excuse to walk away when the man said "Look man, I've been looking into the Métis stuff. I think if you're unsure about it, you're in the majority. Just do things with a good heart and mind, and I'm sure you'll be okay". Shocked, Steven just looked at the man; this was exactly what he needed to hear in this moment, and he could feel his fear and panic start to ebb away. The man nodded at him and turned to walk away. Wanting to learn something about this strange man who had just helped him, Steven said, "Hey man, what's your name?". The man turned around, smiled, and before walking away, responded, "Aaron".

ii)

After sending his message to Steven, and getting no response, Michael was getting ready to close Facebook before something on his newsfeed caught his eye. Sarah had posted something with a very long caption for some of her research findings, and the post was getting a lot of interactions from different people. He started reading the title, "Research on Québec-based Métis Communities – Funded by the Federal Government of Canada", and sat back in his chair in a state of shock. He knew that Sarah had completed her Ph.D. studies with a focus on Indigenous identity, and that she had done extensive research on Métis communities, but Québec? Surely as a descendent of the historic Red River, Sarah couldn't entertain that there were Métis communities outside the boundaries of the historic Métis Nation. All of a sudden, Michael began to feel a swirl of negative emotions, some of which he didn't want to acknowledge, and he quickly closed his laptop.

Michael paced around his house for about 20 minutes, and finally poured himself a glass of scotch, which was his favorite treat. He sat down, but didn't turn on his TV. Instead, he let his thoughts land back on what he had tried to avoid thinking about: Sarah. There was no doubt in his mind that Sarah had been his best friend throughout his four years at university. Something else tugged at him when thinking about her, something he didn't quite want to admit in this moment. They had grown apart over the years, and Michael found himself thinking about the place where he had first met Sarah, the ISC.

The ISC, and Michael's four years at university, had been some of the happiest of his life. He'd had a strong community of close friends, and many professional relationships came from the events and committees that he'd participated in. Sarah had been with him during all of those moments at the ISC, and he had felt a special comfort whenever he was around her. Michael thought about the incident with Aaron in their first year, and how he had never seen Aaron at the ISC since that incident on soup day. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. Aaron hadn't seemed like a bad person, but he had views about Métis people that Michael found harmful.

He took a sip of scotch, and his thoughts turned back to Steven. Michael had never forgiven him for identifying as Métis, something of which he was sure Steven was aware. Steven had never tried to talk to Michael or Sarah since they confronted him, and he came around the ISC more rarely afterwards. This was something that gave Michael a sense of pride, although Sarah didn't seem to enjoy watching Steven leave almost every time they entered a room.

For Michael, confronting Steven felt similar to standing up to a bully, calling people out who were faking an identity. Similar students had come to the ISC during the years claiming to be Métis with vague stories of a single, distant ancestor, and Michael had enjoyed putting those

individuals in their place. By his fourth year, Michael had several authors and sources on Métis identity nearly memorized, and he was always ready to quote these sources to support his arguments.

Michael really enjoyed winning an intellectual debate. The feeling of outsmarting someone, disproving each one of their points, was almost addicting. After graduating with his degree in Political Science, Michael had worked in the Education and Consultation Department at the Manitoba Métis Federation. In this work, he had led educational workshops and got into similar debates on Métis identity with different individuals. He was even considering running for a ward councillor position in Winnipeg next year, something that was made possible by Michael's refined debating skills.

More than the aspect of winning an argument, Michael had enjoyed these conversations because he enjoyed calling people out. Michael was proud of himself for not standing silently by and allowing people to proudly mis-identify. He knew, however, that Sarah did not share the same view.

After one particularly heated conversation, which ended with a young woman storming off in tears, Sarah turned to a triumphant Michael and stated, "That really wasn't cool, Michael, you didn't have to be so arrogant to her". Michael was instantly hurt, and looked at Sarah in disbelief for a few seconds before saying, "How was I arrogant? I was just educating her!". "Besides," he continued, "her points and sources were all bullshit, she said she was 'eastern métis', that doesn't even make sense". Sarah looked at him evenly and said, "I've read a few of those sources Michael, some of them provide good arguments". Michael couldn't believe what he was hearing, "You, of all people, are defending misinformation?" he asked incredulously.

Sarah looked away from him and said, quieter now, “Look, all I’m saying is that maybe there’s more to the story than what *we* know, we don’t know everything”. Michael simply looked at her shaking his head in disbelief. However, afterwards, Michael could feel something had changed between Sarah and him that day.

As both of them were nearing the end of their university career, Michael was planning on graduating and moving home, and Sarah had just been accepted into her master’s studies. Michael had to confront a fact: he hated the idea of not seeing and talking to Sarah every day. He realized that his feelings for her spanned beyond friendship, into something that gave him a huge smile when he got texts from her at night. Their time together was running out, and finally, Michael mustered up the courage, and asked Sarah to be his girlfriend. His smile faltered when he saw that instead of looking happy, as he’d imagined, Sarah looked like she was about to cry. When she started to answer, it came out like a sob, and she said, “Oh, Michael... it’s just... you’re so *angry*, all the time, and” – she was cut off, as Michael, feeling a stabbing pain in his chest, forcefully said “it’s fine.” and stormed off.

They hadn’t really spoken since then, and now, Michael, taking another sip of scotch, thought about how much he missed her. He grabbed his laptop and opened the post that Sarah had made. He read it all through, and though he couldn’t believe that the government had spent \$300,000 researching eastern métis communities, he couldn’t deny that it was an interesting read. As Michael sat alone in his house, he contemplated a frightening possibility. Could he have been in the wrong when he called some of those people out? Michael had previously been so sure about his position, but Sarah’s research brought up interesting questions. A strange feeling overtook him, and he opened the chat feature to send Sarah a message. He noticed that their last

communication had been 5 years ago, and thought, had it really been that long? He sent a message saying that her research looked interesting and that he'd love to talk about it sometime.

Michael was shocked at how nervous sending the message had made him, and anxiously checked and refreshed the page several times, something that made no sense, as it was 11pm, and Sarah was likely asleep. Suddenly, a notification popped up, and Michael quickly scrambled to open the message. He scanned the chat, there was nothing there, which was confusing... until Michael noticed a "thumbs up" reaction on his message. Michael felt immediately awful and embarrassed. He knew that an "emoji react" was what people sent when they didn't feel a message was worth a typed response. Besides, she'd turned him down all those years ago, why did he think that would have changed?

Feeling sad and lonely, Michael thought about what Sarah had said all those years ago about him being angry. He remembered how Sarah's face would drop when Steven would quickly make excuses and leave, refusing to meet Michael's eyes. Michael also realized that the woman he had made cry, the one which Sarah had called him arrogant for, had never come back to the ISC. Michael had always thought he was doing the right thing, that he was defending people like himself and Sarah.

Now, sitting with his thoughts, he wondered what his life would be like if he had handled things differently. Fighting feelings of depression, Michael got ready to stand up and close his laptop... but noticed another notification on Facebook. He opened it, and not being able to believe his eyes, saw a new message from Sarah. Although the full message was cut off, he could see "That sounds great! I really miss you and would love...". Michael's face slowly turned into a big smile, and as he stared at the screen, he felt warmth flooding his entire body.

iii)

After Aaron got home, kissed his girlfriend Tanya, and was nearly mauled by Baron, his golden retriever, he sat down at his computer. Life was good, he could smell a home cooked meal, had a steady job with the band office, and owned a home on the lake. He had just gotten home from visiting his grandfather, who, at 98 years old, still lived at home and was nearly impossible to beat in cribbage. Aaron figured he might play a game on his computer as Tanya finished up dinner (it was her turn tonight: roasted potatoes, carrots, and pork chops), and absent-mindedly tabbed into Facebook. He saw a post blowing up with likes and comments from Sarah, who he'd friended during his time at the ISC and hadn't thought about in many years. Aaron read the title that said the research was on "eastern métis", and sat back, lost in thought until Tanya called his name 30 minutes later for dinner.

During dinner, Tanya asked Aaron why he was being so quiet. His thoughts interrupted, Aaron responded "Oh, what, I'm not being quiet...?". Tanya laughed, "Okay weirdo, like you ever stop talking, just let me know if it's something I can help with". Aaron smiled at her with deep genuine appreciation, and she winked back. Aaron truly loved Tanya, and he was planning on asking her to marry him within the next year. She was right, of course, after reading Sarah's post, Aaron was thinking about the ISC and his four years at university. A time period that was the worst of his life.

After he helped clean up the table and did the dishes, Aaron knew he had to do something to help him feel better and shake the negative memories that were swirling around inside his head. Sometimes, when he wanted to relax, he'd take a THC gummie and watch a movie, but he didn't think that would help him at all right now. In fact, he was pretty sure that would make him feel worse. Instead, Aaron decided to use his surefire way of increasing his mood: exercise. He

let Tanya know he was going for an evening run, and, after negotiating with Baron that he needed to go alone to think (a lengthy process), Aaron set off on his usual course on the trail beside the lake.

After his first year had started out great with the friends he was making at the ISC and on the lacrosse team, Aaron's mental health went downhill quickly. The lacrosse season was short, running only from August to November, and once it ended, Aaron felt a void in his life both socially and physically. When he wasn't playing lacrosse, he didn't really exercise, and wasn't fully aware of the effects that being stagnant would have on his mental health. To make things worse, two of the three buddies that had come to U of G with him dropped out at the end of their first year. Aaron couldn't blame them, university was hard, and he found himself doing poorly in a few of his classes. To remedy this, Aaron began to study much more often, which translated into many hours spent alone reading and doing assignments. A university career that had started off so fun and promising was turning into a lonely, isolated, and stressful existence. Of course, he had kept the promise he made to himself to never go back to the ISC. He did notice, however, that Rick reached out occasionally on Facebook; messages which Aaron stubbornly ignored.

As summer was approaching, Aaron realized he needed to find a living situation for next year. He had enjoyed living in the student residence, as even though two of his friends had dropped out, there were always other students around. He wasn't looking forward to finding a place to live off-campus, and to make matters worse, his remaining friend from home had decided to move into an apartment with his new girlfriend. The experience of finding a place to live was stressful, as Aaron couldn't afford an apartment, and all the good deals on student houses had already been snatched up. He ended up moving in with strangers, and though he had hoped he would be able to integrate into the new friend group, no one ever invited him

anywhere, and it was hard to connect as there was no common area in the house. Everyone just seemed to hang out in their bedroom, and, feeling that he had no choice, Aaron began to do the same, spending a ton of time indoors and alone.

To make matters worse, Aaron's concussions became a major problem. He took a hard slash in the head during a preseason game, and though the player received a penalty for it, Aaron had a hard time walking in a straight line back to the bench. After returning three weeks later (which was likely far too early, but he couldn't stand not playing), Aaron ended up getting into a fight during a scuffle, and, unfortunately, had his helmet pulled off and was punched in the head multiple times. Aaron didn't remember falling unconscious but woke up in the hospital with the team trainer beside him. She was really frightened and told him that the way he went limp was "one of the scariest things she'd ever seen". The doctor's statement to Aaron was clear, "No more contact sports, no more lacrosse, or you're risking serious damage to your brain, and jeopardizing your entire life". Aaron tried to remain around the team after that, but it wasn't even close to the same feeling; he never really felt included. After a while, he stopped showing up to lacrosse events entirely. He'd also had to defer his exams due to his post-concussion symptoms and inability to study or look at a screen, which meant he was now behind schedule to graduate.

By his third year, Aaron started to feel extremely depressed and anxious all the time. He wasn't able to make people laugh or succeed socially - something that used to come so easily. He often wondered if he was broken, and if he'd always be like this. He tried to contact the wellness centre at the university, but the wait was extremely long, and when he finally got an appointment after three months, the social worker told Aaron to "try to think happier thoughts", and to "put himself out there more". He felt even worse after that appointment, and didn't understand what he could do to try to feel better. Aaron began to feel hopeless.

Aaron was told that university was supposed to be the best time of his life, and indeed, everyone around him seemed to be having fun. The loneliness Aaron felt was like a physical pain, and it got worse every single day. The lowest day that Aaron can remember was right before exam time, when he found himself walking in the rain, and noticed that he had subconsciously walked to the ISC building. He saw through the window that there was some sort of an end of semester social going on. He recognized Michael, Sarah, and Rick, and saw that everyone was enjoying good food together and laughing. As Aaron started to walk home, alone and in the rain, he broke into silent sobs.

When he arrived home, Aaron felt like the world was crashing down on him. He was overwhelmingly anxious and began to doubt whether he could even finish his degree. All he could think about was the money and time that he might have wasted, and what his future would look like if he failed. In that moment... Aaron's phone buzzed. He had received another Facebook message from Rick. It said: "Good luck during exam season Aaron, we miss you around here. Take deep breaths and focus, you can do this". Aaron was stunned and stared at the screen. How had Rick known exactly what to say? How had he known exactly when to say it? He looked at the words "you can do this" and again came to tears. Rick was right, Aaron could do this.

Aaron began to build better habits in his fourth year and was able to graduate on time. He was extremely thankful for the timing of the message Rick had sent him and responded, telling him so. Rick and Aaron kept in regular communication over the next ten years. Sometimes, Rick sent him funny memes and videos, but other times, he sent Aaron different academic material on Métis people, normally with an accompanying message like "interesting read". Aaron read all of these sources out of a respect for Rick and started to realize that he had been incorrect that Métis

individuals were just anyone with a First Nations ancestor. Aaron began to realize that there was plenty he didn't know about Métis identity. He started thinking that his treatment of Michael and Sarah that day had been wrong, and Rick had been right to ask him to apologize.

Finishing his run, Aaron thought back to the research Sarah had shared. "Eastern métis" people? Hadn't the sources he'd read made it clear that Métis people were from the western provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta exclusively? Aaron was still struggling to wind down; his thoughts filled with confusion on Métis people and memories from his time at University of Guelph. He decided to stay busy and made a late-night trip to the grocery store. There, Aaron had a profound experience of synchronicity when, to his immense surprise, a man walked in wearing a University of Guelph sweatshirt. The man spotted Aaron's sweatshirt, and they grinned at each other, walking over to say hello. When the man asked about the ISC, for a moment, Aaron was brought back to that rainy night in third year, alone, looking through the glass at a community of people having fun together. He remembered that feeling of soul-crushing loneliness with people mere feet away.

The man looked nervous and, when Aaron asked about his Indigenous identity, he looked anxious and stammered about not being sure if he was métis. In fact, he looked like a man on the verge of having a panic attack. Something dawned on Aaron, and he looked the man right in the eye, and knew exactly what to say to calm the man's fears. He could see instant physical relief flush over the man's face and felt a feeling of intense joy knowing he had helped someone who was feeling low. As someone who had once felt so low and alone, he never wanted anyone else to feel that way. As he headed home, Aaron wondered how Rick had felt when he'd seen Aaron finally respond to one of his many messages, all those years ago.

Chapter 3: For Educators: How to teach about topics that are controversial and sensitive in educational settings

For work that involves topics as sensitive as Métis identity and mental health, it is important to understand how to teach and communicate this difficult material in a gentle and nuanced manner. Educators of all kinds may be dealing with the conversation that surrounds Métis identity. This extends beyond teachers at the primary and secondary level and professors at universities and colleges to include research and teaching assistants, workshop leaders, and even corporate staff who are training colleagues in human resources, Indigenous affairs, equity and diversity, and more.

In Ontario, the provincial curriculum was updated in 2019 so that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies courses replaced Native Studies, 1999 and Native Studies, 2000 (Province of Ontario, 2019). This new curriculum offers courses in grades 9, 10, 11, and 12; all of which include sections on the Métis. This means that the complexity surrounding Métis identity will likely be discussed by educators without the specialized knowledge or training required to teach this topic at the post-secondary level.

In 2023, the province of Ontario “mandated Indigenous curriculum for students from Grades 1 to 3, furthering the previous mandatory curriculum which started at Grade 4. With this initiative, Indigenous curriculum is now mandatory in Grades 1 to 7, as well as 8 and 10” (Balintec, 2023). Métis identity will, therefore, be a topic of learning for students from an extremely early age in Ontario. The complexity around this conversation makes this topic a challenge for educators, especially when individuals of different identities will be in these classrooms. This chapter will discuss the realities that educators may face when addressing the

topic of Métis identity as well as some recommendations regarding how to protect the mental health of those involved.

a) Power Dynamics in Relation to Identity

Educators seeking to discuss difficult, race-related, topics in educational settings are not without guidance. For example, Schick & St Denis (2003) write that, “when students say ‘We just need to get along,’ they deny the power of racial identity to confer privilege. They do not acknowledge that people are differently positioned in hierarchical structures that depend on social and political difference.” (Schick & St Denis, 2003, p. 1). When exploring conversations around identity in an educational setting, it is important that power dynamics are recognized and validated.

Further guidance can be found with Tupper (2014), who writes about pursuing reconciliation through difficult discussions and education. Tupper also mentions the importance of recognizing power dynamics in educational settings, stating:

Critical approaches in peace education ‘aim to empower learners as transformative change agents who critically analyze power dynamics’ (Ba Brantmeier, 2011, p. 221). Such approaches manifest opportunities for students to engage in difficult dialogues across communities of difference with the potential to disrupt foundational bodies of knowledge that particular epistemologies. (p. 469)

For conversations around Indigenous topics, the power dynamics are obvious in terms of the colonial system versus the colonized people. This becomes complicated when discussing Métis identity, as, with no clear definition, the power dynamic can be decided by the educator and their own understanding of who is truly Métis.

The educator potentially controlling the power dynamic around Métis identity in learning environments can be affected in two ways, knowledge and bias. Dion (2007) explains that an inadequacy often exists in terms of the knowledge teachers have of Indigenous content, writing that:

While teachers are being encouraged to include Aboriginal content across the curriculum, I argue that the majority of teachers, like the majority of Canadians, have a limited understanding of Aboriginal people, history, and culture; rather their understanding is informed by dominant discourses (see Schick & St Denis, 2005). Further, until teachers have an opportunity to investigate and transform their understanding of Aboriginal people and the history of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada dominant discourses will continue to be reproduced maintaining the “imaginary Indian” as “the Indian” Canadians have in mind. (p. 330)

Dion argues that the amount of Indigenous knowledge and history that educators have in Canada is often lower than it needs to be.

The lack of information that educators possess on Indigenous, and Métis, identity is a result of the educational system itself. Tupper writes that “Colonial discourses include narratives of the nation that do not account for the foundational importance of Aboriginal peoples or the ways in which assimilationist government policies have been deeply harmful to Aboriginal peoples.” (Tupper, 2014, p. 470). Though this may be changing, the fact likely remains that many educators lack complete knowledge of how complicated and sensitive the conversation around Métis identity truly is. This thesis is meant to act as a resource for educators to gain more

knowledge on Métis identity, in large part by demonstrating how this conversation is made difficult by the lack of a legal definition.

When discussing power dynamics around Métis identity, educators have to be aware of their own bias in relation to this subject. Educators may have a personal relationship to the identity issues or may have a source or colleague whose opinion they favour. Similarly, students may possess their own identity biases, as Schick & St Denis write that “Most students are unprepared for a social and political analysis in which they cannot stand outside and view themselves in a neutral and objective manner.” (Schick & St Denis, 2003, p. 4). It is difficult for bias to be removed in any conversations, but it must at least be recognized.

Focusing on the gaps in knowledge that both the educator and learner may have, as well as any possible bias in regard to Métis identity, is crucial when discussing this topic. Tupper explains that in her work:

As the instructor of the course, I actively worked to address the misunderstandings and gaps in my own knowledge, as well as those demonstrated by my teacher candidates, along with the efforts of some candidates to frame colonialism's destructiveness as minimal – all while interrogating with my students why such beliefs and gaps might exist in the first place (2014, p. 480)

The efforts to address a gap in the educator’s knowledge are extremely important when discussing Métis status. Further, speaking with learners and truly examining why gaps may exist in their own knowledge is a powerful way to examine and recognize bias.

As seen in chapter 2, being connected to one’s Métis identity is correlated with positive mental health outcomes for individuals. This is important for educators to know, as in a study by

Boulton-Lewis et al (2000) it was found that: “Within the school context, teachers have the most impact on the development of positive self-identity.” (p. xi). Boulton et al’s study was funded by the federal government of Australia to focus on positive outcomes for Indigenous students in relation to school outcomes. Boulton et al go on to say that: “Parents and carers were particularly aware of the importance of the attitude and behaviour of the teachers in the development and maintenance of a positive self-identity as an Indigenous person for students within the context of the school.” (Boulton-Lewis et al, 2000, p. 12). This means that when discussing Métis identity, the attitude and behaviour of the teacher is crucial for positive mental health outcomes for Indigenous learners. The power dynamic in Métis identity conversations in the classroom, again, sits most often in the hands of the educators.

Though the experiences of Australian Indigenous students would not completely mirror the experience of Métis students (and those who consider or considered themselves métis), Boulton et al’s research findings are still relevant. They write that:

Specifically, for Indigenous Australian students, the findings of the current study indicate that the following influences are the most important in shaping their identities:

- significant people within the school - teachers, principals, parents/carers, AIEWs, peers;
- school systems—climate, homework centres, class groupings, discipline systems;
- the curriculum—Indigenous studies, languages, alternative programs, vocational education, Indigenous cultural activities;
- home/community—parents and other family members, Indigenous role models;

- general Australian community—e.g., media, police. (p. 10)

Educators in the school system, the system itself, and the curriculum are all listed among the most important factors when shaping the identities of Indigenous learners. The power that educators have over Indigenous and Indigenous-identifying students in terms of mental health cannot be overstated.

If an educator takes issue with a student's identification as Métis, or even presents a definition of Métis identity that is different than what the student believes, negative mental health outcomes may result. Boulton et al found that: "One of the most important contributors to the development of a positive sense of self as an Indigenous person within the context of the school is the extent to which individual teachers exhibit an acceptance and valuing of Indigenous people and their culture." (p. 11). An educator simply presenting a definition of Métis identity that is different from that of a learner could be interpreted as a lack of acceptance by that individual. This situation is not only possible, but also very likely. We have seen in chapter 1 that many different understandings of Métis identity have existed, and there is still no agreement on a universal definition.

b) How to Handle Difficult Conversations Around Métis Identity

Oftentimes, conversations surrounding Métis identity are avoided or quickly shut down due to the many different understandings of the term as well as the emotionally charged nature of the topic. Even in selecting this topic for my thesis, many friends, colleagues, and professors have told me that my decision was "brave" as Métis identity is such a heavily debated area. Dion writes about the phenomenon that I have experienced, saying:

With the advent of multicultural and antiracism education teachers have been inundated with demands to address “difference” in their teaching yet many teachers do not know what to teach or how to teach to difference. They do know that ways of teaching that reproduce stereotypical representations are inadequate, thus there is a fear and a silence involved in addressing this content. (2007, p. 331)

Educators discussing Métis identity may sometimes pass over discussing the complexities surrounding this conversation out of fear. This fear could be for themselves, or for the mental health of their learners, and may result in the silence that Dion describes.

When trying to address the silence around Métis identity, and keep the conversation moving forward in educational settings, author Dwayne Donald (2009) presents an interesting concept. He writes:

Indigenous Métissage is a research sensibility that imagines curriculum and pedagogy together as a relational, interreferential, and hermeneutic endeavour. Doing Indigenous Métissage involves the purposeful juxtaposition of mythic historical perspectives (often framed as commonsense) with Aboriginal historical perspectives. The ethical desire is to reread and reframe historical understanding in ways that cause readers to question their own assumptions and prejudices as limited and limiting, and thus foster a renewed openness to the possibility of broader and deeper understandings that can transverse perceived cultural, civilizational, and temporal divides. (p. 5-6)

The concept of Indigenous Métissage that Donald presents could be a tool for educators when teaching about Métis identity. Rereading and reframing historical understandings, along with an examination of one’s assumptions and prejudices, would create more space within this

conversation for differing understandings of Métis. Donald goes on to say that: “As a research practice, métissage is focused on relationality and the curricular and pedagogical desire to treat texts—and lives—as relational and braided rather than isolated and independent.” (p. 9). If educators present the Métis identity conversation fully, presenting all opinions, the wellness of all learners may be upheld.

There are difficult conversations that need to be had regarding Métis identity, especially in terms of which rights and opportunities should be involved. Perhaps it isn't up to educators to provide answers to the questions this topic brings. Rather, simply outlining the complexity of this conversation may suffice. If the focus is on upholding the mental health of those involved, an educational, rather than argumentative, approach may be best when discussing Métis identity.

Donald goes on to show how these types of conversations could be had, saying that:

Ethical relationality is an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other. This form of relationality is ethical because it does not overlook or invisibilize [sic] the particular historical, cultural, and social contexts from which a particular person understands and experiences living in the world. It puts these considerations at the forefront of engagements across frontiers of difference. (p. 6)

We are all connected, and that is especially true for individuals who have ancestors that have resided on the land that is now called Canada for hundreds of years. Perhaps the Métis identity

conversation can be reframed in educational settings, not to simply focus on the differences of individuals, but also of the similarities.

Differences are important, and individuals need to understand and be proud of what makes their identity unique. It is also important, however, to study the similarities between one another. Donald writes that “It is an ethical imperative to recognize the significance of the relationships we have with others, how our histories and experiences are layered and position us in relation to each other, and how our futures as people similarly are tied together.” (p. 7). Many Indigenous people may have an ancestor of European descent. Many non-Indigenous people may also have Indigenous ancestors; I myself being one example. Focusing on the similarities that individuals have with each other may allow for smoother “engagements across frontiers of difference” (p. 6), thus promoting learner wellness in educational settings.

Knowing that the power dynamics of identity conversations can often be in the hands of the educator, how exactly to deal with these conversations is an important question. One possibility is by presenting concepts and sources that are not always considered the “dominant” voice. Dion writes on this idea here:

My findings suggest that teachers are able to recognise their implication in reproducing dominant discourses. This recognition opens the possibility for teachers to take up alternative ways of knowing, to imagine new relationships, and to think about how they might want to work toward transforming their practice. (2007, p. 330)

Presenting ideas that are not considered the authority on a topic may be helpful for learners when discussing Métis identity. Asking learners what they think when given conflicting information on a topic is, at times, the essence of learning itself.

Having difficult conversations is also a positive, and perhaps unavoidable, way for educators to address Métis identity. Tupper writes that: “In our final talking circle and also in their written reflections, teacher candidates discussed the value of experiencing tensions that ‘arise when covering residential schools’” (p. 482). Residential schools are one of the most difficult topics to discuss when looking at Indigenous history in Canada. It is important that Tupper included a talking circle when doing this research: providing each individual a chance to share their thoughts on the conversation, without fear of being interrupted. Talking circles present a healthy way to work through these conversations and allow less combative forms of disagreement.

Overall, educators need to recognize the power that they hold over the mental health of learners when discussing Métis identity. Educators must pursue more learning, increase their own knowledge, and examine both their own and their learners’ biases when discussing this topic. It is crucial that these conversations are done in a good way, as sometimes it is the response to an event, rather than the event itself, that causes the most damage. Boulton et al wrote that: “For the students in the current study, sometimes it was not the racial comments themselves that were negative in their impact; rather, it was the way in which the school dealt with such incidents that impacted on students more strongly.” (p. 20). Negative outcomes when having difficult conversations are sometimes unavoidable, but each educator needs to have a plan on how to move forward positively after such moments. When there is greater understanding on why a conflict has arisen, it is easier to make amends for all parties involved.

c) Examples Through Stories

i)

A week after he had met the kind stranger, Aaron, in the grocery store in Quebec, Steven found himself replaying the words he heard that day in his head. One sentence in particular kept standing out, “Just do things with a good heart and mind, and I’m sure you’ll be okay”. Steven had adopted this as a sort of mantra, or positive affirmation, since he had heard it. He had certainly needed to, as the meeting with HR had gone worse than he could have ever expected. Other than minor or fixable events, Steven had never been in trouble at work before. He’d been chewed out, sure, but never in a professional setting. The whole process that the City of Sudbury had for HR complaints made Steven feel like he was heading into court.

Essentially, Steven’s worst fears had been confirmed; Martin, his Indigenous colleague at the City, had filed a complaint against him. The man from HR that Steven had met with over Zoom, Greg, was someone he had never met before. Greg had been very cold and told Steven that Martin had claimed he was faking an Indigenous identity. Greg had mentioned the possibility of a human rights complaint, and when Steven confirmed that he did indeed check off “Métis” under the “Do you identify as Indigenous?” box on his job application ten years ago, Greg looked like he had all he needed and promised that “someone would reach out soon”.

Three months had passed since that meeting. Martin had requested to be transferred off the project with Steven, and everything else was, maddeningly, normal. “Who does this to an employee?” Steven thought, “Mention a human rights complaint, and then just leave me floating in the wind without any word?”. The suspense was killing Steven. He didn’t want to email HR to follow-up, as much as he wanted to know... It just felt like asking the executioner if he’d readied

the guillotine or not. Throughout this process, Steven sometimes repeated Aaron's words to himself, and it really did help.

Finally, at three and a half months, Steven got an email from a colleague named Jillian asking if they could meet next Wednesday to discuss the complaint. Steven was a bit relieved, not only to hear the update (good or bad, he was almost starting not to care either way, the waiting was killing him), but because he knew Jillian. He didn't know her super well, but they worked on the same floor and shared an in-office hybrid day. They mostly just talked about the different coffee shops in the area, but she seemed kind, and Steven was glad to be meeting in-person. He felt like this situation would be easier with a human element. He still cringed when remembering Greg's annoyed tone after his webcam had frozen during the first meeting (what are the odds?).

As he remembered her, Jillian was kind and had even bought Steven a coffee from a local shop that was waiting on the conference room table when he arrived. He couldn't help himself, and before she even started, Steven blurted out "Listen, just give it to me straight, am I being fired?". The fact that her response wasn't a laugh or an immediate "no" did not help to reduce his anxiety, nor did the big swig of coffee he took in the silence (he'd already had three and clearly wasn't thinking ahead). Finally, Jillian began to answer, "Listen, Steven, I know we don't know each other super well, but Martin is really upset about this entire thing." Knowing this was a bit obvious, Steven nodded, and she went on "He's... He's demanding you stop identifying as Indigenous, and that you send him a written apology".

Steven sat for a few moments; Jillian was looking at him with an intense... something. Was it pity? Compassion? Apprehension? Perhaps a mix of all three. She certainly looked

surprised when he said, “That’s it?”. “Well,” she started, “I thought that would be pretty hard for you. I know someone’s sense of identity, sense of self, is a really big deal. Unfortunately, and I’ll be completely honest with you here, if you don’t, the road isn’t so clear, we...”. “Hold on.”, Steven said, “Sorry to interrupt, but we don’t need to go down the unclear road, I haven’t been identifying as Indigenous for months now”. He saw her look of surprise, and so, spent the next half an hour explaining the journey he’d be on since university, the Facebook message he’d received from Michael, and the research he had been doing in the meantime.

“Well,” Jillian started slowly, “if you’re fine to stop identifying openly, or, you know, overall, and you’re also fine with the apology... I think, yeah, I think this may all be okay. Martin just felt disrespected, and his biggest concern was you identifying as Indigenous moving forward.” Steven couldn’t believe his luck; this couldn’t be true. “But I identified as Métis on my job application, isn’t that a fireable offense?” he asked. Jillian opened up her notes, “We’ve looked into that, it seems your position wasn’t Indigenous-restricted, did you think it was? Did you apply to it thinking it was an Indigenous-only position?”. “No,” Steven said honestly, “I just checked off that box because I always do, or, always did”. Jillian nodded, “We also checked with your hiring manager, and she told us that the Métis designation didn’t factor into her decision at all. She said you were the best qualified person by a mile anyways”.

Steven sat there for a few more seconds, sipped the coffee, and got another burst of light-headedness from the caffeine overload. He pushed the cup away from him. “So that’s it?” he asked, “I’m not fired?”. Jillian raised her eyebrows at him, with the old jocular smirk that she wore in the hallways on her face. “Do you *want* to be fired?” she asked, bemused. “Hard no.”, he answered, laughing. After a moment, Jillian’s tone shifted, “Listen, one last thing... This whole exercise has really confused the HR staff on this Métis business. It seems... complex. Do you

know anyone who we could bring in to educate the staff on this?”. “Really?”, Steven asked, laughing again, “You’re asking *me* if I know someone, after I was the one accused of wrongly identifying?”. Jillian rolled her eyes in mock annoyance, “You’ve clearly researched this a lot, and we’re not going to just take your suggestion without looking into it, we’re the City. I was just wondering if you had a name to add to the list”. Steven thought back to his old contact from the ISC, thinking about all the great information she’d been sharing on Facebook. In fact, he was pretty sure she was doing educational consulting on the side. “Yeah”, Steven said, “I think I actually do have a really good name to give you”, and he opened Facebook to search for Sarah.

ii)

As he drove down into the nicer part of the downtown core, Michael was battling several powerful emotions. The one that made him feel the most sheepish, and annoyed at himself, was simple, he was nervous. “This is so stupid.” he thought to himself, “I’m a grown man, and it’s not like I haven’t dated before”. Besides, this wasn’t even a date... right? “No, it wasn’t a date.”, he decided, and focused back on driving.

His thoughts began to drift again. Michael had experience with women, he’d had a girlfriend once for over two years. Yeah, it had been a while ago, but he’d had some short-term success since. He’d even been on a few blind dates, or dates from dating apps, but Michael called them blind dates. You never knew who was actually going to show up. Surely that was more anxiety-inducing than this, and this wasn’t even a date, *probably*.

If this was just two old friends meeting for dinner after a long time not seeing one another, he had absolutely nothing to be nervous about, Michael told himself. It really didn’t help to calm his nerves though, perhaps he was just excited? Anxiety and excitement were cousins or

something, there was a saying about that, right? He chuckled to himself in the car, and it came out like a strained squeak. God, why was he being so *weird*? Michael fiddled with the radio as he waited for traffic to move, and, after deciding he wasn't in the mood for pop, country, or EDM, shut the thing off. That was worse, and in the silence, he began to think about his old friend again.

Michael didn't know what was going on with the anxiety, as he had no need to be nervous anyways (he made another weird high-pitched chuckling noise and wiped a tiny bit of sweat off his temple). He turned back to focusing on the emotion that he was committed not to portray: anger. Sarah had agreed to meet him at one of his favorite restaurants in Winnipeg, as she had already been planning to be in the area a few weeks after he had messaged her on Facebook. She seemed excited about the plans, but could you really tell over social media? They hadn't exchanged any other messages since the plans were made, he didn't know what else to say... and really, had just expected her to message him again saying that "something had come up", or "my mother is sick", or, even worse, no excuse at all: "I've been thinking, and this actually isn't a good idea Michael". Of course, he reminded himself, drawing near to the parking garage beside the restaurant, these thoughts made no sense, why would Sarah cancel on seeing an old friend? This. Was. Not. A. Date.

Right?

As he got out of the car, Michael thought again about his commitment to not displaying anger at all during his dinner with Sarah. He had never forgotten that it had been his anger that Sarah brought up when he had asked her out, all those years ago. The other reason was, to be honest, her research really annoyed him, and he could not let that show. He didn't want her to

regret taking the time to see him, or to feel that she'd been right all these years, and he was still simply an angry guy. He gave another squeak-like chuckle as he parked, and felt sure he had never made that noise before today. Michael smiled at his reflection as he turned around to lock the car, and saw a weird, strained looking, anxious man doing a muppet-smile back at him. "What the hell is wrong with me?" he thought, and then told his inner voice to shut it. That guy was constantly talking anyways.

Inside the restaurant, Michael anxiously flipped through the menu for the third time. He was trying his best to act calm and relaxed, and hoped that it showed. He'd told Sarah where he was sitting and had seen her response that she had just parked. He had never been more nervous in his entire life, and what made it worse is that he kept beating himself up for *being* nervous. "What would she think?" Michael thought to himself, "I bet she wants to see a confident man, especially being her, I bet she's not nervous at all" (Sarah would later laugh at this story, as while Michael was thinking these thoughts, she was in the car doing breathing exercises to calm herself down before walking inside).

He saw her from far away, waved, and when she sat down, he could immediately see that she was a bit self-conscious. She had changed a bit, there was no doubt about that. She had some laugh lines on her face, the start of crow's feet around her eyes, and had put on a little bit of weight. None of that mattered, in fact, to him, she looked even more beautiful than before. His thoughts of this not being a date vanished, all that remained was his joy to be sitting across from her. She was still the woman he remembered; she was Sarah.

The conversation was light and enjoyable. "It's crazy", Michael thought, "I haven't seen her in almost a decade, and it's like no time has passed at all". About a half an hour into dinner,

after sharing some laughter over an old memory at the ISC where they had played charades with the staff, Sarah straightened up and looked at him seriously. “Guess who I spoke to today, of all people?”. Noticing the marked change in her expression, Michael ventured forward cautiously. “Rick?”, he asked, thinking that it had to be someone connected to the ISC. “No.”, Sarah said, “Steven”.

After she said it, she simply waited and watched him. She didn’t ask if he remembered him, and Michael didn’t say “Steven who?”. Sarah knew he knew exactly who. Michael grasped for words, multiple emotions coming up. He thought about the message he had sent Steven on Facebook, partly accusing him of being a pretendian. He thought of Sarah’s research on eastern métis communities. Sarah continued to watch him, and he couldn’t help but feel that he was being tested. *You have to say something, it’s been almost an hour*, he thought. After what felt like an eternity, all Michael could manage was, “Oh, how did that go?” in what he hoped was a nonchalant manner.

“Pretty good”, she said, “he asked if maybe I could do some consulting with the City of Sudbury”. Michael was surprised, he had thought she was a full-time lecturer and researcher, how did she have the time to do consulting on the side? Instead, he said “Consulting, that sounds interesting, how’s that going?”. Sarah looked strained for a second. “It’s not my favorite thing”, she said a bit quickly, “but it’s kind of out of necessity”. She paused, biting her lip for a second, seeming to doubt if she could go on. “Necessity? I thought you were a big deal in academia, doctorate with a bunch of big research grants, that sort of thing” he said. He didn’t say this in a mocking tone, but out of genuine surprise and concern.

His tone seemed to encourage her, and she said, “I’ve had a really difficult time academically since publishing that paper on the possibility of Quebec Métis communities”, and she shot him a look, it seemed, to see how he would react. He saw, beneath her defiance, a look of fear. That made him feel incredibly sad, he wanted to reach across the table and take her hand. He remembered angrily calling similar research “misinformation” so many years ago. She was scared he was going to snap on her, he could see it. “Just like everyone else has reacted, go ahead.”, her look said. “What happened, Sarah?” was his response, calm and kind.

It all came out quickly, almost rushed and jumbled. “Most of my research has been on Western Métis, you know, our communities, but I wanted to try something different. I wanted to see if there was something else to explore, new ground to cover. I thought there were some good arguments about older, more eastern communities. I wasn’t declaring that there was, I was just exploring things! Academically, you know, isn’t that the point?” and then, she hesitated, and looked at him, and said “I think, even... maybe... that I accepted the research grant, and to lead the work, to prove you wrong. To show you that there’s more of a conversation to be had... maybe my ego just got the best of me. No one wants me teaching courses anymore. I’ve been put on leave this semester and a bunch of Indigenous and Métis colleagues have come after me and are demanding the university let me go! They’ve even started a petition.”. She ran her fingers through her hair, looking fully and completely stressed, and turned away.

Michael paused, only for a moment this time, looking at her. He had been shocked to hear that she still thought about him, so much so as to commit to a major research project to stand up against the way he used to act. This time he really did reach across the table and grab her hand. “Sarah”, he said, and she looked at him, “If I trust anyone to do this work with integrity, it’s you, and if you’re consulting on Métis identity, I think you should include this

source along with our Western stories to show the entire conversation. I think people need to understand that (he couldn't believe he was saying it) There's at least a *conversation* to be had. I don't think it means those people are métis." he said, holding up a hand, "But I trust you to be the one to lead those conversations."

She had a look in her eye, then. Sarah was staring at him. It was a look Michael had never seen before, from her or anyone else. When he was older, he would tell his grandchildren that there was something in that look. It was the look that made him decide he wanted to marry her, and never let her go again.

iii)

At the exact same time that Michael and Sarah were sitting down for dinner, a few provinces over, Aaron was also sitting in a restaurant, also waiting to see someone he hadn't seen in a very long time. As he looked around, he saw Rick walk in the door and immediately grinned to himself. Rick looked almost the exact same as he had all those years ago. He may have had a bit more white in his hair, but that was it. He still had the same walk, the same twinkle in his eye, and apparently the same likeability. Almost to prove that point, Aaron heard the two waiters laugh as Rick made a few light comments to them passing by.

As Rick approached the table, Aaron stood up and smiled, holding out his hand for Rick to shake. Rick took a moment and looked at the hand, mock-offended, and Aaron remembered Rick's old joke to people in the ISC; "We're huggers, here, get used to it". Always a jokester, Rick dropped the false annoyance immediately and shook Aaron's hand, smiling back at him. "Aaron", he said, "man, it is good to see you!". Aaron nodded back, feeling genuinely happy to see the man he'd stormed out on so many years ago.

“I’m glad you seem happy to see me,” Rick said, looking to his right and grabbing a menu, “I wasn’t sure if you asking me to meet was a ploy to punch me out”. He looked up, an eyebrow raised with a false-seriousness on his face, “You lacrosse players, you’re all wildcards. Don’t know how to solve a conflict without trying to hit someone with a stick”. “We’re in no conflict.” Aaron laughed, “And besides,” he said, “sometimes there’s merit in hitting somebody over the head with a stick, teach ‘em a lesson”. Rick put that fake-serious look on again (he had a way to do this with a smile behind his eyes, like you always knew the punchline was coming, but still, he could look pretty stoic), “I’m an educator, Aaron, of course I know there’s a time to whack someone with a big stick, it just isn’t my *first* move.”. They both shared a laugh, it was great to see him again, Aaron thought.

After they had ordered, Rick started up again, saying “I was worried though, a bit eh, I mean I’ve harassed you with a lot of messages over the years, thought you’d think I was a bit odd. I think you’ve responded to about two of them”. “I’ve sent likes to all the ones recently, so you know I’ve seen them and appreciate the stuff you share” Aaron said, a bit defensively. He wasn’t actually hurt, of course, but it reminded him of something his live-in girlfriend, Tanya, said all the time; “Oh, a like? Thanks Aaron, not like I wanted to engage in conversation. In-person, can’t get you to shut it. Online, it’s like you don’t have thumbs”. Sometimes she would mockingly check his thumbs after a day of sparse texting by Aaron, and he had a fleeting, wild thought, that Rick was about to grab his thumbs and confirm that, yep, they did work after all.

Instead, Rick laughed, and as the food arrived said “Yeah yeah, I know, I more meant while you were in undergrad”. After swallowing a bite of his chicken sandwich, Rick continued, “I don’t think I’ve ever had that many messages left on read before I just gave up, was always worried that I was bugging you”. Out of nowhere, Aaron felt a wave of emotion hit him. Here, in

the middle of a crowded restaurant, with a good man sitting in front of him that he wanted to impress, Aaron felt like he was about to cry. He never cried, not really any ways... and what would Rick think of him, and where was this wave of emotion even coming from?

Rick noticed the change in his demeanor, and asked “Is everything alright, son?”. Aaron composed himself, looking down for a moment. When he knew he’d be fine to continue, he said “Those messages... they saved my... They meant a lot to me, Rick”. Aaron looked up, he didn’t care if it was weird, or not “manly”, he’d been thinking about what he wanted to say for months. “That’s why I wanted to meet, and I saw you were attending that conference out this way. I... wanted to say thank-you, to your face”. “I think,” Aaron continued, “maybe you were right to tell me to apologize that day to Michael and Sarah”.

He didn’t know if he had made the right call, there was a sudden change in Rick’s appearance. Simply, Rick did not look well. To try to change the mood back to the happy dinner they’d been enjoying only minutes ago, Aaron said “I also wanted to ask you in-person, no, confront you, like...” he paused for dramatic effect, “are you a sorcerer, or what, you a medicine man? How did you know I needed those messages sent?”. He accomplished his task, as Rick broke out into laughter. “If I did have magical powers”, Rick said, his fake-serious expression and raised eyebrow back on his face, “I certainly wouldn’t tell a guy like you. That’s elder knowledge”. Aaron laughed, glad to have the happy air return to the table. “You, an elder” Aaron said, “I saw the grays, but man, that’s old”. Rick looked back up, fake-mad as always, and reached for his fries, “I’m an elder only in the knowledge sense, who’s to say you and I aren’t the same age?”. This comment was obviously for fun, as Rick must be in his late sixties or early seventies at this point.

Too curious to let it go, Aaron pushed on. “Seriously though man, how did you know I needed the messages?” and, he added, as Rick looked on the verge of another sarcastic response, “How did you know how to time them?”. Sighing and looking like he was about to say something he didn’t want to admit, Rick said, simply, “Brendan”. Aaron was shocked, but at that moment, it all made sense. Brendan had been Aaron’s buddy from home, the only one who hadn’t dropped out, the one who joined the lacrosse team with him, and the one who had moved in with his girlfriend after the first year. “He kept coming to the ISC and I’d ask about you, y’know?”. Aaron had never known that Brendan had kept going to the ISC, and realized, guiltily, that it was probably because Aaron would have treated it as a sign of betrayal.

“He told me you’d been forced to quit lacrosse; he told me that you were having a hard time socially, that you had a lower mood every time he saw you... he was worried about you, Aaron.” Rick said. He paused, and then went on “We all were, some of us just didn’t know how to reach out, or what to say”. Aaron sat silently, listening and watching, not sure what exactly he was feeling right now. Rick paused, and had that look of feeling unwell again, he looked up, and then looked away. There was no look of mock-seriousness now, Aaron could tell there was no joke coming. Rick began slowly, “Years before you came around the ISC, we... we lost someone”. Aaron was shocked to see tears start to come out of the man’s eyes. “He, he was having a tough time, and he... I didn’t know what to say, I could tell he was struggling.” Rick looked very tired now, his eyes staring off in the distance, “I think a part of us all died a bit the day we heard the news.” he said. “I never wanted to feel like I hadn’t reached out if someone may have ever needed it, ever again”.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, Aaron drinking in what he had just heard, and Rick keeping his eyes down, occasionally wiping away tears. Aaron looked at the man who had been

the silent voice that had got him out of his depression spiral, on that night, so many years ago. He wanted to reach across the table, to comfort him back, but he felt unsure. “What is this line?” he thought, “This invisible line that men feel when trying to help one another, the line that we rarely cross?”. For a second, he thought of a much younger Rick, seeing a different young man who was struggling, and not knowing how to reach across that table; second guessing sending that message. He wondered what would have happened in his own life, if Rick hadn’t sent him a message that night.

Trying, again, to restore the mood, Aaron asked “Well, thank you, sincerely, and that explains the ‘why’ behind the messages, but what about the ‘when’?”. Rick looked up at him, “What do you mean”, Rick asked. “That night...” Aaron started, then realized Rick probably had no idea what he was talking about. “There was a night”, he restarted, “it was really bad.” - an understatement, but he thought Rick followed him - “And, you reached out, and told me ‘I could do it’, and it was the perfect time, the exact words that I needed to hear, how did you know?” Aaron finished. Rick looked at him, and Aaron could see some of the fire in his eyes, a good, healthy fire. A fire that kept everyone else warm, that had kept him warm that night.

“Sometimes” Rick said, “You can’t explain things like timing, the universe works itself in mysterious ways”.

Chapter 4: Takeaways

Conversations around Métis identity are uniquely challenging as a result of a lack of a legal designation set out by the Canadian federal government. One may think that to solve this issue, the federal government should simply create a “Métis Act” to accompany the *Indian Act*. Creating a “Métis Act”, however, may not actually solve the problem or provide clarity for many. The *Indian Act* is a very controversial document, and many Indigenous people find the definition that it provides to be harsh and unfair.

The other problem is that by creating such an act, the federal government may be seriously undermining Indigenous self-determination. Self-determination, as a concept, may be understood by focusing on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights for Indigenous People (UNDRIP).

UNDRIP was created by the United Nations in 2007. Initially, Canada was listed as an objector to the Declaration and did not officially adopt UNDRIP until 2016 (Fontaine, 2016). The 46 articles listed in UNDRIP are meant to protect the rights of Indigenous people across the world. Regarding Métis identity, I believe 7 articles are particularly relevant and suggest that the Canadian federal government may never create a “Métis Act”. This final chapter will focus on these 7 articles.

a) UNDRIP

This section will argue that having adopted UNDRIP, the federal government of Canada cannot define Métis identity without contravening the Declaration. Article 3 of UNDRIP reads: “Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural

development.” (p. 8). With the right to self-determination extending to political status, the government of Canada cannot define Métis identity, and by extension the political status of Métis people, without directly undermining self-determination.

The language in Article 4 is different but has similar implications for the Canadian federal government. Article 4 states: “Indigenous peoples, in exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, as well as ways and means for financing their autonomous functions.” (p. 8). Chapter 1 highlights that the Government of Canada’s website, rather than defining Métis identity, lists provincial and national Métis organizations. If Canada were to define Métis identity, it would be in direct opposition to Indigenous self-government as determined in Article 4 and represented by provincial and national Métis organizations.

Article 5 has similar implications to Article 4, but again, with different language. Article 5 reads: “Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, while retaining their right to participate fully, if they so choose, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the State.” (p. 9). If the Canadian government creates a definition of Métis identity, this definition would not be the same as that of all Métis organizations given that these organizations still disagree on the definition of Métis status (Forester, 2024; The Canadian Press, 2024). Canada creating this definition would undermine the right to maintain and strengthen Métis institutions, and so, threaten their ability to fully participate in the State.

With some of the Articles of UNDRIP, the focus is on who may be deemed Métis by any new legislation. For example, Article 8, states: “(1) Indigenous peoples and individuals have the

right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture. (2) States shall provide effective mechanisms for prevention of, and redress for: (a) Any action which has the aim or effect of depriving them of their integrity as distinct peoples, or of their cultural values or ethnic identities;” (p. 10). If the government of Canada selects a definition of Métis that is restrictive, individuals falling outside of this definition may be deprived of their ethnic identity. That said, a definition that is inclusive of all Métis or métis organizations or peoples may undermine the integrity of the distinctness of different groups of Métis-identifying peoples.

This is all very confusing as UNDRIP is meant to protect the rights of Indigenous people; however, in the case of Métis identity, who exactly should receive that protection?

A similar point emerges when looking at UNDRIP Article 9, which states: “Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right to belong to an indigenous community or nation, in accordance with the traditions and customs of the community or nation concerned. No discrimination of any kind may arise from the exercise of such a right.” (p. 11). If the Canadian government defines Métis identity, and in doing so, excludes some who currently identify as Métis, harm has occurred. How this harm would compare to the harm some Métis people feel when they believe communities are misidentifying, is not a question this Thesis can answer.

One of the most prominent arenas where the Canadian state defining Métis identity would undermine Indigenous self-determination is with decision-making. Article 18 discusses this directly: “Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own indigenous decision-making institutions” (p. 15-16). Even if the Canadian federal government defined Métis identity through

collaboration with, and consensus among, Métis organizations, selecting Métis organizations to participate in this process is not something the federal government can do without undermining self-determination. Again, the question emerges as to who exactly should be allowed to participate in the decision making regarding defining Métis identity.

The final UNDRIP article included in this chapter is the most directly related to the concept of Canada defining Métis identity. Article 33 reads: “Indigenous peoples have the right to determine their own identity or membership in accordance with their customs and traditions. This does not impair the right of indigenous individuals to obtain citizenship of the States in which they live. (2) Indigenous peoples have the right to determine the structures and to select the membership of their institutions in accordance with their own procedures.” (p. 24) Article 33 completely resists the idea of the Canadian government determining what Métis identity is, and thus, who is eligible to qualify for membership. If the Canadian government should not define Métis identity, then Métis people and organizations must do it for themselves.

As demonstrated in chapter 1, Métis political organizations do not agree on a definition. This issue remains as of the writing of this Thesis. On Nov 30th, 2024, the Métis Nation British Columbia voted to leave the national organization; the Métis National Council. When giving a reason for this separation, “President Walter Mineault said in a statement that despite 40 years of ‘good work’, the governance structure of the Métis National Council is no longer equitable” (The Canadian Press, 2024). This is a statement reflective of the issues that the Manitoba Métis Federation and the Métis Nation of Alberta have taken against the Métis Nation of Ontario. Simply put, in terms of finding a universal definition for Métis identity, a solution remains highly elusive.

One of the biggest limitations of this thesis is that it will act as a “time-capsule” for the period in which it has been written. This limitation is also a potential strength, as this thesis gives important context to the issues felt around Métis identity up until this point in Canadian history. It is possible that the term ‘Métis’ will have a universal definition after this thesis is published, perhaps even within a year or two. However, the reality is that if a universal definition is created, it is likely that many individuals will be upset by the definition, and educators will still be tasked with the challenge of treating this subject with great sensitivity and awareness of the importance of identity.

UNDRIP shows that it may be highly problematic for the Canadian federal government to create a definition for Métis identity. However, without any universal and legally enforceable definition, a gap remains. Within this gap, the conversation around Métis identity will continue - a conversation that has had extremely negative impacts on the mental health of many.

Recommendations

For anyone tasked with the challenge of discussing Métis identity in teaching environments, remember the many different ways ‘Métis’ has been understood throughout Canadian history, how old and ongoing the Métis debate is, and how national and provincial organizations and academics continue to lack agreement on this issue. For many reasons, including UNDRIP, it appears unlikely that the confusion around the term ‘Métis’ will lessen any time soon. Métis content will continue to find its way into classrooms, and it is crucial that this topic is handled in a gentle and nuanced manner that supports the mental health of all involved. As an educator, the powerful role you hold regarding the mental health of Indigenous and Indigenous-identifying students cannot be overstated.

The Métis topic is complex, and many educators may find themselves rightfully feeling that their knowledge is inadequate. This feeling is no reason to avoid pursuing more understanding and considering your own bias. After all, it can be powerful to explore why gaps in knowledge and bias exist within your own understanding as well as that of those you teach. Try to fill these gaps with humility - “you don’t know what you don’t know” (Absolon, 2011, p. 10).

Without doubt, there are difficult conversations that need to be had regarding Métis identity. Perhaps it isn’t up to educators to provide answers to the questions this topic brings. If educators present the Métis conversation fully, are prepared to engage across frontiers of difference, and present all opinions without bias, the wellness of learners may be upheld. As conversations unfold, conflict may be inevitable. When faced with conflict, it is crucial that educators are prepared to respond in a good way as it is sometimes the response to an event, more so than the event itself, that causes the most damage.

Discussing Métis identity cannot be seen as simply a matter of intellectual debate. The perspectives shared, how sharing occurs, and the perspectives omitted can all have tremendous impact on the foundation of a learner’s identity and wellbeing. This thesis reminds educators that they may be discussing Métis identity while sharing a room with a Steven, Aaron, Michael, or Sarah. Remember the harm that can be done by holding firmly to one definition of Métis without recognizing the complexity of the topic, as well as the healing that can be fostered through humble conversation. Perhaps, more than any piece of legislation or literature, remember the words of Aaron: “... if you're unsure about [Métis identity], you're in the majority. Just do things with a good heart and mind, and I’m sure you'll be okay.”

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