

# Intersections of Memory, Ancestral Language, and Imagination; or, the Textual Production of Michif Voices as Cultural Weaponry

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Article abstract

Anthologies and studies published in Aboriginal or Native writing and storytelling in Canada or Quebec generally suggest that First Nations and Métis writings form one and the same literature. While such groupings do not prevent the recognition that a particular writer is Métis, nor do they address the question of a distinct Métis cultural production. This state of affairs is further complicated by the fact that the majority of such volumes are written from an English-language perspective, which has historically overlooked the connections between Métis, French, and Franco-Canadian ancestry. The continued “neglect” of this reality threatens two oral traditions which are the product of these diverse groups, Michif and Michif French. While both of these languages may well be disappearing—despite efforts to conserve and resuscitate them—they have become incontestably rich sources of an emergent creative expression of place and identity that validates peoples and cultures that might otherwise be obscured or forgotten altogether.

# Intersections of Memory, Ancestral Language, and Imagination; or, the Textual Production of Michif Voices as Cultural Weaponry

PAMELA V. SING

IN HIS OVERVIEW of the historic origins in modern thought of ideas playing a central role in the current debate over matters of identity and recognition, Charles Taylor emphasizes that, whether it is a question of individual or of collective identity, “we become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression” (32). Languages, in this context, signify modes of expression used to identify ourselves, including those of art and literature, and all evolve, are developed, and are acquired in a dialogical manner — that is to say, through exchanges with others. By underscoring the socially derived character of identity, this perspective explains the importance of external recognition, both on an individual basis and on a cultural one. In this article, I intend to focus on an aesthetic that, grounded in memory, demonstrates and requests recognition for a particular type of “love of words.” The words in question belong to Michif, an oral ancestral language that, despite (or perhaps because of) its endangered status, proves to be a powerful identity symbol. Relegated to an underground existence during the latter part of the nineteenth century, the resurgence of Michif words and expressions in literary texts reminds the community to which they belong, and that they are telling (back) into existence, of its historic, cultural, and linguistic sources, thus re-laying claim to a specific and distinct, but unrecognized space on the Canadian word/landscape. In the texts to be considered here, the love and respect for one’s ancestral language means no longer feigning its non-existence, but rather revealing the manner in which its words and accompanying world view persist to the point of interfering in the way one apparently conforms or adapts to dominant culture and

language. Lying at the heart of an aesthetic that dares to be of and for a particular cultural community whose time it has come to be acknowledged and respected, Michif words have the potential to confer a transgressive and new poetic power upon a specific culture and its way of seeing and saying the world.

\* \* \*

Today's context of globalization has bestowed an apparently hegemonic status upon the English language.<sup>1</sup> However, Jean-Paul Nerrière has made the observation that the English used by non-English speakers of various other "native tongues" — that is to say, by eighty-eight percent of the world's population, is a pragmatic tool — which, continually (re)invented for the purpose of communicating basic information, would most certainly be deemed highly inelegant and often inaccurate, even incorrect, by "purists." Furthermore, if understood by native speakers of languages other than English, it proves to be greatly incomprehensible to native English speakers. Interestingly, Nerrière has devised a set of rules designed to codify what he has named "Globish"<sup>2</sup> — a portmanteau of the words "global" and "English" — whose concept he justifies by citing the need to regulate a "perverted" version of English in order to contribute to the preservation of the integrity of his own native tongue, French.

Nerrière affirms that Globish is clearly not intended for poetry, but he does seem to relish rather gleefully the possibility of "chipping away" at the seemingly solid domination that English holds on the world linguistic scene. In this paper devoted to the theme of aesthetic richness in texts by Aboriginal writers, I intend to bring to the fore a poetics that partakes of a similar irreverent disregard for standardized English. Emma LaRocque has underscored the predominance of a thematic "haunting and hounding sense of loss" (xxviii) in texts produced by all dispossessed peoples, but particularly by Aboriginals. For LaRocque, this results in tensions, one of which she explains in terms of the Aboriginal writer as the site of a power struggle between his or her Native, oral side on the one hand, and on the other, his or her English, written side.

Now, in English Canada, many English speakers and a great number of authors writing in English have a language other than English as a mother tongue. I am referring on the one hand, to minority franco-phones: that is to say, those who, upon the splintering of "French Canada"

in the 1960s, when Quebec's "French Canadians" became Québécois, re-identified as Franco-Albertans, Franco-Manitobans, Fransaskois, Franco-Ontarians, Acadians, Franco-Terreneuviens (of Newfoundland and Labrador) and Franco-Ténois (of the Northwest Territories). In Alberta, where, according to the 2001 census, franco-phones constitute two per cent of the population, contemporary Alberta-born francophone writers practise their art in English, despite having been raised in French.<sup>3</sup> Paulette Dubé is one such person. One of the most dynamic and exciting of writers on the contemporary literary stage, she has won several literary prizes as an English language poet.<sup>4</sup> Her first novel, *Talon*, however, although written mainly in English, integrates several passages in oral Western Canadian French. This is done in a fashion that deconstructs or at least queries the myth of official bilingualism underscoring instead the complex relations between literature, memory, language, and identity.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, there are Canada's "multi-cultural" writers: that is to say, those who have their roots in any number of a multitude of other cultures and languages. They are too numerous to be named here, so I will mention but two bicultural and bilingual writers: Wayson Choy and Josef Skvorecky.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not their writing reveals the intercultural and interlingual tensions that Paulette Dubé's novel makes apparent, it must be recognized that their craft is born of constant, endless crossings between English and a first language that is not English.

Aboriginals, then, are not unique in terms of their double or torn linguistic identity. However, unlike non-Native Canadians, Aboriginals share a history and therefore a collective memory of the land now referred to as "English Canada," when it was defined or characterized by their own ancestral cultural practices and languages. From that perspective, linguistic and cultural displacement is all the more fraught with angst for them, because it occurred in the very place associated with their sources or roots.

This is particularly true of Métis of French ancestry and heritage, a people whose *place* in Canada's linguistic, cultural, and geographic fabric(s) is a complex question. In Western Canada, this people resulted from the marriage (*à la façon du pays*) between men having left New France to participate in the fur trade with the Natives in what was known as Rupert's Land, and women of different First Nations tribes (mostly Cree and Ojibwa). Adapting to the heteroglossic landscape in which they evolved, the Métis were multilingual in the sense of being able to com-

municate proficiently in several languages, albeit not “perfectly” as would native speakers. In other words, they appropriated different languages in a specifically Métis fashion, such that linguists refer to their mastery of, for example, Métis Cree or Métis French. Chiefly, however, they spoke two languages: among themselves, they spoke Michif,<sup>7</sup> a mixed language whose nominal groups stem principally from the French language, its verbal groups principally from Cree. With non Native francophones, they spoke Métis French, a dialect similar to New France French, but also, in many instances, phonologically, lexically, and syntactically different. For the Franco-Métis who came to be referred to as *Bois-brûlés* (Scorched-Wood People) or *Métis Canadien-français* (French Canadian Métis), the term “michif” was and continues to be used for both languages. In all instances, one must appreciate the in-between-ness of their linguistic practices, which represents their cultural practices in general. In light of tendencies toward monologic, binarial discourses, it is important to recognize the challenge presented by the attempt to articulate the aterritoriality of a location impossible to pinpoint, except in terms of being simultaneously “both ... and ...” as well as “neither ... nor ....” Clearly, we are dealing with an atypical space and world vision that, vis-à-vis mainstream Canada, constitutes a potentially revolutionary, or at the very least rebellious, position.

By the nineteenth century, the Métis population had increased to the point that they considered themselves the West’s “New Nation,” and initially, the arrival of French-Canadian homesteaders meant only that the region had a francophone majority. Indeed, the 1870 Manitoba Act that transformed Rupert’s Land into a part of Canada ensured the primacy of the French language and protected the linguistic rights and cultural practices of those who spoke that language. Within ten years of the creation of Manitoba, however, sixty-five percent of the Métis had dispersed, either displaced by the arrival of English-speaking Protestant homesteaders from Ontario, or in search of buffalo or of better land.<sup>8</sup> This inevitably resulted in a fragmentation of the Métis community as well as a weakening of the francophone population. Furthermore, the Métis who had remained in Manitoba began to act no longer as one homogenous group: those who constituted the Métis aristocracy, so to speak, emulated the cultural practices of non Native francophones, thereby distinguishing themselves from those Métis who maintained their Aboriginal cultural practices. Regardless of the attitudes and aspirations of the first group, a number of controver-

sial issues came to erode the relations between the Métis and the French Canadians, with the consequence that the “white” francophones began to refer to themselves as “purebloods,” while applying to the “other” group various labels intended to emphasize their rejection or exclusion.

The 1885 rebellion, whose main cause was related to Métis property rights in the area now called Saskatchewan, resulted in the defeat of the Métis and in the hanging of their symbolic leader, Louis Riel. Thereafter, the relations between white and Métis Francophones were definitively severed. The worst consequence, however, was the shame that became associated with the Franco-Métis identity, a shame that resulted in the “disappearance” of an entire community and culture which, to ensure its survival, became clandestine. Some Métis “became” French Canadians,<sup>9</sup> others, First Nations. Those who chose to “remain” Métis fled to communities such as Saint-Laurent, or formed small squatter communities in places such as road allowances. Together, they became “Canada’s forgotten people.”<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, for the descendants of this group, the battle for the right to be a subject at all is inextricably connected to the problematic search for and/or (re)invention of sources of identity. Many of the memories that must be re-actualized in an attempt to recover distinctly Franco-Métis perspectives, language, and voices are traumatic. The process of re-appropriating the past, then, acknowledges the pain as it transforms that same pain into something valuable: raw material for the ongoing construction of an identity; it must also incorporate a protest against the marginalization, exclusion, racism, and social injustice that define this identity. And that is where writers and storytellers with their love of words, especially of those that “pervert” Canada’s official languages, come in.

In this article, I address the links between articulation of identity and textual resistance to national canons specific to what I perceive to be a French-heritage Métis literary tradition. I am referring to texts that may be included in a larger category characterized using the increasingly globalizing concept of “métissage,” but that are more specifically contextualized, in that they constitute a corpus of various writing and “telling” practices belonging to nineteenth-century Franco-Métis and their twentieth- and twenty-first-century descendants. The corpus is diverse, and its consideration must trace a number of different historical trajectories. This is because for this people, various events, but notably those of 1870 and 1885, led to a varied history of discontinuities and erasures, or, to

put it another way, to different re- and dis-locations and -identifications. Therefore, if Métis of French ancestry have in common an ancestral vernacular language and a culture that resulted from contact with French Canadian language and culture, different communities and their writers and storytellers have developed different types of relationships with this cultural and linguistic past, depending on whether, after Riel's execution altered what it "meant" to be Métis, their ancestors assimilated to First Nations, English Canadian, or French Canadian cultures, or whether they remained Métis. Different histories of displacement have resulted in different linguistic and cultural practices. These specific practices and their defining contexts, in turn, constitute as many potential ways a text can refute the privileged position of a standardized language and the cultural values associated with it.

Speaking to the importance of the relation between context and text for discussing questions related to oral literature, Richard Bauman notes in *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies or Oral Narrative*: "My concern has been to go beyond a conception of oral literature as disembodied super-organic stuff, and to view it contextually and ethnographically, in order to discover the individual, social and cultural factors that give it shape and meaning in the context of social life" (2). Adopting this perspective, Wendy Wickwire has recently reconsidered the significance of some of Harry Robinson's stories.<sup>11</sup> Adopting this same perspective, I will first argue the importance of identifying a French-heritage Métis literary tradition within the larger "Aboriginal Literature" category; then I will discuss a certain number of the themes specific to this tradition, but from a love-of-words perspective; and I will end by sharing a sampling of texts.

### **For the identification of a specifically Métis literature**

Anthologies and studies published on Aboriginal or Native writing and storytelling in Canada or in Quebec generally suggest that First Nations and Métis writings form one and the same literature.<sup>12</sup> While such groupings do not prevent the mention that a particular writer is Métis, neither do they address the question of a distinct cultural production. This state of affairs is also related to the fact that the majority of such volumes are written from an English-language perspective, with the consequence that the historical connections between Métis of French ancestry and Franco-Canadians tend to be overlooked. The continued "neglect" of

this reality is undoubtedly a reflection of the shift in relations between the two groups. However, questions of identity and literary continuity are difficult to establish when part of the scenario is disregarded. The identity issues are self-explanatory, but I want to underscore the fact that by failing to situate French-heritage Métis texts in relation to a particular tradition, by reinforcing the impression that we have a scattering of texts written by a few Métis writers, we diminish the critical, counter-discursive power they possess as expressions of a distinct historical and cultural space. Furthermore, the non-identification of a specifically Michif corpus may seem to contribute to the solidarity and homogeneous character of a “generic,” pan-Aboriginal literature, but a more substantive concern is the preservation of the concept of cultural difference in the critical articulation of Aboriginal literatures. The differentiation of a French-heritage Métis literature contributes to the recognition that Aboriginal literature is a complex, rich, and diverse field whose texts cannot be lumped together and considered as simply Canada’s “other” literature. And finally, there is the concern of approaching Aboriginal literature following traditional literary practices in Canada, which often consist of limiting francophone issues to Quebec — the Rest of Canada being purportedly English speaking and writing, francophones and their descendants living and writing outside of Quebec do so in a sociocultural, geographical, and linguistic void.<sup>13</sup> If this tendency is extended to Aboriginal literature, it may be considered as perpetuating, on some level, the circumstances that led to their being referred to as “Canada’s Forgotten People.”

### Historically speaking ...

During the nineteenth century, the Franco-Métis of Western Canada spoke French, Michif, several First Nations languages, and, in many cases, English. Those who wrote notes, letters, petitions, or memoirs, or those whose spoken texts were transcribed by someone else, prove generally to have left us with texts produced in standardized French. (Generally, I say, since my research data includes documents written in phonetic French.) The most well-known names belonging to this group are Louis Riel, Gabriel Dumont, and perhaps Louis Schmidt, who wrote petitions and letters on behalf of members of the Métis community. Other texts, such as the memoirs that Louis Schmidt wrote and published, the memoirs of Louis Goulet, the voyageur, which were transformed into a manuscript and published by Guillaume Charette, and stories and anecdotes col-



lected and published by Henri Létourneau, conserve a number of traits specific to orally “performed” or communicated texts, in that they convey the Franco-Métis world perception thematically as well as linguistically, through the inclusion of various lexical elements in Michif as well as in a First Nations language. In 2000, we saw the publication in French and Michif of a series of chronicles dictated by Auguste Vermette, one of Louis Riel’s nephews. Otherwise, Métis of French ancestry writing today tend to *use* the English language. My choice of the word “use” is deliberate, and intends to echo the opinion of Gloria Bird who, in the introduction of the collective volume *Reinventing the Enemy’s Language*, opines that English is not the “new native language in spite of its predominant use as a vehicle for native literary production.” From this perspective, literature by Franco-Métis and their descendants is an aboriginal literature historically produced most often in “standardized” French, now most often in “standardized” English, but that seeks to make a breach in English Canada’s “official” language, by incorporating shrapnel consisting of different types of references to the Métis ancestral language, Michif.

### Speaking in a present tense of the past ...

Earlier on, I mentioned that for linguists, Michif is a unique mixed language, whereas for the Métis, the term can be applied to their French, or to a diversely mixed language made up of elements from French, English, Cree, Ojibwa and/or Salteaux (Algonquin). It follows, therefore, that texts that integrate the Métis ancestral language share characteristics with First Nations literatures written in English, with texts written in English by “Country-Born” Métis and their descendants — that is to say, those of Scottish, English, or Irish ancestry — as well as with texts written in French by Native and Métis living in Quebec, but they are different from all of them. A multifarious and almost exclusively oral language, and therefore highly problematic when it comes to its written transcription, Michif is non-normative, anti-institutional, perhaps anti-State, interrelational and re-lativizing. In other words, its textualization is simultaneously an expression of belonging and kinship, of identity and culture, a source of literary innovation and experimentation, and a weapon of resistance against reifying tendencies. From this perspective, texts that remember fragments of Franco-Métis language and culture may be said to challenge both *non-Aboriginal* and other-Aboriginal perceptions of language use and ways of knowing and describing the world, and all this, while demonstrat-

ing that it is community-based and richly contextualized.

Now, French-heritage Métis over forty-five years of age, tend to have lost their First Nations language — such is the legacy of residential schools. As Emma LaRocque mentioned to me six years ago in a telephone message, “somewhere along the way [the Métis] have lost [their] French.” As I have observed while attending the last three of four annual conferences held on the development of the Michif language, however, many find it relatively easy to recognize and master words that come from Canada’s *other* official language, French, and need only to learn the Métis pronunciation. As demonstrated at these conferences, but also and even more so in the literary field, for Métis of French ancestry, identity aesthetics revolve around a certain reclaiming of heritage and roots through the ancestral language. “Certain,” it must be emphasized, because forgotten or ignored echoes of this oral culture have indeed recently begun to reappear, but reinvented, revitalized and life-giving, accompanied by the admission, uttered in the same breath, that the familiar yet foreign sounds are being, in the words of one of Marilyn Dumont’s poems, “lamented, like a phantom limb.” In her poem, “Our tongue belonging,” it is the “nerve of *Cree* [that] remains in the mouths that have tasted a foreign alphabet too long,” but in the poem “les animaux,” it is the Michif spoken by her uncle Gabriel that appears in the text, in response to the recognition expressed in “Our tongue belonging” that “frequently, we sound too little of ourselves.” For many contemporary French-heritage Métis writers, the links to an other-language-speaking ancestry that define and give shape to their writing are intangible, perhaps most alive when they become fiction. Indeed, in its diverse fictionalized forms, the ancestral language contributes to the fashioning of a textual space within which the subject can negotiate a continual, self-defined trajectory.

Thus it is in Lee Maracle’s *Sundogs*, for example, that Marianne, the first-person narrator, tells her “Momma” that she will decide on her positioning vis-à-vis each of her parents’ ancestral languages while traversing the country during the Okanagan Peace Run. Tellingly, it is at Manitoba’s “Pays Plat,” appropriated as “Paise Platte,” that she “naturally” comes into contact with, and continues the steps of, someone “long dead ... probably some young voyageur from Montreal, a half French, half Native fur bearer,” as she says at first. Two sentences further along, she “decides,” emphasizing her agency, that it is “some gorgeous young man” who died for love, and in the course of imagining his story, she invents *his* reinvention

of her. The two imaginations fuse, resulting in Marianne's discovery of a self-acknowledging "internal self" inhabited by a great communal love.

Writing an almost exclusively oral language, the nineteenth-century corpus generally incorporates Michif rather soberly, as though concerned with imparting objective information, and as if to accept the subject position assigned by the powers that be. Louis Schmidt (1844-1935) presents a typical case.

Having studied in Quebec with Riel, Schmidt worked at dozens of different jobs and was a man of letters, literally and figuratively. He rewrote father Albert Lacombe's Cree dictionary, composed letters, petitions, and proclamations on behalf of Riel's provisory government and on behalf of Métis with grievances related to land surveys or homesteads, kept a diary, and in 1911 and 1912, at the age of sixty-seven, he was asked by the Duck Lake newspaper, *Le Patriote de l'Ouest*, to write his memoirs. Schmidt is considered to have integrated well into French-Canadian society, having not only obtained land with his "scrip," but also collaborated closely with the clergy, notably in the capacity of an assistant colonizing agent. For all that, his representations of the people of the homeland's cultural practices form a valorized trope that also serves the role of critiquing the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture.

Schmidt's polyphonic text juxtaposes Michif, standardized French, Sioux, Salteaux, English, and Latin, and results in a subtly festive, transgressive textual openness. Almost all elements in a language other than standardized French are underscored. The effect of this treatment is to give the impression of a francophone territory where intercultural and -lingual relationships are the norm. The tendency to treat all "other" languages in the same way results in a text that is somewhat carnivalized in the Bakhtinian sense of shamelessly disregarding concepts of protocol, hierarchy, and other such orderly and ordering principles. One example concerns his use of a Latin expression to refer to a repugnantly ugly giant of a man from whose murderous intentions he is saved by the intervention of the chief of the Sioux camp he is visiting. The next day, he writes, there is no sign of his "monstrum Horrendum" (4). Elsewhere in his memoirs, Schmidt engages in a sort of linguistic archaeological dig. It turns out that he cannot mention an English place name without revealing its original name in Michif or one of the First Nations languages. Certainly, these remarks have historical value, but above all, they pay tribute to the "people of the homeland" and reveal the rapport between the Franco-Métis and other

peoples of the land.

When speaking of a site that has a Michif and a First Nations name, Schmidt gives equal status to both, as when he writes, “We arrived at la Rivière Rhum or Anoka, the railway station located thirty miles from St Paul” (4).<sup>14</sup> But when referring to a site whose new name speaks to the erasure of the Métis’s former majority status, an adversarial tone creeps into the narration. At the very beginning of his text, for example, Schmidt declares that instead of writing “Lake Athabasca,” a name only *derived* from the Cree word “Athepecow,” he will use the name “Rabasca.” The reasons given for his choice are triple: the word is “more euphonious, therefore, simpler, and it is how the people of the homeland named it” (3).<sup>15</sup> Another passage slyly involves a more elaborate gloss: since it involves the site of a battle where the Métis were victorious, Schmidt takes his time explaining how the English name of *la Grenouillère* came to be. Other passages express disdain for the English more explicitly by mocking a particular member of that group (4),<sup>16</sup> but Schmidt does not ever go as far as his contemporary, Louis Goulet (1859-1936).

In Goulet’s as-told-to memoirs, dictated in all likelihood in the 1920s and 1930s to a fellow Franco-Métis, Guillaume Charette (1884-1952), the voyageur recounts the time a First Nations warrior forces him to join in an attack. He comments that although he found it regrettable to have to kill people, he had to do it. “Fortunately, he exclaims, it was just some ... *Anglais!*” (169). As for attempting to convey the Métis voice speaking his mother tongue, the text rarely does so. While recounting a *wendigo* experience (a delirious old woman claims to be on the point of becoming a “cannibal”) Goulet reiterates his warning to the man supposed to kill the old woman: “Wha! Wha! *boy*, fais pas ça, si tu la tues, la vieille, tu vas être pendu comme un crapaud!” (164). (“Hold it, boy, don’ do it, if you kill the old woman, you’ll be hung like a toad!” Also, once during Riel’s trial, in reaction to a threat uttered in anger when Goulet refuses to perjure himself, the latter explodes in an angry, irreverent outburst, expressed in standardized Canadian French and directed toward the prosecution’s lawyer. It is the disapproving reaction of a friend that is textualized entirely in Michif: “Speaking with a Métis accent, Charles Nolin told me: *Wah! Wah! Boy, té devras pas parler dé mame!*” (181). That the English translation of the memoirs leaves untranslated the passage, which could be likened to something like “Hey, hey! Boy, ya shoun’t talk like dat” (153), conveys the importance and distinctiveness of this cultural fragment, “a clear signifier

... of an Other language.” (Ashcroft et al. 63.)

In 1973, McClelland & Stewart published Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed*. Elements of the author’s ancestral Métis French are largely expunged from the edited version, but the language is referred to thematically when Campbell discusses her linguistic background. Furthermore, the publication conserves two words in Michif: “shnet” (25), a word used to refer to the “booze” made by Old Cadieux, who spoke more French than English or Cree; and the word for “little,” *petit* — pronounced “pitchee” —, which, in names, is shortened to “*ti*” — pronounced [chee], which Campbell writes as “Chi.” The word “Michif” does not appear, but in its place, the narrator states that a person is speaking “French and Cree, ... in the same mixture of languages” (56), or “in French, Cree and English.” A number of Cree words appear, accompanied by an explanatory note in standardized English,<sup>17</sup> while one passage integrates a Cree expression without an explanation.<sup>18</sup> One exceptional passage lets us “hear” the English spoken by a Franco-Métis. When asked what he is doing in a tree, Chi-George answers: “Hi was jist lookin’ ’round to see hif hi could spot a hindian. Don’t trust dem hindians!” (26).

Twenty-two years after the publication of *Halfbreed*, Theytus Books published Maria Campbell’s *Stories of the Road Allowance People*, in which the “village English” — such is the expression used in the preface — of the sort spoken by Chi-George, has the starring role. The aesthetic value the author attributes to a phonetically written language clearly marking the accent, rhythm, grammar, and syntax of a Michif speaker, that is to say, one for whom English is not the mother tongue, is conveyed explicitly by the versified form of the text. The beginning of a story entitled “Rou Garous,”<sup>18</sup> for example, reads thus:

You ever heered about dah Rou Garous?  
 Never!  
 Me I taught everybody he knowed about dem.  
 Well dere humans you know  
 Jus like you an me  
 But someting he happen to dem an dey turn to dogs in dah night.  
 Dats right!  
 Some of dem dey even turn into wolfs.  
 Dats shore funny isn it  
 How tings like dat dey can happen on dis eart. (28)

The pronunciation of “th” as “d,” and the emphasis of certain words expressed by the repetition of a substantive by its corresponding pronoun or of a personal pronoun by its tonic form (“Me I,” “something he,” or “tings like dat dey”), common to Cree and French, but foreign to English, the ungrammatical past tense forms of various verbs (“heered” for heard, “knowed” for knew), and the phonetic spelling of words pronounced “à la mitchif” (“taught” for thought, “shore” for sure), are all means of “perverting” the Queen’s English, while, at the same time, subverting the concept of “literature” and the practice of its “reading” as an art to be appreciated silently, through the creation of an undeniably musical, sonorous poetry that demands to be read aloud.

Between 1981 and 1985, Auguste Vermette, Riel’s nephew, dictated his memoirs to a Franco-Manitoban. In his late eighties at the time, he tells his version of events without quarter. In the following passage, he recounts the memory of the racism suffered while attending school with French Canadians. Interestingly, the unhappy memory is no sooner recalled than the narrator transforms it by conflating the period of his boyhood with a later period, when Louis Riel’s memory had been “rehabilitated”:

Why were the Michif ashamed of saying they were Michif? They were always ridiculing us! I was at school, me and the others, and the French Canadians, eh, it was like we were nothing, because we were Michif. They talked about us with disdain. It was like we were manure! “Bannock Gobblers!” We revenged ourselves, though: we called those little Canucks, “Canshmucks.”

There was SO much they didn’t realize, the important role we played in history. Not one bit! Only afterwards. Huh! Afterwards, when they understood what really happened to Riel. Then, eh, my goodness! They were all Michif. Then, it was okay! Some of those guys were Riel’s descendants!

Damn it all!

THAT’s what made Riel mad! All of a sudden, they all wanted to be Michif!<sup>20</sup>

Less explicit, but perhaps all the more corrosive, are writer Sharron Proulx-Turner’s references to Michif. Thematic for the most part, they constitute vehement critiques of what she calls the “colonizer’s language” or a “foreign language,” and although she differentiates between her language and culture and “Indian people’s cultures,” she recognizes the traits shared by the two communities. To inscribe her Michif identity, she

refers frequently to its French composite, as in the following passage from *what the aunts say*, in which she transforms racist clichés into sensual, yet militant self- and community-affirming declarations. The text having referred to Riel's prophecy that "it will be the artists who give [his people] back their spirit" (32), the narrator speaks of the writer's using words to create "dialogues of doo doo" (41) and of "writing out the silence writing out the pain" (84): "yes she's brilliant for a young savage / her favourite food is french fries and there's something about her / writing / lazy and arrogant / like a rich french dessert" (58).

Other aggressive identity practices include using the "michif cradle tongue" (15) without glossing it in English. Examples are found in a 1994 footnote<sup>21</sup> that invents the voice of her great-great-grandmother calling her "ma petite," words repeated without italics in a text published in 1999 (18-19), and when a voice in *what the aunts say* gives the recipe for "les boulettes" (63; meatballs), or refers playfully to the "rougarou and how do you do" (109), but without glossing the Michif French.

The tendency for planting textual landmines in the form of un-glossed Michif words likely to be recognized only by the initiated or someone with knowledge of French is yet more evident in the writing of Joe Welsh, whose 2003 publication of stories and voices, entitled *Jackrabbit Street*, is prefaced by a page where the author expresses his "love, respect, and gratitude" to different community members. About Maria Campbell, he writes that she "didn't just open the door for us — she kicked the damn thing down." The "us" certainly includes all Aboriginal writers of Canada, but it refers foremost to Métis writers of French heritage.

The voices heard in *Jackrabbit Street* appropriate standardized English by liberating it from syntactical, grammatical, and phonetic rules and by having it share the page with other languages. They remind the reader of Maria Campbell's *Stories of the Road Allowance People*, but are different in that they integrate vocabulary in Michif that comes from the French language. Be they endearments or familiar, popular, or vulgar words and expressions, all are underscored in italics. Their variety contributes to the portrayal of Franco-Métis not as stereotypes, but as individual human beings who get angry, love, suffer, and laugh. They say things like "Maudit Culvert!" (*Maudit calvaire*, in standardized French Canadian; there is not really an equivalent in English, but "Godammit to Hell" conveys the gist of its meaning); "Ah Diable!" (10; "Good gracious"); "Sacrament my boy" (13; "Christ" or "Jeeze"); and "Mange le merde. Nonno!" (32; "Eat shit.

Stupid!” — in standardized French, “merde” is feminine); but also “Bonne nuit, ma joie. I love you;” (23; “Good night, dear heart”); and “ma vieille chouette” (25; “my old darling”). Furthermore, whereas the only French Canadians mentioned in *Stories of the Road Allowance People* are a thief and the priest, *Jackrabbit Street’s* storytellers reveal the French-Canadian influence on the ways they see and inhabit the world. Father Beaulieu is the object of mercilessly hilarious scatological anecdotes, whereas “Half Breed Breakfast,” for example, concludes with the following assertion: “Eat that ever day boy, you gonna grow up an’ be big strong hockey player. Just like Maurice Richard” (34).

Throughout the volume, irreverent humour shares space with examples of brutal demeaning behaviour imposed by authority figures outside the community as well as with tales of “indecent,” scatological anecdotes, in which community members lock horns, but in a friendly adversarial mode. Most often, the humour is ironic, and whether it is mockingly scornful of others or self-deprecating, it points always to the circumstances characterizing existence at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder.

“The Making of a Half Breed Bandit” tells the story of Rocky Poisson who, in need of money in order to entertain his new girlfriend, Rose Adelle Deuxchapeau, during the Depression, decides to become a train robber. Entirely unfamiliar with the ins and outs of the “profession,” he turns to the narrator for guidance. Each time Rocky is informed of the need for a new item, he must steal it. His first acquisition, a horse, elicits the following reaction:

Ah Diable, I start to laugh an’ I tell him, “Hollasmokes Poisson, hownahell you going to rob a train with that old horse? I bet you me I can run faster than him. Besides, you got no gun. You got no bridle. No lines. No saddle. Hownahell you going to hold on to your horse if you got to hold on to couple bags of money at the same time? You’re not going to scare nobody like that. A ban Christ, a ban Christ, the train guys they’s going to laugh at you.

So he go away an’ couple days later he come riding up again. This time he have a bridle a saddle an’ lines. Everthing. He even have a six-shooter, but the horse he still don’t look too good. (10)

After informing the narrator that he got “all the stuff” by robbing “a bunch of [drunk rodeo] cowboys,” Rocky asks, “The train? What time it goes by?”, and upon receiving the answer, rides away, taking leave of



the narrator with an “Adios amigo” that seems to indicate that, in his mind, he has just been transformed into a Mexican bandit. The narrator continues his tale:

Well boy. The train it come an' it stop at the station an' after a few minutes it pull out. An' you won't believe it. Hey hey maudit crapeau ! Before it get going too fast, that crazy bugger Poisson he's chasing after it on that poor old horse ... he have his six-shooter out an' he start to shoot at the train. Pan! Pan! Pan! But a little gun like that it's not going to hurt a train .... So all at once the train driver, he throw a lump of coal an' it hit Poisson on the head an' knock him off the horse.

Hey hey crapeau ! Talk about laugh. Everbody in town see this...  
(10)

The denouement confirms the impasse that is Rocky's life, and, without even attempting to articulate a “moral” or lesson, informs us that not only have the protagonist's plans for solvency failed, but also, the woman for whom he had undertaken to alter his fate, Adelle Deuxchapeau, leaves town with the cowboy who arrives in town, in search of the “saddle an' bridle an' gun” (11) “someone” had stolen from him: “It's last time anybody from around here see her,” states the laconic and single final sentence of the text.

This story is representative of the collection, in that its humour derives from circumstances rife with personal tragedies that characterize the fate of a hapless community. What becomes abundantly clear is that the ability to survive in the face of insurmountable obstacles is an important trait of the Métis culture/identity, and that their telling constitutes a celebration. In themselves, the narrated “events” are important for what they reveal of little-known Métis “experiences.” What transforms them into celebratory pieces, however, is the language used to tell them. In light of literature's tendency to remain a bastion of linguistic purity, the language used to convey the stories and voices of Welsh's narrators, new to the Canada's literary “wordscape,” fly in the face of Canada's official, canonical literatures: that is to say, those written in one of the nation's two official languages. The “English” used in *Jackrabbit Street* is unquestionably “improper” and frequently vulgar, but it inscribes and validates the linguistic as well as socio-economic realities of a culture whose specificity is yet to be widely acknowledged. Moreover, its musicality lends it a surprisingly and undeniably poetic quality. Above all, it carries linguistic markers of

the little-known and all-but-disappeared Michif language.

In the first category, let me cite various elisions (for example, *an'* for "and," *hownabell* for "how in the hell"), double negatives (*not going to scare nobody*), ungrammatical verb forms (*you got no... , he don't look good, the train guys they's going to laugh at you*) and mispronunciations of certain words (*Everthing, everbody*). The second category of traits includes a syntactical repetition of a substantive by its pronoun in order to place emphasis on the first element, used in Cree and in French, but not in English (*Poisson he, the train guys they's*) or of a personal pronoun by its tonic form (*I bet you me I*). The textual trait most foreign to canonical English Canadian expression is of course the integration of Michif French expressions, be they interjections or onomatopoeia, that, written without any distinguishing marks, not only "contaminate" a text that could otherwise be considered to be written in "low English," all the while rendering the text partially opaque for unilingual anglophone readers, but also, at times, "pervert" canonical French Canadian French. If, in French, for example, "well, Christ" is expressed with the words "ah ben, Christ [Crissé]," Welsh writes "A ban Christ," as though it were a question of "banning" Him. Also, while in French Canada, common euphemisms for "Christ" include "crime" and "crèche," the narrator of "The Making of a Half Breed Bandit" is fond of the word "crapeau" (meaning, literally, "toad," which, in standardized French is written "crapaud"), whence his interjection, "Hey hey (maudit) crapeau!" Finally, it must be noted that "Pan! Pan! Pan!" does not refer to kitchenware but is the equivalent, in standardized French as well as in Michif French, of the English-language onomatopoeia "Bang! Bang! Bang!"

The explosion of familiar or vulgar Michif French and mutilated English in the body of a text already liberally punctuated by blasphemous English slang is humorous, liberating. Above all, it ensures against the takeover of particular voices by a universalizing language. In this study, I have attempted to show that as oral forms of expression, Michif and Michif French *may* well be disappearing, despite efforts to conserve and resuscitate them, but they have become incontestably rich sources of an emergent creative expression of place and identity that validates a people and culture that have been all but forgotten. The reinvention of a language specific to some of Western Canada's Métis of French ancestry, in the form of publishable, written words — and used to uncover fragments of individual knowledge and experiences that, if they were to be told in canonic

Canadian English or French, could well have the effect of re-colonizing the Métis — has the potential to reinscribe a space that, to the Métis, feels like a *homeland*. As the interest in Métis culture(s) and cultural production continues to grow, thereby fostering increased confidence in their artists, it must be hoped that other inventions of languages infused with specifically Métis ways of loving words appear in print, thus giving new life to some of the many languages that seem to have disappeared, but that, remembered, reinvented, and revitalized in fiction, will noisily reveal heretofore hidden and, for non-Métis, unsuspected, realities, sounds, and poetry. This could only confirm what we already know, namely that the memories, dreams, and traumas that contribute to defining the Canadian land- and wordscape are indeed many and diverse.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For further reading, consult Donaldo Macedo, Bessie Dendrinis, and Panayota Gounari.

<sup>2</sup> For further reading, consult Nerrière, *Parlez Globish* and *Découvrez le Globish*.

<sup>3</sup> For further information, consult Pamela V. Sing, “Mémoire.”

<sup>4</sup> These include the Milton Acorn Memorial People’s Poetry Award (1994) and the CBC Alberta Anthology Award (1998).

<sup>5</sup> My study of this question will appear in *Canadian Literature*, 187 (2006).

<sup>6</sup> For further information, consult Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond, Smaro Kamboureli, or Lianne Moyes, Licia Canton and Domenic A. Beneventi.

<sup>7</sup> The term comes from the phonetic transcription of the Métis pronunciation of the word “métis.”

<sup>8</sup> When the Hudson’s Bay Company sold Rupert’s Land to the Canadian government, the latter signed two types of treaties with the Aboriginals who, in exchange, agreed to extinguish their property rights. The First Nations received collective treaties in the form of reserves, whereas the Métis had to apply for individual “scrips,” certificates for either land or for money with which to purchase land. Several factors contributed, however, to the sale of such scrips — for derisively low sums — and, ultimately, to the loss of territory. Here, I will cite two: first, the fact that the only eligible lands were those that had been surveyed, and that these were often not only found at a distance from those already occupied by the Métis, but also in scattered areas, so that families and communities would have to separate in order to take possession of a property; and second, the fact that several Métis, poverty-stricken, thought it more profitable to sell their scrips for immediate cash.

<sup>9</sup> Officially “white,” the francophone community was nonetheless destined to become a minority. As Manitoba became an officially unilingual anglophone province (as would Saskatchewan and Alberta), the francophones felt the need to compensate for their diminishing prestige, which they did by seeking to dominate Michif speakers. At school, anyone caught speaking Michif received the “strap” or had his or her mouth washed with soap. Even if the Métis spoke French, however, their accent was made fun of. One can easily imagine how, treated with condescension, the victims of racist remarks, Métis children abandoned school in large numbers and would never forget the hurtful intolerance they were subjected to. Whence,

inevitably, the ease with which Métis assimilated to the English language, rather than join in the battle for the survival of a “French Canadian way of life.”

<sup>10</sup> This aptly coined label was first used by D. Bruce Sealey and Antoine S. Lussier.

<sup>11</sup> At the time of writing, Heather Wickwire informed me that her article was forthcoming in the *Journal of American Folklore*.

<sup>12</sup> Hence titles such as the following: *The Native in Literature: Canadian and Comparative Perspectives* (1987) edited by Thomas King, Cheryl Calver and Helen Hoy, *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present* (1990), by Penny Petrone, *Native Writers and Canadian Writing* (1990, 1991, 1992), edited by W.H. New, and *Native Poetry in Canada: A Contemporary Anthology* (2001), edited by Jeannette C. Armstrong and Lally Grauer.

<sup>13</sup> For further information, consult Pamela V. Sing, “Solitude.”

<sup>14</sup> My translation of: “Nous arrivions à la Rivière Rhum ou Anoka, terminus du chemin de fer, à trente milles de St Paul.”

<sup>15</sup> My translation of: “c’est plus euphonique, partant plus simple, et c’est le nom que les gens du pays lui donnaient.”

<sup>17</sup> His reference to an old Irish sergeant, Woodlock, for example, leads to two digressions: first, he remembers a priest whose refusal to speak English led to his referring to the sergeant by the comical French translation of his name (Woodlock becomes “serrure de bois”); secondly, he recalls the sergeant’s “poor French,” demonstrating its ungrammatical quality, and, no doubt, suggesting its heavy accent, by remembering the lament he would repeat while thinking of the settlers he had left behind: “Moi, regretter la mouille; pas de mouille pas de blé à la Rivière Rouge” (“Me missing the rain; no rain, no wheat at Red River,” (4). Another, more openly condemning passage recalls how “le Six,” the Sioux chief who was the most compromised by his participation in the 1862 massacres in the United States, was caught and turned in, betrayed on English territory by greedy individuals who, attracted by the price place on the chief’s head, “renewed the kiss of Judas” (4, my translation). The most critical comment expressed on the subject of the “Anglais” is expressed in the discussion of the demands the Métis made of the Canadian government. This group believed almost all of the Métis demands to be excessive, and the need to convince them of the legitimacy and fairness of the requests often taxed the patience of Schmidt’s people. However, he comments wryly, they were very happy to be able to benefit from the hard won gains.

<sup>17</sup> We learn, for example, that Cadieux was an “ak-ee-top” or “pretend” farmer, and that the Métis, considered by the Indians to be their “poor relatives,” were “Awp-pee-tow-koosons,” meaning “half people” (26).

<sup>18</sup> “Ye Christe my Nees-tow, we almost had trouble here” (57).

<sup>19</sup> Without knowledge of folklore common to people of francophone ancestry — to French, Franco-Canadians, and Franco-Métis alike, a reader would perhaps be less likely to recognize the cultural/religious ideology behind the figure of the “loup garou” (werewolf), a creature conceived with a view to encouraging the observation of certain Catholic practices.

<sup>20</sup> My translation of “Pourquoi les Métis avaient honte de se dire Métis? On était tout le temps bafoué !”

J’étais à l’école, moi, puis les autres, les Canadiens français, là, c’est comme si on avait été rien, parce qu’on était des Métis. Ils parlaient de nous autres par dédain. C’est comme si on avait été du fumier, quoi! Des « mangeux de galette ! » Nous autres, on se revengeait; on les appelait les « cannes à chien », les petits Canadiens.

Ils se rendaient pas compte de tout ça, du rôle important qu'on avait joué dans l'histoire. Pantoute ! C'est rien que par après. Ah! Par après, quand ils ont compris la vraie histoire de Riel. Là, oh my ! Ils étaient tous Métis! Là, c'était correct! Il y en avait parmi eux autres qui se compaient parmi les descendants de Riel !

Maudite affaire !

Ça, ça choquait Riel ! Là, Ils voulaient tous être Métis !

<sup>21</sup> "she is reading her blanket with her hands," *Gatherings*, V, p. 149-154.

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