



cultures

*My grandma, Evelyn Wylie, is the girl in the front right, beside her mom.*

## Cultural Stories and Metis Self-Creation

Cathy Richardson

Have you ever wondered how many photographic backgrounds you have become a part of, perhaps unknowingly? How many times photos were shot directly in front of you, at events, at tourist sites or parties, later to be developed and placed into someone else's album? Is your image sitting on shelves, both local and foreign, as part of a historic record of someone else's life? You may be in the background to someone's trip to Greece, Chelmsford, or Disneyland. So it is with stories. As with the photos that serve as someone's mementos, we are both part of the backdrop to the life story of others, as well as being the protagonist in

our own life story.

The Canadian Metis have commonly been in the background of someone else's story, someone else's history. Until recently, Metis history has been told by non-Metis people, with renditions appearing in systems of law, education, religion and child welfare. In writing my recent Ph.D. dissertation in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria, I decided to tell a story about Metis experience with other characters in the background and the Metis in the fore. As a researcher, I invited various Metis voices to contribute their views of the topic of Metis self and Metis cultural stories. I performed the multiple

roles of narrator, choreographer, interviewer, story-collector and interpreter in a kind of transformational, action-research metissage. My task involved interviewing Metis people, exploring the ways in which people create their sense of self as Metis, and how this self is influenced by cultural stories. I considered various bodies of literature and theoretical perspectives, which also represent a form of 'cultural stories.'

I dedicated this study to my grandmother, who, throughout her life and until her death, denied her Aboriginal ancestry. This investigation took me into the world of institutionalized racism, colonialism, and historical oppression in a country that espouses fairness, treating people the same in the name of democracy, and peacekeeping. My grandmother had a lot to contend with. She had her stories and she protected them. She wouldn't let on that they were, in fact, Metis stories. In a racist climate, she was preserving the dignity of both her stories and her self. The act of living with dignity revealed itself as strikingly crucial throughout this research process.

Rather than advancing a narrative of how the Metis are affected by racism and colonization, the participants in my study told a poignant story of how they respond to the challenges they face as Metis people in Canada. For example, one participant, who I call Aline, shared the following thoughts and feelings:

When I talk to my Nuu-chal-nulth friends they are very

much linked to their language and culture and traditional food. My friend gets 50 salmon each year from her band. I think of the buffalo slaughter and how this impacted Indigenous people on the prairies. It makes my heart ache. When I read about the Resistance (Northwest, 1885) I have mixed feelings – proud and also sad at the defeat. I also see resistance as a continual process. Metis people are not defeated; we are here and alive and are reclaiming who we are along with other Native peoples (p. 146).

In general, participants spoke at length about the numerous challenges racism has ushered into their lives. It is important to note that racism and colonialism are systemic and political, while its interpersonal manifestations are symptoms of a state ideology. Richard Gwyn, reporter for the Toronto Star sums up Canada's racist statecraft in the following way:

We are at one of those critical junctures where two ideals are in conflict. There's the principle of the legal equality of all. There's the fact that there are serious inequalities in our society, many of which can only be remedied by treating people unequally. Which puts liberals like myself at war with ourselves (1993, cited in 1995, p. 13).

This ironic, and tragic, impasse is known as 'democratic racism'

and implies ongoing difficulties in resolving systemic historical injustices towards Aboriginal people, in areas of land, resource use, and Residential School reparations for example. Historically, some Canadians have found safety and a good life at the expense of other Canadians, mostly without knowing it. Cultural psychologist Monica McGoldrick (1998) articulates the importance of safety and belonging for all individuals within a society – a belonging that has largely eluded the Metis and left them to experience despair and disrespect: "We must not seek safety that jeopardizes others or denies them their own sense of belonging and spiritual connection" (p. 210).

Many Aboriginal stories have a long introduction that talks about the coming of the European, local attempts to welcome and assist newcomers, the development of mutually beneficial commerce, things going wrong, clashing worldviews, the installation of a foreign system, land theft, Residential Schools, the Department of Indian Affairs, the continuing overrepresentation of Metis children in child welfare, and the loss of Aboriginal culture. Writer and Massey Lecturer Thomas King (2003) believes that putting all this history up front in an Aboriginal story is one way of saying "once upon a time" (p. 29).

The colonial policies towards Aboriginal and Metis people that form the foundation of services are based on the kind of state program described in the following passage by English writer Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*, his classic novel about dehumanization.

Here, a conversation takes place on a plane flying over North America looking down on an Indian reservation:

... about sixty thousand Indians and half-breeds... absolute savages ... our inspectors occasionally visit ... otherwise, no communication whatever with the civilized world ... still preserve their repulsive habits and customs ... marriage, if you know what that is, my dear young lady; families ... no conditioning ... monstrous superstitions, Christianity and totemism and ancestors worship, extinct languages, such as Zuni and Spanish and Athapascan ... pumas, porcupines, and other ferocious animals ... infectious diseases ... priests ... venomous lizards (p. 87).

In reality, Native people have not been as fortunate in avoiding the colonizing influences as Huxley predicted in 1932. And the struggles for justice in which Aboriginal nations engage are seldom framed as a movement for the preservation of dignity and human rights where numerous laws (legal, spiritual, natural, social) have been violated through the auspices of colonialism and racism.

### The creation of a dignified self

There are a number of things to consider when explaining how Metis people create their sense of self. Although prominent developmental theorist Erik Erikson (1963, 1982) states that identity

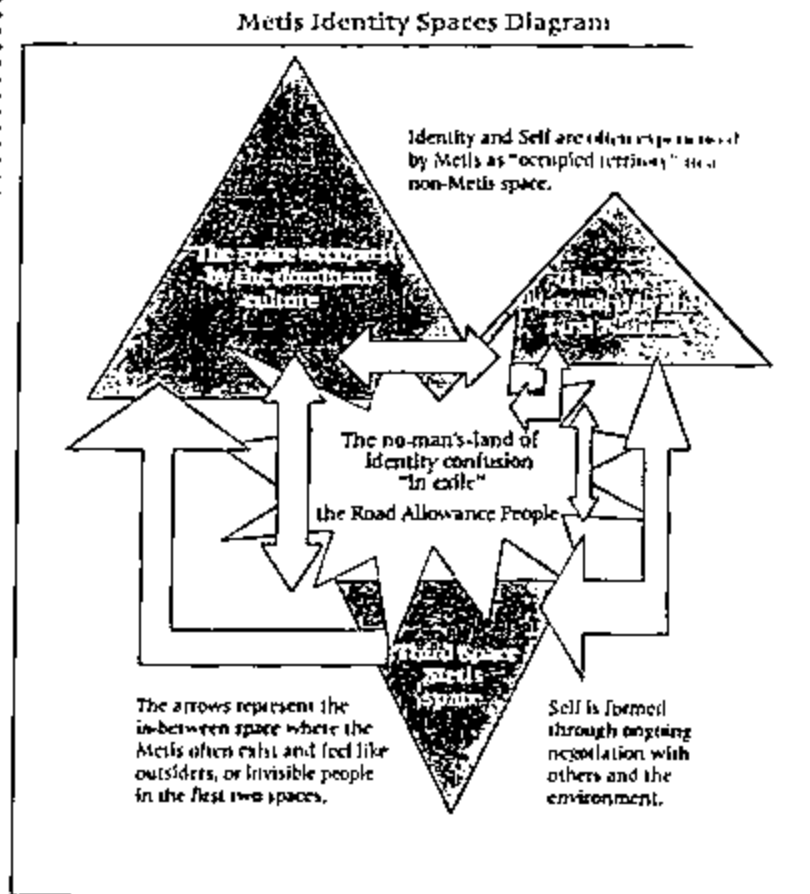


formation takes place largely in early adolescence, the formation of Metis cultural identity appears to be a life-long process occurring across all life stages. The relentlessness of Metis identity formation may be due to the sporadic cultural interaction that occurs when living in a non-Metis dominant culture. Metis writer Joanne Amott (1995) documents the process of Aboriginal cultural erasure saying:

I am a person of mixed Native and European heritages. Fundamentally what I have inherited is a good deal of information about the various European traditions from which I come, and racist denial of the existence of my native ancestry (1995, p. 1).

She adds that many Metis employ a survival strategy of passing as members of the dominant culture in "a virulently racist society" (Amott, 1995, p. 59). Dominant culture eurocentric practice means that all Canadians are forced to conform to Eurocentric practice if they wish to participate in society, and in fact have little option. In Canadian society, Metis children have varying degrees of exposure to Metis culture and cultural stories.

Narrative therapist Michael White recognizes that people experience a phenomenon of multiple authenticities as an outcome of living out their lives in various contexts or zones, and that problems are "embedded in the person's cultural context" (in Madigan & Law, 1998, p. 28). One Metis participant said that as a



mixed-blood person he has a "revolving door identity" and that he feels "more Metis in the place of the heart . . . just a completely spiritual place" (Interview, p. 3). Another reported that operating in the different worlds is like "putting on your different hats, and still being the same person in all of them" (Interview, p. 9). Thus, Metis children tend to develop a multi-faceted, multicultural identity where they express the different facets of self according to context and social safety. The self-formation process takes place within a number of different cultural spaces, and largely on foreign ground.

According to Aboriginal

worldview, and specifically Metis worldview, the self has a number of aspects including realms of the mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional bodies (Bopp, Bopp, Brown & Lane, 1984). Notions of "self," "mind," and "problems" do not exist in the head, but are part of an overall organic, energetic, and social system. As individuals of both society and spirit we are connected to each other and to the external world. No one lives in isolation or apart from their context. Also, according to the narrative practices of Aboriginal culture and some Indigenous psychological theorists, "we create a self that is whole and purposeful because it is embedded in a

coherent and meaningful life story" (McAdams, 1993, p. 92).

Theorists, both European and Aboriginal, see the self as created, or carried into existence through the process of storytelling (Adams, 1995; Barthes, 1974, 987; Deloria, 1992; Howard, 1991; Madigan & Law, 1998; Smith, 1999; White, 2000). Some theorists believe that the sense of self is held together by stories (Chandler, 2000, 2001; Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1988) or is embedded in them (McAdams, 1993). Others assert that we are our stories (Bruner, 1987; Hopcke, 1998; Randall, 1997; Sarbin, 1986). Aboriginal writer Thomas King (2003) asserts that "stories are all we are" (p. 2). The self is created through living a life story.

Symbolic Interactionists (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934, 1977; Millikan & Schreiber, 2001) describe the process of self formation as an ongoing internalization of experiences which are sorted and analysed according to one's developing sense of self. Narratively speaking, part of the self is the hero in the life story (the 'Me') while another part (the 'I') is the editor and writer (Sarbin, 1986).

Relevant and meaningful experiences are integrated to enrich the life story while other experiences are edited out. Perception psychologist Berger (1963) observes that "of the near-infinite number of things that could be noticed in any given situation, such a tiny fraction are," implying that we are active editors. Narrative psychologist James Hillman (1996) comments on how humans tend to experience much more than we integrate and attributes human

restlessness to this lack of integration. Implicit in this observation is the human need for safety from violence and threat in order to focus on a reflective, meaning-making process. Whatever exactly events may be, moving them "from outer to inner," from existence to experience, takes time and energy. Integration requires reflection, examination, attention, some sort of psychological process and a period of digestion (p. 63). Due to lack of safety and oppressive social response, the Metis self has largely been created on the run. This is the Metis context. As Robert Kroetsch (1995) points out, "Now we're on my home ground, foreign territory" (p. 395).

Our stories always have a setting, or context. Reclaiming cultural stories involves moving ourselves from the background to the foreground of our life story. This process can also be described as de-colonization. Psychological theorist Erving Goffman (1963) studied power imbalances in society and noted:

The self is a stance taking entity, a something that takes up a position somewhere between identification with an organization and opposition to it, and is ready at the slightest pressure to regain its balance by shifting its involvement in either direction. It is against something that the self can emerge (p. 320).

Metis self-creation constitutes a dance between conformity and resistance. For example, one participant shared her experience

of the dominant culture:

When you are together with other Metis people, it's a pleasure. But otherwise you're always ashamed. It's really true. Always have that feeling you're inferior and you don't believe it, but it's true (p. 29).

While Metis people oppose their oppression, they can identify with the resistance of their people to historical and current injustice. Louis Riel expressed his opposition to the oppression of the Metis by the Canadian government by appealing to God when he recited the following prayer on the battlefield at Batoche:

O my God! Do not let England  
Get the better of me,  
For she would annihilate me  
Together with my nation.  
Save me from her power  
(1997, p. 51)

Similar to the way the Riel sought protection from violence, Goffman observed rebellion against oppressive practices in the case of patients in mental hospitals. He noted:

The practice of reserving something of oneself from the clutch of an institution is very visible in mental hospitals and prisons but can be found in more benign and less totalistic institutions too.  
... this recalcitrance is not an incidental mechanism of defence but rather an essential constituent of self.

So is it with Metis people in relation to the Canadian state and



towards individuals and structures which discriminate against the Metis.

For the Metis, it is against the colonial notions that 'pure race is best,' that the Metis have no rights as a people in Canada and that a holistic mixed-race self can be formed. Clearly, the challenges that still exist for Metis people are indicative that a violent and oppressive environment threaten the processes of self-creation and cultural continuity.

According to the participants in my study, the social response towards Metis people in Canada is characterized by regular and systematic assaults on their dignity, such as:

- being renamed by others, derogatory titles such as "Breed," "Squaw," "Sauvagesse," "Halfbreed"
- being excluded from the workforce as part of a racist social response
- having to attend non-Metis schools and universities
- being asked to explain if you're an Indian who is 'part white' or a white person who is 'part Indian'
- learning that you don't speak about being Metis because of racism (e.g. "Keep your mouth shut", "Keep the word Metis off your resume")
- experiencing not-belonging ("A feeling of never quite belonging anywhere haunts me")
- loss of culture and feeling alienated from your people ("Was there a place where I could finally fit in and be comfortable?")
- hearing your history told inaccurately by others

- having to adjust one's thinking from 'Metis thinking' to European thinking, to First Nations thinking, depending on the environment, for survival.
- having to continually scour the consciousness and reflect on one's own behaviour to make sure one is not acting as badly as the perpetrator or oppressor - 'the inverse moral response' (Nick Todd in Coates et al 2003)

This list is not conclusive, but contains a number of the points made by Metis participants in my study. This list shows not how the Metis are affected by oppression, but rather how they resist and respond to these assaults.

Research shows that "whenever people are badly treated they resist." (Wade, 1995, p. 168). Resistance practices have been widely documented (Burstow, 1992; Burstow & Weitz, 1988; Gilligan, Rogers, & Tolman, 1991; Jenkins, 1990; Kelly, 1988; Pagelow, 1991; Scott, 1990; Wade, 1995, 1997). Theorist of violence and language Allan Wade poses the question, "How does an individual build up a psychological barrier between himself and his tormentors behind which he can manufacture some sense of safety, autonomy and self worth?" (Wade, 2005). This is the quintessential question for the Metis. I would add also, "How do they Metis create a sense of self when living in conditions of oppression and social violence?" Interview participants in my study, along with Metis writers, share some of their survival strategies and the contents of their survival toolkit:

- use of intuition, inner knowing, dreams, visions

- Metis community organizations
- family history and genealogy as ancestral maps (ancestors become allies, "the ancestors are calling you back to your people")
- their Creator, spirituality, prayer, guides
- access the life force and healing power of nature
- adaptability, multiculturalism, developing the skill of moving fluidly between various cultural worlds
- thinking Metis thoughts in the privacy of mind, preserving Metis worldview
- using a language/discourse of dignity - calling themselves "The Free People," "The People Who Own Themselves" (otaypamišewak), "The People,"
- practicing "aplomb" ("keeping a cool head in dangerous situations")
- Metis cultural stories
- being in Metis spaces where stories and culture are shared, and a Metis political analysis is articulated
- recreating the self in Metis settings where belonging is experienced ("Home is where you see yourself in the faces of others on the street," Laufman, 1997)

These practices keep Metis people strong and focused in their activity of becoming and remaining Metis in Canada. These practices are integral for maintaining dignity in a social realm where dignity is often assaulted. As a therapist, I facilitate client exploration of these strategies for Metis self-creation and self-strengthening.

## My grandmother and her flagrant mental wellness

My grandmother was largely motivated by the desire for respect and dignity. Because the Metis are not the dominant culture in Canada, their acts of resistance are frequently seen as misguided or symptoms of illness such as post traumatic stress. Resisting oppression and disrespect could more rightfully be identified (and diagnosed) as "a flagrant sign of mental wellness" (Wade, 1995, 1997). Researchers have documented how resistance is often pathologized in western psychology and how psychology has a tool in the project of colonialism (Wade, 1995).

As researcher and therapist Richard Routledge (1997) points out, "Having considered the [narratives of Jewish concentration camp prisoners and black slaves] examples of 'resistance' as acts of heroism—which took place at the same time that the field of psychotherapy was developing—an issue arises concerning our notions of 'resistance' as evidence of pathology." He continues, "...with all the emphasis on resistance as pathological, where in the psychotherapy literature is the corresponding language of heroic, or respect-worthy, resistance" (p.7). Both Routledge and Wade would answer that "we don't have one and this reflects a clear and definite bias within the culture of therapy" and thus psychological overall. While colonized people experience trauma, it is problematic to attribute their suffering to 'post-traumatic stress' because it

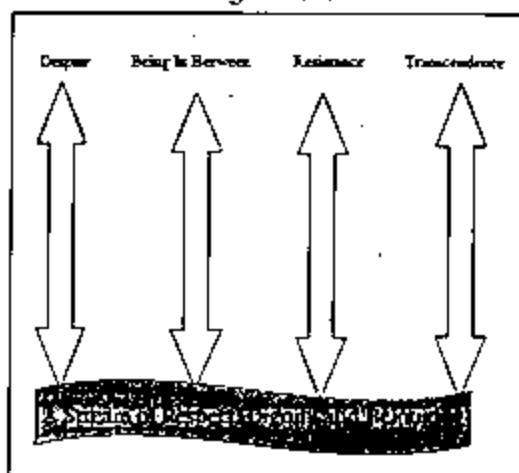
shifts the emphasis from social violence to an intrapsychic psychological disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 218). Violence and oppression are located in social interaction, not within the minds of the oppressed. The problem of colonized people is not their internal psychology but the oppression and power abuses that exist, both historically and currently, in their lives.

During the time of the slave trade, two forms of psychopathology were commonly diagnosed among slaves. The first drapetomania, consisted of a single symptom of slaves running away; Dysaesthesia aethiopica consisted of numerous conditions such as destroying plantation property, showing defiance, and attacking the slave masters, also known as "rascality." Both were nerve disorders coined by reputable physicians (Bronstein & Quina, 1988 cited in Robinson, 2005).

### Metis strategies for living the situation

After interpreting the research data, Metis stories and theoretical literature, I encapsulated thematic plot lines into four major categories: Despair; Being in Between; Resistance; and Transcendence. In the face of the social response against the Metis, participants find sources of belonging and respect to counter the challenges of being Metis. The diagram above illustrates how these states interact to form a Metis strategy for survival.

### A Metis Strategy for Living the Situation



#### Despair

Despair emerged for participants in response to the racism and injustice they experience in their lives. Despair is an evoked emotional response to a state of injustice. Despair serves a number of functions and is seen theoretically in

different ways. This emotional response is linked to a process of decolonization identified as mourning. Laemul (2000) identifies mourning as the first phase of the decolonization process wherein "people are able to lament their victimization" (p. 154). Despair is a form of resistance and demonstrates that the individual refuses to be contented with oppression and mistreatment (Coates & Wade, 2004). Despair is linked to grief and mourning. Native American theorists Duran and Duran (1995) believe that grieving is a process that was denied colonized people in the traumatic disruption caused while receiving Europeans and their cultural ways in North America.



Although the initial colonization took place generations back, Metis people are coming to terms with what was lost as a result of European colonization. Interview participant Sarah states that, after a day of witnessing racism and injustice, "sometimes it's too much and I just go to bed and cry" (Interview, p. 16). Metis participants often identified a key person who served as a link to the Metis family history and stories and experience despair as a response to their loss. Grandmothers were identified as being important transmitters of culture, and find their passing to be very difficult. Metis people rely on their personal and communal strategies in response to life challenges.

Metis people need a place to go to experience respite, rejuvenation and strengthening. Many of the ways in which they experience the healing properties of respect, dignity and belonging are listed in 'the survival toolkit.' (reference?) Foundational in the lives of Metis participants is the need for respect and belonging. They use stories to teach the importance of respect and the preservation of dignity. One interview participant shared, "I have always been a bit of a rebel and outcast. Perhaps that is why I have wandered so far from home looking for people who share my dreams" (Interview, p. 2). Two other thematic plot-lines, "being in-between" and "transcendence" relate to the Metis situation in complex ways which I only mention briefly in this article. "In-between-ness" describes how many Metis view their social location, and at times their invisibility. Transcendence refers to experience

of 'going beyond' struggles and experiencing wholeness and peace. Transcendence/transcending (as both as a verb and a noun) is the process of 'experienced peace and beyondness' enriched by opportunities such as love acceptance, belonging, joining with a universal life force, being in nature, prayer and meditation, and being transported by stories.

Metis people often feel the greatest sense of safety and belonging when they are in community with other Metis people. Although some Metis have gained acceptance in the mainstream, they often do not feel at home there due to the incongruence with their cultural selves. Being in Metis spaces helps to escape the limits of what postcolonialist writer Edward Said (1993) calls "emulation and mimicry" (p. 317). Erving Goffman (1963) talks about – a place where people of shared suffering can come together for support as well as to engage in counter-discursive practice. Here, the Metis can outline a political and social agenda of dignity and respect – a place where everyone's stories can inform the way we live together.

### Stories are medicine

The transformative power of stories is reminiscent of the Native belief in shapeshifting. Our sense of self expands when we integrate the knowledge of our culture, our past, and our Ancestors; stories help us to become more whole and can we respond to them in profound ways. Aboriginal writers have noted that stories have the power to change us:

Take [this] story, for instance,

It's yours. Do with it what you will. Tell it to friends; Turn it into a television movie, Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now (King, p. 29).

Thomas King (2003) says that stories are a form of medicine (p. 92). In this statement he refers to the power that stories possess to heal, to comfort, and to make people feel well. Like many good medicines, they "fight illness and death" (p. 92). For Metis people, stories promote survival. They do this literally by delivering messages that teach children to stay safe, and to teach people how to behave in times of difficulty or challenge – to behave with aplomb, to practice humour, to be respectful to all forms of life.

Research participants indicated that storytelling is an important part of their Metis self-formation process, and that having a Metis space for sharing stories from a Metis perspective is crucial for Metis self and community development. One research participant reminds us that the ancestors are calling us back to our people, but we sometimes need the help of other Metis people, to remember to recognize their call and to find each other. Cultural psychologist George Howard (1991) believes that a cultural group is a group of people who share the same stories.

### How this relates to all children, youth and others

Children create their cultural

identity in ways that make sense developmentally. They learn about self as they position themselves in the fore against differences in their background. White children become aware of being white they see others who are not-White. When my daughter was four, she asked a question about her cultural ancestry: "Mommy, am I white?" "You are Metis," I say. Her little brother contributes from the back seat, "Juliet, your shoes are white!" Early on, children get a sense of where they are positioned in relation to the dominant culture, and to others around them. However, when creating a self portrait, not one of us can find the right shade of crayon to colour in our skin. We make the best of what we have.

Children become experts at sussing out the environment to see where their needs will best be met. These young humans develop an understanding early on about whether to approach dad or mom, and when bring in grandma as an ally. Strategies for negotiating successfully the environment account for our existence here today, in spite of the hazards faced by our ancestors throughout time. Humans endure because we attach to that which feeds us while safely and strategically resisting harm. The children I know perform acts of civil disobedience with thrust and grace. They are able to articulate their position on any matter that concerns them. As Goffman (1963) says, we form the self through identification both towards and against conditions in the environment. In this way, we find out what kind of people we are.

It's like the time on the airplane when my four year old son Rupert asks the little girl in front of him innocently, "What kind of kid are you?" In addition to figuring out who we are, the self creation process is a response to the questions "Who do I want to be?" and "How do my actions reflect who I am as a person?" Through this process we develop the values we aspire to live by. Chief Seattle of the Squamish (1853) reminds us of an ongoing obligation towards social justice if we are to live together honourably:

At night, when the streets of your cities and villages are silent, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land. The white man will never be alone. Let him be just and deal kindly with my people. For the dead are not powerless (cited in *Highway*, 1998, p. 1).

It is never too late to recreate ourselves and repair the harm we have done to others – at least that is what we tell our children. And today, we run the risk of getting our spirit captured in someone's digital snapshot, to be attached and forwarded through cyberspace until time immemorial.

When I read the eulogy at my grandmother's funeral, I tried to honour her memory by not using the word 'Metis' in the address. That used to matter to her. Instead, I described her as being descended from a proud family of Orkney Islanders and early Canadians who helped build this country through their activities in the Hudson's Bay

Company and in the fur trade. I remained vague enough to say what I felt was important, but to conceal her Aboriginal ancestry from her friends and her community, as she had always done. She would have wanted it that way. Metis or not, self-identification is a defining feature of who we are, so I can describe her, but I cannot define her.

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Cathy Richardson recently completed her PhD in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria. She is a counsellor and family therapist who has worked for Metis Community Services in Victoria since 1997. She is Metis, and is currently involved in a number of Aboriginal community wellness initiatives.



A photo of me with three Metis children in Fort Chipewyan, taken 6 years ago. The two on the right are mine, and the one on the left is their cousin - an example of how DNA creates Metis people with diverse features.