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*"To me, Indigenous Research means allowing our voices to be heard. It builds strength within the Indigenous community to stand up for what we believe, supports our thoughts and feelings with evidence to solidify our ideas. It has been a gateway to healing, a stepping stone to climb out from the depths of our woes. "It is a guide to understanding and acceptance; of what has happened, what is happening now, and what we hope for the future."*

## BREAKING THE STIGMA

### Acknowledgement

I acknowledge that I am simply a long-time visitor on the land of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc territory that is situated within the unceded traditional lands of the Secwépemc Nation. With this acknowledgement, I want to recognise that I respect the people of this land, and the land itself, for allowing me to share this story. I will continue to be respectful to this community, and always be grateful that I am allowed to be a student of knowledge on this land. I have felt welcomed by the community, and I will continue to honor the gifts that this beautiful community holds. I want to thank the Elders, who have shared knowledge and special interactions with me: Elder Mike Arnouse, for his stories that exude such strength; Elder Margaret Hyslop, for the words of wisdom, and allowing our spirits to unite; Elder Sandy Hendry, for being a strong, female, Métis leader; Elder Doreen Kenoras, for your guidance through my Knowledge Makers journey, and sharing your love and understanding. I hold the words and lessons that you share with us as a cherished gift that I am humbled to have received.

Thank you to Knowledge Makers facilitators, and the other members who have shared this journey with me. You have all inspired me, and I thank you for allowing me to participate in your adventure. This experience is one that for which I am very grateful. I cannot wait to see the friendships that I have made here flourish.

This paper is written with hopes of empowering Métis community members, like me. The ones who have had their journeys halted by colonial coercion, the ones who have lost their sense of culture for a time, and the ones who find it difficult to establish where they belong. It is written with the feelings of pride, acceptance and contentment.

Lastly, I think it is important to acknowledge my ancestors: ma famii (my family), aunts, uncles, cousins, grandmothers, and grandfathers, and all those who came before them. I spoke with my Elders and family members who have shared their lived truths with me. I thank my father, Roland Mockford; his sister, Alma Leach; my father's cousin, Norman Fleury; and my sister, Hollie Farkas. Your lived experiences have helped me with this paper and I am forever grateful. I will document their stories from memory, with permission from those who shared with me, in hopes of encouraging others who are holding in their truths. The strength I have to write this paper travels through me, from you. Marsii! Thank you!

### Introduction

I believe there is a magic that runs through the veins of every Métis person, a magic that is comprised of strength, resilience, fire, and an energy that belongs to all those of mixed blood. Not Indian or European, but a mix of the two cultures; it is important to understand

and accept that we cannot be placed in one cookie cutter definition or another. In this paper, I will use my family's story and literature to highlight strengths, and how the Métis built such strengths through lived experiences. I hope to begin to break the stigma of Métis people feeling like they are not able to check one box or another.

While researching for this project I found a book by the author Marie Campbell, titled *Halfbreed*. In awe, I read her stories of growing up in a Métis home. She highlights her struggles with racism and segregation, and how these moments made her feel. I took inspiration from the way she tells her stories, and this book guided me through the journey of composing this paper. I mention her book in this paper often. I speak about my own experiences, and my family's experiences with finding our place within the Métis culture. I explain the colonial definition of Métis, and the word Michif, what it means, and why I claim it. I outline my suggestions for educating future generations on the cultures of Indigenous people, and why I feel this is important.

This paper is written from a place of forgiveness, and from an unapologetic stance that these are our stories, and that I have the merit to be an avenue through which they travel. I will not conform to the colonial academic standards that have silenced our people's truths for so long (Ahenakew, 2016; Kuokkanen, 2011; Lavallée, 2009). I will use the words,"half-breed" and "Indian," not in a derogatory sense as they are used now, but as a way of acknowledging that while these words were once used to hurt, they also were used in everyday life by many Indigenous people. I have heard my relations use them and have used them in our own household while growing up, only because they had no negative connotation attached to them. It is not my wish to disrespect anyone, but I feel that my story would not be a whole truth without their use. There are also Michif words throughout the paper. I believe it is important to submerge ourselves in our cultures; even though I am still a student of our language, I try to incorporate it into whatever I am doing. I hope to start a revolution, a revolution based in pride for the mix that we are and to celebrate it in hopes that it will empower present and future generations of Métis.

## Strength

The word strength comes to mind whenever I think of past generations. One thing we cannot deny is the strength of our ancestors; not just physical strength, but a strength of mind, and spiritual strength. A connection to the energies that flow through everyone and everything. The Métis people have a connection to this strength and although some may be more in tune with it than others, all of us hold this potential, which is why I will be examining their strengths.

We all know someone we would consider strong, someone whose resilience is unimaginable. The coureurs des bois – which translates to "runners of the woods" (Morrow & Wamsley, 2017, p. 16) - were undoubtedly some of the strongest men. They were fur traders who were rebels of sorts, and gained the reputation of being "unruly, wild and uncivilized" (Morrow & Wamsley, 2017, p. 16). They would act as middle-men between the Europeans and the Indians while exchanging furs. They never had commercial permits for these exchanges, so they often would have to live in the bush, and a lot of the time became quite close with the Natives in the areas (Mary-Rousselière, 1984). They were the epitome of strength and endurance. They learned their endurance skills from the Aboriginal people, through subsistence techniques. These types of men mixed with Aboriginal women, due to their close relations with Native people, and this was a base for the robust nature of the Métis people. The coureurs des bois are icons of bush masculinity.

Not only were the men associated with strength, but the women as well. Women were resilient in many ways. They looked after the children, cooked, maintained the home, chopped wood, and butchered game and fish that the men brought home from hunting (Van Kirk, 1984, p. 10). They even accompanied their men on trapping and hunting excursions. They were caregivers and medicine women, and always looked after anyone they were able to. It was not uncommon for all the women to

embody such strength. Morrow and Wamsley (2007) note, "Fur traders and travellers marvelled at the strength of Athapaskan women, who pulled sleds burdened with supplies and other gear or carried heavy packs from camp to camp." (p. 9) Even women as young as 12 years old were able to carry heavy loads for long periods of time. The role of women was, and is, important: "Indian women are the reason Indian cultures have survived" (Hollrah, 2004, p.122). We need to learn from our pasts to be stronger, and to endure today.

*Sometimes in order to keep moving forward, not only must you take one step at a time, but you must be willing to look back occasionally and evaluate your past, no matter how painful it is. Looking back lets you know whether or not you are headed in the right direction. (Attributed to G.K. Adams[1])*

I am particularly fond of strong women because I stem from them. My grandma, who was a Michif, was one of them. I say "Michif" (or *Michif niiya* – I am Michif) because that is how they identified themselves. I learned of this through my dad's *koozin* (cousin), Norman Fleury. Norman is a Special Lecturer at the College of Education—University of Saskatchewan, a *Li pleu vyeu moond* (the older people, or Elder) of the University, and of the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan. Norman is a wealth of knowledge and has been very supportive throughout my academic journey. I would also add that I consider him a protector of the Michif language:

*The meaning in saying you are a Michif places you as part of a nation, it's a language and its own culture. When we say "Métis," this is how we are recognized as a Nation by our Métis Government, and Canada historically. The "Michif" were of French and Cree ancestry. Our Michif language demonstrates this: nouns associated grammar are in French, and the verbs associated grammar are in Cree. English borrowed words which are old and new words. Our Michif people spoke not only Michif language, but also other languages such as Cree and Assiniboine, Nakota and Saulteau; very little English language was used, if any. The people who called themselves "Halfbreed" were of Cree, Saulteau, Scottish, Irish and English ancestry. They spoke Bungee, which is made up of Cree and Saulteau, Gaelic and English. (N. Fleury, personal communication, 12/8/19)*

The colonial definition of Métis is "people of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry" (Gaudry, 2019). The Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples (2013) states that they "acknowledge that the identity of Canada's Aboriginal peoples is a matter for peoples themselves to determine" (p.1).

At 16 years old, my grandma married my grandfather, who was from England. Due to her age she needed her parents' signature to marry; this was difficult because they were not fond of their white, English future son-in-law. But the couple, *mii granpearaant* (my grandparents), were successfully married and had nine children together, six girls and three boys; my father is the youngest. After many years, my grandparents separated. Her parents were Michif, and exposed to torment for being Indians, like so many others; "[Native peoples'] struggle has been one against racism and national oppression" (Bourgeault, 1983, p. 45). Oppressed people often oppress people, as Paulo Freire highlights in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1989): "the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors" (p. 45). This is not an excuse, but is part of what we need to change if we want to break the stigma of the divide. After the separation, my father spent his time with his father. It is possible that the reason we lacked Michif culture in our home is that he was removed from it for a period of his life. This is true for many of my relations, who grew up Michif but gravitated towards

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1 Retrieved from https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/5375398.G_K_Adams

colonial ways. Given that people were being pulled from their homes and put in residential schools, told not to use their language and urged to forget their culture, one can assume that it may have been easier to claim to be white. Now, many do not identify as Michif; I am so grateful to those who still do.

One of my Taants (aunts), the seventh of the nine children, did not lose the spirit of the Michif. She spent a lot of time with her grandmother and grandfather, and for a time, lived in their home. I spoke with her to get an idea of my great-grandma's and great-grandpa's strengths. She explained to me that their household was a Michif household. Like many others, my great-grandpa trapped and brought home furs to trade (Schultz, 2019). He would gather many furs and walk to the next settlement, carrying the heavy load on his back. She spoke of him as a kind and gentle man, who really loved Granny. Granny would ask him to go out and fetch various medicinal ingredients for her to make concoctions. He was very caring of others, and more stoic, but he was a joker and always made everyone laugh. Granny was the "leader" of the household. She was a firecracker, loved to dance, and was a fun lady. She was always baking and making food for anyone who was at her house. As Marie Campbell (1982) observed, "One thing about our people is that they never hoard. If they have something, they share all of it with each other, regardless of good or bad fortune" (p. 55); mii taant, too, described how Granny shared with others, commenting, "Didn't matter who it was, they came in, warmed up, were fed, and took food with them" (A. Leach, personal communication, 12/6/19). She even would extend her kindness to the White people who snubbed her, when they fell upon hard times. She was a pillar of strength.

The characteristic of strength to survive and overcome struggles was, and is, common in female matriarchs. They practiced only what they knew from their past generations.: "we find our strength and our power in our ability to be what our Grandmothers were to us: Keepers of the next generation in every sense of that word – physically, intellectually, and spiritually" (Miller, 1996, p. xi). These women endured living through the most challenging times, very often pregnant and on their own, raising numerous children. They held strong as they were discriminated against and called terrible names. A piece of advice that Marie Campbell's Cheechum gave her is to "always walk with your head up and if anyone says something then put out your chin and hold it higher" (Campbell, 1982, p. 37). This is what my family has passed on to me as well. One thing about mii famii is that we are known as spitfires. Sometimes my mouth gets me in trouble, but I am like my dad, like my taants, like my grandmother and my great-grandmother; I consider it a strength. We have always been told to not let anyone break you, to be resilient, and to stand up for yourself and anyone you believe needs support. I have learned to overcome discrimination like my ancestors, although I would not say I have had the hardest life, or even close. However, I have experienced trauma that damaged my spirit for a long time.

## Perseverance

We must build the foundation of strength first, to then persevere through challenges of discouragement. I grew up in a White household, knowing that we had Métis heritage. Every summer as far back as I remember, my parents would pack me and my three siblings up in the family vehicle, and we would drive from BC to Manitoba. My dad's family is from there and we loved to go for visits. Our *tannts* and *noonks* (uncles) were loving people, always singing, dancing, and laughing. They would speak in a mixture of French, Michif, and English, and we would laugh at them when they mixed up sayings and words. I always felt connected to them and the land, but I never knew why. Later in life, once I started to learn more about my culture, I realized that the things I was drawn to in them were all characteristics of Métis culture. I knew that this feeling of "magic," as I called it earlier, was in me. I was Michif.

When I was a little girl, some of my cousins on my mother's side were abusive. I did not recognize it at the time, but they would mentally and emotionally abuse me. They were narcissists. They would build me up to the point where I thought they really liked me, then they would strike me down with damaging blows, the really low blows that hurt deep inside. Then they would proceed to laugh it

off and claim that they were only joking, and start the building up over again. They would call us (my siblings and me) little Indians, or say bad things about my dad, in a poor attempt at an Indian accent. One time in particular I remember one of them having a conversation with me. I was young; I do not remember the exact age, but I was small enough to go crawl under the coffee table after our interaction. I remember him saying to me, with a huge grin on his face, "So you're an Indian, eh? That's so cool. Do you know any words in Indian?" He was being facetious, and his voice was filled with so much sarcasm that even at my young age, I second-guessed if he was making fun of me. I could not tell, but it felt so good when they allowed me to feel that high that I catered to his request. I said, "Yes, I do." Then I mumbled some made-up "word" and he started laughing, the obnoxious laugh that made me instantly know: I had fallen for it. Again, and again. Throughout my entire childhood. This made me hate my White side, and I started to claim Aboriginal at school, and on all documents.

Discrimination comes from both sides, and I experienced it. I was never accepted as either White or Indigenous. I would go to school and there was always a clear division between Natives and Whites. The town I grew up in was surrounded by three reservations. One was situated on the North side of the South Thompson River, and we would have to cross a bridge to get over to "the Darkside," as my peers would call it. I have to admit that I am guilty of calling it that at times, too. I was always liked in school, and could fit in well with different groups, but I never seemed to have best friends. Once I was at a party and I was standing with a group of White girls, and a group of Native girls came in. A remark was made about letting the "Darkside dogs" into the party. I remember wincing because it was so distasteful and it made me mad. I told the girl that it was a rude comment, and she promptly told me I was welcome to go join the "Darkside dogs" if I loved them that much. I just shook my head and went home. I was so disappointed that I was part of something like that.

2006 rolled around and I was about to graduate from high school. I received an invitation to participate in the Aboriginal Graduation and I was thrilled. I went in alone and was a bit shy. I saw other students from my school so I made my way over and stood near them. As we were all lining up to walk across the stage, I heard a woman speaking to the woman beside her: "Geesh, there sure are a lot of whities here, I thought this was supposed to be an Indian graduation." My feelings of happiness and accomplishment instantly were taken over by embarrassment and shame, embarrassment that I had agreed to participate in the event when I surely was not supposed to be there.

The point I hope to make by sharing my personal experiences is that I am clearly not one or the other, and I do not believe that my experiences are unique. Unfortunately, this happened in the past and it happens in the present, but hopefully it will happen less in the future. It took me a long time to be happy and accept that I do not need to fit into one side of the line. But I am constantly overcoming struggles and trying my hardest to persevere. I am proud to be Michif. My hope is to break the stigma that is associated with being in the middle; it needs to be celebrated. The strength and resilience of our ancestors should be celebrated. I will continue to be proud, with an unapologetic attitude. Yes, I am too Native to be White! Yes, I am too White to be Native! Yes, *Michif niiya*!

## Education and Celebration

I am currently working towards finishing my post-secondary studies, with hopes of attaining a Bachelor degree in Education and becoming a teacher. I have chosen this occupation because I believe that the education of children is where we can begin to create change. Intergenerational trauma and lateral violence[2] do not have to go on any further. I feel like we are working towards correcting this, but it will not change on its own. We need to connect with children at an impressionable age to teach them coping mechanisms and offer support. All groups should have the right to be proud of who they are. We need to teach them that they are valuable and worthy

**2 "Lateral violence (LV) refers to the ways oppressed and powerless people covertly and overtly direct their dissatisfaction inward, toward each other, and those less powerful than themselves." (Clark, Augoustinos, & Malin, 2016, p. 43-44)**

of accomplishing something great. We are a culture of sharing, as mentioned before: not just material things, but also stories of strife and success. Indigenous people have passed on their histories through storytelling and shared experiences that are then bestowed on future generations. A great way to continue this tradition is to bring the knowledge of past generations to the forefront by inviting older generations to build up our youth and assist them in believing they have potential. I hope for Elders to become frequent visitors in classrooms, so students can understand respect, absorb knowledge, and be grateful to have Elders come to share their knowledge with the youth so they, in turn, can continue to pass it on in the future.

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Children need to learn life skills, and how to be sustainable. Sustainability is something that is common in recent news. With climate change and the earth warming, we cannot go on depredating the land any longer. The definition of sustainability is "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Flisrand, 2008). Teaching children the ways that Indigenous people once lived and passing on their skills is a goal. Passing on important life lessons and teaching them that we need to be resilient is a goal. We need to help children get in touch with their ancestry and learn about their own families' strengths. I think when they are able to recognize strength in someone to whom they feel personally connected, then they will be better able to cope with hardships they may face in life.

The new BC Government has recently implemented changes to add more Indigenous education into the BC curriculum (Province of British Columbia, 2019). They are equipping teachers with Indigenous education resources and are highlighting lessons that add First Nations knowledge into the learning objectives (Province of British Columbia, 2019). These are steps in the right direction. Relating the stories of Indigenous history could help break down the segregation between the races.

I will teach my own children the importance of accepting their own identities with pride, and respecting others' identities. I will teach them to support ones who are still searching, and help guide them by finding strengths within. I will strive to be encouraging to those who are on their own journey to support them in celebrating our culture. As Elder Mike Arnouse once told me, "If we're all going in the same direction, we might as well walk together" (personal communication, 10/20/19). Together we will be able to stand strong.

## Conclusion

Without past family members' experiences we would not know what strength is. Judy Iseke cites Shawn Wilson in her paper "Importance of Métis Ways of Knowing in Healing Communities" (2010) and I feel like these words are very fitting to my Knowledge Makers experience: "If research doesn't change you as a person, then you haven't done it right" (p. 95). The person who is writing this conclusion is a very different person than the one who began. I am thrilled with the person I am, and I have such pride for where I came from. I am continuing to empower others to "take back their culture," and I am teaching the young children the ways of our ancestors. Good or bad, we should share the knowledge of our ancestors with future generations so they can understand how our people once lived, and what they had to overcome for us to stand where we are today. We should celebrate that we are an individual culture. Only when we realize our strengths, will we be able to break the stigma and learn to be proud of who we are.

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