

Emerging Voices of Métis Women - Leah Dorion

Module Objective: In this module, the students will learn about some of the seminal readings on Métis women.

In the past, most Métis societies were often matrilineal and matriarchal, which resulted in the high status of women. Métis women's roles in the family and community were valued and fundamental to the preservation of Métis culture. In her article, "Les Métisses: Towards a Feminist History of Red River"¹, Sharon Blady has identified that Métis women at Red River, during the nineteenth century, held social and political power that was unseen in the lives of contemporary European and Euro-Canadian women. Overtime, there was an erosion of the status of Métis women due to the Europeanization of their communities during the nineteenth century. As a result, Métis women's perspective and voice were often neglected in the historical record. Métis filmmaker and writer Christine Welsh effectively explores the impact of assimilation on the women in her family in the article, "Voices of the Grandmothers: Reclaiming a Métis Heritage."² Her search to document the life of her great-great-great-great grandmother, Margaret Taylor, led to a new personal self-awareness. She

¹ Sharon Blady, "Les Métisses: Towards a Feminist History of Red River", in Jill Oakes and Rick Riewe, Editor. *Issues in the North*. Volume II. Occasional Publication # 41. Calgary: Canadian Circumpolar Institute and the Department of Native Studies, University of Manitoba, 1997, pp. 179-86.

² Christine Welsh. "Voices of the Grandmothers: Reclaiming a Métis Heritage.", *Canadian Literature*, Vol. 131, 1991, pp. 15-24.

painstakingly discusses issues such as erosion of cultural identity, survival mechanisms, racism, adaptability, reviving the oral tradition and silence, which are common themes in other literature written by Métis women. Welsh adamantly feels that, "being both women and Native we have been doubly silenced." She claims that through her work Aboriginal women will be no longer rendered historically voiceless.

Other women have tried to reconstruct the life history of their grandmothers. Jock Carpenter's book entitled, *Fifty Dollar Bride: A Chronicle of Métis Life in the 19th Century*³ is based on family papers, remembrances and correspondence to tell the lifestory of her grandmother, Marie Rose Smith. This work gives important insights into Métis women's roles and work, family duties and gender relations. Sylvia Van Kirk's article, "What if Mama is an Indian?"⁴ closely examines how the mixed-heritage boys and girls within the Alexander Ross family assimilated into fur-trade society. Van Kirk discusses important issues about race, class and gender in regards to the Ross children's mixed-heritage

³ Jock Carpenter. *Fifty Dollar Bride, Marie Rose Smith - A Chronicle of Métis Life in the Nineteenth Century*. Sidney, British, Columbia: Gray's Publishing Ltd., 1977.

⁴ Sylvia Van Kirk, " 'What if Mama is an Indian?': The Cultural Ambivalence of the Alexander Ross Family" in J. Peterson and J.S.H. Brown. Editors. *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985, pp. 207-217.

identity. The article is particularly relevant because, through its example of one nineteenth century Red River mixed-heritage family, Van Kirk is able to illuminate the struggle that many mixed-heritage families have in coming to terms with their identity. More case studies like this are needed to better understand the roots of the historic Métis' identity dilemma.

Since the 1980s, historians, communities and families have documented the lives and contributions of Métis women. However, there is still limited information about twentieth-century Métis women especially about the women at Batoche. Most writing about Batoche is Eurocentric and male-centred. Diane Payment in the article, " 'La vie en rose' Métis women at Batoche, 1870-1920,"⁵ finally documents the life and times of Batoche Métis women. Her work was based on interviews with 18 Métis women from the Batoche area who were born between 1870-1920. This work is a great complement to the existing body of literature about Métis women. The article provides commentary on the erosion of Aboriginal women's status through contact with European missionaries, fur traders and colonizers. This literature

⁵ Diane Payment. ' "La vie en rose"? Métis Women at Batoche 1870-1920", in Christine Miller and Patricia Chuchryk, Editors, *Women of the First Nations*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1997, pp. 19-32.

examines both the diverse and similar life experiences of Métis women. Payment highlights the underlying strength of the female kinship tie and the once complementary roles of women and men. She notes that Métis women participated right beside the men in building buffalo pounds, scouting, interpreting, hauling and skinning meat.

In order to have a comprehensive understanding of Métis history it is necessary to learn about the Métis and the fur trade. Unfortunately, most traditional fur trade literature entirely ignores the contributions of Métis and First Nations women. If women were mentioned they were often a passing reference in a traders journal or viewed in a variety of popular stereotypes. In the past, most popular fur trade histories used negative and stereotypical images of Métis women such as the dirty or promiscuous half-breed. Racist terms like "squaw" or "squawman" were used extensively in fur trade histories.⁶ A squawman was a negative term for a trader who lived with an Indian or Métis woman. For instance in the book, *Trappers and Traders of the Far West*, the author dedicates a chapter to "Dorion's Squaw". In the book she was never given a name

⁶ For more information on these terms see David D. Smits, "'Squaw Men', 'Halfbreed', and Amalgamators: Late Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Attitudes Toward Indian-White Race-Mixing." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 15:3 (1991), pp. 29-61.

and was portrayed as the possession of her husband even though her name (Marie Toway) and her independence were well documented⁷.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Jennifer Brown, Sylvia Van Kirk, and Jacqueline Peterson made significant contributions to the literature on Aboriginal women and the Fur trade. These scholars viewed Aboriginal women as active agents and integral players in the development of fur trade society⁸. In 1979, Ron Bourgeault published an article entitled, "The Development of Capitalism and the Subjugation of Native Women in Northern Canada"⁹ which took the issues of First Nations and Métis women in fur trade society in a new direction. Bourgeault carefully examined how pre-industrial capitalism, mercantilism, class divisions, and colonization during the fur trade contributed to the subjugation of Aboriginal women. He spent a great deal of effort dealing with the economics

⁷ This book also portrays Pierre Dorion Sr. as a drunken wild half-breed who would kill unfortunate individuals in a drunken rage. James Daugherty, *Trappers and Traders of the Far West*. Random House: New York.1952.

⁸ Jacqueline Peterson, "Prelude to Red River: A Social Portrait of the Great Lakes Metis", *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 25, No. 1. (Winter 1978), p.41-67; Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in the Blood: Fur Trade Company Officials in Indian Country*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980, and Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society in Western Canada*. Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer, 1980.

⁹ Ron Bourgeault, "The Development of Capitalism and the Subjugation of Native Women in Northern Canada", *Alternate-Routes*, Vol. 6 (1983), pp. 209-240. See also Ron Bourgeault, "Race, Class and Gender: Colonial Domination of Indian Women, " in O. McKague. Editor. *Racism in Canada*. Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1991, pp. 129-150.

behind the displacement of Indian and Métis women. Today, scholars like Emma LaRocque are expanding the study of the impact of colonization on Aboriginal women into the post-fur trade era¹⁰.

Even more comprehensive research is needed about the extensive historical experience and contributions of Métis women and youth. The women at the Métis Resource Centre have made a conscious effort to include vignettes of Métis women in their newsletter, *Buffalo Trails*. Cathryn Halverson's 1997 article¹¹ examines the role of Métis women in the agriculture and ranching frontier of the nineteenth century. Today there is much evidence Métis women are now reclaiming their roles.

Métis women are now taking the lead in community development, politics, and education based on the foundations laid by preceding generations of Métis women. The first author to address the hard issues surrounding the life and times of Métis women was Maria Campbell in her

¹⁰ Emma LaRocque, "Preface, Or Here are Our Voices - Who Will Here?" in Jeanne Perrault and Sylvia Vance. Editors. *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada*. Edmonton: NeWest Publishers, 1990, pp. XV-XXX. See also: Emma LaRocque, "The Colonization of a Native Woman Scholar" in Christine Miller and Patricia Churchryk. Editors. *Women of the First Nations: Power, Wisdom and Strength*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1996, pp. 11-18.

¹¹ Cathryn Halverson, "Redefining the Frontier: Mourning Dove's Cogewea, the Half-Blood: A Depiction of the Great Montana Cattle Range", *American Indian Research and Culture Journal*, Vol. 21 (4), 1997, pp. 105-124.

book *Halfbreed*¹². After its release in 1973, Campbell paved the way for a new generation of Métis women writers. In the tradition of *Halfbreed* most writing that followed was in the form of biography. Even though it is listed as fiction, *In Search of April Raintree*, by Beatrice Culleton also poignantly illustrated the challenges, which many Métis women face, particularly regarding their own Métis identity, the effects of racism, and the impacts of the child welfare system on Métis children and families¹³.

In contemporary society, Métis women are now reclaiming their rightful roles in community, the work force and in the family. Scholars recognize this trend. For instance, Jennifer Brown's article entitled, "Woman as Centre and Symbol in the Emergence of Métis Communities"¹⁴ acknowledges this contribution to community and family life. In Grant MacEwan's anthology of biographies called *Métis Makers of History*¹⁵, he included biographical excerpts of two women and sixteen men. MacEwan highlighted the lives of Granny Callihoo and Pauline Johnson but he failed to give recognition to the many other women who helped form the

¹² Maria Campbell. *Halfbreed*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973.

¹³ Beatrice Culleton. *In Search of April Raintree*. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 1983.

¹⁴ Jennifer Brown, "Women as Centre and Symbol in Métis Communities", *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 3 (1 - 1983), pp. 39-46.

¹⁵ Grant MacEwan. *Métis Makers of History*. Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1981.

backbone of the Métis historical experience. By comparison, *A Pictorial History of Métis and Non-Status Indians in Saskatchewan*¹⁶ by the Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan made concentrated efforts to include both Métis men and women. This publication highlighted mainly contemporary women and included the following: Madeleine Welky Dumont (1840-1886), Rose McKay-Boyer, Nora Ouellette-Thibodeau, and Maria Campbell. Madeleine Welky Dumont's legacy was particularly strong in oral memory, where she has been honoured as an educator and a healer who tended to the wounded Métis resistors at Batoche in 1885. However, in some modern general Métis histories and anthologies Métis women still struggle to have their equal presence and voice included.

Métis women are creating awareness of Métis identity and culture by sharing their own diverse stories. Métis writers such as, Louise Legare, Marilyn Dumont, Janice Acoose, Dorothy Daniels, and Cheryl L'Hirondelle are Métis women scholars and writers who have dedicated a large portion of time documenting the lives and oral history of Métis women. The strength of these women to tell their

¹⁶ Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan. *A Pictorial History of Métis and Non-Status Indians in Saskatchewan*. Regina: Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, 1976.

stories ensured that further Métis women to share their voice in current literature. Published in 1985, *In Our Own Words: Northern Saskatchewan Métis Women Speak Out*¹⁷ reflects how Métis women will no longer be ignored or silenced. Entire courses delineating the experience of Aboriginal women are delivered in educational settings. It is now possible to find more contemporary academic material on Métis women such as the article by Miriam McNabb on the adaptation of Métis women in the northern Saskatchewan community of Pinehouse¹⁸. Recent literature has started to document how Métis women have persisted, adapted and survived but more research is still needed on these issues and other issues.

Nancy Morrisette née Arcand [1910-1987] - By Leah Dorion and Blanche Gehriger

Nancy Arcand was born to Cecile Montour and Jean Baptiste (Old St. Pierre) Arcand. Her parents were both originally from the Batoche and St.Louis, Saskatchewan area. Nancy had a very difficult life and did not have much formal education or any money to speak of. She was

¹⁷ Irene Poelzler and Dolores Poelzler. *In Our Own Words: Northern Saskatchewan Métis Women Speak Out*. Saskatoon: One Sky, 1986.

¹⁸ Miriam McNab, "From Bush to the Village to the City: Pinehouse Lake Aboriginal Women Adapt to Change", in David DeBrou and Aileen Moffatt. Editors. *Other Voices: Essays on Saskatchewan Women*. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, pp. 131-144.

just under five feet tall and walked with a slight limp. She had an air about her that gave the impression of dignity that commanded the respect of anyone who met her. She was very serious in her manner of speaking and wouldn't hesitate to let you know if she didn't agree with what you had to say. Some people described her as a female Gabriel Dumont. Nancy spoke the Michif language and was born near St.Louis, Saskatchewan in approximately 1910.

Her mother Cecile died at approximately age thirty, when Nancy was five years old. Many women died young at that time, usually from hard work and the scarcity of doctors. Nancy told her daughter Blanche that she was allowed to go to school when she was nine years old, but because it was so hard to get cloth and also because she hadn't learned how to sew yet, she still wore the coat her mother had made for her when she was five. She was embarrassed to go to school. But, within a month she moved up to second grade. Then her father made her quit saying she was needed to take care of the house. She later taught herself to read.

At the age of eighteen, Nancy Arcand married Jeremy Morrisette at Debden, Saskatchewan in 1928. Jeremy Morrisette was born on March 26, 1906 at the Muskeg Lake

Reserve. He eventually lost his Indian status in order to move off the reserve and find work. Nancy and Jeremy settled and raised their family in the Métis road allowance community of Spring Valley. They grew up living near other Métis families such as the Campbell's, Arcand's, and Lemire's. Together they had fourteen children: Bernadette, Elcide, Cecile, Roseanne, George, Paul, Joey, Phillip, Leo, Yvonne, Blanche and three children that passed away. The family spoke Michif in the home. Nancy highly valued education and was very proud to see her sons and daughters have access to education.

Nancy and Jeremy made a living off the land and its resources. Nancy and Jeremy were very equal in sharing the workload and did things like a team. They both hunted, trapped and fished to provide for the family. Jeremy sometimes worked picking potatoes for local farmers to obtain extra income for the family. It was often necessary for him to leave the family often in order to find work on the railway or at local farms.

During the time that he was away Nancy survived by hunting and trapping. People in the community respected her skill in looking after the animals they had. People that knew

her spoke of how fearless she was when it came to breaking-in horses. She was also known as a midwife and possessed a large amount of knowledge about traditional healing plants.

One of Nancy's favourite hobbies was making blankets. The reason being was that she didn't have a blanket when she was little. She used an old coat to wrap herself in and she slept on the floor. Nancy made exquisite rabbit fur blankets and sewed clothing and blankets. Nancy and other Métis women from the area used to have large quilting bee's to make blankets. Her children recall that she always wore long dresses and moccasins.

Nancy Morrisette was a hardworking Métis woman. Her children remember her pushing a plow to break the land and spending long hours tending the garden. Her children also remember how people in the community collectively worked the fields during harvest time in the community so the families would get all the work done. Poverty is relative but the family did not have many luxury items and always had the basics.

Nancy maintained strong Roman Catholic beliefs all her life and never smoked or drank. She brought up a large family and had many grandchildren. The neighbour's children and

cousin's children were always present at her house. When the children were grown up and gone and when her husband passed away she was placed in a rest home in Duck Lake, Saskatchewan. She didn't mind staying there because the person that ran the place was her cousin. At this time, her Alzheimer's disease progressed rapidly. This is where she passed away, a few kilometres from where she was born.