Teaching the Michif (Métis) people

A conversation with Melanie Brice

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BIOGRAPHIES

Annie Pilote is a full professor at Université Laval's Faculty of Education. As an educational sociologist, she is interested in social and educational inequalities through the lens of equity and inclusion. She has led different projects in collaboration with First Peoples' organizations to include Indigenous realities and perspectives in teacher's training. She has also conducted research on the linguistic identity of young people from official language minority communities in Canada.

Melanie Brice is an Associate Professor in Indigenous Education, Language & Literacy Education, and Educational Core Studies with the Faculty of Education, University of Regina. She holds the Gabriel Dumont Research Chair in Métis/Michif Education. Brice, a Michif (Métis) born in Meadow Lake and raised at Jackfish Lake, Saskatchewan, has a strong understanding of Indigenous histories, cultures, languages and literacies, perspectives, educational experiences, and cross-cultural education issues.

Melanie (M) : First and foremost, let's make it clear: if you have a First Nations' person with Europeans' person, their child is not Métis. And so, we have to move away from that thinking that now that child can say that they're Métis. Métis is about our culture, about our language, our traditions, our practices, our protocols, that are very specific to who we are. It's one of the reasons why, now when I identify, I say, "I'm Michif." Because people don't understand, they think Métis, as in: "Oh, you're half this and half that." They're part of, you know… "You're mixed". I've had conversation with colleagues, like teachers, like out in the field, who honestly believe that if a First Nations person had a child with somebody who was non-Indigenous, that child would be Métis. And, you know, these are people who are well educated!

Annie (A) : So, would you say it's the first thing that we really should put on the table before learning about the Métis people? That we need to deconstruct that concept?

M : Yes.

A : Okay. And then what does it mean to be Métis? So, there's a history, there's a culture, and there's language, and there are all these things that make it a nation. Would you say that the political mobilization of the Métis people is as much an important component as other cultural characteristics that you've talked about?

M : Oh, definitely. Michif identity really came out of a political need. Because when you look at our history, and why Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont are such huge, huge figures… It's because of what they represent for us, like, politically, in fighting for our rights and who we are, as a people and as a nation.

A : Okay, so I will try to see how to build around that. It's not pretending "It's the history of the Métis people!" No, it's why it's important for teachers to know about the Métis people in their own teaching.

M : Definitely. Looking at the early 1800s in pre-Manitoba, the Métis people were just described as being… different. They're not the First Nations. They're not the settlers. They dressed a little different, they had their own language and cultural practices… They were their own, right? And they were called different names by outsiders like Bois-Brûlés, the Voyageurs or many other names to describe them…

A : All referring to the same cultural group?

M : Yes, and then, the thing that sort of ended up happening was, of course, the settlers coming in and like different groups, looking at the land that these people had lived in, that they worked on, and then different groups contesting how the land is being used… All that leading to 1816, the Battle of the Seven Oaks, which was led by Cuthbert Grant. That sort of was like this political solidification of this identity…

A : That's a key date in defining of the Métis identity. But your identity was existing before that?

M : Yes. We understood that we had to come together and protect our rights and protect our ways and our life and where we live, because there were established, like different Métis communities, in the Red River area. Jean Teillet, who's a Métis lawyer, is one of the first who wrote, like, an actual history of the Métis people, as a Métis person.

The Métis economy, especially in the south, was very centered around the buffalo hunt. Voyageurs used pemmican for the fur trade because it was easy to transport, right for the food. So that whole buffalo economy was really, really, really key. The buffalo hunts would be like, up 1000s of people. The whole families would go off and they would set up in, like these brigades where they would have groups of 10, and somebody would be in charge of, like a group of brigades. And so, then each of the sort of, like the captains, they would come together. So, through the buffalo hunts already, they had like a way to organize themselves and create like a political structure so that when it came time to things like the battle in 1816, they were able to use that same sort of structure that they used to organize themselves.

A : So, the identification didn't come solely from the outside, but they also had to organize themselves internally through the buffalo hunt?

M : Yes, exactly. And the buffalo hunts were so central. So then, of course, with the eradication project of the buffalo by the colonial government, they took away their economy, their livelihood, right? And so that was such a change. The Imperial mindset of the government was a very agrarian lifestyle: "You are on this land, and you farm the land." But in the south, in the Métis way, you would have to leave and follow the buffalo on the buffalo trails to hunt for a period of time. So, then you're not tending to any fields while you go buffalo hunting. So, you're looked down upon, right? Like you're not taking care of your home. And so, sometimes when they would come back from the buffalo hunts, there'd be people on their land saying, "Well, you weren't using it." But no, because we were out hunting, pursuing our livelihood. It was a different way of living. It wasn't a Western-European idea of what you should be doing with your land.

A : Taking the land and occupying it, 365 days a year...

M : Under the Homesteads Act (Dominion Lands Act), the government brought up a lot more settlers to "improve" the land by cultivating it. So, the same thing happened. At the time, the Métis people of the Red River were well established into communities, they had their different parishes that were organized around river lots. They were narrow river lots, which is brilliant because everybody could access water. But when government came in to do the surveying, they were looking for square lots, which is the way the colonial system works, so they didn't acknowledge the river lots, nor their title or ownership. So that's when we got into, like 1869 and 1870 with the resistance there. Louis Riel, who was, you know, like a huge figure. He was seen as such a good person to have. Because he had actually come to Montréal, like he went to school and studied in Montréal. So being well educated in the European way, he could then write all these petitions to the government to say, like "Nope, this is our land." And so then, under him, they created this provisional government to be able to say, "No, this is ours..." You know. "We're the government. This is our area." So, it's interesting because he was hanged for treason. But then, looking at it from Métis perspective, it would be : but that treason against whom, right? Because you'd have to be a subject of the crown. But if this is your land already, you're not going against, like this is the government that he established. He wasn't going against his own government. It was the Canadian government who got the land from, like, did the land transfer from the Hudson Bay Company. So, Hudson Bay Company didn't have the rights to settle the land. It wasn't theirs. So, there's, of course, like all of these things over that occurred in terms of injustices. Where the Canadian government saw "Oh, we paid for the land. It's ours." But you bought it from somebody who didn't own it, right?

A : In terms of the land, so you've talked about the Red River, and what is now Manitoba. But how does Saskatchewan come into that? How does the Métis land crosses over those provinces?

M : Even before the Resistance in 1869, you had the people in that area, in the Red River, like they would go on, like the buffalo hunts, and there were trails. And so, these trails that went down into, now into the Dakotas and then into Alberta, into the south, like, there were trails all the way up to what is now Edmonton, into Saskatchewan, into Fort Carlton. So, there were routes that they would go to do these buffalo hunts and so. And then they have like, kinship ties to these different communities. And then, of course, because of the connection with the buffalo hunt, to the pemmican trade, which was tied to the fur trade. Then you also have, like fur traders, right? Because a lot were with the members of Northwest or worked for the Hudson Bay Company, and that's how you get the Métis communities moving even, like further north into Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta. Because that's where the trap lines were, and so they'd have these kinship ties to all of these different places, all coming out of the buffalo economy, right? Red River had like, 1000s and 1000s of Métis people, and then people were, like, killed even after the land transfer happened. And so those who didn't like what was happening, you know, basically left. They moved to where they had already kinship ties, like the Qu'Appelle Valley, for example, or towards Edmonton or near Batoche, right around, like the Carlton trail and stuff like that, because they were no longer safe in around Red River. And so, it's so interesting. Looking at my own family is how, you know… That's why we can trace our ancestry right to Red River, because of how we've had these connections for hundreds of years. But then, as well, people moving to go where they had… where they could have a life. So, then a lot of people, of course, moved whether it was into Qu'Appelle Valley, into the Turtle Mountain, into Batoche, St. Paul… it's called St-Paul-des-Métis, which is in north of Edmonton, like we've also moved to around Edmonton, like St. Albert. And so, you have these other Métis communities.

A : And they were connected? Because they were isolated, one from the other, but they had lines of communications between them?

M : Well, a lot had to tie into everything around that buffalo economy. And then you'd have that kinship and those family ties. So, then people moved west because it was no longer safe in Red River. There were definitely some who stayed but… And then the other piece was like the scrip, which came out of the land transfer, because that was part of the agreement under the Manitoba Act that they would, the Métis people would get a land scrip.

A : The scrip? What do you mean by scrip?

M : Under the Manitoba Act, they said that each, like Métis person would get sort of… like a deed, it's called land scrip. So, say you get so many acres of land, right? And so, when they negotiated that into the Manitoba Act, they thought, "Okay, well, then this means I can use this to go get the land, where I am, where my family is". But what the government did was saying, "No, we will tell you. This is where your scrip… where we're giving you this land. Here's your little piece of paper that says you have this land." For some people, it worked out. But other times, like the land where they were, this allocation was nowhere near where they were, nowhere near family. The people would come to get their scrip token, their piece of paper that says they got

this land allocation. People who came alongside said, “Oh, well, we’ll buy that. We’ll buy that land scrip from you, and we’ll give you…” You know, so if it’s 160 acres, okay, we’ll give you $160 so then it’s like, “Oh, well, I don’t want to take this land way over here. I’ll take the $160 and then be able to go and be where I want to be.” Historians who’ve done their research and so, the signatures are like just putting in an X. So, was it really that person? Because anybody could come into an office, and say, “I’m this person. This person here will attest to me being who I say I am. And yeah, so give me my scrip, and then, okay, now I’m gonna go in and trade it for money.” You know, it was just not… a good system. I have family who took scrip, and it’s the interesting thing about it, they had to detail everywhere that they lived and who their children were. Looking at my great, great grandfather’s scrip application to be able to see. Oh! These are all the places that they lived, and these are all the children that they had, the names. It was an awful thing, but yet, now we have this really great way to be able to trace and see where our family moved.

A : Can you explain to me… Because I’ve also heard about the road allowances. How does that fit in with the scrip?

M : Sure. There are a few different things. Communities were no longer able to go out on the buffalo hunt. Their livelihood has been destroyed. And so, if they got scrip, they might have sold it, to have money to be able to move wherever. And so, they would then be looking for work, for example, in the Qu’Appelle Valley. Okay, well, where will we live? And so, there are Crown lands that might be available. Let me go back in time for a moment. Remember that the government went and surveyed all the lands. They did them all into these townships, they were all in these squares, as we said. But they had set aside lands for future sites for the CP rail, churches, schools, etc. They also set aside land for roads that were quite significant. So, these are all Crown lands. If they weren’t building a road on it, it was just sitting there and thus, became available for a lot of people that could move on. These lands had been called road allowances. Even if these lands were initially set for schools, like the one my grandmother grew up on, it still became considered road allowance.

A : So, they did not own this land, but they could actually build houses on it… but they could also be taken out anytime?

M : Yes! Yes, one of Wilfred Burton's children's book called "Road Allowance Kitten" does a really beautiful telling of where the people who lived on the road allowance in the south were told, "You can't live here. We've got great land for you." And in the north. They moved them, put them on cattle cars, moved them to up north to Green Lake, moved them up north. And then, they burned their homes so they would have nothing to come back to. And so, some, wherever the government moved them to, would build lives there. But some also… It's a different landscape, you know. So, they might decide to go back and find another place to live. A lot of the people who lived on road allowances worked as laborers. They worked for farmers or ranchers, because that was very labor-intensive work.

A : So there were the scrips, and the road allowances came after that?

M : Yes. You had people living on road allowances into the 40s, right? But not all Métis, some would live in urban centers, like in towns as well. And so, you have different areas, like in communities where people had houses, where they lived within those towns, like within Winnipeg itself, or within Regina, or like my family is from Meadow Lake. But also, you had Métis families who did, like my grandfather's family, they got a homestead and had met the requirements according to that Dominion Lands Policies, they were forced to break so much land to fulfill these 'improvements' and cultivate the land. So, some Métis did do that. Not everybody lived on, but quite a few Métis did live on road allowances.

A : To the takeaways from what you've been saying. We see a lot of injustices that actually came to define who the Métis people were.

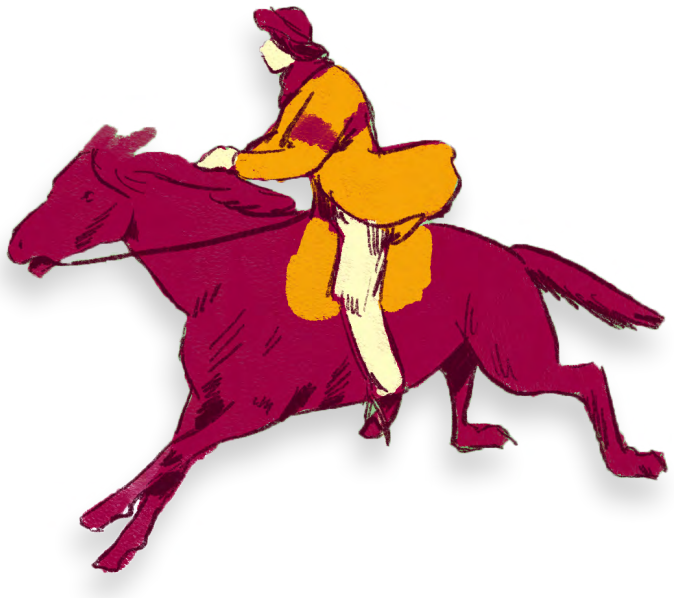
M : Yes.

A : There was a cultural basis, yes, around the buffalo economy. But after that, we can see different injustices that have amplified this collective sentiment of being part of the same nation.

M : Yes.

A : There were diversity of lived experiences, and depending on your family line and where you were established, you did not necessarily go through exactly the same history… But people were sharing this concept that they were part of a whole?

M : Yes. Fur trade was just such a big thing in terms of trapping. And then there were Métis people working as laborers, like my great, great, great grandfather. They're just different ways that Métis people did participate and earned a livelihood if they weren't like hunting or trapping.



LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

A : And now I'm bringing you towards language. How does Michif language fit in this identity? If these communities were dispersed (I understand that there were links between them, economic links, family links, so people that were dispersed on this territory, but they had different kinds of exchanges between them), was there a common language from the start, or...?

M : The Michif language was mostly spoken within the families, it wasn't something that was spoken outside. But most Métis, Michif people were multilingual. They were able to speak many languages, to be able to, you know, work and live. You have communities like in Alberta and in Northern Saskatchewan, who will say... Yet they are Michif speakers. But what they speak is different from what would be spoken out of, like, around Camperville, Manitoba, the Fort Qu'Appelle area, in the Qu'Appelle Valley, and then into the Turtle Mountains. So, there's a very distinct... what now we refer to as Southern Michif. It's like pretty much a 50-50 of Cree and then French. So, it's the Cree verbs and the French nouns. But, there are influences of like Saulteaux and as well as English on that Michif language.

The interesting thing about the Southern Michif that makes it so unique... Usually with the contact languages, one language will sort of dominate, you might have borrowings of words, but they will follow like the grammatical structure of one predominant language, right? But the Southern Michif doesn't do that. The Cree words maintain the Cree grammatical structures and the French words maintain the French grammatical structures.

A : You say that the language basically evolved inside the family home. And did it come to a point where it stopped being taught or spoken in the family at home? How did it travel through time and was transmitted to future generations?

M : From what I'm told, the Southern Michif was still spoken in the home, but the Métis didn't have to go to school. Well, schools wouldn't let you in. So, some Métis people did go to, like, residential schools, but a lot of times they weren't allowed to. Because, they were saying, "You're not First Nations. You're not Indian. These are for Indians, and you're not that." Right? "You're not settler, you're not white, but you're not Indian."

A : And the Métis were not covered by the Indian Act?

M : Exactly.

A : That's an important component in our history, here.

M : Yeah. And I think that's the defining thing. If you weren't into the Indian Act, then you couldn't go to residential school. If they had room, then some Métis definitely did go to residential schools. But a lot, like my great-grandmother, went to what was called a mission school. So, it wasn't a school that was funded or run by the government. It was funded and run by the church. So, mission schools, and a lot of times they'd be called like, the convent, or what... You know, that is how that was referred to, in terms of the mission schools, run by the priests or the nuns.

A : So they were taught in French in those schools?

M : In some… others were taught in English.

A : Michif was not taught in schools? Like you said earlier, it was really in the family home. And when did it become something that could be transmitted through the education system?

M : Yeah. Well, it's still… it really isn't.

A : It isn't?

M : No, not really. So, if you owned land, you could go to, like, the public school, but if your family didn't own land, like my grandmother… Because she was on a school section, like road allowance. You didn't own land. So, unless they let you come to school… Because you'd have to pay, right, if you wanted to go to school, and a lot of people couldn't afford that. You know, if your kids were old enough and they could go to work and help and contribute, that's what they did. There was a lot of pressure for English, because that's what you needed to be able to be out and working. Even though Michif was still spoken in the homes, you're surrounded by English. When the Métis did start going to school, there was a lot of course… You know, you had to speak the English language. And my mother tells stories about how they were made fun of and ridiculed for how they spoke. Because they were using French. But the French that she knew, it was more like a Michif French, so the way she pronounced things was a lot different. And so then it was like, "you're not going to use that language outside". Because there was a lot of racism, discrimination and, you know, being made fun of because you're talking differently. Now there are schools, like school divisions, that are trying to do Michif because the majority of the speakers are like 70. My generation, my children's generation are not speakers. So, we have to learn, acquire the language as adults. There is no one to teach it within the schools, unless you bring in the old ones, "les vieux". Any of the fluent speakers around my age would probably have acquired it as an adult, would not have grown up speaking it.

A : And in your own journey, how did you go about trying to integrate your own language into your own identity and to start learning it again?

M : I grew up hearing the language because my mother and her siblings and my grandparents, they're all speaking the language. And so, I grew up hearing words. So, I understood words like "astam" [Michif word] means like, to come here, "awas" [Michif word], you know, go away, "kiykwey" [Michif word], which means "What?", and "l'assiette", etc. So, there are different words that I learned, although I didn't really use them. I knew what was sort of being referred to. For me, it was interesting. The first language I personally was interested in learning was French. And I did. I was in a course, in a linguistic immersion course in Jonquière for six weeks. When I was out here, I called home to talk to my parents. My grandparents were over, and my grandfather got on the phone and started talking to me in French, and I never knew they could speak French! Like, you know, here I am a 20-year-old, and that was the first time that I found out that my grandparents were, like, multilingual. They could speak French and Michif and Cree and English… And you just think how that's really, really changed, right? That my generation only speaks English. Because in school, the only opportunity that you would have, would be to learn

English or French. And so then, now as an adult, I would love to be able to sit and have that conversation with my mother in her language, in our language: Northern Michif. That's sort of what fuels me now. The Northern have a bit more speakers, because in the north, there were communities able to hold on to their language. I think with the last census, the Southern Michif has like 1000 speakers, so it's endangered.

A : In the north, there are more [speakers]?

M : There's more. It's still not in a great situation, but there are definitely more speakers. Because there are people my age, in the north, who do speak the language. But the thing though, that I've noticed, too, is more of them will speak more Cree. So, they don't do have as much of the French. It's the older people who have more of that Michif. The Cree is a lot more prevalent.

A : And what work are you doing with your Gabriel Dumont Chair in relation to all of this? What kind of contribution are you seeking to make inside the University?

M : Well, one of the main thing is doing Métis specific research. So that, it's really focusing on our ways of knowing and our ways of being, because so many people have taken up a Métis identity without understanding it's a distinct culture. And people misunderstand. They think, "Oh, if I have any kind of Indigenous ancestry…", because they look at it as mixed and not as a distinct culture, a distinct nation. That we have our own ways of doing things. And so, that's the hope, by doing Métis specific research, that we can have that very clearly articulated. And then it will come into the school, so that people will understand and not see it as, like, half of something, or mixed. And then as well, with the Michif language revitalization, I've done a couple projects in terms of looking at Michif language transmission. There are a few school divisions who have pre-K, kindergarten Michif, but the teachers aren't fluent speakers. They say it's immersion, but it's not, unfortunately. It's more language awareness. Because you can only have somebody who comes in and hear some [Michif], "Here are the days of the week, here are the numbers, here are the colors." And, you know, that kind of thing. But in the north, they're able to do more of an immersion because the speakers are younger. You have teachers who actually can speak the language. When I was in Île-à-la-Crosse, I went in to see this little pre-kindergarten classroom. The teachers are telling them to come in and take off their shoes and wash their hands and say it all in the language. And the kids know. So, that's where, like to me, the research comes really important to be able to find out what are the most effective practices for transmission, to create more speakers.

A : Are you working in collaboration with the school divisions in some projects?

M : No, I've been working more in collaboration with SUNTEP, the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program, with the one that's affiliated with the University of Regina. So, working with the faculty there because it's a four-year B.Ed. program, and the students are required to take Michif language. They do a three weeks' land-based learning camp, to teach the students how to [speak Michif], in the hopes that they will start, and maybe continue with their own learning to become, hopefully, fluent speakers. But also, so that they can learn how to teach language within the classroom.

A : In your own journey as an educator and a researcher, was Michif history, identity and culture always at the center? Or did you come to it later in your journey?

M : Well, I'm very fortunate in that. I was always raised within my culture, so I always knew who I was. The traditions were very much nurtured within me and within my family from a very young age. So, when I decided to become a teacher, I enrolled through SUNTEP.

A : Okay, so you did this program yourself to become a teacher.

M : Yeah. And because it's a cohort model, you're with all other Métis. They do let First Nations students in as well, but it's predominantly Métis/Michif people. And so, when I went through, everybody knew who they were, where they came from. And then you're learning how to be a teacher and learning how to bring your culture and your identity into the classroom as a K to 12 teacher. Even when I started teaching, there was another woman who was from the very first graduating class, because SUNTEP has been around since the 1980s. I remember, I was at a teaching-in service, and she came up to me and said, "I hear you're SUNTEP grad. I will help you." And she was somebody who was such a good mentor to give me the confidence to be able to bring my culture and bring my identity into my teaching all the time, and not feel that it was something that I had to, you know… "Oh, that's out there." And then I come into the classroom and I have to be something different.

A : So, you were always able to make it part of your own teaching? You were teaching in the regular school system, you were bringing it in to all of the students?

M : Yeah. And so that is actually what led me to pursue my master's. It's because I started thinking, like, "I know what I'm doing." And then I sort of wondered, is that just a "me" thing, or are other Métis teachers doing the same kind of things? So that was actually the basis for my master's research, Métis teacher identity. My master's was such a great experience, and I used stories and storytelling, that's my main teaching methodology. I did another research project looking at the use of the story and storytelling as a teaching methodology, and then thinking, "Yeah, I really like this research thing. I want to keep doing this!" And so, I decided to pursue my PhD. But I sort of shifted my focus because I was a teacher librarian. I was doing a lot with kids who were readers. And then, seeing all the research was saying that Indigenous children were doing so poorly in schools and thinking, "I did well in school. I've taught a lot of First Nations, Métis children who have done well in school. So why are some doing well and others not?" So, I wanted to look at what those who were doing well were doing in terms of their reading. So, that was the focus of my doctoral research. I was looking at Indigenous children who were proficient readers and writers and seeing what they did. And then, when I started in my academic position, realizing there hadn't been very much done since my master's research, and a lot of the work focuses on either the history of the Métis, a lot of that in Indigenous studies departments or the history departments or the political science departments. So, it was sort of like, "Okay, I need to maybe go back to focus on Michif, Métis education and Michif and Métis learning and focus." So, now I'm sort of back to where I was before!

A : Yeah, and I suppose there's so much to do and so little of you!

M : Yeah.

A : What would be your dream? If you had the capacity to hire whoever you could hire and to really introduce the essentials in the teachers' programs. What would you want future teachers to know when they get out into the classrooms?

M : I think it really comes to moving away from that sort of pan-Indigenous idea, right? Like there are so many more Métis scholars, who are doing such amazing work today than there were, like, 10 years ago, let alone, 20 years ago, right? So that is really nice to see who are focusing on and doing Métis specific research, which is really, really important. And I think that would help in terms of having these future teachers understand that Métis/Michif, its own culture, it's distinct. We have our own ways of doing things. Well, similarities, commonalities with our First Nations kin, for sure, but looking at different ways. There are Anishinaabe ways. There are like Dene ways. There are Métis/Michif ways. So, seeing that there are all these different perspectives and world views, while there may be commonalities, there are still things that are specific to those local communities, and so that the teachers don't treat it like everybody... you know, "It's all the same". Indigenous isn't just one thing. You know that there are all these different nations, so that when they're in the schools, they can look up to, "Well, who are the communities right here, for where I'm working?"

A : From a local point of view...

M : Yeah! And focus on bringing that knowledge from that local community, the languages from that local community into the schools. I think it's great if they're bringing anything Indigenous in. But I think we're now at a place where we can start saying, "Okay, what are the specific communities and their ways and their knowledge? How can we teach the students about that local context? I think that's the most important.

A : And what would you say if you had a bunch of those teachers in front of you saying, "Well, we're starting out. We want to do what's best. We don't know how to go about doing this the right way, because we haven't been trained to do that."

M : We always say, like going out into the community, right, and making those connections with the actual knowledge keepers, the language carriers, the elders, the old ones in those particular communities. And then it's also getting out of that Western frame of mind and ask yourself, "What am I doing as an individual?" Not what you're doing as a teacher, but for yourself. Are you going out into the community, going to events, actually meeting people, like building those personal connections with people, like getting to know?

A : Okay. This would be step one!

M : There are many people that say: " I don't know anybody to bring them into the classroom." Well, then go out! Go out and meet them, and build that relationship with people, and go to the events. There are so many things going on and, you know, go out and learn for yourself. And then once you build up those relationships and you're known in a community, it's going to be so much easier to be able to know who, if you want to bring somebody in, but also how to do it in a good way. So don't miss that step. It's work! It's a lot of work.

A : And what we're seeing is that a lot of people are actually more than hesitant, I would really say scared of doing that, because they are so afraid to make mistakes. How do we bring our teachers to build that confidence that it's not inappropriate for them to try to do this? How to make sure that they are maybe accompanied in this? Do universities have a responsibility? Do communities have a responsibility to make sure that they are well supported?

M : When you look at the curriculum and the different things that you're required to teach, you have to go and learn about them, right? At the university, when we try to take our students out to community events, that they don't look at it as, "I don't have time for this." If there's a way we can change the thinking, like "This is going to be such a valuable learning experience for me. And to build a relationship and to get to know people, so that I can then build that capacity to be able to do that in my classroom, so I don't have to always maybe be bringing somebody in." How do we create that shift so that the students who want to become teachers realize how important it is for them to be out, building those relationships, making those connections, going out to community events?

A : If we open this up now, to teaching Canadians about Métis history, the Métis culture, and making sure that people stop mistaking Métis (mixed) with the Métis people. So, what would you say to our students in Québec, for example, on how to bring them to get interested and understand?

M : Well, the main reason is so that people are conflating what it means to be Métis, to have that understanding that we're a distinct people. And that's been the hard part. Here in Québec, this is not our homeland, right? We're further west. So how can you connect with Métis people? But there are Métis people who have moved! So, there might be things there. But now, of course, even with technology… There are so many different resources, ways that you could connect with other communities in the West. You'll find plenty of resources to start with in the this booklet*. I think there's possibilities where connections could be made, but a lot would be just learning, so that you know that it's not mixed.

A : And if we had a student who said, "Oh, well, we do have Métis in the East." What would you say to them?

M : I would say that they don't!

* For ease of reading, these resources have been integrated directly into the text of the conversation at the appropriate points, in the form of hyperlinks.

A : We can be firm about that?

M : Yes. We cannot let these ideas circulate. I would say, "You will need to find another term." Right? My nation has claimed that term Métis to refer to our nation as a distinct people. So, I'm not discounting that your community may have Indigenous ancestry, but you have to find another name for yourselves. You can't use that one. You can't use our... I've seen some communities who will use our symbols, like the infinity symbol, right?

A : And what does it mean in your culture using this symbol?

M : Well, the infinity symbol means a few different things. One is about the coming together, like two worlds. That is how we came to... like, our ethnogenesis as a nation. It's an early symbol in Métis identity, from the Red River. One of the things that I had the opportunity to go back and teach at SUNTEP as faculty, and because of how things have changed, we had a lot of students who didn't have the privilege that I did to be raised so solidly, knowing who I was and understanding my culture. I've talked about this with other faculty, how we see the students who are coming in, they don't understand what it means to be Métis. In the same way. I don't know if it's because of our communities are structured a little bit differently now, like with urbanization. But now the programs are set up to teach like you have to teach them about what it means! So, it's like you're teaching them what it means to be Métis and how to be a teacher. Where, for me, when I went through, I was learning about how to be a teacher and how to bring your own identity, which was already there.

CONCLUSION:
A DREAM FOR THE FUTURE

A : To conclude, I would like to ask you a last question: if you project yourselves 30 years from now, where would you want us to be?

M : I'd love it for us to have our own institutions, like our own schools, where you could actually have our language. Wouldn't it be great to be able to, you know, think the same way, here in Québec, where you can study any kind of subject in your own language? Where you can be able to study things and learn things within your language, to learn…

A : This would be the biggest thing, to be able to have a full-school system?

M : Yeah! Yeah, where it's all… And then have created a lot more speakers within our own communities… And then, I guess, within the Canadian, with the larger context, again, is just that, in order for us to have that sovereignty, we also need to have people recognize that we're a distinct, sovereign nation.

A : And if we want to get there, education is part of it?

M : Yes, yeah! I think that it's like, tied together. Having the sovereignty in terms of who… of your nation. And then, you also have your own institutions. I remember back when I did my master's and trying to get, on my committee, people who were Métis/Michif on my committee. There was nobody at the University! You know, my supervisor, bless her, she worked really hard to get somebody who had a master's degree, who was well known in the community, to be on [my committee]. You know, get that permission from the Faculty of Graduate Studies for her to be on my committee, because that was really important that I had somebody, you know, holding me accountable right to. We still need more, but it's definitely a lot better now. You know, any Indigenous student could. It's a lot easier to find an Indigenous person to be on your supervisory committee to help sort of guide your research and stuff. So, it's coming!

Montréal, June 18, 2024

Illustration references

Image 1 (cover): Melanie Brice (photo: Annie Pilote)

Image 2 (page 3): Annie Pilote and Melanie Brice (photos: Annie Pilote)

Image 3 (page 4): A Métis family at Île-à-la-Crosse, Saskatchewan (photo: Louis Cochin)

Image 4 (page 5): Buffalo hunt (inspired by: Manitoba Culture, Heritage, Tourism and Sport and No. 9, Buffalo Hunt, Surround by George Catlin

Image 5 (page 6): Louis Riel and his associates, circa 1869 (Photo: Ryder Larsen/University of Manitoba)

Image 6 (page 8): Meeting of the Scrip Commission at Lesser Slave Lake, 1899. L-R: J. P. Prudhomme Major Walker, J. A. Coté and Charles Mair., Glenbow (Archives NA-949-18)

Image 7 (page 13): SUNTEP program cohort at Michif camp (photo courtesy of Melanie Brice)