

Embodying both oppressor and oppressed

My perspective as a Metis woman

Cathy Richardson¹

The following piece is a result of an interview with and writing by Cathy Richardson. We approached Cathy in relation to this edition of the journal because of her perspective as a Metis woman with both European and Aboriginal heritage. When considering the issue of forgiveness, it seems important that the experiences of those with multiple cultural heritages are acknowledged and honoured. As Cathy describes, when these heritages include Aboriginal or Indigenous ancestry, and the heritage of European colonisers, it leads to complexities when considering notions of forgiveness. The following piece is offered in a spirit of exploration. It does not seek to offer answers in relation to these issues, but instead to consider the complexities. It begins with an explanation of the history of the Metis people.

As a Metis person in Canada, I have studied the history of my people. We are the descendants of European fur traders and Native women, the result of a cultural mixing. Over generations many European men, who had travelled to Canada without European women, entered into relationships with Native women. Whatever the complexities of these relationships, they brought together different communities, different families, languages and

cultures. Their mixed-race children often became the mediators between cultures.

When European women began to arrive during the settlement period, many of the Native women and their children were abandoned. By the early 1800s the Metis, the people of mixed heritage, were identifying as a distinct people and began to take on particular roles in wider society. Early on, the Metis were appreciated as cultural guides and providers of sustenance to the European fur traders. They were the mediators between the various indigenous and European cultures. My great-grandmother, for example, spoke several languages and worked as an interpreter for a major fur trade company at Fort Chipewyan.

As settlement from Europe continued to grow, the Metis people were gradually pushed to the margins of society and suffered accordingly. The story of the Metis from this point onwards is a familiar one in many colonised societies. Like other Native peoples, the Metis struggled to retain land and to hold the government accountable to its promises. As a result of government assimilationist and colonial policy, landlessness was followed by a Metis diaspora: families were separated and the culture was destabilised.

As with Native peoples throughout the Americas, this history took its toll. Cultural pride diminished as people became reluctant to identify as 'Metis'. Recognising only

'white' or 'Indian' people, no-one would see us and we became 'the Invisible People'. The Metis tried to pass as European and would explain their dark features by saying they were dark Irish, Spanish, French Canadian, or Italian. Only now are we moving away from this phase as our people are re-discovering that we are Metis and that our Aboriginal heritage was a family secret.

The complexity of identity

There is now a context in which Metis people are proudly claiming their cultural heritage. There are a range of ways in which people choose to identify culturally. Some may say they have a mixed background while others identify as Metis, celebrating both European and Aboriginal ancestry. Others choose to identify as Aboriginal, and live within a First Nations cultural context. There is now a renaissance among the Metis in the discovery and integration of their previously denied ancestry and cultural heritage. And of course, there are some who continue to identify exclusively as Euro-Canadian, in spite of the knowledge that they have Aboriginal roots. The process of cultural identification is complex and it is constantly evolving.

When one identifies as Metis, a part of this process involves coming to terms with the fact that in various ways we embody both 'the oppressed' and 'the oppressors'. An ongoing process of reconciliation and integration occurs, and this is experienced differently for different people. We are constantly renegotiating our own peace process, shaped by our history and transcending our historical imprint.

When Sir Frances Drake arrived in Canada in the late 1580s, he found a place free of duality and separation – where rocks and trees embodied the spirit of creation, where air, fire, water and earth remained free from pollution, and where gifts were exchanged with respect and gratitude. Interaction with the spirit world was a daily part of life. And to this land, the Europeans brought their own worldview, traditions and ways of being.

For us as Metis people, there are diverse cultural traditions that influence our lives. Trying to fully integrate this diversity can be a complex process; I've found that some Native teachings have been helpful in this process. For example, we have been taught that all the races of the earth received particular gifts at the time of creation. Tradition suggests that we must use these gifts consciously and

responsibly, for the good of all. Through the movement and mixing of cultures they are to be shared between all peoples. It is possible for Metis people to honour all the aspects of our cultural heritage, both inside and outside ourselves.

The challenge then, is living this cohesion as we continue to be oppressed by institutionalised racism and marginalisation. It is therefore important for Euro-Canadians to engage in some soul searching of their own, and recognise their responsibility in redressing the legacies of the past. When they are able to do so, it makes the possibility of cross-cultural co-operation and social justice become all the more likely. It also makes the process of reconciling history more possible – both on the broader social level and also in relation to our personal histories as Metis people.

As a Metis woman, I am both European and Aboriginal. Some of my ancestors arrived on this land from the continent of Europe while others were already living on Canadian soil. This means that in some ways I embody both the oppressor and the oppressed – both the people seeking forgiveness and those in a position to grant it. It is a complex position but one that we as Metis people are learning to celebrate and to honour. For hundreds of years our people have acted as mediators between worldviews and cultures. I'd like to think we can still play this role today and into the future. It is our part in a universal peace process.

Acknowledgements

As a part of the process of thinking about and creating this piece, Cathy consulted and interviewed a number of Aboriginal elders on Vancouver Island. Dulwich Centre Publications and Cathy Richardson would like to acknowledge the contributions of Robert Donahue, Monica Salvatella, Dana Seaborn and Skip Dick.

Note

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