

READING THE RECEPTION OF MARIA CAMPBELL'S *HALFBREED*

Kristina Fagan
University of Saskatchewan
krf787@arts.usask.ca

Stephanie Danyluk
University of Saskatchewan
smd387@mail.usask.ca

Bryce Donaldson
University of Saskatchewan
brd778@mail.usask.ca

Amelia Horsburgh
University of Saskatchewan
akh919@mail.usask.ca

Robyn Moore
University of Saskatchewan
rhm456@mail.usask.ca

Martin Winqvist
University of Saskatchewan
mew244@mail.usask.ca

Abstract / Résumé

This essay surveys the critical reception of Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* and uses it to trace some major trends in the study of Aboriginal literature in Canada. While most critics have focused on Campbell's identity, that identity has been variously defined as "Native," as Métis, and as hybrid. Other critics have focused on how identity is politically mobilized within the text, either as a form of resistance or by creating a sense of shared Aboriginal identity. A theoretical movement known as "post-positivist realism" may offer a way to understand these multiple identities within *Halfbreed*.

L'article présente un aperçu de la réception critique du roman *Halfbreed* de Maria Campbell et y a recours pour définir certaines tendances majeures de l'étude la littérature autochtone au Canada. Bien que la plupart des critiques se concentrent sur l'identité de l'écrivaine, celle-ci est définie de plusieurs façons : identité autochtone, métisse ou hybride. D'autres critiques se concentrent sur la manière dont l'identité est politiquement mobilisée dans le texte, sous la forme d'une résistance ou de la création d'un sentiment d'identité autochtone partagée. Un mouvement théorique connu sous le nom de « réalisme post-positiviste » peut offrir un moyen de comprendre les multiples identités exprimées dans le roman.

Half illuminated and half in shadow, Maria Campbell's proud and determined face adorns the black and white cover of McClelland and Stewart's first edition of her autobiography, *Halfbreed*, published in May 1973. In the same month, *Maclean's* magazine published excerpts from *Halfbreed* in an issue that also featured the work of two other Aboriginal writers, Duke Redbird and George Manuel. The magazine's cover image is at first glance strikingly similar to that of *Halfbreed*: underneath the magazine's title is an Aboriginal man's face, half illuminated and half shrouded in darkness. However, instead of determined, the man's expression is sad and a single tear runs down his cheek. Below his face are the words, "Death of a Great Spirit: Canada's Indians speak out." The image and headline both suggest that Aboriginal people are tragically doomed, an idea that is not reflected and indeed is challenged by the Aboriginal words inside. The pieces by Campbell, Redbird and Manuel speak of Aboriginal people's "deep-seated faith in their Indigenous cultural values both philosophically and as a practical way of life" (Redbird 74) and their ongoing process of "emerging from your [non-Aboriginal] world, in which we have no honorable place, into our own" (Manuel 28). These Aboriginal writers do not see themselves as, as one non-Aboriginal contributor to the *Maclean's* issue writes, "dying today for our [non-Aboriginal people's] sins" ("Native Condition" 25); rather, they speak of a people who are very much alive and asserting their identity and rightful place in Canada. The disparity between *Halfbreed's* cover and that of *Maclean's* reflects a seeming disparity between what Campbell (and other Aboriginal writers of the time) was expressing and how that expression was received by many Canadian readers.

This early interpretation of *Halfbreed*, as represented by the *Maclean's* cover, was only the beginning of a widespread public response to Campbell's autobiography. *Halfbreed* went on to receive nation-wide recognition and is widely considered to be the "watershed for Native literature" in this country (qtd. in McKenzie 106). It was a Canadian bestseller at the time of its publication, and has since been the subject of a large body of literary critical work. As the study of Aboriginal literature began to emerge as a field in Canadian universities in the 1980s and 90s, *Halfbreed* became the focus of much scholarly attention and continues to generate new readings today. As Beth Cuthand asserts, "[i]f people are studying Canadian Native literature, they have to read it. *Halfbreed* is standard" (35). This collaborative essay surveys the critical reception of *Halfbreed* and uses this reception as a case study to trace some of the major trends in the study of Aboriginal literature.¹

The study of Aboriginal literature is based in the assumption that there is such a thing as Aboriginal group identity and that this identity is

expressed in the work of Aboriginal writers. However, there has been ongoing debate within the field as to how to theorize Aboriginal identity, and we can see this debate reflected in *Halfbreed* criticism. It is not surprising that there is such debate about identity in *Halfbreed* since Campbell herself self-identifies in a variety of ways over the course of her autobiography. In her description of her childhood, she situates herself within a highly particular web of kinship bonds, making distinctions between the various strands of "Halfbreed" families (23-24) in northern Saskatchewan while also discussing her family's complex ties to "treaty Indians" (20) and "Indian relatives" (25). She also politicizes her kinship ties, linking herself through her great-grandmother, Cheechum, to the Métis people led by Louis Riel in the Rebellions of 1869 and 1884. Later, as an adult, she also identifies herself as part of a larger pan-tribal group of "Native people" (177) with "brothers and sisters, all over the country" (184). Moreover, she describes herself variously as "Halfbreed," "half Indian" (148), and, at one point, as "a representative of the Metis Association of Alberta" (the closest she comes to describing herself as Metis) (153). Faced with this multiplicity and complexity, critics of *Halfbreed* have often tended to define Campbell's social identity by a process that Michael Hames-Garcia calls "restriction," in which the "multiplicity of the self becomes restricted so that any one person's 'identity' is reduced to and understood exclusively in terms of that aspect of her or his self with the most political salience" (104). Of course, the identification that gives "the most political salience" to *Halfbreed* varies significantly depending on the position and assumptions of the critic.²

Some literary critics view Aboriginal identity as an essential critical and political concept that "provide[s] modes of articulating and examining significant correlations between lived experience and social location" (Moya 4). In fact, Campbell herself has commented that her work is about group identity: "it's not my story I'm telling; it's the story of a people" (qtd. in Balan 85). However, critics have made a variety of claims about who her "people" are; some define her as belonging to pan-tribal "Native people," and others view her as part of the nationalist Metis.³ Other critics worry about essentialist conceptions of identity which do not acknowledge "the instability and internal heterogeneity of identity categories" (Moya 3) and see in Campbell a person of mixed descent, an example of a fluid, hybrid identity. Yet another body of critics has focused less on the inherent identity of *Halfbreed* and more on how that identity is politically mobilized within the text. For many critics influenced by post-colonial theory, this process is one of resistance to non-Aboriginal society and government. But for others, particularly other Aboriginal writers, *Halfbreed* works primarily through the sense of shared

identity it creates between Aboriginal people. This essay concludes with some reflections on whether a new theoretical movement known as “post-positivist realism” might offer a way to understand these multiple identities within *Halfbreed*.

Many of the early responses to *Halfbreed* viewed it as an expression of a pan-tribal “Native” identity. The 1960s and 1970s were a time when Aboriginal people from a variety of backgrounds were coming together, often in an urban context, and finding strength in a united voice. As early as 1976, Beth Paul, in a CBC Radio documentary, described *Halfbreed* as the harbinger of “A New Native Literature” that was “informing non-Indians about us [Native people] as people.”⁴ Also, at this moment, the North American public was becoming increasingly curious about Aboriginal people. Craig Womack, writing in an American context, argues that the early seventies were a turning point: “By 1973 a critical mass had been reached so that Native people were no longer considered an exclusively historical phenomenon but a modern one” (“Single Decade” 11). The same change in public consciousness was happening in Canada (Hamilton 248): as Campbell has commented about the moment of *Halfbreed*’s publication, “Canada wanted to know about Aboriginal people” (qtd. in Powers C1). In this context, *Halfbreed* seemed to offer Canadians the possibility of insight into contemporary Aboriginal people, but at that time most critics made little distinction between Aboriginal writers of different cultural backgrounds. For instance, Bataille and Sands, in a 1984 essay, use the terms Indian, mixed-blood, and halfbreed interchangeably. In 1987, Kate Vangen calls Campbell an “Indian” writer (188), Helen Buss in 1990 describes her as a “mixed-blood person” without designating any cultural affiliation (165) and Julie Cairnie in 1995 describes her as a “Native Canadian woman autobiographer” (95). These works were typical of their critical moment, when “Native” literature was just being discovered within the academy and few literary critics were yet situating texts in particular Aboriginal cultures or communities. Such criticism sought to find markers of generalized Aboriginality within *Halfbreed* to distinguish it from the European autobiographical tradition. Armando Jannetta, for instance, is typical in his argument that *Halfbreed*’s “oppositional potential” is in its “[i]nvoicing the ‘natural,’ oral tradition of the Indian telling coup stories or tall tales” (42) of the West and other pre-literate ‘autobiographical’ narratives with their traditional Native conventions” (172). Similarly, Kevin Kardynal finds the “Aboriginal” oral tradition present in the text through its multivocality, conversational tone, and non-linear and anecdotal form. These critics valuably brought *Halfbreed* into the academy and valorized it as a “Native” work though they paid little attention to the text’s specific histori-

cal, political, cultural or regional context.

Increasingly, however, such criticism, which focuses on the general "Nativity" of texts, has been criticized as privileging "a singular and fictitious pan-Indigenous culture over the numerous and distinct living cultures" (Acoose, "Honoring" 222). There has been a movement, largely driven by Aboriginal scholars, to pay greater attention to the identities and political priorities of particular Aboriginal communities, a movement sometimes called "Aboriginal Nationalism." Thus, critics have increasingly seen *Halfbreed* as representing an identity that is specifically "Metis." This may seem strange when we consider that Campbell never refers to herself as Metis in her autobiography. At the time of *Halfbreed's* publication, the term "Métis" was widely seen as referring to French-speaking Aboriginal people of mixed descent. Campbell has family ties to both French and English-speaking people of mixed Cree and European descent, but appears to have identified herself primarily as an English-speaking "Halfbreed." Through the seventies, however, there was a movement to remove the accent aigu from the word Métis and to make it inclusive of many more people, including the English-speaking "Halfbreeds" of Northern Saskatchewan, and the word is now used by groups of mixed-descent from Labrador to British Columbia. Maria Campbell was clearly aware of the Halfbreed /Metis distinction at the time of *Halfbreed's* publication. In a 1973 interview, she refers to herself throughout as a "halfbreed," yet uses the term "Metis" to refer to a broader group of Aboriginal people of mixed race who are similarly impacted by government policies: "I am a resident of Alberta, yet I can sit down with a man from Labrador (we are both Metis) and through talking we will find out things about each other – what the system is doing to us" (Interview with George 3). "Metis" is a term that still has a shifting and contested meaning, and that is used and rejected by various groups depending on their situation. For instance, many of the "Halfbreed" families mentioned in Campbell's autobiography have regained status under Bill C-31 and would now be considered First Nations people (Episkew "Aboriginal" 126). Yet there is an ongoing effort by organizations such as the Métis National Council to define and stabilize the meaning of the word so that it can be used in the pursuit of political goals. Many of the critics who write on *Halfbreed* are clearly influenced by this political effort. Thus, they align their description of the identity asserted in *Halfbreed* with current definitions of "Metis."

However, rather than acknowledge the historical instability and internal heterogeneity of the term "Metis," critics of *Halfbreed* most often treat the term as transparent and self-evident. Toni Culjak, for instance, insists that *Halfbreed* asserts a Metis rather than a Halfbreed identity:

“Although the sense that Maria Campbell views herself as a Métis woman—as a member of a specific culture—is clear from the start of the text, her language is not. Campbell’s use of the term ‘Halfbreed’ is problematic in a number of ways. The community she was born and raised in was distinctly a Métis community” (140). Culjak’s argument is that somehow Campbell has made a mistake and failed to acknowledge her inherent Metis identity. Armand Ruffo also claims that *Halfbreed* asserts a Metis identity and seeks to distinguish it from closely-related Cree culture: “while the text illustrates the Métis’ distinct culture—they wear moccasins yet read English literature—they are nevertheless intimately related to their “Indian cousins” (“Remembering” 81). Despite any “disruptions” to Campbell’s Metis identity, Ruffo insists that *Halfbreed* “maintain[s] a world-view based on traditional Métis sources” (80). Similarly, Jeannie Wills emphasizes the continuity between Cree oral traditions and *Halfbreed*’s rhetorical techniques, arguing that the autobiography is a “historical chronicle of the Métis people in Saskatchewan” (36). Overall, these critics emphasize the continuity of an inherent and positive Metis identity in *Halfbreed*, originating in the Red River Region of Manitoba and carried forward by the strong influence of Cheechum on Maria Campbell’s life. However, in insisting on a single Metis identity, these critics tend to ignore the other forms of identity that Campbell expresses in her autobiography, particularly pan-tribal “Native” identity. As Tol Foster has suggested, the culturally-specific approach should not exclude attention to the “contributions and collisions between communities” (273). In fact, in an interview from the time of *Halfbreed*’s publication, Campbell insists that division between “halfbreeds” and other groups are largely a product of the “system”: “It is this whole thing about non-status, Treaty, halfbreeds, White and Black, that’s how our whole system lays it on us. That is how we get sucked in” (Interview with George 3). Campbell’s conscious participation as an adult in a pan-Indian and politicized community has yet to be fully explored.

In contrast with the critical emphasis on unity and continuity, another group of critics have viewed *Halfbreed* as an example of the hybridity of Aboriginal identity. The hybridity approach to Aboriginal literature has been popular since the eighties, influenced by post-colonial and post-modern theory. Offering an alternative to binaries that would define Aboriginal people as either “pure” and “traditional” or “assimilated” and “disappearing,” hybridity theorists instead emphasize the ability of cultures to blend. Aboriginal people of mixed-descent are especially popular subjects for those interested in hybrid identity. Jodi Lundgren, for instance, views the Metis as inherently hybrid: “Hybrid by definition, Metis identity is *predicated* upon what is ‘an inescapable and

characteristic feature of all post-colonial societies,' namely cultural syncreticity" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin qtd. 63, italics Lundgren's). Thus, Lundgren emphasizes, for example, the ways that young Maria's education in European authors is juxtaposed with her learning of traditional "Native ways," such as the use of wild plants (73). Julie Cairnie similarly focuses on Maria's childhood fascination with European literature and its influence on her childhood games, commenting that "the children perceive and negotiate the incongruity between the context of the game and the context of their lives" (98). According to Cairnie, such negotiation is the "project" for writers of what she calls "composite" origins: "to identify the negative and positive aspects of their hybridity, to portray it as a painful division and to celebrate it as a rich cultural heritage" (96). Kevin Kardynal also sees Campbell's identity as ambivalent and divided: "her character identifies with various groups simultaneously.... In fact, the apparent incompatibility that Campbell perceives between the Native part of her and her desire for the upper-class wealth and lifestyle available to Whites is the root of her identity conflict and downfall" (45). Whether they view Campbell's identity positively, as fluidly transcultural, or, negatively, as painfully torn, critics of the hybridity school focus on the existence of two separate cultural identities mixing in Campbell. In fact, Monika Kaup is so attached to the hybrid ideal, which she calls "the plural poetics of métissage" (197), that she views Campbell's identification with the Riel rebellion, a "Native-like resistance movement" (198), as a sign of her failure to fulfill the "promise" of hybridity (197).

Critics from the hybridity school also see Campbell's hybridity reflected in the mixture of genres within *Halfbreed*. Cairnie focuses on the tensions between autobiographical and testimonial narratives, concluding that *Halfbreed* is an "integration and therefore a modification of both" (106). Wills states that Campbell's autobiography is a "blending" of her "community's oral conventions with English literary conventions to subvert both practices, so debunking simplistic notions of authenticity" (23). And Jannetta draws parallels between the Métis and Campbell's autobiographical genre, suggesting that the genre should be perceived "as a 'hybrid/half-breed' or go-between for fiction and historiography, oscillating between an un- or underdefined space, full of creative potential and freedom" (172).

Some Aboriginal scholars, however, have taken issue with this hybridity approach. They argue that the influence of one culture on another is universal and ordinary and that it does not necessarily imply a divided identity (Womack, "Theorizing" 383). This insistence on Aboriginal people's "hybrid" identity, these scholars argue, does not represent

how Aboriginal people see themselves and also undermines the political right and need for Aboriginal people to speak strongly from a particular identity, as, for instance, Metis. Jo-Ann Episkenew, a Metis critic, has critiqued the idea that Campbell expresses identity confusion in *Halfbreed*: “Granted, negotiating identity in a purportedly post-colonial society is a challenge that all Indigenous people face. However, many academics persist in the belief that it is confusion about their identity—and not the racist oppression that is a legacy of colonialism—that cause mixed-blood characters their difficulties” (“Socially” 57). The “hybridity” interpretation, Episkenew argues, is an example of a problem with so much criticism of Aboriginal literature, that it “lacks a fundamental understanding of the ideological context in which the works were written” (“Socially” 56). Christopher Teuton agrees, pointing out that more and more Aboriginal critics are insisting that, “this issue of culture-sharing has little to do with cultural purity/impurity and more to do with the production and aims of knowledge within a colonial context” (205). Both Episkenew and Teuton, then, insist on the consideration of “context” in understanding the mobilization of identity.

The notion that identity is actively mobilized in *Halfbreed* has offered some critics an alternative to trying to locate an inherent identity in the text. Robert Warrior has commented that attempting to fix Aboriginal identity has constrained the study of Aboriginal literature:

Native Americanist discourses continue to be preoccupied with parochial questions of identity and authenticity. Essentialist categories still reign insofar as more of the focus of scholarship has been to reduce, constrain, and contain American Indian literature and thought and to establish why someone or something is “Indian” rather than engage in the myriad critical issues crucial to an Indian future. (*Tribal* xix)

As an alternative to trying to prove how a text is Aboriginal, Warrior suggests that critics pay attention to how Aboriginal texts “are, or it may be better to say, can be, part of larger processes of political and social engagement” (*The People* xxix). And indeed, some critics, since *Halfbreed*’s publication, have seen the text as politically active and have focused on its function. Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, for example, states that *Halfbreed* “became more than a personal, literary act of autobiography. It became an important public act of telling and was therefore both a social and political act” (108).

Many have seen *Halfbreed*’s political act as primarily one of resistance to colonial policies and attitudes. Drawing on Campbell’s direct address to the non-Aboriginal reader, “I write this for all of you, to tell you what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country” (8), these

critics argue that the purpose of the text is to induce a response in non-Aboriginal readers. Kate Vangen, for example, quotes Campbell as saying, "I tried being the militant speaker and the activist.... That's when I realized that...writing was the best way to reach people" (190) and, according to Vangen, these "people" are Euro-Canadian (190). In this line of argument, through the very act of publishing her life story in the context of Canada as a colonial state, Campbell is necessarily engaging in a resistant act since "she moves towards an historical subjectivity traditionally denied First Nations people" (Harry 8). The text is seen as challenging dominant ideas about Aboriginal people since *Halfbreed* "intervene[s] in the Euro-Canadian literary tradition and challenge[s] existing stereotypes" (Acoose, *Iskwewwak* ix-x) and "subvert[s] the master narrative of White imperialist history" (Lundgren 72).

This view of the autobiography has been heavily influenced by post-colonial theory which views the writing of "colonized peoples" primarily in terms of the experience of and resistance to colonialism and imperialism. While reading *Halfbreed* as a resistant narrative can explain some aspects of the text, it is important to remember that literary resistance is not "simply there in the text as a structure of intentionality" (Slemon 145). Stephen Slemon, in a critique of "resistance theory," argues that "resistance is grounded in the *multiple* and *contradictory* structures of ideological interpellation" (145, original emphasis). In other words, the resistance is formed by the interaction between the critic and text and is necessarily shaped by the assumptions of the critic. Thus, for instance, most "resistance" readings of *Halfbreed* assume that the text is directed to non-Aboriginal people, will be read by non-Aboriginal readers, and is primarily concerned with responding to non-Aboriginal society. In fact, these assumptions can be seen from the earliest reviews of the text, many of which spoke of the autobiography's inducement of guilt in the White reader. Cornelia Holbert's 1973 review in *Best Sellers* is typical of many responses to the book, as she writes, "*Half-Breed*...is shocking, not because of what Maria Campbell has been (yes, a fifteen-year-old bride, yes, a prostitute, yes, a narcotics addict, a twice attempted suicide), but because the hand that holds the book trembles at what it has done" (344).⁵ In less obvious ways, many resistance readings similarly place the critical emphasis on the "trembling hand" of the Euro-Canadian reader. In this way, as Slemon points out, "centre/periphery notions of resistance can actually work to *reinscribe* centre/periphery relations and can 'serve an institutional function of securing the dominant narratives'" (145). That is, many critics see the resistant narrative as focused on and existing for the colonial society, thus inadvertently reproducing that society's dominance. For example, Vangen compares *Halfbreed's*

resistant politics to a scene, imagined by Rudy Wiebe in *The Temptations of Big Bear*, in which an Aboriginal man who is part of the Riel Rebellion “moons” the approaching Canadian troops (188-189). Yet she does not consider the implications of comparing *Halfbreed's* politics to a Euro-Canadian author's depiction of an Aboriginal man in a scene depicted from the perspective of the Euro-Canadian soldiers. In addition to prioritizing non-Aboriginal perspectives in this way, resistance readings from the eighties and nineties often describe resistance in a generalized, idealized, and dehistoricized way.

More recently, however, some critics have focused on contextualizing *Halfbreed's* acts of resistance within a particular historical place, looking at the ways in which the mobilization of identity in *Halfbreed* can be seen as shaped by “the social conditions of the text's production” (Suzack 124) – that is, as a strategic response to historical and political circumstances. Cheryl Suzack and Jo-Ann Episkenew, for example, describe *Halfbreed* as a response to unjust government policies about Aboriginal people and their identity. It “explains in an accessible manner how public policies have harmed Indian and Metis people in this country” (Episkenew, “Aboriginal” 125-6). Suzack is even more particular, arguing that debates around the 1969 White Paper and around two 1973 court cases challenging the Indian Act's policies around Indian status are “important condition[s] of production against which to read Maria Campbell's life story” since, according to Suzack, the text is an “intervention” in some very particular “social debates of its time” (123). This approach, as Suzack argues further, allows us to see Campbell's identity as sometimes shifting and sometimes deliberately stable, and that both these approaches are part of her “critical approach to social reality, an approach whose political purpose is to intervene in political discourse” (133-134). By specifying Campbell's resistance to particular circumstances in a particular time and place, these essays avoid the implication that Aboriginal people are essentially defined by their resistance to non-Aboriginal society.

While *Halfbreed's* resistance to colonialism has clearly been an important part of its function for readers, it is surely limiting to perceive the book only in terms of what it is *against*. As Daniel Justice has noted, focusing only on decolonization “runs the risk of being merely reactionary, not creative or transformative. At its best, peoplehood is shaped by relationships and shared purpose” (152). Justice is one of a number of Aboriginal critics who have recently turned their attention to the ways in which we can theorize Aboriginal identity as constituted by ongoing and active relationships.⁶ And indeed, in looking at how Aboriginal writers and critics have responded to *Halfbreed* over the years, we can see that

they have often focused on the role that *Halfbreed* has played in connecting Aboriginal people to one another. Emma LaRoque, for example, a contemporary of Campbell, explains that for her the text is not about resistance but about connection: "I do not read Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* – I experience it. Maria told a story, her story. She did not use the Métis as a vehicle for a worldview, a doctrine or even as a social protest. She simply told a story, and because it is authentic, it is my story too" (91). In such responses, we can see the development of shared identity based on an experience of communication. Justice has articulated this active connection as the experience of kinship: "kinship is best thought of as a verb rather than a noun because kinship, in most Indigenous contexts, is something that's *done* rather than something that merely is" (150). Indeed, Daniel David Moses uses a metaphor of kinship to assert that Aboriginal writers in Canada experience Campbell as an active influence, calling her "[t]he mother of us all" and Lenore Keeshig-Tobias agrees, "[s]he is. Of course she is" (83). For Aboriginal writers, this sense of connection seems to come from a shared activity and purpose with Campbell. And this sense of connection is not unique to Metis readers; many of the Aboriginal writers and critics who were interviewed by Harmut Lutz in the early nineties also allude to the strong influence and connective quality of *Halfbreed*.

This experience of kinship is significantly different from the abstract pan-tribal unity that is assumed by some critics to exist among Aboriginal writers. This is rather what Lisa Brooks has asserted as a "historically and spatially specific intertribalism – which is based in the actual relations between individuals, families, nations, and places, as well as a continuous attempt to build and maintain communication and relations" (253). Brooks further asserts that this active intertribalism is enacted in part by connected "networks of writing Indians" (254). These networks are clearly visible around *Halfbreed*. Episkenew declares, "[t]he reception that *Halfbreed* received surprised and motivated aspiring Aboriginal writers; it revealed that mainstream Canadians would listen to their stories" ("Aboriginal" 123). Acoose further contends that "the movement initiated by Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* is growing ever stronger" as, for many Aboriginal writers, *Halfbreed* is a "vehicle" for their own resistance and empowerment ("Post *Halfbreed*" 40). And Campbell's autobiography continues to influence writers even decades after its publication. For example, Gregory Scofield, in his 1999 autobiography *Thunder through My Veins*, writes that both Campbell and *Halfbreed* were integral to his own life struggle. Scofield asserts that writers such as Campbell "made me want to write. They brought my mind and spirit to life. They gave me a sense of something larger than myself, something more pro-

found than the pain, fear and anger. They led me to a place of belonging, a permanent home where I have found a voice to speak with" (xv). Scofield's sense of the Aboriginal intellectual network that is evoked through *Halfbreed* provides him with a sense of connection to a larger community. As well, the autobiography provides him with a foundation—a home—from which to maintain and nourish his own literary voice. While scholarly criticism of Aboriginal literature has generally focused on the work's resistance to dominant Canadian society, a look at how Aboriginal writers like Scofield have responded to the text suggests that Aboriginal people are less focused on the text's resistance than on its ability to connect Aboriginal people together. This is a function of Aboriginal literature that has thus far been little explored in the published criticism.

Since its publication in 1973, *Halfbreed* has been interpreted in the service of many political or theoretical causes. It played a key role in the validation of "Native" literature. It has been called upon as a symbol of nationalist Metis identity and, conversely, as a banner text for hybridity. It has been read as a resistant text directed at White readers or as a community-building work for Aboriginal writers. Indeed, part of *Halfbreed's* lasting appeal seems to be its ability to serve a wide array of purposes. It is tempting then to conclude with some relativist claims about the work meaning different things to different people. We might say that, since identity is socially constructed, all of the identities that critics claim to have found in *Halfbreed* are equally valid. But such relativism is unsatisfying in that it provides no guidance as to what might constitute more or less ethical approaches to Aboriginal literature. Craig Womack has worried about a "relativistic abyss" that advocates "an open-ended definition of Indian experience"; we must maintain, he argues, a sense that there is a "core" to Aboriginal experience and identity, even if it is ever changing, and that it can provide us with a meaningful approach to Aboriginal literature ("Theorizing" 408). The question then is how to get a sense of that "core," without creating a restrictive notion of identity that cannot address the complexity of a work such as *Halfbreed*.

Recently, there has been a movement, known as post-positivist realism, which attempts to reclaim identity as a meaningful term of analysis without falling into dangerously restrictive claims; post-positivist realists claim that, through a careful and continually correcting process of interpretation "one can more or less accurately grasp the complexity of the social processes and multiple conditioning that make up the 'truth' of experience" (Hames-Garcia 109).⁷ Along these theoretical lines, perhaps the many efforts to fix and contain identity in *Halfbreed* might be reconsidered in favor of an approach that acknowledges the multiplicity

of identities that are at work in the text. Campbell identifies as a mother, a northern Saskatchewan Halfbreed, a Native person, a representative of the Alberta Metis Association, etc. Hames-Garcia, writing on such multiplicity, argues that such social identities do not “comprise essentially separate ‘axes’ that occasionally ‘intersect.’ They do not simply intersect but blend.... They expand one another and mutually constitute each other’s meanings” (103). Rather than restricting our critical focus to a single identity, he suggests, we can investigate how and why certain identities in a text are affirmed or excluded as well as “the context for exclusion and affirmation, and the historical character and social function of each” (Hames-Garcia 119). This is not a relativist affirmation of all identities or a celebration of hybridity; rather, as a self-proclaimed “post-positivist realist,” Hames-Garcia claims that this theoretical approach allows us to distinguish between more or less true and ethical identity claims and to move towards a more coherent view of the real, experienced complexity of identity (119).

Sean Teuton’s recent essay on the teaching of *Halfbreed* uses realist theory in reading *Halfbreed* in order to “piece out the differences among inherited, imposed, and chosen identities, [so that] students begin to understand that our identifications with nations, lands, religions, or the past, as well as with ethnic groups, can be diminished or improved – based on our freedom to interrogate, challenge, or relate to them” (198). Teuton’s argument sensitively traces the ways in which Campbell chooses or is pushed into various identities over the course of the autobiography, considering multiple factors such as class, race, appearance, and religion. He shows how this approach to the text allows his American students, who, he points out, feel quite distant from this Canadian text, to begin to examine their own self-identifications (201). This distance between the American and Canadian contexts, however, is also a limiting factor in Teuton’s essay. The identity of Metis/Halfbreeds of Western Canada, with their distinct cultural identity and political recognition, is very significantly different from mixed-race identity in the United States. In an effort to make connections between *Halfbreed* and his students’ lives, Teuton pays relatively little attention to the particular historical, political and cultural forces that influence Campbell’s identity.

Nevertheless, Teuton’s essay usefully points to the ways in which the classroom can be an ideal place to explore the multiplicity of identities in a text. He suggests that the classroom can act as a microcosm of the world in which “a diversity of viewpoints contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of literary texts and of differently situated people in the world” (192). As part of our research for this paper, we were interested, not only in the published criticism on *Halfbreed*, but

also in how the text is being taught. Thus, we contacted a group of scholars by way of e-mail⁸ to inquire *how* and *why* they teach *Halfbreed* in their classrooms.⁹ In the responses that we received,¹⁰ we found that Campbell's *Halfbreed* is still widely taught, primarily in introductory or survey courses on the canon of Aboriginal/Indigenous literatures (Episkenew, Ruffo, and Renate Eigenbrod) but also in courses in Métis history (Brenda MacDougall), Indigenous Women's Stories (Eigenbrod), as well as in Women's Studies and Native Studies courses (Deanna Reder). The responses from the professors of these courses suggest that, in the classroom setting, teachers are situating *Halfbreed* within a variety of social and political contexts.

Based on the responses we received, it appears that those teaching *Halfbreed* are engaging with its multiple identity claims in complex and socially-grounded ways. Deanna Reder, for instance, likes to "juxtapose the effects of legislation on Métis identity with Cree ideas of relationship," and Episkenew uses the text "as a critique of Canadian government policies, especially—but not exclusively—the policies of identity." The professors who responded to our query also emphasized that they place *Halfbreed* within a literary and historical context. Almost all the respondents emphasized the importance of *Halfbreed's* influence on other Aboriginal writers, calling *Halfbreed* a "seminal text" (Ruffo and Sam McKegey), a "canonical text" (Reder), and "one of the landmark publications in Canadian/Aboriginal literature" (Eigenbrod). Ruffo explains that *Halfbreed* "was also the most popular and influential text in terms of consciousness raising and providing a 'model' for others to write their own stories." Moreover, several respondents mentioned that they teach *Halfbreed* in relation to other texts. Daniel Heath Justice believes that the text "teaches best in tandem with another Métis work, either selections from *Stories [of the Road Allowance People]* or, more successfully, alongside Gregory Scofield's book of poetry *I Knew Two Métis Women*, which is a fine complement to Campbell's autobiographical text." Similarly, Ruffo contextualizes Campbell's book with other texts by Aboriginal writers from the same time period such as Harold Cardinal and Howard Adams. Ruffo further suggests using Emma Larocque's writing, such as *Defeathering the Indian* (1975), to analyze *Halfbreed* as it provides an "Aboriginal/Métis theoretical perspective." Episkenew contextualizes *Halfbreed* using the "historical and social conditions of the late 60s and early 70s." By creating a fuller context for *Halfbreed*, these teachers are engaging in what Hames-Garcia calls "realism": "realism seeks to make increasingly fuller contexts cohere within increasingly more accurate explanations. In this sense, its conception of truth is coherentist rather than foundationalist or relativist" (119).

Teachers of *Halfbreed* also acknowledged the ways in which the institutional context of the university influences what is taught or not taught and how students will receive a given text. Several professors who are not currently teaching *Halfbreed* explained their decision in terms of publishing and curricular issues. For instance, Sam McKegney prefers teaching Beatrice Culleton Mosionier's *In Search of April Raintree* (particularly the critical edition edited by Cheryl Suzack), for he feels this edition makes the text "more critically accessible to students." Jennifer Andrews notes that she has not taught Campbell's text because of its absence from the anthology she has used in the past—*A New Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* (2002) edited by Donna Bennett and Russell Brown—as well as the anthology she plans to use in the upcoming academic year—*Canadian Literature in English: Texts and Contexts* (2008) edited by Laura Moss and Cynthia Sugars. Moreover, cost becomes a prohibitive factor, particularly if Andrews has asked her students to purchase an expensive anthology: "[A]sking for the students to purchase a separate copy of a book like *Halfbreed* is usually not an option." Ruffo similarly lamented that Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie's second and third editions of *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English* (1998 and 2005 respectively), omitted the selections of *Halfbreed*, which had been in their 1992 first edition. That a work so universally acknowledged as central to Aboriginal literature is not easily accessible to teachers in anthologies or in a critical edition is problematic. Other scholars noted that they are concerned about how students will respond to *Halfbreed*. Justice worries that Campbell's *Halfbreed* "reinforces a number of stereotypes many students have about Métis and other Aboriginal people...its [*Halfbreed*'s] rather limited time span doesn't engage any of Campbell's later (and to my mind, more interesting) development as an activist, community leader, and writer." Sean Teuton, on the other hand, acknowledges that many of his students bring problematic assumptions to *Halfbreed*, but he encourages his students to reflect on these assumptions, suggesting that open classroom discussion can lead students "who are otherwise non-reflexive" to rethink their privilege (192). These responses remind us that considering the context in which we read *Halfbreed* is as important as looking at the context in which it was written.

In 1973, Maclean's prefaced its excerpts from *Halfbreed* with, "We see these little bands of Indians and Métis as we drive into such towns and cities as Fort Macleod and Prince Albert and The Pas. Only this time we are witness through the eyes of one of the people we stare at" (27). Critical responses to *Halfbreed* have come a long way since this colonial "stare," in large part because the readers of this text have included

not only, as the *Macleans'* editors assumed with their restrictive "we," Euro-Canadians, but Aboriginal readers, writers, professors, and students. The accounts we received of how *Halfbreed* is currently being taught suggest that scholars of Aboriginal literature are increasingly moving towards a complex and deeply contextualized analysis of identity in this important text. Critics of Aboriginal literature have grappled with *Halfbreed* for decades, attempting from a variety of theoretical perspectives to come to terms with its depiction of Aboriginal identity. At times, these attempts have appeared to do what Gregory Sarris has described as trying to "nail down the Indian so we can nail down the text" (128). But it appears that teachers of the text are now able to draw on these various perspectives in the classroom to create an expansive understanding of *Halfbreed's* significance and of Campbell's "whole and multiple self" (Hames-Garcia 127). Yet this expansiveness is not yet fully reflected in published analyses of the work. After all the critical attention that has been paid to *Halfbreed*, there is still a need for a study that traces, in historical and regional context, the variety of identities that Maria Campbell "does" (and does not do) in *Halfbreed*, paying attention to how she enacts kinship and culture, and how she interacts with colonial society as well as with an emerging Native movement in Canada.¹¹ But no doubt this kind of analysis will come as *Halfbreed* continues to live on: here in Saskatoon, a librarian in the public library system told us that they are unable to keep the book on their shelves. *Halfbreed* continues to find new readers and to challenge us in new ways.

Kristina Fagan is a member of the Labrador Metis Nation. She teaches Aboriginal literature and storytelling in the Department of English at the University of Saskatchewan. She is an editor of *Call Me Hank: A Stó:lō Man's Reflections on Logging, Living and Growing Old* as well as *Orality and Literacy: Reflections across Disciplines*. She is currently researching the connections between storytelling and identity among the Labrador Metis.

Stephanie Danyluk has a B.A. in English from the University of Saskatchewan. She is currently completing her M.A. at the University of Saskatchewan, with a concentration in Aboriginal literature. Her M.A. thesis focuses on Metis narratives of foster care.

Bryce Donaldson is pursuing his English MA at the University of Saskatchewan. His Marxist bent has led him to approach Aboriginal literature as a necessarily political act. Although passionate about the in-

tricacies of theory, he intends to use his education to contribute to achieving justice and freedom for actual oppressed peoples.

Amelia Horsburgh completed her MA in World Literature at Case Western Reserve University (Cleveland, OH). She is currently a PhD candidate in the English Department at the University of Saskatchewan, researching for her dissertation the Canadian short story by female writers with a focus on body images, beauty ideals, and body discourses. She continues to do research in the field of Aboriginal literature, particularly Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* for this issue of *CJNS*, and is presently examining Eden Robinson's *Blood Sports* in relation to larger questions of Aboriginality and kinship.

Robyn Moore is currently completing her M.A. in English at the University of Saskatchewan with a focus on Canadian and Aboriginal literature. She recently attended an ethnohistory field school in British Columbia where she collaborated with the Sto:lo people to generate a relevant research paper for the community. In her undergraduate degree, she did a similar field school to Ghana, West Africa, studying African literature. Robyn did her B.A. at Mount Royal College and Athabasca University.

Martin Winquist recently completed an M.A. in English Literature at the University of Saskatchewan, and will begin his PhD in English Literature at the University of Western Ontario in 2009. His field of study is the relationship between postmodernist thought and gender, focusing on how gender is constructed and performed in contemporary society. His M.A. project focused on the construction of gender identity in Carol Shields's *The Stone Diaries*, and his PhD studies will examine the construction of community in the works of Virginia Woolf.

Notes

1. This is a collaborative essay that emerged out of Kristina Fagan's graduate course in Aboriginal literature in the English Department at the University of Saskatchewan. While collaborative papers are commonplace in the sciences, they were new territory for most of us in the course. Each student was given a time period and assigned the task of surveying all published responses to *Halfbreed* during that period and presenting them to the class. When that process was complete, we drew from the research a number of major trends in

those responses and each student then wrote a section of the essay. While we continued to study other works, in each class we discussed our on-going work on *Halfbreed*, sharing our ideas as well as any difficulties we were encountering. Finally, we collaboratively developed an overall argument for the essay and Fagan pulled all the contributions together into a cohesive whole.

2. A number of critics have focused primarily on Campbell's identity as a woman. While feminist critics have played a substantial role in *Halfbreed* criticism, responses focusing on Campbell's identity as a woman are beyond the scope of this essay.
3. Editors' note: Fagan et al spell "Metis" here (and elsewhere in this article) without the accent aigu in order to make it more inclusive of all Metis, rather than just French Métis (exceptions are when the word refers specifically to the French Métis or when it is spelled with an accent in a quotation).
4. Likewise, *The Native Voice*, an Aboriginal-run publication, wrote in 1973 that Campbell "tells a story of Indian and Métis life" (4).
5. This "tragic Aboriginal woman telling the story of her plight to awaken the non-Aboriginal" trope runs through a number of other reviews and commentaries about the book as well. William French, for instance, purports that "If there are any smug bureaucrats and self-righteous Wasps left in [Canada], Maria Campbell's book will help jolt them out of their complacency" (15).
6. See also, for instance, Tol Foster and Lisa Brooks.
7. For an introduction to post-positivist realist approaches to identity see Paula Moya's introduction to *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*.
8. The following is a copy of the e-mail that Amelia Horsburgh sent:

*Good morning,
My name is Amelia Horsburgh, and I am PhD graduate student in Kristina Fagan's ENG 818 Interdisciplinarity in the Study of Aboriginal Literature at the University of Saskatchewan.
I am writing to you in the hopes of receiving a bit of pedagogical information regarding a text that our class is currently researching: Maria Campbell's Half-breed (1973). We are endeavouring as a group to write a paper on Campbell's text, analyzing the reception and response over the last 36 years. While the other graduate students in the class are researching the scholarship surrounding this pivotal Canadian text, I am attempting to find out if this book is being taught in Universities today; how it is being taught (the pedagogical tools you use in the classroom); the context under which it is being taught (i.e. as Canadian Lit-*

erature/Aboriginal Literature/Autobiography); and why the text is (not) on your syllabi.

In a nutshell, if you are teaching Campbell's *Half-breed*, I am interested in knowing how and why you teach this text.

A brief e-mail reply from you would be greatly appreciated.

My very warmest regards,

Amelia

9. We wanted our list to be as inclusive as possible. We approached a mix of women and men, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, Canadian and American, and from departments of English, Native Studies, Creative Writing, Folklore, as well as Women and Gender's Studies. The following recipients responded: Jennifer Andrews (University of New Brunswick), James H. Cox (University of Texas), Renate Eigenbrod (University of Manitoba), Jo-Ann Episkenew (First Nations University), Helen Hoy (University of Guelph), Daniel Heath Justice (University of Toronto), Brenda Macdougall (University of Saskatchewan), Sam McKegney (Queen's University), Deanna Reder (Simon Fraser University), Armand Garnet Ruffo (Carleton University), and Sean Kicummah Teuton (University of Wisconsin-Madison). Many thanks to these scholars for their generous participation in our research.
10. Some scholars even offered to send material they believed would be pertinent to our research. In particular, Sean Teuton sent a copy of his chapter titled "Teaching Disclosure: Overcoming the Invisibility of Whiteness in the American Indian Studies Classroom" and Armand Ruffo sent his article "Remembering and (Re)Constructing Community: Considering Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* and Gregory Scofield's *Thunder Through My Veins: Memories of a Metis Childhood*." Again, our many thanks.
11. A scholarly and critical edition of *Halfbreed* could make these various contexts more accessible to teachers and students alike.

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