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Not Invisible

Métis Women in the Fur Trade

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What happens when two cultures meet? Nineteenth Century Western Canadian Métis women provide us with an example. As the offspring of colonizing Euro-Canadian fathers and colonized Native mothers, Métis women fulfilled a vitally important role in the fur trade. In doing so they helped to create a distinct culture of their own.

In spite of Métis women's importance, patricentric historical ethnographies and archaeological findings minimize their role and often leave them voiceless and invisible (Brown, 1992, p.114-115). This is due in a large part to the fact that wealthy white men were typically the writers of history and historical documents so Métis women's roles have been under-represented. For this reason a multi-disciplinary approach is necessary in uncovering Métis women's important roles in the fur trade. Fortunately, in the last thirty years archaeological, anthropological and historical gendered analysis have gone a long way in helping to reconstruct Métis women's lifeways. Yet, as discussed below, the role of past Métis women is still buried in male centered assumptions evident in a significant portion of academic scholarship.

This paper seeks to uncover the gendered biases in the Métis literature and in the process illustrate the important role Métis women played in the fur trade as well as examine their influence on a unique Métis identity and culture. Utilizing a variety of archaeological, ethnohistoric and historical sources, my paper will begin with a background study on Métis ethnogenesis. Following this discussion and forming the bulk of my paper, I investigate academics' gendered biases and illustrate successful archaeological and

historical approaches that acknowledge Métis women's presence in and importance to the fur trade.

First a discussion on the term Métis is necessary. Jennifer Brown, widely recognized as *the* anthropological authority on the Métis explained that metis is an old French word for 'mixed.' Other terms that were used during the nineteenth century to identify a person of mixed ethnic descent included michif, bois-brûlé, chicot, country born, mixed blood and half breed. Most of these terms have fallen out of use (1992, p. 105). But, as Jennifer Brown (1992) contends, the many different spellings of Métis indicate many different meanings. For instance métis with a small 'm' has a proscriptive meaning and refers only to those people with a French Catholic and Native heritage. (p. 105) Métis with a capital 'M' is not used in a generic sense, this spelling refers to people that possess a distinctive socio-cultural heritage and ethnically self-identify as Métis. Finally, the Anglicized spelling of Metis with a capital 'M' indicates a legal or political identity of a distinct people, comparable with status Indians or Inuit (Brown, 1992, p. 105).

But as Sabrina Peressini reminds us “[t]he rather complex issue of conceptualizing Metis¹ identity may perhaps be best illustrated by mercury, which is fluid and elusive” (2000-2001, p. 87). Peressini agrees with Martin Dunn and cautions “If we make the mistake of replacing the human process of identification with the academic or legal process of definition, we run a serious risk of demeaning and diminishing the significance of Metis

¹ Peressini confused Jennifer Brown's definition of the Anglicized Metis with a capital 'M' with Brown's Métis definition.

reality” (2000-2001, p. 88). John Foster also argued Métis people are Métis if they and others define them so (Foster, 2007, p. 101).

With these cautions in mind the paper will utilize the French capitalized spelling of Métis. This spelling is preferred because the paper investigates the birth of the Métis people as culturally distinct from Native and Euro-Canadians and then specifically examines the roles of culturally distinct Métis women within the nineteenth century fur trade. Further the Métis Nation of Alberta and the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan both prefer this spelling. Finally, the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal People also used this form in their report (Royal Commission, 1996). But, as will be discussed, not all children of Native mothers and Euro-Canadian fathers culturally identified themselves as Métis. In this instance they will be referred to as mixed-bloods, in hopes of eliminating confusion. In order to highlight the importance of Métis women in the Nineteenth Century Fur Trade a context of the fur trade needs to be provided. And within the following contextual discussion of the fur trade the emergence, or the ethnogenesis, of the Métis people will also be illustrated.

Children of the Fur Trade: Métis Ethnogenesis.

The Métis people were born out of the fur trade, to Native mothers and Euro-Canadian fathers. But as ethnohistorians Jacqueline Peterson and John Anfinson (1992) argue, the

term *fur trade* is an oversimplification. They suggest there were many fur trades over time, cultures and ecological landscape (p. 82). Due to Western cultural ethnocentrism many people overlook the fact that cultural contact did not just vary by European nationality. It also varied by band. Further as Sarah Carter and Patricia McCormack (2011) demonstrate, movement of Natives, Euro-Canadians and mixed-blood children was fluid; international and territorial borders were constructs. People of the fur traded easily moved across these invisible lines (pp. 3-7). For this reason the paper examines three broad fur trades: The British Fur Trade along the Hudson and James Bay, the French fur trade out of the St. Lawrence and Great Lakes Region and the North West Interior Trade.

The Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson's Bay, or the Hudson's Bay Company [HBC], was granted charter to all lands draining into Hudson's Bay in 1670. The HBC preferred to stay on the coast and have inland traders come to them. The company found that higher revenues were possible if native traders were responsible for transporting goods to the post. The local native groups, predominantly made up of Cree bands, and some Ojibwa groups were collectively known as the Home Guard Cree. The local bands proved to be very adaptive to the new European presence on the bay. They worked for the HBC as provisioners, labourers and mail couriers between posts (Brown, 1992, p. 108). Not surprisingly, the HBC and its capitalist shareholders were primarily concerned about profits. They were not prepared to support 'country wives' and 'half-breed' children with expensive imported food. So they adopted a policy of removal and dispersal. The company removed traders, clerks and servants from the coast when they

retired or when their contracts were completed. The HBC also encouraged native populations to disperse for the winter, thus mixed-blood children were typically assimilated into the Home Guard Cree culture rather than developing their own distinct communities (Brown, 1992, p. 108).

The French fur traders on the St. Lawrence and Great Lakes adopted a very different approach from their British counterparts. The French traders established interior post networks in order to foster trading alliances with natives. The French also utilized these alliances as a check on the power of the Iroquois Confederacy and their English allies. (Nassaney, Brandão, Cremin, & Girodano, 2007, p. 4) To build and maintain the alliances the French encouraged a ‘putting out’ system. Frenchmen were encouraged to marry the Native women of the region. (Mann, 2008, p. 322)

But, as Jennifer Brown explains, the French policy of intermarriage was quickly turned on its head. They had expected French husbands to ‘civilize’ their Native wives and therefore Natives but they became alarmed at the propensity of Frenchmen to ‘go native’ (Brown, 1992, p. 106). The French colony introduced the *filles du roi*, French marriageable young women from orphan’s hospitals in Paris, in an effort to stamp out intermarriages that were believed to produce ‘inferior offspring’ and unchristian, savage lifeways. (Brown, 1992, p. 106) Jesuit Missionaries were also very vocal in their disdain of Frenchmen. As Susan Sleep-Smith (2000) argues “most priests viewed the fur-trader husbands as licentious drunkards who undermined Christian ideals” (p. 425).

In response to ethnocentrism from the French colonializers, the ‘inferior offspring’ of the mixed marriages cemented their distinct identities by building informal and fluid bi-racial communities with their own moral and social order. The mixed blood descendants of the unions choose to live in distinct permanent villages with other mixed blood offspring. During the eighteenth century these villages served as geographical locations for “a people in the process of becoming” Métis (Peressini, 2000-2001, p. 90). Further marginalization and ethnical segmenting efforts of the British and later Americans colonializers only served to strengthen a Métis distinct identity in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence region (Mann, 2008, pp. 322-328).

The Northwest interior fur trade was different than those of the HBC and Great Lakes region. At the close of the eighteenth century some intrepid Montréal based fur traders realized they could cut into the HBC trade by establishing interior posts in the Northwest. These Montréal Peddlers, or independent traders, decided to pool their resources and establish the XYZ Company more commonly known as the Nor’ West Company, NWC. Like the French fur traders, the NWC used intermarriage to establish strong trading links with the Native groups of the interior. The HBC, once happy in its isolation on the coast noticed its profits were dwindling and fewer and fewer Natives were trekking to the coast to trade (Van Kirk, 2002, p. 4). Upon the findings of an interior expedition, the HBC realized they were being cut out of the trade. They set up interior posts and stiff competition ensued. The HBC finally fully realized the economic benefits of intermarriage as a way of cementing trade relations. They too adopted the ‘putting out’ trading system from St. Lawrence and Great Lake fur trade (Foster, 2007, p. 95).

In 1821 the NWC and HBC merged putting an end to the stiff competition (Van Kirk, 2002, p. 4). By this time the newly merged HBC had fully realized the advantages of the 'putting out' system, which solved the perennial problem of surplus winter labour. John Foster (2007) argued that company servants and free men traders² were hired to transport trade goods and furs to export posts in the spring, summer, and autumn. But, there was little need for them during the long winter months and they were considered a drain on profits (p. 96). For the HBC it was more cost effective to dispatch men with a limited supply of trade goods than keep them for the winter. They could exchange the European goods for food and other necessities with local Native groups. In the process the interaction would foster better trade relations between the HBC post and local Natives (Foster, 2007, p. 96). Sometimes this process resulted in country marriages.

Interior intermarriage or 'country marriages' were not rough pairings of company servants and Native women. John Foster (2007) has illustrated the European male almost always of free man status had to be a 'man of consequence.' They had to be physically strong, generous, and entertaining, and they had to have the ability to sing a provocative song. They also had to, and probably most importantly, have the ability to engender good relations with the bride and her tribe (p. 92 & 101). The country bride's male kin provided the free man with strong trading relationships. And on a more basic level they also provided him with survival means as they gave hunting, fishing & trapping access/instruction.

² John Foster explains free men traders typically started their fur trading careers as servant, indentured employees with a contract. Successful and industrious servants could sometimes move up the company ranks and operate without a contract. Thus, they were *free* men.

But what were the women doing? Sylvia Van Kirk (2002) argues the Native women's roles were vital to the fur trade. Van Kirk contends that the most important fur trade relationship was the country marriage, because the spousal relationship entrenched the obligation of the wife's kinsmen to the trader and the trader provided his affinal kin with important new European tools and technologies (p. 3-4). The country bride provided her free man husband with trading and diplomacy advice as well as important clothing and food production. But this was not a one-way relationship the Bride's kin received regular and almost guaranteed access to European goods and technology, for instance guns and powder.

Many male-centered assumptions discount or disregard the women's input in the country marriage and assume she was the pawn of the arrangement but the bride herself benefited from increased status as she was married to a good provider with access to European goods (Van Kirk, 2002, p. 4). In many cases country marriages would only last one winter, because the bride and her kin would basically test-out the free man's ability to provide for his wife and her kin. If the free man was found wanting in this area he would be dismissed. On the other hand sustained country marriages endured many winters and the trader husband received many benefits from the relationship with his native wife (Foster, 2007, p. 97).

In line with Van Kirk, Clara Sue Kidwell (1992) argues that in addition to providing their men with an entrée into their cultures, country brides were translators, mediators, guides

and counsellors. Kidwell argues that it is a myth that Native women were overwhelmed by the complexity of their roles. (p. 98) Instead they were active participants in the marriage. Native women counselled, translated for and guided their white husbands. Kidwell also asserts that the offspring of intermarriages were important mediators and products of two cultures. (1992, p. 104)

Plains Métis ethnogenesis was different from the Great Lakes Regions. John Foster (2007) argued the free man was the primary reason a distinct Métis culture emerged on the Plains. Foster illustrates a general model of Plains Métis ethnogenesis. He argues free men chose to live alongside other free men and their families. The mixed-blood children of these unions then chose to marry other mixed blood children and through endogamy a distinct Plains Métis culture emerged. Foster believed the free man carried his ethos as a 'man of consequence' over to his home life and was *the* important decision maker in his children's enculturation process (pp. 93-94). Foster partially recognized the male centeredness of his assumption when he acknowledged more research needs to be done on the role of the mother and wife in Métis enculturation (2007, p. 103). Nevertheless, his gender bias is evident.

Exposing Gender Bias and Uncovering Métis Women's Important Fur Trade Roles

The remainder of this paper will address male-centered assumptions found in history, archaeology and anthropology. The paper will show that women were important to the fur trade and the creation of a distinct Métis identity. Foster's argument about the

predominant role of free men in the birth of the Plains Métis people defies a growing field of research on Great Lakes Métis ethnogenesis. Many anthropologists, archaeologists and historians have recently spilled a lot of ink illustrating the important role of Métis women in the fur trade. Although the two regions experienced different fur trades and were made up of different bands and European peoples some parallels can be drawn, at least until more work is done on Métis women on the Plains.

Historian Susan Sleeper-Smith (2000) suggests Métis women of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence region utilized Catholic fictive kin relationships to build positions of economic prominence within the Great Lakes fur trade community. Métis women who practiced ‘frontier’ Catholicism created an ever-expanding kinship network by serving as godmothers to multiple individuals (pp. 425-426). Sleeper-Smith argues against the historical grain which typically depicts Métis women “...either as historical outliers or as women who did not challenge traditional spheres of male authority” (Spring 2000, p. 426). To disprove this historical inaccuracy, Sleeper-Smith provides several examples of individual Métis women that utilized Catholic fictive kin relations to create regional affinal and fur trade networks which consequently fostered a regional Métis identity (Spring 2000, pp. 426-442). Sleeper-Smith’s analysis increases the economic visibility and importance of Métis women in the fur trade.

Like Foster, many archaeologists discount the important role of women in the Fur Trade, likely unaware they are displaying gender bias. For instance ethnoarchaeologists Robert Jarvenpa and Hetty Jo Brumbach (1985) examined the material adaptation of Métis Cree

in northern Saskatchewan during the late fur trade period, by utilizing post account books, journals and other archival material (pp. 309-400). But, they only studied the Métis male ecological responses to dwindling fur resources (Jarvenpa & Brumbach, 1985, p. 310). Jarvenpa and Brumbach utilized a caloric intake diet analysis model to discover that the Métis' food purchases only contributed a small portion of their family's daily caloric needs. Journal entries indicate the rest of the Métis diet was likely made up with country foods including small game trapping, large game hunting, fishing and gathering exercises (1985, pp. 324-325). Jarvenpa and Brumbach conclude that the self-sufficient responses of the individual Cree Métis demonstrate an environmental adaptation in face of the dwindling employment opportunities offered by the HBC. They argue that the Métis Cree were a culture *in-between*, their purchase of Euro-Canadian foodstuffs, employment and ecological adaptations illustrate they mediated between the Native and Euro-Canadian cultural identifiers (Jarvenpa & Brumbach, 1985, pp. 324-325). Jarvenpa and Brumbach only indirectly reference women when they refer to estimated family caloric requirements of Métis families. Completely missing from their analysis is the important role Métis women would have played in food procurement. They also fail to consider Métis women's role as food processors and clothing producers, incredibly important roles especially in the harsh winters of northern Saskatchewan.

Robert Mann commits a similar gendered error in his analysis of Wabash Valley Métis folk housing. Mann asserts the dissimilarities in the construction of Métis homes illustrate a defiant response to British and American hardening colonial attitudes. In a response to marginalization Métis people built their homes very differently from their

colonializers (2008, pp. 321-322). Mann argues the typical Métis home displayed a unique cultural identity that was invested with meaning. Attesting to a shared identity the Métis of Red River, Saskatchewan and Alberta constructed homes in the same manner as the Métis of the Wabash region, building their homes in defiance of the “landscape of colonial tensions (2008, p. 322).” Although Mann’s study offers an important materialist culture response to ethnocentrism and colonial prejudices, Mann does not consider how the interior layout of the Métis folk housing would have affected Métis women’s day to day lives and thus cultural experiences.

David Burley, Scott Hamilton and Knut Fladmark’s also display gender ignorance in their 1996 analysis of the assemblage and activity areas of the Historic Rocky Mountain Fort near present day Fort St. John, British Columbia. They fail to recognize Métis women were there. The archaeologists chose to investigate non-verbal communication evident in the fort’s U shaped construction. Interestingly, they argue the clerk’s home and trade store symbolically placed at the center of the U demonstrates non-verbal social and class hierarchies (Burley, Hamilton, & Fladmark, p. 54).

Although their work is important to class and social interpretations, it is disappointing that the archaeologists provide no interpretation of the artifacts that are identifiable with women. Burley, Hamilton and Fladmark only quantified their assemblage findings. Of the 20,000 artifacts, 19,000 were beads. The remainder of the assemblage items were brass and copper kettle fragments, knives, awls, files, axes, guns, razors, and a few

broken arrowheads. (1996, pp. 56-62) The archaeologists believed that many copper, brass and iron non-damaged trade goods were refashioned as pendants, pins and arrowheads. They also suggested that the refuse pit assemblage indicates the Fort's dominate activity was bone grease production (Burley, Hamilton, & Fladmark, 1996, p. 57 & 59). Their evidence indicates women were very active at the fort, yet they do not offer a gendered perspective on the massive assemblage of beads or who processed the bone marrow. In their analysis women appear to be invisible.

At least Michael Nassaney, José Ant3nio Brand3o, William Cremin and Brock Giordano (2007) attempt a gendered interpretation of the assemblage they uncovered at Fort St. Joseph, an eighteenth century western Great Lake post. The team chose to use the artefact deposits to "infer economic activities and to provide insights into the occupational tasks, the operation of the fur trade, and the broader cultural processes of contact and exchange associated with European-Native American interactions" (p. 4). Yet, a good portion of their discussion is devoted to a colonial coin likely minted between 1709 and 1713. Although an interesting, scarce, and easily datable find, the team admits the coin serves little purpose for their research goal because, at the time, the primary exchange between Natives and Europeans was a system of barter (Nassaney, Brand3o, Cremin, & Girodano, 2007, p. 13). The archaeological team briefly discusses gendered identities at the sight. They found large numbers of glass beads which "testify to the practice of decorating garments and bags using imported objects, perhaps for use in the fur trade" (Nassaney, Brand3o, Cremin, & Girodano, 2007, p. 14). Although not directly implied, women would have been the main producers of the garment bags. Nassaney, Brand3o, Cremin

and Girodano do address that Métis women were at the site with their interpretation of the smudge pit. They argue the pit was used for tanning hides and “that females also likely contributed to the high frequency of wild animal remains that reflect the modification of French subsistence practices in the context of new environmental and social conditions” (p. 15).

Anthropology graduate student, Drew LaBounty (2009) provided a much more complete gendered analysis of women’s activities at the predominantly Métis Ojibwa Fort at Grand Portage, in (modern day Minnesota). LaBounty stressed the importance of archaeological evidence in reconstructing Fort histories and making women visible because fort journals make few references to women (pp. 36-37). LaBounty also argued that women at historical forts can be archaeologically quantified in the number of goods that are marketed to them, such as beads, brass kettles and cloths. (p. 42). The assemblage left at Grand Portage includes thousands of beads, and several needles, awls and ribbons, and few male-gendered axes and guns. With this evidence LaBounty argues that although trading was primarily carried out by men, women were likely the best customers as the most popular goods were associated with them (p. 42). LaBounty’s findings are especially useful as Burley, Hamilton and Fladmark completely overlooked the massive assemblage of beads in their analysis of the Rocky Mountain Fort.

LaBounty also makes an another important argument, he suggests that Métis and Ojibwe wives of white traders continued to perform their traditional Ojibwe gendered tasks of berry and maple sugar harvesting and canoe construction and repair in addition to

incorporating Montreal wives' tasks into their gendered roles. LaBounty defines this as a "blended cultural identity" (2009, p. 43) Overall LaBounty provides a sound gendered archaeological argument, and stresses how the material culture left behind highlights the important role of women at post communities.

In an earlier and independent study, Archaeologist David Burley analysed transfer printed earthenware ceramics found at three southern and central Saskatchewan Métis wintering sites. Burley makes a gendered argument and describes the activities and experiences of Métis women. He suggests it seems impractical for a mobile hunting community to transport non-utilitarian fragile articles across the Plains, but the printed ceramic fragments of cups, plates and saucers provide a symbolic view of Métis lifeways. The assemblage also illustrates material culture as a mechanism for ethnic integration and interaction (1989, p. 97).

Burley provides a context for the original use of ceramics by Métis women; citing Brown and Van Kirk, he suggests the power elite of Euro-Canadian traders and company officers began to prefer Métis daughters as marriage partners before the turn of the 19th century. They expected their wives to display "English" and "civilized behaviour" so ownership and use of ornate ceramics quickly identify 'civilized' Métis women (1989, p. 102). After Governor George Simpson returned from England with a white English wife, HBC company officers also began to seek white marriage partners. Burley suggests uniformity is often sought in all cultures. Thus, the once elitist use of ceramics spread to Métis society as a whole through Métis women's visiting circuits (1989, pp. 103-104). Burley

successfully integrated a gendered interpretation into his material culture analysis proving gender can be integrated into other archaeological research interests.

Staying with the material culture theme, we move back to historian's attempts to right the male-centered assumptions of fur trade and Métis academics. In her discussion of the Southesk mid-19th century Métis art collection, Susan Berry uses material culture to provide the individual Métis women artists with a voice not found in historical documents (2011, p. 29). In 1859, in an early form of eco-tourism, the 9th Earl of Southesk embarked on a seven month hunting expedition across the Canadian Plains, along his 4000 km journey he commissioned and acquired several creative and utilitarian Métis cultural items. Part of the collection includes a gun cover, a fire bag pouch, gloves, and three pairs of moccasin slippers made by four different Métis women (Berry, 2011, pp. 29-30). According to Berry, the Southesk collection is unique because it is backed by documentation and mid-19th century Métis art is rare. (2011, p. 31)

Through the objects, and aided by historical documentation, Berry narrates the life stories of the four Métis women who helped to create a distinctive Métis aesthetic. The women shared several similar experiences, they sewed to make additional money, suffered economic and health problems, and they were highly mobile, transmitting their culture as they travelled with their families (2011, pp. 34-58). Berry argues Métis craft is art. She claims the art/craft dichotomy privileges men's creativity over women's crafts. The popular Plains pictorial autobiographies of the late nineteenth century deny recognition of

Métis women as artists. Berry's work does much to overcome the collective anonymity assigned to Métis women (2011, p. 33).

The ongoing interest in the historical Métis has produced numerous new and exciting ways of studying the children of the fur trade. These studies are necessary as Métis' cultural experience and their complex colonial encounters provide important analogs for modern day cultural interactions. But, many archaeologists, anthropologists and historians are loath to recognize Métis women as important to the fur trade. Gendered bias and ignorance prevents holistic interpretations of the Métis culture. By failing to recognize the importance of half of the historic Métis people, academics are not reconstructing true and representative studies of Métis experiences. Instead they are contributing to ongoing *gendercentrism*. Archaeologists, anthropologists and historians need to be called to task and produce complete reconstructions of Métis lifeways. This cannot be done by ignoring the role of Métis women.

Fortunately some archaeologists, anthropologists and historians have realized the giant gap in the literature and have worked to fill it with stories of Métis women. Their work has illustrated that Métis women played a vital role the fur trade, and in the process contributed to the dynamic Métis identity formation. In addition to their important roles in fostering economic trade relations and inter-regional Métis networks, women also fulfilled an essential role of provisioners of the fur trade. They were food producers, fur processors, clothing makers and canoe manufactures. The cultural exchange during the fur trade would not have happened if it were not for Métis women.

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