

The end of hybridity: Self-indigenization in *Métis* literature

O fim do hibridismo: auto-indigenização na literatura *Métis*

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Abstract: This essay contends that the acute discomfort with racial mixing in contemporary discourse suggests that we are no longer living in the Age of Hybridity. The uneasiness about biological hybridity is particularly evident in *Métis* literature, where the frequent questioning of their indigeneity by First Nations people has led *Métis* writers to dissociate themselves from one set of ancestors – the European ones.

Keywords: *Métis* literature. Hybridity. Self-indigenization. Blood quantum.

Resumo: Este ensaio argumenta que o forte desconforto com a mestiçagem racial no discurso contemporâneo sugere que já não estamos a viver na Idade do Hibridismo. O desconforto acerca do hibridismo biológico é especialmente evidente na literatura *Métis*, onde os frequentes interrogatórios por membros das primeiras nações sobre a indigeneidade de escritores *Métis* os têm levado a se desassociar de um grupo de seus ancestrais – os europeus.

Palavras-chave: Literatura *Métis*. Hibridismo. Auto-indigenização. Quantum sanguíneo.

*It makes me mad the way [whites] portray native people.
It makes me wish those whitemen had never come here.
But then we would not have been born.*
Beatrice Culleton Mosionier

One of the most striking cultural developments since the 1990s is the widespread appeal of the concept of hybridity. In contrast to much of modern history, which was dominated by the idea of “pure origins, pure lineages”, many contemporary writers and scholars posit not only that hybridity has always been common among humans but even that it is “intrinsic to the evolution of the species” (NEDERVEEN PIETERSE, p. 94, 101). So broadly embraced is the notion that peoples and cultures are inherently mixed that it has already provoked an “anti-hybridity backlash” from critics troubled by the concept’s “cosmopolitan” or transnational orientation (NEDERVEEN PIETERSE, p. 91, 240). The animus toward hybridity should not have come as a total surprise. After all, the thesis that every people is equally hybrid is dubious, since it fails to address variations within and among groups. More precisely, it does not historicize those “contact zones” in which “peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other” and,

as a result, new forms arise from old ones, be those forms biological or cultural (PRATT, p. 4, 6). In addition, many proponents of global mixing seem more at ease with cultural hybridity than with racial hybridity. They tend to emphasize discursive elements over biological ones, favouring “constitutionally hybrid genres” and “*in-between* space[s]” to mixed peoples (GARCÍA CANCLINI, p. 249; BHABHA, p. 38). It is as if even those individuals harbour serious reservations about the desirability of sexual mixing across biological lines, which may explain the “banishment of race” from their “hybridological” schemes (LUND, p. 78, 27-41). Perhaps most significant, there is much evidence that some peoples of mixed ancestry themselves have become uncomfortable with their own ethnoracial hybridity. As I will show in this essay, focusing mainly on *Métis*² literature, the fact that a mixed-race people like the New Nation increasingly chooses to identify with only one set of its ancestral progenitors indicates that we are no longer living – if we ever were – in the Age of Hybridity.

The political anxiety about racial hybridity is especially pronounced among Indigenous intellectuals, who have responded in conflicting ways. On the one hand, writers like Sherman Alexie and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn depict “mixed-bloods” as negative figures who purportedly are not committed enough to Indigenous peoples and their homelands. Cook-Lynn accuses mixed-bloods of producing a literature “characterized by excesses of individualism” instead of a body of writing that reflects the “life-affirming aesthetic of traditional stories, songs, and rituals” (p. 69, 67). Alexie, in turn, states that he wonders if “the writers who identify themselves as mixed-blood Indians” find it a challenge “to decide which container they should put their nouns and verbs into” (p. 18). He further adds that the reason books by mixed-bloods “sell more” than books by “strictly Indian[s]” is because of the former’s lack of collective fixity, asserting that “Mixed-blood writers often write about any tribe which interests them, whether or not they are related to that tribe” (p. 21)³. Jace Weaver, Craig Womack and Robert Warrior, on the other hand, make a concerted effort to incorporate people of mixed ancestry into the Indigenous world. In their manifesto *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, the three collaborators identify “footloose, rootless, mixed-blood hybridity” theory as being particularly detrimental to the First Nations, since it makes it “impossible to espouse a Native perspective” (p. xx).

In his attempt to demonstrate that mixed-bloods should be deemed “*Natives* rather than ‘hybrids’,” Weaver becomes almost nostalgic for “the one-drop rule” that has been the taxonomical yardstick for defining people of African descent in the United States, writing that “if you are black, you are black. But contemporary, crossblood *Natives* are too often looked upon as inauthentic” (WEAVER, WOMACK and WARRIOR, p. 22, 48).

Contrary that what Weaver implies, though, one suspects that the reason he and his co-authors are so passionately opposed to hybridity is not that it calls into question the authenticity of mixed-bloods but that of so-called homogeneous ethnoracial groups, notably the First Nations. For some scholars, it is not only people of mixed ancestry who are hybrid but everyone, including “all Indigenous peoples” (ANDERSEN, *Métis*, p. 5). As Womack quips, “we are told all Indians are hybrids, as are their literatures and ideas. Like the concept of original sin, our lot is one of original hybridity” (WEAVER, WOMACK and WARRIOR, p. 124). There is yet another reason why some Indigenous critics resist the concept of hybridity, and that is its systematic privileging of the migrant, the diasporic. The sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse, for instance, contends that “we are all migrants” (p.32), a remark that in most countries in the Americas sounds like a truism. But for Indigenous cultural nationalists such as Weaver, Womack and Warrior the statement is not only patently false but also an insult, since it obscures the very dissimilar relationship to a particular territory between migrants and Indigenous peoples. According to Warrior, “One of the central problems with the way hybridity theory has been applied to Native texts is that it does not seem to account for the relationship between community and land” (WEAVER, WOMACK and WARRIOR, p. 240). That is, not all groups are migrants, who by definition have “some consciousness of making the land [their] own” (GRANT, p. 17). Even if one accepts the thesis that the First Nations did not originate in the Americas, which is still much contested (PEDERSEN et al.), they have been in the continent for so long that they have no conscious memory of any other space and thus are not torn between two or more homelands.

It is understandable why First Nations and other subaltern groups would be reluctant to accept the legitimacy of a mixed-race subjectivity, even when they openly concede that many of their citizens are “mixed-bloods” with “various cultural and genetic inheritances”

(WEAVER, WOMACK and WARRIOR, p. 136). As the Cree writer Paul Seesequasis satirizes the situation in “The Republic of Tricksterism,” sometimes the greatest champions of Indigenous authenticity are “mixed-race pure-blood[s]” who live in “denial of [their] white parentage” (p. 469). Considering the political and demographic fragility of many of these groups, they feel that they “cannot afford to lose additional members in the face of centuries of sustained genocide” (BRENNAN, p. 2). But when this political anxiety about hybridity is expressed by people of mixed race, like the *Métis*, it becomes much more problematic. Hybridity, as Richard Young observes, always carries “with it an implicit politics of heterosexuality” (p. 25). It also bears a politics of raciality. It has become common to assert that “there are no races” or that “there is *no such thing as race*” (APPIAH, p. 45; Formalization, p. 97). Yet it is apparent that discussions of mixed-race people necessarily demand that we “buy into ideas about race.” In the words of the Métis sociologist Chris Andersen, “in order to see a particular person or group as ‘mixed,’ there must be some agreement that there are ‘pure’ or ‘real’ races from which these mixed identities are born – such as ‘white’ and ‘Indian’” (Formalization, p. 96). Moreover, race has hardly vanished from every-day life, not the least in academia, as reflected in the common “desire that the faculty and student body comprise different races” (AMOKO, p. 129; see also BRAZ, Whitey, p. 151-52). Still, when it comes to group identity, it may not be significant whether race has a tangible reality. The fact is that race and racial markers have been perceived, and continue to be perceived, as real. The *Métis*, for one, owe their identity to their heterogeneous ancestry. Their current tendency to identify with only one set of ancestors, the First Nations, also suggests that they see the two groups as distinct. The dilemma for the *Métis* is that it is not clear how they can deny their mixed cultural and biological origins without denying themselves. As Beatrice Culleton Mosionier highlights in the passage that serves as the epigraph to this essay, without the politically and culturally thorny Europeans, the *Métis* “would not have been born” (p. 84).

The Red River *Métis* are unique for several reasons, starting with their having evolved in a part of the world that is ostensibly adverse to racial mixing – the top half of North America. For many scholars, in South and Central America “*mestizo* connotes pride,” but north of the Rio Grande “anything *mestizo* elicits mistrust and violence” (AUDINET,

Human Face, p. 36). No less a figure than Françoise Lionnet affirms that the “Anglo-American consciousness seems unable to accommodate miscegenation positively through language” (p. 14). Linda Hutcheon, similarly, maintains that “Canada has experienced no actual ‘creolization’ which might have created something new out of an adaptation process within a split racial context” (p. 78)⁴. Nevertheless, it was in the heart of North America, in the Red River Valley of what is now Manitoba, that the *Métis* were engendered and grew into what they themselves called *La Nouvelle Nation*, or The New Nation. Of mixed First Nations and European ancestry, the *Métis* emerged toward the end of the eighteenth century and came of age as a nation in the nineteenth. In their national history, there are three pivotal events: the 1816 Battle of Seven Oaks (*La Grenouillère*), in Winnipeg, when they established their identity as a nation; the Red River Resistance of 1869-70, also in southern Manitoba, where they consolidated their sense of nationhood; and the 1885 Battle of Batoche, in north-central Saskatchewan, which marked the beginning of the end of their dream of living as an autonomous people. Since then, they have transformed themselves from a predominantly French-speaking collectivity into an English-speaking one. They have also largely drifted away from the Catholicism that once defined them, especially in relation to their English-speaking and Protestant cousins, the Halfbreeds (BRAZ, *False Traitor*, p. X, 39-40). Yet, while the *Métis* no longer have a territory of their own, they continue to exhibit a distinct national consciousness.

There are many parallels between the *Métis* and other mixed-race groups in the Americas, such as the Mexicans. However, there is one crucial difference: the *Métis* are not the product of political conquest but of the fur trade, an exchange that was not nearly as violent (KAUP, p. 197). “In most other areas of the world,” writes the historian Sylvia Van Kirk, “sexual contact between European men and native women has usually been illicit in nature and essentially peripheral to the white man’s trading or colonizing ventures.” But this was generally not the case in Western Canada, where “alliances with Indian women were the central social aspect of the fur traders’ progress across the country” (p. 4). The behaviour of the fur traders, as the historian Jennifer Brown underlines, is partly explained by the fact that they “were not colonists. Unlike many Europeans who came to the New World, they arrived in the fur trade country with the intention of returning to their

homelands, *cum animo revertendi*” (p. XI; see also VAN KIRK, p. 9). The relationships between the European fur traders and the Indigenous women in Western Canada were not without imbalances, given that they not only involved a group of men from one culture and a group of women from another but also that many of those unions appear to have been initiated pragmatically for their “value in forming trade alliances” (BROWN, p. 72). Yet, despite the tendency to see New World hybrid peoples as arising from “the rubble of defeat” (GRUZINSKI, p. 33), there is considerable evidence that, because of the dependency of the European fur traders on the First Nations, the *Métis* were the product less of violence than of “a close economic partnership” (VAN KIRK, p. 242).

The fur trade roots of the *Métis* are worth emphasizing because they may elucidate why there seems to be no precise moment of genesis in their history, be it traumatic or utopian. As Octavio Paz has famously documented, Mexicans trace their national beginnings to the political and sexual encounter between (the European) Hernán Cortés and (the Indigenous) La Malinche. This was an extremely violent relationship, as evinced by modern Mexico’s national cry: “¡Viva México, hijos de la Chingada!” (p. 74), which translates literally as: Long Live Mexico, Children of the Screwed One! For Mexicans, avers Paz, La Malinche is “the Mother forcibly opened, violated or deceived. The *hijo de la Chingada* is the offspring of violation, abduction or deceit” (p. 79). Paz’s conception of Mexico’s ethnocultural origins has been challenged by Chicana feminists, who expose the misogyny and racism that inform the Mexican (and Mexican-American) tradition of seeing “the Indian woman in us [as] the betrayer” (ANZALDÚA, p. 22). In contrast, writers like Gloria Anzaldúa and Carmen Tafolla have La Malinche charge that it was not she who “sold out my people but they me,” and so cannot have been a “traitor” (ANZALDÚA, p. 22; TAFOLLA, p. 199). For them, the begetter of “la raza” is “the raped mother whom we have abandoned” (TAFOLLA, p. 199; ANZALDÚA, p. 30). Anzaldúa further highlights her own affinities with La Malinche by declaring that she is the latter’s child; or, more precisely, she is the daughter of the Screwed One: “Sí, soy hija de la Chingada” (p. 17). Of course, in the process, Anzaldúa ends up echoing Paz’s thesis that Mexicans (and *Chicanas/os*) locate their origins in a sexual/political relationship in which their national mother was either used or abused by their national father, who then

callously forsook both her and their progeny.

There is no such covenantal violation associated with the ethnogenesis of the *Métis*. It is telling that the *Métis* usually present themselves as originating, not with the encounter between an Indigenous woman and a European man, but as a full-fledged people. Although they tend not to camouflage their mixed origins, they create the impression that they emerged as a fully developed mixed people; that is, they created themselves. Characteristically, in her play *Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*, as she portrays the women identified with the formation of mixed-race peoples throughout the Americas, Monique Mojica describes such historical figures as La Malinche and the title character, Pocahontas (p. 22). But when she reaches the *Métis*, she is compelled to invent a composite personage she names “**Marie/Margaret/Madelaine**” (p. 41). Furthermore, Mojica’s decision is not idiosyncratic but reflects the way the *Métis* have fashioned themselves. The reality is that there is no Indigenous Eve in *Métis* mythology, as there is no European Adam (BRAZ, “Whitey”, p. 155), since no one “knows for sure when the first *Métis* person lived or when Contact first occurred” (DORION and PRÉFONTAINE, p. 17). Deliberately or otherwise, the *Métis* have bypassed that necessary cultural and sexual encounter between their Indigenous and European progenitors and imagine themselves as always having been *Métis*⁵.

Métis iconography, in fact, is not only predominantly *Métis* but also chiefly male, as we can see from the names of the collectivity’s greatest heroes: Cuthbert Grant (1793-1854); Gabriel Dumont (1837-1906); and Louis Riel (1844-1885)⁶. Of the three, Riel is the most influential culturally, for he was a religious and political leader and a writer. A mystic, Riel came to believe that God had “anointed” him the “prophet of the new world” and that his mission was to save the Catholic Church by relocating the papacy from the Vatican to his hometown of Saint-Boniface (RIEL v. 3, p. 261, 144-46). He eventually clashed with the Church and attempted to start a new religion (FLANAGAN, p. 74, 81-104). His own political activities on behalf of the *Métis* also led him to engage in two military confrontations with Canada and to his hanging for treason on November 16, 1885. Paradoxically, despite his conflicts with Ottawa, Riel has metamorphosed into the most popular figure in Canadian culture, the subject of a seemingly endless parade of poems, plays, novels, films, operas, sculptures, and even comic books (BRAZ, *False*

Traitor). Still, Riel was first and foremost a *Métis* nationalist. Throughout his life, he struggled to find a geographic and political space for his people, who were threatened by Canadian expansion. Contrary to the common belief that in Canada hybridity has been endorsed “only by those in a position of power” (GROENING, p. 121), in his poetry and prose Riel promulgates a complex vision of a mixed-race subjectivity. Indeed, along with Simón Bolívar, José Martí, and José Vasconcelos, he is “one of the great exponents of racial hybridity and continental identity in the Americas” (BRAZ, “North”, p. 78). Significantly, of all those figures, Riel is the only one who is himself of mixed ancestry.

Riel’s articulation of a mixed-race subjectivity is already discernible in an early work such as the poem “*La Métisse*,” whose speaker proclaims her boundless pride in belonging to a rising “nation” favoured by God but loathed by its envious neighbours (v. 4, p. 88). Riel is acutely aware of the small size of the *Métis* population, and of its political vulnerability. Yet, for him, his people are “la race à trois sangs,” or the “the race with three bloods” (v. 4, p. 326), and it is their ethnoracial heterogeneity that gives them not only their national identity but also their courage and self-confidence. The importance of racial hybridity in Riel’s work becomes even more noticeable in his later writings. One of the most persistent criticisms of contemporary hybridity theory is that it promotes a lack of identification with the local or national, since its proponents supposedly embrace a cosmopolitan ethos and identify with “the world rather than the nation” (FRIEDMAN, p. 237). This is not the case with Riel’s idea of racial hybridity, which is grounded in the local realities of what are now the Canadian Prairies. As Riel describes the symbolism of the term *Métis* to a French-Canadian associate who desired that the *Métis* people call themselves French Canadians:

Je crois que le nom Métis est de nature à favoriser la fondation d'une puissante nationalité dans le Manitoba et le Nord Ouest. C'est un nom qui signifie mélange. Jusqu'ici il a servi à désigner la race issue du sang mêlé des européens et des Sauvages, mais il est également propre à dénommer une race d'hommes, qui se recruterait du mélange de tous les sangs, entr'eux; et qui, tout en passant dans le moule canadien-français, conserverait le souvenir de son origine, en s'appelant Métisse. Le nom Métis serait agréable à tout le monde, parce qu'il n'est past exclusif et qu'il a l'avantage de mentionner d'une manière convenable, le contingent pour lequel

chaque nation contribuerait à fonder le peuple nouveau. Et à ce point de vue je crois qu'il serait difficile de donner comme base à notre nationalité dans le Manitoba et le Nord-Ouest, une idée plus large et plus forte que l'idée Métisse. (v. 2, p. 120).

I believe that, by nature, the name *Métis* favours the founding of a powerful nationality in Manitoba and the North West. It is a name that signifies mixture. Until now it has served to designate the race born from the mixed blood of the Europeans and the First Nations [*Sauvages*], but it is equally appropriate to designate a race of men resulting from the mixing of all bloods combined; and that, in passing through the French-Canadian mould, will maintain the memory of its origin, by calling itself *Métis*. The name *Métis* will be acceptable to everyone, for it is not exclusive and has the advantage of underscoring in a suitable manner the portion that each nation will contribute to the founding of the new people. And from this point of view, I believe that it will be difficult to provide a base to our nationality in Manitoba and the North-West that will be broader and stronger than the *Métis* idea (My translation).

So confident was Riel about the viability of racial hybridity that to the end of his life, at his 1885 trial, he continued to express his desire to settle Western Canada with a variety of peoples, all of whom would intermingle with other groups and evolve into related but distinct hybrid nations (*Queen*, p. 356).

Not surprisingly, there are complications with Riel's "idée métisse." Like many of his contemporaries, Riel was convinced that the Indigenous peoples of the Americas were destined to vanish "degré par degré" (v. 2, p. 409). Possibly for the same reason, he also identified more closely with his European ancestors than with his Indigenous ones. He counselled the *Métis* to cherish their Frenchness ("Soyons fiers d'être français") and was particularly proud of the French tongue, "une des plus belles langues du monde, et certainement la plus polie de toutes" ("one of the most beautiful languages in the world, and certainly the most sophisticated of all") (v. 2, p. 301). Riel's connection to France was personal, reflecting his conviction that he had a direct claim to the country's throne, allegedly being one of Louis XI's "princes descendants" (v. 3, p. 209). Still, he does not conceal his people's relations to its two collective progenitors. While he sometimes asserts that the *Métis* are "[t]oo civilized for the Indians" (v. 2, p. 272), he tends to depict his people largely as liaisons between the First Nations and the Europeans. For Riel, the *Métis* not only paid "the most conciliatory role between their white parents and their

indian relatives,” but were formed precisely to act as an “intermédiaire” between their two ancestral groups (v. 2, p. 374; v. 1, p. 92).

In *Métis* history, the period between 1885 (the Fall of Batoche and Riel’s hanging) and 1960 is generally considered the “Forgotten Years.” This was a precarious time during which the group’s primary concern was not nation building but mere survival. It was also a period when there was little literary production by the *Métis*, or interest in them by others. As the *Métis* writer and scholar Emma LaRocque encapsulates those decades, “because of discrimination few *Métis* mixed happily with other Canadians. Nobody really knew us” (p. 22). The *Métis* only started writing actively again in the 1960s, beginning with Adrian Hope. More a community activist than a poet, Hope follows the nineteenth-century tradition of depicting his people as mediators between the First Nations and the Europeans. In his “Ode to the *Métis*,” the opening piece in his poetry collection *Stories in Rhyme*, he writes that “stalwart men of Scotland,/ France and England” crossed the Atlantic Ocean, and “married Indian maidens.” Together, they created a new people, who had “access to both cultures” and who “had friends among the whites/ And every Indian band” (p. 6). Despite the political setbacks suffered by the *Métis* since the mid-1880s, Hope wants his compatriots to seek inspiration from their history. As he closes his poem, the mixed-race people of Western Canada, who embody the values of both the “Indian and the white man,” will overcome any new challenge they face, for they are “the Great *Métis*” (p. 9).

The text that truly revitalized *Métis* literature, however, was Maria Campbell’s 1973 memoir *Halfbreed*, a work that systematically (and perhaps not unintentionally) deemphasizes the *Métis* people’s mediatory role between their two ancestral groups. Written when Campbell was in her early thirties, *Halfbreed* depicts her life journey: growing up in a poor *Métis* settlement in north-central Saskatchewan in the 1940s and 50s; trying to escape her community at the age of fifteen by marrying a white man she does not love and moving away; descending into drugs and prostitution after her marriage collapses; and finally discovering a sense of self-worth when she becomes a political activist. More crucially, the memoir chronicles how Campbell derives inspiration from her Cree paternal great-grandmother, Cheechum, to try to understand how the *Métis* lost

“their hopes” after Batoche and what they must do to become collectively whole again (p. 7). In her text, Campbell strives to create nothing less than an Eve figure for the *Métis*, a woman who displaces the historical male leaders and becomes the author’s “resistance warrior and mentor” (KAUP, p. 202). But as Monika Kaup shows in her compelling study of *Métis* and Chicana/o formations, Campbell is able to do so only by importing a foreign model of biocultural relations and turning Cheechum into “her legendary *Métis* Malinche” (p. 203). Campbell, Kaup underscores, places her people’s ethnogenesis in the “colonial” second half of the nineteenth century, rather than at the end of the eighteenth. Consequently, her “construction of *Métis* origins . . . becomes identical with the violent beginnings of *mestizaje* as portrayed by Octavio Paz.” Since Cheechum perceives the relations between First Nations and Europeans as necessarily violent, she leads her progeny to adopt her “dualism, rejecting white culture and ancestors and siding with their Native heritage” (KAUP, p. 204). Needless to say, this is a choice that precludes the possibility of the *Métis* being mediators between their two ancestral groups.

Halfbreed is considered one of the most influential texts in contemporary Canadian literature. It is deemed “to mark a beginning for Native literature in Canada” (MURRAY, p. 91) and its author “one of the first few Indigenous people who appropriated the colonizer’s language to name her oppressor’s unjust systems, laws, and processes, and subsequently to work towards decolonization” (ACOOSE, p. 91-92). But, in many ways, *Halfbreed* is a paradoxical work. Throughout her text, Campbell uses the rhetoric of plural subjectivity. She frequently asserts that her main concern is the welfare of the *Métis* people, specifically her desire to help her collectivity deal with the traumatic impact of the defeat at Batoche. Commenting on her book elsewhere, she even labels herself not a writer but a social worker, “a community healer” (“Maria Campbell”, p. 42; GRIFFITHS and CAMPBELL, p. 69, 84). Yet *Halfbreed* is utterly dominated by Campbell. In the introduction, she states that, when she returns to her hometown after a long absence, she thinks “I might find again the happiness and beauty I had known as a child.” But as she becomes aware of the general decline of her birthplace, she realizes that “if I was to know peace I would have to search within myself” (p. 2), implying that solutions to one’s problems are not to be found in the community at large but in the individual. In

fact, as one reads Campbell's memoir, one cannot help but notice her profound ambiguity about the *Métis*. *Halfbreed* may be her attempt to "search [] for the lost 'history' of a marginalized people" (ANDREWS, "Framing", p. 308), but Campbell overtly "resists close identification" with that people (HUNSAKER, p. 40). Although Campbell claims to be proud of her heritage, she reminds those around her in no uncertain terms that she has no wish to be like them. As she tells her beloved Cheechum, she longs "for something different" and does not "want to be like our women who had nothing but kids, black eyes and never enough of anything" (p. 98). Or, as she responds when her boyfriend Smoky hints that they will not be able to marry until she turns eighteen, "Marry you? You've got to be joking! I'm going to do something with my life besides making more Halfbreeds!" (p. 117). Campbell recognizes the contradictions in her attitude, confessing that "I loved my people so much and missed them if I couldn't see them often. I felt alive when I went to their parties, and I overflowed with happiness when we would all sit down and share a meal, yet I hated all of it as much as I loved it" (p. 117). Still, it does not seem by accident that, at the beginning of the text, the *Métis* are poor but have a real sense of community. By the end, they have degenerated into lives of alcoholism and family abuse. The exception is Campbell, who has discovered her true self.

Another striking aspect of *Halfbreed* is its portrayal of the relations between the *Métis* and the First Nations. For Campbell, the *Métis* are simultaneously Indigenous and distinct from strictly Indigenous people. "There was never much love lost between Indians and Halfbreeds," she writes. "They were completely different from us – quiet when we were noisy, dignified even at dances and get-togethers. Indians were very passive – they would get angry at things done to them but would never fight back, whereas Halfbreeds were quick-tempered – quick to fight, but quick to forgive and forget" (p. 25). She contends that "Treaty Indian women don't express their opinions, Halfbreed women do," a stance that has not always endeared her to First Nations scholars (p. 26; see also ACOOSE, p. 92). Campbell further asserts that the First Nations saw the *Métis* as their "poor relatives" and attributes the differences between "Indians and Halfbreeds" to the fact that, whereas the former "had land and security, we had nothing" (p. 25). Nevertheless, it is striking that she never considers the possibility that the behaviour of

the *Métis* may have something to do with their being partly Caucasian. Her reticence about her people's European biocultural heritage becomes especially conspicuous considering that Campbell notes she has "green" eyes and that the older women in the community link her outspokenness to "the white in her" (p. 95, 26).

From the moment it was published in 1973, *Halfbreed* has been popular with both critics and readers. Besides eliciting a tremendous amount of scholarly commentary (MURRAY, p. 108-9), it led Campbell to collaborate with the established Euro-Canadian playwright and actor Linda Griffiths in the creation of a play called *Jessica*. The play itself turned out to be extremely controversial, raising myriad questions about voice appropriation and authorship (GRIFFITHS and CAMPBELL, p. 90). *Jessica* was eventually published as part of a collection entitled *The Book of Jessica*, which is preceded by two long exchanges between Griffiths and Campbell in which they dissect their collaboration. In one of the dialogues Campbell reveals why the theatrical partnership was fraught with danger from the outset. While Campbell tells Griffiths that she believes "mixed-blood people were the obvious link between whites and Natives and that they would be the ones to bring about a renaissance in spiritual thought" (GRIFFITHS and CAMPBELL, p. 19), she is ambivalent about the political ramifications of the relationship between the *Métis* and the First Nations. As she recalls one of her conversations with Griffiths:

I told her I'd always felt a kind of historical guilt because we had been (when I say "we", I mean *Métis* people, Halfbreed people, mixed-blood people) the link between Indians and whites. We had acted as interpreters in treaties, we had walked ahead of the explorers and showed them the way. In the course of trying to deal with that guilt, I had come to the realization, on both sides, that it wasn't my guilt. That garbage belonged to both those two peoples, not to my people. We were children of two peoples who wanted something of each other. And when they started to hate each other, they focused that hate on us, their children, until we were just like a band of gypsies moving around, landless, carrying the few things that they had cast off – a little bit of language, a little bit of culture. (GRIFFITHS and CAMPBELL, p. 19-20).

Campbell may have reached the conclusion that the conflict between the First Nations and the Europeans in Canada is not the fault of their progeny, the *Métis*, but she seems unable to overcome her "historical guilt." As she confides, whenever she has

attempted to look into “the Indian stuff, Indians never let me forget that I was part white” (GRIFFITHS and CAMPBELL, p. 35). Of course, the full implications of her whiteness are one aspect of her ancestry that she elects not to scrutinize in *Halfbreed*.

The matter of the European heritage of the *Métis* people, in truth, poses a major challenge not only for Campbell but also for most other contemporary *Métis* writers, such as Marilyn Dumont, Sharron Proulx-Turner, and Gregory Scofield. The poetry of Dumont and Scofield has been described as being infused with “irony,” a trope that enables the two authors to “overturn [] stereotypical assumptions about the historical legacy of the *Métis* and the current lives of those who consider themselves to be ‘halfbreeds’” (ANDREWS, “Irony”, p. 7). I must admit that I fail to discern much irony in the work of either poet, or that of their compatriots. Instead, I agree with Kaup that, unlike its Chicana/o counterpart, *Métis* literature is “overwhelmingly oriented toward the memory of dispossession and the poetics of resistant nationalism” (p. 197), and reveals little enthusiasm for either celebrations of hybridity or discursive games. I would go further and argue that the reason for the discomfort with hybridity in *Métis* literature is not only the relatively small size of the community (KAUP, p. 197) but also a profound anxiety about its Europeanness, which has led to a persistent questioning of the Indigeneity of the *Métis* by members of the First Nations. As Proulx-Turner remarks, “in first peoples country,” if you “look too much like a white person,” even “good first people turn their backs to you” and consider you “a white wannabee” (p. 14). This is a phenomenon that has had a profound effect on today’s *Métis* writers.

In her collection *A Really Good Brown Girl*, for instance, Dumont writes perceptively about growing up in Western Canada “in a town with fewer Indians/ than ideas about Indians” (p. 20). She is also insightful about the politics of multicultural literary taxonomy, noting that “one wrong sound and you’re shelved in the Native Literature section/ resistance writing” (p. 54). Yet, while Dumont stresses that she belongs to “two worlds” and has “a dual life” (p. 15), she becomes defensive about her biocultural hybridity whenever some First Nations person questions whether she and the *Métis* are Indigenous enough. In her prose poem “Leather and Naughahyde,” she relates meeting a “treaty guy from up north” and together making fun of urban white

people. But the conversation then obliquely turns to where she is from, which both parties know well is a way “to find out someone’s status without actually asking.” At this point, she tells her companion that she is “*Métis* like it’s an apology and he says, ‘mmh,’ like he forgives me/like he’s got a big heart and mine’s pumping diluted blood.” Or, as she concludes, he reacts as if he thinks “he’s leather and I’m naughahyde” (p. 58). In other publications, such as her essay “Popular Images of Nativeness,” Dumont can be rather casual about her collective identity, one moment describing herself as “*Métis*” (p. 46) and the next as “an urban Indian” (p. 47) or an “urban native” (p. 48, 49). But as “Leather and Naughahyde” illustrates, she does not appear convinced that the terms are synonymous. If the *Métis* were always perceived as being truly Indigenous, their indigeneity would not be so easily undermined. Although Dumont states that she has to face “the scrutiny of white yardsticks” (*Green Girl*, p. 65), when it comes to her collective identity, the only standards that appear to distress her are those invoked by First Nations people.

Like Dumont, Scofield is ambivalent about the precarious position occupied by the *Métis*. A self-described admirer of Campbell, whom he considers his “sister and friend, mother and mentor” (*Love Medicine*, p. 13; *Thunder*, p. 197), Scofield has long been captivated by the simplicity of the First Nations/ European divide. As he says of his youthful days in his first collection, *The Gathering: Stones for the Medicine Wheel*, it was “easy for me/ hating every pale face,” for he saw himself as “all Indian” (p. 40). He later comes to surmise that the *Métis* have a history of their own and says that he has reconciled himself with his mixed heritage, the fact “my way is not the Indian way or the white way” (p. 81). Yet his people’s hybridity continues to trouble Scofield. Moreover, it is not, as he declares, because “[w]hite people have their own ideas/ How a real Indian should look/ In the city or on the screen” (p. 81), but because First Nations do. Both politically and psychologically, what truly muddles the lives of those in-between people who contend that “we/ are not one or the other” but still believe that “anything but pure is less than perfect” (p. 82, 50) is their acceptance, or rejection, by the First Nations.

The magnitude of Scofield’s struggle with his collective identity becomes most evident in his memoir *Thunder through My Veins: Memories of a Métis Childhood*. Despite the text’s subtitle, Scofield is not conscious of his *Métis* heritage through his early

years. Even after he learns that he and his family are “sort-of-Indians” (p. 43), he remains uncomfortable with his biocultural hybridity, which he sees as a form of impurity. As he describes his reaction to the news of his *Métis* heritage, he says, “I was disappointed that we weren’t *pure* Indians” and decided “to disassociate myself from anything white or mixed-blood” (p. 107). His desire to be unadulteratedly Indigenous is complicated by his fair complexion. This is a situation that he attempts to correct by dyeing his “hair black” and lying for hours in the sun but he cannot change the fact he has “grey eyes” (p. 112). Scofield, who also has difficulty dealing with his homosexuality, only embraces his mixed ancestry when a friend tricks him into travelling to Batoche, the location of the *Métis* people’s greatest defeat but now their most sacred site. Watching masses of *Métis* singing and dancing “as if nothing else mattered,” he realizes that they are not “like Indians or whites” (p. 164). They are a distinct people, his own “people,” and he knows that he has “come home at last.” As he elaborates, “The importance that I had once placed on being Cree – a true and pure Indian – seemed to disappear with the sinking sun” (p. 166). Still, Scofield’s adoption of his ethnoracial hybridity remains partial. While he finally accepts that he is *Métis*, this appears to imply little beyond a way of being Indigenous.

As one reflects on the growing trend toward self-indigenization in *Métis* literature, it is not easy to determine why so many writers have become uneasy with the European side of their heritage, and consequently with their biocultural hybridity. One possible explanation is legal. In 1982, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that, from that moment on, the term “‘aboriginal peoples of Canada’ includes the Indian, Inuit and *Métis* peoples of Canada” (*Consolidation*, p. 69). Although this is a historic judgment, reportedly making Canada the only “country in the world [that] has constitutionally recognized a mixed-blood people as ‘Aboriginal’” (TEILLET, p. 61), it is problematic because it fails to “determin[e] who the *Métis* are” (BELL, p. 374; see also BRAZ, “Whitey”, p. 173). The Constitution Act of 1982 obviously cannot account for Campbell’s *Halfbreed*, which was published almost a decade earlier. Thus another explanation might be linguistic, the fact the *Métis* have transformed themselves from a predominantly French-speaking people into an English-speaking one. Historians have long remarked that mixed-race communities in North America tended to develop mainly in French-speaking areas, from the St. Lawrence River Valley, through the

Great Lakes region and Louisiana, to the Red River Settlement (MURPHY, p. 14, 45-76). In the not-so-distant past, some Anglophone commentators even conflated mixed-race peoples with French-speakers, claiming that both were more related to “the Prairie wolf” than to humans (MURPHY, p. 73-74). The link between languages and attitudes toward racial hybridity, or miscegenation, is not a frivolous one. Such prominent thinkers as Françoise Lionnet and Jacques Audinet have pointed out that “English speakers” in North America “don’t have a precise word to designate the same thing” that people in Latin American and elsewhere convey without much difficulty (AUDINET, *Human Face*, p. 36; LIONNET, p. 14). This deficiency is highlighted by the common usage in US English of the Spanish term “*mestizaje*” and in Canadian English of the French word “*métissage*,” neither of which has really been naturalized .

Without dismissing the significance of the *Métis* people’s linguistic transition from French to English, my inkling is that the ambivalence about racial hybridity that marks so much contemporary *Métis* writing is more likely a reflection of the reigning cultural zeitgeist. More specifically, it seems to underscore the largely unacknowledged but real return of blood quantum, as reflected in the general acceptance of “hypodescent, a policy that assigns mixed race individuals to the race that has been saddled with the lowest social status” (BRENNAN, p. 2). In his incisive meditation on “Race and Mixed-Race,” Rainier Spencer contends that what he terms “the tyranny of the One-Drop Rule” has become so “pervasive” that it is virtually impossible to question it (p. 135, 137). As he expands, referring specifically to people of mixed African and European ancestry, “Consider the absurdity of the racial analysis: if the mixed-race person has difficulty identifying with the so-called black group, she is confused, fractured, and therefore sick; if she is well-adjusted and happy in identifying as neither black nor white but mixed, she is diagnosed as being utterly sick, since the test of healthy identity for mixed-race persons is that they identify as black” (p. 132). When it comes to the group identity of people of mixed race, the only “healthy” choice clearly is not much of a choice at all.

This apparent rejection of the possibility of racial hybridity has become so widespread that it is embraced even by people of mixed ancestry, like the *Métis*. In *Halfbreed*, Campbell writes that interracial relationships were “common in our area: the

white men were crazy about our women and the white women, although they were not as open and forward about it, were the same towards our men” (p. 108). Yet when she decides to marry a white man, her great-grandmother is “heart-broken” and refuses to attend the wedding. Cheechum declares that “nothing good ever comes from a mixed marriage” (p. 121), calling into question the character of her own (mixed) people. More significantly, when Campbell returns to her hometown late in the text, she meets her first boyfriend, the aforementioned Smoky. As the two talk over coffee, Smoky tells her that he is now “living with a white woman and her sister.” He boasts that his conjugal arrangement is a form of racial warfare. “You remember how the white people used to hate us?” he asks her rhetorically. “Well, they’ve got Halfbreed grandchildren all over now. Times have changed here, Maria, even the whites have deteriorated, or I guess perhaps their deterioration shows now” (p. 173). Months later, after Campbell goes back to the city, she receives a letter from her father informing her that Smoky has shot “his blonde-haired wives” and “then killed himself” (p. 174). Even among people of mixed race, racial hybridity has become not merely a theoretical construct with “little relevance” (GROENING, p. 131) but an impossibility, except as a sign of degeneration. Or, to phrase it differently, we appear to have returned to the eighteenth-century idea that “*mestizaje* doesn’t exist” and cannot exist – even if has to be stopped from propagating at all costs (AUDINET, *Human Face*, p.79). All evidence to the contrary, as exemplified by the existence of peoples like the *Métis*, then as now, we have indeed reached the end of hybridity.

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Notes

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- ² Although there is no consensus on whether there is one or several Métis peoples in Canada (BELL, p. 355; TEILLET, p. 64), in this essay the term Métis is restricted to individuals who trace their ancestry to the Red River Métis or New Nation.
- ³ Ironically, Alexie is one of the writers that Cook-Lynn accuses of not being committed to the preservation of “tribal national life” and of producing works that “reflect little or no defense of treaty-protected reservation land bases as homelands to the indigenes” (p. 68).
- ⁴ Hutcheon makes that statement a few paragraphs after acknowledging the existence of the Métis, stating that, along with their “Native” counterparts, “Métis writers are today demanding a voice” (p. 76; see also Braz, “Fictions”).
- ⁵ As John Foster notes, “The Métis were unique among native peoples in the sense that as distinct entities they did not antedate the fur trade” (p. 73). Or, as Laura Murray phrases it, “the Métis are a people created by the fur trade” (p. 97).
- ⁶ Even a woman writer like Maria Campbell has written a book entitled Riel’s People, in which she states the today’s Métis are “the descendants of Riel’s people” (p. 46), suggesting that Riel is the “father” of the nation.
- ⁷ While Riel’s spelling and grammar can be rather idiosyncratic, especially when he writes in English – which he does increasingly toward the end of his life all quotations from his poetry and prose are reproduced as they appear in the text. Also, unless otherwise noted, the translations from his French writings are mine.
- ⁸ Some scholars consider only the period between 1885 and 1900 the Forgotten Years, labelling the decades between 1900 and 1960 the years of “The Road Allowance People” (DORION and PRÉFONTAINE, p. 14), but no one questions that the whole period between 1885 and 1960 was an extremely trying one for the Métis.

- ⁹ Another concrete example of the English language's apparent inability to describe racial hybridity pithily is the translation of Audinet's own book *Le temps du Métissage*, which has been rendered into English as *The Human Face of Globalization*. Needless to say, globalization is not the exact equivalent of *Métissage*.