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Commentary
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"I'm Métis, What's your excuse?": On the optics and the Ethics of the Misrecognition of Métis in Canada

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As a kid, I spent my formative years growing up in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. In addition to the numerous visits to family living north of the city, we used to attend "Back to Batoche," an annual Métis celebration held adjacent to the historic battleground between Métis troops and Canada's army during the 1885 Battle of Batoche (and now a national historic site). For those who don't know, the Batoche Days festival represents both a commemorative and a "living" site of Métis politics and national identity. What I remember most about the Batoche Days of my childhood, however, is not its more overt political symbolism but, rather, a t-shirt my mom bought me one year. It featured a fairly iconic picture of Gabriel Dumont on a horse, captioned underneath with the phrase "I'm Métis, what's your excuse?" What I remember thinking at the time was that the phrase meant "I'm Métis, this is why I – why *we* – act this way: what's your excuse?" To be honest, I wasn't sure what "acting this way" entailed, exactly, although I suppose I have since roughly equated it with part of the original sentiments behind the title of Murray Dobbin's excellent account of Métis political activity during the twentieth century, "The One and a Half Men." According to Dobbin, the term was coined by a priest in Red River during the nineteenth-century heyday of the Métis nation, to describe to a newcomer the Métis he saw as "one-and-a-half men: half white, half Indian and half devil."

Unlike the Métis of the priest's taxonomic imagination, though, my identification as Métis wasn't and isn't based on the apparently obvious fact that I'm not white but have white ancestry, nor because I'm not First Nations but have First Nations ancestry. Nonetheless, the idea that Métis are essentially "mixed" remains a near-ubiquitous feature of Canadian society: John Raulston Saul opines that, at its root, Canada is a "metis"

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nation; the Supreme Court of Canada in its wisdom declared, in the 2003 *Powley* decision, that Métis are Aboriginal despite – or in addition to – our "mixedness"; and, more locally to where I live, an Edmonton news station, leading their 16 November 2010 newscast with a story about the anniversary of Métis leader Louis Riel's 1885 hanging, immediately explained that Louis Riel was mostly white but thought of himself as Métis (one wonders how those who voted Tommy Douglas Canada's "Greatest Canadian" might react to his being described as someone who, though mostly Scottish, thought of himself as Canadian).

These and a host of similarly banal indignities raise complicated issues around Métis identity, both in the realm of the "whom" and the "what": namely, "who" gets to decide and "what" it consists of. In a recent *Globe and Mail* article, journalist Joe Friesen waded bravely into these deep and admittedly muddy waters by discussing a recent (and seemingly ill-fated) attempt by Indian Affairs officials to seek clarification and standardization of Métis membership systems by awarding a contract to the Canadian Standards Association (CSA). For someone like me, who is Métis and who has been researching issues of Métis identity for more than a decade, Friesen's article is especially interesting for its attempts to come to grips with the "what" of Métis identity because he writes according to a logic that most Canadians readily identify with: namely, that the "truth" of Métis identity lies in our "mixedness." His definition of Métis as being "the descendants of fur-trade marriages of Europeans and natives" – a definition that, despite Friesen's specific application to Métis identity, applies to many First Nations people(s) and European-Canadians as well – is one that continues to resonate widely among Canadians. Of particular relevance to my own research, Friesen's remarks on the recent doubling in the "Métis population" in the Canadian census between 1996 and 2006 in the last decade are instructive examples of this "Métis=mixed" logic. He argues, as most Canadian demographers have, that this increase cannot be explained by conventional demographic factors alone (such as mortality and fertility) but, rather, must also account for a large increase in the number of individuals beginning to declare a Métis identity despite their not having done so in the past.

Friesen (and the demographers) are probably correct about the reasons for the "Métis population" increase. However, the matter is more complicated than their positioning indicates because, in a colonial country like Canada, the decision to declare a Métis identity never takes place in a

vacuum. Indeed, we might legitimately ask why someone might decide to begin self-identifying as Métis rather than, say, any number of identities that fall under the "First Nations" umbrella. And what role, if any, might commonsensical "Métis=mixed" logics play in such a decision? Scholars have written extensively about the racist and patriarchal underpinnings of the Indian Act that, over successive generations, led the Department of Indian Affairs to declaim thousands of (formerly) status Indian women and their families, forcing them to move away from their reserve communities and kin. And, while many were able to maintain links to their family, many did not. I would argue that this institutional genealogy and the avenues for justice closed off by it, coupled with deeply and widely held presumptions about the essential "mixedness" of Métis identity, have conspired to produce latter-day identification as Métis in geographical regions of Canada with no historical Métis collectivities.

All of this begs the question, then: even if, as a matter of logic, we can think about Métis identity in terms other than mixedness, are we prepared to do so? If not, what does this say about how little we value the political core of Métis identity or, for that matter, Indigenous identity more generally? If so, what can it teach us about Canada's continued obsession – at virtually all levels – with the "mixedness" of Métis identity? Thinking about these issues through the lens of Indigenous nationhood might allow us to tell a much different – and more complex – story, about a Métis society historically centred in Red River (now roughly Winnipeg, Manitoba) that rose to prominence during the middle and latter parts of the nineteenth century, fueled by a varied economic role in the mercantile political economy of the era; that took up arms to challenge the colonial claims, first, of the Hudson's Bay Company and later, of the Canadian state; and that, following the events of 1885, faded into political obscurity (or at least so it might seem to the mainstream). We need not list here the litany of events, people, and social relations central to such a narrative. But, were we asked to do so, we would not have to presuppose the "mixedness" of Métis identity as a price of admission (as the Supreme Court of Canada's definition of Métis, for example, seems to require). Yet, little academic discussion and even less media coverage seems able to resist the temptation to explain Métis identity in terms of mixedness – even, apparently, at the conceptual ground zero of Métis nationhood, the anniversary of Louis Riel's hanging!

Now, lest this collapse (further) into a nationalist rant about Métis identity, we should bear in mind that Métis are not without responsibility

in the entrenching of this racialized logic. Not only do we indulge in such rhetoric from time to time (i.e., "we are the result of the unions of the strongest fur trading men and the most beautiful First Nations women…"), but our political history has including a history of tempering our claims to fit into the interstices of Canadian legislation massively geared towards "Indian" issues. Likewise, a century and more of colonial authorities – and sometimes even First Nations – declaring our "mixedness" has exerted its own impact in shaping our self-consciousness. Some days, it's enough to give an identity a complex! However, if Métis identity is "caught between two worlds," it isn't because it somehow reflects the "core" of our identity. Rather, it is because Métis identity carries the freight of more than a century of official Canadian attempts to impose binary "truths" ("Indian or Canadian") onto Indigenous social orders, the avenues of resistance such attempts have opened up (and closed off), and the "leakage" of such racialization discourses into our perceptions of the world. A quick peek at the historical documentation, for example (one place we might look for evidence of the historical core of Métis identity), doesn't reveal a "respect for mixedness" among the list of demands by the provisional government in 1870 Manitoba.

When I argue for the drawing of boundaries around Métis identity to reflect a commitment to recognizing our nationhood, however, colleagues often object, as many of you might, in one of two ways. The first objection usually takes the form of a challenge rooted firmly in racialization: "If someone wants to self-identify as Métis, who are you to suggest they can't? Why do you think you own the term Métis?" I ask them to imagine raising a similar challenge to, say, a Blackfoot person about the right of someone born and raised, and with ancestors born and raised, in Nova Scotia or Labrador, to declare a Blackfoot identity because they could not gain recognition as Mi'kmaq or Inuit. Second, I am sometimes asked, "What of those Indigenous people who have, due to their mixed ancestry and the discriminatory provisions of the Indian Act, been dispossessed from their First Nations community? What happens to them if we prevent the possibility of their declaring a Métis identity (some of whom, due to complex historical kinship relations, might legitimately claim one)?" Such disquiet is often buoyed by a broader question of fundamental justice: what obligation, do any of us – Métis included – owe dispossessed Indigenous individuals, and even communities, who forward claims using a Métis identity based not on a connection to Métis national roots but because it

seems like the only possible option? Whatever we imagine a fair response to look like, it must account for the fact that "Métis" refers to a nation with membership codes that deserve to be respected. We are not a soup kitchen for those disenfranchised by past and present Canadian Indian policy and, as such, although we should sympathize with those who bear the brunt of this particular form of dispossession, we cannot do so at expense of eviscerating our identity.

An unfortunate reality of colonialism is that non-Indigenous people get to choose when and how they have relationships with Indigenous people(s). Educators, journalists, and policy actors alike must take responsibility for the fact that recognizing Métis as "mixed" rather than as a nation – that is, to use the term "Métis" rather than "person of mixed ancestry" because you think it more dignified than the latter phrase – is an ethical choice. It is to choose a racialized, rather than Indigenously national, relationship with the Métis people and, for that matter, with Indigenous peoples more generally. It is also to choose to reproduce and re-entrench the racism of the Indian Act and the categories originally anchored in its logics. I'm Métis because I belong (and claim allegiance) to a set of Métis memories, territories, and leaders who challenged and continue to challenge colonial authorities' unitary claims to land and society. What's your excuse for recognizing me – for recognizing us – in any terms other than those of the Métis nationhood produced in these struggles?

Chris Andersen is an associate professor in the Faculty of Native Studies, University of Alberta and has written extensively on issues relating to Métis identity. He is currently writing a book-length manuscript with UBC Press entitled: *"In Addition to Our Mixedness": Race, law and the misrecognition of Métis identity.*