

# Pamela V. Sing

---

## Globalization, identity and cultural cores: Mixed-Blood and Métis Writers in Canada and the US

---

Review of International American Studies 6/1-2, 215-236

---

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

## GLOBALIZATION, IDENTITY AND CULTURAL CORES:

Mixed-Blood and Métis Writers in Canada and the US

Contemporary cultural theory construes identity as a particular, modern, way of socially organizing cultural experience. Stuart Hall (1996), notably, discusses it succinctly as an ensemble of definitional practices anchored in the positioning of one's group in relation and in contradistinction to other groups. History, language and culture are effective resources to use in reinforcing one group's 'difference' or distinctiveness, because they appear to invoke origins in a historical past with which one's group continues to correspond; that is to say that they are readily used in the creation of origin myths. Benedict Anderson has famously asserted that our cultural identity is constructed by self and communal definitions predicated on specific, usually politically inflected differentiations such as gender, religion, race, or nationality; all are categories of *imagined* or *imaginary* belongings which are publicly institutionalized and discursively organized. Thus it is that we live our gender, race, religion, or nationality in a structured way, that is to say, according to a *politics*.

Globalization is thought to threaten a group's previously established identity politics. Cultural sociologist John Tomlinson summarizes how that situation is widely believed to have evolved:

Once upon a time, before the era of globalization, there existed local, autonomous, distinct, and well-defined, robust and culturally sustaining connections between geographical place and cultural experience. These connections constituted one's—and one's community's—'cultural identity.' This identity was something people simply 'had' as an undisturbed existential possession, an inheritance, a benefit of traditional

Pamela V. Sing  
University of Alberta  
Canada

long dwelling, of continuity with the past. Identity, then, like language, was not just a description of cultural belonging; it was a sort of collective treasure of local communities. But it was also discovered to be something fragile that needed protecting and preserving, and that could be lost. Into this world of manifold, discrete, but to various degrees vulnerable, cultural identities there suddenly burst (apparently around the middle of the 1980s) the corrosive power of globalization. Globalization, so the story goes, has swept like a flood tide through the world's diverse cultures, destroying stable localities, displacing peoples, bringing a market-driven, 'branded' homogenization of cultural experience, thus obliterating the differences between locality-defined cultures which had constituted our identities. Meanwhile, cultures in the mainstream of the flow of capitalism, specifically, dominant US of A. culture, saw a standardized version of their cultures exported worldwide (Tomlinson, 2003: 269).

Tomlinson's ironic account of the 'globalization story' clearly indicates his disagreement with it, but before examining his perspective, it would be appropriate to dwell briefly on one example of how the 'free-trade' point of view has been applied to Canadian literary matters.

One year before the publication of the Tomlinson essay just cited, Canadian novelist and essayist, Stephen Henighan argued that, 'for Canada, globalization means Americanization. ... No sooner had the Free-Trade Agreement gone through than Canadian novelists lost the thread of contemporary Canadian existence' (Henighan, 2002: 134, 190). Best-sellers were no longer determined by 'local' critics applying criteria stemming from Canadian experiences and sensibilities, but in terms of their projected marketability elsewhere in the world. In support of his argument, Henighan presents scathing, critical close readings of novels that have become the sacred cows of 'CanLit.'<sup>1</sup> He believes that they do little more than illustrate how globalization has transformed a formerly robust national literature into an increasingly insipid, uniform one whose 'assault on the stuffy, provincial, overwhelmingly decent, obstinately regional yet residually communitarian Canadian ethos' (Henighan, 2002: 134) means that '[n]o one can remember the Canada of the 1990s' (190).

Henighan's polemical essay may lack nuance, but it does nonetheless underscore the fact that many contemporary Canadian

---

1. The *English Patient* (Michael Ondaatje), *Fugitive Pieces* (Anne Michaels), and *The Stone Diaries* (Carol Shields) are three cases in point.

literary writers eschew Canadian-ness in favor of 'universality.' The present article will discuss a literary phenomenon that, rather than illustrating the imperialistic, assimilative workings of globalization, highlights the latter's propensity for producing the 'local.' 'The' literature to be discussed is produced in Canada and the US, by writers who share a little-known culture. I am referring to the Métis, a specific people who, born out of unions between French-Canadian men and Native women, are literally native to the North American continent. In 19<sup>th</sup>-century Western Canada, more specifically in and around the Red River settlement in present-day Manitoba, on the Canadian prairies, they felt that they constituted a 'New Nation' defined by specific and distinct cultural practices resulting from a unique blend of two cultures (Dickason, 1985). By the end of that century, however, they were well on their way to becoming 'Canada's forgotten people' (Sealey and Lussier, 1975). Events that will be detailed further on resulted in their 'disappearance' from the public eye. Until the early 1970s, parts of that culture were practiced and maintained in the private sphere, but large chunks of cultural and historical knowledge were lost: oral traditions cannot remain intact when faced with the progressive erosion of conditions permitting their transmission. How, then, has this people pursued its quest of itself while contending simultaneously with the need to recover forgotten patrimonial knowledge, as well as the onslaught of images, ideas, values, and practices flooding the very cultural landscape on which it has undertaken that quest?

This article will address that question by first returning to the theoretical stance taken by John Tomlinson in regards to the relationship between specific cultural identity and globalization. The second part will give a brief history of the Métis people in North America, in order to underscore the importance of the role that artists play vis-à-vis the Métis community at large. The last section will then look at how Tomlinson's theory applies to the work of chiefly two literary artists of Métis ancestry: Canadian poet Marilyn Dumont, and American poet and novelist Louise Erdrich.

#### UNDERSTANDING THE GLOBALIZATION PROCESS

Tomlinson invites us to understand global modernity as a cultural package, one characteristic of which is productively described

in terms of the deterritorializing character of the globalization process. Social geographical location is no longer an important factor, since it merely participates in the 'mundane flow of cultural experience' (Tomlinson, 2003: 273). Cultural experience is 'lifted out' of its traditional 'anchoring' in particular localities in various ways, and shared around. The places where we live, then, become increasingly 'penetrated' by the connectivity of globalization. Location, writes Tomlinson, is increasingly penetrated by distance. The entering of globalized influences, experiences, and attitudes into the 'core of our local lifeworld' does trigger a transformation in our routine pattern of cultural existence, but in the face of these globalized and globalizing influences, local culture manifests a robustness or 'upsurging power' (270), thereby offering resistance to the centrifugal force of capitalist globalization. That which had previously been nothing more than inchoate, less socially policed belongings, develops into *organized* resistant identitarian strategies or formations. This is because identity, particularly in its dominant form of national identity, is not a mere 'communal-psychic attachment,' but a major component of institutionalized social life in modernity, the product of concerted cultural construction and maintenance of state regulatory and institutionalizing efforts, exercised mainly in the domains of education, law, and the media. In this way, globalization may be said to create or produce, and proliferate identity. Let us now look at the role played by that process in the literary discourse of North American Métis writers.

Special Issue  
*Decoding  
American Cultures  
in the Global Context*

RIAS VOL. 6, SPRING-FALL N° 1-2/2013

#### THE EVOLVING 'PLACE' OF THE FRANCO-MÉTIS IN CANADA AND THE U.S.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Franco-Métis formed a majority group in what is today named the Western Canadian province of Manitoba: as key players in a space that developed in function of and concomitantly with the fur trade, their language was spoken in public and private domains, and the lands they occupied were 'theirs.' Once the Canadian government began to covet those lands, their world was turned upside down. When the 1870 Manitoba Act created the province of Manitoba, it 'promised'—or the Métis were led to believe that it did so—that 1.4 million acres of land

of the new province would be set aside for Métis children, and that the occupied lands along the river would be left alone. But that was not what came to pass.<sup>2</sup>

As white settlers from Eastern Canada poured into the new province, tens of dozens of Métis were driven from their land. Whether influenced by this development or not, others abandoned their homes in order to engage in economic pursuits requiring that they leave Manitoba (Ens, 1996). Many went south to the US, and many others, farther north and west, into present day Saskatchewan and Alberta. In an attempt to avoid a similar kind of territorial dispossession in their new space of residence, the Métis of Saskatchewan sought to obtain land titles from the government of Canada. When, time after time, their demands and letters went unanswered, they resolved to take action. The result was what is commonly called the North-West rebellion of 1885. Despite the brilliant military tactics of Gabriel Dumont, the Métis were defeated by the Canadian army at the battle of Batoche, and their spiritual and political leader, Louis Riel, was hung for high treason. Dumont fled south of the border into Montana, and then, eastward, to a French community in New York, from where he sojourned briefly in Quebec, in an attempt to garner support for the Métis cause. After the Canadian government granted amnesty to the Métis, he eventually returned to Batoche, where he ended his days in 1906.

Contrary to Dumont, many other Métis embarked on journeys that ended in permanent exile. Some disavowed their Métisness and, re-identified as Canadian or American 'Indians' or as 'generic' non-Native Anglophone Canadians or Americans, and isolated themselves from their own people. Scattered all across the North American continent, they lived 'incognito.'

---

2. Whereas the government signed 'treaties' or, euphemistically put, collective territorial 'compensation,' with First Nations people in exchange for extinguishment of Aboriginal rights, they offered the Métis the opportunity to apply for individual certificates called scrips, which ostensibly attributed to the holder either a surveyed parcel of land or else money with which they could purchase land surveyed for that purpose. Scandals developed around those scrips, and many people either did not receive the scrip(s) to which they were entitled, or were enticed to sell them to speculators who bought them for a fraction of their worth, and then sold them for much more.

Others managed to relocate in Métis communities. Among the more 'fortunate' were those who moved to remote villages like Cumberland House, in Saskatchewan, or Saint-Laurent, in Manitoba. Others, dispossessed of their lands, were reduced to setting up shacks on Crown lands reserved by the government for the construction of public roads, eventually creating what became known as 'road allowance communities.' Still others fled south of the Canada-US border, notably to join friends and relatives who had settled on the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation in North Dakota after the 1870 creation of the province of Manitoba.

Regardless of where they lived, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Métis were in survival mode and had largely 'disappeared' from the public eye. Many of those who continued to live amongst their own in a community that included elders maintained or conserved what they could, but the conjuncture was not conducive to public celebrations of their social practices.

Since the 1970s, the Métis in Canada and the US have become an increasingly self-aware and visible people. Those who live in the US, where they have no official status, must identify solely in relation to their 'Native/Indian' ancestry, but that does not necessarily mean the disappearance of their 'Métisness.' Indeed, the author of *History of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians* who had been the Reservation's Tribal Chairman from July 1953 until January 1959, wrote in 1960 that 1% of the Band's population were 'full-bloods,' not meaning people 'of pure Indian descent,' but those adhering to an 'Indian way of life.' the majority were 'Metis' or, as they refer to themselves, 'Mechifs,' a term corresponding to the Métis pronunciation of the word 'Métis.' Contrary to the 'full-bloods,' this group favored the European/French aspects of their double heritage, and prided themselves as a progressive people.

Descendents of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Métis who continued to live in western Canada have been formed by different experiences, but generally speaking, and contrary to their Turtle Mountain counterparts, those who adopted 'progressive' practices, which largely meant that their socioeconomic status allowed them to first emulate, and subsequently, assimilate to, French Canadians, were considered to be French Canadians. Consequently, the term 'Métis'

no longer signified a nation, but an impoverished and marginalized social class (St-Onge, 2004).

Regardless of whether the 'original' communities fell apart because of displacements or re-identification through social mobility, the sparseness of today's Métis cultural 'archives' is in large part due to the fact that their culture has been an oral one.<sup>3</sup> When a nonliterate community is torn apart, much of the stuff of oral traditions is lost. With no one to transmit one's knowledge and ways of knowing to, no one else to validate one's beliefs, a particular 'way of being in the world' gets forgotten. Moreover, Métis *difference* vis-à-vis both First Nations and whites, construed in terms of failure or lack<sup>4</sup> rather than cultural distinctiveness, has often resulted in feelings of shame for their heritage, and contributed to the decision to not transmit practices and beliefs indicative of Métisness. Certainly, when denigrating stereotypes are internalized, they lead to identity issues with devastating psycho-social consequences.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, that very decision to submit in various ways to the pressures of 'invisibilization' triggers an acute awareness of the need to feel 'at home' *somewhere, somehow*.

In North America, aboriginal First Nations groups have undertaken projects of cultural reterritorialization in the form of reclaiming localities (land rights movements). Tomlinson observes that although their 'claims of identity are inextricably

---

3. The narrator of one of Maria Campbell's *Stories of the Road Allowance People* confirms this in the following words: 'dats dah reason why we have such a hard time / us peoples. / Our roots dey gets broken so many times. / Hees hard to be strong you know / when you don got far to look back for help. / Dah Whitemans / he can look back thousands of years / cos him / he write everything down. / us peoples / we use dah membering / an we pass it on by telling stories an singing songs. / Sometimes we even dance dah membering.' Maria Campbell, *Stories of the Road Allowance People*, Penticton, Theytus Books, 1995, p. 88.

4. See, for example, the poem 'Leather and Naughahyde,' in Marilyn Dumont 1996: 58.

5. Referring to the way family members of her parents' generation had been 'knowing / not knowing' about their Native side 'for years,' Métis writer Joanne Arnott suggested fifteen years ago that '[t]he violence, the sexual abuse and every other oppressive and "crazy" thing that happened to and around me is intimately connected to that crazy-making denial and the crazy-making racist oppression that parented it' (Arnott, 1995: 64).



mixed with issues of political and economic justice, ... the argument for many, is for a right to an ethnic “homeland” conceived as coexistent and compatible with a national identity’ (Tomlinson, 2003: 275). The Métis have undertaken similar reterritorialization projects. Those that have taken the form of land claims have been largely unsuccessful. The 2007 dismissal of the lawsuit that the Manitoba Métis Association launched in 1981, claiming that the Métis community was entitled to land agreements made in regards to a 1.4 million acre stretch of land in the Red River Valley, for example, concerns the breach of a ‘promise’ made 136 years earlier. I would like to suggest that in the face of the repeated failure to reappropriate land, reterritorialization through cultural production acquires an incommensurable importance.

#### CULTURAL CORES IN NORTH AMERICAN NATIVE LITERATURE

Earlier, I cited Tomlinson’s reference to globalizing influences that infiltrate the ‘core’ of our locally situated lifeworld. The word ‘core’ is also to be found in a text belonging to Native American author Louise Erdrich, who wrote in 1985 that, ‘in the light of enormous loss,’ contemporary Aboriginal artists must ‘tell the stories of contemporary survivors while protecting and celebrating the *cores of cultures* left in the wake of the catastrophe’ (Erdrich, 1985: 23; emphasis added). Consideration of Métis literary production in light of both references to the notion of cultural cores prompts the question of the interrelationship between a pervasive and invasive majority or imported culture and a local culture whose colonization has all but completely decimated its cores.

In the literary domain, ‘Native American’ and ‘Native Canadian’ writers are in the process of producing what has become in the last two decades a particularly dynamic, burgeoning literature. Many of those writers are descendents of Canada’s 19<sup>th</sup>-century Franco-Métis. One of them, Maria Campbell, whose seminal autobiography sought to reveal to Canadians ‘what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country’ (Campbell, 1973: 8), is considered by many to have initiated contemporary Native Canadian Literature.

My last sentence correctly suggests the tendency to think the field of Native Canadian Literature in terms of a pan-Aboriginal

approach, that is, by conflating Métis and First Nations writers and works. On the one hand, this approach is understandable and appropriate, particularly in light of the divisive effects of government policies such as the *Indian Act* that, prior to 1985, pitted 'status Indians' against 'non-status Indians' based on gender: if a Native woman married a non-Native man, she lost her 'Indian status,' but not so a Native man who married a non-Native woman. The reader can easily imagine the sort of injustices, inequality, and hostility that kind of policy has created among members of a same family, community, and/or marginalized national group. The feeling of belonging-ness and solidarity achieved through thinking of themselves and each other in an inclusive way empowers the group and the individuals within that group and enables them to better resist the negative effects of colonialism affecting them all, albeit in different ways.

Indeed, First Nations and Métis people share many experiences, but their history and culture have developed in distinctively different ways. One chief perspective that brings this to light concerns the role played by different aspects of European, in particular French culture in each community's linguistic, culinary, and spiritual practices. The conflation of First Nations and Métis literatures, then, prevents readers from appreciating the complexity of 'Native' or 'Aboriginal' or 'Indian' populations that inhabit North America, and also, leads to problematic representations. The critically acclaimed novel, *in Search of April Raintree*, first published in 1983 by Métis writer Beatrice Mosionier (whose last name was Culleton at the time), for example, depicts two sisters who, despite their being identified as Métis, do, think and say little that would enlighten a reader on the subject of Métis cultural specificity. Now that Native literature is recognized and celebrated as a dynamic and increasingly robust field, both in Canada and in the US, the twenty-first century is witnessing the emergence of a contemporary Métis identity poetics that, through the recuperation of traditional identity and cultural paradigms or 'cores,' speaks to historical and cultural specificities particular to the Métis as well as the latter's membership in the pan-Aboriginal community at large. Let us now look at how that shift has manifested at a time when globalization is no longer but a hypothetical situation.

Pamela V. Sing  
University of Alberta  
Canada

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Canadian writers identifying as Métis have become numerous enough for it to be appropriate to speak of second and third wave authors, as well as emerging writers. Among these, novelist, short-story writer, and essayist, Lee Maracle, and poet Marilyn Dumont, both grew up in the full knowledge that they were Métis, while fellow writers Gregory Scofield, Joanne Arnott, and Sharron Proulx-Turner grew up with the uncertainty of their cultural sources: they reclaimed their Métis identity as adults. Short-story author Sandra Birdsell presents yet another identitary scenario: raised with the knowledge of her maternal Mennonite sources, while secrecy surrounded the details of her father's Métisness, she has yet to discover those details and the importance they could have for her and her writing.

In the US, published and emerging writers whose art carries traces of their Métis ancestry tend to have roots in the Turtle Mountain Chippewa reserve in North Dakota, a community of 'mixed-bloods' whose cultural sources are historically the same as Canada's Métis of French-Canadian ancestry. Two cases in point are the aforementioned poet and novelist Louise Erdrich, who has been publishing since 1984, and poet and fiction-writer, Mark Turcotte, whose first book of poetry was published in 1995.

#### A SHIFT TOWARD SPECIFICALLY MÉTIS CULTURAL CORES IN CANADIAN MÉTIS LITERARY DISCOURSE

In 1993, Métis award-winning poet Marilyn Dumont wrote that 'the circle, mother earth, the number four or the trickster figure' were 'positive images of nativeness' that permitted writers to assert their membership in an 'authentic,' but nonetheless generic native community (Dumont, 1993: 47). Moreover, they had the disadvantage of raising issues regarding colonization and reductive 'othering' stereotypes, internalization of those stereotypes, and/or pressure exerted by aboriginal identity politics. In her 1996 prose-poem, 'Circle the Wagons,' Dumont discussed the dilemma in terms of specifically Métis and pan-Native cultural references, as well as those indicative of the global context:

There it is again, the circle, that goddamned circle, as if we thought in circles, judged things on the merit of their circularity, as if all we ate

was bologna and bannock, drank Tetley tea, so many times 'we are' the circle, the medicine wheel, the moon, the womb, and sacred hoops, you'd think we were one big tribe, is there nothing more than the circle in the deep structure of native literature? ... Yet I feel compelled to incorporate something circular into the text, plot, or narrative structure because if it's linear then that proves that I'm a ghost and that native culture really has vanished and what is all this fuss about appropriation anyway? ... There are times when I feel that if I don't have a circle or the number four or legend in my poetry, I am lost, just a fading urban Indian caught in all the trappings of Doc Martens, cappuccinos and foreign films ... (Dumont, 1996: 57).

As this last passage makes clear, pan-Native symbols *do* function as resistance against mass culture imports, but their use by the Métis writer elicits feelings of unfulfillment. Since the year 2000, Dumont's projects have continued to critique the attitudes of whites to Native people and pay tribute to various aspects of personal and family life, but there has been a shift toward *wahkotowin*, a Michif Cree word that, to quote Maria Campbell, means 'honoring and respecting kinship, relationship and [human] family. ... They are our stories, songs, ceremonies, and dances' (Campbell, 2007). In 2007, Dumont and five other Aboriginal women staged *Honour Songs*, a performance of texts written by Alberta's Native women on personal life experiences, and incorporated into a visual art installation of shawls based on the texts and a performance.<sup>6</sup> On the subject of the entire experience, Dumont wrote:

I am very proud not only of the words we crafted and performed through *Honour Songs*, but in some ways, maybe more so, of the hand-work we constructed and displayed along with the performance. This was one small way to validate women's handwork which is often marginalized as craft rather than taking its rightful status as art. While sewing the shawl, I felt that my hands and spirit were somehow shadowing all the Aboriginal women's hands that meticulously crafted clothing for their families' survival during the history of Edmonton, and that the sewing I did was a demonstration of my respect for their skill and hard work. The written word is important, but the handcraft was the unspoken message of *Honour Songs*. ... Creating things with our hands as a group, also spoke to the practice of aboriginal women work-

6. Youtube clips and photographs of the performance, are found at <http://www.edmontonpoetryfestival.com/anthology/honor.html>

ing together in extended family groups, groups which continue to this day to raise children and hold communities together (Dumont, 2007).

By paying tribute to cultural cores that allow her to express the specific Métisness of an art form belonging also to Non-Métis Aboriginal people, Dumont practices a poetics that is simultaneously personal and communal. Since the *Honour Songs* project, Dumont has deepened her connections with other traditional art forms such as beading and weaving, and this is reflected in her writing, notably in two as-yet unpublished poems, 'and with second sight, she pushes' and 'Sky berry and Water berry.' In and through the first piece, the poet remembers the painstaking movements of her mother's beading, as the patient push-and-pulls of her needle and thread give artful, loving birth to 'her belief / in petal, stem and leaf,' while reconfirming her connections to the natural world, to the children she also gave birth to, and to her children's children:

with second sight, she pushes  
the needle and thread up precisely  
where her eye wants to meet it  
on the surface of the fabric  
then down  
between each bead  
by seed bead

seed

over and over  
repeated

...

The bead's colour makes no sound  
but it is cranberry, moss, and fireweed  
it is also wolf willow, sap and sawdust  
as well as Chickadee, Magpie and jack-rabbit

a bead is not simply dark blue  
but Saskatoon blue

...

and it's not just a seed bead  
it's a number # 11 pearlized bead  
or a number #10 2-cut glass bead  
or a number #10 French white heart

...

she, this link  
holds

Special Issue  
*Decoding  
American Cultures  
in the Global Context*

RIAS VOL. 6, SPRING-FALL N° 1-2/2013

each beadberry  
a thought  
each beadberry  
a word in prayer  
for her son  
for her daughter  
for her grandchild ...

In the second poem, beading is constructed as heritage that connects one with the cosmos, and as a ceremony that brings back to life lost, longed-for ancestors and a way of life whose remembrance adds something delicately new to the present:

like the life-liquid of berries, her brothers  
thirsted for in ceremony  
and recalled now in colour  
their small fruit  
tasting of blossom

While remaining firmly anchored in the contemporary urban context that is the poet's space, these poems pay tribute to the cultural cores that not only demonstrate emphatically that the myth of the 'vanishing Métis' is bosh, but also empower the poet to feel 'at home' in today's global context.

#### A SHIFT TOWARD SPECIFICALLY MÉTIS CULTURAL CORES IN US MÉTIS LITERARY DISCOURSE

The characters created by Louise Erdrich possess many universal characteristics, but between 1984 and 2008, tropes emphasizing their Métis heritage and cultural patrimony have undergone a visible shift. Those depicted in her first novel, *Love Medicine*, the 1984 edition of which was followed by a 'new and expanded' 1993 edition, make frequent auto-identitary references to their 'Indian-ness,' and only a limited number of references to their Métis-ness. The signification and significance of the latter references are for the most part easy to miss, since the narrators of the different stories do not bother to elaborate or explain such details. Moreover, the reader is encouraged to not dwell on intra-communal distinctions, since, as we shall see, each reference to a specifically Métis trait or practice is followed by a reference that blurs that distinc-

tiveness. To illustrate my point, here are a few samples taken and stemming from the novel's second chapter, told in the first person by Albertine Johnson, the daughter that her mother, Zelda, had with her ex-husband, '[her] Swedish boy' (Erdrich, 1993: 15). Albertine is a medical student in Fargo, but has returned to the reservation for a visit.

Soon after her arrival at the family home—the grand-parents' house is treated by the family like 'communal property' (Erdrich, 1993: 29)—Albertine is asked by Zelda if she has 'met any marriageable boys in Fargo yet,' the narrator explains that 'By marriageable I knew she meant Catholic' (14). When her mother expresses consternation upon learning that her daughter is more interested in a career than in marriage, the latter protests, remembering that 'Mama had kept books for the priests and nuns up at Sacred Heart ever since I could remember' (15). Are readers reading about 'a North Dakota reservation' for the first time surprised to learn of the existence of a Catholic Indian community? or does that bit of socio-cultural information slip by them? This would not be surprising, since the abovementioned sequence is interrupted by a narrative sequence that, told in the same paragraph, introduces another important theme, that of Native and non-Native interculturality.

As Albertine's cousin, King, and his wife, Lynette, enter the driveway, the following exchange is triggered:

'There's that white girl.' Mama peeked out the window.

'Oh, for gosh sakes.' Aurelia [Zelda's sister] gave her heady snort again ... 'What about your Swedish boy?'

'Learnt my lesson. ... Never marry a Swedish is my rule.' (Erdrich, 1993: 15)

The trope targeting the devalorization of Native-European cultural *métissage* is made explicit in the narrator's comparison of her grandfather, Nector, who 'came home from boarding school knowing white reading and writing,' and his brother, Eli, who 'knew the woods': 'Now, these many years later ... my Great uncle Eli was still sharp, while Grandpa's mind had left us, gone wary and wild' (Erdrich, 1993: 19). As the novel progresses, it reinforces the opposition between the two brothers. Nector is identified in relation

to the town, social conversation, fiddle dances or parties (Erdrich, 1993: 61, 63), his dream of a 'French-style wedding' (63), 'slim wages and his chips at the pool hall and home-brewed wine' (91), his marketable good looks (124, 233), his mistress's 'French rouge' (131), the 'songs he sings out in the middle of Mass' (232), and finally the insight that God 'has been deafening up' on the reservation's residents (236). Eli, meanwhile, is a 'nothing-and-nowhere person' with a 'soft hushed voice' and knowledge about carving, birdcalls, 'whistling on [one's] own fingers,' and snaring. His songs are 'wild, unholy ... Cree songs that made you lonely. Hunting songs used to attract deer and women' (92), and he is the loving father-figure that, at the age of nine, June Kashpaw, whose death opens the novel, chooses to live with.

When King and Lynette leave momentarily, Zelda resumes her criticism of her niece-in-law, and ends by underscoring the importance of cultural 'purity':

Pamela V. Sing  
University of Alberta  
Canada

'That white girl,' Mama went on, 'she's built like a truck-driver. She ...'  
'Jeez, Zelda! ... so she's white. How do you think Albertine feels hearing you talk like this when her Dad was white?'  
'I feel fine,' I said. 'I never knew him.'  
I understood what Aurelia meant though—I was light, clearly a breed.  
'My girl's an Indian,' Zelda emphasized. 'I raised her an Indian, and that's what she is.' (Erdrich, 1993: 24)

After a short absence, King and Lynette return home, where the group is soon joined by Gordie, King's father, and Eli. at one point in the evening, an inebriated King turns to his uncle and the following exchange takes place:

'Can you gimme a cigarette, Eli?' King asked.  
'When you ask for a cigarette around here,' said Gordie, 'you don't say can I have a cigarette. You say *ciga swa*?'  
'Them Michifs ask like that,' Eli said. 'You got to ask a *real old-time Indian* like me for the right words.'  
...  
'I think the fuckin' world of you, Uncle!'



'Damn right. I'm an old man,' Eli said in a flat, soft voice. '*Ekewaynze*.' (Erdrich, 1993: 32-33; emphasis added.)

In the 1984 edition of the novel, the second part of Eli's first response is 'You got to ask a *real old Cree* like me for the right words' (Erdrich, 1984: 30; emphasis added.), and his second response does not include the Ojibway word for 'old man' (commonly spelled 'Akiwenzie' in Canada). The 1984 reference to Eli's Cree heritage places emphasis on the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Indian Reservation's mixed socio-cultural core, but by so doing, it also diminishes the tension the novel seeks to establish between the 'Michifs' on one hand, and 'real old' or 'old-time' people or 'Indians,' on the other. Written without any explanation, translation, or other commentary, the 1993 Ojibway word Eli uses to self-identify underscores the oppositional relationship, and consequently as well, the novel's objective of re-actualizing the Turtle Mountain Band's pre-French-contact core, when the Plains-Ojibway or Bungi were a mixture of only Native tribes: '[m]ostly Ojibway, a little bit of Cree, a little bit of Ottawa; and also a little bit of Assiniboin and Sioux' (Gourneau, 1989: 5).

Given that ideological position, the community's catholicity referred to in the novel's second chapter and amply alluded to throughout the rest of the novel must also be devalorized as the novel advances toward its dénouement. Historical accounts of missionary experiences suggest that in 'Indian' gathering sites, evangelical efforts were largely unsuccessful because their 'faith in their own religion' was so strong (Nute, 2004: 37), whereas the contrary was true in communities with a Métis majority, notably the Pembina mission, located approximately 177 kilometers east of the Turtle Mountain Reservation (Nute, 1942: 309, 327). If the majority of the characters depicted in *Love Medicine* are Catholic, they are very likely descendents of Métis whose 'old language' would have been Michif, a rare mixed language consisting of nouns taken mostly from French, but also English, and verbs taken chiefly from Cree, but also Ojibway.

That the old ways so explicitly favored in the novel signify Ojibway values and language, then, is a rejection of Métis cultural cores. This is perhaps most notable in the evolution of Marie, Nector's wife, who, because she 'doesn't have that much Indian

blood' passes for a 'skinny white girl' in her youth (Erdrich, 1993: 43, 63). On the one hand, Marie is associated with the convent, galette, the French word for bannock (103, 141), political power, and appearances. On the other hand, she manifests a latent spiritual and physical attraction to and for Eli (94), with whom she shares a particularly affectionate love for June Kashpaw, one of the many children she 'takes in,' and most of all, she develops a relationship with Rushes Bear and Fleur Pillager, both of whom are speakers of the old language and keepers of the old ways and spirituality. When the two women act as Marie's mid-wives, they attend also to the birth of Marie's Ojibway self. That it is a new dawn for her is symbolized by the fact that it is the first time that she gives birth in the daylight. Moreover, her search for a motivational birthing word leads her to the rediscovery of an Ojibway one from her childhood, *Babaumawaebigowin*, meaning 'driven along by waves' (Johnston, qtd. in Beidler, 2003: 61). Guided by the 'low voices' of the two women, Marie thus makes her way safely 'to shore' or 'home,' where she discovers that she has a new son, but also, that Rushes Bear is her 'own mother, [her] own blood' (Erdrich, 1993: 104). Some thirty years later, Marie has rejected the 'new' world, symbolized by 'the Catholic [worldview], the Bureau [of Indian Affairs] [and] the comfortless words of English' (263). Having frequented 'other old people at the Senior Citizens,' she speaks 'the old language,' and has hung on to the 'old strengths Rushes Bear had taught her' (263).

Fifteen years after the publication of the longer version of *Love Medicine*, Erdrich published *the Plague of the Doves*, an intergenerational novel involving two families, which, from its very beginning, establishes the primacy of the Catholic, French-Native mixed-blood universe that the first novel made so little of. Indeed, the novel's opening sentence introduces the reader to the 1896 universe of the narrator's great-uncle, Father Severine Milk, 'one of the first Catholic priests of aboriginal blood' (Erdrich, 2008: 5). His brother, Seraph Milk, is her grandfather or Mooshum, and it is his stories and storytelling that she recounts, intertwining them with details of her own love story with Corwin Peace, thus establishing the significance of Métis values and beliefs while underscoring the incommensurable importance her people place on community

and oral tradition. The story of Evelina's grandparents' mutual *coup de foudre* illustrates this.

In the field where Father Severine summons the villagers in an effort to rid the community of the eponymous disaster, Mooshum loses consciousness when he is struck by one of the doves:

At this point in the story, Mooshum became so agitated that he often acted out the smiting and to our pleasure threw himself upon the floor. He mimed his collapse, then opened his eyes and lifted his head and stared into space, clearly seeing even now the vision of the Holy Spirit, which appeared to him not in the form of a white bird among the brown doves, but in the earthly body of a girl.

...

And there she was! Mooshum paused in his story. His hand opened and the hundreds of wrinkles in his face folded into a mask of unsurpassable happiness. ... She had the pale, opaque skin and slanting black eyes of the Metis or Michif women. ... Her last name ... comes down to us from some French voyageur ... I imagined their dark, mutual gaze. The Holy Spirit hovered between them. (Erdrich, 2008: 11-12)

Other threads of Métis cultural cores woven into the texture of Erdrich's 2008 novel include numerous references to Louis Riel–Evelina, it turns out, is named for Riel's 'first love' (Erdrich, 2008: 265)—words or entire sentences in the mixed French-Cree/Ojibway Michif language<sup>7</sup>—for example, when Evelina says she thinks she looks French, her interlocutor replies: 'Well, you are French, aren't you?' and Mooshum comments: 'La zhem feey katawashishiew' (191).<sup>8</sup> Shortly thereafter, when his granddaughter demonstrates that the language she is learning is 'standard' French, and not Michif, Mooshum says disgustedly, using the Ojibway word for 'white person,' 'That's not how it goes! She tries to speak Michif and she sounds like a damn chimookamaan' (191). Evelina protests, 'I sound *French*, Mooshum. Je parle français!'—but her

---

7. One of the homodiegetic characters, Judge Antone Basil Coutts, explains that 'Ojibwae language in several dialects is spoken on our reservation, along with Cree, and Michif—a mixture of all three' (Erdrich, 2008: 195).

8. This response is likely to have been taken from Laverdure and Allard (1983), where the entry under 'girl' includes the sentence 'The young girl is pretty. La zhenn feey katawashishiw' (Laverdure and Allard, 1983: 110). I would like to thank linguist Richard Rhodes for informing me that the correct spelling of the last word, in Cree, is 'katawāshishiw.'

grandfather comments, 'Ehhh, the French, Lee Kenayaen!'<sup>9</sup> and soon finds the opportunity to declare that on 'the Chipewewa side, we're also hereditary chefs. And we're quick' (Erdrich, 2008: 192). Last but not least, as I show in another study (Sing, 2010), an important leitmotiv in the novel is constructed around a particular model of that most emblematic of Métis cultural icons, the violin or fiddle. Its story alone encapsulates the spirit, beliefs, and passions of a people whose identity is still relatively little known by students of North America's cultures.

\* \* \*

This study has emphasized the shift that has occurred in the writing of two contemporary authors of Métis ancestry, one a Canadian, Marilyn Dumont, and the other an American, Louise Erdrich. The earlier works of both writers emphasized pan-Native Canadian and American cultures, whereas their more recent writing show them to be increasingly committed to debunking the myth of the 'vanishing Métis' assimilated to the beliefs, values, and practices of a 'universal,' globalized North America. Dumont and Erdrich continue to affirm the links between First Nations and Métis peoples and cultural practices, but rather than writing about a generic Indian identity, they bring to the fore the personal aspirations and cultural cores that are specific to their respective communities. By so doing, they show these communities to be worthy of literary representation. As members of a culture that was almost completely destroyed by the dynamic of nation state building in Canada and in the US, then, both writers show that globalization allows for a resurgence of local cultures, community identity, and new ways to share multiple identities. Just as importantly, they indicate the conditions under which that is made possible, since community or Métis-ness is not portrayed as an isolated, frozen-in-time homeland or set of practices and beliefs ready to be accessed whenever one feels in need of a dose of identity refreshment. Rather, local, culture-specific community or grounding is constructed as a space that emerges through the accumula-

*Pamela V. Sing  
University of Alberta  
Canada*

9. 'The French Canadians,' in standardized French, is 'Les Canadiens.' Mooshum's dialect is Michif French.

tion of repeated moments of attentiveness paid to a number of potentially mnemonic fragments, each one of which remains bereft of meaningful signification unless considered creatively and in relation to other such fragments. Writers such as Dumont and Erdrich exploit universal themes such as memory, loss, family, and identity as they are affected through and by explicitly (re)territorialized cultural experiences, and by doing so, show that globalization certainly does not have to mean the inevitable transformation of the continent's literary landscapes into one insipid, uniform everyman's land. On the contrary, they validate Tomlinson's claim regarding the robustness of the 'cores of our local lifeworld' (Tomlinson, 2003: 270) and the role they can play in resisting the force of globalized and globalizing influences, but underscore the personal investment and efforts needed to produce that source of resistance.

Special Issue  
*Decoding  
American Cultures  
in the Global Context*

RIAS VOL. 6, SPRING-FALL Nº 1-2/2013

## WORKS CITED:

- Anderson, B. R. (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso / NLB.
- Beidler, P. G. (2003) "'In the Old Language": a Glossary of Ojibwe Words, Phrases, and Sentences in Louise Erdrich's Novels,' *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 27(3): 53-70.
- Campbell, M. (1973) *Halfbreed*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.
- (2007) 'Reflections: We Need to Return to the Principles of Wahkotowin,' *Eagle Feather News* November: 5.
- Culleton, B. (1983) *in Search of April Raintree*. Winnipeg: Pemmican.
- Dickason, O. P. (1985) 'From "One Nation" in the Northeast to "New Nation" in the Northwest: a look at the emergence of the métis,' in J. L. Peterson and J. S. H. Brown (eds), *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 19-36.
- Dumont, M. (1993) 'Positive Images of Nativeness,' in J. Armstrong (ed), *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*. Penticton: Theytus Books. 46-50.
- (1996) *a really good brown girl*. London, Ontario: Brick Books.
- (2007) 'Comments on the ensemble.' <<http://www.edmontonpoetryfestival.com/anthology/honor.html>> Accessed: September 30, 2007.
- Ens, G. J. (1996) *Homeland to Hinterland: the Changing Worlds of the Red River Metis*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Erdrich, L. (1984) *Love Medicine*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- (1985) 'Where I Ought to Be: a Writer's Sense of Place,' *New York Times Book Review* 1: 23-24.
- (1993) *Love Medicine: New and Expanded Version*. New York: Henry Holt.
- (2008) *The Plague of Doves*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Gourneau, P. (Aun nish e naubay) (1989 [1960]). *History of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians*. Bottineau, North Dakota: Gourneau.

- Hall, S. (1996) 'Introduction: Who Needs Identity?' in S. Hall and P. Du Gay (eds), *Questions of Identity*. London: Sage, 1-17.
- Henighan, S. (2002) *When Words Deny the World: The Reshaping of Canadian Writing*. Erin: Porcupine's Quill.
- Laverdure, P., and Allard, I. R. (1983) *The Michif Dictionary: Turtle Mountain Chippewa Cree*. Winnipeg: Pemmican.
- Nute, G. L. (1942) *Documents Relating to Northwest Missions: 1815-1827*. Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society.
- (2004 [1950]) *Rainy River Country: a Brief History of the Region Bordering Minnesota and Ontario*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society.
- Peterson, J. L., and Brown, J. S. H., eds. (1985) *the New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.
- Sealey, D. B. and Lussier, A. S. (1975) *the Métis: Canada's Forgotten People*. Winnipeg: Manitoba Métis Federation Press.
- Sing, P. V. (2010) 'Ancestral Songs and Sorrowful or Joyous Shreds of Imaginings in Contemporary Métis/Mixedblood Stories: Dubé, McNickle, and Erdrich,' in S. Pellerin (ed), *A Usable Past: Tradition in Native American Literature and Cultures*. Pessac, France: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 109-121.
- St-Onge, N. (2004) *Saint-Laurent, Manitoba : Evolving Métis Identities, 1850-1914*. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre.
- Tomlinson, J. (2003) 'Globalization and Cultural Identity.' <[www.polity.co.uk/global/pdf/GTReader2eTomlinson.pdf](http://www.polity.co.uk/global/pdf/GTReader2eTomlinson.pdf)> Accessed: August, 2009.