

# A People and a Nation

*New Directions in Contemporary  
Métis Studies*

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AND CHRIS ANDERSEN



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# Introduction: A New Era of Métis Studies Scholarship

*Chris Andersen and Jennifer Adese*

AT ONE TIME, research on Métis issues was confined mostly to the narratives of non-Indigenous historians, but as more Métis scholars enter the field and as Métis communities increasingly define research priorities, Métis studies has taken a distinctive and positive turn toward research by and for the Métis people.<sup>1</sup> This intellectual turn has been spurred by a growth in the number of Métis scholars over the past two decades, as evidenced by this volume, which is predominantly by Métis authors – the first of its kind. It has also been influenced by an explosion in the Métis population between 1996 and 2006, which has caused the federal, provincial, and municipal governments to look to Métis communities with renewed interest. Alongside these intellectual and policy shifts, several important Métis court cases – including the *Powley* ruling (2003), *Manitoba Métis Federation v Canada* (2013), and *Daniels v Canada* (2016) – have wound their way through the Canadian legal system, ending in Supreme Court of Canada rulings that have altered the political landscape of Canada–Métis relations. At a more foundational level, however, these developments were instrumental in raising the public profile of – along with debates about – Métis issues, particularly the complexities of Métis identity.

Debates over Métis identity typically assume a binary form. On the one side are peoplehood-based arguments that look to the core of Métis peoplehood (to the collective culture, history, and politics practised by Métis communities across the Métis Nation's

prairie homeland). On the other side, are more racialized arguments that take many historical instances of racial mixing in much of what is now called the United States and Canada and conflate them with historical and contemporary Métis communities, who understood themselves as bounded political communities defined not merely by mixedness. Followers of this view often accuse proponents of peoplehood-based arguments of exclusion and lateral violence or internal colonialism. Lost in these relatively hardened positions are sustained discussions of the actual social and political contexts within which the Métis people and their communities have lived in the past and live in today. A historically rooted understanding of Métis peoplehood, we argue, is directly relevant to thinking about Métis identity in ways that respect Métis self-determination and political power (though we note that the continued dominance of discourses around “mixedness” complicate the ability to remove them completely from academic debate, even one as peoplehood-based as is this one).

### **Métis Studies: A Portrait of a Field and Its Genealogy**

Métis studies has seen rapid transformation over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and through its evolution it has moved from a historically focused topic area to a more diverse field, expanding broadly to encompass a greater range of topics of interest to Métis scholars and communities. Nonetheless, Métis studies as a scholarly field of inquiry has been afflicted by the nagging presence of racialization throughout its genealogy. Such scholarship, whether in single-author monographs or in edited collections, has largely taken for granted the link between Métis identity and mixed-ancestry origins. The majority of previous writings about Métis have reflected an inability to reconcile their investment in racialized discourses of mixed-racedness with Métis people’s existence as a distinct Indigenous People. Instead, the works enclosed here utilize a peoplehood-based analysis of Métis issues, as reflected in the methods and approaches that scholars in this volume have adopted.

The field of Métis studies evolved out of earlier scholarship on Métis issues undertaken primarily by historians, and later ethno-historians, rooted in even earlier scholarly efforts that took for granted mixed-raced identity as the basis of Métis experience. This scholarship explored issues related to what “Métis” meant and who the Métis people are in a manner similar to more recent scholarly works. This early work was generally informed exclusively by analysis of the Subarctic fur trade and the “opening up” of the Canadian west through the so-called Riel Rebellion in 1869–70 and the North-West Rebellion in 1885. Throughout much of the twentieth century, Métis issues were investigated utilizing conventional historiographical methodologies, focused in particular on the role of the Métis leader Louis Riel, who was hanged by the Canadian state in 1885 for his role as leader of the Northwest Resistance. These histories were undertaken in the tradition of the “great man of history” school, so Riel’s political movements and life experiences were the lens through which many came to understand Métis people more broadly.

During the field’s initial development, little scholarship on Métis issues was synergistic but instead consisted of fairly isolated examinations that have since come to be regarded as classics (e.g., Morton [1973], Stanley [1936/1992], Giraud [1945/1986]). Perhaps the most extensive treatment of the Métis was that of French historian Marcel Giraud, whose monumental two-volume, 2,000-page-plus *The Métis of Western Canada* stood as the historiographical standard on the origins, flourishing, and eventual (political) demise of the Métis. In the 1970s and early 1980s, however, four PhD theses were completed that fundamentally altered the methodologies and conclusions through which Métis studies had until then been examined. Sylvia Van Kirk (1983), Jennifer Brown (1980), Jacqueline Peterson (1981), and John Foster (1973) each explored the origins and rise of Métis communities in the Upper Great Lakes and on the Northern Plains, their relationship to the fur trade, and the gender relations therein. These advancements in the study of the Métis people came together in 1985 in the first edited collection on Métis studies, coedited by Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer Brown and

titled *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*. This volume was groundbreaking in that it brought together for the first time many of the top scholars investigating Métis issues. It documented, in great detail and with lasting sophistication, a number of issues pertaining to the origins of the Métis, including the internal complexity of the Red River locale (i.e. language, marriage patterns, religious differences, material culture, etc.), their diasporas, and other issues that continue to shape the way that scholars talk about the Métis today.

Despite various debates regarding Canadian obligations to the Métis (culminating in a classic debate between Tom Flanagan [1991] and Doug Sprague [1988] on whether the Métis left Red River because of economic self-interest or were forced out by colonial intrusion) and continued analyses of Métis economic dynamics (Tough 1996; Ens 1996), the most in-depth examination of Métis issues in the 1990s is likely the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Among its various emphases, the commission formalized and officially sanctioned the notion of “other Métis,” meaning those communities who have recently started self-identifying as Métis based, often, on the mixed ancestry of their communities. The deep racialization of the logics that undergird these self-identifications continue to play themselves out in more recent scholarship.

In recent years, a number of anthologies have been published pertaining to Métis issues, geographies, and identities. In 2007, Ute Lischke and David T. McNab coedited *The Long Journey of a Forgotten People: Métis Identities and Family Histories*, which made use of the common trope, coined by Métis political leader Harry Daniels in the 1970s, about the Métis being a forgotten people. The book includes scholarship on so-called eastern Canadian Métis communities, locates early Métis origins in British military personnel and their mixed-blood descendants, explores legal dynamics in the production of Métis identity, and features one especially poignant autobiographical account of Métis identity. What is perhaps most interesting is the volume’s use of a racialized notion of the Métis, based on a Métis-as-mixed discourse, which diminishes

the historical presence of the Métis people of the Northern Plains. It engages in fairly direct historical revisionism – through which historical individuals, communities, and activities are rendered Métis by virtue of their supposed “mixedness” – rather than recognizing the central importance of the notion of connection to a historically self-ascribing Métis community (Lischke and McNab 2007).

In 2012, Nicole St-Onge, Carolyn Podruchny, and Brenda Macdougall coedited *Contours of a People: Métis Family, Mobility, and History*. This comprehensive volume, the heir apparent to Peterson and Brown’s (1985) *The New Peoples*, is a comprehensive account of historical Métis ontologies, particularly as they related to the Métis’ fundamental mobility and the manner in which this fact of historical mobility fails to square with how the Canadian state, then and now, understands appropriate (and legal) land use and occupancy by the Métis. The collection is geographically expansive in scope, ranging from the Great Lakes to British Columbia to the upper regions of the United States. This largely historical volume must be appreciated for the sophistication of its theorizing, the creativity and expansiveness of its empirical evidence, and the rigour of its methodologies. However, while *Contours* represents a great leap forward in terms of how we theorize the historical Métis community and Nation, many of its chapters remain in the clutches of racialization, incorporating broad ranges of mixed communities who did not understand themselves as “Métis” until quite recently, which clouds the analyses of several otherwise fine studies (St-Onge, Podruchny, and Macdougall 2012).

In 2013, Christopher Adams, Gregg Dahl, and Ian Peach coedited *Métis in Canada: History, Identity, Law and Politics*. This edited collection brought together leading scholars in a number of related fields of research – including history, anthropology, political science, sociology, and Aboriginal rights law – to explore in a multidisciplinary fashion the various elements through which the idea of Métis identity has been constructed in the academy and the policy field. The editors make the point that recent trends in legal jurisprudence (particularly the celebrated Supreme Court of Canada *Powley* decision) have reconfigured how we think about



Métis identity in Canada. With several exceptions, however, the edited collection continues to rely on an explicit Métis-as-mixed discourse, even though it undertakes a more sophisticated analysis of the Métis Nation's own strategic use of racialized discourses (Adams, Dahl, and Peach 2013).

Most recently, the field of Métis studies has undergone an explicit bifurcation in which, on the one hand, an increasing number of individuals, organizations, and communities in eastern Canada (particularly in Quebec and the Maritimes) are beginning to make ahistorical claims to Métis identity (See Andersen 2010; Leroux and Gaudry 2017; Leroux 2018). Such claims are solidly rooted in racialized discourses. Several scholars affiliated with these movements have begun to publish scholarship in support of these claims as well relying heavily on racialized discourses. On the other hand, and partly in reaction, Métis scholars have begun to write according to a more explicitly nationalistic position but also in an effort to elucidate precisely what it is that makes the Métis a distinct Indigenous People. While this bifurcation has so far mostly taken place in the context of online media (Facebook and Twitter debates as well as various blogs and so on), it is beginning to spill over into academic scholarship (see, for example, Bouchard, Foxcurran, and Malette 2016). It is within this latest context that we see this volume making its most lasting contribution, as a timely intervention during a developing, historically important debate.

### **The Métis People, in the Singular**

In the spirit of previous edited volumes, we see the scope of this volume as geographically, theoretically, methodologically, and empirically expansive. However, we would nonetheless like to take the opportunity here to set out a trajectory for what we mean by Métis peoplehood historically and today, including Métis genesis on the Northern Plains, the rise of Métis economic and political power, the growth of Red River as a metropolis, and the Métis people's eventual political marginalization following the Northwest Resistance in 1885. In contrast to the previously mentioned

edited collections, this volume supports the idea of a single Métis people, a position that has support in Canadian constitutional law as well as international law as it applies to Indigenous Peoples (see Andersen 2014; Chartrand and Giokas 2002).

What does it mean to position the Métis as a Nation and as a people? Nations are often positioned as a form of political consciousness grounded in (perceptions of) common roots and territory (Anderson 1991), and their associated nationalism embodies the cultural and political symbols, discourses, traditions, and myths that anchor and (re)produce these perceptions of origins and commonality (see Andersen 2008). Theorists of nationalism tend to link it to the growth of modernity and its associated industrialization and, as Chris Andersen notes in this volume, tend to position it within western and central European processes of modern liberal state building and legitimation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (see Anderson 1991; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990). Though we separate the term geographically from its typical European positioning, “nation” is used in this volume as a form of political consciousness rooted in an emphasis on common origins.

In contrast, we use “peoplehood” (in juxtaposition to the more biologically rooted discourses around mixedness) to emphasize the broad relations of Indigenous diplomacy that tied together Indigenous collectivities in storied relationships of time and place. Explained further by Andersen in his chapter on peoplehood, suffice it to say here that we use “peoplehood” not only to refer to “real” sets of social relations that existed (and still exist) but also to better understand how Indigenous collectivities interacted with one another and with the encroaching colonial powers. This is an important point, since we are not suggesting that other concepts (such as biological notions of race that sit at the root of Métis-as-mixed discourses) cannot conceivably be used to analyze these social relations. Instead, our point is that such concepts do not reflect the manner in which people(s) understood themselves historically, nor do they provide compelling analyses today.

It is in this analytical context that we position the Métis as an Indigenous People who rose to prominence on the Northern Plains

of what is now western Canada and the northern United States at the beginning of the nineteenth century. One of many Indigenous Peoples with postcontact origins, the Métis people were part of the Neyihaw Pwat (the Iron Alliance) in partnership with the Saulteaux, the Cree, and the Assiniboine (Innes 2013, 43–69). Like other alliances of this time and place, the members of the Neyihaw Pwat relied on one another for economic, political, and military support, and the different bands intermarried heavily. This broad alliance marked Indigenous life on the Northern Plains from the eighteenth century onward.

The Métis became a powerful force on the Northern Plains by the middle part of the nineteenth century. Resisting, first, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and, later, the Canadian state, the Métis pushed back against the HBC's presumed control of the region and then led two armed resistances against the Canadian state, prevailing in the first one in 1869–70 and suffering military and political defeat in the second, in 1885. We thus use the term "Métis," in the context of this book, in association with key events, leaders, geographical territories, economies, land tenures, artistic styles, languages, and perhaps most importantly, kinship connections and diplomatic relations with other Indigenous Peoples (see Peterson and Brown 1985; Peterson 1987; Sprague 1988; St-Onge, Podruchny, and Macdougall 2012 for discussions of this history).

Bearing this in mind, we likewise position the descendants of the Métis Nation as being represented (though imperfectly, to be sure) through the combined efforts of the Métis National Council and its provincially based affiliates in British Columbia (the Métis Nation of British Columbia), Alberta (the Métis Nation of Alberta), Saskatchewan (Métis Nation–Saskatchewan), Manitoba (Manitoba Métis Federation), and, until recently, Ontario (Métis Nation of Ontario). These provincial affiliates were born from the sustained effort of the Métis, throughout the twentieth century, to ensure that the Métis people and concerns were not forgotten in the maelstrom that is Canada's political landscape. In the latter decades of the twentieth century, the council and its members continued to actively resist the erasure of the Métis from the political landscape

by engaging in various nation-to-nation policy relationships with municipal, provincial, and federal levels of government (Sawchuk 1998; Weinstein 2007; Troupe 2009; Adese 2016).

Thus, the chapters here explore the intricacies of the Métis people and our communities, both recognizing and supporting the existence of Métis peoplehood. These multidisciplinary contributions additionally explore the current complexity of Métis identity in relation to ongoing North American settler colonialism while at the same time affirming the continuity of a collective Métis peoplehood. This book is unique in that it focuses specifically on issues relating to Métis peoplehood in the contemporary era. It places emphasis on the necessary historical and contemporary connection to pre-colonial and pre-state Métis collectives. By centring this volume on the collective belongings that produce Métis peoplehood, these works individually assert that the Métis belong to a historically bounded and identifiable Indigenous People – the Métis Nation – whose ongoing existence must be respected as the Métis narrate our history and our contemporary existence.

Embracing a diffuse and complex nationalist Métis narrative, the works in this volume explore the differing experiences of Métis communities, identifying the common threads that connect the Métis people through time and space and respecting the past and present limits that the Métis have placed on their communities. The contributors represent many disciplinary traditions and explore Métis peoplehood through diverse disciplinary methodologies. By examining these elements of Métis sociality, they allow for a more sophisticated understanding of the Métis people as an Indigenous People who have long understood ourselves this way.

The contributors forge a new path for thinking ethically about the Métis people. The chapters that follow act as a series of signposts that signal major changes in the field of Métis studies. The authors are young and early career scholars whose cutting-edge work is transforming common (mis)conceptions of the Métis people. With diverse disciplinary training, these Métis intellectuals map the many layers of the change facing the Métis people as we increasingly enter into mainstream political discourse. The chapters themselves

introduce a deeper complexity to the contours of the conception of Métis peoplehood. They emphasize both the broad commonalities of Métis experiences rooted in the contemporary tendrils of Métis peoplehood and the specific histories that productively complicate and build on Métis peoplehood.

## The Chapters

In [Chapter 1](#), Chris Andersen challenges Holm et al.'s (2003) replacement of nationhood with peoplehood in the context of their peoplehood matrix and argues instead that the two concepts are in fact analytical mirror images of each other, insofar as peoplehood situates external relations between peoples while nationhood remains conceptually useful for evaluating internal features of a people. Together, Andersen argues, these paired concepts provide great analytical sophistication for the growing field of Indigenous studies, and his chapter ends by setting out a conceptual lens for thinking about Métis identity in the context of Métis peoplehood. In [Chapter 2](#), Robert Hancock applies Robert K. Thomas's peoplehood perspective to Métis politics and political organizations. By outlining the possibilities of adopting a peoplehood-based model of Métis politics, rather than a more typical approach based on Western models of nationalism, Hancock suggests the Métis can escape the trap of state recognition in favour of collective self-identification in Indigenous contexts. Using the concepts of *wahkohtowin* (being a good relative) and *niwahkomakanak* ([all] my relations), he demonstrates that a Métis political identity predicated on the peoplehood model best reflects the profoundly relational character of Métis identity and its roots in the kinship networks of the Northern Plains.

In [Chapter 3](#), Daniel Voth explores how the positioning of the Métis people as mixed effectively frames the Métis people as less threatening to the Canadian settler political order; in doing so, such a practice politically disempowers the Métis people. The chapter carefully traces these effects and then concludes by offering emerging alternatives for conceptualizing Métis politics. He

suggests that analyzing racial mixing as a strategic political tool empowers some while disempowering others. Moving past this, scholars can better appreciate the nuanced way racial mixing manifests within both the theory and practice of politics in Canada to undermine Métis and other Indigenous peoplehoods in service of the settler state.

While Voth discusses the way that discourses of racial mixing undermine the Métis people and politics, in [Chapter 4](#), Robert Innes examines the close social and political alliances between the Métis and other prairie Indigenous Peoples, a reality that is evidence not only of Métis peoplehood but also of its interrelatedness with other political traditions. He suggests that an examination of Métis–First Nations relations demonstrates that the emphasis placed on the supposed racial difference of the Métis people from First Nations ignores the fact that these groups shared many cultural characteristics and often lived together in multinational bands and hunting brigades. Innes argues that while the Métis, Plains Cree, Saulteaux, and Assiniboine were culturally different from one another, they were not as culturally distinct as existing scholarship makes them out to be.

Jennifer Adese, in [Chapter 5](#), contends that in spite of their notable contributions to the landscape of Métis nationalist political organizing, Métis women have been largely erased from pre-eminent records of Métis political history. This erasure is linked to a long history of sexism that, as a key technique of colonization, has contributed to the dispossession of Métis women. Adese challenges the erasure of Métis women from, in particular, John Weinstein's 2007 account of Métis political history, *Quiet Revolution West: The Rebirth of Métis Nationalism*. While Weinstein's work is indeed comprehensive, Adese argues, it is centred on the accomplishments of Métis men in politics, paying minimal attention to Métis women's position within the Métis Nation and thus Métis women's struggle within nationalist political organizing throughout the twentieth century. Adese argues that rather than abandoning Métis nationalism, Métis women have worked to create a more inclusive vision of contemporary Métis nationhood that

confronts colonization's gendered fracturing of the Métis Nation and its attending debasement of Métis women.

In [Chapter 6](#), Jesse Thistle's account of several defining moments of one Métis man's life in Saskatchewan echoes the claims made by Hancock in his chapter and moves away from Adese's focus on political history to delve into Métis microhistories. Through the presentation of three microhistories contained in stories told to him by Alcide Morrissette, which provide important oral history insights into Métis experiences in the twentieth century, Thistle offers a poignant analysis of the historical context that gave rise to the stories. Utilizing this provocative research methodology, Thistle presents intimate Métis experiences while also exploring the macro sociocultural impacts on Métis microhistory.

In a related vein, in [Chapter 7](#), June Scudeler addresses other forms of Métis storying by applying a Métis peoplehood, nation-centred reading practice to Métis poet Marilyn Dumont's 2015 book *The Pemmican Eaters*. Here, Scudeler rejects the lens of hybridity and instead uses Métis ways of knowing to consider how Dumont uses the poetic medium to provide a Métis-centred account of the Northwest Resistance in 1885. Her chapter repositions Métis writers and scholars as creators of knowledge rather than as objects of study and, in doing so, celebrates Métis literary contributions to Métis peoplehood.

In [Chapter 8](#), Paul Gareau explores how scholars have long portrayed the Métis as ambivalent about their Catholic identities. His chapter explains how an uncritical understanding of religion has led to a misrepresentation of Métis experiences and worldviews. By soliciting insight from religious studies to help redefine the category of religion, Gareau outlines a theoretical framework to examine the flexibility of Catholic popular devotion, specifically through the Virgin Mary, and in the process reveals that the Métis are *doing* religion in ways that are decidedly not ambivalent but rather reflect the sovereignty and self-determination of Métis religion.

Adam Gaudry's concluding chapter situates Métis studies scholarship in the wider landscape of Indigenous studies. Gaudry argues that Métis studies scholarship must develop its own people-specific history that is legally and politically distinct from most of

the other Indigenous Nations. While the Métis have much in common with other Indigenous Peoples historically and politically, they are subject to different Canadian laws and limitations than First Nations or Inuit, so Métis-specific teaching and research is necessary. Gaudry concludes by proposing a number of recommendations to allow for the growth of a self-conscious field of Métis studies, one that collectively nurtures the development of Métis-focused scholarship.

This book is the first of its kind, anchored as it is in a complicated, robust discussion of Métis peoplehood and authored by Métis scholars. A focus on Indigenous peoplehood not only extends the usual discussions of peoplehood beyond nation statehood) – it pushes back against deeply racialized contours within the conceptual sediment of Métis studies. We believe that such arguments, often (though not always) well intended, mischaracterize the character of Métis sociality, historically and today. They do more than that, though: we think that they more fundamentally mischaracterize the meanings, contours, and boundaries of indigeneity and Indigenous sociality entirely (since the logics that racialize the meaning of “Métis” similarly racialize our understandings of all Indigenous Peoples and all indigeneity). Moreover, the wide variety of disciplinary traditions from which our authors write means that readers are being offered a broad multidisciplinary lens through which to view the complexity of historical and contemporary Métis peoplehood. Together, these chapters make a distinctive contribution to our understanding of the Métis people in ways that allow us to face many of our contemporary challenges in a rapidly changing social and political landscape.

## Note

- 1 Throughout this volume, readers will find some variation with respect to the spelling of “Métis” as either accented or unaccented. We, the co-editors, have chosen to use “Métis” with an accent, which is an increasingly common practice even among Anglophones; other authors opt to use “Metis” to avoid over-emphasizing Frenchness. For more on this question see Chris Andersen (2014) and Brenda MacDougall (2012).



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