

Where No Michif Has Gone Before: The Form and Function of Métis Futurisms

by

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Abstract

Indigenous futurisms, a term coined by Grace Dillon in 2003, and indebted to Afrofuturism, seeks to describe a movement of art, literature, games, and other forms of media that express Indigenous perspectives on the future, present, and past. This research outlines the scope of Métis futurisms as being a specific kind of Indigenous futurism, rooted in otipêyimisiw-itâpisiniwina, Métis worldviews.

Using autoethnography and research-creation, I wrote four speculative fiction short stories set within the kinscapes of Métis from manitow-sâkihikan as a form of what Scott Lyons calls rhetorical sovereignty. Each story is an exercise in worldbuilding/prefiguration as a way of imagining otherwise, with the intent to kwêskîmonaw, change our own shapes and destinies as Métis people.

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Introduction

I have written four stories that explore Métis existence and resistance through a lens of *being Métis*, or more specifically, being Métis from manitow-sâkihikan (Lac Ste. Anne).¹ Utilizing creative philosophical fiction and research-creation, I ask questions about Métis presence in the past, the present, and the future, in ways that invite the reader to co-constitute potentialities with me. Each story is followed by an analysis, explaining the purpose of the story and the many sources of inspiration that helped me write.

These stories are in chronological order, and each arose as an answer to a central research question. The first and longest story is called “Buffalo Bird.” It is a piece of historical speculative fiction set in the mid 19th century, before Canada violently colonized the Plains. The research question was: How could have the nêhiyaw-pwat, or “Iron Confederacy”, survived, and if it had, could it have successfully stopped Canadian expansion?² It is an alternative history, setting the stage for us to imagine what the nêhiyaw-pwat could be like today if there had been no colonial interference.

The second story, “Michif Man,” occurs during the mid 20th century. The research question for this story was: What would a Métis superhero do with their powers? This story is set during the end of the golden age of comic books, and focuses on encouraging Métis to think of how our “powers” or talents could manifest when wâhkôhtowin, or extended kinship, is our guiding principle.

The third story, “Dirty Wings,” occurs in the hazy present, informed by Métis metaphysics, asserting Métis reality in a time when our otipêyimisiw-itâpisiniwina, Métis worldviews, are supposed to be fading away. Rather than being organized around a central research question, this is a dreaming story. I offer up this story for collaborative interpretation.

The final story, “âniskôhocikan,” is a sci-fi story set in the near future, challenging notions of Métis people being anti-technology and demonstrating how we will continue to

¹ Métis people have been referred to, and refer to ourselves, in numerous ways, as Métis, Halfbreeds, Michif, and so on.

² (Hogue 2015; Vrooman 2013). The nêhiyaw-pwat, also known as the Iron Confederacy, or Iron Alliance, was a political and military alliance among Cree, Saulteaux, Nakoda, Métis, and Iroquois (who had moved into the west), during the height of the fur trade. The nêhiyaw-pwat acted as a barrier to U.S. and Canadian expansion until the genocide of the buffalo and decline of the fur trade.

innovate without compromising our self-determination. The research question was: How might Métis people continue to use technology to assist with cultural continuity?

Stories are an inherently collaborative experience, and all stories have a purpose. Among Métis and nêhiyawak (Cree), as with other Indigenous peoples, there are âtayôhkêwina (sacred stories), mamâhtâwâcimowina (miraculous stories), pawâmêwâcimowina (spiritual dreaming stories), kiskinwahamâcimowina (teaching stories), wawiyatâcimowina (funny little stories that entertain), stories that map out terrain and resources, kayâs-âcimowina (stories that pass on history), kwayask-âcimowina, âcimowina (true stories), kîyâskiwâcimowina (false or fictional stories), miyowâcimowina (good stories), and macâcimowina (evil or malicious stories).

These genres within Métis/nêhiyaw literary tradition have their own forms and literary conventions, some of which I use in my stories. I blend these with whitestream genre writing without necessarily making the Métis/nêhiyaw allusions and conventions legible to non-Métis/nêhiyawak, such as in “Dirty Wings” where I use seasonal rounds, allude to specific âtayôhkêwina (sacred stories), and reference Elder’s counselling discourse patterns, which “work rhetorically to effect [sic] learning in the reader” (MacKay 2014, 357). In this way I am making space to respond to whitestream speculative fiction either by Métis-fying it (adding Métis literary conventions and allusions/history/cultural aspects) or by subverting it by switching observer-subject roles (see below in *Indigenous Futurisms to Métis Futurisms*).

My refusal to explain these Métis/nêhiyaw allusions and conventions is a signal that my primary audience is not the whitestream, but rather other Indigenous peoples, specifically Métis/nêhiyawak. Fusing “traditional European based literary constructs and boxes” with an Indigenous worldview is not new (Beeds 2014, 61). Métis and nêhiyawak authors such as Maria Campbell (1973), Marilyn Dumont (1996), Freda Ahenakew (1988, 1998) and so many more have done this within their own work. Recognizing that a wider audience exists, presenting cultural specificity this way also allows those outside our context to experience our subject material more authentically, without the material being distorted by translation via colonial semiotics.

It is important to understand that within otipêyimisiw-itâpisiniwina, stories like all language, have power. Language is not merely a tool of communication, but rather a place where reality can be shaped. *Language is transformational*; “our breath has the power to kwêskîmot, change the form of the future for the next generation” (Beeds 2014, 69). My thesis seeks to

engage in that transformation, making space for Métis to exist across time, refusing our annihilation as envisioned by the process of ongoing colonialism, and questioning the ways we are thought to have existed in the past.

Creative philosophical fiction refers to works which use literary fiction techniques to explore the sort of questions normally addressed in discursive philosophy, such as the function and role of society, the purpose of life, ethics, morals, the role of art in human lives and so on (Mikkonen 2013, 3-9). This does not mean these stories are philosophical treatises with a few elements of story-telling! Sometimes creative philosophical fiction is called the “novel of ideas,” and includes many speculative fiction works, including utopian and dystopian/apocalyptic fiction (Schneider 2016).

Through creative philosophical fiction, I wish to extend Métis existence beyond official narratives, beyond current constraints, and imagine what living in a “Métis way” could look like in spaces and times we haven’t (yet) been. Creative philosophical fiction also allows me the space to express otipêyimisîw-itâpîsîniwîw, from a Métis perspective, asserting facts that run contrary to a mainstream narrative of our existence. This challenges the divide between fact and fiction, as Métis people assert a reality that is perceived as impossible in whitestream thinking. If Métis people say a thing is possible, who gets to determine that thing is fictional?

Creative writing is the vehicle through which I attempt to apply otipêyimisîw-itâpîsîniwîw to both factual and fictional problems and situations. I began with broad research questions, engaged in research-for-creation as a world-building exercise, and then set my characters free to act.

Locating myself

I am a white-looking, cis, queer, intermittently able-bodied otipêyimisîw-iyiniw (Métis person) from the historic Métis community of manîtow-sâkihîkan (Lac Ste. Anne). My mother is an otipêyimisîw-iskwêw (Métis woman), and my father is a mônîyâw-nâpew (white man) of Ukrainian and Irish background. nîkotwâsik nîtawasîmisîw, I have six children. I am a first-generation post-secondary graduate with a BEd and an LLB, and no matter what other work I do, I always come back to teaching. Despite coming from a Métis community that was once multilingual, the only Indigenous language I have been able to reclaim to date is nêhiyawêwîw (Plains Cree, Y dialect).

It is also important to understand that I come from landless Métis, for outside of the eight Métis Settlements in northern Alberta, Métis do not have communally held lands equivalent to reserves. I had access to our territory growing up only because my parents own a quarter section of land there, held in fee simple. I myself own no land in my own territory.

Like a huge number of Alberta Métis and nêhiyawak, my great-great-great-great-grandparents were Louis Kwarakwante Callihoo and Marie Patenaude (his second wife). One of their sons, Michel, became headman of Michel's Band and signed a Treaty 6 adhesion in 1878. Their daughter, Angélique "Angele" Callihoo, was my great-great-great-grandmother and she married Louis Divertissant Loyer, son of Louis Bonhomme Loyer and Louise Genevieve Jasper.

Angélique and Louis had a son in 1867, Samuel Loyer. Samuel married Isabelle Gladu, daughter of Oskinikiw Joseph Gladu, headman of Michel's Band, and Marie "Emma" Amable Belcourt. Samuel and Isabelle had my great grandmother, Katherine Loyer, who married Alonzo Bryant Teague. My grandfather, Kenneth Teague, was their son.

I provide this brief genealogy to find cuzzins! It also locates me within a constellation of relations, of Mohawk, nêhiyawak, and Métis ancestors, some who took Treaty, some who took scrip, and who span many different communities throughout the northwest, as well as Irish, Scottish, and Ukrainian ancestors I know much less about. These are the *kinscapes* that inform all of my stories.

Kinscapes, as defined by Métis scholar Brenda Macdougall, are "a network of family relationships knit together in a certain place and time" (Research Matters 2017, Macdougall 2010). Kinscapes, are governed and constituted by wâhkôhtowin, a complex series of relationships not only between human, but also non-human kin and all of creation.

When I refer to Métis, I mean Métis-as-People, not métis-as-mixed, although drawing these lines is neither clean, nor easy (Andersen 2014; Innes 2013). At the same time, I want to push back against the nationalist rhetoric of the Métis as being a "distinct People." Yes, we have a specific history and culture, we are "distinct" in that sense. However, the colonial-administrative effort to atomize Indigenous Peoples into clear-cut, separate groups encourages us to work at odds with one another, and as Robert Innes maps out beautifully, also negates the reality of the shared history, territories, and kinscapes we continue to occupy (2013). Where I am from, Métis and nêhiyawak are linked through familial, cultural, and political relations, through a shared history and through territory.

As Tasha Beeds points out, Métis and nêhiyawak have “fluid kinship lines and [a] shared worldview” where she is from and this is also true of where I am from (2014, 70, note 1). While she chooses to use the term “nêhiyaw-iitâpisiniwin”, which means a Cree world view, I have opted for “otipêyimisiiw-itâpisiniwin” to specifically centre Métis peoples. Where I am from most Métis will have a nêhiyaw-itâpisiniwin, but in other areas throughout the Métis homeland, Métis may share a more Anishinaabe worldview, and I wish to keep space open for these differences within the Métis experience. My own work foregrounds my community’s nêhiyaw-itâpisiniwin, as one possible approach within the plurality of otipêyimisiiw-itâpisiniwina, Métis worldviews.³

Until I moved away from home at seventeen, I was raised on a quarter section of land between three lakes: Lake Isle, Wabamun Lake, and Lac Ste. Anne (see Figure 1) (Google Maps 2014). Lake Isle is fed from the southwest by the Sturgeon River, and from the northwest by the Dussault and Round lakes. Lake Isle then drains back into the Sturgeon River at its eastern end, feeding into Lac Ste. Anne. Lac Ste. Anne, which is also fed by Birch Lake to the northwest, drains east into Matchayaw Lake and Big Lake before flowing into the North Saskatchewan River. Wabamun Lake is fed by the Beaver and Jackpine creeks, and also drains east through Wabamun Creek into the North Saskatchewan River.

I locate myself geographically between these lakes and note their interconnections to creeks and rivers, because these boundaries make much more natural sense than range and township roads, highways, and hamlets that have only existed for a hundred years or less. These lakes provided sustenance to Métis and First Nations in the area, particularly after the settler-colonial genocide of the buffalo was almost complete. These days these lakes are sites of ongoing cottage colonialism, where the needs and desires of non-Indigenous, mostly white, people are given primacy over the ongoing relationships to land, water, and non-human kin that Indigenous peoples continue to maintain. Despite all of this, Lac Ste. Anne remains a powerful gathering place for Indigenous peoples every summer, as it has been for generations.

All of my stories are located within, or informed by, the kinscapes and land/waterscapes of Lac Ste. Anne. And just as watersheds and drainage basins are larger than any single body of water, these kinscapes land/waterscapes expand beyond Lac Ste. Anne itself to encompass all the

³ I am using a standard written nêhiyawêwin throughout this thesis, and my spelling of certain words may not be the same as sources I cite.

spaces my ancestors made relations. I clarify this to explain that while my characters are mainly rooted in Lac Ste. Anne, these stories are happening within a much wider time and space that nonetheless does not represent all Métis.

Kinscapes and land/waterscapes are also a unifying metaphor for the way in which none of my work occurs in isolation, even when I am feeling isolated.

Indigenous Futurisms to Métis Futurisms

Grace Dillon first coined the term “Indigenous futurisms” in 2003, seeking to describe a movement of art, literature, games, and other forms of media which express Indigenous perspectives on the future, present, and past. More specifically, she argues that all forms of Indigenous futurisms “involve discovering how personally one is affected by colonization, discarding the emotional and psychological baggage carried from its impact, and recovering ancestral traditions in order to adapt in our post-Native Apocalypse world” (2012, 10).

Indigenous futurisms are not merely synonymous with science fiction and fantasy, despite how they may be viewed as such within the whitestream. Indigenous futurists express their ontologies in various forms, and as Grace Dillon puts it, “our ideas of body, mind, and spirit are true stories, not forms of fantasy” (2019). For example, Tsilhqot'in filmmaker Helen Haig Brown's short film *The Cave*, is listed on IMDb as being science fiction, but it depicts a traditional Tsilhqot'in story told to her by her uncle, Henry Solomon (2009). Indigenous futurisms offer an alternative genre to Indigenous creators that allow us to foreground our worldviews and realities.

Although Indigenous futurisms has only in the past decade taken root as a named and self-reflective movement, it does so with inspiration from, and is indeed indebted to, the path breaking work of Afrofuturists such as Sun Ra, Octavia Butler, Janelle Monae, Samuel R. Delaney, Nalo Hopkison, and so many others.

Afrofuturisms, so named in 1994 by Mark Dery, but referring to works beginning in the late 1950s and arguably much earlier, explore the intersection between the African Diaspora and technology (1994, 179-222). Afrofuturism centres Afrodiasporic experiences and cosmologies across a vast range of themes, offering alternatives to Western views of Africa and of the African diaspora (Esteve 2016).

Dillon points out that science fiction as a genre “emerged in the mid-nineteenth-century context of evolutionary theory and anthropology profoundly intertwined with colonial ideology” (2012, 2). These themes are exhaustively explored in whitestream science fiction, exposing particular settler-colonial anxieties and aspirations that tend to erase or completely ignore the experiences and perspectives of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC). In (re)imagining history, whitestream speculative fiction is particularly adept at repressing the violent histories of colonialism from the public imaginary (Gaertner 2015). This does not mean that the topic of colonization is absent from science fiction; far from it (Rieder 2008). We find constant dichotomous reframing of settler colonials as agents of space-faring Manifest Destiny or the inevitable subjects of colonization at the hands (tentacles, squishy pseudopods, or furry appendages) of aliens (Justice 2018, 149-152). Whitestream science fiction insists that colonialism is inevitable. It’s ‘us or them’, and it had better be ‘us’.

Increasingly, BIPOC are becoming content creators, operating from within worldviews that exist beyond the whitestream. Much of this work involves switching observer-subject roles, so that instead of BIPOC being under the external gaze of the white anthropologist/colonizer (the subject), we are viewing the outsider through our own cultural lenses (the observer). This is not merely a push-back against the colonizing narrative of whitestream speculative fiction; it can also be a form of social justice organizing. As Walidah Imarisha puts it, “whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction” (2015, 3). Dillon takes the transformative potential of the work even further, stating that “this process is often called ‘decolonization’ and as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Maori) explains, it requires *changing* rather than *imitating* Eurowestern concepts” (2012, 10).

This characterization also speaks strongly to the primary intended audience. Danika Medak-Saltzman clarifies that “Indigenous futurist works do not simply ‘include’ Native people as part of the narrative; rather, they are generated by and inspired *for* Native peoples” (2017, 143).

Before I get into explaining what I mean by “Métis futurisms,” I want to acknowledge what Lou Cornum rightfully points out: that the term “Indigenous” is often used in a way that implicitly excludes Black people from its definition, either denying the Indigeneity of Black people or avoiding the question altogether (2015b, 3-5). Speaking of the “space Indian” as a

diasporic figure, Cornum suggests that Indigenous futurists can “participate in complicating our notions of home, Indigenous identity, and shifting relationships to land and belonging” in ways that “evoke similarities with other diasporic figures...specifically...the Black diasporic figure” (2015b, 3).

I refuse to exclude the potential and real Indigeneity of Black people either implicitly or through omission. I take seriously the assertion that “the coupled structure of settler colonialism and slavery calls for new understandings of Indigeneity that can account for diaspora of Indigenous peoples and alternative forms of belonging not dependent on sovereignty over an ancestral territory” (Cornum 2015b, 4). While the stories contained in this thesis do not directly address Blackness and Indigeneity, these complexities are part of the theoretical framework I am working from; they are foundational aspects of the world-building I do here, and will continue to do after this thesis.

The futures I envision include expansive notions of Indigeneity, according to the principles of *wâhkôhtowin* (expanded kinship, including with non-human kin), *miyo-wicêhtowin* (the principle of getting along with others) *miyo-pimâtisiswin* (the good life) and *wîtaskiwin* (living together on the land) (Ahenakew 1998; Wolfhart and Ahenakew 2000; Cardinal and Hildebrandt 2000; Belcourt 2006; MacDougall 2010; Ghostkeeper 1995). When I speak of Indigenous peoples, I am not limiting myself to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit of North America, but rather to Indigenous peoples globally, recognizing that these definitions are fraught, contested, and like all definitions of what it means to be human, often rooted in anti-Blackness (Walcott 2015, 93-95).

I have been hugely influenced by Black authors, whose work I only began to access in my thirties, having been raised instead on a steady diet of whitestream theorizing, as well as fantasy and science fiction prior to that. In particular, Octavia Butler’s work expanded my understanding of what is possible in terms of speaking back to whitestream visions of the past and future⁴. Butler’s work never elides or pretends to solve racism, misogyny and misogynoir, ableism, homophobia, classism, or any other systems of oppression.⁵ Neither do these structures

⁴ These books include: *Patternmaster* (1976), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Survivor* (1978), *Kindred* (1979), *Wild Seed* (1980), *Clay’s Ark* (1984), *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), *Imago* (1989), *Parable of the Sower* (1993), *Parable of the Talents* (1998).

⁵ Misogynoir is a term created by Moya Baily and further developed by Trudy of Gradient Lair, and it describes misogyny directed towards Black women, thus reflecting race and gender.

forbid Black possibility; they exist as they do now, as constraints that must be contended with and resisted.

This approach differs from that of popular mainstream science fiction, in particular *Star Trek the Original Series*, and *Star Trek Next Generation*, where it is imagined that in twenty-third and twenty-fourth centuries, humans have somehow solved all of these structural oppressions. *Star Trek* “is so invested in its liberal humanist multicultural utopian vision, that it can’t reckon with the ways in which it replicates fundamentally oppressive and hierarchical power imbalances, especially through its promotion of Starfleet as a militaristic, interventionist (in spite of the Prime Directive) organization” (Swain 2019). Unsurprisingly, this whitestream vision of the future mirrors contemporary refusals to acknowledge structural oppression or understand the intergenerational impacts of settler colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade.

This kind of future imagining requires a form of forgetting that Black scholars like Christina Sharpe (2016), Robyn Maynard (2017), Sarah-Jane Mathieu (2010), and Rinaldo Walcott (1997) all work to resist. Uncovering Black/Indigenous presence in the past, and then asserting our existence in the present and into the future can be a way of seeing into, or even making better futures. To me this is a major component of Indigenous futurisms.

As the term “Indigenous” is fraught, and its boundaries expand or constrict according to who uses it and for what purpose, I have chosen to call my work Métis futurist instead of simply using and accepting the broad Indigenous futurist label. In making this decision, I have been inspired by Nnedi Okorafor.

Author Nnedi Okorafor often clarifies that her work is not Afrofuturist but rather Africanfuturist and Africanjujuist (which are not interchangeable terms) (2019; Okolo et al. 2018). She distinguishes between Africanfuturist work, which contains elements of science fiction, versus Africanjujuist work which blends African cultural beliefs and fantasy (2018c).

As she tweeted in October of 2017, “If we are going to use the word Afrofuturism, African writers from within Africa should be the majority when listing central examples of it.” She states that because she was “not allowed to evolve the definition of Afrofuturism to rightfully include what [she does]”, she created a new term (2018a; 2018b). It has not been easy for Okorafor to make the term Africanfuturist stick; almost all references to her work use Afrofuturist instead.

When searching for how Okorafor defines Africanfuturism and how it differs from Afrofuturism, most of the search results are of the author telling people to respect how she identifies her work, and refusing to provide her analysis via social media. Okorafor's stories foreground African characters in African spaces. As an example, she points out that "a lot of times, African Gods are portrayed through a Western lens" (Okolo 2018). It is clear that Okorafor believes Afrofuturism fails to centre African writers from within Africa, and that the term Africanfuturism provides that specificity.

The space Okorafor carves out with the way she characterizes her own work strikes me not as dividing something up into smaller parts, or subgenres, or of trying to be opaque in how she thinks of her own work, but rather as a way of clarifying her positionality/worldview and purpose. It also has the potential of opening up space for other writers to identify in the same way. Witnessing her creation of the term, and how she insists on being defined in the way *she* has chosen helped me work through some of my thinking on why I want to call my work Métis futurist.

The term "Indigenous" is incredibly broad, even vague, especially in an international context. It makes little sense for me to identify, individually, as an Indigenous person. I use "Indigenous" to either speak nationally and include First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, or internationally, to include all Indigenous peoples. I cannot be all those people! I am specifically Métis, and even more specifically, Métis from manitow-sâkihikan. That is where my stories come from, and other Métis from manitow-sâkihikan are the people I am most accountable to.

Métis futurisms allow me to envision a number of potential futures rooted in my history, community, and worldview – Métis futurisms to me is not simply any speculative fiction work done by a Métis person. Imagining potential futures, or alternative worlds in any time, is not merely an exercise of imagining; I assert it as an act of what Scott Lyons calls rhetorical sovereignty, "the inherent right and ability of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit" (2000, 449).

Accepting Métis cosmology and relationships as true, as science fact, offers alternatives to prescribed colonial roles for Indigenous peoples in the past, the present, and near and far future. This opens up space and time to set goals for the future that do not privilege the colonial project, without having to provide a step-by-step plan for how to achieve these futures.

I am not interested in being overly specific with genre outside of insisting my work is Métis futurist. It may include elements of science-fiction, fantasy, or not. I wish to, as Grace Dillon puts it, “sometimes intentionally experiment with, sometimes intentionally dislodge, sometimes merely accompany, but invariably change the perimeters” of speculative fiction (2012, 3). Existing whitestream genres are forms I can play along with, subvert, or avoid altogether.

Given the way in which Indigenous peoples are so often forced to reactively hyper-focus on the present and day-to-day survival, having some space to cast ourselves as far into the future is vital and potentially emancipatory. Setting these stories in contexts that explicitly reject anti-Blackness, heteronormativity, ableism, patriarchy, and white supremacy is one way to think about how to overcome colonial logics. This work can and must be done in a variety of mediums; literature, music, film, art, fashion, video games, and so on.

How I got here, hint: it wasn't alone

This thesis feels like a natural progression of the critical analysis and world-building I have been doing on my own (but never in isolation, because my thinking has been and always will be profoundly influenced by the texts I access), and then as a cohost of the Indigenous, feminist, sci-fi podcast *otipêyimisîw-iskwêwak kihci-kîsikohk*, *Métis in Space* (n.d.).

Five years ago I was living in Montreal. For Canada Day in 2014, I released a role-playing video game called *Idle No More: Blockade*, which is about a young Cree girl who needs to gather land protectors to defend a Sundance field from an evil pipeline company (Vowel 2014). During her mission, she battles anti-Indigenous stereotypes manifested as various creatures from Cree and Métis cosmology. It got a weird amount of interest, but as I was soon to realize, other folks like Elizabeth LaPensée were also making video games (of much higher quality) rooted in Indigenous worldviews (2019; *Path of the Elders* 2009).

In August of 2014, I was rattling around an empty house with my partner, all four of our children with relatives in other cities. I was bored, morose, and restless. My now co-host, Molly Swain, would visit, we'd drink a bottle of wine, watch some sci-fi, and verbally eviscerate either its erasure of, or ridiculous portrayal of, Indigeneity. We thought we were the two most hilarious people on earth, and decided that we should record our decolonial bitch-sessions for posterity.

Métis in Space was born! Within three days of us jokingly imagining a podcast, we'd recorded our first episode and set it loose upon the universe.

At the time, we truly thought we were alone in the world, two Indiginerds who loved Star Trek, and science fiction in general, despite its shoddy treatment of Indigenous folks. We soon discovered the truth: Indiginerds exist across time and space, and we all have complicated relationships with speculative fiction, no matter how much we love it!

All of a sudden, a new horizon opened up before me. This was the same time I was devouring the Afrofuturist writings of Octavia Butler, and I was riding a high I never knew was possible. BIPOC could exist into the near and far future in ways shaped by our own worldviews and experiences! In fact, BIPOC have been subverting, adding to, and imagining otherwise within speculative fiction for longer than I've been on this earth, and I had only gotten the smallest glimpses of this gorgeous reality.

Most importantly, this work, these multiple futurisms, gave me joy and filled me with hope at a time when I was experiencing severe burn-out, and some very intense grief. The Idle No More movement was at its peak, and Indigenous peoples were using social media to make connections with one another in unprecedented ways, but I still felt like I was constantly streaming energy outward without any time to regenerate. Through Métis in Space, I was able to make connections that fed into my sci-fi nerdery and made me excited about the future. I wasn't doing this work in isolation anymore!

Up to this point, my nerd diet was almost exclusively whitestream spec fic, but now I was inhaling multiple expressions of BIPOC creativity, far beyond just the written form. I was fascinated with images of Indigenous cosplayers, and visual art in particular has had an enormous impact on developing my Métis futurisms.

Here is a teeny tiny slice of the Indigenous futurist work that zapped like laser beams into my brain, forever altering that grey, squishy landscape:

- Suquamish and Duwamish artist Jeffrey Veregge's reimagining of iconic comic book and movie characters using a Salish form-line style (n.d.).
- A Tribe Called Geek's online Cosplay Spotlight, featuring Indigenous cosplayers (n.d.).
- Kwakwaka'wakw interdisciplinary artist Sonny Assu's painting "They're Coming! Quick! I have a better hiding place for you. Dorvan V, you'll love it." from his series "Interventions on the imaginary", which create the necessary backstory to Star Trek The

Next Generation's episode "Journey's End", an episode we review in Season 1, Episode 11 of *Métis in Space* (n.d.).

- Diné writer Lou Cornum's provocative and world-changing essay, "The Space NDN's Star Map" (2015a).
- Crow multimedia artist Wendy Red Star's Thunder Up Above series, featuring an incredible blend of traditional and space glam fashion on alien planets (n.d.).
- Métis designer, writer, and artist Elizabeth LaPensée's animations, art, writing, and video games, such as *Invaders* (2015), and *Thunderbird Strike* (2017) (n.d.).
- A Tribe Called Red, in particular their song "Electric Pow Wow Drum," which was THE neechie anthem for a couple of years during Idle No More! (2012).
- Cree artist Joi T. Arcand's Cree syllabic installations, and also her fabulously popular Mad Aunty Cree language jewelry (n.d.).
- Comanche/Taos, co-owner of The Soft Museum, Autumn Dawn's 8-Bit Neo-Traditional Medallions and earrings, made of Hama beads (2015).
- Ojibwe artist Maria Hupfield's objects constructed out of industrial felt and adorned with jingles, specifically her jingle boots and jingle mask (2012).
- Two-Spirit Métis/Saulteaux/Polish hard femme visual artist Danya Danger's beaded fetish masks and also her absolutely stunning series "Big 'Uns" (n.d.).
- The hilarious Onkwawenna Kentyohkwa-produced, *Star Wars* (Tsyori:wat IV: Yonhská:neks) Episode IV, done in the Mohawk language, directed by Karahkwenhawi Zoe Hopkins (2013).
- Oji-Cree Two-Spirit author and academic Joshua Whitehead's poetry collection, *Full-Metal Indigiqueer* (2017).
- Everything Cree/Métis/Saulteaux editor, critic, curator, and art historian Lindsay Nixon has written about art and kinship, and especially their piece "sâkihito-maskihkiy acâhkosiwikamikohk" and their memoir *nîtisânak* (2016, 2018).

This is not meant to be an exhaustive review of the incredible and diverse expressions of Indigenous futurisms that continue to inspire me and shape my thinking. Instead, these examples reflect the material and intellectual Indigenous futurist gestalt that I accessed as I became aware of Indigenous futurisms, and which became central to the formation of my own Indigenous

futurist work. These are the pieces that wander around my brain, or that I still wear/view/read/listen to, and which display the possibilities of forms beyond what I could have imagined on my own. It would be impossible to separate out how each piece has specifically influenced my writing, because it all has, and all of these works exist in my mind in conversation with one another. I want to make clear that the Indigenous futurist cultural production happening in Indian country right now goes far beyond speculative fiction writing. In fact, I think this is a central aspect of futurisms, generally: it is a movement, not simply a genre, and my written work is only a fraction of the content I have, and want to produce.

I am informed and inspired by all these diverse cultural expressions of Indigenous priority, continuing presence, and futurity. This thesis then is my latest addition to the various ways Indigenous peoples are doing this work.

Methodology

Through otipêyimisiiw-itâpisiniwin, Métis worldview, which understands words and stories as potentially transformational, I engaged in autoethnography and research-creation to create the stories in this thesis.

Through four stories, I span centuries of Métis existence. I asked broad research questions specific to each story, but the central unifying question was: How might Métis from manitow-sâkihikan behave under the circumstances which are the premise for each story? I drew from my own experiences where I could, and where I don't know the answer to something, I did research to fill in the gaps. In this way, the research process became an organic autoethnography and exercise in research-for-creation as I sought to learn more about my own community's history and my place within it.

As Onowa McIvor puts it, "the method of autoethnography is also largely about telling stories, in this case one's own. As a research methodology it extends beyond the realm of storytelling for entertainment but not unlike much Indigenous storytelling, it holds a greater purpose of teaching, learning and at times, creating new knowledge" (2010). My thesis is not telling my individual story, it is telling the real and potential stories of Métis from manitow-sâkihikan, past, present, and future, and those stories are inextricably linked to the wider kinscapes land/waterscapes I referred to earlier.

Research-creation integrates a creative process and some sort of artistic work as an integral part of the study, in this case, speculative fiction short stories (Chapman and Sawchuck 2012). The investigations I engaged in, being as they are set in alternative histories and potential futures, were not possible to research without engaging in creative practice. Thus, of the four subcategories of research-creation identified by Chapman and Sawchuck, this thesis engages in research-for-creation. This subcategory of research-creation involves an “initial gathering together of material, ideas, concepts, collaborators, technologies, et cetera, in order to begin” (2012, 15-16). This gathering together is research, and in my case was absolutely necessary to do first in order to write a single word. As well, as the stories progressed, the research remained ongoing.

To give a better sense of the way in which I conducted my research for this thesis, I’ll provide an example. For my story, “Buffalo Bird”, I wanted to reimagine the nêhiyaw-pwat as being victorious against Canadian western expansion. I did some character and world-building, creating the parameters for the story, mainly socio-political in nature, big picture stuff, all of which required substantial research. I then let my characters loose in the world, triggering the need to do research as scenes unfolded.

At one point, my main character wakes up in a cabin in Lac Ste. Anne in 1854. In order to write this scene properly, I had to research Métis vernacular construction for that time period, assuming the cabin was built at least a decade prior. I learned *a lot* about Métis construction in various locations during that time, but the reader gets the barest glimpse of this research in the actual description.

A deeper dive had me asking whether or not Métis in Lac Ste. Anne had cast iron stoves during these years; I didn’t want to include a cast-iron stove as a detail otherwise. This led me on an incredible, twisting search. I joined a closed Facebook group of cast-iron enthusiasts. I read about the history of foundries in eastern Canada, found articles about the kinds of stoves that were shipped west, but the information only traced sales to white families. I looked up scanned images of cast-iron stove catalogues. I scoured Métis memoirs for this detail, none of which went back far enough to answer my question. Finally, someone suggested I speak to an amateur cast-iron stove historian who also restores said stoves, Michael Strong (2014). His website is a veritable treasure trove of information on cast iron stoves, and after a brief phone call, I was able to determine that my character probably would not have had a cast iron stove in her home! None

of this research made it into my bibliography, but definitely took hours of work to finally settle on her having a clay oven instead, and that detail was cited in the pieces on vernacular Métis construction.

It may sound like I was simply wasting time with little details like this, but listen! I grew up with a father who was an amateur WWI and WWII historian, with a particular focus on tanks and other weapons. Whenever we watched movies set during these periods, he would say things like “that tank wasn’t produced until two years later!” etc. So not only do I worry folks reading my stories will notice historical inaccuracies in a way that could mess with their suspension of disbelief, I also use this process as a way of learning more about the specific history of my community. I have a responsibility, with the access I have to the time and resources the academy provides, to ensure the research I do can be relied upon by others in my community.

This does not mean I am prevented from taking liberties when required. I am still fairly certain, based on talks with Sharon Morin of the Musée Héritage Museum in St. Albert, that Lac Ste. Anne Métis were not raising pigs during the 1850s, but I felt I needed them for the story. Even that decision, to be potentially historically *inaccurate*, was only made after extensive research. At least no one can take me by surprise if they contest this detail; I can explain my process and my choices in an informed manner.

Using autoethnography and research-creation allows me to learn more about the history of my community while also charting out potential futures for it. These stories allow me to “imagine otherwise,” as Métis scholar Daniel Voth does in his re-imagining of Howard Adams (2018). As Voth points out, Adam’s intellectual work is marred by “his colossal failure to adequately and appropriately address Indigenous gender and Indigenous gendered power dynamics within his explication of colonial domination” (2018, 17). If we can imagine past, present, and futures that take into account the complexities of gender, race, classism, and disability, we can see ways to turn imagining otherwise into acting otherwise, now.

I am powerfully and irrevocably moved by Métis scholar Daniel Voth’s words on “imagining otherwise,” which perfectly sum up what motivates my exercise in Métis futurisms: “Indigenous peoples have suffered greatly at the hands of the intersecting power dynamics of settler colonial oppression. If we are to engage in struggles of and *for* freedom and imagine, act, think, and love otherwise, it might be helpful to spend some moments with our relations reimagining other ways of acting, thinking, and loving” (2018, 34).

Buffalo Bird

1854⁶

She found herself on the shore of a vast freshwater lake that seemed to have swallowed up everything before her. The gunmetal sky met quicksilver at the horizon, confusing the eye, blurring boundaries or perhaps merely rejecting them. Instead of sand beneath her feet there was long prairie grass rasping quietly around her naked thighs, colourless and out of place, stretching behind her for an eternity. Thunder rolled above her head, deep and booming, filling her chest but failing to crack her apart. Reflexively she pawed at her side, seeking tobacco to light to bolster the strength of the Thunderers as they battled once again to prevent the world from being destroyed, but her hand found only her own cold flesh.

Mixed with the fetid perfume of silt and vegetative rot was the sharp tang of blood, and under it a hint of the unintended intimacy of fluids from deep within the body; it came in waves, carried somehow in the absence of wind, a miasma that filled her nostrils, infusing itself into her skin and hair. Death was coming, and she felt fear bubbling up inside her, weakening her control, coursing in painful jolts through limbs that did not want to obey.

There was a dark spot in that heavy sky. No, she realized, it was touching the waters of the lake. A slow fog appeared there, where the water met the sky, rolling forward, towering like a fort wall built to enclose the world, as though it were consuming air and liquid both, blocking out everything but that tiny black figure.

⁶ This scenes in this story do not all unfold chronologically, so help the reader keep track of the age of the main character during each of the time periods, I am including this guide: 1844 (6), 1852 (13, then 14), 1854 (16), 1870 (32), 1871 (33), 1913 (75). Also, rather than use distracting in-text citations, I am performing hybridity and putting them into these footnotes instead.

The Thunderers continued to make their presence known, a steady reverberation now more felt than heard. Instead of comfort, she felt it was a warning. Perhaps this time they would not be able to protect her People. She realized she could not move, not even to blink, helplessly watching that black figure cross the lake at an impossible speed. There was bile in the back of her throat, and a terrible familiarity. She wanted to turn and run, she wanted to vomit. She felt a terror so complete it seemed to liquefy her insides; as though outside of herself, she could hear her own strangled whimpers. The figure was only a few canoe lengths away now, that wall of mist had eaten the world leaving only a small semi-circle of smooth slate against the shore.

Cowled in thick black wool robes, the being that glided towards her did not quite touch the water; its face and shape were obscured and it was difficult to gauge its size. It seemed distorted somehow, as though viewed on the bottom of a shallow stream. Inexplicably she smelled smoke now, and heard a high-pitched howling.

With a sudden, disorienting wrench her perspective flipped; the figure was not coming towards *her*, she was falling towards *it*, cold wind howling past her ears. Spasming in shock, she finally regained control of her muscles, shooting her arms in front of her to protect her head as she fell. At that moment, thunder split the world.

Her eyes flew open in the near complete darkness, the full body convulsion that was her body's rejection of impact with that cowled figure like an echo in her muscles. There was something wrong with her hands, the fingers fused together, hardening, the muscles in her arms twisting, pulling away from bone. She struggled against the pain, refusing the change. A bright flash seared her eyes through the rawhide windows and growing chinks in the clay and buffalo hair mixture cemented on the exterior of the logs of her cabin, gone before she'd registered it but leaving its imprint throbbing at the back of her skull.⁷ Thunder ripped the sky asunder again

⁷ (Paquin and Young 2003, 4-6). In the 1850s, maisons d'hiver as described in this story were still heavily in use, particularly among communities that participated in the buffalo hunt. They were constructed of saddle-notched logs cemented together with mud and clay mixed with buffalo hair or grass, sod or hay roofs, and bison hide coverings for windows and doors. The floors were usually packed dirt. Unlike settler homes of similar styles, Métis homes did not have rooms, but rather were completely open. As

almost simultaneously, and the prairie heavens let loose a torrential downpour that began battering the sod roof.

She lay on her pallet, worn buffalo hide kicked off during her night terrors, slowly registering the cold in her extremities despite having slept in her wool pants and a long linen shirt, panting while her heart slowed and her limbs relaxed once again into familiar forms. The cabin filled with the roar of the spring deluge, her vision adjusting to the faint reddish glow from the dying embers in her clay oven.⁸

The door rattled fit to be torn from its rawhide thongs, and her heart leaped once again into her throat. With the strange clarity of memories retrieved from the edge of consciousness, she realized someone had been pounding at her door for some time now. She pulled the buffalo robe up over her head, a ridiculous attempt to pretend absence, like a child hiding during a telling of the Rolling Head story, fear still a shameful tang in her mouth.⁹ She bit her own lip in anger at herself, the pain galvanizing her to stand, wrapping the hide around her and groggily feeling her way across the open packed earth floor to the door.

She reached the door as it endured another thrashing from whatever was on the other side. The rain so occupied the soundscape she was barely able to make out muffled shouting. She bit her lip again, the pain a goad. It had been a dream, there was no cowed monster waiting for her, though she couldn't imagine what else would be out in this weather. Unwrapping the long rawhide strap that kept the plank door secured, she was knocked back a step as a bulky shadow

Métis were spending the bulk of the spring and summer on the hunt, these homes were only inhabited during fall and winter, and required annual upkeep.

(Burley and Horsfall 2009, 23-30). Métis home construction began changing from the 1850s on to structures that were often one and a half stories using willow lathe strips and dovetail notches, or tenon-and-groove construction (known as the Red River frame) adopted from Francophone communities. Again, the openness of Métis floor plans is discussed as reflecting Métis views of space.

⁸ (Burley 2000, 30-33). Métis homes before the 1870s often used clay ovens for cooking and heating, with cast iron stoves only becoming commonplace later in the 19th century.

⁹ (Ahenakew 1929). This is a particularly terrifying sacred story that Cree and Métis people tell during the winter months.

slammed their fist into the wood and became unbalanced by the lack of resistance, nearly falling across the threshold. Something clattered to the ground, evoking a string of curses from this intruder.

“Cyprien?” finding her balance, she pushed him aside non-too-gently and struggled with the door, whipped by wind and rain before managing to force the door closed again against the nearly horizontal sheets of rain.

“I dropped my lantern, don’t move, let me find it.” his voice was raised so she could hear him over the bedlam outside. She acquiesced and waited for him to bump around searching for the small metal cage on the floor. The faint glow from her oven did not reach this far, but when he crossed in front of it, blotting out even that tiny illumination, she shivered, the fading stamp of dream fear lingering enough to make the darkness feel cloying.

“What are you doing here?” she finally thought to ask. Realising he may not have heard her over the din of the storm, she raised her voice, “Wait, did you ride? Is our auntie’s horse out there?!”

“No, no, I walked.” A greasy yellow flame flared up, casting huge twisted shadows before quieting into a steady glow. She jumped; Cyprien was all the way across the room by the oven. He’d fished out a piece of bison tallow wrapped around a braided grass wick from his fire bag and stuck it on the spine meant for fancy wax candles they usually didn’t have, and lit it with a coal scooped quickly from the hearth. In the dim light she could see what a sorry state he was in, soaked to the bone and shivering. He left the lantern perched on the oven.

“Can you please, Angélique?” he chattered, pointing his lips towards the oven, arms withdrawn from the sleeves of his red blanket coat, hands stuck under his armpits for warmth. The fat wouldn’t cast light for much longer.

She nodded sharply, quickly coaxing the coals back to life, building up the fire until the cabin was bathed in soft amber light and warmth began to radiate from the curved dome of the

oven. She set her kettle full of leftover tea to warm and helped Cyprien spread his coat close enough to the fire that it began to steam as it dried.

The rain had already started to lessen in intensity, and thunder no longer cracked directly overhead. She was fully awake now, the last tendrils of terror fully melted away by the light and a familiar face.

“What are you doing wandering around at night?” she shoved a crude wooden mug full of strong tea into his hands. Cyprien blew on it gratefully before risking a sip, wincing as he burned his tongue anyway.

“Our auntie sent me,” he looked at her from underneath a mess of curly brown hair that was still dripping, a worried twist to his mouth, “Angelique – it’s bad.”

She’d known this wasn’t a social call; no one was going to walk this far along the lakeshore in the middle of the night to rouse her just to chat, but his tone chilled her. “Bad? Bad how? Is everyone okay? Is the baby coming?”¹⁰

“No, no, Marie is fine.” he gingerly sat on one of the two chairs in her home, and set his cup on the small wooden table. She suddenly noticed that his knees above his leather wrappings weren’t just darkened with water; the grey fabric of his pants was nearly black where he’d clearly been kneeling in mud.

“We’re all okay at the house but –” he paused, seeming uncertain.

¹⁰ (Anderson 2011, 40-43). It’s important to note that prior to the 1860s, Métis women were using family planning, including contraceptives and abortifacients, as were their Cree and Anishinaabek kin. After the 1860s, Métis families were often larger than settler families. Anderson quotes Nathalie Kermoal on this, noting that the increasing in families coincided with the decline of the buffalo hunt. When we think of Métis families in the 1800s and into the early 20th century, we often think of very large families, but in the 1850s, families would often have a maximum of four children, making my character Angelique’s family of 2 siblings, not all that strange. In addition, pregnancies were often planned to coincide with the spring, and this part of the story is happening in late May.

“But what? What’s going on?” she just barely stopped herself from grabbing the front of his shirt and shaking him until his teeth rattled. He seemed to sense her growing anger.

“Out back, in the pen. The pigs were panicked, so I thought maybe a wolf had gotten in.” he stared down at his hands for a moment and continued, “I had to put the three of them down.”

She winced at that, pulling a chair over and sitting next to him.

He shook his head, closed his eyes for a moment, “That’s not why she sent me, Angelique.” He opened his eyes again, and regarded the stains on his knees. She couldn’t help it, her stomach dropped at his tone, and she pulled the buffalo robe around her even tighter, wishing she could draw it over her head and not hear the rest. She didn’t want to see the accusation in his eyes. When he finally looked at her though, there was nothing there but sadness.

“She needs to know if it was the Rougarou.”¹¹

It didn’t take her long to get more warmly dressed, and by then, Cyprien’s jacket had dried enough to be serviceable. The storm had moved on and the wind had quieted, leaving the sound of waves lapping the shore and the drip drip of water as it rolled over new leaves onto the bushes below. He held his lantern low, sputtering fat casting scant illumination, but good enough

¹¹ (Sing 2009, 63 – 69). This piece compares the Métis stories of Rougarou to Francophone Loup Garou.

(Cariou 2010, 157 – 168). Crucial to this story is the different way that Métis relate to Rougarou (Roogaroo, Rigarou), and indeed shape-shifting, compared to Francophones. Cariou, who insists his own uncle was known to be a Rigarou, notes that among the Métis, and many First Nations, the power to transform is respected, not feared, or treated as evil, the way that the French saw it. In Métis folklore, a Rougarou is not a werewolf, but rather tends to be a black mare, or a black dog. Cariou notes that the loup-garou “is also implicitly about race”, reflecting European anxiety of hybridity, of which the Métis in particular represent. Cariou links the description of Métis as “the one-and-a-half-men”, half white, half Indian, and half devil, with the way in which Métis were seen as inherently evil, untrustworthy, and potentially capable of transforming into savagery. In this story I want to challenge these notions, maintaining the respect towards the power of transformation, and troubling the notion of savagery as an inherently Métis trait; in fact, I suggest the savagery lay within the Europeans who so viciously colonized these lands.

for the two of them to follow a trail they'd often run blindfolded for fun as children. Not so long ago, really, when this old cabin still lay empty, a place for children to play at being grown. Their breath billowed out before them, the earth not entirely awakened from a winter that had been particularly harsh this year.

Over a hundred and fifty souls clustered along the shore of manitow-sâkahikan, with Father Thibault's mission, built 10 years back, squatting malevolently in the centre, making it seem as though the settlement had grown around him.¹² Uncharitably, she thought the priest had been entirely too fond of changing the settlement he'd been asked to serve, including the name of the lake. It had been a relief when he'd returned to St. Boniface, but the respite hadn't lasted long. The interim priest, Bourassa, seemed to watch her constantly, she who never wore dresses, who lived alone when the rest of his flock gathered together two to four families in a home; she who, or so the rumours went, could transform into a black mare.

She hated those rumours.

There was light glowing from within their aunt's house but Cyprien steered her away from the warmth and welcome. There'd be time enough for tea and bannock. After.

Cyprien stood awkwardly under the sputtering light of a torch meant to provide more illumination than the inadequate lantern had. In that, he'd been successful. She heaved one last time, weakly, and wiped her mouth on the back of her sleeve, glad she'd at least managed to keep the sick from splashing the white wool of her jacket.¹³ He at least knew her well enough to offer no comment while she tried to collect herself.

¹² (Drouin 1975). Lac Ste. Anne, known in Cree as Manito Sakahigan, is spelled manitow-sâkahikan in standardized Cree, which I use here. Father Thibeault, originally from St. Boniface had a mission built at manitow-sâkahikan in 1844, and in September had the lake named Lac Ste. Anne. Joseph Bourassa, a young priest who accompanied Thibeault, was 27.

¹³ (Adams, Peach, and Dahl 2013, 16 – 18). In the early 1800s, Thomas Nuttall, a botanist, wrote his observations of "metif" families, by which he meant mixed-race. He noted that there "were not necessarily distinctions between 'metif' meaning 'mixed race', and other Indian groups." For example, all wore blanket capeaus (in this case in the story, a white HBC multi-coloured point jacket popular among

Where the cousins stood, the earth was unusually muddy and torn up, soft in comparison to the pounded soil throughout the rest of the enclosure. And the smell – it reminded her of her dream. The smell of death.

She took a few steps toward the remaining pigs, huddled together at the far end of the pen, and drew in gulps of clean air before turning back.

“Tell me everything.”

1844

The gardens were planted and wind teased the poplar leaves into a dance that the long prairie grass answered, a constant susurrations that left her drowsy as they bumped over rough tracks. The large Red River cart wheels squealed, wood turning against wood, in a complicated counterpart as they made their way southeast. They’d been joined by Métis and a few Cree and Stoney families along the way, numbering over a hundred carts now.¹⁴

Sometimes she would lay on top of bundles of supplies with Eunice, staring up at the vast cloudless sky, always watching and listening for the liquid call of the brown headed birds that heralded bison nearby. Eunice would curl up against her, solid toddler head insistently pushing into her armpit. Attempts to wiggle into a more comfortable position were met with equanimity; Eunice simply shoved herself closer until it felt like Angelique might roll off the cart altogether.

Métis and First Nations for centuries), moccasins, etc. One of the things I want to stress in this story is that Métis share more with First Nations than we differ from them, a central premise in Rob Innes’ book, *Elder Brother and the Law of the People*.

¹⁴ (Callihoo 1960, 24 – 25). Victoria Belcourt Callihoo was born in Lac Ste. Anne in 1861, and was part of the last generation from my community to participate in the buffalo hunt. Her mother was a medicine woman who would help set bones of riders flung from their horses during the hunt. Although this portion of the story is set in 1844, I use a number of details from Victoria’s description of the hunt.

Most times she walked, chatting with Cyprien, or taking turns carrying Eunice on her back. A thick Assumption sash helped to support her sister's weight, tied over her shoulders and across Angelique's breast bone to keep her arms free, just like she saw the older girls do.¹⁵ Eunice would giggle and pretend she was riding a horse, painfully jamming her little moccasins into Angelique's hip bones, standing for a few seconds as though she were a scout.

The wagons were slow, and when they needed to ford streams, as was often the case, the children would sit on the banks stripping seeds from grass while horses, men, and wagons struggled. Eventually an adult would come and ferry them across to the other side. They'd already made the worst crossing across the kisiskâciwani-sîpiy with minimal loss of supplies and only a few scary dunkings.¹⁶ She put tobacco down with the others, showing her little sister how to press the dry shredded leaves into the rich river mud.

At night, there was laughter and songs around the fire-pits, many of the stones laid there generations ago, easy to miss if you didn't know what to look for. Eunice would fall asleep against their father's chest as he told stories of past hunts to an audience of aunts, uncles, and countless cousins, all of whom were entranced no matter he'd told these stories a thousand times before.

Cyprien was the same age as she, and had not yet decided he had more important things to do than help her with her chores, unlike their older cousins who were busy preening like mating grouse, hoping to catch the eye of an unrelated boy or girl from a different settlement. He would help her rub tallow on the wooden axles of her parent's cart, reaching up high where she couldn't; keeping an eye out for wear in the rawhide lashings. Some families took as many as three carts, but her parents had always made do with one.

¹⁵ (Anderson 2011, 70 – 72). Traditional child-rearing among Métis, Cree, and Anishinaabek peoples involved what Anderson calls a high level of indulgence, and that whatever the needs of children were, somebody would take care of them. Older siblings had an important role in the care of younger siblings, and often carried younger children during travel.

¹⁶ The Cree name for the North Saskatchewan River.

A day of travel later and the scouts returned. The wagons fell silent and the air was full of the mellifluous calls of birds who had abandoned their young in other nests to follow the herds.¹⁷

Eunice cried big silent tears, but she wasn't allowed to come along with their father, who showed Angelique and Cyprien how to slither along their bellies as they neared the top of a slight hill.¹⁸ There, stretching in every direction to the ends of the world was a dark mass, hardly distinguishable as individual bison. The smell was incredible, rich, distinct, familiar.

She gazed out at the herd and imagined she was one of those birds, perched between dark horns, eating insects from the grass, groups of them startling and rising above the shaggy backs before settling back down. She wondered how their babies found them, how they knew to join their kin.

Watching their strange antics, the way they confidently arranged themselves along the backs of these huge Plains beasts, she suddenly realized she had it wrong. She reached across to Cyprien and squeezed his hand. He looked at her in askance.

¹⁷ (Robinson 1995, 428 – 460). The brown-headed cowbird, formally known as the buffalo bird, is a parasitic bird that was historically found almost exclusively in the short-grass prairie west of the Mississippi. This particular article details their historic presence, following the bison herds, and their subsequent spread with cattle ranching. Like the cuckoo, they lay their eggs in other bird's nests. They had a balanced, symbiotic relationship with the bison, catching insects flushed out by the buffalo and being in most abundance among the bison in May and June. This reduced the irritation from insects, making things more pleasant for the buffalo. However, cowbirds began spreading rapidly east as herds of cattle replaced the bison, yet another example of how long-standing animal relationships have been severely impacted by colonization.

If you'd like to hear what these birds sound like, there is a youtube video here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPgFIKa7IDE>

¹⁸ (Anderson 2011, 68 – 69). Anderson details information from various Michif, Cree, and Anishinaabek Elders, as well as ethnologist accounts about the importance of teaching Métis and First Nations children (including babies) to be silent. These practices include gently pinching an infant's lips shut. For the most part, child-rearing among Métis and First Nations communities involved high levels of autonomy for children, with little in the way of physical discipline, but self-control was also taught, and at times the silence of children was a matter of survival. Again, these accounts demonstrate the strong similarities between Métis, Cree, and Anishinaabek (Ojibwe and Saukteaux) peoples.

“They look like birds.” She whispered. Cyprien wrinkled his forehead in confusion, and her father scowled at her for the noise before turning back to regard the herd. She shifted closer to Cyprien, her mouth almost touching his ear. She needed him to understand.

“They look like birds, but the buffalo are their real kin.”¹⁹

She pulled away and saw her father staring at her, his dark lined face unreadable. Without a word, he jerked his head back the way they came, and they carefully returned to camp.

1854

They perched side by side on the top rail of the paddock, as far away from the... remnants... as they could be. The moon, which had been hidden behind towering masses of storm clouds, was now hung swollen and low in the sky, an unhealthy pale colour that reminded her of grubs wriggling beneath a disturbed log.²⁰

Cyprien pulled out a pipe, packed it from his fire bag, and carefully lit a small twig before handing the torch to her to extinguish.²¹ Cupping his hand around the tiny flame, he held it to the pipe and puffed on it until the tobacco was well lit. Married last summer and already expecting his first child, his still youthful profile reminded her of her father.

¹⁹ (Goldber-Hiller and Noenoe 2015, 1 – 26). This piece explores the notion of Indigenous people having other-than-human kin, in this case between Kanaka Māoli and the ‘ulu (breadfruit) plant. They have more work that explores similar kinship relationships with pigs on the island. I am keeping in mind the fact that among Métis and First Nations people, kinship extends beyond the human, and if this is true, then it makes sense that different animal species can also be kin with one another.

²⁰ (Vincent 2013). I had to have an accurate idea of where the moon would be close to dawn in May in the northern hemisphere.

²¹ (Duncan 1991, 56 – 66). A fascinating article about the pre-19th century origins of the firebag, and its adoption by Métis.

After a long draw, exhaled in a ghostly stream to the sky, he spoke. “It’s Louis, I think. Cecil’s brother. The pigs were at him when I came out here.” He glanced at her, “It’s why I had to –“

She hissed through her teeth, “You were right to put them down.” She eyed the remaining sows mistrustfully, “I didn’t know he was back from Fort Pitt?”²²

Cyprien nodded, and handed her his pipe. She took a puff and briefly raised the pipe to the sky before handing it back.

“He’d come with supplies.” Cyprien explained.

“You mean he’d come with the things he’d stolen.”

Cyprien shrugged.

Louis and Cecil were fraternal twins, following in their father’s footsteps as freeman working at times with the Hudson’s Bay Company, sometimes working for themselves with what they could pilfer.²³ Equal parts cunning and generous, the two men wintered with their mother’s people at Tobacco Weed Plain but had wives and children at Lac Ste. Anne.²⁴ Probably wives

²² (Ens and Sawchuk 2015, 42 – 70). Métis involved in the fur trade ranged from Montréal to Fort Pitt and Fort Edmonton on a fairly regular basis, sometimes with the Northwest Company, sometimes with the Hudson’s Bay Company until the two were integrated in 1821, at which point the HBC was the only game in town.

²³ (Devine 2004, 75 – 110).

²⁴ (Fromhold 2013). This is a self-published book that does not even have page numbers, but it is an exhaustive chronological history using primary and secondary sources, and contains a shocking amount of information on the specific members of certain bands as well as their whereabouts, so I’m using it for this story! Tobacco Weed Plain, so named for the kinnikinnick that grew in abundance there, is close to Leduc. From the 1830s to about the 1840s, a mixed Cree/Nakoda (nêhiyaw-pwat) band led by Pesew wintered in this area. The sources Fromhold uses in his many self-published books really highlights again the mixed nature of most Indigenous communities within the nêhiyaw-pwat territory; “pure” bands were fabrications by colonial authorities post 1885, and more often contained Nakoda, Saulteaux, Cree, Iroquois, and some Métis people at the same time.

and children at Tobacco Weed Plain too, if she were being realistic. Louis had hired on as a labourer at Fort Pitt last year, while Cecil maintained the summer run to Montréal.²⁵

“I don’t know how you could possibly tell though.” She shuddered and wrenched her thoughts away from the grotesquerie in the bloody earth just a few lengths away. Cyprien reached into his fire bag and pulled out a small unadorned and stained smoked hide pouch on the end of a rawhide loop. He passed it to her. She felt an unexpected weight, and rolled the hard, flattened object between her fingers through the leather.

“I already opened it. That’s his lucky musket ball.”²⁶

She knew the story well. During a drunken tavern brawl in Montréal a number of years ago – probably over a woman - , a Canadien drew his flintlock and was about to fire point blank into Louis’ face when the Frenchman slipped - probably in a puddle of vomit - and the bullet hit the wall directly beside Louis’ right ear. The explosion had left Louis partially deaf, but he was alive, and he dug the ball out of the wood to keep in his medicine pouch. The Frenchman supposedly fled in terror, but Cecil had once let it out that Louis head-butted the man unconscious before ordering another round with the coins from the man’s purse.

²⁵ (Daschuk 2013, 59 – 79). In the 1850s, various diseases swept across the plains, such as influenza, scarlet fever, but vaccinations at Red River mitigated the losses somewhat. In addition, American and eastern Canadians started a slow trickle that became a flood when gold was found on the Fraser River, and the hold the HBC had on Rupert’s Land slipped considerable. During this time it’s quite likely that men making the summer journey to Montreal were in the habit of pilfering what they could to support their families and communities experiencing the stressed of disease and invasion. Small pox spread like wildfire across the Plains and into BC in the 1860s, but in this story, I imagine that the Iron Alliance was successful at keeping out the settlers who carried this disease, and that the Iron Alliance was not so severely weakened as is the case in the historical record.

²⁶ (Whisonant, 2015 61 – 73). Musket balls during this time were made of lead, and would often mushroom inside the body, doing maximum velocity damage to organs, rarely exiting the body. They caused more massive bone and tissue damage than any bullets today, which tend to pass through the body. Anyway, I had to find out what would happen to a musket ball if it were shot into a wood wall, and this chapter made it clear it would flatten.

Louis had retold and embellished that story so many times that he'd have his audience believe angels themselves had spoiled the Canadien's aim. Every telling had him pulling out the flattened lead slug, holding it above his head triumphantly to the cheers and jeers of listeners. He never went anywhere without it. Cyprien was right. What was left of Louis lay in a wide circle before them.

She handed the pouch back to him. "What was he doing out here in the middle of the night?"

Her cousin frowned, "I mean, he said he was going to drop by with something for our aunt, but we stopped waiting for him after the sun had set."

"Did he have anything with him?"

Cyprien spread his hands, and tapped the last of the ashes out of his pipe before returning it to his bag.

She sighed. "Right. Well I guess we need to talk to Cecil in the morning."

He hesitated, and she felt her stomach drop. He wouldn't meet her eyes. Reaching back into his fire bag, he held something out for her.

Trembling, she opened her hand, and he gently pushed a tangle of coarse black hair into her palm.

"It was all over the place, Angelique."

She looked down at the horse hair, stomach twisting.

"I haven't *changed* since. You all know that." she stated flatly. Cyprien nodded, but his gaze was still evasive.

“People are going to wonder.” he reached out tentatively and squeezed her shoulder. She nodded jerkily. He squeezed again, then let go.

“Come in, our auntie will want to feed you.”

1852

Cyprien helped her drag the canoe onto the shore, flip it over their heads and walk it up to her cabin. They’d had a taste for okâwak, the fish the sullen, baby-faced priest Bourassa called doré, so they’d taken her father’s canoe north, out to the hump where the lake rose sharply to just a few spans above a grown man’s head.²⁷ The okâwak loved that spot and to prove it, they’d caught six between them, enough for Cyprien to take some home and enough for the “fish-tithe” her mother would force her to take to Bourassa and Father Thibeault.

Cyprien had nicknamed Bourassa mahkitôn because he was always gobbling up the food people brought him, like a starving man, his overly large mouth rarely closed while he chewed, little flecks staining the black wool cassock he always wore.²⁸ They lay the canoe down, and grinned at each other.

“Say hi to everyone, I’m going to get these to our auntie!” Cyprien slung his sack of okâwak over his shoulder and set off back home.

His mother had died in childbirth when he was a baby, and his father had left the settlement soon after, so he lived with her father’s sister, his maternal aunt. His other siblings

²⁷ (Waugh 2018). In this piece, a white fisherman refers to the journal of Viscount Milton who came to Lac Ste. Anne in 1860 as a tourist. This article is a piece of trash, but the Viscount described the Métis settlement, and something called the Mission hump, which is a real place just north from the old mission, where the lake comes up from about 30 feet to 9 feet, and is a favourite place for walleye (okâwak, doré) to hand out. Angelique is 13 in this scene.

²⁸ (Dictionary of Canadian Biography 1972). I get my physical description of the priest directly from the photo included in this biography.

lived with their paternal grandmother on the other side of the mission. She often thought he should come to live with her and Eunice; her mother wanted more children but had been unlucky in that regard, and why not house the cousin who was as close to her as a brother? Whenever she asked, her father would mutter that it wasn't right; Cyprien was her cross cousin, and potential marriage material.²⁹ She wished she could make her parents understand that she'd never be interested in boys like that.

With this thought fresh in her mind, she started guiltily as she walked through the door to find Father Thibeault seated at their long wooden table, in deep conference with her father. There had been no horse tethered out front, so he must have walked all the way from his home beside the mission. Her pleasant afternoon fishing with Cyprien melted away, to be replaced with the anxiety she felt around the priests who seemed to always direct their sermons about modesty and obedience directly at her.

Her father looked up at her entrance and she saw his lips tighten. She was wearing Cyprien's cast-off brown wool pants, her moose-hide moccasins lashed to just below her knees, a loose linen shirt half tucked in, and her long black hair scrunched up and shoved haphazardly under a battered and nearly shapeless brimmed felt hat. No different than most afternoons, really, and her father had mostly given up trying to force her into a dress, but the priest insisted women wear skirts.

The large priest, clad in worn black robes buttoned up the front just below a starched white collar. He turned ponderously in his chair to fix her with a disapproving stare, and she noticed he had a smear of lard in the short, white-flecked beard he wore just under his wide chin. Proof of her mother's hospitality, offered despite the antagonism that lay between Katherine Loyer and the Church. The priest's bushy eyebrows were always fixed in a perpetual scowl, and

²⁹ (Macdougall 2010, 51 – 85). Métis family ties are complex, and tend to respect the Cree concept of parallel and cross cousins, wherein parallel cousins are treated as siblings, and cross cousins can potentially be marriage material. So one's mother's sisters have children that are your siblings, but a mother's brother has children that are your cross-cousins. A father's brother's children are your siblings, but a father's sister's children are your cousins.

his short bristly hair was more unkempt than usual. He had a habit of running his thick fingers through it when he was talking, and by the looks of it, he'd been talking to her father for quite some time.

She ducked her head and shot a glance at her mother who sat, stiff backed on a stool in the corner with Eunice at her feet, ostensibly fixing nets, the tang of lake water and fish escaping through an uncovered window. Her mother's fingers weren't moving however, and her expression was stormy. With unease squirming deeper into her, Angelique noticed her mother's nails were thickened, sharp and long, a disconcertingly flat black. She hoped the priest hadn't seen.

Clearing his throat, the priest pushed his chair back and stood, as did her father. Paying her no more mind, the two men clasped hands.

"I'm sure you'll think on what we discussed," the priest said to her father in Cree.³⁰ Her father nodded and walked Father Thibeault to the door. She kept her head down as the priest passed her, holding her sack of fish and feeling frozen to the spot. Her father stood in the doorway for a long while, watching the priest leave, before turning back inside.

Her mother let the net drop, and bolted upright. She bared sharp teeth, her normally soft brown eyes deepening to black, and she waved an emphatic finger.

"I don't care what he thinks. Our daughter is not... she's *not* going to any school run by those, those..." she sputtered, and then angrily spat out, "les grises!"³¹ Glaring in challenge at

³⁰ (Kermoal n.d.). The Métis at Lac Ste. Anne were fishers when they were not on the buffalo hunt, and traded often with Fort Edmonton and surrounding communities. As well, Father Thibeault spoke fluent Cree.

³¹ (Duval 2001, 65 – 87) The Grey Nuns "les grises" arrived in 1844 in the west, opening various missions in Métis communities with a specific focus on ending Métis women's dependence on the hunt by teaching them how to farm and homestead. They opened a school in St. Boniface, which had a high cost attached to it. The Grey Nuns actually came to Lac Ste. Anne in the 1850s once Father Albert Lacombe took over the mission and invited the Oblates to run the mission with him. In my story, none of

her husband, she growled softly, lips still peeled back from pointed teeth that did not seem to want to fit into her generous mouth.

Eunice watched her parents, wide eyed. Angelique felt a chill run down her spine. She rarely saw her mother this angry, and it was terrifying. They'd been discussing sending her away? Who were the grey women?

Her father was wary, as he always was when confronted by his wife's temper. He opened empty palms, but made no move to approach her, and he cast his eyes downward, staying very still. The growl that had continued rising in her mother's throat slowly subsided. Angelique risked a quick peek and saw her mother's nails were once again short and without colour.

Her father walked, slowly, carefully, to Angelique and held his hand out for the sack. Peering inside he pursed his lips in approval.

“Good. Go clean them.”

“But papa!” she protested, feeling that the fish were entirely beside the point.

He made a small warning gesture with his hand and met her eyes, “Then take one to Frère Bourassa, these are his favourite.”

“Samuel!” her mother barked, demanding his attention.

“Yes, Katherine, my beloved. One moment.” his voice was calm and sincere. He lay a large hand on Angelique's shoulder and gently pushed her toward the door, waving Eunice after her.

this happens. Father Lacombe never arrives, and in fact the church is driven out of the community completely.

Numbly, she let her feet carry her out of the house, and down to the shore where she could clean the fish. Eunice, in her long-sleeved grey dress, shuffled to keep up with her. Behind them, they could hear her mother's raised voice, the growl back in her voice, and the low tones of her father as he tried to placate her.

Angelique kneeled down on the fine sand, unhappily dumping her three fish out into a pile in front of her. They slid off one another and settled, sand caught up in their iridescent scales, cloudy eyes staring sightlessly up at the golden sky as the sun began to set. A chill breeze blew in from the water, and Eunice shivered, sitting next to her sister and leaning into her for warmth.

Taking her knife from her belt, Angelique made the first long slit along the silver-white belly of one of the fish, warm innards spilling out, steaming slightly in the cooling air, noisome and familiar. She'd offer them to the water when she was done. She tried to clear her mind, focus on her task, be patient like her father had taught her, not jump to conclusions. Still, her mind raced, and she scraped the backside of her blade against the scales of the gutted fish, shucking them off into a glittering pile, trying to focus on these sounds, and not the rising voice of her mother.

Eunice made no move to help, she just stared out over the lake with her head resting against Angelique's shoulder. Finally, she said, "The priest wants you to go to St. Boniface. To the Grey Nuns."

Angelique's blood ran cold and she faltered, the sharp knife nicking the fat part of her thumb. Hissing in pain, Angelique put her mouth against the wound. Eunice mewled softly, in sympathy, but the cut was shallow and wouldn't bleed for long. Angelique stared out over the water, her mind racing, telling herself it was impossible, her parents would never send her away. Fear made her stomach clench.

"He said awful things about you." Eunice's voice was soft, with none of their mother's iron in it, "That you're idle, unfit to be a proper wife. That the devil's made you think you're a

boy.” Eunice regarded her with a troubled expression. “Is it true, Angelique? Is that why you dress like one all the time?”³²

The words stung. Angelique’s bark of laughter was bitter and mirthless, “No, I don’t think I’m a boy, Euny! I just don’t behave the way he thinks I should and – and - that mahkitiyêw has always hated me!”

Or perhaps, the priest’s dislike of her mother had just expanded to encompass her. Her mother, whose headstrong nature was legendary, so in contrast to the equanimity and patience of her father. A woman whose glossy black hair sometimes seemed to grow places it shouldn’t, whose eyes shifted from golden, to brown, to black, whose nails at times resembled claws. It ran in families, her father said, but Eunice was fair-haired and slender, well-liked and Angelique – well, Angelique took to her mother’s side.

From the house, her mother’s voice became even more shrill, almost a howl, and her father was shouting now, something she had rarely ever heard. The sisters stared at each other, both afraid. The noise abruptly ended, and the air was still. After a moment, a large black dog dashed from the doorway of their home. A moment after, they could see their father, leaning against the frame, his face unreadable. Eunice pretended she hadn’t seen, scattering the tiny mountain of scales, smoothing them over the sand.

“He told papa that Albert Cunningham is traveling next week to St. Boniface to be a witness at his cousin’s wedding, and that there was room for you.”

The sun was setting quickly now, and with bile in her throat, Angelique lay her knife on the sand. Her tongue had thickened in her mouth and her heart was beating strangely. She felt

³² (Morgensen 2015, 38 – 61). This chapter focuses on the ways in which heteropatriarchy and gender norms were both created and imposed upon Indigenous peoples during colonialism, in ways that erased and punished fluid sexual orientations and gender identities that exist pre-Contact. So while Angelique’s gender presentation and sexual orientation would not have been a problem among First Nations people pre-Contact, it would have been a sticking point with the Catholic church. Although her father usually didn’t care about these things, it made problems for her and the family when the priest made it an issue.

flushed and alternately cold and hot; she was dizzy. Staggering to her feet, she swayed for a moment, the drumming of her heart filling her ears, while Eunice stared up at her in terror.

“Angelique, your eyes!”

“You c’n clean ‘em.” she slurred, nodding jerkily at the fish. Her mind was whirling, crowded with images of stern women with damp grey skin reaching for her, and she shook her head to dislodge the vision. She lurched away, towards the trees, breaking into a run before her sister could stop her, hearing her father shout behind her. She crashed headlong into the pine and poplars, letting her feet carry her down a path without really thinking about it.

Her heaving breaths turned into rattling sobs, and tears of anger obscured her vision as she ran. Her blood was surging, pounding, loud in her ears and full of a terrible pressure. Her heart felt like it was going to burst, and for a moment she thought she was going to throw up. She pushed herself forward, needing to get away, needing to be alone.

Suddenly she slammed into a dark shape and was knocked back, landing hard on her back so that she gasped for air like a fish in the bottom of a canoe, writhing in pain. In the dim light of dusk, she saw a hazy black figure looming over her and if she had been able to draw breath, she’d have screamed aloud.

There was a terrible wrenching, as though she were being pulled by every limb, in every direction and for a moment she thought she would black out. She was seized with an intense vertigo and her eyes didn’t seem to work properly. She was wracked with the most intense pain she had every felt in her life.

The figure that had been looming over her was now directly in front of her, but seemed somehow to have shrunk so she had to look down at him. It was Father Thibeault, and his face was twisted in horror. He lifted a meaty fist as though to strike her, and without thinking, she lashed back in defence. Her hoof struck him on the shoulder and flung him back a number of

paces. With difficulty, he picked himself up, his arm clearly broken, and with one last wild look at her, he staggered off, running as quickly as his long cassock would allow him.

She screamed aloud in pain, but all she heard was the panicked whinny of a horse. Confused and disorientated she crashed into the trees again, trying to get away, branches whipping her eyes and scratching her sides. When she slammed into a branch this time, she sunk gratefully into unconsciousness.

She was swaying, being rocked, like when she'd been a baby in the wêwêpisowinis, the swinging cradle. Or when she'd swung her sister in it. Her eyes fluttered open and she saw her father's face looking down at her, concerned. He murmured something, but she didn't understand. Her mother was there too, she could feel her concern, a light touch on her brow as the world continued to swing her through the darkness. She slipped back into nothingness.

Like floating in the warm lake, ears submerged, sounds did not reach her distinctly, but she could tell from the low rumble and the bright brassy hum that her parents were talking, voices pitched too low to hear properly. And just like when one ear rose above the water briefly, she would catch a clear word here or there, in between sounds that made no sense but filled her with a deep sense of safety.

“left”

“Boniface”

“black mare”

“stupid priest he”

“rougarou”

Then one clear phrase. “She doesn’t know what she is.”

As she let herself sink beneath the surface again, she thought she heard her mother’s voice, breathing into her ear.

“She knows. She knows. She knows.”

What did she know, she wondered?

1854

Tears streamed down Cecil’s face, and his wife was wailing fit to wake the entire settlement, their youngest boy looking at his parents in bewilderment before he too opened his mouth with its three little teeth, to howl his fear and confusion.

“I don’t understand what’s going on!” Cecil clawed at his hair, the braids messy and nearly undone from the sleep he’d been roused from just an hour ago. He’d be taken to see his brother’s remains before men from the community took on the grim task of gathering them together for burial. Cecil’s eyes were wide and staring, and he trembled intermittently, pacing in front of them with a terrible energy.

Cyprien nodded in sympathy and Angelique closed her eyes for a moment in annoyance at the role he’d left for her. Taking a deep breath, she opened her eyes again.

“Cecil. Cecil!” she barked. Arrested in his pacing, he stared at her with something between rage and fear. Behind him, his wife was still wailing, the toddler abandoned and the older boys cowering in confusion. With a surge of impatience, she stabbed a finger at them, and

then at Cyprien, who had the grace to look embarrassed before he crossed the room to offer Cecil's wife comfort, scooping the howling baby up in one arm as he went.³³

Lowering her voice now that she had his attention and the cacophony of grief had subsided somewhat, she gestured for Cecil to follow her outside.

They stepped into the morning chill, and before she knew what was happening, he'd grabbed her by the arm and wrenched her toward him. She was at least a head and a half shorter and nowhere near him in mass. Leaning his face toward her, his sour breath hot on her cheeks, he snarled, "Tell me this wasn't you, Angelique. Tell me this wasn't you or I'll – "

She yanked her arm out of his grasp and shoved him with her other hand, anger giving her strength. He stumbled back, surprised, and a flash of fear crossed his face.

"Oh course it wasn't me, Cecil! iyaw! What the hell's wrong with you?"

He stared at her for a moment, and then his face twisted again and he shook his head and clawed at his hair once more. Not wanting him to start weeping uncontrollably again, she crossed the distance between them, and reached up to slap him across the face.

"Stop it!" she hissed at him, hating herself for her gruffness, but needing him attentive. It worked; he let his hands fall and looked at her helplessly. It would seem a strange scene, a grown man clearly intimidated by a slight girl; but the people here knew there was more to her, just as there had been more to her mother.

She took another steadying breath. "Cecil. We need to know what Louis brought from Fort Pitt. What he was taking to my aunt's house."

³³ (Tsosie 2010, 29 – 42). Métis women would have held positions of power and leadership, like other Indigenous women, until those roles were deliberately targeted by colonial powers. Métis women began to lose leadership power in the latter 19th century with the rise and fall of the buffalo trade. In my story, in this alternate future, that also never happens.

Cecil nodded as though anything made sense in this situation and he scrubbed his face with one hand. “It wasn’t much this time,” he told her, “he’d left most of it with our mother and our-“ he blinked and coughed uncomfortably. “Our mother, at Tobacco Weed Plain. Just some muskets and a few barrels, whiskey mostly. He thought your aunt could use the buffalo tongues though.”

She furrowed her brow, “buffalo tongues?”

“Yeah, he knew your aunt would make sure everyone got some.” He looked at her sharply, “They were in a big cask. It wasn’t there, I thought you’d had it taken inside?” She shook her head. Cecil looked thoughtful for a moment, then shuddered, the grief breaking through again. He put his face in his hands and shook his head.

1870

Pîhtokahânapiwiyin and Angelique looked down at the charred remains of Colonel Garnet Wolseley.³⁴ He lay quite a distance from his troops; he’d almost made it to the river and it was clear he’d run as soon as he’d seen wall of flame approach. It had been a tricky tactic, setting the prairie grass alight, but the wind had been true, and Wolseley’s exhausted troops, laden as they were with supplies, and ordered not to abandon their cannon, never stood a chance.

Payipwât’s warriors and Angelique’s group of Métis irregulars had done the rest with muskets and arrows.³⁵ They’d captured two dozen of Wolseley’s men; the rest hadn’t made it out

³⁴ (Captain 1871) Angelique is 32 in this scene. This is a first-person account of the Woseley expedition which in truth, was a terrible blow to the Red River. The journey was considered one of the most arduous military campaigns in history and took over three months across nearly impassible terrain, but when they arrived, Riel had ordered Upper Fort Garry abandoned, so it was captured easily. In my story, the Iroquois porters that Woseley hired were related to the Lac Ste. Anne Métis, as our community was founded by Mohawk men and their families. In this version of reality, Woseley was defeated, the Provisional Government was never disrupted, and the resistance of 1885 never needed to happen.

³⁵ (Payipwât) Piapot was leader of a nêhiyaw-pwat band and a major part of the Iron Alliance after 1860. He went on to sign Treaty 4 in 1875, but in this version of history, the numbered treaties also never happened, in great part because the buffalo were not wiped out.

of the raging fire that had burned right up to the banks of the Red River. Upper Fort Garry was in poor shape, some of the timbers still smouldering, but it was a small price to pay. Macdonald's railway would remain an unrealized dream, all his negotiations with British Columbia for naught.

Wolseley had set out in May, and Angelique's Iroquois cousins had been with them the entire time, slipping ahead to warn them the expedition neared. Iron Confederacy leaders never expected it to take until late August for his troops to finally arrived but apparently, he'd encountered significant obstacles.³⁶ Riel had argued for abandoning the Fort and retreating, but Payipwât, Pihtokahânapiwiyin, and Gabriel pushed through for a rout.³⁷ Uncertain of victory, Riel and a few supporters had slipped away a few nights ago.

Good riddance. Angelique had clashed with younger man repeatedly over the years, usually over his strange religious notions, but his obvious fear of her *reputation* forced her into a tiring state of wariness she was glad to let go. It hadn't seemed to matter that she'd never let the power flow, or that her people spoke well of her, Riel watched her, always. It had been a bad moment when he hung Scott, never mind the loudmouthed Orangeman deserved it.³⁸ For a while she wondered if he was going to try the same with her. Lucky for the Iron Confederacy, he'd made no moves against her; it had been her idea to use the prairie itself against Wosley.

In contrast, Dumont reminded her a little of Cyprien; he never seemed intimidated by her, and there was a kindness there she sorely missed, coupled with a teasing nature she had

³⁶ (Vrooman 2013). The Iron Alliance included Métis, Dakota, Cree, Anishinaabek, and at times, the Blackfoot Confederacy. It formed around 1600, rose to prominence in the 1850s and then waned in power as the buffalo were decimated. In this story, the Iron Alliance remains strong, and continues to the present day.

³⁷ (Dictionary of Canadian Biography 1982a). Pitikwahanapiwiyyin (Poundmaker) was Stoney, and his mother was mixed blood, but his culture was purely Cree. He was adopted by a Blackfoot chief and lived among them for a while, given the name Makoyi-koh-kin (Wolf Thin Legs). His experiences, like those of the other leaders I mention in this story, highlight the ways in which the various Iron Alliance and Blackfoot Confederacy bands had relationships with one another that were fluid, and important.

³⁸ Referring to the execution of Thomas Scott on March 4, 1870, the reason the Woseley expedition was sent by Macdonald.

appreciated very much over these hard years. As much as she missed her cousin, she was glad Cyprien had stayed with his wife and children, safe in Lac Ste. Anne.

Dumont heeded her council, and took advantage of her ability to blend in to the background when the Iron Confederacy needed information about the Canadians. He relied on her when English was needed, and the high regard he had for her meant she'd been easily accepted by the other war chiefs.

Pîhtokahânapiwiyin wiped ash from his eyes, and flashed her a grim smile, "Someone should take word to Macdonald."

She nodded thoughtfully. He was right, it was time to take a delegation and settle this mess. The Iron Confederacy bands were tired of surveyors and Ottawa's lackeys throwing their weight around. Macdonald was no doubt emboldened by the deal he'd struck with the Hudson's Bay Company for the transfer of rights to what they irritatingly insisted on calling Rupert's Land, and she'd gathered intel on his negotiations with British Columbia and the promise to build a railway across the Plains; this was not a problem that would go away on its own.

Angelique squinted into the fading sunlight, "A day to rest, and then we'll go." She met Pîhtokahânapiwiyin's gaze, seeing the resolve there. He gestured questioningly to the corpse at their feet and she pursed her lips for a moment, before giving a quick dip of her chin.

"It'd be rude to show up empty-handed." she agreed.

1854

"Joseph was with him." Cyprien joined her on the shore. They could both clearly still hear the wailing behind them.

She was staring into the calm water at little spiders skating along its surface, as always awed by the slight dents they made in the silver liquid. Once, perhaps twice she'd managed it for

a few moments before splashing through, back when she still let it happen. She wondered if Jesus had walked on water as a man, or as something else.

She sighed deeply; as abrasive as Louis and Cecil could be at times, they were well loved, and this death was a sorrow that would ripple through the settlement for a long while.

“Then let’s see what he has to say.”

Joseph was a ruddy-faced man with a prominent bulbous nose and a thick, wild beard, inherited from his Scottish father. He was originally from Saint Boniface, but he’d fallen in love with a Stoney woman on the buffalo hunt, and wintered with her people on the other side of the lake most years, so was often found visiting the settlement. It took a while to locate him, but they were finally directed to the back of the mission, where they found him sprawled on the ground, wrapped in a large buffalo robe and snoring loudly against the church timbers.

Angelique hated being so close to the priest’s domain, so she was perhaps a bit rougher than she intended when she nudged him with her mocassined foot; perhaps she even kicked him a little. With a shout, the big man lurched upright, stark terror on his face.

“Calm down, Joseph.” Cyprien urged, but it took a moment for sense to return to the older man’s drawn face. He stared up at them with a haunted expression, gathering the buffalo robe around him again as he staggered to his feet.

“Why are you sleeping here?” Cyprien asked while Angelique nervously eyed the priest’s house for any sign on movement.

“Couldn’t get into the church,” he mumbled, then began coughing, deep and racking, clearing his lungs out after damp hours spent in the cold. She pressed her lips together in

annoyance at the racket he was making. Finally, he spit out the rattling phlegm and righted himself again.

“You came back from Fort Pitt with Louis.” She stated, and he flinched at her flat tone before nodding. He held up a hand and refused to meet her gaze.

“You can stop right there, Angelique, I’m not going to be interrogated by a wee girl.” He coughed and spat again, and wiped his mouth. “No need. You’re the only one that’d believe what happened anyway.”

Cyprien and Angelique shared a glance.

“Why don’t you come back with us and – “ she started, but Joseph waved her off.

“I’m not leaving hallowed ground, not for anything!” He was looking at her finally, his jaw set. There was something in his eyes that chilled her; he was covering it up but Joseph was scared.

With another uneasy glance at the priest’s house, she nodded. “Okay, so tell us.”

Leaning against the church, he began his account.

“Louis and I set out a while back, as soon as the water was open enough to give us passage. They’d withheld a large portion of Louis’ pay after he’d been caught brawling, and he was angry, so we took enough to have us sitting dangerously low in the river. I convinced him to drop most of it off at his mother’s camp, which made getting back here a lot easier.”

Cyprien frowned, “Everyone knows Louis’ a brawler, why was he docked this time?”

Joseph grimaced, “That old bastard, One Pound One, John Rowand, he was at the Fort for some visit and he saw Louis laying into someone for something or other.³⁹ Rowand’s temper is like nothing I’ve ever seen, he came stomping over like an angry bull, swearing up a storm, when he just dropped dead, right there! Well his son runs the Fort and he decided to take it out on Louis. Docked him and kicked us both out!”

He shook his head in disgust, “We bid our time a few days, then helped ourselves to our fair pay. We got in early last night, stashed the rest with Cecil and Louis’ wife. On the way we’d realized one of the barrels we thought was rum, was actually pickled buffalo tongues, and he knew your aunt wouldn’t cuss him out for it, so we decided to bring it over right away.”

Angelique narrowed her eyes, “It took both of you to carry a barrel over?”

Joseph spread his hands, “It was heavier than it looked! Damned heavy, and why not, when it was a damned thing?” The fear was back in his face, “We had it up on our shoulders, him in back, me in front, and I started hearing...” he paused and closed his eyes tight, looking like he was trying not to sob. Cyprien raised an eyebrow at her, but she just wished he’d out with it already.

“What did you hear, Joseph?” Cyprien asked gently.

Without opening his eyes, Joseph’s strangled voice sent ice through her, “All the devils of hell. I heard all the devils of hell.” Sucking in a ragged breath, Joseph opened his eyes again

³⁹ (Two Tales n.d.). John Rowand was 300 lbs, and walked with a limp due to a broken leg as a child; his gait earned him the nickname One Pound One. He died of a heartache when intervening in a fight between two men. They buried him, but his will insisted he should be buried in Montreal. He was disinterred in a state of decomposition and his body was boiled so that only the bones remained for transport. Those bones were put into a cask filled with rum to preserve the bones, and labelled buffalo tongues so the porters would not throw it overboard out of superstitious fear. In reality, the cask was sent to York, to England and then to Montreal, and along the way, the rum had been siphoned off by sailors! In this story, Louis unluckily steals the cask.

Cool fact, when Cadence Weapon was Edmonton’s poet laureate, he wrote a timpani-based club anthem based on the legend of John Rowand: <https://soundcloud.com/hprodeo/one-pound-one-cadence-weapon>.

and his eyes were pleading, “I swear I wasn’t drunk. The whispering was coming from the barrel. We were just about at your aunt’s place when Louis dropped the damn thing; he’d must have heard it too. The barrel cracked, and something gushed out of it, like a roaring wind! Then...well we ran! With a sound like a thousand banshees chasing us. Louis headed towards your aunt’s place, my only thought was to reach the church.”

“There was no barrel when I found him, Joseph.” Cyprien was pensive.

“Found who?” a cowed figure stepped from around the corner of the church, clad in heavy black wool robes against the morning cold, the hood drawn fully up, seemingly with no face within it. Angelique flinched in shock, suddenly back in her nightmare, that figure gliding towards her across the lake -

Baby-faced Bourrassa brushed his hood back slightly, his pale face clearly visible against the black cloth. Angelique shuddered in revulsion, and the priest’s watery blue eyes, bulging like his beloved doré, fixed her with a rancorous gaze.

His eyes flicked to Cyprien, standing beside her, and the priest recoiled, face going slack, as though he’d seen a ghost. The moment quickly passed, and she once again had all of his unwelcome attention.

“Ah.” he said with a note of deep satisfaction, “I’ve been hearing talk of evil doings, how fitting I find you here, in the middle of it.”

She felt frozen to the spot, every muscle in her body screaming at her to flee. His eyes bored into her, his malevolence palpable in his voice, at odds with its boyishness.

“Angelique, the Rougarou of Lac Ste. Anne.”

1853

In the end, it had been Father Thibeault who traveled with Albert Cunningham to Saint Boniface, not Angelique. His broken arm splinted, he'd sat stiffly in the Red River cart, glaring at those gathered to bid him adieu.

The Elders had heard him out, quietly listening to his description of the black mare that had attacked him, listened to him as he named Angelique Loyer a rougarou. Then the Elders had visited her parents, she in the corner laying on a buffalo robe as they talked in low tones. She was still wracked with fever, confused, coming in and out of consciousness as Eunice hovered nearby, wiping her brow with a cool cloth.

A decision was made and Father Thibeault was presented with a rifle and three buffalo robes. The gun was her father's but the robes came from the community. The matter was considered settled, but the Father refused to accept this. At first, he merely *threatened* to leave, working himself up to delivering an ultimatum about Angelique's continued presence in the community, but when Elder after Elder softly responded with "kiyâm", he'd angrily packed, accepting the goods he'd been gifted, and made arrangements.

Frère Bourassa refused to accompany the Father. His sermons were respectfully attended at first, then less so as he again and again denounced Angelique and her mother, Katherine, as servants of the devil. Some in the settlement agreed with Bourassa, crossing themselves when they encountered the Loyer women, but for the most part it was considered poor form to continue a conflict that had been deemed resolved.

No one had expected Bourassa to stay. He'd been meeting with a Father Lacombe who had been considering taking over the mission, but it seems he'd decided to man the mission alone. After about half a year, his sermons became less impassioned, and he was seen throughout the community, tending once more to the day-to-day needs of his flock, presiding over baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Lac Ste. Anne settled back into a comfortable equilibrium.

Equilibrium was much harder for Angelique to achieve during those months. Her mercurial temperament worsened after menarche, or at least control over herself slipped more and more through her fingers like muddy lake water. Her mother often grew impatient with her, less able to curb her already poor restraint. The two were like oil and water, or perhaps like flame to fat. They set one another off, and the pain that preceded transformation left them both short-tempered with one another, and everyone else. Eunice and her father tiptoed around them, quiet ghosts in the presence of roaring flames.

It was after a particularly bad day that Angelique decided to go beyond the small experiments. Instead of clamping down on the power, she'd let it flow freely through her. She left the house as the sun dipped low over the lake, the ethereal sound of a loon call echoing out across the copper water, following her into the woods.

Her mother let her go, tired, and nerves drawn taut, snapping at her husband when he sought to bring Angelique back.

“Give her the space, Samuel! She'll be safer out there than in here with me right now!”

She couldn't have known it was prophecy.

Angelique broke into an easy run along the trail that led further back into the woods, rather than the one that snaked around the lakeshore. It was already night here, under the trees, but her eyes adjusted immediately, because she let them. The itch under her skin spread, and this time she didn't hold it back. This time she welcomed the pain, the wrenching, the thickening of her tongue, the sliding of her sight, the twisting of her limbs. It hurt like nothing had ever hurt before, but she knew the pain would end, and that knowledge was enough to endure it.

Mid-stride, hooves slammed down into packed earth, the jolt carried along her spine as she crashed forward, four legged now instead of two. Hampered by the trees, aching for an open plain, she made due with the space she had, startling waking beings as she passed, crashing about, not quite sure footed yet.

She tired more easily than she imagined, sweat lathering her heaving sides, air coming into her lungs strangely, in bellowing gasps, through wide nostrils. That's when she smelled the smoke.

At first, she thought her heightened senses were fooling her, intensifying what should have been the normal smell of her family's cooking fire, but as she headed back home, the smoke grew thicker. When she began to see grey tendrils reaching around thin tree trunks like skeletal fingers, she ran.

She burst out of the trees into light that seared her night-vision, like a blast that left her unable to process the scene, confused by the smoke, the roar louder than she could have imagined. And within it, barely audible, the thin, high yelps of an animal in pain. Gasping, stumbling, she lost her form all at once, a whinny turning into a scream, falling forward onto her unprotected face, stunned by the shock for a moment.

She heard her name being called, but her ears were ringing from the impact, and she couldn't make sense of more. She'd managed to roll onto her side, naked, the heat of the blaze searing her back as her family's home roared up in massive licks of flame into the night sky. Hazily she began to make out figures running to the lake, a bucket brigade was forming.

Her sight returned, but she was unable to move, shaking uncontrollably, her limbs twitching spasmodically as she tried to control them, to call the power back, to *move*, to do *something*. Suddenly Cyprien was there, kneeling down, calling her name, covering her with his coat, his face streaked with soot and tears. Her teeth chattered together as she tried and failed to answer him, and she stared at him helplessly, every answer she never wanted, written there in his eyes.

She saw something move, behind him, and she tried to focus. Out there, in the lake, just at the edge of the greasy orange reflection in the too-calm water. A figure stood, barely visible. She reached for the power again, demanding it, forcing it to help her *see*. The effort was almost too much, and if she could have screamed, she would have, the pain was that intense. Straining

and fading at the same time, knowing she was pushing herself too far, her vision cleared for a split second before agony broke her open like dry twig being snapped, and for a time, she ceased to exist.

When she moved into the abandoned cabin by herself, at the far edge of the settlement, they let her.

It wasn't fear. Cyprien had been the first to raise the cry, when the flames rose above the trees, but at least a dozen people had seen her change as she fell. It didn't matter, they knew what she was, just as they'd known what her mother was. They respected her, and they respected her grief.

What little there was to bury was interred without comment; not even Bourassa interfered. The small, delicate bones of her sister, the larger remains of her father, and the misshapen skull of a dog amid the skeleton of a woman.

They brought her necessities, a kettle, tallow, flour, drymeat. In return, she attended births, focused on her medicines, kept busy so she had no option but to collapse into sleep at the end of the day. At first, she had many visitors, as the community reached out to fold her into the grief they all shared, but she fell silent in their presence, staring off into nothing, and in time, it was only Cyprien.

1871

They'd been left cooling their heels, literally, for a number of hours now in a committee room on the main floor of the labyrinthine Parliament building.⁴⁰ The room was drafty, and poorly supplied in wood, forcing them to keep them to keep a comically small fire going in the

⁴⁰ (Artemiw n.d) I needed to know what the original Parliament looked like, before it burned. I wanted to get a sense of where the Iron Alliance delegation would be put. Angelique is 33 in this scene.

oversized fireplace. It was a childish tactic on Macdonald's part, and not a particularly effective one. The Iron Confederacy delegation, which now formally included the Blackfoot Confederacy, were all hardened veterans of Prairie winters, and well outfitted in wool capotes and buffalo robes.⁴¹

The close quarters of the city had set them all on edge. Something about the way their eyes sought distances that weren't there, a sense of claustrophobia lay over them like a foul fog. If this was the future Macdonald and his peers longed for, they could keep it.

Angelique was dressed in her habitual wool pants, with her winter moccasins wrapped in soft beaver fur to mid-calf, a white multi-coloured point jacket over a cotton shirt and beaded hide vest, secured with an Assomption sash, and a warm beaver fur hat. She knew from prior experience infiltrating Parliament and the taverns of Ottawa during their Confederation celebrations in 1867, that she'd be taken for a man, and that suited her fine.

Aatsista-Mahkan grunted in annoyance and started to build the fire up.⁴² When Dumont looked at him in askance, the Siksika leader grinned and held up a small kettle he'd pulled from one of his packs. He said something, and Kyi-yo-Kosi, or Jerry Potts as he was often called, translated for those who didn't speak the language, "Running Rabbit says he wants tea, and we can bust up the chairs if need be."⁴³

This broke the tension in the room. Ignoring the table, they sat in a semi-circle in front of the fire. Mistahimaskwa shared some dry meat, Payipwât had pemmican, and

⁴¹ The Battle of Belly River never happened in this version of history, instead the Blackfoot Confederacy had made peace with the Iron Alliance and joined them in 1870 against the Woseley expedition.

⁴² (Dictionary of Canadian Biography 1998). Aatsista-Mahkan (Running Rabbit) was a Siksika chief and signatory of Treaty 7 in 1877 (which never happens in this story).

⁴³ (Dictionary of Canadian Biography 1990). Jerry Potts (Ky-yo-kosi, Bear Child) was the son of a Kainai mother and Scottish father, and was apprenticed to an American Fur Company trader, who treated him very badly. He spoke many languages. He is often called "Métis", but his loyalties and kinship ties were clearly to the Blackfoot.

Pihtokahânapiwiyin pulled out a little flask of brandy.⁴⁴ Angelique raised her eyebrow at that; it was in a metal flask with the initials “H.C.W.L” on it.⁴⁵ Pihtokahânapiwiyin shrugged, feigning innocence. She wondered when he’d managed to pilfer it from that bombastic lawyer.

None of them were comfortable in this ugly imposition on what was otherwise a beautiful spot above the river, but full bellies and the warmth of purloined liquor helped steady all their nerves.

Another hour passed before the door banged open, and Macdonald strode in, his unruly dark curls sticking up on one side, the other side smoothed and oily, as though he’d been patting it down repeatedly. The bags beneath his eyes were deeply pronounced, and blooms of burst capillaries stained his cheeks and nose a blotchy red. Though he drew himself up to his full, not inconsiderable height, his step was unsteady. Behind him came two men other who looked like they could be twins, both with bushy white beards, receding white hair, and dour expressions. The one on the right was dressed a little finer perhaps, and just as drunk as Macdonald; the smell of gin wafted into the room ahead of their entrance.

Not waiting for anyone to stand, Macdonald made no pretense of hiding his hostility, curtly introducing his compatriots, jerking a finger first at the better dressed man, “This is Sir Hugh Allan,” and then at the slightly seedier, but much more sober version of the same fellow, “And this is John Dougall.”⁴⁶ Spinning to face the two men, his back to the delegation, Macdonald swept his long arms out, “And these are the reason we haven’t been able to get the railroad in.” The two other men regarded them with scorn.

⁴⁴ (Dictionary of Canadian Biography 1982c). Mistahimaskwa (Big Bear) was a Plains Cree chief, though his parents may have been Saulteaux.

⁴⁵ Henri Charles Wilfred Laurier. It had obviously been stolen from somewhere.

⁴⁶ (Mccallum 2008). Sir Hugh Allan was involved in the Pacific Scandal that resulted in John A. Macdonald being forced to resign.

(Dictionary of Canadian Biography 1982b). John Dougall was a newspaper man. Now seriously, go take a look at the pictures of these two men, and tell me if you can tell them apart?!

Pitching her voice low, Angelique said in Cree, “Fancy pants builds steel roads, dumpy bum writes big letters for lots of people to read.” Potts quickly translated that in Siksika for Aatsista-Mahkan, as they all gathered themselves up and stood.

She remembered seeing these two before, during her reconnaissance for the Iron Confederacy in 1867. They’d been meeting with Macdonald and a bevy of other politically hungry men in a saloon where so much of Canadian politics seemed to happen. Dougall was there despite being a founding member of a Temperance society in Montreal, drinking water while the rest of them poured wine down their gullets.⁴⁷ She’d been sitting in a booth nearby, across from a young clerk who had thankfully already been passed out, his head on the table in a puddle of drool. She’d kept her hat low, and hadn’t had to *extend* her senses at all, the men were roaring in laughter, and boasting loud enough to be heard outside.

They’d been planning for the first general election in August, and there’d been much discussion of the need for railways and drumming up political support for them through the papers. They’d made her mission incredibly easy for her, with their loose talk and constant drinking.

Macdonald was glowering at her, clearly annoyed at the string of unfamiliar words. He looked frazzled, his vest buttoned up crookedly, the high collar around his neck stained, and his cravat skewed. Angelique was wary; a man not willing to cover himself in the pretense of calm is always dangerous. His gaze shifted to Dumont, and his lip curled.

“It’s you goddamn half-breeds!” he thundered angrily, then seemed to hear himself in the small room, and shook his head, letting loose a mirthless laugh. “Well I guess you’re my problem after all.” Dumont, who did not speak English, said nothing.

Glancing uneasily at one another, Fancy Pants and Dumpy Bum slid themselves into chairs around the conference table. Macdonald stared a bit longer at Dumont before he too, took

⁴⁷ (Skelly, 2015).

a seat. Aatsista-Mahkan shot a sly look at Dumont before choosing the chair he'd been eyeing up for the fire not so long ago, and Potts stood behind him. Angelique stood behind Dumont to act as his translator, while the others also found seats.

For three hours, Macdonald threatened, pleaded, blustered, threw up his hands and threatened to walk out, letting Fancy Pants and Dumpy Bum argue his case for him, before he returned to his seat and started the cycle over again. It was clear he was desperate to build his railway, fearing he'd lose British Columbia, and perhaps more than that, if the Americans came sniffing. It was also clear his political star had set; they were looking at a leader on the way out.

He offered them treaties, he offered them gifts, he even suggested not-to-subtly that large financial bribes could be ongoing to the leaders if they came to an agreement. Through it all, the Iron Confederacy representatives stood firm, rejecting every proposition. In frustration, Macdonald finally slammed his hands onto the table and leaned forward, glaring at Dumont.

“Then what, in the name of God, *do* you want?” he snarled, spittle flying from his lips. Angelique didn't bother to translate; the question was clear in any language.

Dumont gestured, and Angelique fetched him their gift, which he then laid on the table.

In the sudden silence, the three white men stared at the sack in the middle of the table in confusion. Angelique reached over, undid the tie at the top, and let the cloth fall. Woseley's skull, still with patches of scorched skin and hair, grinned at them.

Macdonald's face drained of all colour, and Fancy Pants nearly knocked his chair over as he shot to his feet. Dumpy bum stared in horrid fascination, frozen to the spot.

Very clearly, into the silence, Dumont spoke. “otipêyimisiw-iyiniwak ôma niyanân.”

Angelique cleared her voice and spoke directly to Macdonald for the first time.

“He says, ‘We are the People who Own Themselves’.” Macdonald fixed her with a baleful glare, clearly not understanding.

“We don’t want or need, *anything* from you.” her tone had sharpened. She looked around their delegation, receiving a nod from Dumont, a quick grin from Aatsista-Mahkan and Potts, and quiet assent from the three Cree leaders. They were all tired, and ready to be done with this.

Turning back to Macdonald, she continued, “We are not going to become a part of your national experiment. If Canada wants any kind of trade relationship at all, think long and hard before sending another military force to press the point.”

She gazed pointedly at Wosley’s remains, and Madonald met her eyes with a seething rage clearly boiling up within him. She bared her teeth at him, feeling the points there, the change as her eyes deepened from brown to black. He recoiled in shock, then shook his head in confusion, wiping one large hand across his face and sighing deeply.

“This is a mistake.” he finally said, flatly, and without another word, the three men filed dispiritedly out of the room.

Canada had its chance to crush the Iron Confederacy, and it failed.

She came to all of a sudden, with a splitting pain in her head and overcome with nausea. She leaned over as quickly as she could, never mind how it made her head feel, and she vomited. When she’d emptied her stomach, she gingerly lay back down and tried to force her vision to stop blurring. She’d obviously been hit on the head, and any movement was going to make her feel ill at this point.

With her eyes slit half closed, she took stock of the situation. She was laying on cold stone, in a dark room. The only illumination came from a small square in front of her, faint, from

outside. A door. She groaned, surprising herself by the volume of the sound as it bounced between close-set walls. She was in some sort of cell.

Without meaning to, she passed out again, anger a faint buzzing behind her ears.

She was woken an indeterminate time after when the door to the cell banged open. Squinting against the too-bright lantern light, she saw a dark cowed shadow. She didn't see the boot coming, and felt it connect with her side in a sickening crunch. She howled in pain, and spasmed into a fetal position, gagging and heaving.

“Does it hurt?” it was Macdonald's voice, heavily slurred, “Good. Goddamn Wosley to hell!” he roared furiously, “He should have killed every last one of you!”

He aimed another boot at her, but in his state, only caught the top of her thigh as she lay on the ground.

Her head was spinning, and she was determined not to fall into unconsciousness again. He held the lantern higher and looked down at her in contempt. She had a few vague impressions of navigating dark streets with the Iron Confederacy delegation, leaving their inn early because they'd expected betrayal, and then breaking into a run when it was clear Macdonald had waited less time than even they'd believed possible. She prayed she was the only one captured.

“I was more than fair with you Indians.” Macdonald continued, pointing a thick finger at her and slowly leaning down towards her, alarmingly unstable, his large nose looming in her field of vision. “But they sent me you? A woman? Is this a joke to you people?” he laughed, a truly unpleasant sound.

She realized she was only in her pants and cotton shirt, and that it was easily apparent that she was not indeed a man. His glassy eyes slid over her lasciviously, and she felt a deep disgust well up inside her.

“Barely a woman,” he muttered contemptuously, reaching down faster than she’d expected, and grabbing her by the front of her shirt, bunching it up in his large fist and yanking her towards him. Her head snapped back painfully, little sparks of agony shooting through her aching skull. He held the lantern dangerously close to her face as she dangled in his grasp, the heated glass radiating across her ear and cheek.

His breath was hot and sour with gin on her face, spittle scoring her flesh like sparks from a fire. “I’m going to hang you.” he hissed, “And eventually I’ll hang the rest of them that slipped away. Then I’m going to drive the railway right through your damn buffalo-infested Plains, and the lot of you can jump into the Pacific Ocean!”

He shoved her roughly back down, slamming her head into the stone with a crack. She almost threw up again with the pain. She began to panic, as her vision darkened, terrified of losing consciousness again with this man in the cell with her.

She hadn’t called the power in so long. It had been hard enough, when she left Lac Ste Anne to join the resistance against Canadian invasion, to be taken seriously as a woman. If Dumont hadn’t formed such a fast friendship with her, she wasn’t sure she’d ever have fit in. Everyone knew the stories, of her, of her mother, and at first they’d treated her like a wild animal, wary, skittish. For nearly two decades, she exercised the control she’d lost, all those years ago, when her family was taken from her.

It was sluggish at first, barely a whisper, fading in and out as her vision continued to blur and darken, Macdonald standing over her, his lantern swinging in slow motion, everything slowed down, his mouth moving glacially, lips twisted in hate, his eyes burning with it. A sound began to build inside her head, crashing, powerful waves, like her lake in a storm with the Thunderers roaring.

She focused on that, the power of the Thunderers, feeling an answer in her bones, jagged, shooting pain like lightning strikes, worse than anything she could ever remember. It began, the sliding of bones and sinews, too stagnantly, causing her more torment than it should, threatening

to push her under, but the fear of being caught *in between* the change was stronger than the agony.

All at once, the power *surged*, and she lurched up on forelegs, unbalanced at first with the new perspective, limbs responding strangely at first, but then with more certainty.

Macdonald fell backwards, his lantern crashing and shattering on the stone. She heard shouts outside, but it didn't matter. He was between her and the way out. Rearing up, she brought all her weight down on him, sharp hooves smashing, rending, flattening. She did it again, and again, and again, until what remained was a spreading smear of blood and innards.

With a furious bugle, she squeezed through the open door, sending flying some very surprised men who had come running at the noise.

The rest was a blur, she ran through corridors, and smashed through a window, the wind whipping through her mane as the swollen moon shone on her dark skin.

When she arrived at the camp, heaving and covered in sweat and blood, it was Dumont who steadied her, remarkably calm though he'd never seen her like this before.

He stroked her long, muscled neck, whispering, "Ça va, nitôtêm, ça va bien," over and over until her breath steadied and she felt the slippage again. She lay against the ground, naked and shivering, her head still throbbing.

"Can you ride?" Dumont asked her in Cree, crouched down, gesturing to Potts for a blanket. One was quickly found for her, and she slowly sat up, clutching it around her gratefully.

"If I had to, I'd fly." She answered back, and laughed painfully, pushing her sticky hair out of her face, wanting a bath more than she ever had. Dumont's face split into a relieved grin.

“And miss all my stories on the road? Let’s just travel the regular way, alright?” he teased, and she nodded. She looked around, relaxing a little once she saw everyone else was still with them.

She was going to have one hell of a headache, but Macdonald wasn’t going to be a problem for them anymore.

1854

Looking into Bourassa’s face, his mouth twisted into a mockery of a smile, she realized suddenly that he hadn’t settled in, as they all imagined. He’d been holding on to his hatred of her this whole time. She could feel it radiating from him, and she swayed with the knowledge of it.

The priest reached out a pale hand, long, delicate fingers closing around her forearm, and she stared down at them in horrified fascination. Something was tickling the back of her mind, a fear that she could taste in the back of her throat like iron. His fingers continued to dig into her flesh painfully, and then he yanked her towards him.

She was off balance, nearly falling against him, and she heard Cyprien protest wordlessly. Bourassa thrust his face close to hers, regarding her with a reptilian intensity, and she caught a whiff of something, vile, noxious. The smell of death. She tried to shake off his grasp, but he was so, so much stronger than he looked.

“This time,” he hissed, so only she could hear, “you’ll be right where you are supposed to be. And this time,” his wide grin was venomous, “you won’t escape what’s coming.”

Like hitting the flat mirror of the lake with all limbs extended, the breath was knocked from her chest. The world tilted, and once again she was on her side, the smell of smoke surrounding her, flames roaring, casting a greasy orange reflection out across the lake. There, at the edge of the light, out in the water itself, a figure. She’d reached then for her power, forcing

her eyes to focus better, see further. She'd strained to breaking and then, just before she'd blacked out...

A figure, in thick black robes, a hood with no visible face within it, watching the fire, watching *her*. And then, one pale hand, long, delicate fingers, reaching up to tug the hood even further down.

The vision left her gasping, grief slamming into her like a mighty hammer. Bourassa was dragging her along with him now, and she struggled to keep up, stumbling and nearly falling as the enormity of what she'd remembered flowed through her. Casting a look behind her, she saw Cyprien frozen in indecision, and Joseph gazing at her with a questioning look.

"The fire!" she choked out, willing her cousin to understand, as Bourassa yanked her around the corner of the church and out of his sight.

People were beginning to gather in front of the church for the Sunday service. With news of violent death having been spread throughout the entire settlement by now, it looked like most of the families were going to attend this morning, even those who had taken to avoiding the church since Bourassa took over.

Her heart sunk as she saw Cecil, his eyes red rimmed, looking like he'd started drinking whiskey the moment she'd left his house. His wife was hand in hand with her sister-in-law, the children of the two brothers walking or being carried by the older ones. There were a lot of tears in the growing crowd.

She attempted once more to wrench her arm away from the priest, but he had a grip like iron, surprisingly strong for a man who did no labour, not even to catch his own fish. Panic began battering at her, and she found her vision beginning to blur. Her blood was surging, pounding loud in her ears, and her throat had gone very dry, almost constricted. Bourassa stopped in front of the church, and shoved her in front of him, his grip still holding her captive.

“That’s right, let’s see you transform again.” he whispered harshly, his lips brushing her ear with disturbingly intimacy, “Let’s see if they continue to abide your presence when they all witness your evil manifest itself.”

“What’s going on, Frère?” called an older man, Hubert, a cousin of her father’s. He was a regular at church, a devout Catholic who never missed a sweat, and had the Thirst Dance scars to attest to his expansive piety.⁴⁸ There were looks of confusion and concern as people neared to find the church still closed, and Angelique thrust out in front of the priest like some sort of offering.

Bourassa raised his voice so that everyone could hear him. “We all know there was a murder last night; who was it that was taken from us?”

Cecil raised his tear-stained face, “It was Louis, Frère, it was my brother.” his shoulders shook as he closed his eyes and his face crumpled.

Bourassa’s expression was sorrowful, “So we have lost a pious brother, a father, a son.”

She saw Hubert exchange a small look with his wife. Louis was well loved, and a generous with the goods of others, but Thibeault and Bourassa had often denounced the brothers for their “wicked ways”, and no one would ever describe either as pious.

Angelique tried yet again to pull away from the priest, but with his other hand, he knocked off her hat, letting her dark hair spill down around her shoulders, before grabbing a painful handful and pulling her head back towards him.

⁴⁸ (Anderson-McLean 1999, 5 – 32). This article speaks to the syncretism present in the Métis settlement of Lac Ste. Anne, and in particular the blended traditions of Catholicism and Indigenous spirituality as expressed by the annual pilgrimage.

His voice shifted, and he shook her hard enough for her to bite her tongue, blood blooming bright and metallic on her lips, “An unholy murder!” he roared, “A devil walked among us last night, a devil too long permitted to live among us!”

When he let her go, she fell to her knees. The crowd shifted, uneasily.

Bourassa reached into his robes and pulled out an object. He raised up his fist so all could see, and then opened his hand, letting black horse hair rain down. There were a chorus of gasps.

“She left her mark! Rendered a man unrecognizable, and she will certainly do it again. What will it take to have her cast out?” he was roaring now, loud enough to be heard at the very edges of the gathering throng.

Angelique was having trouble hearing, a sound like waves smashing against the short filled her head, and she felt like throwing up. The terror that had filled her that night when she’d struck Father Thibeault, the loss of control she’d been fighting ever since, began to flood through her. A strangled moan was wrenched from her throat, and her sight began to dim. Even then, confusion crowded her mind; if he hadn’t even known who’d been killed, why did he have any of the horse hair left behind?

There were concerned murmurs in the crowd, sounds rolling over her, muffled, questioning, afraid.

“Who else?” the priest continued, “Who else among us would do this? Who else among you would attack a man of the cloth, as she has, driving Father Thibeault from us? Who else among us was seen as a black mare, as her family burned to death?”

The words were striking her like physical blows, he had all but admitted to her that he’d murdered her family, but it was all she could do to stop from shifting into that hated form in front of everyone, and her tongue, thickening in her mouth, refused to work.

“Look to your neighbours! Who else among us flaunts the Lord’s plan? Comports herself as a man rather than the girl she is?” There was a deep note of disgust in his voice, “This creature, I have seen with my own eyes, trying to tempt your daughters into sin, approaching them as a man does!”

Shame bloomed in her, all those sermons she’d endured, that had twisted her feelings in herself, until her parent’s deaths had freed her from having to attend. She panted, eyes closed, trying to calm herself, trying to push the tremors away, the spasms that threatened to wrench her sinews into a new shape.

She could hear the murmurs, but could not grasp the tone of them.

“It is past time we cast out this evil!” the priest roared again, silencing the crowd, “Past time you all cast out the sin that you’ve allowed to flourish here!”

Angelique leaned over onto her hands, breathing raggedly, afraid to look at her neighbours and relatives, afraid to see judgement there. These people knew what she was, they all knew, surely they would not believe her capable of killing Louis?

Could they think anything else if she changed in front of them?

With every ounce of will she could muster, she fought that rending pain. She dug her fingers into the soil, and sucked in a deep breath, drawing in the silty, vegetative scent of the lake.

The murmuring among the crowd returned, growing louder now, but this time she detected a note of surprise.

“Then what’s this, Frère?” shouted Cyprien, unexpectedly close. Angelique’s eyes flew open in shock, and there he and Joseph stood, her cousin holding high a rusty scythe, and Joseph

with his foot on top of a muddy and cracked barrel. Barely legible under the filth, “buffalo tongues” was stenciled on the cask.

There was a feeling like diving into cold water, and suddenly she no longer felt the pressure of impending transformation. Forgetting her pride, she scuttled away on all fours from the priest towards Cyprien before she felt safe to stand.

Bourassa’s face was mottled in rage, and he peeled his lips back in a snarl as he pointed a trembling finger at her, “Cast her out! Cast out this devil!”

Cyprien’s eyes blazed under brown curls, and suddenly Angelique saw the scythe was not rusty; it was crusted in dried blood. Raising his voice to be heard over the ripples of confused conversation from over a hundred throats, Cyprien jabbed the scythe at the priest, and turned to address his community.

“Louis and Joseph were carrying this barrel to my auntie’s home last night, but it was missing when we found Louis’ remains.”

Joseph was nodding, his furious gaze fixed on the priest, “Ay, and it was in the priest’s quarters, along with this scythe.” he pointed a thick finger at the tool Cyprien held. Angelique held her breath as she saw person after person register the dried blood on its blade.

Faces swiveled towards the priest, who was shaking his head angrily. Uncertain looks were being exchanged among neighbours.

Angelique took a deep breath, and stepped forward.

“The fire.” she croaked, her voice still not working properly. She cleared her throat and tried again, her mouth twisting with grief as she remembered the flamed, “He was there. He was in the lake. Watching when my family died. He must have barred the door, no one could explain

why they weren't able to get out." her voice trailed away into a sob, and Cyprien was suddenly beside her, an arm around her shoulders. He glared at the priest, still clutching the scythe.

Bourassa looked out over his flock, seeing the troubled looks, and his confidence seemed to fade a bit.

"I know that barrel as well!" Angelique was shocked to see Cecil had drawn closer, shocked to hear him raising his voice in support when even he had a moment of suspicion earlier. "I brought that cursed thing back from Fort Pitt." he wheeled to face Bourassa.

"Why would you have this?" he cried out, his voice breaking, "What did you do?" Bourassa stepped back at the expression on Cecil's face, looking uncertain.

Angelique reeled in shock. Bourassa had viciously murdered a man, just to frame her? How long had he been planning this? What kind of sickness was in him to drive him so far?

Feeling the mood shift, Bourassa fixed her in his hateful gaze again. "I lost *everything*. Everything, because of you." Silence rippled through the crowd until all they could hear was the gentle crash of waves on the sand. Angelique stared at him, shocked.

"You? You lost everything?" she demanded. She felt a scream rising in her throat, but she forced it down. The priest was trembling, his huge watery eyes filled with more malice than she thought any human could hold.

"Father Thibeault was going to make sure I got out of this pestilent land, but you drove him out!" he fairly spit, before fixing Cyprien with a gaze as baleful as any he'd directed at her. "It was meant to be *you*." he said hoarsely, his voice trembling with rage, "With them gone, killing you would have broken her."

Her mind flew back to that moment when Bourassa had rounded the corner of the church and seen Cyprien, the shock at seeing him there, such a brief expression before he'd brought himself under control.

Her stomach dropped again; Louis had been a mistake, driven there by drunken fear when he and Joseph dropped the cask. Bourassa must have been waiting in the pen for Cyprien to use the outhouse. She saw again the slashed and trampled remains, the savagery with which Louis had been met.

Suddenly the crowd surged forward, men pulling Cecil away from the priest; he'd lunged at the man but only managed to grab a fold of dark cloth before being restrained. Louis' twin was incoherent with rage, straining to reach Bourassa who was cowering now, the priest's pale face grey and slack with defeat. With the focus on Cecil, no one saw Louis' wife in time as she, dressed in a black cotton dress buttoned up to just below her chin, raked her nails across the priest's eyes, drawing blood.

Angelique swayed, completely drained. Cyprien dropped the bloodied scythe and caught her as she slipped towards the ground. Joseph peered at her with worry.

"She'll be okay," Cyprien told the other man, then said it again to her, "You'll be okay, Angelique. It's over."

She laughed weakly, and closed her eyes, wanting nothing more than to let herself rest. "Oh Cyprien," she mumbled, and he brought his face closer to hear her faint words, "this is just the beginning."

1913

Sharp and abrupt as a scythe cut, the grass that had been rasping against her ankles ended. With a gentle squeeze of her knees she signaled her horse to stop, straddling that liminal space.

Stretching before them as far as the horizon, was churned up brown earth, and flocks of birds darting down to snatch up exposed insects, or in some cases, even larger prey. She made the mistake of gazing up under her wide-brimmed felt hat at the sky to watch a hawk dive towards the trampled soil, and found herself dazzled for a moment. Blinking away tears, she located the hawk rising above, an unlucky mouse in its talons.

Despite a steady wind, her cotton shirt stuck to her back under her beaded leather vest. Her knees ached, the large knobby knuckles of her hands holding her reins throbbed, her sit bones complained, and she briefly wondered if she was going to fall apart completely, her final act of transformation simply a bloodless dislocation of all her limbs. She doubted her horse would appreciate it.

At least her teeth, those that remained, were still good. She was chewing rat root for a low cough she'd developed a few days ago; one that built up slowly like the frothy foam on the shores of manitow-sâkahikan in summer, until she was forced to hack and heave and spit out phlegm tinged slightly pink.

“Thank you for humouring me, Elzear.” she flashed him a wry smile.

Elzear, sat with the envious ease of youth on his painted horse, regarding the buffalo trail with a content expression. The Cree-Métis man was easily fifty years her junior. “My grandfather always spoke well of you.”

“Did he, now.” She grinned and reached up to remove her hat, wiping sweat from her brow and raising her wrinkled cheeks to the sky, her eyes closed for a moment. The wind cooled her scalp under braided white hair, but the fierce sun pricked almost painfully.

He coughed uncomfortably and she could hear him shift slightly in his saddle. “Well,” he sounded a bit embarrassed, “he respected you.”

She laughed, a sharp bark of amusement, before replacing her hat. Raising an eyebrow, she looked him in face and repeated, “Did he, now?” Cyprien had known her too well for ‘respect’ to really apply.

Elzear’s face split into a shy smile, his young, unlined brown face reminding her of her father. An echo of that old loss returned for a moment, and she imagined small feet digging into her hip bones, a childish giggle in her ear. It hurt, and it always had, but she let the feelings wash through her, swirling around her heart like a song.

She returned her gaze to the horizon, an insistent pressure building in her chest again. She heard a liquid peal in the distance, followed by an answering one closer. Her eyes were not as good as they once were, but she finally found the little brown head among clods of torn up earth. For a moment her vision wavered, of late she’d found tears came easily. But this time it was happiness that filled her, until her scalp nearly tingled with it.

“Well capan, go tell them where the herd is.” He looked at her with faint alarm.⁴⁹

“We should both get back to camp,” he suggested uncertainly, uncomfortable with contradicting her.

She shook her head and smiled gently. “Don’t worry, I’ll catch up.” The buffalo bird caught her attention again and she fell silent.

Clearly unhappy, Elzear nodded and gently tapped his mount’s sides, turning back toward the camp. His horse broke into a trot, and when Elzear reached the top of the hill, he turned back in his saddle to check on her.

⁴⁹ Capan is an intergenerational Cree term, used by a great-grandparent to their great-grandchild, and vice versa. This man is Cyprien’s grandson, but by using the term she creates more generational distance between them while claiming him as her direct kin.

Her saddle was empty, but there, perched between the horse's ears, barely visible at this distance, was a small bird with a brown head.

Buffalo Bird analysis

Indigenous futurisms can, as Rebecca Roanhorse puts it, “rewrite the past to reimagine the present” (2018). If one is a believer in parallel universes, it is entirely possible, even probable, that what we imagine already exists out there in one of these infinite permutations parallel to our reality.

Transformation

What is alternate about “Buffalo Bird” is not imagining that the ability to shape-shift is possible; this is not the point of divergence from our current universe. Indeed, transformation is the one true constant of our reality, and it happens all around us at all points along that fourth dimension we label time. As Leroy Little Bear points out, “existence consists of energy. All things are animate, imbued with spirit, and in constant motion” (2000). He describes this as Blackfoot metaphysics; a worldview encompassing the fundamental nature of reality (2016). Transformation, shape-shifting, are central aspects to Métis worldview as well, whether the transformed/transformer is Elder Brother or Chi Jean, or some more ordinary being.

Working from Métis otipêyimisiw-itâpisiniwin, transformation and shape-shifting are real, and a constant potential in everything. I ground this story in the truth of this worldview, but further, I assert that this transformational potential is a characteristic of what I am calling Métis futurisms. Transformation is rendered ordinary, although specific acts of transformation can be extraordinary in terms of their impact.

This story imagines a successful nêhiyaw-pwat (Iron Confederacy) resistance to Canadian expansionism. The buffalo are not exterminated or removed, and neither are the Métis and our allies. The reader is invited to think about what this might mean for the present, what

could be different, what could be the same. Buried deep in this story is a call to resurrect the nêhiyaw-pwat.

Revenge

I also draw heavily on revenge as a theme, in part to pay homage to the very real resistance that Métis and other Indigenous peoples continue to mount against colonial forces, and in part simply because it is satisfying to imagine. I draw on Tekahionwake (Emily Pauline Johnson) and her short story, “A Red Girl’s Reasoning”, as well as the film of the same name by Elle-Maija Tailfeathers, both of which foreground the autonomy and self-determination of Indigenous women in resisting the colonial violence of white men (Johnson 1893; Tailfeathers 2012). Over a century apart, these stories enact revenge in different, yet equally devastating ways. I deliberately invoke the stomping death meted out by Deer Woman both in the ancient tales, and as envisioned in contemporary storytelling (LaPensée 2017).

The research questions which led to the construction of this story were:

- What was daily life like for my ancestors in Lac Ste. Anne in 1854? What were some of the specific details of housing, livestock, dress, and so on?
- What would the journey to the buffalo hunt have been like for a small child in the 1840s?
- If Father Thibeault had left Lac Ste. Anne in 1852, who would have taken his place? Would Father Lacombe have ever made his way to Lac Ste. Anne? What impact might the removal of the power of the church have on Métis communities in the Lac Ste. Anne area?
- If the nêhiyaw-pwat had retained power, who could some of its leaders have been? Would Louis Riel have retained primacy in the narrative of the Resistance?
- What event, more than others, would define a shift in Canadian expansionism into the Plains?
- How would a Two-Spirit person be received in Lac Ste. Anne, among leaders of the nêhiyaw-pwat, and among Canadian politicians?
- What might it be like to carry the power of transformation as a Métis person?

Michif Man⁵⁰

Excerpt from a talk by Shelley Vogel, “Michif Man from Lac Ste. Anne: Microhistory or Mythology?” presented at the 2020 Native American And Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA) annual conference in Toronto, Ontario.

It could be said that the origin story of Michif Man from Lac Ste. Anne began with a goring by a radioactive bison, but if we begin there, can we understand the man behind the mythology?

We are all familiar with certain academics who have written extensively on Michif Man as a “modern trickster tale”, classifying the accounts as “Indigenous storytelling”. Some have allowed that he may have been an actual person, whose exploits were exaggerated for dramatic effect. Our research however has been able to demonstrate that the stories we do have may have in fact been downplayed to make them seem *less* extraordinary.

Although we focused on a short period of time from 1955 – 1960, and on what were a series of relatively minor episodes centred on a population at the margins - namely Lac Ste. Anne Métis living in Edmonton in the mid twentieth century - we did not take an episodic microhistory approach, but rather engaged in a limited but systematic microhistory analysis.⁵¹ It

⁵⁰ (Walker 2015 15 – 22). “The Token Superhero” by David Walker, is my inspiration for this story. In his piece, he rejects a post-racial approach to the superhero genre, and imagines what life would truly be like for a Black superhero. When Alonzo Ramey is born with a genetic anomaly guaranteeing him superpowers, his life as a Black person is changed, yes, but structural anti-Blackness remains. Ramey as Black Fist gets tired of being tokenized and retires, before finding out that he had been an important role model to Black youth despite the way the overculture downplayed his successes and contributions. He takes on the mantle of Black Fist again, but approaches being a superhero in a different way this time, taking on the big battles with super villains, but also doing community organizing and youth outreach. I wanted to imagine a culturally rooted Métis superhero, and see where that might take us.

⁵¹ (Gregory 1999, 102 – 103).

was absolutely necessary to reconstruct individual and social relationships in a restricted geographical setting using archival records, as this was the only way we were able to demonstrate that Michif Man did in fact, exist.

Imagine if you will, a tornado: forming, touching down, and wreaking havoc. The forces that create a tornado are mostly invisible to us. When we witness the power of this phenomenon, we are seeing the way in which these invisible forces affect whatever they come into contact with. Take this slide for example. We cannot *see* the winds, but we can witness all the detritus they have picked up including Dorothy's little house there, and that very surprised cow, twirling round and round in the maelstrom! Though invisible to our human eyes, there are ways to track these forces, using modern weather imaging technologies that *see* in ways we are not capable of.

For this project, we did not use doppler radar or satellite data. Rather we dove into the archives and found mysteries; unexplained events and unsolved crimes, miracles and mayhem. News reports, police case files, insurance claims, interviews. We began to see a distinct pattern of *absence* at the centre of all these events that tied them together.

Like the reoccurring character of Not Me in this Family Circus cartoon, it is clear *someone* was causing things to happen. In the comic, it was almost always the children at fault, but in the case of the events we tracked, Not Me seems to be a real, and if not literally invisible figure – family assure us that, unlike H.G. Well's Invisible Man, Michif Man was not capable of vanishing from sight – then *retroactively unseen*.

The vast lacunae in any official documentation for Michif Man has stymied most traditional historical research, forcing our team to rely almost entirely on interviews with his aged relatives who, for reasons we do not fully understand, are the only ones who remember him directly at all. Of the two documents we could find to prove he existed, one was in a personal

(Eckert and Jones 2010, 5 – 16). Eckert and Jones discuss the way in which a focus on micro-worlds gives prominence to “new actors” and avoided places, moving them to the centre of historical inquiry. This story is a work of fiction, but as much as I could, I included accurate details of the “everyday” variety, making this a work of (micro)historical fantasy.

collection, and the other in an archive that had yet to digitize and dump their collection. In every other instance, where collections were updated and the paper copies destroyed, it seems the people in charge of digitization uniformly failed to include any documents related to Michif Man.

Thus, we were able to obtain a hard copy of a baptismal certificate from the Lac Ste. Anne parish for Solomon François Gabriel Callihoo dated January 8, 1923, and a receipt for antibiotics for the same person, which was in the possession of his sister who paid the bill and kept it in the (forlorn) hope of one day collecting, both pictured here. No vital statistics information seems to exist beyond this.

Relatives have informed us that Michif Man was known to them as “Franky”.

Franky was born to Ann-Marie Belcourt and Solomon Callihoo at the Lac Ste. Anne Métis settlement in Alberta, sometime in 1922. He had six older brothers and one younger sister, all of whom have complete vital statistics records. Interviewees seem to agree that Franky was “a massive pain”, who often engaged in daredevil behaviour resulting in broken bones and other injuries. This could be a result of attempting to stand out among seven siblings and many more cousins in the community. His attention seeking behaviour eventually wore on his parents, who sent him at 13 to work a trapline with a great-uncle in the Northwest Territories, near Fort Smith.

His return at 16 coincided with the outbreak of World War II. Franky apparently took a neighbour’s horse and rode in to Edmonton to enlist, and began his wartime service as a sapper with the Royal Canadian Engineers, one year before Tommy Prince was to join the same outfit.

The neighbour, Baptiste Letendre, was Franky’s mother’s second maternal cousin. Baptiste’s grandson told us that his grandfather complained about the loss of his horse until his passing in 1972. This is a picture of Baptiste with his horse, whom he named Jim.

No one knows what became of Jim.

We have considered that it may be possible some records related to Franky could exist in physical form in Normandy, but our SSHRC grant could not cover the related expense of verifying this. Other research teams should consider that as Frankly lied about his age, he very likely also lied about his name, so it may be impossible to link him to any records at all.

Interviewees indicate that Franky returned to Lac Ste. Anne between 1946-1949, with substantial disagreement on the exact timing. He probably moved to Edmonton around 1951 and did odd jobs. His risk-taking behaviour had apparently not lessened, and he was prone to fights. However, interviewees note that in almost all cases, the fights were begun by white men, to whom the sight of Métis enjoying themselves was apparently a goad too intense to bear. He was arrested for being drunk and disorderly on a number of occasions. Somehow, he was able to get his hands on one of his many mugshots, which he presented to a cousin as a tongue-in-cheek gift.

This is the only known photo of Michif Man. As you'll note, he was tall, extremely well dressed for a man of his meagre means, and quite handsome, even with one eye swollen shut.

We now know from declassified documents, that the U.S Army conducted a number of highly unethical tests in western Canada from the 1950s onward. In 1953, six kilograms of zinc cadmium sulfide was sprayed over Winnipeg, and then a decade later, in Medicine Hat, and Suffield.⁵² Suffield bore the brunt of the worst tests, as in 1964, a radioactive material phosphorus-32 and a deadly nerve agent, VX, were sprayed over the town.⁵³ Canada also subjected 3000 volunteers at the Suffield military base to mustard gas experiments during the second world war.⁵⁴

It has yet to be revealed which government was involved in irradiating a small group of plains bison at the Elk Island National Park in early 1955, or what the purpose of the experiments

⁵² (Committee on Toxicology 1997).

⁵³ (Martino-Taylor 2017).

⁵⁴ (Micale 2001).

may have been. We also have no idea what Franky was doing there, that he managed to be gored in the right buttock by one of the radioactive bison. The date on the receipt for antibiotics is April 13th, and we posit that it would have taken him four to six weeks to recover from his wound. By late May of 1955, Michif Man had been born. For some reason, stories about him taper off after 1960, which is why we ended our research there.

We agree with Sabyasachi Bhattacharya that history from below “means more than just the enlargement of the scope of history” and that it “may involve a break with the nationalist paradigm”.⁵⁵ In this case, we believe that tracking the history of Michif Man allows us to continue to challenge the long-standing characterization of Métis peoples as passive (re)actors to colonization, and reiterate that The People Who Owned themselves engaged in extraordinary actions of personal and communal agency.

1955: Edmonton, Alberta

He’d been fired of course. Too many days in the hospital, and when he snuck out on the fourth day to avoid the bill, hobbling over to his foreman to insist he be put back on the lineman digging crew, the man acted like he’d never seen Franky before, and hollered at him to get the hell out of his office!⁵⁶ Even refused him severance pay, the bastard. Franky slammed the door on his way out, and it must have been hung improperly or something, because it clear fell off when he did. He’d had to scoot out of there faster than he’d have liked, to avoid a lickin’ for that bit of showmanship.

When things were at their worst, he liked to figure out his next steps on a full stomach. He only had a few dollars to his name, but a man couldn’t go looking for a job oozing

⁵⁵ (Bhattacharya 1983, 7 – 8).

⁵⁶ (Belcourt 2006, 75). Herb Belcourt talks about drilling holes by hand for power poles for sixty cents an hour in 1947. I took liberties with the timing, as this work was likely going on throughout the province into the mid 50s.

desperation. A good suit and a good steak; that'd been his winning combination on the job search for a long time now.

The coffee came as soon as he gingerly perched himself on the bright red plastic upholstery of a floor-mounted stool in front of the service counter. The blonde waitress gave him an unfriendly look, and put the mug down a bit hard, hot liquid sloshing over the edge. As he reached for it, she pulled it away a space.

“You’ll have to order if you want to sit here.” She told him flatly in an unpleasant, nasally voice. He was used to this sort of treatment; a lot of these *môniyâws* figured a halfbreed like him didn’t have any money.

He made a show of pulling out his ten dollars, peeled two bills off, and slid them onto the counter, giving her his most winning smile, “I’ll take your biggest T-bone steak, rare, and go ahead and throw a couple of fried eggs on it. You can keep the change.”

She took the money, and still eyeing him with mistrust, she nudged the cup towards him and hollered over her shoulder at the cook, “Slab of moo, let him chew it, and flop two on top!”⁵⁷

Still trying his best to radiate charm, he reached for his coffee. With a sudden snap, the handle broke off, and coffee spilled across the counter, splashing onto his pants before he could hop off his stool.

“Oh look at what you’ve done!” the waitress cried, before snatching the broken mug away and angrily wiping up the mess.

“Me? Good thing your coffee is room temperature or I’d be burned!” he responded hotly, “This is a hundred-dollar suit!”⁵⁸

⁵⁷ (Smiley 2012).

⁵⁸ (Palmer 2001, 288). An Eaton’s suit by Michael of London, went for \$99 in 1955, which while on the low end of couture suits (some of which were as expensive as \$350) still represented an almost obscene

The waitress made a little snort of disbelief as he grabbed a couple of napkins, futilely dabbing at the stains, and she stalked off in a huff to the far end of the counter. Cursing under his breath, he tossed the wadded-up paper in a trash can near the door, then took his seat again. He could smell his steak sizzling on the grill, and spill or no spill, it was going to be a fine meal!

The waitress returned and set a mug of coffee in front of him, just as hard as the first time, letting the liquid slop over the sides. Murmuring a bit of an insincere thank-you, he reached for it, only to have her pull it away again.

“You’ll have to order if you want to sit here.” she said, giving him the unfriendly look he was starting to grow accustomed to from her.

“What are you talking about?” he asked, taken aback, “I already paid for my meal!”

Her rouged mouth twisted, and she crossed her arms across her chest. Keeping a distrustful eye on him, she called over her shoulder, “Jim! We got an Indian cracking wise here, trying to get a free meal!”

A large man in a cook’s apron came out from the kitchen, with huge hairy forearms and a serious expression. Franky was on his feet, never mind the twinge of pain from his accident, staring warily at the man.

“Mister, I don’t want no trouble, but I gave that lady there two dollars for a steak with some eggs on top, and I don’t appreciate being fleeced!”

amount for a working-class Métis! Contrast that with an off-the-rack wool suit from Simpson’s Sears, which cost between \$44 – \$56, a price that would still have been out of reach for many. I want to highlight that Franky was a bit of a fop.

The cook glanced at the waitress for confirmation, and received a tight headshake of negation. His eyes narrowed, and Franky felt a familiar surge of anger. It didn't seem to matter how he dressed, or how politely he behaved, when it came to a mōniyâw's word against his, that was that.

Other patrons in the diner were craning their necks to see what the commotion was about, and Franky could feel the back of his neck heating up. The cook jabbed a thick finger at the door.

“Out.”

He was hungry, out of work, and the whole situation stunk. It was petty, but Franky kicked at his abandoned stool as he turned to leave. With a groaning clang, the stool's hollow metal base snapped completely off, the upholstered red seat bouncing once loudly on the floor before rolling to a stop against the wall.

The three of them stared in shock at the damage, and the diner was absolutely silent. Franky felt his anger drain out of him, and he held his hands up in a wordless apology before backing slowly out of the restaurant.

As he stepped out onto the sidewalk, he heard a bell ding. “Slab of moo, let him chew it, two flopped on top!” called the other cook.

“What the heck are you talking about, Robbie?” came the faint voice of the waitress, “I never put in for a steak!”

No one gave Franky a further look.

Things just got worse from there. It seemed no matter where he went, folks were acting queerly, turning their backs on him for a moment, then turning back and acting surprised to see him, or greeting him again like they hadn't said the exact thing just before. He lost two more

dollars that way, trying to get someone to serve him an actual meal, only to have them forget and claim he hadn't paid them.

At the last restaurant he tried, he slammed the door in frustration and the entire front window shattered into a million clear shards, *and* the entire door came off its hinges! He'd held it in front of him, not really sure what to do with the damn thing, shame flooding him for causing such a scene. There was no point trying to put it back, so he tossed it aside, then watched in sick fascination as it flew over the heads of a crowd of pedestrians, and smashed into hood of a cherry red Chevrolet parked along the street.

The sound of crunching metal banished the sense of unreality that enveloped him like a fog, and he quickly shoved his hands into his pockets and walked off, before the police, or the owner of that car showed up. His head was spinning, but no one came chasing after him. What the hell was going on?

Three days of this, and he thought he might be going mad.

He stopped going to restaurants, eating almost exclusively at Lovatt's corner store where he could take a sandwich to the counter and pay for it before he was forgotten.⁵⁹ For over a year, Franky had been renting a dingy room at The Bernard next door, and had chatted with Norman Lovatt with almost daily regularity as he purchased cigarettes or sweets. Having the man ask him over and over if he was new in town filled him with despair; he started feeling like a ghost, stuck repeating the same events.

⁵⁹ (Herzog 2016). The original Lovatt General store was opened up on Jasper avenue in 1900, and was run by family members into the 1950s. There is a picture on this website of a building called The Bernard, that seems to be a business front on bottom with either rooms or offices up top; I haven't been able to track down any information on it, so I'm just going to take a stab at it and make it a rooming house.

He figured he'd finally caught a break when he applied for a job as a bottling machine operator at the Prairie Rose Manufacturing Company down on 96th. He had a great chat with the co-owner Mike Shandro, who made a point of saying he didn't mind hiring Indians, and was offered a job for ninety cents an hour.⁶⁰ Franky knew for a fact that this was almost forty cents less than he was paying white men; he'd found out about the job in the classified and the wage was listed right there.⁶¹ Still, it was better than nothing.

Mike left to get a bottle of Orange Crush for them to celebrate with, but when he returned, he looked at the bottle in his hand with confusion. Franky's stomach sank. Mike looked back up at him with a friendly smile.

“You here for the job?”

Shoulders slumped in defeat, Franky shook his head and left.

Election fever was in the air, though Franky didn't see what the point was. The Socreds had been in power almost as long as he'd been alive, and Albertans seemed to worship Ernest Manning. Maybe Ernie'd die of old age in office, and they'd embalm him like Lenin and stick him in a mausoleum out front of the Legislature building.

His spirits were awfully low, and he found himself wandering the streets aimlessly like some sort of lost spirit, oblivious to the ripples he caused as he passed. Never mind his life was falling down around his ears, it'd take the end of the world to get him out of his fancy suits.

⁶⁰ (Tingley 2009, 16).

⁶¹ (Department of Labour, Economics and Research Branch 1955, 58). Standard rate for a bottling-machine operator in Alberta was \$1.29 in 1955, the highest rate in the country probably due to the oil boom that began in 1947. The lowest rate of ninety-nine cents was in the Atlantic provinces, which is still higher than what Franky is being paid in this story.

Growing up wearing nothing but the most worn of hand-me-downs, looking clean, kempt, and well-dressed meant a lot to Franky.

As he passed them, women in their tight sheath dresses, or more flowing swing dresses, would smile at him with his perfectly styled hair and his broad handsome face, then affect a kind of pout when he looked right through them. Any men accompanying these women would scowl at him threateningly, but he didn't see them either and the moment he was out of their sight, it was like Franky had never been there at all.

Normally he walked these streets like a blustering peacock, never one to let the *môniyâwak* make him feel small. He used to flirt outrageously with any woman, and he was quick with his fists if her guy objected. It was one of the ways he made himself feel seen, and being seen is exactly what had been taken from him. He supposed he might have better heeded his *câpân*'s warnings about pride.

He didn't notice that his feet had brought him to his cousin's house at Jasper Place until he was at the door. Feeling a bit foolish standing there, he knocked.

Sam answered the door and gave him a big smile, clapping a huge hand on Franky's shoulder and pulling him inside. Too surprised to resist, his head whirling, he barely heard his cousin's heartfelt greeting.

"You okay, Franky?" Sam asked, "You look like you've seen a ghost!"

"I feel like I *am* a ghost." Franky mumbled in misery, but Sam didn't seem to hear him.

"Boy am I glad to see you! You're just the person I need right now, you looking for work?"

Hand still on his shoulder, Sam guided him towards the basement, full of all kinds of different chairs piled on top of one another, stacked unsteadily until it seemed like there was barely any room to move around.

Sam let him go and gestured at the mess.

“Been upholstering these chairs by myself, and I could really use some help! I’m bringing in oh, six to eight dollars a chair and if you’re game, I’d split that with you eighty-twenty for the ones you finish.”⁶²

“Sixty-forty.” Franky said automatically, sharp even in the funk he was in.

Sam grinned and clasped Franky’s hand in his, shaking on it. Franky held on to the other man’s hand like he was drowning, and the smile faded from Sam’s face.

“You okay? You really don’t look well.”

“Sammy, I’ve had a hell of a week. You got anything to drink? And maybe something to eat that isn’t a blasted sandwich?”

Sam didn’t believe him at first, but after walking around town a bit, conducting experiments, it became clear Franky was telling the truth. Most people would forget the man existed the moment their attention was drawn away. They’d made their way back to Sam’s place, and sat on the steps, sharing a smoke.

“So why can’t I forget your ugly mug?” Sam tried to sound jovial, but there was a thread of unease there. Franky shrugged, feeling unmoored and out of sorts. He stubbed the cigarette out, and flicked the butt onto the sidewalk, exhaling into the cold air.

⁶² (Belcourt 2006, 83 – 84). This is drawn directly from Herb’s account of his basement upholstery business he began before he opened up Herb’s Upholstery on Stony Plain Road in 1958.

Just then, they saw their cousin, Ambrose, waving at them from across the street. Sam raised a hand in greeting, and Ambrose crossed over.

“You fellows got a smoke?” Ambrose asked once he was nearer. He was reed thin, and a bit bookish looking.

Franky was still staring off into the distance, looking melancholy so Sam answered, “Last one, sorry.”

“What’s with him?” Ambrose jerked a thumb at Franky, and Sam raised a surprised eyebrow.

“Hey, what’s that over there?” Sam asked, pointing back across the street. He’d quickly discovered during their experiments that a split second of distraction was all it usually took to get a person to forget about Franky.

Ambrose was craning his neck, trying to see what Sam was talking about, then turned back, a suspicious look on his face, “I don’t see nothing, cuz, quit fooling.” he turned his attention back to Franky, “You okay? You look like someone stole your dog!”

Franky’s head snapped up and he stared intensely at Ambrose. “You remember me?” he demanded.

Ambrose gave him an annoyed look “Quit messing with me, sheesh, that got old when I was still a kid.”

Franky and Sam exchanged a quick, hopeful look. Sam stood and clapped Ambrose on the back, the smaller man still regarding them both with suspicion.

“Kitchen party tonight, m’boy, go spread the word!” Sam told him and Ambrose broke out in a grin.

“Now that’s more like it!” Ambrose rubbed his hands together and gave them a lopsided grin, “I’ll go tell ma and the boys, you want us to bring anything?”

“Just as many of our relatives as you can find,” Sam said, giving Ambrose a bit of a friendly push, “be back in an hour!”

Franky watched their cousin dash off, and looked up at Sam quizzically, “A party? Really?”

Sam wagged his eyebrows theatrically, “I have a theory, and anyway, are you really going to turn me down?”

“Franky, I think you might be cursed.” Sam finally pronounced, as his wife busied herself making sure there was tea and bannock for the impromptu kitchen party. The house was packed to the rafters with raucous relatives, close and distant; and just like Sam had suspected, they could all see and remember Franky.

“That’s just the half of it.” Franky said miserably. Sam’s eyes narrowed in interest.

Franky glanced around for something to use in his demonstration. He briefly considered the cast iron pan his cousin’s wife had cooked bannock in, but on second thought, wasn’t willing to deal with her wrath if it went wrong. He settled for a butter knife.

Holding the butter knife in his left hand, he gingerly pressed at its tip with the pointer finger of his right hand. The top of the knife bent with no resistance, easy as could be, until it was perpendicular.

Sam let out a whoop of amazement, throwing himself back in his chair and shaking his head, a huge grin across his face. That drew everyone's attention and before he knew it, Franky was outside bending larger and larger objects while his relatives called out to one another, laughing and marveling at the sight. At Sam's goading, they followed Franky down the street like a carnival procession, stopping right in front of a white Ford truck.

"Show us what you've got, Franky!" someone yelled, and he grinned back. Theatrically, he bent down and made a show of getting a good grip on the undercarriage, before standing, and effortlessly raising the front end with him. There was a reverent silence, and he let the truck back down gingerly, worried about bursting the tires.

He turned around to face his family, and was met with sudden cheers and delighted laughter. He had to admit, his spirits were feeling higher than they had in a long time, so he thought he'd give them a bit more. Turning around, he leaned down again and put his hands under the front end of the truck, this time putting a little more of his back into it.

Expecting some sort of resistance, he was wholly unprepared for there to be no more than would be if he'd lifted the nose of a canoe out of the lake, and he became unbalanced, falling backwards as the truck flew up six feet or more into the air, before crashing down catastrophically in the middle of the street, right on its front end!

As metal and glass crunched, and the squeal of breaks peeled out as a car swerved hard to avoid the sudden obstacle, his relatives scrambled away from the scene with hoots and hollers.

For the few months he holed up in his cousin's basement, flying through the backlogged upholstery orders, sewing Leatherette from Eaton's onto chairs, and then chesterfields, as easily as drawing his fingers through water. The cousins made more in three months than they'd normally make in a year.

When Franky needed something, he'd send a relative to get it for him so his money didn't evaporate into The Distortion that seemed to surround him. That's what they were calling it, the way people forgot about him, the capital letters clearly noticeable in speech.

Laying on his back on the roof of Sam's roof one night, puffing little clouds of smoke into the bruised violet skies above, Franky mused that he had more money than he knew what to do with, and that was an odd situation to be in. If times were normal, he'd buy a couple of bespoke suits so he didn't have to be so careful with the one navy blue Michael's of London one he owned, but there didn't seem to be any point anymore. Who but relatives would even see him in it? Same with his dream of a cherry red Chevrolet. Who was he going to impress? If he were being honest with himself, those things had been meant to prove that he was just as good as, maybe even *better* than, all those white men who curled up their lips at him like he was dirt.

In a way he supposed it was a bit freeing. He wanted for nothing, with help from his extensive family he ate whatever and whenever he wanted, he laughed and jigged and drank with them. No one followed him around department stores, or shooed him out of the front of their shops when he ducked under the eaves to get out of the rain. He hadn't been in a fist fight in what felt like forever – he wouldn't dare for fear of killing a man! - and he'd slowly stopped constantly scanning the space around him, senses extended to detect danger. Not being under constant belligerent or contemptuous surveillance had muscles unknotting in his body he'd never even realized *could* relax.

He could do things like breeze into the Paramount Theatre on Jasper Ave because the ticket clerk forgot he didn't buy a ticket. He'd been underwhelmed by *Rebel Without A Cause*, not identifying with the main character the way he clearly was supposed to, but saw *Abbot and Costello Meet the Mummy* three times, laughing his head off every time.

Maybe it was time to do a little more with the powers he'd been given by that buffalo spirit. At least, he was pretty sure that's where this had all started. Flicking the stub of his cigarette off the roof, Franky followed its arc down, jumping into the backyard and landing with

a satisfying thump. He couldn't leap tall buildings in a single bound, but he'd once managed an eight-foot hop, and besides, Superman wasn't real!

“Superman.” He chuckled and shook his head. Then a thoughtful look crossed his face.

Sam took one look at him, and roared in laughter. Franky's neck grew hot, and he shifted in embarrassment, his puffed-out chest deflating as his cousin doubled over, howling his mirth.

Looking down at himself, he didn't think he looked ridiculous at all! He was dressed in a pair of form fitting slacks done up in royal blue gabardine, and a matching cotton royal blue button-up with the sleeves rolled up to his well-muscled biceps the way he'd seen stars in the movies do. He had a moose-hide vest over that with a floral bead pattern on the front, and wrapped around his trim waist was a red ceinture fléchée tied off to the right. He'd abandoned oxfords for a pair of hide moccasins with no fur edging so the leg of his pants tapered just over top.

He'd handed his cousin Virginia seventy dollars, a prince's ransom, to bead a white infinity symbol on the vamp of each moccasin under a small wild rose, and a larger version on the back of his vest. The vest also had two large capital “M”s between his shoulders.

When Sam finally regained his composure, and circled around Franky to get a full look, he touched the beading on his vest and asked, “M,M? What's that, Mickey Mouse?” His voice shook with suppressed laughter, and Franky scowled a little.

“It stands for Michif Man!”

“Michif Man, what's that?”

Franky turned to face his cousin a bit heatedly, “I figure if I've got super powers, then I should have a superhero name!”

Sam's eyebrows shot up, "Superhero? This ain't New York, Franky, this is small-beans Edmonton and you're a halfbreed no one can remember, how are you going to be a superhero?"

"Well," Franky said, a bit embarrassed, "I was sort of hoping you'd help me plan that out."

Sam was a good-natured man, with a keen head for business, and an endless supply of schemes. Franky could see the wheels turning.

"It's not *that* bad, is it?" Franky asked plaintively, gesturing to his outfit.

"Better than tights, I suppose." Sam shrugged, half lost in thought.

Excerpt from a talk by Shelley Vogel, "Michif Man from Lac Ste. Anne: Microhistory or Mythology?" presented at the 2020 Native American And Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA) annual conference in Toronto, Ontario.

Perhaps one of the most extraordinary feats attributed to Michif Man, is the continuing existence of the Elizabeth and East Prairie Métis Settlements in northern Alberta.

Rather uniquely in Canada, Alberta passed a Métis Betterment Act in 1938 that set aside well over a million acres of land, and created twelve Métis Settlements.⁶³ However, over the years, four of these Settlements were removed by Order in Council, including the Wolf Lake Metis Settlement in the early 1960s.⁶⁴

⁶³ (Federation of Métis Settlements 1979).

⁶⁴ (MacEwan Joint Committee. 1984, 7).

In the 1950s, interviewees claimed that Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris uncovered plans to close the Touchwood, Marlboro, Cold Lake, Elizabeth, and East Prairie Settlements, highlighted in pink on this map. In this decade government policies focused on centralizing the Métis and “modernizing their social life”, which often meant encouraging relocation to urban centres.⁶⁵

Word-of-mouth had spread from relation to relation and then eventually on to unrelated Métis about Michif Man and his superpowers, which were apparently: super strength, and something all interviewees refer to as The Distortion. The claim is that people not related to Michif Man would forget about him completely, the moment they were distracted. It wasn't invisibility, but rather like a cloak of forgetfulness that surrounded him.

While The Distortion caused Michif Man to experience a rather unique level of isolation – after all can one truly be called isolated when surrounded by many hundreds of relatives? – we're told he'd been counseled by Elders to see it as a power as useful as his strength.

As an aside, literary scholars analyzing the Michif Man tales have always insisted The Distortion is a rather heavy-handed metaphor for the Métis as a “forgotten people”, who were “hidden in plain sight”.⁶⁶ However, our research team has considered pairing with physicists to posit scientific models that could explain The Distortion.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ (Dobbin 1981, 183).

⁶⁶ (Daniels 1979). In this story I really wanted to explore the idea of being truly forgotten, and overlooked, as potentially an emancipatory situation rather than one defined by loss or deprivation. I didn't necessarily have time to get into it too much, but what would the implications be, for example, of not being “on the grid” bureaucratically? Of having no government oversight at all and therefore also to not be subject to bureaucratic whims and regulations? As Michif Man discovers, being “forgotten” has some advantages; he is not subject to as much intense racism for example, and is in many senses, more truly free than Métis have been since they were freemen.

⁶⁷ (Ergin et al. 2010). This is an interesting article on a real invention. “Invisibility” technology tends to use refractive and transformation optics akin to camouflaging. As “The Distortion” actually results in people forgetting Michif Man, other scientific explanations would have to be found.

The interviewees claimed the events transpired thusly: Brady and Norris sent word through their networks about the location of enabling documents related to the dissolution of the five Settlements. Michif Man's cousin, Samuel Belcourt, accompanied him in plain daylight to the Alberta Legislature, in order to act as the distraction necessary for The Distortion to be triggered. Michif Man was able to burn up a large number of documents before the smoke was noticed, and all manner of firefighting units and police showed up to the scene.

When asked why Michif Man did not simply continue burning all the documents, we were informed by interviewees that his super strength did not extend to invulnerability – that he cut himself shaving like every other man – and that if he were shot before The Distortion was triggered, it wouldn't do him much good to be a forgotten corpse.

We were able to find transcripts of discussions related to the closing of Touchwood, Marlboro, and Cold Lake Settlements, but nothing at all that mentioned Elizabeth or East Prairie. Of course, this is not proof that this story about Michif Man is true, and absence of evidence cannot be evidence of the absence – namely that officials for some reason forgot all about their plans to close the two Settlements – claimed here. Nonetheless, Michif Man is widely hailed as a hero for his putative actions.

Apparently, Brady then attempted to recruit Michif Man into the socialist struggle for national liberation, but was rebuffed. Michif Man was known for his intractable and almost parochial loyalty and focus on his home community of Lac Ste. Anne, and his relations living in Edmonton. Perhaps his time abroad during the second world war was as outward looking as he'd wanted to be in his lifetime. His attempt to prevent the five Settlements from being closed was as much as he was willing to do outside of that. However, Brady and Michif Man shared an ad hoc approach to reducing the suffering of individuals, and confronting – or in Michif Man's case, punishing in some way – those responsible for the misery.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ (Dobbin 1981, 199-200). Dobbin details some of the instances of organized resistance in LaRonge like the “bubble-gum gang”, and brawls that Brady was involved to defend Native people, as well as the care taken to ensure drunks ejected from bars in the winter made it home safely.

The bulk of Michif Man's reported feats centred around improving the lives of Métis in Edmonton. Records of their debts would mysteriously disappear, leaving people free and clear. Welfare clerks were reprimanded frequently for strange discrepancies in funds distributed, without being able to locate where the overpayments were happening. We located hundreds of documents including correspondence between different branches of the government complaining of the way in which Métis affairs in Edmonton seemed to be almost universally mishandled to the benefit of "the halfbreeds". An intergovernmental investigation was actually launched in 1960, with some fairly harsh accusations made suggesting collusion between white clerks and Métis clientele, but nothing was ever proven, and in fact, many of the clerks were found to be "properly" antipathic towards Métis in general. No one could explain why this was only happening in Edmonton.

A new architectural trend among Métis homeowners in Edmonton bloomed in the late 50s, which some have named "Métis Rococo", featuring intricate naturalist motifs akin to flower beadwork carved into exteriors and interiors of homes and then painted in bright colours. It has been often noted that the dimensions of these carvings exactly match an average adult human finger, as though someone had simply pushed a digit *through* the wood itself. No tools have been found that would explain the uniformity of this measurement, nor has the style been successfully attributed to any specific craftsman, and all attempts to recreate the style have failed.

Insurance claims provided particularly interesting corroboration for Michif Man stories, as an unusual number of vehicles were found flipped violently onto their roofs, as though tossed by a tornado, with no disturbance in the weather that could explain it. However, when we showed these documents to interviewees, numerous insurance claimants were identified as men who had been known to behave offensively towards Métis men and women.

Interviewees pointed us towards another line of research which we successfully followed up on: bizarre home explosions! In 1955, the Edmonton Electric Lighting and Power Company's Rosedale plant switched from coal to natural gas, and natural gas became a much more common

source of heat in Edmonton homes after that.⁶⁹ Apparently, as many as 40 homes “exploded” between 1955-1960, disasters which were attributed to faulty natural gas pipes.

However, we were able to prove that only 5% of the affected homes had natural gas installed, and in the damage reports, inspectors describe a scene that resembles cataclysmic vandalism, as though, as one inspector put it “someone drove a damn bulldozer through every structural support in the house.”

Interviewees tell us that these homes were owned by men who had sexually assaulted Métis women. Michif Man had apparently been strongly urged by Elders to never resort to physical violence against any white man, as he would be unable to prevent retaliation against Métis who did not have his super powers. Thus, he confined himself to destroying their homes. As it seemed impossible for any human to cause so much damage, suspicion did not fall on the Métis community, and in many cases, the men who had committed assaults became rather fervent church-goers who did not re-offend.

There are many more stories of feats of strength, stealth, and generosity attributed to Michif Man. The living conditions of Métis in Edmonton during this time improved considerably, even though family allowance and old age pensions typically accounted for half a family’s income in the 50s.⁷⁰ This fact confuses a lot of people, at it seems to suggest nothing much was changing, but it should be understood that reliance on welfare among Métis was not stigmatized but rather seen as an obligation of the government as a form of reparations for destroying their self-sufficiency. In any case, welfare monies were never intended to allow Métis to lift themselves out of poverty, and there was almost no incentive to stop collecting them.⁷¹ Many attempts were made to discover what “illegal” activities Edmonton Métis could be involved in that would explain the overall economic rise of this community, to no avail.

⁶⁹ (Alberta Energy 1970).

⁷⁰ (Dobbin 1981, 185).

⁷¹ (Shewell 2004, 228 – 259).

These stories may seem underwhelming to those of us accustomed to the hyperbolic feats of comic book superheroes, but our research demonstrates that Michif Man used his superpowers in culturally relevant ways that fulfilled the needs of reciprocity, kinship, and community. As he was clearly unable to receive acclaim or fame outside of his community, he directed his efforts towards raising up the whole people. In doing so, he aided in extraordinary communal acts of resistance against ongoing settler colonial violence against Métis people, and circumvented or outright subverted bureaucratic process intended to subjugate, discipline, or punish Métis who refused to assimilate into a Canadian model of citizenship.⁷²

1960: Edmonton, Alberta

It was a fine day, he thought to himself as he strolled along Jasper Avenue, enjoying the warm sunshine and the endless azure expanse above him. Franky spotted his reflection in a storefront window and smiled; no one who'd known him before the accident would recognize him now, and not just because they couldn't! Gone were the overpriced, fancy suits, and he'd retired his admittedly ridiculous superhero costume just a few months after creating it. Now he was comfortably dressed in jeans, moccasins, and a cotton t-shirt.

But it wasn't just his manner of dress. His whole life he'd felt like he needed to prove himself, and so he'd pushed himself to take more and more risks. Now, he no longer felt that pressure. When he was called upon to help a relation, there was genuine thankfulness for his actions, but he wasn't treated like a hero or saviour. At first that had felt a bit unfair to him, until he realized it really didn't matter. The love and care that his family and community showed him ensured his needs were always met; accolades wouldn't fill him up any further. Besides, he knew that even if he had never been given his powers, his people would have continued to take care of him and each other, the way they had always done.

⁷² (Bokahker and Iacovetta 2009, 407 – 434).

Ironically, he'd become a much gentler man. No longer always on the defensive, no longer always angry at the constant barrage of prejudice and contempt he'd grown up facing from white society; a society that he no longer existed in at all. After a few years he'd stopped feeling like a ghost. Surrounded at all times by people who understood and related to him, he realized that it was these white people who, in their unceasing drive to dominate every aspect of the world around them, unmoored from the reciprocal obligations that kept Métis life in balance, were the real ghosts.

He thrust his hands into his pockets and started whistling a little tune, an orange blossom special, smiling at passersby even though their eyes slid past him almost immediately. Up ahead, a truly radiant brown skinned woman in a bright yellow summer dress was walking along, staring into every shop window intently. Her long brown hair was tied loosely into a careless braid tossed over her shoulder and she kept pushing flyaway strands out of her face impatiently as the downtown wind gusted and dropped, gusted and dropped again. As he neared, she glanced up at him and he smiled as he passed by, admiring her handsome features.

She scowled at him. "You got a staring problem, mister?"

He stopped dead in his tracks, and turned around to face her in surprise. Her eyes hadn't slid off him.

She thrust her chin up and gave him a wary look, "I seen you staring at me since you crossed the street over there." Her reflexive lip point felt like a stone dropped into his stomach. The Distortion wasn't working, *because she was related to him!*

He sighed to himself and shook his head ruefully; so many beautiful women in the world and the only ones who even knew he existed were his cousins.

Her wary eyes softened a little when he didn't seem likely to do her any harm, "Where are you from?" she asked, with a little questioning nod upwards with her chin. What she was really asking was, are you a halfbreed too?

“Lac Ste. Anne,” he answered, “but I’ve been living here a long time. My parents are Ann-Marie Belcourt and Solomon Callihoo.”

“Oh ah!” she brightened, “I just moved here, me, from Fort Smith. My dad’s Dene, but my ma’s a Callihoo. Helene.”

Franky pursed his lips in thought for a moment, “Was her mom Sophie-Anne Letendre? Married to Samson Callihoo?”

She nodded, surprised, and Franky did some quick math in his head. “That’d make you, let’s see...my fifth cousin. Well, half-cousin I guess. Hardly related at all!” He laughed and held out a hand, “I’m Franky Callihoo.”

She grinned and shook his hand, “Abigail Koe. Pleased to meet you.”

It was a fine day, he thought. A fine day indeed.

Michif Man analysis

A short story called *The Token Superhero* by David Walker, is my inspiration for Michif Man (2015). In his piece, he rejects a post-racial approach to the superhero genre, and imagines what life would truly be like for a Black superhero. When Alonzo Ramey is born with a genetic anomaly guaranteeing him superpowers, his life as a Black person is changed, but structural anti-Blackness remains. Ramey as Black Fist gets tired of being tokenized and retires, before finding out that he had been an important role model to Black youth despite the way the overculture downplayed his successes and contributions. He takes on the mantle of Black Fist again, but approaches being a superhero in a different way this time, still battling super villains, but also doing community organizing and youth outreach. I wanted to imagine a culturally rooted Métis superhero, and see where that might take us.

The Golden Age of comics

I chose to set this story in the Golden Age of superhero comics, which waned rapidly after WWII. This was a period dominated by DC Comics and featured heroes like Superman, Batman, Green Lantern and Wonder Woman. Marvel kicked off the Silver Age in 1956 with a modern version of the Flash, and continued on with superheroes like Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four, X-Men and many others (Klock 2002, 2-3). However, I decided that since Indigenous peoples historically have been “left behind” by settler-colonial sociopolitical policies, I wanted to metaphorically reference this by writing a superhero in a way that was also a “bit behind” for his time. Even perhaps a little *quaint*.

The Golden Age of comics featured larger-than-life characters whereas the Silver Age eased into portrayals of more humanized (and sometimes flawed) characters against a grittier, more “real” backdrop of modernity. For me, inserting Michif Man into the Golden Age represents the opportunity to engage in a bit of caricature. I want to play with archetypes!

Super people, not super man

This choice allows me to reflect on Métis agency within a coercive system as a People, rather than accepting the extreme individualism that superhero stories are particularly prone to. Though Franky is the purported protagonist of this story, in truth he is not the main character; his community is. As Ryan Griffen, creator of the Aboriginal superhero Cleverman puts it, I wanted to create a character that is “able to teach moral lessons...not just for Aboriginal people, but for many more out there as well” (Griffen 2016). It is important to me that these moral lessons rebuff heteronormative, patriarchal, racist, and ableist settler colonialism from a specifically Métis worldview.

This story is about Métis people, not a Métis “super man”, because too often Métis history is distorted through a lens that focuses on individuals like Louis Riel or Cuthbert Grant; choices that erase women and Two Spirit people, and obscure the extended kinship systems that allow Métis people to survive violent settler colonialism.

To draw attention away from the “super man”, much of this story is told by a Métis academic, giving a presentation at what is a very real, and important conference in the field of Indigenous Studies. I wrote the scenes with Franky first, as though I were planning out a comic

book. As a result, those scenes are sparse, and intended to be very visual and exaggerated. One day I would love to adapt this story for a graphic novel.

Breaking the academic fourth wall

I wrote the scenes with Shelly Vogel as though I were creating a real academic presentation on folktales from my community, trying to prove the truth behind stories that have been dismissed by mainstream white academia. However, Vogel is also cartoonish; somewhat of a parody. Listen, if I can't get my digs in at the academy, what's the point? Her name is based on my own, so it's also an auto-parody. Her presentation is an extended tongue-in-cheek teasing of my colleagues, but it's also me, applying the field the way I believe it actually would be if Michif Man had truly existed. Long after I wrote this story, Sarah Carter passed along an academic article about a Métis folk hero, Paulet Paul (Foster, 1985). Upon reading, I felt even more confident that my fictionalized academic approach isn't that far off how people actually talk about our "legends", never mind getting into why these discussions are often problematic.

I'm not *just* poking fun at the academy (and myself) with the character of Shelley Vogel. Narrating through an academic presentation I am able to break the fourth wall somewhat, to express what I feel is the importance of stories rooted in a Métis worldview. When we tell our own stories, even fictionalized ones, we stand up against the narratives that have been imposed upon us.

The scenes are also sparse, because I wanted to "zoom out" and cover some mid-century Métis history. There is plenty of time later for me to develop more adventures for Michif Man to have; this is merely an introduction, and I wanted to give a bit more context for those who are unfamiliar with people like Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris, the Alberta Métis Settlements and the standard of living for Métis in Edmonton during those times. I was also very interested in what an academic investigation into a Métis superhero would look like if the parameters I set actually existed. Honestly for me, that was more fun than the scenes with Franky themselves. Maybe I'm not the only history-nerd who feels that way.

Playing with tropes

Superhero stories belong to a specific sub-genre of speculative fiction, with a particular history and a number of defined tropes. I questioned whether or not I wanted to engage with

those tropes, either by drawing on them, or by rejecting them. Both actions reinforce these tropes in some way, but I am not genre-busting with this story; I am trying to genre-subvert. Again, I am drawing on the experiences of Métis communities within settler-colonialism, and the ways in which Métis people have “failed” to wholly accept or participate in imposed colonial structures.

To the great frustration of priests, factors, and politicians alike, the Métis have consistently exercised their agency in ways that reflect Métis worldview and aspirations; or as Alexander Ross put it, Métis “cordially detest all the laws and restraints of civilized life” (Anon 1984, 7). I think my Métis in Space co-host, Molly Swain, puts it even more succinctly when she declares that “Métis are defined by three things: scheming, squatting and scamming” (2017).

Superheroes deriving their power from radiation is a trope that spans both the Golden and Silver Ages of comics. I chose to invoke this trope and offer conflicting interpretations of the event; the academic blithely accepts radiation as a plausible explanation for superpowers, while Franky muses on a bison spirit gifting him with a unique obligation. We do not witness the event so have no idea which is true. Other Indigenous superheroes often have more clearly “Indigenous” sources for their powers, such as Super Shamou, the Inuk superhero who is visited by a spirit and given a powerful charm, or Cree superhero Equinox whose powers derive from the Earth and changes in the season.

I did this to suggest again that although Métis people are constrained by imposed structures, we find ways to subvert these boundaries to our own benefit, wherever possible. Bison are central to Métis identity, and what is done to bison cannot but impact Métis people. I wanted to take a negative event, the fictional irradiation and ongoing harm of bison (based on real life Cold War experiments on human populations in the same area!), and have it create a situation where the unintended consequences could be seized by Métis to withstand settler colonialism. The source of the power does not necessarily define the use the power will be put to, or the obligations created, and that is something we need to think about as Métis continue to participate in capitalism.

Richard Reynolds in his book *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, identifies seven defining features of the superhero narrative that I wanted to play with a bit. First, those features are: lost parents, the “man-god”, justice, the normal and super-powered, the secret-identity, super powers and politics, and science as magic (1992, 12-16). I wanted to see if any of these features made sense in a Métis context.

The lost parents feature requires a hero to “reach maturity without having a relationship with his parents” but although Franky seeks to forge his own path he is throughout the story inextricably linked and accountable to his family and community (Reynolds 1992, 16). These powers are not his alone, they are in a sense intended for his whole community. The “distortion” that causes those not related to him to immediately forget he exists, ensures that Franky is not seen (at all!) as god-like by white society, and his relations do not view his power as setting him apart from them; truly “with great power comes great responsibility” (a quote by Voltaire, more broadly recognized as a quote by Peter Parker’s uncle Ben). However, it is a uniquely Métis view of responsibility that Franky explores in this story.

The justice feature of superheroes often sees them running up against the law in their efforts to do the right thing, but Métis are historically already seen as either lawless or ungovernable. Franky is not torn between a duty to uphold the nation state and serving his people; his duty is to subvert and resist the state. In mainstream superhero tails, the contrast between those with powers and those without is highlighted. In Michif Man, Franky’s community is careful not to allow him to become too proud or celebrated. There are many Métis stories where lack of humility results in disaster not just for the individual, but for the wider community. White society, which does not value humility in the same way, has no opportunity to make a celebrity of Franky.

Franky’s identity is so secret, he simply ceases to exist to white society. In this, he experiences a sense of freedom from racism, surveillance (bureaucratic or otherwise), and from the pressure to perform masculinity. I wanted to subvert the idea of Métis as “hiding in plain sight”, or of being a forgotten people by suggesting that if settler colonial society were to truly forget us - as in stop interfering with us entirely - that could be a wonderful thing.

Rather than science as magic, where superhero stories form a mythology that create a sense of wonder, I wanted the Métis reaction to Franky’s powers to be underwhelming. After all, Métis oral history is full of beings with extraordinary powers; powers that must be respected but not necessarily feared. Franky is not unique in having powers; he is part of a long lineage of human and more-than-human beings who can do the extraordinary.

The research questions that helped me create this story were:

- What would it would be like for a Métis to be a superhero?

- What kind of super powers would our hero have, and where did those powers originate?
- How would a Métis superhero behave; what systems of accountability would be in place?

Dirty Wings

They are a bit grey around the puckered leather seams that attach the vamps to the soles, ôhi maskasina, these moccasins. I don't remember seeing them before, but they fit my feet in the way only well-used moccasins can. nimaskisina cî ôhi?

I usually wear slipper moccasins in the Dene style, trimmed with beaver fur, with fully beaded vamps. Works of art for everyday use. My last few moccasins were made by Tłı̨ch̨o women, glittering flowers on white backgrounds and golden, smoked moose hide that overpowered the nostrils; filled the entire house with the smell of the bush for weeks until I broke them in.

I had to pay a fine in a hotel room once after a rainy urban powwow. nimaskisina made it smell like we'd set up camp on the two king size beds, an indoor/outdoor reclamation of a place built without free, prior, and informed consent on Odawa lands. I had the windows open all night and the four of us shivered in the cold, but the wet moose hide permeated every molecule of air, infused itself into our skin and hair, into the walls even. I slept poorly, imagining the smell was visible, golden light pouring out the windows, and every nechie who looked up would know exactly what it was. I love the smell, but even I grew tired of tasting it.

During check out they made us wait until someone could look at the room; the hotel was full of Indians and I guess they were worried we drank up the mini bar. I remember the look of confusion on the concierge's face when housekeeping called him back, trying in vain to describe a smell that seemed foreign, but belonged more than the damn hotel did. He caught a whiff off me a moment later, and his face twisted. They charged me the way they'd charge someone who smoked in the non-smoking rooms.

I've been waiting years for nikâwiy to make me moccasins; you're not supposed to buy them, that's what môniyâwak do. But no one taught nikâwiy, and every couple of years her and my aunties would try a new pattern, something from a book or described to them by a friend, giving up before finishing the pair. She's got a bunch of left foot moccasins in different styles crammed into her craft drawers. None of them "felt right", she'd laugh when I pulled them out and asked why she didn't finish them.

So I bought my moccasins, and felt a little ashamed about it because they didn't say anything about me or nikâwiy or nikâwisa or nohkom. And I bought my kids some because I'm better with words than with sewing needles; I guess I will speak when omaskisina cannot.

These ones on my feet, where did they come from? Feel like moosehide, but there's no smell and the reinforced soles are worn, stretched to fit me perfectly. Instead of heavy duty felt vamps, it's more leather with a boring geometric design, like something you'd see on factory made-in-China moccasins, but these were clearly hand-made. Short leather wrap-arounds too, like a high-top sneaker, just barely above the ankle, what's the point? The leather moccasin strings were gone, replaced by black nylon combat boot laces.

I'm sitting on a couch in a common living/kitchen area. Four kookums are on high stools around the kitchen island, resting their rubber boots on a metal bar attached to the island. They wear thin windbreakers and long skirts. They're drinking tea and patting their floral kerchiefs, talking about food. I pull off my moccasins and start spreading mashed avocado inside them with my fingers. It's time consuming work, I have to do it right.

I'm living in an Indigenous dorm at the University of amiskwacîwâskahikan. I'm in a program with a small cohort and the kookums are talking about the young men. We only have a certain amount of money each month for food, and the Elders decided to give it to the men. The kookums are laughing about what aniki nâpêwak have been buying with that money, fancy breads from artisanal bakeries, and aged cold cuts. They laugh uproariously about the spring water in glass bottles in the fridge.

I wonder why we don't just eat ramen noodles like every other student. I know how to stretch it out, making 'soup bombs' you can throw in when the noodles are cooked, pieces of

meat and lots of vegetables you freeze in small batches for when you need them, it's basically a full meal. I can teach them, I think to myself. We can sew soup bombs into cleaned buffalo intestines.

My fingers stay busy. The kookums are pulling on their short pipes now, little puffs of tobacco drifting like cotton candy, sticking to the ceiling, becoming clouds. The men will be out of money soon, far too soon into the month, and that means we'll all go hungry. I'm not hungry yet, but the suggestion makes my stomach clench. Lasting lessons are hard on everyone.

The men are back, braids but no faces, laying loaves of bread on the kitchen island, proud of themselves. They kiss the hands of the kookums and I'm not angry anymore. It will be okay. I slide the moccasins back on, tie them tight.

We are sitting in a circle outside in the quad. The sun is so bright and so high, we are sitting on our own shadows. A mōniyâw, a white man, stands outside our circle and when his mouth moves I hear wings flapping. Not eagle wings mind you, not even raven wings. Dirty pigeon wings and I feel ashamed I don't honour the pigeon. It didn't build the cities, it just adapted. Maybe even better than we did.

Or maybe exactly how we did.

We are pulling spruce root up through the grass, laying it in front of us in coils. Dirty wings, dirty wings. Somehow I understand he is mocking us, saying our program is just "underwater basketweaving". We don't do that, but I think it might be fun. That one, mōniyâw ana, in his 19th century hipster beard, he just wants us to know he thinks what we do is useless. Arts and crafts at best. I bet he studies poli sci.

The four kookums wrestle themselves to their feet, it's hard for them, knees creaking like abandoned gates blowing in the wind. They stretch out their arms in front of them, then bend them so their hands are touching their own shoulders. Their elbows are sharp and I'm confused; the kookums aren't blind. They push that one, ana mōniyâw, poking him with their elbows when he seems reluctant to move.

We all stand and follow the kookums. We are in a building with a large pool. The water lies in shadows, a shade of green like spruce boughs. There are cattails obscuring its size and in a few places you can see all the way to the bottom. We usually bring our canoes here but not today.

The kookums elbow that mōniyâw into the pool. He falls and drags all the cattails down with him like pulling on a tablecloth, until the pool is clear and blue and you can see him just sitting there on the bottom, looking up in confusion. The kookums throw him coils of spruce root and tell him he can come out when he has woven a basket.

He doesn't even try. He swells up a little, his skin is becoming puffy and flecks of his clothes start floating to the top of the water. We watch his skin come off in patches. Soon the whole surface of the pool is covered in soggy leaves.

The men take their woven spruce root baskets and skim the leaves out of the water. The men are silent but the rest of us are singing. The kookums are sitting, puffing on their pipes again, but these are the longer pipes, the women's pipes.

I gather the waterlogged leaves up in my hands, there are so many, they keep falling and I have to pick them up again. I am outside and it is deadly cold, the earth hushed and blanketed. I have to take these leaves and spread them under the trees in the University quad. I cannot see the sky, it is getting dark and snow is falling, thick, wet and heavy all around me.

I risk freezing to death, but my feet are warm. I am glad I took the time to spread the avocado inside, my feet are coated as though with bear grease. I find a patch of waskwayak and I remember how once they were whipped by Elder Brother. It is winter, why can't I remember their name? I lay those leaves down, no more flapping wings. I hear wîsahkêcâhk laughing.

I am ready for the coming fast.

Dirty Wings analysis

I present this story with no annotations or citations within the text. Of all the stories I wrote for this thesis, I wanted this one to be the most open to interpretation. This is because this story began with a dream, rather than the answer to a series of research questions.

This dream is actually why I decided to write this thesis; I had been struggling with the original topic for my thesis, unhappy with where it was leading me, and how lacked generative energy. This dream left me certain that I needed to write these stories. Not simply to create fiction, but to do deep thinking about collective survival.

I have always been taught that dreams are significant in Métis/nêhiyaw culture, as they are for many other Indigenous peoples. Dreams represent an epistemological diversity along with visions, prophecy, specific ceremonies and interactions with non-human and non-living kin. Some dreams are prophetic, some dreams teach new ceremonies and medicine, like the jingle dance, or syllabics (Matthews 2003; Stevenson 2000). Others are just dreams, and don't mean anything. I have always remembered most of my dreams upon waking, and am pretty confident that the bulk of the dreaming I do is of the meaningless sort. This dream felt different.

As nêhiyaw scholar Michael Hart explains in conversation with Margaret Kovach (2009, 70), dreaming as an Indigenous methodology is not merely having a dream, nor even interpreting a dream, but rather “what you do with that dream, how you put it into reality.” This explanation dovetails perfectly with my conception of Métis futurisms as a whole: that imagining potential futures or alternative worlds in any time is not enough; what we *do* with these imaginings is what creates new realities.

I hesitate to call this story a pawâmêwâcimowin, (a spiritual dreaming story), because I feel that I do not have the necessary level of cultural competency to make that call. Sharing the dream that caused me to undertake this work is important to me because it was part of the process, and making space for narrative styles rooted in dreams and dreaming feels appropriate.

Rejecting magical realism

This piece will likely be read by some as surrealism, or even magical realism, which is a term I desperately dislike, though it ostensibly makes space to blend the “fantastic” with the “real”. The term arose within the context of Latin American literature, but has come to be applied internationally, and has been taken up to understand many Indigenous texts.

Daniel Heath Justice warns,

the assumption of a singular model of ‘realism’ ...can actually work violence against our struggles for figurative and experiential liberation, for it presumes, first, that there’s a singular reality against which all others must be compared, and second, that any cultural expressions or understandings inconsistent with that interpretation are deficient at best, pathological at worst (2018, 142).

Magical realism seems to preoccupy itself with dualities, though it strains to be a “powerful tool of postcolonial interrogation” (Mrak 2013, 2). This focus on dualities, rather than on accepting the holistic nature of Indigenous ontologies as truth, constantly frames Indigenous literature in relation to whitestream literature, which is perhaps not where we choose to exist; after all, Indigenous literatures precede Contact.

As Brenda Cooper puts it, “magical realism arises out of postcolonial, unevenly developed societies, where modern and ancient, and scientific and magical, views of the world co-exist” (1998, 216). She goes on to describe writers of magical realism as “cultural hybrids”.

The colonial chauvinism of these comparisons is breathtakingly offensive, regardless of intent, particularly coming from a Métis perspective, and being very tired of concepts like hybridity being used to flatten Métis Peoplehood (Andersen 2014, 27). Despite Cooper’s nuanced approach to the genre (as I do not want to do her a disservice and suggest her understanding is limited to these two quotes), it is all too easy for literary critics to take up these kinds of definitions to delegitimize Indigenous literature.

I am a big proponent of discarding terms once they cease to be liberatory and begin to be used in ways that confine us. I think much of the post-colonial theorizing around magical realism is solid, but I do not want to be slotted into this genre. Woe to anyone who chooses to label my work in this way, we will most certainly have words!

Instead, I quite like Justice’s concept of “wonderworks” which he says is “a term that gestures, imperfectly, toward other ways of being in the world, and it reminds us that the way things are is not how they have always been, nor is it how they must be” (Justice 2018, 152). It neither relegates stories to fantasy, nor bumps up against a dichotomous framing of real/unreal.

Weirding

A great deal of this story seems to focus on shoes, the strangeness of the moccasins I find myself in, and memories of how authentic smoked moose hide moccasins have branded me as transgressive outside of the safety of the powwow arbor (Vowel 2016). The hotel scene actually happened, and I added in these details after I had the dream. However, the focus on moccasins is really about cultural transmission, and the fraught question of operating within a capitalistic framework to access culture when transmission has been actively severed.

The story begins with me spreading mashed avocado into the strange moccasins. Later when I woke, it occurred to me that I was working with the materials I would have the most access to, that I would have preferred bear grease to protect and warm my skin. Avocados are much more plentiful now in these lands than bear grease is, who knows what our descendants may end up using, no matter how strange it may seem to us now?

Many of the details of this story blend traditional practices with the necessity of innovation and substitution, but at times also *weirds* these practices.

I draw here on a concept embedded within Frank Herbert's *Dune* series. Herbert's "weirding way" (1965) is a form of movement, even of combat, (and sometimes sound!) but it is based in the notion of altering one's perception of reality, of space-time, and cause and effect. In this ways, practitioners of the weirding way are able to do things that seem impossible, which *weird* cause and effect. In the *Dune* universe, weirding is conscious, controlled, and intentional.

Herbert links weirding to combat, and within this text I make repeated references to resistance. Soup 'bombs' as weapons against hunger and malnutrition, for example. Hunger was weaponized against Indigenous peoples repeatedly, but to most effect here on the Plains (Daschuk 2013). Combat boot laces, the overpowering smell of smoked hide driving people away (a weapon itself perhaps?), the appearance of ancient beings who defeat racist words and assumptions, ceremony, and communities of care even in the face of adversity.

"Weirding" is used as a verb in a number of other contexts, most of which gesture towards the idea of unexpected consequences. Thomas Friedman (2007) credits Hunter Lovins with the term as it relates to climate change saying "global warming doesn't really capture what's likely to happen. I prefer the terms 'global weirding'...because the rise in average global temperature is going to lead to all sorts of crazy things."

The ableism of labelling climate weirding “crazy” aside, global weirding is not controlled or intentional. We cannot predict how it will impact us, but we must adapt, something Indigenous peoples have been doing now for centuries.

U.S. civil war historian Stephen Berry proposes the term weirding “as the historian’s equivalent of ‘freakonomics’ (the use of economic theory to investigate atypical subjects in the hope of yielding fresh insights into typical social dynamics)” (Berry 2011, 5). He explains that in this context, weirding “is a way of alienating the past from its present purposes, releasing the past from its present work, and returning to the past a measure of its original ‘foreignness’ (Berry 2011, 5). This intentional way of viewing something a field considers ‘known’, may open up new interpretations and possible ways of understanding the past. So too, I suggest weirding can be used when contemplating the present, and the future.

I use weirding to induce a sense of strangeness or alienation towards otherwise mundane things and actions. It is also a strategy in writing to draw the reader’s attention. For example, bear grease is not normally applied to the feet, it is applied to the hair, or on the skin as a protective barrier against the sun and wind. It has medicinal properties as well. This is not a detail I would expect non-Indigenous people to know, however. I am making this strange for the Métis/nêhiyawak readers.

I kept this odd detail the same for the sake of weirding the story, but also as resistance to a notion of traditionalism that freezes us in time, and concepts of authenticity that allow for no deviation in practice and material use beyond some arbitrary moment in history; concepts that are not solely externally imposed.

Insider, outsider positionality

Many of the references in the story aren’t necessarily legible to the “outsider”, and that is deliberate. The symbolism and allusions were there in my dream because I know them best. I chose not to translate them within the story because I want non-Indigenous people to engage with our stories, symbols, language, and history, on our terms. Just as I have had to research the sources of literary allusions unfamiliar to me in order to access deeper meanings within western European literature, I expect this work to be done by non-Indigenous peoples, especially those on our lands. That might look like annotated versions of our stories for a while, just as I was only able to understand classic European works that made constant allusions to other European works.

I chose not to do that with this story, because it is being accompanied with this analysis, but if I publish it again, I will include extensive annotations.

Not all Indigenous people will have the insider knowledge required to understand symbols and allusions used in Indigenous literature. Either because we are from outside the specific cultural perspective (for example, I would not be able to interpret Diné symbolism!), or because as members of a specific culture, these things haven't been learned. This reality has softened my approach somewhat to the idea of annotating, or making legible some of my work.

This story was published during the process of writing my thesis (Vowel 2018). It has changed slightly since publication, but it was reviewed twice by two white men, at least one of them English. I am sharing their reviews to highlight the illegibility of this particular work to the "outsider". First from Jeff McGregor:

The protagonist spends much of these four pages, which are not "speculative" as much as "surreal," talking about shoes. The story includes many undefined regional words and untranslated non-English phrases and may be about pre-Europeans struggling with assimilation (2018).

The second review was done by Geoff Houghton:

"Dirty Wings" by Chelsea Vowel is a flow of consciousness from a Native American living on the edge of mainstream Canadian society. The author is plainly familiar with this Native culture and uses many native words, although their approximate meaning can usually be deduced from the context.

This is speculative fiction rather than SF. The writing style is idiosyncratic and there is no conventional plot. Instead the reader leaves behind common or garden Western World certainties and is drawn into an alternative way to view our Universe. If you believe that reality is reality is reality and what we see is what we get, then pass this story by. If you are less certain in your metaphysics, then you may wish to enter this alternative way of seeing the world through eyes not automatically attuned to Western Capitalist and Materialist values (McGregor and Houghton, 2018).

I find these reviews absolutely fascinating! I suppose I am reviewing their reviews. The term “pre-Europeans” really jumps out at me; I have heard us referred to as pre-Columbian, and even pri-mative, but never pre-European! The way the reviewer unconsciously prioritizes European presence and homogenizes all those that “came before” provides interesting insight into how he read this story. The hesitance with which the reviewer proclaims the plot of the story is also telling, and in the absence of more context familiar to him, he falls upon a familiar whitestream trope of “struggling with assimilation”.

I am happy that the second reviewer was able to figure out the nêhiyawêwin words I used, untranslated, throughout the story, though he does not know which specific language I am using, and refers to Indigenous cultures in the singular.

I refuse to translate, because I want non-Indigenous people to learn these words, as they have learned French, Spanish, German, and Japanese phrases which are peppered throughout English. I also appreciate that this reviewer grasps that this story does not exist within the exact same metaphysical framework of conventional speculative fiction.

I think it is safe to assume that neither reviewer understood the literary allusions to ayâs, or Elder Brother, nor grasped the cultural significance of the pipe ceremony versus social smoking, of the cycle of season, of clan systems, of the many purposes of fasting, and all the other culturally specific nuances throughout the story. One could ask what the purpose is of writing something that remains so opaque to the vast majority of readers, but my response to that is I am offering a piece within a growing literary tradition. What is illegible now may not remain so, as over time our culturally-specific works sharply elbow spaces open.

spoiler alert I take comfort in the fact that when I read *Moon of the Crusted Snow* by Waubgeshig Rice (2018), I immediately grasped from the contextual clues that the white man who comes to the community will become a wihtikow (or wendigo as the Anishnaabe say). Yet in discussions with non-Indigenous peoples, it has become clear that this was not at all obvious to them, because they lack the cultural knowledge and the clues were missed. Rather than ruining a major plot line for me, feeling like an “insider” was refreshing and welcome.

My audience is primarily other Indigenous people from this territory, specifically Métis, Cree, Anishinaabe, and Nakoda, because these are the cultural influences that have shaped who I am and how I perceive the world. This is first, an internal conversation, to which I invite others to witness, even if understanding comes later.

Explaining the story

This story takes place in an urban setting, but clearly the land plays an important role. Asserting that all cities exist on Indigenous land is vital, particularly since the majority of Indigenous peoples now live in urban areas, but also to highlight the artificial nature of the rural/urban divide (Statistics Canada, Simpson 2014a).⁷³ When we exhort one another to “go back to the land”, we seem to always mean “leave the city”, but this is not possible or even necessarily desirable for everyone. As Leanne Simpson often points out, we should be encouraging Indigenous people to make connection with the land wherever they are, even if it is a city park.

“Dirty Wings” occurs within a seasonal cycle specific to where I have grown up, and around amiskwacîwâskahikan. The markers are all there, in the way the kookums dress for the spring, the height of the sun, the leaves, the cold. Surviving the cycle results in experiencing another one, and another, and another. It also means the troubles I face, or the troubles we face as Indigenous peoples, can pass. Hard times can be followed by renewal.

When I talk about honouring the pigeon, I gesture to clans among nêhiyaw and Anishinaabe kin, referring to a long-standing in-joke with friends about the way white people seem to always claim certain animals as their “spirit animals”. Animals like the bear, or the eagle, but never the rat, or the pigeon. Being pigeon clan might be viewed as ignoble, but as I point out, it is not just human beings who have adapted to drastic changes in the landscape. Our animal kin have also experienced severances, and fractures in their own cultural transmissions, as well as innovating for survival.

The kookums are central to the story. It is they who decided to let the young men make decisions that the kookums know will have consequences for all of us, because they need those men to learn responsibility extends beyond the self. They smoke pipes twice, once socially, once in ceremony, each kind of offering of tobacco with its own purpose. The kookums teach us how to connect with the land, even in the city, and they are the ones to teach that môtîyâw a lesson about mocking skills he cannot himself master.

When the kookums have sharp elbows, I am referring to an âtayohkêwin (a sacred story) about Métis/Cree cultural hero, ayâs, as told to me by Eeyou (eastern Cree) storyteller Elma

⁷³ In 2016, 51.8% of the Indigenous population of Canada lived in a metropolitan area of at least 30,000 people.

Moses. In that story ayâs outwits blind witches with sharp bones jutting out of their elbows, who were sent by his father to kill him. ayâs is responsible for the world fire and the rebirth of the world. One could see the world fire as an apocalypse, but rather than heralding an ending, it ushered in a new beginning. All of the stories I offer in this work reject the apocalypse as an end that must be feared for its finality. In this story, the mōniyâw does not outwit the witches. He does not usher in a new beginning, but rather seems to be in the way of one, and his ending is not their doing, rather his own.

The kookums give me a task I don't understand, but I do it even though it is difficult, because I trust they have a reason for it. I recall another âtayohkêwin as told by the late Freda Ahenakew (1988), about how birch trees got their stripes from the cultural hero wîsahkêcâhk. In this story, Elder Brother enlists the aid of birch trees to help themselves exercise self-control, but when things don't go their way, the birch trees are punished with a whipping.

I am using they/them pronouns for Elder Brother for two reasons. For one, in the âtayohkêwina, Elder Brother is not just one gender, they are not always even human. They transform constantly. The other reason is that nêhiyawêwin, the Cree language, lacks gendered pronouns and “they” is a more faithful translation of “wîya” than “he” or “she” can be.

In Métis/nêhiyaw culture, there is a cultural taboo against using Elder Brother's name outside of the winter months. This restriction extends to many other beings and animals as well. This creates a bit of a problem for story-telling in forms other than oral, because we cannot always be certain that our stories will be taken up in the proper season.

Métis filmmaker, Danis Goulet provides an interesting solution to this restriction in her short film “Wakening”. First, the film description is: “In the near future, the environment has been destroyed and society suffocates under a brutal military occupation. A lone Cree wanderer Wesakechak searches an urban war zone to find the ancient and dangerous Weetigo to help fight against the occupiers” (Wakening n.d.).

In the film itself, snow falls, signaling that the film exists within the proper season, and so even when viewing this film in a different season, it is perhaps permissible to hear or speak the name. This compromise might not be acceptable to everyone, but it at least signals a desire to observe cultural protocol.

In the story, there is snow on the ground, but I cannot remember Elder Brother's name in the dream. This is another moment of weirding. What could be preventing me from remembering

their name, what is wrong, or out of balance? Silencing the racist and patronizing voice of the mōniyâw restores something, and Elder Brother's name is legible to me again.

At the end of the story, I am ready for a fast, referring to many different things at once. I must fast because the young men made poor decisions about food, and our collective suffering is part of the lesson they must learn. I must fast because it is winter, a time of scarcity. I must also fast in order to understand how to deal with problems I am facing. Perhaps I need to fast as resistance. Fasting is an important practice in for Métis, Cree, and Anishinaabe peoples and can hold many meanings (Simpson 2014b).

âniskôhōcikan

Hint-fiction version

THE ANCESTORS SPOKE

We didn't understand.

They spoke again.

This time, the nanites ensure our comprehension.

Micro-fiction version

HER NAME IS THE CREE WORD FOR SPRING

Sweet, fat limbed baby, passed around from co-parent to co-parent, receiving blessings like a scene from Sleeping Beauty. The microscopic machines, introduced in-utero at nine weeks, swarmed/developed at the same time as organic structures. Intercepting inputs, analyzing, choosing outputs, standard Athelas nanorobotic rule-based programming.⁷⁴

Rule: InterceptAnalyzeTranslate

```
{  
  Initialize: R, T, A;  
  When: conc ($Y @T) > 5;  
  Actions:  
    reject ($R @T)  
    translate ($T @(A AND B AND C...Z));  
    allow ($A @T)  
  Until: conc ($Y @T) < 2;  
}
```

Or perhaps more easily understood this way:

```
if (not nêhiyawêwin) then  
  (reject) and (translate);  
elseif (nêhiyawêwin) then  
  (accept)  
end if
```

⁷⁴ (Wiesel-Kapah, et al 2016). This article provides an interesting suggestion for nanobot programming that I've adapted for this story.

This cooing baby, like all the others, will only ever hear nêhiyawêwin. This is the decision the Elders and co-parents made; the need for first-language speakers has become critical.

She is named sîkwan, for the season of her birth, and because from her the language will spring anew.

Short story version

ÂNISKÔHÔCIKAN

She peered into the small glass vial, careful to keep her hands behind her back as Val held it aloft, pinched between two fingers encased in purple nitrile. It seemed empty; perhaps, if she squinted, was that a fine coating of dust? Maybe just a shadow. Disappointed, she straightened and shoved nervous hands into her jean pockets.

Val chuckled as she carefully laid the vial back into its molded cushion, “I warned you, Kat. People seem to forget that ‘nano’ means really, really small.”

Katherine shrugged impatiently, “But it works? For sure?”

“Nothing is ever for sure. We don’t think this would work with deaf children, and there are at least a dozen other situations we’d be screening for – “

“Cripes, Val!” She splayed her hands over her stomach protectively, “I mean will she speak Cree?”

Val's eyes flicked down to Kat's swollen belly, and she nodded sharply, "If it takes, Cree is all she'll ever speak."

sikwan gurgled contentedly on her soft star-blanket, and pumped fat legs in the air, reaching for the earring Kat dangled just out of reach.

Three of her co-parents were mucking about in the kitchen getting lunch ready, filling the air with pleasing domestic sounds and the smell of moose stew wafting through to the living room from time to time. Curtis and Shawna were on bicycle maintenance duty out in the backyard, getting everything ship shape for spring riding. Josh and Amber were both sunk into their favourite chairs, getting a little beading in before it was time to eat.

Josh threaded gold-plated beads onto some waxed dental floss and held them up, admiring the way the soft spring light coaxed a warm glow from the tiny pieces of glass. His makeup was impeccable as always; no one did Indigi-glitter quite like him, and even in a house full of Métis and Cree queers, he channeled the peacock pretension of his prairie forefathers with a dedication that was almost like worship.

"So it's like beading," he stated, letting the strand of dental floss twist lazily in the air.

Kat pursed her lips in thought. "Sort of, I suppose? If each nanite is a bead, they link up in a specific pattern."

Amber glanced up at the strand in Josh's hand, blowing a lock of bleached white hair out of wiya's face, lips pursed in thought.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ In Cree, there is no gendered pronoun equivalent to she or he. Instead, the third person singular pronoun is wiya. I have yet to meet someone whose pronouns in English are wiya and wiya's, but I imagine it's going to happen one day.

“I learned that one in class,” Amber said, obviously straining for recall, “the word for string of beads in Cree.” Kat and Josh looked at wiya in interest; the three co-parents were university students, but only Amber was studying Cree.

Amber smiled at them, fingers still busy at wiya’s bead loom, “It’s a weird one because bead is mîkis, but this doesn’t sound like it at all...”

sîkwān farted, long and wet, tiny limbs spasming out in surprise at the force of it, and the three of them laughed.

“âniskôhîcikan!” Amber exclaimed

“Bless you?” Kat teased. Josh’s teeth flashed as his grin widened even further.

Amber giggled, “It means string of beads, maybe it’s a good Cree name for the nanites?”

Kat looked uncertain, “But they’re just infrastructure. The translator mostly. Doesn’t work without the data.”

Josh lifted up the round medallion he always wore, a wavy, irregular line of blue across a background of green. “Beads are just infrastructure too. You know what this is?”

She did, but only because he’d told her. The blue line was the North Saskatchewan River near Keephills, a tongue like the head of a blue heron jutting up, peeking west, eye picked out in negative green space. It’s where Josh’s mooshum raised him.

Josh let the medallion fall and peered at his string of gold beads again. “There you go. Doesn’t work without the data.”

sîkwān’s hands caught the earring, her grip tightening immediately. Kat smiled down at their daughter and carefully pried it out of her grasp.

“tôhtô tôhtô tôhtô!” sîkwan howled, smushing her sounds together, angrily tugging at Kat’s sweater, demanding to be breastfed. sîkwan’s little toddler cheeks were red and hot and she was in a terrible mood; teething had not been easy anyone in the house. Maybe it was a poor time to try weaning, but Kat had been having trouble with her milk supply since the baby was born, and surely eighteen months was more than long enough?

“Let me take her.” Winter held out their arms, and Kat gratefully let them gently pull sîkwan away. Winter’s pink and purple hair was already tied up; all eight of them had long ago experienced sîkwan’s death grip and the wincing pain of strands being torn roughly from the scalp. Raising a baby, even communally, was a bit like running an endless gauntlet of baby head-butts, near strangulation when she got ahold of a necklace or scarf, and constant lacerations from tiny razor-sharp nails.

Kat rocked her head side to side, trying to relax her neck muscles but sîkwan’s cries and incoherent babbling intensified as she struggled in Winter’s arms, trying to reach her birth-parent.

Winter gave Kat a sympathetic look, “Maybe go for a walk? She’ll calm down when she can’t see you.”

Kat nodded gratefully. She could use the break. She could hear Winter singing a modified version of “B.I.N.G.O” to try to calm sîkwan down, the one where a kookum had a magic dabber. Kat wondered what her daughter was actually hearing. There are no Bs or Gs in the Cree alphabet.

The three children had been shy meeting at first, but were smashing toy cars together now, chattering away, their words too fast for Kat to follow. There would be other children

eventually, but small groups were spacing out their visits, a chance to get comfortable with the space that was to be their school.

And what a space it was! Kat gazed around her happily, letting the rich, moist air of the greenhouse roll over her. They might be stuck in the city, but they didn't have to be stuck inside brick and concrete. There was a path circling a little pond full of fish, and a number of small areas within the greenery to sit, play, and learn. Her co-parents were spread out, investigating every plant, talking excitedly to one another about their beloved little *sîkwan*.

“*kimiywêyihên cî?*”

The teacher was tiny and probably in her seventies, eyes rheumy and intelligent behind thick, fishbowl glasses, wearing a loose, short-sleeved ribbon dress in the heat of the greenhouse.

She was one of the only fluent Cree speakers the parents had been able to find who had also been raised in the culture. The nanites could impart the language but not that vital cultural context. Having a Cree-speaking instructor also meant the translators wouldn't need to work as hard. She was smiling kindly at Kat, who reached out to clasp the Elder's hands in greeting.

“I'm sorry, what?” Kat asked, focusing on the Elder's lips so she wouldn't be staring disrespectfully in her eyes.

“*kimiywêyihên cî?*” the Elder repeated, a bit slower this time.

Kat shifted in embarrassment, “Uh, I don't, um, *apisîs nêhiyawêwin*.”

“*apisîs kinêhiyawân*,” the Elder corrected her gently.

Kat flushed and nodded, “*apisîs ki... no. apisîs ninêhiyawân*.” She said back dutifully.

She'd committed to learning as much Cree as she could so she could understand sîkwan, but speaking was still so much harder than listening and understanding. As much the co-parents wanted otherwise, they often just responded in English, knowing the translator was there to make up for it.

Seeing her discomfort, the Elder switched languages. "I asked if you are happy?"

Kat watched sîkwan trying to convince the boys to let her pile the toy cars on top of one another. Her daughter's tone was what Josh called "overly reasonable," but what else would you expect from someone raised in a queer Indigenous feminist collective? Kat only understood about every fifth word that was rattling out of her daughter's mouth right now. When they were one on one, sîkwan tended to speak much slower for her mother's benefit.

Amber was the only one whose fluency had improved enough for most of wiya's conversations with sîkwan to be in Cree. Kat had struggled with being honest with her co-parent about the needle prick of jealousy that caused her, and even confessing it hadn't quite made it go away.

"I am, yes," Kat answered finally, realizing she'd let the pause grow too long. She glanced at the older woman. "But also worried. I can't keep up."

The Elder nodded. "That's why we needed them. We couldn't bear the language loss anymore. You parents were very brave."

It was a well-worn conversation, but Kat felt that the Elder would understand better than most.

"They'll only ever speak Cree. That's what the nanites did. Do. Unless I speak Cree, our own daughter doesn't even really hear my voice. She hears the translator. Not me."

The Elder pursed her lips, “You think you aren’t the ones teaching her? Raising her? Is the sound that important? She won’t hear you sign either.”

Kat’s mind flashed back to Val’s lab, the invisible nanites in their glass tube. Three of the children, out of many dozens that had been augmented, had experienced gradual hearing loss or been born deaf. There was no reason to think it had been the procedure that had caused it, but they all wondered sometimes.

The deaf children would be joining the preschool too; the doctors believed they’d still pick up the language, and everyone, including all the parents, would be learning Plains Sign Language.⁷⁶ A project that had been hyper focused on one language was now ensuring two languages would blossom.

“I just wonder what opportunities they’ll have.” Kat sighed, the familiar weight of worry settling over her.

The Elder’s laugh surprised her. “We needed monolingual mother-tongue speakers. All we had were second language speakers and the language was still dying, surrounded by English the way we are. We needed them to be exposed only to Cree, and that technology made it happen. They will teach the next generation!”

Kat nodded. “But so few people speak Cree out there right now. They can’t even learn another spoken language now, they’ll never have normal lives.”

“They’re Cree and Métis children in a colonial state. Their lives were never going to be ‘normal’.” The Elder fell silent for a moment, then looked at the children where they were playing. “Do you know why we say children are sacred?”

“They’re our future.”

⁷⁶ (Davis 2015).

“Our future yes.” She nodded seriously. “But also our past. They come to us from the spirit realm, from the ancestors, the âniskôtapanak. And these ones are here, from our ancestors, to bring the language back. That’s what they’ve been called to do.”

“ânsikô...”

“tapanak.”

“I thought that meant string of beads? That’s what some of us have been calling the nanites.”

“A string of beads is mîkisâpiy.” the Elder thought for a moment, “âniskôhîcikan is a string of beads tied end to end, like the hanks you can buy. The words are related though, âniskê refers to being linked together end to end. âniskôtapanak means the ancestors, but also our descendants.”

The Elder mimed pulling a string of beads straight, “Our ancestors here,” she lifted her left hand ever so slightly, “our descendants here.” she lifted her right hand a smidge too. “Both are âniskôtapanak.”

Kat nodded, but didn’t really get what the Elder was trying to say. The older woman smiled faintly, and slowly curved the invisible ends of the string up beads up to meet one another. Kat recalled Josh’s golden beads shining in soft spring light; she could almost see the loop in the Elder’s hands.

The Elder moved her fingers apart, then pressed them back together, “That is where the âniskôtapanak meet.” she said, making the open and closed gesture again. “You don’t need to be there between them for that connection to happen. You are part of the string, just in a different position.”

Kat thought about that for a moment, picturing herself there, on the bottom of the loop, nestled between the beads that were her co-parents. It was a beautiful notion.

sikwan was contentedly piling the toy cars one atop the other, and letting each little boy kick down the pile in turn. Their happy shouts rang out in a language Kat had barely been exposed to growing up, and the syllables tugged at a grief she didn't often acknowledge.

A grief her descendants would never feel.

âniskôhocikan analysis

A Montreal-based magazine asked me to write some fiction that considers “the strange and uneasy union of nature and tech in our lives”. They were looking for a vision of how technology could be “more humane, and seamlessly integrated into our lives”, but were also alive to ironies such as “learning to make a fire from YouTube, running through forests on a treadmill, etc” (Mann, 2019). I thought this fit exactly into the pieces I was doing for my thesis, so I agreed. However, they wanted a story under 1000 words! My time in academia has not prepared me to be pithy and I struggle a lot with writing sparsely.

My research question for my original piece was:

- How could technology *successfully* help Indigenous people solve the issue of language loss?

I am truly passionate about language revitalization, I've done a heck of a lot of research on the topic, and I've paid close attention to the many times technology has been hailed as our linguistic saviour. Somehow, our Indigenous languages continue to decline, despite the promises of our tech overlords.

I wanted to create a piece where Indigenous people use technology to create radical change, in this case, producing mother-tongue speakers of Cree in one generation. This story is neither dystopian, nor utopian. I think of it as Métis/nêhiyaw pragmatism.

Very short fiction

This story began as a challenge to create a piece of very short fiction, much shorter than anything I've ever written, specifically flash-fiction, which is defined as being between 300-1000 words.

Unsurprisingly I completely failed at creating a short draft. My original submission clocked in at well over 1500 words. I had to shave it down again, and again, and again, just to get it in under 1000.

In very short fiction, you have to find the small idea and stick with it; there simply is not room for more, but there was a lot more I wanted to put into this story. The central idea is about creating mother-tongue speakers with tech, but I also wanted to imagine communal child-rearing, something I firmly believe needs to be restored as well. Centering chosen family, in an LGBTQ2S context, as a form of cultural resiliency, is a future we can imagine and act on much more easily than creating the kind of nanobot technology I invoke here. It is a future we can live in, and maybe are already living in now, for as Emily Riddle (2018) puts it, "Indigenous governance is gay".

When I began edits on my story, I couldn't bear to leave it whittled down. Instead, I expanded it, but still with the goal to keep it brief. My focus on brevity was not just about personal challenge, or editorial requirements. Being as short as it is, this piece raises more questions than it answers, and I quite like that. Short stories, in general, seem to allow for more collaborative space between the story and the reader. I've thought of the many unanswered bits to this sort of technical "solution" to language decline, and even have some potential answers, but I deliberately did not include more than the bare bones of the situation because I want the reader to ask those same questions. For example, one of those questions might include whether or not we can ever think of machines as kin (Lewis, Arista, Pechawas, and Kite 2018).

In this way I am deliberately encouraging percept ambiguity, leaving space for the audience to draw their own conclusions, based on the concept structure of their belief system (Borrows 2018, xi; Black 1977, 100).

After rewriting the story, I was finally able to also create a 147-word micro-fiction version. Micro-fiction is defined as being fewer than 300 words, opening up even more potential for collaboration. As Robert Swartwood (2011, 24) describes extremely short fiction, "the writer and reader meet halfway, the writer only painting fifty percent of the picture and forcing the

reader to fill in the rest.” The irony is not lost on me that to create an extremely short version of this story, I had to map out just as much detail as a traditional short story in my own mind first.

I didn’t want to stop there, however, because even shorter fiction is possible, as in Swartwood’s collection, *Hint Fiction: An Anthology of Stories in 25 Words or Fewer*. Explaining the title, Swartwood (2011, 25) declares “the reader is only given a *hint* of a much larger, more complex story.”

One example of this kind of story-telling is Joe R. Lansdale’s contribution to the anthology, titled “The Return” (Swartwood 2011, 33):

They buried him deep.
Again.

In all the pieces of hint-fiction in this anthology, the title of the story plays a pivotal role in interpreting what is happening. It reminds me somewhat of poetry, and I found myself sometimes reading it that way.

Finally I wrote a hint-version of the story that is 13 words long. It is fascinating to me to see what gets stripped out as the stories get shorter, and what remains. This very short story writing is something I would like to experiment with more in the future as an exercise in collaborative story-telling; one that I think could be very useful in community when “imagining otherwise” and planning out steps to “act otherwise”. I think the vehicle of flash fiction is a method of storytelling that invites, if not compels, the reader to participate in the world-building.

Conclusion

Indigenous futurism is a movement that includes a variety of forms of cultural production by Indigenous peoples, shaped by Indigenous epistemologies, that in some way push back against, and challenge, colonial constraints and ontologies. In calling my work Métis-futurist I signal the specificity of the perspective and *otipêyimisiw-itâpisiniwin* (Métis worldview) within which I am working.

Through the four stories in this thesis, I engaged in autoethnography and research-for-creation. To write these stories, I had to research specific details about the history and day-to-day life in my community of *manitow-sâkihikan*, rediscovering and sometimes uncovering a tapestry of kinscapes across space and time that have helped define who I am as an individual and as part of a People. Not only was this an exciting way to learn more about my community at the micro and macro level, but it provided the context necessary to “imagine otherwise” in the past, present, and future.

In “imagining otherwise”, we can grapple with the impact that historic and ongoing settler colonial oppressions have had on our communities, without accepting the inevitability of replicating these structures. Though all four of these stories “imagine otherwise”, they are also an invitation to “act otherwise”, to build a present and a future based on where our most fantastic decolonial dreams could possibly take us.

With these stories, I wanted to imagine-in-collaboration; setting scenes to ask questions that I hope could help us build a reality that rejects apocalypse. What might Métis governance look like now, if we accepted that the *nêhiyaw-pwat* is a still-living alliance that requires constant tending? What places could we take within our Indigenous nations if it were understood that our unique gifts, our “superpowers” flourish best in service to a community that unequivocally loves and respects us in return? What knowledges could we remember or learn anew if we were more open to the epistemological diversities of Indigenous pedagogies? How will we continue to use technology in ways that facilitate our cultural and physical survival as Indigenous peoples?

Métis futurisms offer up worldbuilding/prefiguration based in our *otipêyimisiw-itâpisiniwina*, trying to get us to where no Michif has been before, and sometimes reimagining where we have already been. It is my hope that these kinds of cultural productions, be they short stories, films, video games, art, and anything else under multiple suns, go beyond merely longing

for a difference and a decolonial existence. I operate under the belief that, as Tasha Beeds insists, we can indeed speak/act/imagine to kwêskîmonaw, change our own shapes and forms, as well as “chang[ing] the form of the future for the next generation” (2014, 69).

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Appendix I: Waterscapes

Figure 1

