

# TIS The Independent Scholar

A peer-reviewed interdisciplinary journal

[www.ncis.org](http://www.ncis.org)

ISSN 2381-2400

## **Volume 6 (February 2020)** **'Meeting Challenges'**



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## WRITING AND ART IN ACTIVIST COLLABORATION: A MÉTIS STORY OF RESISTANCE AND CHANGE

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Date submitted: 15 October 2019

Accepted following revisions: 6 February 2020

### **Abstract**

*Canada's Métis evolved from the children of seventeenth-century Amerindian women and French fur traders. The people's history of oppression, defiance, and persistence are represented in Métis author Maria Campbell's *Stories of the Road Allowance People*. A children's book, it is of significant critical interest through its portrayal of socioeconomic realities. The text represents Campbell's renditions of stories told to her orally by "road allowance people," those who lived in poverty-stricken communities that developed along pieces of Crown land earmarked for future road construction throughout Canada's rural West. Illustrated by Sherry Farrell Racette, the book conveys a vivid sense of the narrators' lived experience. The theory of intersectionality—an interdisciplinary approach to understanding how gender, race, and education intersect with selective societal forces such as the dominant language, culture, and socioeconomic class to make it extremely difficult for some to succeed—relies on identifying the confluence of oppressive social structures. This makes it an apt critical framework in which to consider the book from the standpoint of how writing and art can collaborate to aim for social improvements.*

**Keywords:** *Canada, Métis, Indians, farm instructor, French, English, hybrid languages, literature, art, cultural intersections, intercultural relations, fur trade, Halfbreed, Maria Campbell, Sherry Farrell Racette, intersectionality, activism, resistance*

An embodiment of intercultural relations, Canada's Métis people evolved from the children of seventeenth-century Amerindian women and French fur traders. The Métis Nation of Ontario, one among many regional organizations with a stake in the complicated history, explains: "Intermarriages between these mixed ancestry children resulted in the genesis of a new Aboriginal people with a distinct identity, culture and consciousness in west central North America—the Métis Nation." Concentrated mainly in western Canada but also found throughout the country (and beyond), the people's trajectory is one of oppression, defiance, and persistence, all of which are represented in Métis author Maria Campbell's *Stories of the Road Allowance People* (1995). The book was written to appeal to and teach children but is also of significant interest and importance from a critical perspective for its treatment of history, culture, and socioeconomic realities. Because of this combination, the theory of intersectionality (defined in the following section) is an apt critical framework for a consideration of Campbell's children's book from the standpoint of how writing and art can collaborate to aim for social improvements.

Illustrated with paintings by Sherry Farrell Racette, the text represents Campbell's renditions of stories told to her orally by "road allowance people," one of which Campbell herself once was. The term refers to poverty-stricken communities that developed along pieces of Crown land earmarked for future road construction throughout the rural West. As late



as 1960, many Métis were still building their own makeshift shelters. *Canadian Geographic* describes the situation: “Road allowance houses reflected the Métis’ extreme poverty—houses were usually uninsulated, roofed with tarpaper and built from discarded lumber or logs and various ‘recycled’ materials. The small one- or two-room dwellings housed entire families” (Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada). Campbell grew up in road allowance communities as her own family’s situation deteriorated, and her collection of stories from others who also did captures this people’s troubled, yet coherent history.

The Métis demand for equal treatment was denied in the nineteenth century (as will be explained in greater detail shortly), and the people dispersed. Maria Campbell and others preserved the stories of diaspora typified by oppression, violence, alcoholism, prostitution, poverty, and lack of access to adequate health care or education. Their story has been told and retold throughout the literature, like a motif in a visual pattern. Métis scholar and creative writer Emma LaRocque elaborates on the abstract staking out of territory: “There is a powerful ‘returning home’ motif that runs throughout Métis writing, obviously suggesting that there is an unbroken and cohesive home to return to. As complex as the discussion of Métis identity is, Métis Nation peoples have a very strong sense of identity as a distinct culture. While this culture is not congealed, neither is it culturally unmarked” (LaRocque, 2016, 142; see also 139–40). By echoing throughout the literature, the rhetorical pattern helps to preserve a unique culture.

Métis literature has sometimes been approached hesitantly. Some have argued that only members of the group can understand and write about it, an idea that Armando Jannetta refutes in his *Introduction to the Politics of Dialogism and Difference in Métis Literature* (2001). As Jannetta notes, to insist that only those members of any given group may appropriately consider it critically is to practice cultural totalitarianism. Nevertheless, in attempting to interpret a culture that is different from one’s own, or to understand any event that occurred in history, it is important to bear in mind Mikhail Bakhtin’s beautifully elaborated concept of the chronotope (“time-space,” referring to the uniqueness of a specific moment intersecting with a specific place), and how experiences—hence interpretations—differ according to personal circumstances. The present study approaches Métis literature in this respectful spirit.

#### AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH

A term initially used by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality is an interdisciplinary approach to understanding how people’s gender, race, and education can intersect with selective societal forces such as the dominant language, culture, and socioeconomic class to make it extremely difficult for some to succeed (International Women’s Development Agency, 2018). In his introduction to the tenets of the theory, psychologist/sociologist Patrick R. Grzanka emphasizes the need to identify systems of power that come to bear on groups of people and on individuals. He argues that ways in which identity is constructed can serve oppression. Grzanka maintains that systems “such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, and capitalism” produce inequalities, which themselves lead to “social identities” such as those described by the personal qualifiers “illegal” or “alien” (Grzanka, 2014, 68).

Premier intersectional scholar Bonnie Dill Thornton sees the theory as “an interpretive tool” that can “expand our understanding of how inequality affects people of color, demonstrates the ways public policies reinforce existing systems of inequality, and shows how research and teaching using an intersectional perspective compels scholars to become agents of change within institutions.” Because intersectionality strives to be a practical, on-the-ground way of understanding situations, it aims to offer real solutions that “will help bring us one step closer to achieving positive institutional change and social justice” (Dill and Zambrana, 2009, abstract).

Constructions of social identity—including their premises and exclusions—have implications that affect jobs, careers, and personal lives, so an examination of societal forces from this point of view is relevant in any in-depth study of people who have historically been oppressed. Such a consideration quickly reveals strategies for survival. For example, Emma LaRocque expresses a resolute defiance in this preface to her work:

I have spent many years in university, as a student and a professor. There is tremendous pressure to keep up with the Academic Joneses, so I have had to read and write scholarly articles, theses, and dissertations. Unfortunately, too many scholars apparently assume scholarly writing must, by definition, be pedantic, stifling, and soul-less! But I am Métis—I refuse to let conventional dictates of Western scholarship bury me in dry dust (LaRocque, in Perreault and Vance, eds., 1993, 137).

Such unapologetic vitality and determination are emblematic of a defiant persistence that spits back throughout Métis writings. The causes of this anger, covered in the following section, point directly to the societal structures



and forces that are the focus of intersectionality. Both Métis history and creative (and critical) expressions illuminate aspects of the theory. In *Stories of the Road Allowance People*, the language and artwork reflect the lived experience of the narrators. After briefly reviewing the history, this essay examines in detail one story, "Big John," to reveal the intersectional forces coming to bear.

#### THE METIS HISTORY OF RESISTANCE

Half Indian and half European, these marginalized people were commonly referred to as "halfbreeds" until well into the twentieth century. Campbell's first work of literature faces the racist designation head-on starting with its title, *Halfbreed* (1973), a memoir/novel that launched both her own career and those of many other Métis who followed. Joe Welsh, for example, succinctly captures Campbell's leading role in his own work, *Jackrabbit Street*, where he writes in the acknowledgements that Campbell "didn't just open the door for us, she kicked the damn thing down" (Welsh 2003).

The door had needed kicking down for a long time. In the early nineteenth century the Métis were still following buffalo and other game throughout Rupert's Land, a vast region around Hudson's Bay. But in 1870, the recently formed Dominion of Canada purchased the land from the Hudson's Bay Company, and native populations were pushed aside as the government encouraged westward migration. Indian and Métis populations were completely ignored in these transactions, leading to armed resistance in 1885. This was brutally put down, and Métis leader Louis Riel was executed (Bothwell, 2006, 218; Braz, 2003). It was at this point that many Métis, fearing further retaliation, dispersed and became even further marginalized.

To find work, indigenous and Métis people learned English. At residential schools, their children were taught in English as part of the government's program to retrain and assimilate native populations. Children were often forcibly removed to these schools. For all these reasons, French today is difficult to find in Métis literature, except in traces. Critic Pamela Sing zeroes in on this linguistic movement as part of the cultural changes resulting from the 1763 British conquest of previously French Canada: "In English Canada, many English speakers and a great number of authors writing in English have a language other than English as a mother tongue[...]. Their craft is born of constant, endless crossings between English and a first language that is not English" (Sing 2006, n. 4).

The hybrid modes of expression that the Métis developed are known as Mitchif (alternately spelled without the t). This language(s) incorporated elements of Cree and French, "though in some regions it also mixed some English and Saulteux. In all these languages, the Métis 're-cree-ated' or invented anew stories and traditions steeped in European and Indigenous oralities and alphabets" (LaRocque, 2016, 131). This is the verbal expression that Campbell captures in *Stories of the Road Allowance People*.

#### A STORY TO TEACH HISTORY

In "Big John," the narrator is the nephew of the protagonist for whom the story is named. Big John "was a Treaty," meaning Indian. The Canadian government since 1830 had officially encouraged the development of farming among Indians, with supervision and "instruction" arranged through "farm instructors" (Carter, 1999, 131, 150). In this way, the Canadian Indian Department tried to provide guidance and ensure that rules were followed. However, these rules did not account for realities in the culture that the dominant system strove to guide, regulate, and govern.

The rules included not killing one's own cows without permission. "My Uncle / he wants to kill one of hees cows / cause him an hees family dey was real hard up," the nephew explains, in Campbell's rendition of the orality she listened to while collecting the road allowance people's tales (Campbell 1995, 70). The English is understandable, a thick vernacular that Campbell "translates" using phonetic spellings such as "hees" for "his" to convey the actual sounds of the language. The format is that of poetry, arranged in uneven lines according to where a speaker might pause or emphasize a point. This adds a creative visual dimension in the writing itself.

The farm instructor forbids the slaughter, speaking to Big John as though he were stupid. But, the narrator tells us, actually it was the farm instructor himself who knew nothing, including about farming. This was not because he was a "halfbreed," or Métis, like the narrator. Instead, the farm instructor was "Jus plain no good." "How he ever get dat job, nobody he knows. All dey was ever good for, my Mudder he use to say, was to give dah res of us Breeds a bad name" (74).



Grammatically, the transcribed language in all the stories does not include the pronoun “she” for women; everyone is “he.” Thus, the narrator’s mother (“Mudder”), from whom he knows that the farm instructor and his entire family are no good, is referred to as “he.”

The common designation for people who were of mixed races has been discussed. In this scene we also see evidence of the type of pejorative self-designation that reveals one of the numerous ways in which the views of a dominant culture can penetrate the mindset even of those it keeps down. The nephew distinguishes between two categories of people, both of whom fit into the same group that is governed by the Indian Department. The uncle is Indian, while the nephew/narrator, like the “no good” farm instructor, is Métis. Part of the reason the narrator and his mother likely see the instructor as bad is that he works for the government, which they resist. From an intersectional standpoint, the abstract dividing point between the instructor and the narrator, thus, pertains to governmental structures and who works inside them against whom. This reveals political and economic differences that, by limiting what has and has not been possible for the people occupying each space, also contribute to the people’s views of themselves as well as of their potential.

The dividing point is a subjective, artificially constructed line, but is invested with great power, both physical and psychological, over lives. Yet the clashes that it can cause also can give rise to new understanding. As Grzanka remarks: “Binaries and dualisms, such as Black/White, gay/straight, native/immigrant, are wholly insufficient to capture life at the borderlands, where national boundaries, cultures, identities, and histories overlap, collide, and grind against one another to create new forms of consciousness” (2014, 35). Such an opening of awareness is shown through the observations of Big John’s nephew.

Big John wants to ignore the farm instructor and kill the one cow to feed the family. His wife begs him not to, reminding him of another man who was arrested and hung for killing a cow without permission. So instead, Big John and his nephew do go hunting the next day, for which Big John has no skill but the narrator is, and gets two ducks.

“On dah way home / my Uncle he tell me I was lucky I wasen a Treaty. / Well me / I don know if I agree wit him or not. / Cause I shore don tink being a Halfbreed was very / good eeder. / Us Halfbreeds we don even got land. / An we shore as hell got no Kings cows to kill. Me you know / I never want to be a Treaty. / I see how bad dey was treated. / I see my Uncle / a big strong man, a real smart man / treated worse den a dog an it hurt me inside” (82).

This scene shows how both the nephew and the uncle have learned and internalized the social realities that prevent them from living as they wish and from succeeding. Yet at the same time, the narrator is clearly aware of the effects of these realities. The next step will come with acting on that awareness, which he will accomplish with Campbell’s help. The act of recording such scenes for publication represents resistance and the determination to change the politics that shape people’s real lives. Through preserving the story of Big John’s humiliation, his nephew, working with Campbell, articulates a demand for recognition and social justice.

The social reality of the nephew witnessing his proud uncle being humiliated is bound up with how the nephew has learned to see himself and his people: his sense of identity. As conditions change because of forces beyond their control, the people’s sense of self suffers accordingly, individually and a group, in a process that Patrick Grzanka breaks down in his notion of what constitutes “nation,” which he ties very closely to identity. “If nation remains a tacit, taken-for-granted construct, then we will inevitably reproduce colonial logic even while attempting and claiming to do something different.” Instead, Grzanka argues for the promotion of “a methodological cornerstone of intersectionality: dimensions of difference co-construct one another.” Like other scholars of intersectionality, his aim is to “treat dimensions of inequality *in relation to one another*,” because “nation” is “a historical process that is produced within and by local and global gender, sexual, economic, and racial politics (which it also affects)” (Grzanka, 2014, 197). These politics are equally affected by in-the-moment decisions taken by those who are on the receiving end of the oppression in real-time situations. To be thorough, an intersectional perspective should account for all sides of social and socioeconomic interactions, within the context of the dominant powers being identified.

Dill emphasizes the importance of never losing sight of real-world conditions: “The challenge for intersectional scholars today is not to trap ourselves in a tower of ideas but to [...] apply both our old and new insights to generate strategies to address experiences of injustice on the ground.” For Dill, the *raison d’être* of the theory is to “provide



a tool that could be used to pry loose notions of separation and discreteness to reveal the interconnections that were always already operating beneath the surface" (Dill, 2014, 343, 342).

This under-the-surface operation of interconnected forms of oppression is clear in this scene, in both the writing and artwork. In the full-page illustration that accompanies this heartbreaking, yet simple and straightforward expression of pride, humiliation, and outrage, Big John stands like a lost figure in the middle of a prairie of which he is also a part, because this is where his forebears hunted and remained in motion. Accenting this impression of his belonging, the prairie grasses rise slightly to surround his head with a yellow glow. Yet Big John himself stands motionless with hands in pockets, suggesting either passivity or defeat. His proud face betrays no emotion, as he stares straight ahead. The farm instructor lectures him, his finger pointed upward as if he had all the answers. He wears a jacket, suggesting some authority or status. The boy (and narrator of the story) who knows how to hunt stares straight ahead. Like that of his uncle, the boy's demeanor is impassive and betrays nothing of his true feelings, which the reader knows only through the narration.

The artwork fleshes out the narrative visually, showing how the characters look in their world while the storyteller explains how they actually feel. Together, the visual and narrative elements tell of a culture in the process of being lost, but at the same time preserved through these media. This collaborative enterprise involves the artist, the writer, and the storytellers remembering and conveying their experiences and how the events affected their lives and those of the wider population.

Grzanka, in an examination of rights and justice, notes that "the standard analytic mechanisms of political science remain configured around single-axis and multivariable approaches that fail to conceive identities and institutions as co-constitutive" (Grzanka, 2014, 227). In "Big John," the nephew both feels the effects of and identifies to some extent the political and economic structures that are in the process of disenfranchising the Métis and Indians. At the same time, through his self-referencing vocabulary choices, it is clear that he has (partly) accepted the dominant culture's rhetorical messages: he is a "Breed."

His uncle, a descendant of buffalo hunters, has lost the skill for hunting and is not even allowed by law to slaughter one of his own cows. The only hope seems to lie with this nephew who can secure food from the wilds, and then later pass on the history of how his people were treated. In so doing, he undermines the governmental structures aimed at assimilation.

Complementing one another to work as an evocation, the writing and artwork in *Stories of the Road Allowance People* together hold out an invitation to the book's audience, offering more than just information. The visual appeal draws the audience in, while the narration provides details about the history that inspired it. As LaRocque describes such a collaborative effort: "I have noted the 'resistance' voice and aesthetics of [Métis] writers [but] it is important not only to place this in the national context from which it grew, but equally, to appreciate the poetics of this literature. Métis writers have inventively gathered roots, relations, stones, bones, beads, and songs as their work has developed in range, depth, and style" (LaRocque, 2016, 143).

Through its interactive dynamic, Campbell and Racette's *Stories of the Road Allowance People* represents a form of communication that is also a valuable teaching tool. Such multidimensional educational utility conforms with Campbell's longtime commitment to "the Métis political movement and to developing and teaching Aboriginal literature, filmmaking, and drama" (Campbell 1995, author's biography).

#### CONCLUSIONS: PRESERVATION CAN BE ACTIVISM

In *Stories of the Road Allowance People*, Campbell provides the breathing room for others in her culture to convey their experiences, perspectives, history, and stories. Seen in an intersectional light, the views expressed by the characters in "Big John" result from structural forces with which they have had no choice but to contend in order to survive. These forces represent the "economic or political interests" of the dominant population, forces that have been organized into structures to provide "advantages and disadvantages that predict life chances and that make certain 'choices' tenable and others impossible [...] these processes are exceedingly difficult to see when looking through a dominant framework or paradigm" (Grzanka, 2014, 229).

Campbell's book, however, relays information from the perspective of a non-dominant paradigm. This is why, as noted, the nephew can see aspects of the systems that oppress and humiliate his uncle, but he does not see what he could do to change them. The sociocultural forces of exclusion that pressed on Big John had been organized





since the nineteenth century, and to begin recognizing them in order to then take action, organization on the part of the Métis would be necessary. Campbell is one among many who have devoted their lives to the effort.

To explore the intersections of cultural discourse and narrative involved in such a massive undertaking, Monica Michlin and Jean-Paul Rocchi carve out a space in which “transformative self-reflexivity” becomes possible, “a *praxis* of intersectionality preventing disciplines from closure and the human subjects they study from reification” (2013, 17). In this way, a text/story can be “not merely literary but transformational. Like metaphor it bridges intra- and extra-textual spaces, being and doing, and can give birth to theories of liberation [...] These theories and theorizations are the record, both affectual and political, of lived experience, and an invitation to social change that strives to resist systemic authority” (Michlin and Rocchi, 2013, 5). In other words, Michlin and Rocchi argue that intersectionality—the close study of the confluence of oppressive social structures—should be actively used to encourage social change for the better.

Maria Campbell’s act of writing to preserve culture, while also teaching the next generation and a wider audience, exemplifies engaged literature, meaning literature that takes a stand in order to effect change. The space in which an individual and a group can find possibilities for survival is the same space in which ideas about the self and a sense of group identity are shaped. Becoming more aware of the nature of the outside forces and the available space in which it is possible to breathe, self-sustain, regroup, and grow opens up a powerful possibility: no less than changing the identity, changing “from the inside.” This involves self-consciously, deliberately reconstructing ideas of the self, which can be aided by positive reinforcement such as that of a group. Together, the group has the power to recast a dominant discourse into an entirely different story.

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