ABORIGINAL WOMEN IN CANADA: ON THE CHOICE TO RENOUNCE OR RECLAIM ABORIGINAL IDENTITY

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Abstract / Résumé

As a woman of mixed European and Aboriginal heritage I am a product of Colonization, living with the repercussions of both the original acts of Colonization and Canada's subsequent assimilation policies. For over 150 years, Aboriginal women in Canada were subjected to active and deliberate marginalization, gender discrimination, and racism before being granted the opportunity to reclaim official Aboriginal rights as "status Indians" through the 1985 Indian Act. Today, I am entitled to reclaim official "status" from the Canadian State; however, I do not feel that this is an entitlement that I should ethically be awarded solely on ethnic heritage. If we are to accept the popular idea of "race" simply as a socially constructed phenomenon, then official Aboriginal recognition should no longer be awarded on the basis of inherited ethnicity.

En tant que femme d'ascendance mixte (européenne et autochtone), je suis un produit de la colonisation et je vis avec les répercussions de la colonisation originale et des politiques assimilatrices subséquentes du Canada. Pendant plus de 150 ans, les femmes autochtones du Canada ont fait l'objet d'une marginalisation active et délibérée, de la discrimination sexuelle et du racisme avant qu'on leur accorde la possibilité d'obtenir des droits autochtones officiels à titre d'« Indiens inscrits » aux termes de la *Loi sur les Indiens* de 1985. Aujourd'hui, j'ai le droit de réclamer un « statut » officiel au gouvernement canadien. Toutefois, du point de vue de l'éthique, je ne crois pas qu'il s'agit d'un droit qu'on devrait m'accorder uniquement sur la base du patrimoine ethnique. Si nous acceptons que l'idée populaire de la « race » n'est simplement qu'une construction sociale, la reconnaissance officielle des Autochtones ne devrait donc plus être accordée uniquement sur la base de l'ethnicité héritée.

Introduction

It seems that mainstream Canadian society today is increasingly preoccupied with the concepts of ethnicity and culture. As a society built on a foundation of widespread cultural diversity and the ideology of multiculturalism, many Canadians are faced with opportunities to hold a hybrid or dual identity, or to choose their identity according to personal values and compatibilities. In relation to Aboriginal identity alone, Satistics Canada has reported a substantial increase in the Canadian Aboriginal population – an increase that cannot be explained exclusively through methods of conventional population growth (Statistics Canada 2001).

Further analysis of this phenomenon has demonstrated that while the Aboriginal birth rate is one-and-a-half times the overall Canadian birth rate, the phenomenal population growth of a seven-fold increase between 1951 and 2001 is attributed to the census's opening up of the definition to include a greater degree of expression, and an increased tendency for people to utilize the opportunity to self-identify. Statistics Canada reports that:

> The trend to increased reporting of Aboriginal origins or identity has been evident since the 1986 Census and is thought to have resulted from an increased awareness of Aboriginal issues. This could have occurred as a result of numerous events, such as the Oka crisis, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, recent court decisions on Aboriginal rights and the creation of the territory of Nunavut. A similar trend in increased reporting has also been observed in the census counts of the Indigenous population in Australia, the United States and New Zealand. (2001)

Furthermore, people self-identifying as Métis account for the largest increase in Aboriginal population, increasing by 43% over the last five years.

Some theorists have credited the increase in proportion of people self-identifying with their Aboriginal origins to the increasing trend of ethnic mobility seen in Canada (Guimond 2003). Is the concept of "ethnicity" a recent trend, and is the continuing increase of people self-identifying as Aboriginal simply an attempt to hold a distinct identity consistent with the increased value placed on the environment within Canada's "cultural mosaic?" Other research has examined the characteristics of the people engaging in this trend more closely to find that the population of people changing their identity to reflect their Aboriginal origin is positively correlated with level of education achieved (Siggner 2003).

As a Canadian-born person of mixed European and Aboriginal origin, I have long struggled with the idea of choosing between conflicting cultural values reflected in my ethnic origins. Time and time again, I have considered and even begun the process of officially recognizing my Aboriginal origins through affiliation with nearby Aboriginal institutions and by initiating the motion of claiming Aboriginal status, but this journey has presented some major obstacles in terms of my mindset and motivations. While on one hand, I recognize that the ability to choose an identity should be perceived as a privilege, I also recognize that this is not a decision that I can take lightly. This is *my* identity, and ought to reflect everything about me: my motivations, my personal values, my aspirations, *and* my ethnic origins.

Yet, I must also consider that up until the very recent past, Aboriginal women have had their identities altered, stolen, and even purposely lost for over 150 years before being granted the opportunity to regain it. As a woman who is in this position as a direct result of enfranchisement and induced shame over her ancestors' ethnicity, is it not time that I take back what was stolen? Conversely, being removed from Aboriginal culture for two generations, who am I to claim the same rights as an Aboriginal person whose culture has played an integral role in their lifestyle throughout their entire life?

Throughout my journey to resolve my personal identity crisis, it has become obvious that there is a clear difference between Canadian State and Aboriginal perspectives on what constitutes Aboriginality; however, the criteria seem to be open to interpretation, especially in the case of those people in Ontario who claim Métis origin, as I do (Peters, Rosenberg, & Halseth 1991). In choosing my identity I do not want to fall into the category of "ethnic drifters," falling prey to the ideology of Canada's multiculturalism or the enduring stereotypes of spiritualism and environmentalism that are associated with Aboriginal culture and have come to be viewed as desirable qualities in today's society (Guimond 2003).

Aboriginal Women: 500 Years of an Increasingly Devalued Role in Society

Western society has only recently granted women recognition as persons, and as a result of this, women still face many obstacles in terms of equality. However difficult this transition has been, it pales in comparison to the barriers that Aboriginal women have had forced on them since initial Western contact over 500 years ago. In coming to the "Americas," colonial powers forced their gender prejudices on Aboriginal societies, imposing drastic changes on the social and political structure of

Aboriginal life (Dickason 2006). In many aspects, Aboriginal society can be interpreted as far more advanced than European; for example, it is clear that the role of women in Aboriginal societies far surpassed the dysfunctional Western treatment of women (Osennontion & Skonaganleh:rà 1989).

When European colonizers landed, Aboriginal women held a strong identity and highly respected roles in society. As European influence grew, this identity gradually changed to take on many of the identity traits of Western women; Aboriginal society was forced to assimilate to the European way of doing things, gradually having the men take on the stereotypical European role and take part in actively marginalizing women. Even after women were officially recognized as persons in 1929, self-identifying Aboriginal women continued to be denied equal treatment as women: forced assimilation into Western society was largely directed at Aboriginal women, who were often denied official "status" under the *Indian Act* until 1985.

The repercussions of these policies are felt throughout Canadian society even today. By this time, the dysfunctional European ideologies justifying gender discrimination and racism had become accepted as inevitable by many people in Aboriginal societies, and for some time Aboriginal women had lived with the idea of "marry[ing] a White man to give [their] children a chance" (Lovelace 2008: 23).

The choice to intentionally avoid recognition of Aboriginal origin is especially evident in cases of mixed origin, particularly within the group of people who came to be known as the Métis. Burley, Hoesfall, and Brandon (1992) illustrate this by noting that in early mixed Métis and European societies

> …those women who were most White and most "English" were highly prized as wives by company officers and clerks… Participation in Red River society required Métis women to suppress recognition of their maternal kinship, an acknowledgement that might jeopardize the possibilities for a marriage of position for themselves for their children. (23)

Recognizable Aboriginal identity had quickly become a source of negative differential treatment and segregation in the European–imposed hierarchy of "races," especially for those of mixed parentage (Ibid: 24).

More often than "voluntarily" suppressing their identity, Aboriginal women were subject to forced assimilation through enfranchisement. Often unaware of the permanent consequences of "marrying out" of their reserve, status Aboriginal women who took a non-status husband lost all their treaty rights, including (but not limited to): her status as an "Indian"; reserve and band rights; freedom from State taxes; her right to

be buried at home (on the reserve); and the ability to return home to the reserve if her marriage were to fail (Weaver 1994:93). Any subsequent offspring of an Aboriginal woman were also affected.

With the formation of "Indian" reservations, the incentive to deny Aboriginal heritage was further intensified and widespread across gender and all cultures with the implementation of the "pass system" in the early 1880s (INAC: 9.10). Under this system, residents from "on reserve" were required to obtain a "pass" from their "Indian agent" stating their reason for leaving the reserve and when they were expected to return. This system was developed

> …not only to prevent Indian leaders and potential militants from conspiring with each other, but also to discourage parents from visiting their children in off-reserve residential schools and to give agents greater authority to prevent Indians from participating in banned ceremonies and dances on distant reserves. (INAC: 9.10)

Given the opportunity to escape this segregation and visit or even *keep* their children (instead of having them taken away to residential schools), it is clear that the "voluntary" decision to assimilate, while never actually voluntary, was often a calculated decision as to how best to survive.

With the introduction of Bill C-31, Aboriginal women and their children who had lost their status and treaty rights children through the "marrying out" policy were given the opportunity to officially reclaim their State identity as Aboriginal people (thereby receiving a reinstatement of treaty rights and payments), and reclaim their role in their culture without shame. On one hand, mainstream Canadian culture would assume that all eligible people with Aboriginal ancestry would jump at the opportunity – the majority population has the mistaken assumption that the *Indian Act* provides vastly greater rights to Aboriginal people than the average Canadian citizen is afforded. What Cairns calls (2000) "Citizens Plus" illustrates the mainstream idea that Aboriginal people are afforded not only all the rights and freedoms of the average Canadian, but also many more positive and valuable benefits, rights, and freedoms. In the eyes of Aboriginal people, however, this legislation is restrictive, coercive, and the racist stigma associated with Aboriginal recognition persisted at this point in time (Warry 2007:104). Twenty years later, the strengthening nationalistic ideology of Canada as a "cultural mosaic" and a tolerant, racism-free nation, has lifted a great deal of the stigma associated with proclaimed Aboriginal identity.

Repercussions: Two Generations Later…

Although it was never a part of her heritage that she celebrated, I

have always known that my mother came from a significant Aboriginal background. As a rule, she didn't often speak of her life growing up, preferring instead to simply remind us that she never had it as nice as we did. She came from a large family of eight children, and nearly every resident in her home village of Perth Road was part of her extended family. Her family struggled financially, sharing a two-room shack, with her father usually unemployed and prone to drinking. While the children never starved, there never seemed to be enough food – she remembered only feeling "full" once, when her aunt had taken her and a few cousins to a KFC restaurant in Kingston and she had gorged herself on unlimited fried chicken.

When she was eighteen, she left her family in the village of Perth Road, married my father, and went on to raise her own family of eight children. Aside from the occasional visit to her mother (now divorced from her father), she actively avoided the rest of her family. When visiting my Grandmother's house, I remember flipping through the photo album and wondering whatever had become of all those uncles and aunts whom I had never met. As I grew older, I began to understand that she distanced herself from her family in an attempt to protect us from both the discrimination she couldn't hide from while growing up and the shame associated with her acceptance of the "Aboriginal" stereotypes that she saw demonstrated in her family—alcoholism, poverty, lack of education, unemployment, and a life of violence and crime—possibly manifested as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

My family home is situated on the outskirts of the Tyendinaga Mohawk Reserve. My mother taught music at the Quinte Mohawk Elementary School for many years, and at the age of sixteen, I began working in a gift store on the reserve as well. Surrounded by the Mohawk culture, I was increasingly aware of my unique ethnic heritage. I experienced the same emotions as Laura Schwager describes experiencing (2003): feeling unworthy of publicly proclaiming my Aboriginal heritage with my fine blonde hair and green eyes, and I clung to my "legitimate" European ethnicity as my concrete and uncontested identity. For reasons I can only speculate about, I often have strangers querying my ethnic background – in these cases I have found it easiest to point towards my German-born father and leave it at that. Similar to Schwager, I have struggled to feel worthy of naming myself as Aboriginal, but contrary to Schwager's experience, it is in the presence of Aboriginal people that I feel this way. In the presence of non-Aboriginal people I am more than happy to correct their preconceived notions on what a person of Aboriginal origin looks like outwardly, but my confidence leaves me when I feel I need to prove my claim to this identity.

I am not alone in feeling this way. I know that for one, my mother feels the same way. She worked for ten years on the reserve, but was still regarded as an "outsider" by her peers, one of only a few "non-Aboriginal" teachers at the school. During this time, I have seen a difference in her inner acceptance of her Aboriginal heritage: she has clearly stopped feeling ashamed of her ethnic background and has inwardly embraced the idea that she may have common ground with her peers. However, we are not of Mohawk heritage, and the Tyendinaga reserve is not home to a pan-Aboriginal culture. We are something else – I suppose we fit into the category of "Ontario's Métis," an obscure classification of people who "…for whatever reasons, are not regarded as either [Aboriginal] or White" according to the Canadian State, and have developed independently of the Métis of Red River (Peters, Rosenberg, & Halseth 1991:2-3). I distinctly felt like an outsider among my Mohawk peers, regardless of their "status," and I often wondered if this difference would be any less pronounced if I looked less "European," or if my mother had looked more "Aboriginal" like her sisters. What role does the socially constructed ideology of "race" play in identity formation?

On Identity Formation: Culture, Ethnicity and "Race"

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) has remarked on the difficulty of "the survival of Aboriginal identity in an environment that is usually indifferent and often hostile to Aboriginal culture," that is, mainstream society and more notably, urban society (RCAP 1993:2). Furthermore, they have associated the development of identity strictly with the reserve/land base, an association that is criticized by some in light of the fact that over 50% of all self-identified Aboriginal people reside in urban areas (Belanger et al. 2003:3). Belanger et al. examine the development of Aboriginal identity in youth residing in urban areas, and argue that a process of acculturation must take place between mainstream and Aboriginal culture that impacts and aids in the development of identity formation (2003:4).

Other research has shown that an individual can develop a sense of cultural identity that is diasporic, or a strong dual identity that varies according to the environment that the person finds themselves within (Wilson & Peters 2005; Karner 2007: 79). In considering this, some theorists have compared cultures to languages, and "biculturalism to bilingualism": just as some individuals are able to speak two languages, some able to draw on "are very different frameworks of self-definition and interpretation in different contexts without experiencing an inevitable sense of confusion" (Karner 2007: 93). This is not to deny that there are also contradictory demands, expectations and interpretations involved in

diasporic or dual identities that can be very painful, but many Aboriginal people living in urban centers find a way to balance their identities (Wilson & Peters 2005). In a 2005 study interviewing adult urban Anishinabek participants, researchers Kathi Wilson and Evelyn Peters reported that:

> […] respondents identified three scaled strategies they used to overcome these challenges and to maintain this aspect of Anishinabek cultural identity. First, they create small-scale places of cultural safety in urban areas to express their physical and spiritual relationship to the land. Second, urban-to-reserve mobility is a strategy that allows Anishinabek to maintain their relationships to the land across urban and reserve boundaries. Third, participation in "pan-Indian" ceremonies and beliefs in the sanctity of Mother Earth are ways of sustaining spiritual and symbolic links to the land. (Ibid:9)

In terms of *developing* an Aboriginal identity, Belanger et al. echo Jenkins' sentiments with relation to holding a dual identity, agreeing that "an individual can develop a sense of belonging to two cultures without compromising his or her sense of cultural identity"; however, their interviews have demonstrated that in developing an identity, "Aboriginal youth must find ways to satisfy the need for purpose through a sense of belonging and independence, mastery and generosity" (Ibid. 2003: 4). In order to achieve this, Belanger et al. (2005) recommend accessible cultural institutions and events be made available to Aboriginal youth, as well as more cultural integration community activities to combat the enduring racism that they invariably experience (Ibid: 25).

Ethnicity & "Race"

Despite the promoted "cultural mosaic" ideology within mainstream Canadian nationalism, the idea of "race" remains persistent in Canada (Chartrand & Giokas 2002: 281). "While racial and ethnic categories have frequently been taken for granted in the social sciences, it is important to recognize that these categories are socially constructed," and the definition of "race" as it is used in mainstream thought and culture remains elusive (Anderson 1979, as cited in Peters et al. 1991:7; Chartrand & Giokas 2002: 281).

"Race" is primarily associated with physical characteristics, and while it is now widely acknowledged that "races" are "social constructs rather than biological givens," the social construct of "race" continues to influence both government policy with regards to Aboriginal people and individual Aboriginal identity in terms of individual racism experienced (Karner 2007:16-17). Karner further notes that "the choices of physical markers *assumed* to be racial characteristics are historically and cultur-

ally variable," a point illustrated by the assimilation goals of the colonial state. For example:

> […]when "half-breeds" and Métis were defined by society at large, some allusion to Indian ancestry was made and physical characteristics were noted, but in fact these were given social significance only because of the lifestyle led by the individuals. A "half-breed" or Métis was poor, unschooled, lived in a shack, engaged in a variety of seasonal employments[…] The majority of people of mixed descent who were integrated into the European "White" society did not self-identify as Métis. (St.Onge 1988: 84; as cited in Peters et al. 1991:7)

Original legislation for determining Métis status utilized a blood-quantum definition, with a ¼ blood person not considered an "Indian" or a "non-treaty Indian" for the purposes of the 1927 *Indian Act* (Gionkas & Groves, 2002: 47). Similar legislation governing the identity of "Indians" was not necessary at this point in time, as the patrilineal design behind "marrying out" determined Aboriginal identity without blood-quantum: "An Indian was defined as any male person of Indian blood reputed to belong to a particular band; any child of such a person; and any woman lawfully married to such a person" (Weaver 1994; Furi & Wherrett 1996). However, the Canadian Federal State definition of Aboriginality (in section 6(2) of Bill C-31) has since relied heavily on the blood-quantum definition and the racial characteristics associated with it, enforcing what is known as the "second-generation cut-off rule" of blood-quantum (Furi & Wherrett 1996).

In their final report, RCAP clearly established that Aboriginal people are not simply a biological race of people identified by birth

> Aboriginal peoples are not racial groups; rather they are organic political and cultural entities. Although contemporary Aboriginal groups stem historically from the original peoples of North America, they often have mixed genetic heritages and include individuals of varied ancestry. As organic political entities, they have the capacity to evolve over time and change their internal composition. (RCAP final report: 177)

Despite this, the blood-quantum criterion persists in Canadian legislation. This may in part be due to an erroneous conflation of "race" with "ethnicity."

"Ethnicity" is also a socially constructed phenomenon, "[…]widely associated with culture, descent, group memories/histories and language" (Karner 2007:16-17). Described as a "way of seeing the world," ethnicity is manifested both through the identity-bestowing *us* and *them*

dichotomy of differentiation and through "broader frameworks of shared meaning" that work together with ready-made theories and interpretation of the world and an individual's place in it (Karner 2007: 31-32). Karner describes ethnicity as "politicized culture – culture conscious of itself," providing the grounds for "race" through dichotomies and exaggeration of cultural differences (Ibid.:165). One of the processes that has been considered to explain the emergence of the Métis people as separate from other Aboriginal peoples is the formation of an ethnic identity, or "ethnogenesis" (Chartrand & Giokas 2002:281).

Struggles With Identity

Identity is certainly a multifaceted phenomenon. Growing up as an outsider among Mohawk friends, I kept my own ethnic heritage secret, lest I offend my peers with my meagre and unsupported claims at an Aboriginal background. Instead, I celebrated my father's culture, travelling to Germany, learning his language, learning all I could of his culture and background.

It was always clear to me that there were some significant conflicts between my parents' values and beliefs, and I grew up struggling with these contradictions. From an academic stance, it is easy to write of Karner's (2007) "biculturalism" and dual identities, quite another to live them out. My father's conservative, traditional, disciplined German values and views on life, parenting, and world issues directly contrasted with my mother's liberal, collectivist and hands-off approach. See-sawing between perspectives is exhausting and I found myself choosing the easiest route and adopting my father's dominant perspective. My experience as an outsider working on the Tyendinaga Reserve strengthened my position as a mainstream Canadian from a European background, and I did not outwardly pursue any sort of Aboriginal identity.

I did not decide to pursue my Aboriginal "status" because of an identity crisis, more so it was out of curiosity as to whether I had a claim and, if so, for the potential benefits associated with status. I had heard from my Grandmother that a cousin had received official status recognition and I desperately wanted a job with the Federal Government: with "status," I would be eligible for employment equity positions. I figured, "What have I got to lose?" and began the process. Definitely not honorable reasons as a starting point, but (to my credit) as I went through the application process I realized just what a role Aboriginal culture had played in my development through my affiliation with the Mohawk people. For three years I had worked on the reserve, first only as a salesperson at a gift store, then, as a desperate high-school dropout determined to keep my independence, I supplemented my income by crafting

dreamcatchers for two competing Mohawk establishments – a take-home job where I made only a few dollars an hour. I babysat "Mohawk" children for friends in return for a place to stay when the weather was too bad for me to walk home, and in addition, I was widely recognized locally as "the music teacher's daughter." In retrospect, I was only an outsider because of my self-identified ethnic origin.

When I received a reply from the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (DINAC), simply asking for my cousin Ross's information, I filed it away with my "important documents," undecided whether or not to pursue it further. This was no longer about a meaningless process of paperwork just to have a better chance at a job interview: it had become a matter of my personal identity. In proving my official identity to these nameless, faceless people with a checklist of criteria, I felt that I was devaluing myself and my identity – the heritage that I had only thus far celebrated and shared unconditionally with my many brothers and sisters. While I considered myself to be a well-adjusted Canadian woman confident in my identity and role in society, I recognized that Aboriginal identity was not something to be taken lightly, and until I knew what role 'status' recognition would play on my personal identity, it was best not to pursue it.

Métis vs. "Indian": Who Is Aboriginal?

An Inconsistent Definition from the State

Further exploring the "us and them" dichotomy of ethnicity, Richard Jenkins (1997) posits some interesting ideas. He distinguishes between types of identity, one being "social categorization": the official label bestowed by the institutions who hold "sufficient power and authority" to categorize and allocate individuals to particular groupings; and "group identification," which is a group-internal process where individuals collectively define themselves in terms of a community and profess experiences of belonging and shared meaning (Ibid:80). "Social categorization" can be seen as the attempts of the Canadian State to categorize, divide, and allocate Aboriginal people to certain subsets of their concept of pan-Aboriginality, while "group identification" is demonstrated in the attempts of Aboriginal groups themselves to define what it is that constitutes Aboriginality – as per RCAP's final recommendations. These two processes are "inextricably linked," and consideration of the power struggle between Aboriginal groups and the Canadian government goes a long way towards illustrating Jenkins' proposal (Ibid).

Karner (2007) echoes this sentiment, stating that "ethnic identities are negotiated, albeit under conditions of profoundly unequally distributed power, by people with agency and several sources of possible iden-

tification at their disposal" (Ibid: 2). RCAP and all Aboriginal groups are in agreement that the Canadian State should not be the designated authority to classify Aboriginal peoples or to determine who qualifies as Aboriginal. This designation ought to be up to the individual Aboriginal groups who will be accepting the individual to determine (RCAP). The Canadian State has never held a consistent definition as to what constitutes Aboriginality – even "status" Aboriginality is complex and open to interpretation:

> Even under the *Indian Act*, there may be several different types of "legal Indians." Some of the distinctions made are based on law, while others are based on other criteria, including those used by Aboriginal people themselves. Thus, reference is often made to "old status" (pre-1895) Indians versus "new status" (post-1985) Indians[…]; "6(1)'s" (persons registerable under section 6(1) of the *Indian Act*), versus "6(2)'s"[…]; status Indian band members versus non-status Indian band members or versus status Indian non-band members[…]. (Giokas & Groves, 2002:44)

To add to this confusion, there is a separation between those individuals deemed "Indian" and those claiming "Métis" status, with the Federal government "neither maintain[ing] nor prepar[ing] lists of Métis individuals or claimants," suggesting that "if you believe that you are Métis, you should discuss this with your local or provincial Métis organization" (INAC). While this is a positive development in terms of self-representation, those communities claiming Métis status are denied many of the rights afforded to other Aboriginal populations. Douglas Sanders points out that while Métis claims and the claims to "non-status Indians" are historically separate, many individuals self-identifying as such find themselves in similar situations (as cited in Giokas and Chartrand, 2002: 104). "They are members of groups that are supposed to have been assimilated…conscious of a distinct identity but the politicians tell them that they are simply part of the national population. They may be a part of the multicultural mosaic, but they have no special rights" (Ibid).

Giokas and Chartrand (2002) criticize the Canadian State's approach to the unilateral definition of "Indian" as inconsistent and dysfunctional legislation without regard for membership in distinct nations or even original treaty rights, and state that under the current legislation it is easier to pose and answer the question "who is *not* a Métis?" than it is to answer the question "who *is* a Métis?" (104, emphasis added). They note that under the current legislation, the determining criterion of "Indian" legal status

> […]cannot be a function of blood quantum [as it was re-

> garded historically], […]as White women could never have become Indians through marriage and their children equally could not have had Indian status[…]nor can it be kinship, for the scrip, marriage-out, and enfranchisement provisions have the effect of splitting families[…]nor can the determining criterion be lifestyle[…] nor can it even be tied to self-identification[…]. (Ibid: 105)

They sum it up nicely in their conclusion that: "what Canada has is an increasingly arbitrary recognition system for Indians" (Ibid: 106).

The controversy over Métis definition in Canada involves two distinct views, with each promoted by a national representative organization. For the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP), Métis identity constitutes a pan-Aboriginal movement emphasizing Aboriginal ancestry and heritage. In contrast, the Métis National Council (MNC) points out that "the 1982 constitutional amendment recognized and affirmed 'the *existing* [A]boriginal and treaty rights of the [A]boriginal peoples of Canada,' [and therefore] must be interpreted by reference to the pre-existing history of political relations between the ancestors of the western Métis and the political action" (Chartrand, 2002). Chartrand supports the MNC position, arguing that while the original meaning of the term *métis* referred to a mixed-blood people,

> […]the notion of a mixed-blood people distinct from the Aboriginal peoples of a region is an unusual one in the international experience of Aboriginal-colonial relations. Generally, mixed-blood people are either part of the Aboriginal community or part of the new colonial society, since communities are formed not by biological but by social and political processes. (Chartrand 2002)

I feel that he makes an excellent point here and that if we are to acknowledge that it is not biological, "racial" components that determine an individual's ethnicity, then well-adjusted individuals removed two generations from a culture should not claim equal access to the rights afforded to that Indigenous culture.

(Less than) Honorable Intentions

I can (and have) admitted that my original intentions for pursuing official state recognition of my heritage were not very well guided. They were clearly selfish reasons and I thankfully realized the error in my thinking before I had devalued this part of my heritage through using it simply for personal gain. Unfortunately though, I do not feel that my reaction to the application process is typical. With the amendments of Bill C-31, the number of registered "status" Aboriginal individuals was expected to

grow by approximately 56,800 people; however, the actual number has far surpassed this estimate – a phenomenon that Aboriginal groups have attributed to both INAC's underestimation of initial applicants, and to the inadequate and inefficient registration process (Furi & Wherrett 1996). From my experience, the application process for status is not sufficient to determine Aboriginality. While Wayne Warry argues that "status fraud" is not a valid concern, in this age of "ethnic drifting," I feel that it is indeed a realistic concern that needs to be monitored (Warry, 2007: 104-105).

I have had to address my ethnic heritage a little more closely. How is it that I can claim to be of Métis heritage? Only because one cousin was granted official State recognition of our shared Aboriginal ancestry in the specific form of Métis status. Otherwise, I vaguely recall my mother once saying that her Grandmother was from the Ojibwa Nation. So, while I support the MNC's idea of what constitutes an individual of Métis heritage, I identify my own heritage under the CAP's pan-Aboriginal definition. In explanation of this difference, I believe that the MNC's suggestion that "métis with a small 'm' refers to mixed Indian and European ancestry, while 'Métis' is a socio-cultural and political term referring to a distinct Indigenous people who evolved historically in a certain region of Canada" (Peters, Rosenberg, & Halseth 1991:3). While this suggestion was rejected by the Native Council of Canada in 1991, it seems to be more applicable as more and more people self-identify as Métis on CAP terms.

On Ethnic Drifting

Wayne Warry (2007) does not feel that "status fraud" is a realistic concern, as "…it is highly unlikely that a non-Aboriginal person would want to claim to be a member of a marginalized minority" (105). He further states that "…individuals identify with a particular cultural or ethnic group because it has meaning for them"; however, as the previously outlined theorists and researchers have pointed out, official status recognition is not self-identification or identifying with a cultural or ethnic group.

To add to this, we have the increasingly popular trend towards protection of the environment and "ethnic drifting" (Guimond 2003). Aboriginal self-identification is implicated in this phenomenon due to the stereotypes associated with Aboriginality and nature (Francis 1992). In their study on Aboriginal people living in an urban setting, Wilson and Peters point out that

> […]the idea of a First Nations Indigenous relationship to land needs to be evaluated. The conflation of First Nations

> peoples and nature was a persistent trope in 19th-century colonialism and has echoes in contemporary Canadian thought. First Nations peoples were represented as "nature in human form." (Ibid: 2005; Francis 1992)

In today's society, identity is fast becoming "an 'over-used' but ill-defined concept; rather than offering an explanation, it requires explaining, not least since constant 'identity talk' is juxtaposed to many people's everyday lives that are shaped by several 'cultures'" (Karner 2007:2). Both Aboriginal people and "mainstream" Canadians are utilizing their ethnic mobility to change their ethnic affiliation in order to maximize their chances at socio-economic prosperity (Siggner 2003; Guimond 2003). Where it becomes complicated is when there is a conflict in perspectives, for "none of us *is* just one thing, *belongs* to just one group, and *has* just one identity; and yet we are constantly surrounded by a language that emphasizes being, belonging, and having" (Karner 2007: 2).

Conclusion

Chartrand and Giokas (2002) point out that the current Canadian federal approach to defining Métis ancestry rests on the basis of an irrational federal definition of what constitutes Aboriginality, and that faults the approach on its focus on the individual identities "as if Aboriginal rights belonged to individuals as *Charter* rights do," instead of persistently focussing on the identity of the Aboriginal community to which a claimant belongs, "without which the individual has no Aboriginal rights" (295-296). Considering that the Ontario "Métis" focus is on a pan-Aboriginal identity (with the exception of the Northern Ontario Métis of Treaty #3), they do not fall into a category that the Federal State is equipped to identify or award treaty rights to. Furthermore, they argue that

> […]moving towards [a] positive core of Métis identity means abandoning not only the conceptual boundary of Indian definition, but also the idea that Métis rights are derived from the rights of Indians. In particular, Métis persons have no claim to participation in the benefits of Indian treaties. The idea that Métis persons can claim treaty benefits only arises if the erroneous assumption that "métis" means "mixed-blood" is adopted. (Chartrand & Giokas, 2002: 295)

I have no doubt that if I were inclined to do so, I would be awarded "status Indian" identification by the Canadian State. But to do so would be to devalue an identity that is crucial to many Aboriginal people and that I hold as a facet of my unique heritage. I am not Aboriginal, neither

am I German, as my father is. I am Canadian, and I believe that I would be best to view my Aboriginal heritage as a method of legitimizing my "Canadian" identity through my genetic ties to Canada's Indigenous peoples. I may self-identify as coming from a "métis" heritage, but only if it is spelled with a lower-case "m" and refers to a general pan-Aboriginal ethnic heritage. I support Aboriginal people and their quest for the implementation of the "two-row wampum treaty," and I will ensure that my son enjoys aspects of our heritage and cultural background. But I do not expect that simply because I have biological ties to a culture, I ought to enjoy the same rights as those individuals who have actively lived that culture. Joy Hendry accurately sums up my views in her conclusion, stating that:

> In the world more broadly, there are many people who can draw on various cultural traditions – through birth, marriage, and residence, as well as through lines of inheritance from their parents, and personal identity has been added to the things one may be able to choose in life […]. In recent years, it has become a matter of pride and sometimes advantage to be regarded as a member of a First Nation […]. Small wonder then that some First Nations are guarding their boundaries a little, for to return to claim benefits after escaping the discrimination may seem hypocritical to those who stayed the course through thick and thin. (Hendry, 2005: 196-197)

What is done is done. I do not fault my Great-Grandmother for choosing to "marry-out," or my mother for distancing herself from her family and heritage in an attempt to escape the stereotypes, discrimination, and racism they had both experienced as a result of their ethnicity. When a parent has the opportunity to offer future generations a life that is easier than their own, it is natural for them to choose this route, regardless of the personal consequences. I can be seen as guilty of this choice myself, having chosen to move back home from South Africa to Canada to raise my son, thereby removing him from his father's culture. I justified this choice through my belief that Canada would provide a safer and more opportune environment for him to grow up in. In doing so, I also removed him from his father, his father's language, and a huge potential part of his identity – none of which I have the capacity to replace here. While I was not forced to do so, is this so different from choosing to "marry out?"

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