

## “Giving Them Back Their Spirit”: Multiculturalism and Resurgence at a Metis Cultural Festival

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*Abstract: Metisfest was a large, annual festival that—from its conception in 2006 until its cancellation in 2013—brought the Metis Nation together through fiddling, jigging, and other cultural activities. While the event was constructed as apolitical, Metis elder Duke Redbird suggested in *We Are Métis* that cultural activities can, in fact, bring about political change because they are non-threatening to the dominant culture (1980: 48). This essay addresses this seeming contradiction, arguing that while the event adopted the language of multiculturalism (i.e., language that is non-threatening to the Canadian mainstream), in practice, Metisfest used an Indigenous-centred approach to cultural celebration—an approach that prioritized Metis resurgence. In this way, Metisfest accomplished important political goals.*

*Résumé : Le Metisfest (festival métis) était un grand festival annuel qui, de sa conception en 2006 à son annulation en 2013, réunissait les membres de la Nation Métis autour du violon, de la gigue et d'autres activités culturelles. Bien que cet événement ait été conçu pour être apolitique, l'ainé métis Duke Redbird suggérait, dans son livre *We Are Métis*, que les activités culturelles ont en fait la capacité d'amener des changements politiques parce que la culture dominante ne se sent pas menacée par elles (1980 : 48). Cet article se penche sur cette apparente contradiction, en soutenant que bien que cet événement ait adopté le langage du multiculturalisme (c'est-à-dire un langage n'étant pas menaçant pour le courant majoritaire canadien), en pratique, le Metisfest avait un caractère de célébration culturelle de l'autochtonie—approche qui donnait la priorité à la résurgence des Métis. De cette façon, le Metisfest a concrétisé d'importants objectifs politiques.*

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My people will sleep for one hundred years, and when they awake, it will be the artists who give them back their spirit.

— Louis Riel (1844-1885)

The words of Louis Riel (quoted above) are often repeated at Metis events, pointing to the importance of cultural activities to the contemporary Metis Nation.<sup>1</sup> Although there has been some tension between Metis who

feel that promoting cultural activities takes attention away from the bigger issues facing the Metis Nation—issues such as political rights and land claims—for many, the support and promotion of cultural practices is the key to reclaiming Metis pride and independence (see, for example, Redbird 1980: 47). For this reason, some Metis believe that the Metis Nation should “attack on a cultural, rather than political level” (Redbird 1980: 47), and that re-establishing Metis cultural vitality can be a first step in reclaiming political rights. As Metis elder Duke Redbird argues, nurturing cultural life can be “a viable vehicle for change, simply because it is a non-threatening activity to most sectors of the establishment” (1980: 48); in this way, nurturing cultural life can be an effective political strategy.

During my fieldwork in Manitoba, Canada, and North Dakota, USA, it became clear that Metis “gatherings” (large-scale cultural events organized by and for Metis people and sometimes referred to as *rendezvous*) are most often constructed as apolitical: Metis political organizations were often not present at these events, or played a very small role; and several of my Metis consultants told me that they had turned to cultural activities because, in their opinion, some Metis organizations had become too political. In the latter case, my consultants voiced their frustration with political factions within some Metis organizations—factions that made it difficult to bring about meaningful change. While a turn towards cultural events suggests a move away from politics, Metis cultural events, as noted above, are also understood by some as non-threatening political events. This seeming contradiction raises a couple of key questions: to what extent can a cultural event constructed as apolitical accomplish political goals? And how might these events fit into Indigenous<sup>2</sup> approaches to political, cultural, and/or national independence?

This essay explores these questions by focusing on *Metisfest*, a Metis cultural event that began in 2006 as a gathering to mark the centennial anniversary of Boissevain, a small town in southwestern Manitoba. In 2009, the event was moved to the Peace Garden on the North Dakota/Manitoba border, and, for three years, was promoted as North America’s only truly international Metis gathering; it took place on shared land, was organized by Metis from both sides of the border, and included performers and attendees from Canada and the USA (Goodon, interview, August 30, 2012). The event lost its international status in 2012 when organizers adopted a venue donated by the town of Killarney, Manitoba. Although financial difficulties and volunteer burnout led to its cancellation in 2013 (Goodon, personal communication, November 26, 2013), similar events (such as the Ryan Keplin Summer Fest in North Dakota and Koushkoupayh Days in Manitoba) have taken its place. An analysis of *Metisfest*, then, has continued relevance because it serves as

an example, applicable to other events, of the potential political implications cultural gatherings have for the Metis Nation.

Just as importantly, this article adds to a growing body of research on Indigenous cultural festivals, and the social, cultural, and political meanings they hold for Indigenous nations. These articles explore festivals as sites of resistance and (sometimes covert) political action (Conlon and McKenzie-Jones 2013; McKinnon 2010; Phipps 2010; and Slater 2014); spaces for community building and reconnection (Goertzen 2005; McKinnon 2010; and Zeppel 2013); and “mode[s] of cultural expression through which [attendees] can acknowledge, create, negotiate, embody, enact, and maintain” their nation-specific identities (Tulk 2012: 71; also see Ellis, Lassiter, and Dunham 2005: xi; Phipps 2010; and Zeppel 2013). These articles furthermore explore how festivals are used to reclaim positive spaces for Indigenous peoples (McKinnon 2010; Phipps 2010); and, in the context of events that draw out non-Indigenous attendees, to challenge stereotypes and encourage outsiders to respect Indigenous autonomy and/or distinctiveness (Goertzen 2005: 285, 298; McKinnon 2010: 256; Neuenfeldt 2001; Phipps 2010: 217). An analysis of Metisfest thus serves as an example of how some of these ideas play out in a Metis-specific context.

### Metisfest 2012: A Narrative Overview

This article is based on five years of fieldwork in southern Manitoba and surrounding areas, as well as archival research and musical analysis. Although I began my research with a focus on Manitoba’s old-time (i.e., Anglo-Canadian) fiddle scene, it soon became clear to me that the province’s old-time and Metis scenes were closely linked; understanding the musical and social relationships embedded in these overlapping scenes seemed, to me, to be the most compelling area for research. This revelation led to my decision to study both scenes and the ways in which fiddling serves as a site of relations between peoples. This shift in focus entailed a shift in the relationship that I had with some of my consultants. Having grown up in Manitoba’s old-time fiddle scene, my return to “do research” at old-time events was somewhat of a homecoming (although as I describe elsewhere, my position as an insider was somewhat complicated by my education and time spent in Toronto [Giroux 2013: 12-13]). In contrast, while I had many connections with fiddlers and others in the Metis scene before beginning my research at Metis events, I was cognizant of my position of privilege as a white researcher, and how my research was “a powerful intervention” (Smith 1999: 176).

The following first-person narrative (an approach to writing adopted by numerous ethnomusicologists including Samuels 2004; Cain 2003; Goodman and Swan 2003; and McNally 2000) is incorporated into this paper as a way to give readers the opportunity to better understand my relationship with my field of study, acquainting them with a sense of what it is like to attend Metisfest as a non-Metis woman, and illuminating both my and readers' roles in the process of creating meaning—i.e., the ways in which this research is an intervention. As Cree scholar Shawn Wilson notes, oral traditions, unlike written texts, maintain relational context “by utilizing the direct relationship between storyteller and listener” (2008: 8-9). In this way, “[e]ach recognizes the other’s role in shaping both the content and the process” (Wilson 2008: 8-9). Giving readers some insight into my relationship with Metisfest replicates some of the dynamics of oral tradition (although certainly does not eliminate the problems embedded in written texts), “build[ing] a relationship between the readers of this story, myself as the storyteller and the ideas I present” (Wilson 2008: 6). The narrative is, then, not so much about the researcher/writer as it is about understanding how the knowledge presented in this essay emerged as knowledge.

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“Come as a friend, leave as family.”

—Metisfest Motto

Early on a sunny Friday morning in July, I leave Winnipeg, looking forward to three days of entertainment in Killarney, Manitoba, the location for this year’s Metisfest. The three-hour drive from Winnipeg to southwestern Manitoba takes me across flat prairie land—almost ready for an early harvest—into the rolling hills of the Turtle Mountains. Organizers have moved this year’s event from the International Peace Garden, a popular tourist attraction on the North Dakota/Manitoba border that features acres of beautifully manicured parks, a small camping area, cabins, an indoor concert hall, and an open-air stage (used as the main stage at previous years’ events) to the small town of Killarney (population 2197 as of 2011). The event is now set to take place almost exclusively indoors, likely a welcome change for both performers and audience members given that the event is being held a month earlier than in previous years—right at the end of July, when the mercury often reaches past 30 degrees Celsius.

There are already approximately one hundred cars, trucks, and RVs (showing off license plates from Manitoba, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta,

Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation, and North Dakota) parked on the hot asphalt when I arrive at the large recreational complex—this year’s venue. Two volunteers greet me at the door, take my 40 dollars (the cost for a weekend pass), and direct me to the information booth for a program with information on the performances scheduled for the large main and smaller “udder” stages (the latter named to jokingly refer to the way that some Metis pronounce “other”). The program also includes information on vendors and displays (like the “rendezvous village” featuring a tipi and a fire pit), and special events such as talks on Metis history and “voyageur” games for those who want to “check out” Metis culture “first hand” (Metisfest program 2012). The last pages list the event sponsors, which include Manitoba Culture, Heritage, and Tourism; Canadian Heritage; and Manitoba Lotteries.

Music wafts down a long, narrow hallway as I head towards the main stage. Garry Lepine (b. 1950), a Metis fiddler from Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, is just starting his set (playing “Faded Love” by Bob Wills) as I settle into a cold metal chair. Lepine is the oldest fiddler at the event, but a favourite among dancers; the arena’s hard, concrete dance floor fills as his bow hits the strings.<sup>3</sup> The feet of attendees who remain in their seats tap to his groove-based feel,<sup>4</sup> which he creates by accenting off-beats, using an almost continuous stream of sixteenth notes, and moving the melodic line towards the first beat of every measure. Lepine’s set includes many of the popular old-time and Metis tunes from Manitoba, and although he only plays a few asymmetrical tunes (i.e., tunes that use irregular phrase-lengths and that are often seen as iconically Metis), he blurs the beginnings and endings of phrases.<sup>5</sup> The combination of these features creates a sound that is unique to Lepine, although adapted by his son Jason, who is also entertaining at Metisfest.

While my feet follow the music, my eyes drift to the flags decorating the arena. These include a mix of blue and red Metis flags and a combined Canadian/American flag that hangs from the arena’s ceiling—the latter a symbol of a rendezvous that seeks to cross colonial borders. Two large dream catchers also hang from the ceiling. The crowd is largely made up of seniors, although a few younger adults, some teens (mostly musicians or dancers), and a few children are also in attendance. An older man asks me about the meaning of the sideways “eight” (i.e., the infinity symbol) seen on many of the flags (representing the endurance of the Metis Nation and the joining of two people), while a woman sitting next to me tells me that this is her first time at Metisfest (she notes that she is not Metis) and expresses surprise that the fiddlers are wearing “street” clothing; she seems satisfied when I indicate that the jiggers scheduled for later will undoubtedly wear regalia. These

interactions make it clear to me that, despite the largely Metis/Indigenous audience, Metisfest also brings out some non-Indigenous attendees.

Part of Metisfest's mission is "to provide, both established and emerging, Metis artists with the opportunity to showcase their talent" (Metisfest program 2012), a goal that is being fulfilled this weekend by including numerous invited (paid) dancers and nearly 30 musicians, mostly fiddlers. The majority of the fiddlers are in their late teens (three even younger) or early twenties, although a few are in their thirties and one is a senior. Likewise, the dance troupes that are now making their way into the arena are largely made up of young dancers, including children and youth in their teens. Thus, the featured artists are predominantly young, while the audience is made up, primarily, of seniors. As the day unfolds, the fiddlers' biographies—provided by the fiddlers and read to the audience by the emcee—strike me as notable: several of the young performers (those in their teens and early twenties) indicate that they began learning to fiddle in school;<sup>6</sup> in contrast, the older fiddlers typically described themselves as self-taught, influenced by family members or by other local fiddlers.

Each fiddler is accompanied by the rather loud house band, made up of two electric guitars (lead and rhythm), bass, and drums, and featuring musicians from Winnipeg's Indigenous music scene. Many of the fiddlers play the same tunes, with the most popular being "Whiskey Before Breakfast," "St. Anne's Reel," "Big John McNeil," and "Faded Love." Tunes recorded by Ojibwe fiddler Cliff Maytwayashing (1939-2009) are also popular this year. Interestingly, some of the features most commonly associated with Metis fiddling by outsiders and detailed in the work of Anne Lederman (1988), such as clogging (i.e., foot work) and asymmetrical phrases, are only rarely used (except when playing the very popular, asymmetrically-phrased "Red River Jig"). Yet stylistic differences between fiddlers are notable; some clearly articulate each note and use little droning, while others use many "ghost" notes (i.e., barely audible notes added for rhythmic interest rather than pitch) and droning that almost drowns out the melody.

By late afternoon, dance troupes begin making their way to the floor for a one-and-a-half hour showcase. The women are in colourful dresses with billowing petticoats under knee-length skirts that lift like a blossoming flower, revealing their matching undergarments as they twirl across the dance floor; the men (and women filling the male role) are wearing pants and collared shirts that match the women's dresses. The troupes jig (i.e., use a specific, and uniquely Metis dance step) throughout their square dance sets, beginning with a first change (a jig in 6/8), a second change (a moderate-tempo reel in 4/4), and finally a breakdown (a quick-tempo reel). The "Red River Jig" is included

by each group, often at the start and end of their set, giving each dancer the opportunity to show off their fanciest steps. The audience cheers as the steps get more complicated, becoming especially noisy when one dance troupe jigs to the “Orange Blossom Special,” cheering more loudly as the music gets faster. The young showcased dancer’s feet move more and more quickly, never missing a step, as the fiddler pushes the dancer to her limits.

The excitement is still hanging in the air as the crowd exits the arena, moving towards the MmmmmMichif Café for a supper of roast chicken, mashed potatoes, mixed vegetables, and pie. I use this time to set up my tent at a campground on the outskirts of Killarney. Although both of the town’s campgrounds have been booked for months, the owners have allowed me to set up behind the campground office, on a small patch of grass that I soon find is infested with ants. After setting up, I make the five-minute drive back to the venue just in time to catch the evening show and dance. The entertainment, featuring well-known Metis musicians Darren Lavallee and Donny Parenteau (who played fiddle, guitar, and mandolin with country singer Neal McCoy), includes more fiddle music—waltzes, two-steps, polkas, reels, and specialty dances such as the seven-step and heel-toe polka—as well as country hits (e.g., tunes recorded by George Strait and George Jones). Attendees have already spent the day on the concrete dance floor, yet it remains full until the band plays their last tune at ten o’clock. It is clear that dancing to the music—not just listening and watching dance troupes—is a central aspect of this event.

Saturday’s lineup follows the pattern set the previous day with the addition of “dignitary remarks” at noon. The dignitaries are the region’s MP, MLA, and mayor, along with Robert Pilon (President of the Oshawa Metis Council), Tony Belcourt (former president of the Metis National Council and the Metis Nation Ontario), Barrett Racine (from the Turtle Mountain Metis Council), and a representative from Manitoba Lotteries. Representation from the Manitoba Metis Federation (MMF) is noticeably absent. (An organizer later tells me that he tried to get the MMF on board but that he has not been able to garner any interest, possibly because they are more interested in overtly political issues than cultural gatherings.) The importance of building a network of Metis events is noted in an exchange between a Metisfest organizer and Pilon, while Belcourt suggests that Metis artists need a better online presence. To my surprise, a Metisfest organizer describes Metisfest using the rhetoric of multiculturalism (a policy often critiqued by Indigenous people, as discussed further below), noting that the Metis are “first and foremost” Canadian citizens, and that their desire to “preserve and promote” their culture is like the desire of Ukrainians to do the same. This sentiment is also expressed by the representative of Manitoba Lotteries who points to the importance of Canada’s “cultural mosaic.”

A second event unique to the Saturday program is a jigging and fiddling contest. Since the hired performers are not allowed to participate, there are few competitors (three fiddlers and six jiggers in four categories). As is usual at Metisfest, the rules are determined and announced just before the event begins; the exception is a rule posted on the event website stating that jigging competitors can use taps on their shoes.<sup>7</sup> This is typical of contests held during Metis events, although quite different from the John Arcand fiddle contest, which includes a traditional Metis category with strict rules about tune choice and performance style, such as requiring fiddlers to cross-tune their instruments and clog as they perform (for further details on John Arcand's festival and dance troupes, see Quick 2009). In contrast, there are no rules regarding fiddle style at Metisfest, and none of this year's fiddlers clog, a detail that also distinguishes this contest from the Metis (style) category at the Manitoba Open. I listen to each fiddler play their two tunes of choice with interest, trying to guess who will win, and am therefore disappointed when, after the very short contest ends, no mention is made of who won or when prizes will be handed out.<sup>8</sup> (The prizes, it turns out, are announced before the evening concert.)

Just before seven o'clock, I make my way into the arena, not wanting to miss the start of the evening's show and dance. A man with a long, dark beard is speaking from a lectern on the main stage. Although not indicated in the program, it does not take me long to realize that this is a re-enactment of Louis Riel's last testament, a theatrical piece that has been part of the festival since it began. The evening show, featuring fiddler Ryan Keplin from the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians, begins immediately after the testament. The dance floor fills quickly, while Keplin offers further enticement by offering free CDs to the best jiggers and waltzers. A number of attendees that I know from old-time fiddle events chat with me throughout the evening, highlighting, in my mind, the overlap between old-time and Metis events.<sup>9</sup> As the evening draws to a close, the organizers station themselves by the exit, shaking attendees' hands in a fashion that marks their attempt to make sure everyone leaves as "family."

The next morning's schedule begins with a gospel hour and what is referred to as a "Sunday service." Although the inclusion of Christian worship does not surprise me given that the trading post (the area set up for vendors to sell their wares) includes a few evangelizing Christian "vendors," the choice to include an ecumenical service (in contrast to a Catholic mass as is the case at Back to Batoche Days) is of note, since Catholicism is the religion most often linked to the Metis, at least in public discourse. Yvonne St. Germaine, an award-winning gospel singer who mixes song with her



story of redemption from alcohol, drugs, abuse, and attempted suicide after a pilgrimage to Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta (a traditional sacred place for Indigenous people that has become a contemporary site of pilgrimage for Indigenous Christians) begins the morning. St. Germaine's singing and ministry are followed by a middle-aged First Nations preacher conducting a sermon; he asks his (First Nations) wife to share her story of finding Jesus and then shares his own story, relating how the Gospel came to his reserve. The service has not attracted many event-goers, and after the preacher proclaims that Jesus is the only acceptable path to salvation, I wander over to the "half-stage" where a larger crowd has gathered to hear an impromptu performance by JJ Lavallee.<sup>10</sup>

Lavallee, accompanied by a beat machine and a young boy on spoons, plays in a distinct style (associated with the Lavallee family), with strongly accented off-beats and many ghosted notes. One of the most striking aspects of his playing is his use of "filler" sixteenth notes—what someone described to me as adding the "jiggy jiggy." It is so strong in Lavallee's playing that, in some cases, the "jiggy jiggy" drowns out the melodic line. This, combined with ghosted downbeats followed by accented upbeats and frequent droning, creates a style that is highly percussive. His infectious feel quickly attracts onlookers to the tiny space in front of the small stage, and they join him by jigging or dancing the polka in couples. Given that this is an impromptu performance and the stage is scarcely separated from the audience—it is just a small platform near the venue's front doors—allowing Lavallee and the audience to chat freely between tunes, this performance has, more than others, the feel of a house party.

Although performers are scheduled until five thirty, Metisfest begins drawing to a close by three o'clock Sunday afternoon. Today's crowd is already sparser than yesterday's, so it does not take long before the arena, the hall, and the parking lot begin to empty. The trading post vendors clear off their tables and pack up their vans, heading home to nearby towns or to more distant destinations, including southern Ontario. There is an atmosphere of contentment as people say their goodbyes and express their thanks to the organizers. The question of whether there will be a Metisfest next year is, as in previous years, left hanging in the air; a tight budget and the vast amount of time and energy required to put on the event makes its continued existence somewhat tenuous. Yet every year the organizers work from the principle that the event will continue for years to come, calling "see you next year" as the audience, vendors, and finally the performers wander out the front doors of Killarney's Shamrock Centre.

## Multicultural Festivity and Resurgence: Structure and Critiques

At first glance, Metisfest, like other Metis cultural gatherings, is decidedly apolitical, with a clear focus on music, dance, and socializing.<sup>11</sup> Although representatives or former representatives from Metis organizations make special appearances, Metisfest does not include meetings, discussions of Metis nation-building, or political organizing (unless this happens ad hoc, far from the stages), nor is the event affiliated with Manitoba's largest and most politically active Metis organization, the MMF. Furthermore, as the above narrative highlights, organizers and invited dignitaries appear to embrace the status quo by situating the festival within the framework of Canadian multiculturalism, linking the event to other celebrations of Canada's ethnic diversity, and using the festival as a way to demonstrate the true Canadianness of the Metis (i.e., noting that the Metis are "first and foremost" Canadian citizens); certainly, this does not seem to challenge the relationship between Metis people and Canada envisioned by settlers.<sup>12</sup> At a superficial level, Metisfest can in fact be understood as part of a broad network of festivals that serve to bolster Canadians' sense of identity as a multicultural nation. Yet, can it serve another purpose? Can it accomplish or support the broader political goals of Indigenous nations? And is it in practice aligned with Indigenous approaches to political, cultural, and national independence rather than with settler ideas about intercultural relations?

In the 1970s, the Canadian federal government began "reward[ing] musical institutions in Canada for demonstrating their commitment to multiculturalism" (Robinson 2012b: 244). Numerous festivals sprang up across the country, taking advantage of available funding; despite a broad and recent "world-wide retreat from multiculturalism" (Kymlicka 2009: 16), festivals like Winnipeg's two-week long Folklorama continue to attract large crowds. With 43 pavilions presented in 2015 (attracting an estimated 400,000 people), Folklorama gives attendees the opportunity to "sample" the music, dance, food, and crafts of diverse cultures.<sup>13</sup> Each pavilion presentation follows the same format, with three, fifty-minute, identical shows each evening (usually focused on dance accompanied by live or recorded music), allowing attendees to choose one pavilion for an appetizer, a second for a main course, and a final pavilion for dessert. Plenty of time is allotted between shows, giving attendees the opportunity to peruse the craft tables before driving to the next venue (see Bramadat 2001a and Thoroski and Greenhill 2001 for further discussion). While Folklorama serves as the clearest example of a festival working within the framework of multiculturalism given that it features many cultures side-by-side, festivals that showcase a single ethnocultural group can serve a similar

function, giving outsiders the opportunity to sample the music, dance, food, and crafts of a culture that is, perhaps, unfamiliar to them.

Multicultural festivals have been critiqued by a number of scholars. Some have argued that they present or endorse a limited understanding of culture, focused solely on music/dance, food, and crafts (Fleras and Elliot 1992: 136; Thoroski and Greenhill 2001: 190). Culture, in this way, becomes something for display rather than the “heart and soul” of an ethnocultural group (Bissoondath 1994: 88). Even those who focus on the positive aspects of multicultural festivals have acknowledged that they are spectacles (i.e., organized events through which an ethnocultural group represents itself to others and to each other in a dramatic, entertaining, and extraordinary way [Bramadat 2001b: 3]) that are meant to engross and entertain an audience; they are, therefore, “(in a literal sense) extraordinary” rather than ordinary expressions of culture (Bramadat 2001b: 3). Raising a similar point, Thoroski and Greenhill note that the expectations of tourists who come out to multicultural festivals wanting to experience an “exotic” culture shape the event and often “fail to take into consideration the lived realities of the peoples they have commodified” (2001: 190). In an attempt to create a performance that is cohesive, concise, and entertaining to a crowd seeking both the exotic and the “authentic,” such festivals often present a narrowly defined version of a particular culture, hiding differences within a group (Thoroski and Greenhill 2001: 195). The “exotic” performances, then, often have little to do with the way in which the people represented live their everyday lives. Separated from everyday life, culture becomes “lightened and simplified, stripped of the weight of the past” (Bissoondath 1994: 88), a “flavour” that is valued only in so much as it “enriches” the “whole way of life” of the national culture (Mackey 2002: 67, 98).

While the above outlines general concerns related to multicultural festivals, scholars have also addressed multiculturalism within the context of Indigenous/settler relations. The concerns raised by these scholars stem from the way in which multiculturalism assumes the presence of an unmarked, and fully legitimate, cultural centre—a norm or national culture—whereby every other cultural group becomes “ethnic” (see discussion in Mackey 2002: 20). The power to “tolerate” the other, then, is in the hands of the unmarked centre, and can easily shift to intolerance if the policy is no longer beneficial to the dominant culture (Mackey 2002: 105). Since multiculturalism is meant to benefit this core culture, it often serves to cover up “egregious wrongdoings” (Robinson 2012a: 227), such as Canada’s legacy of colonialism and genocide; through the “tolerant” policy of multiculturalism, Canada is constructed as an innocent and accepting nation that is, and always was, benevolent to

Indigenous (and other) peoples (St. Denis 2011: 209). Fundamental to this critique, of course, is the issue of pre-contact rights. Since a group with assumed legitimacy delineates the degree to which the “other” is accepted, “ethnocultural” traditions are added to the framework of the centre rather than destabilizing the conventions of the centre (see Robinson 2012b: 119-20 for a discussion of this issue in the context of intercultural music-making). As many Indigenous scholars have argued, the rights of Indigenous nations are pre-contact rights. Therefore, policies created by settler governments that only “include” Indigenous peoples within a settler framework cannot establish a just relationship between peoples (St. Denis 2011: 309).

A closely linked concern raised by Indigenous scholars is that multiculturalism as policy positions Indigenous peoples as just another one of the many ethnocultural groups found in North America, with no special status vis-à-vis the colonizer. Thus, “the specific and unique location of Aboriginal peoples as Indigenous to this land” is erased “by equating them with multicultural and immigrant groups” (St. Denis 2011: 311; cf., LaRocque 2010: 172). As St. Denis notes, “the result is a trivializing and erasing of Aboriginal sovereignty” (2011: 311). Multiculturalism, then, is seen by many Indigenous scholars as a form of colonialism that “works to distract from the recognition and redress of Indigenous rights” (St. Denis 2011: 308). The issue at stake here, then, is whether Metisfest falls into the negative trappings of multicultural festivity, or if upon deeper analysis, it can be understood as emerging from within an alternative (and potentially more relevant and Indigenous-centred) framework. As argued in the next section of this article, Metisfest is, in practice, a challenge to multicultural festivity because it does not enact a colonizer/colonized relationship. Although constructed as apolitical, Metisfest serves an important, albeit non-confrontational, political, and Indigenous-centred function, creating “a space and a place where the impacts of colonialism [are] lessened, where [Metis people can] feel what it feels like to be part of a united, healthy community” (Simpson 2011: 12-13). Metisfest is, ultimately, a space to celebrate survival, continuance, and resurgence (Simpson 2011: 12), rather than a space to celebrate Canadian multiculturalism.

The concept of resurgence, as developed in Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson’s (2011) book, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence*, provides a framework for a more nuanced and culturally appropriate understanding of the meaning of Metisfest for attendees and, more broadly, the Metis Nation. While resurgence is purposefully undefined in her text, a choice Simpson made as a way to encourage each nation to use the concept in a culturally relevant way (2011: 25), several key aspects emerge in her discussion of resurgence among the

Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg in what is now eastern Ontario. Resurgence, at its core, is about a “flourishment of the *Indigenous* inside” (Simpson 2011: 17). Instead of engaging with colonial policies and attempting to change colonial attitudes, resurgence is about Indigenous peoples engaging with Indigenous ways of being in the world, with Indigenous processes, and Indigenous visions for a future where Indigenous peoples can live “as *Indigenous Peoples* in contemporary times” (Simpson 2011: 17, emphasis in original). Resurgence, then, centres on the embodiment of Indigenous traditions (Simpson 2011: 31). Far from being “just theoretical,” it is about finding meaningful ways to live Indigenous traditions as part of the everyday. While colonial policies created/create both cultural and physical loss (in fact, cultural and physical death), resurgence is about creating life, propelling life, and nurturing life both physically and culturally (Simpson 2011: 143). This, of course, comes full circle to the core idea of flourishing, whereby a resurgent Indigenous nation embodies creativity and growth (i.e., life).

### “Danc[ing] a New World into Existence”: Metisfest as Resurgence

If through your life you don’t know where you came from, if you don’t know what’s behind you, how can you go forward?

—Dan Goodon (2012)

Allowing for difference is one of the most important ways in which Metisfest moves beyond the confines of multiculturalism while fulfilling the goals of resurgence. This, however, is not immediately apparent; in fact, on the surface Metisfest does just the opposite, presenting fiddler after fiddler, and, in the process, representing fiddling as *the* Metis music.<sup>14</sup> Although “[f]ew would dispute the widespread use of Metis fiddling as a cultural marker, and symbol of Metis identity” (Chrétien 2005: 179), Metis ethnomusicologist Annette Chrétien cautions that fiddling “has now come to constitute a musical stereotype” (Chrétien 2005: 179). In particular, she argues that the Red River style of fiddling from Manitoba has been constructed as “real” Metis music (Chrétien 2005: 107). The problem, as articulated by Chrétien, is that “in constructing the image of one Metis nation through one Metis music, the rich and varied traditions of many other Metis are not only reduced, but are effectively erased, and thereby silenced” (2005: 21).<sup>15</sup> While Chrétien’s concerns are important and relevant to Metisfest, it is vital to note that there are significant differences between fiddlers performing at the event. The

styles heard include 1) the style played by the Lepine family; 2) an old-time “down-east” style; and 3) two “Interlake” styles that developed in the region of Manitoba that falls between Lake Winnipeg and Lake Manitoba.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, Metisfest organizers are promoting Metis fiddlers—showcasing Metis talent (Goodon, interview, August 30, 2012)—instead of attempting to define *one* Metis style. In the process, the differences between fiddlers, and thus the differences within the group “Metis,” are highlighted, not hidden.

In an interview, key organizer Dan Goodon explained this point further, noting that there is much Metis talent, but that many Metis artists are not well promoted; some even lack an online presence. Goodon hoped that his festival might help support veteran and emerging artists. The fiddlers attending Metisfest notably come from varied backgrounds, whether growing up on a reserve, in a Metis community, or in a settler community. Performers are invited because they are part of the Metis (or broader Indigenous) music circuit (Goodon, interview, August 30, 2012),<sup>17</sup> and do not have to be “card-carrying” Metis (i.e., they do not need to have a membership card from the Manitoba Metis Federation). The promotion of Metis fiddlers, and Indigenous performers more broadly since some of the fiddlers and dancers are First Nations, emerges, then, as a key component of Metisfest. There is no expectation that fiddlers or other musicians have to play in a particular style. Again, the result is that Metisfest allows for difference rather than promoting a cohesive idea of what being a Metis fiddler sounds like.

The implication of promoting difference among Metis people is significant given the context of Metis identity politics. The MMF, for example, has strict guidelines for membership (i.e., for becoming a card-carrying “Metis”); potential members must be able to prove an ancestral tie to someone living in the Red River region of Manitoba in the 1800s. Metis political scientist Chris Andersen argues in support of these strict guidelines, noting that “Métis is not a soup kitchen for Indigenous individuals and communities disenfranchised in various ways by the Canadian state” (2014: 24). While every nation has the right to determine its own membership and certainly Andersen’s point should be taken seriously, these guidelines have excluded some who consider, and have always considered, themselves to be Metis (Sawchuk 2000: 86). Federal policies on Indigenous identities have furthermore created divisions between Metis and First Nations that may not have otherwise existed. As Bonita Lawrence (Mi’kmaq) notes, government policies forced Metis away from their First Nations cousins when, in some cases, a stronger connection would have been desirable (2004: 86). At Metisfest, these official identities—shaped by historical factors, government policies, and Indigenous political organizations—lose some of their relevance; the event becomes a

space for community-building where issues related to political belonging (i.e., membership to an official Metis political organization) are put aside. Each performer (and attendee) becomes an important part of the Metisfest community over the course of the weekend, and, in this way, the boundaries between First Nations and Metis in particular, and Metis and settlers to a lesser degree, maintain some of the fluidity that they often have in day-to-day life. Although I do not wish to suggest that there is no real difference between Metis and First Nations peoples, the Metis Nation and First Nations do have some common history, as well as a history of exchange, whether through marriage or work with organizations such as the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, or early Metis and non-status organizations.

An equally important, related aspect of Metisfest is the way in which it presents culture as emerging from and fully integrated into the everyday lives of performers and attendees, most of whom are Metis. At Metisfest, organizers, performers, and others do not create clearly delineated lines between the event as a cultural display and culture as a daily expression of one's identity. For example, most of the performers (with the exception of the dance troupes, who only get a small amount of the stage time) do not don clothing that is markedly different from their everyday clothing, although the addition of some symbols of Metisness is somewhat common (e.g., a shirt with the infinity symbol stitched on the pockets, or a *ceinture fléchée*<sup>18</sup>). There is, then, fluidity between donning "ethnic" regalia and wearing "street" clothing (cf. Goertzen 2005: 285, who points to the importance of varied clothing at powwows). The performers, similarly, do not present music that is vastly different from the music that is part of their daily lives; it is the music they perform in their communities and at other musical events throughout the year. (For further discussion of sites for Metis fiddling see Dueck [2007, 2006, 2005], and Quick [2009].) The style of music presented is, just as importantly, not strictly distinguishable from the region's mainstream fiddling; although the focus on groove over melody is somewhat unique to Metis fiddling, the style is informed by contemporary, old-time fiddling, just as contemporary old-time fiddling is informed by Metis musicians. In this way, Metisfest is an expression of the lived realities of Metis performers rather than a site that attempts to define one expression of culture for display (in contrast to multicultural festivals).

The importance of creating a space for Metis to gather, reconnect, and express themselves as Metis people was also made clear by Dan Goodon, who spoke at length about this aspect of the event. Goodon told me with great enthusiasm about the many connections that are made at Metisfest as people get in touch with what he calls their "lost relatives" (interview, August 30,

2012; cf. Goertzen 2005: 280). He further explained that hundreds of people have told him the same story, that “they had a feeling” they were Metis, but only discovered the truth in their later years. It is only now that they are able to understand where they come from:

When they die, they can die fulfilled now, die happy, die knowing that they know where they come from. They maybe feel sad that their parents or maybe even their grandparents didn’t live that life, or they didn’t, they weren’t exposed to it. It was hushed up, and they might feel sorry that they didn’t, but now they’re living it. They’re living it for their parents. They’re living it for their grandparents that never lived it. (Goodon, interview, August 30, 2012)

Here it is clear that Goodon wants to give Metis people a space to live together as Metis people, and that he sees the event as a starting point from which they can continue living their Metis culture. Metisfest, to Goodon, is a space for Metis people, and Metis culture, to proudly and publically flourish (cf. McKinnon 2010: 264-5); a space where their identity is not “hushed up.”

The importance of creating public spaces for the expression of Metis culture was perhaps most obvious when our conversation turned to the Pemmican Trail (Goodon, interview, August 30, 2012). Borrowing from the concept of the Powwow Trail, organizers of Metis festivals that take place across Canada and the United States want to create a network of Metis festivals, linked online through a “one-stop-shop” website. Unfortunately, the name “Pemmican Trail” already has an online presence that is unrelated to Metis culture. It is, nonetheless, the concept of an interconnected network, regardless of the name, that is important here. As Goodon told me,

If they can’t afford to go anywhere, we want to make sure that they can get somewhere without having to dig, and dig, and dig, and dig. Where do I find that festival, or where do I do this? We want them to come to Metisfest, sure. Does Batoche want them to go to Batoche? Sure, they do. But can they afford it, right? So with this Pemmican Trail of connecting it, there might be something in Montana, or they can look north into BC, or Alberta, somewhere that’s closer so they don’t have to travel for 20 hours to get there. (Goodon, interview, August 30, 2012)



Although he wants his own event to be successful, Goodon places a priority on creating spaces that are easily accessible, where Metis people can rebuild connections with other Metis people, and where they can freely and openly live their Metis culture (cf. McKinnon 2010: 256).

While Goodon's words highlight a sense of community connection, Metisfest also differs from mere cultural displays (multiculturalism) through the participatory acts of attendees (a key aspect of resurgence)—participatory acts that are central to the success of the rendezvous rather than peripheral to the event. Although there are a few events specifically presented for a viewing audience (in particular the performances by dance troupes and the fiddling and jigging contests), the majority of Metisfest brings the audience to the dance floor. For the most part, there is little division between performances meant for a viewing audience and those meant for a participating audience. It is clear that, to attendees, dancing (and socializing) is just as important as, and perhaps more important than, watching a show. Similarly, the use of the “half-stage” for impromptu performances (not to mention the use of outdoor spaces for a similar purpose) is a way in which all attendees become participants, moving the event away from being a site of culture as display. In the context of these spaces, where performers play spur-of-the-moment sets and interact with each other and the audience in a casual and spontaneous way, the event becomes an embodiment of creativity and responsiveness to the community. In these ways, the event once again does not attempt to define one expression of culture to be displayed to an audience of outsiders, but rather serves as a space for Metis people to come together and create their own understandings of what it means to be part of a contemporary Metis nation. (For further discussion of the role of dance in the process of community building, see Dueck's discussion of Indigenous social dancing [2006]).

The connections between Metisfest as a bounded, annual event and the lives that each attendee returns to are particularly important in understanding how Metisfest moves beyond the extraordinary, becoming instead an expression of the ordinary lives of the people who take part. While the music heard at the event reflects, on one hand, the experiences of each performer (audible in the styles that they adopt), it also moves back into the daily lives of attendees through the sale of recordings of the event. As Goodon related to me, “Some of them [attendees] are junkies now . . . they have to have the fiddle going; they have to be able to watch a DVD of dancers, you know. They have to be able to see the dance. And that's good to see” (Goodon, interview, August 30, 2012). Playing a CD or DVD of fiddlers and jiggers (which are available at Metisfest) is a way for attendees to feel connected to a Metis cultural network after they return home from Metisfest; the music functions as a kind of “portable

[Metis] space” (Browner 2009: 139). In this way, Metisfest moves into the everyday lives of attendees through the music and dance that they bring back into their homes (i.e., into their ordinary lives, “outside” of the event [Ellis 2005: 7]). And it is this connection, this sense of building a community that comes together during Metisfest but does not dissolve as the weekend comes to a close (i.e., it is not extraordinary), that most clearly moves the event beyond a “shallow multicultural education day for Canadians to feel less guilty about their continued occupation of [Metis] lands” (Simpson 2011: 13). Metisfest thus promotes the resurgence of the Metis Nation by facilitating the flourishing of Metis culture long after the rendezvous comes to a close.

During my conversation with Goodon, it was clear that the moments he most enjoyed and found the most memorable were those where community building was front and centre, moments when he saw lost connections being rebuilt. He noted:

That’s what you’ll see at the festival. You’ll see people smiling and laughing, and shaking hands, and hugging, and you know you’ll see even crying, but it’ll be more tears of joy, you know. I found a relative and I never seen you for the last fifty years, you know. We’ve made this connection here and you’ll see people, they will come back and they’ll just continue coming back. They are just kind of drawn to it. (Goodon, interview, August 30, 2012)

Through the festival and his work promoting it, Goodon wants “to talk to people, and let them know, it’s proud, it’s okay to be Metis” (interview, August 30, 2012). Doing so in a public space—that is, reclaiming a public space—is furthermore an important antidote to the years when Metis people were forced to hide in plain sight (Newhouse, Voyageur, and Beavon 2007: 8). It is this aspect of the festival, an aspect that has nothing to do with engaging with colonial policies (such as multiculturalism) and attempting to change colonial attitudes (i.e., educating a white audience), that is fundamental to its meaning for organizers and attendees. Metisfest is a first step, a safe space to publically and communally build a sense of pride that can then be taken into the everyday (cf. Zeppel 2013: 103). Although Goodon’s explicit goal is to promote and preserve Metis culture, the event becomes a dynamic embodiment of creativity and growth as performers and audience members together “dance a new world into existence” (Simpson 2011: 149), recreating a flourishing Metis culture that can spread across the Pemmican Trail and back into attendees’ everyday lives.

## Conclusions

As one of many annual, Metis-centred events, Metisfest provides an opening into the priorities of a Metis rendezvous. At first glance, the event reinforces the status quo by borrowing descriptive language from multicultural ideology (i.e., Canada's mainstream approach to intercultural relations); it thereby presents a non-threatening, even apolitical face to outsiders. Yet in practice, Metisfest is a far cry from "multicultural" versions of cultural celebration. As argued in this essay, the Indigenous-centred concept of resurgence provides a more nuanced and accurate framework for analysing the event. Understanding Metisfest as resurgence highlights how it is, first and foremost, a space for the contemporary expression of a lived Metis culture not strictly bounded in a particular place or time. It is a space for the embodiment of creative and growing Metis traditions, and a space to find meaningful ways to live as Metis, inserting a Metis presence into a settler context to celebrate still being there "after everything" (Simpson 2011: 12).

As a central component of the event, fiddling is a particularly strong reflection of the diversity of this lived, Metis identity; it is not one thing, bounded within a restricted, narrowly defined style, but is varied based on the lived experiences of the fiddlers. In this way, the music at Metisfest is an extension of the everyday—it draws from and builds on the everyday lives of fiddlers and attendees—rather than a special form of music packaged for the event. Just as importantly, it maintains a dynamic relationship with the everyday lives of attendees who, through video, sound recordings, and new relationships and community connections, continue to live Metisfest throughout the year. Through Metisfest, Metis people become united as a healthy, vibrant community (Simpson 2011: 12-13), publically reasserting themselves as Metis, an action that has important, political consequences: it is not a spectacle for the benefit of the non-Indigenous outside, nor is its relationship with mainstream, settler culture crucial to its existence; rather, it is a space to work towards rebuilding the independence of the Metis Nation.

This, of course, is something that Metis attendees already know, even if expressed through embodied action instead of academic discourse. What, then, is the purpose and consequence of this research intervention (borrowing, again from Smith 1999: 176)? Although this article has been shared in various drafts with my consultants, it is ultimately an intervention directed at a settler audience, and will, undoubtedly, be read through a settler lens; this settler lens is made visible in my narrative, which highlights my process of learning and meaning-making, and a degree of separation between me and the "other" as my research subject. The intervention that I therefore hope to achieve is one that

challenges settlers to rethink the kinds of relationships festivals can embody (whether it is a festival that embodies a colonizer/colonized or dominant/subordinate relationship, or alternatively a nation-to-nation relationship); that re-dresses settlers' tendency to view Metis culture and Metis people as a culture and people of the past; and that affirms the vitality of contemporary Metis culture. ❁

## Notes

1. In this article, "Metis" is written without an acute accent as a way to counter an overemphasis on French ancestry (see Macdougall 2010: 260). For an opposing point of view, see Andersen (2014: 211).

2. The term "Indigenous" is adopted in this article because of its global resonance, and because it is the term most often used by Indigenous scholars and activists. The first letter is capitalized to indicate that it is a proper noun rather than an adjective (as it would be the context of a phrase such as "plants indigenous to the area").

3. Although he never took formal lessons, Lepine's father, mother, and other family members fiddled, placing him in a milieu that allowed him to learn on his own. By the age of 9, he was playing for dances, and at 17, at old-time fiddle contests. Lepine is well known in the Metis circuit, appearing at various Metis events throughout the year (Lepine, interview with author, August 28, 2012). He has recorded five CDs, one of which won him an Aboriginal Music Award, and was included on the Gabriel Dumont Collection *Drops of Brandy*, an anthology and accompanying four-CD set featuring Indigenous fiddlers from Western and Northern Canada. Lepine also provided some of the music for the documentary *How the Fiddle Flows* (Coyes 2002) and can be heard on the film *The Dances of the Metis* (Prefontaine n.d.). He was inducted into the Metis Music Hall of Fame in 2005 and the Manitoba Fiddle Wall of Fame in 2012.

4. I use the term "groove" somewhat differently from Charles Keil (2010), who focuses on the interaction between musicians in a performance (and hence "participatory discrepancies"). My use of this term is intended to emphasize the sense of forward motion created by Lepine and the indescribable "feel" that pulls dancers in the fiddle community to their feet and to the dance floor as Lepine plays.

5. Asymmetrical tunes are often seen as iconically Metis, although in recent years Metis fiddlers are more likely to play symmetrical tunes (see discussion in Dueck 2007: 56).

6. This formalization of learning began in the early 2000s when the Frontier Fiddle program brought group fiddle lessons, usually taught by non-Indigenous fiddlers, to largely Metis and First Nations schools in northern Manitoba's Frontier School Division. Some of the Indigenous fiddle circuit's best known young fiddlers got their start through this program. See Gluska (2011) and Lederman, White,

Alexander, and Baggins (2012) for further information.

7. There is some debate over the use of taps (metal “plates” added to the soles of shoes to make percussive stepping more audible) in the Metis dance circuit. At the John Arcand Fiddle Festival in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, contestants are not allowed to use taps because Arcand wants to encourage traditional jigging (Quick 2009: 196-7, 220). However, most dance troupes in Manitoba use taps.

8. With a sample of just three fiddlers, it is difficult to come to clear conclusions about the style being performed at this contest. However, two of the fiddlers frequently attend old-time contests and several of the tunes they chose (e.g., “Country Waltz,” “Short Bow Jig,” “Maple Sugar,” and “Red Headed Fiddlers Waltz”) are tunes shared by both old-time (i.e., those who adopt the mainstream, Canadian fiddle style) and Metis fiddlers.

9. In Manitoba, old-time fiddle events have a long history as events that draw out a largely white audience. Although Indigenous fiddlers have always taken part in old-time events, their presence, especially until recently, was often hidden. In fact, many Metis performers who took part in old-time events were described (or described themselves) as Franco-Manitobans.

10. JJ Lavallee (b. 1980) is from the Metis town of St. Ambroise, Manitoba. He was born into a musical Metis family (which includes fiddler Darren Lavallee) whom he credits as an important influence. Lavallee is a composer (perhaps best known for his fiddle tune “Metchif Reel”), songwriter, and singer, and plays a variety of instruments including fiddle, guitar, mandolin, bass, and drums. He has recorded three CDs, one of which won an Aboriginal People’s Choice Music Award for best fiddle album, and has opened for well-known country stars including Johnny Reid, Charlie Major, Jessie Ferrell, and Shane Yellowbird. Lavallee is well known in the Metis fiddle scene and is a regular entertainer at Metis events.

11. Although, as noted earlier, Metisfest has not run since 2012, I use the present tense to avoid presenting Metis festivals as events that only happened in the past.

12. I use the term “settler” to refer to all immigrant peoples who now live on Turtle Island (what is now known as North America). While it is admittedly a homogenizing term, so too is the term “Indigenous.” It is therefore not intended to indicate sameness, but rather to highlight a power relationship that exists between Indigenous peoples and those who colonized the continent.

13. Although a Metis pavilion has been included in the past, there has not been one since 2010.

14. The prevalence of fiddling is likely due to a combination of factors including the popularity of fiddling among Metis people; the number of fiddlers available for hire; the audience’s desire to dance to fiddle music; and, possibly, the assumption among performers and audiences that Metis music *is* fiddling (e.g., see Chrétien 2005: 179).

15. Andersen argues, however, that there are no “other” Metis, only Red River Metis (2014: 25); at the same time, his argument does not mean that Red River

Metis are a homogenous group that should be represented by a single type of music.

16. See Lederman (1988) for an overview of “old-style” Metis fiddling; Dueck (2013) for discussion of recent changes to the style; Quick (2010) for discussion of two models for Metis fiddling; and Giroux (2013: 123–33) for analyses of multiple Metis styles.

17. The term “circuit” is commonly used to describe a network of events that fiddlers and audience members attend throughout a “season” (in this case, the summer months). Fiddlers often play at “sister” events in this circuit; these include events in Batoche, Saskatchewan, and on the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation, North Dakota.

18. The *ceinture fléchée* (or Assumption sash) was a belt used by voyageurs for a variety of purposes. It is now an important symbol of Metis identity.

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