
Chris Andersen. “Métis”: Race, Recognition, and the Struggle for Indigenous Peoplehood. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014. 267 pp

http://www.ubcpres.com/search/title_book.asp?BookID=299174387

Métis writer Chris Andersen’s book “*Métis: Race Recognition, and the Struggle for Indigenous Peoplehood*” (2014) is a comprehensive analysis of colonial, racist interference in Métis identity and self-identification. The political and historic foundations on which the Métis Nation is built, most notably the Louis Riel led resistances of 1869-70 and 1885, expansion west, and the encroachment on Métis territories, are each vital parts of that self-identification, and nineteenth and twentieth century responses to processes of nation building in Canada. Rather than recognizing the Métis as a people of this Nation, however, the Métis are imagined, by certain governmental policies and by the majority of mainstream Canadians, to be all or any people who are of ‘Indian’ and white European descent. Debates in Canada regarding Métis identity are current and increasingly contentious, often centring on who, exactly, is Métis. That definition matters, both in terms of the historical treatment of people and communities defined as mixed, and in terms of government policies today. Andersen argues that those policies are predicated on racist categorizations, and calls for a definitive clarification over the political and cultural ambiguities surrounding the term Métis. In short, he eschews the racialization that “encompasses the hierarchical processes through which races are produced and legitimized” (15).

“*Métis*” is an important book that intervenes in the misunderstandings, confusion, and lack of knowledge surrounding Métis identity. Andersen challenges Canada’s colonial, institutionalized racism that has formed “the worldview for most Canadians, who generally have only cursory knowledge of Aboriginal histories and communities in general and the Métis in particular” (30). He attributes the protracted misconstruction of Métis identity, in part, to academic, scholarly imprecision and scholars’ failure to grasp, or explore, the prevalent misunderstanding of Métis identity as mixed-race. Andersen argues that many scholars “have seized upon” the historically ambiguous meanings of Métis identity “as evidence of the “natural hybridity” of the Métis” (43).

In order to understand Andersen’s analysis and perspective, it might be wise to reconsider the complex historic and contemporary governmental policies and legislation that defined Métis identity and rights. Foremost among these are the revisions and amendments to both the Indian and Manitoba Acts. Devised, at various stages, to define, assimilate, and displace First Nations’ and Métis peoples, these Acts eroded Métis rights, and eventually saw the people losing their status and their land. That situation lasted for more than a century, until Section 35 of the Constitution Act (1982) made provision for recognition of the Métis as Aboriginal, alongside First Nations and Inuit peoples. Even then the Court balked at *defining* the Métis as a people and territory, too, is left undefined. The complexities of First Nations identities are recognized by more nuanced categories (regarding status, treaty, and band membership) than are granted the Métis in regard to culture and territory. Partly in response to the developments instigated by Section 35, the Métis National Council—formed in 1983 to represent the Métis Nation—convened in

2002 and defined “Métis” as “a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, is of historic Métis Nation Ancestry and who is accepted by the Métis Nation.” The historic Métis Nation Homeland is recognized to include Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, sections of Ontario, the Northwest Territories, and the northern United States. In 2003, the MNC amended their identity criteria in order to incorporate the Supreme Court of Canada’s judgement in the *R. v. Powley* case. This was a seminal Aboriginal rights case which debated the rights of two Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario hunters, the Powleys – who self-identified as Métis. As Métis the men had legal authority to hunt without a license, but they had been arrested for killing a bull moose nevertheless. Despite that, the Supreme Court judged that the two men could legally hunt, as Métis, under the protection of Section 35 of the Constitution. This right had previously been interpreted, under the Natural Resources Transfer Agreement, to mean that hunting and fishing rights of “Indians” did not include the Métis. Subsequently, the “*Powley Test*” was formulated to set parameters that would define Métis authority to determine who was legally entitled to these rights, and therefore protected under Section 35. The MNC amendments read, “Self-identification as a member of a Métis community, ancestral connection to historic Métis community whose practices ground the right in question, acceptance by the modern community with continuity to the historic Métis community” (*Métis Registration Guide*).

Andersen objects to the “ethnic origin” questions asked on past and current Canadian census forms, on the grounds that they do not make a distinction between national and racial concepts. Canadian Census forms have four questions in relation to self-identification as First Nations people, whether or not they are registered as Status/Non-Status or Treaty/Non-Treaty ‘Indians’. The first query on the questionnaire asks the respondent to answer “ID_Q01: “Are you an Aboriginal person, that is, First Nations, Métis or Inuit?” (*Statistics Canada*) If the respondent answers yes to self-identifying as First Nations/Indian, they are then asked if they are a member of a “First Nation or Indian Band”. Andersen points out those respondents “can conceivably self-identify as North American Indian, Métis, Inuit, and as a member of a First Nation/Indian band, with or without reporting “status” as a registered Indian” (79). The confusion fostered by these Census questions is that they are, as Andersen argues when referring specifically to the Métis, administrative terms that fail by their very design because: “historical and contemporary distinctions [...] have never been so neat or categorical” (80). Andersen traces the history of Canadian census taking and finds that from 1886—after Riel’s hanging as a traitor—and for more than half a century, “Métis communities remained administratively invisible as Métis to official policy makers” (81). The ambiguity within government Census categorizations is a result of exclusively classifying Métis people as a race rather than as a Nation for the purposes of assimilation into Canadian nationalism, at the expense of the development of the Métis Nation. While Andersen acknowledges a minority of scholarship that has examined “censuses as sites of political contestation,” he censures it for seldom looking “inside ‘the black box’ of the census field itself to explore the manner in which statistics are created” (166).

Andersen describes Canadian governmental reasoning as being deeply flawed, primarily because it relies upon racial constructions and administrative classifications of the Métis.

If the Métis are categorized as mixed race/hybrid, he asks, then what separates them from First Nations people, who also intermixed with Europeans, and lived in close proximity to Métis communities? Why, Andersen wonders, is First Nations indigeneity often considered to “purer than Métis indigeneity”? (38) Or, put another way, why aren’t *all* First Nations people racially identified as ‘Métis’.

What is crucial in this judgement is the fact that the Court passed into law a definition of Métis peoples which was, in effect, based on a racialized colonial mandate; no real distinction was made between Métis from the historical Homelands and peoples of Indian/non-Indian descent. Moreover, no political representation was made by, or sought from, the MNC. Andersen quotes the Supreme Court’s *Powley* ruling in its reference to Métis mixedness: “The term “Métis” refers to distinctive peoples who, *in addition to their mixed ancestry*, developed their own customs, way of life, and recognizable group identity separate from their Indian or Inuit and European forebears” (65; emphasis, Andersen’s). This point is of extreme importance to Andersen’s thesis, primarily because he questions the racialized logic that equates a mixed Indigenous/European ancestry with claims to the “historical Métis community” of the Red River.

Ethnohistorical scholarship is also reproached by Andersen for steadily incorporating *Powley*’s logics as a rationalization for its own assumptions based on the racialization of the Métis. (Although he does note that latterly there have been scholars who have criticized the *Powley* decision for misrepresenting the historical community relations of the Métis (219).) When the Supreme Court recognized the Métis community in the Sault Ste. Marie region, it created increasing numbers of Métis rights conflicts that it had set out to resolve. Referencing *Statistic Canada* numbers, and calling the upper Great Lakes region of Ontario a “political hot potato,” Andersen reports that between 1996 and 2006 the “Métis identity population” soared from 204,000 to almost 390,000” (83). Andersen stresses that he does not criticise the Powleys or their legal team for the Supreme Court’s decision in the *Powley* case. What is problematic, he argues, is that the court reached its decision on a racialized mandate. Andersen’s position is that the Sault Ste. Marie Métis “*are not Métis for the reasons the Powley court says they are*: their Métis-ness stems from—can *only* stem from—their connections to the Métis core of Red River... not their mixedness and historical separateness from tribal communities” (150; emphasis, Andersen’s).

In her influential book “*Real*” *Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood*, the Mi’kmaq scholar Bonita Lawrence traces Métis history and the role that the Canadian government had in excluding Métis people from a collective Indigeneity. Lawrence criticizes the lack of understanding of the development of the diverse meanings and uses of the terms Métis and mixed-blood, likening it to the homogenization of distinct identities of Indigenous nations under the use of the term “Indian.” She argues that the category “Métis” summarizes disparate “historical experiences” under the fur trade, and that it also condenses the immense divergence among contemporary Métis. Lawrence explores the complexities of Métis categorization and notes that since the Constitution Act of 1982, mixed-blood peoples are being “encouraged to join local Métis organizations, whatever their ancestral Indigenous

heritage” (85). Lawrence advocates caution in the protocol of naming any historical group of mixed-blood people as Métis that suggests that they have continuously “self-identified as such” (86). But she also believes that Métis people “should be free to embrace their hybrid distinctiveness as ‘New Peoples’ if they choose to,” considering the arbitrariness of colonial categorizations, including the legal category of “half-breed” that had been created during the signing of the Numbered Treaties (87). In restricting MNC membership in 2002, Lawrence finds it striking that the Council issued strong statements “distancing themselves from their former constituency, calling them “wannabees” (in much the same way that status Indian organizations currently dismiss Métis people)” (85).

In response to Lawrence’s work, which he describes as “justifiably lauded,” Andersen remarks that her thesis is “not about Métis self-identification per se,” but objects to her use of the terms Métis and “half-breed” “more or less interchangeably” (56). Andersen maintains that because of Lawrence’s analysis of the Canadian state’s historic definition of the term “half-breed” based on blood quantum and her epistemological correlation of the term with “Métis,” that it is a “small step for her to dismiss differences between racialized and nationalist self-understandings” (57). While Andersen does not disregard Lawrence’s logic for contemporaneous Métis self-identification, he does consider her arguments to be based on deeply embedded racialized concepts. He also sees Lawrence’s cautious inclusiveness of self-identifying Métis outside of the Métis Homeland, and her challenges to the restrictions implemented by the MNC for membership, as “normative” racialization (58). Andersen does find that the MNC is inconsistent in its representation of the Métis Nation. He argues that politically, it “incompletely” represents a large number of people who self-identify as Métis and are able to “trace their roots” to the Métis historical Homeland of the Red River, but are “not members of the Métis provincial organizations.” Andersen maintains that some members, conversely, are “admitted to Métis organizations under various racialized criteria” even though they “cannot trace their geologies back to Red River” (213 n.21). At the same time, however, he defends the MNC when it is criticised for excluding particulars of nineteenth and twentieth century details in its national narrative, claiming that the Métis Nation’s memory is no more selective “than any other claims to nationhood, including Canada itself.” Indeed, but there are double standards applied here when Andersen credits Canada’s powerful claims to nationhood to its ability to “better hide their inconsistencies and ambiguities, and they often do so by shining a light on the apparent frailty of others” (130). The judicious reader may wonder if this question might also be applied to Andersen’s argument for strictures against identification claims of those individuals and communities outside of the Métis historic Homeland?

Andersen takes a strong position on who has the right to claim a Métis identity. In his introduction he states that, from his perspective, if a self-identifying individual or group “lacks a connection to the historical core in the Red River region, it is not Métis” (6). He also anticipates censure and possible charges against him of “Red River myopia” and essentialism. Andersen answers these charges by emphasizing that those who make claims to the identity of a “Red River Métis” are not “necessarily” required to “produce Indigenous ancestors who physically lived in or, even, had ever been to Red River” (18).

Andersen, as does the MNC, recognizes kinship relations that tie Métis, for example, in Ontario, to Red River Métis, through a “people-based” examination of history that “reveals links and connections among these locales, as pre-existing kinship relations were cementing a broader fur trade community” (128). But he argues against the claims of self-identifying individuals and/or communities based solely on prior presence. That is, if there is an absence of consciousness as “Métis” prior to Métis nationalism, and no ancestral links to a Red River regional core, then they do not, “necessarily,” have legitimacy as Métis (128).

Quoting Métis scholar Olive Dickason, Andersen points out that she “pinned the birth of Métis consciousness” on the unstable conflicts with white settlers who began to arrive in Red River in 1812, “rather than on the upper Great lakes fur trade, which catalyzed a mild awareness into conviction. From that point, the métis knew they were a distinct people with a way of life that was worth defending” (48). But Dickason has also indicated that the history of Métis people outside of Red River is less well-known than the “better documented Northwest” (24). There is a definite rigorousness in Andersen’s views on Indigenous individuals and communities excluded from claiming a Métis identity, for which he makes “no apologies.” He writes that although there is sympathy from the Métis for those ruled out of the Indian Act through its prohibitory requirements, the “category “Métis” is not a soup kitchen for Indigenous individuals and communities disenfranchised in various ways by the Canadian state.” While recognizing the volatility of Métis “citizenship codes” he maintains that they grew out of necessity in reaction to and a consequence of Canada’s colonialism and “they deserve to be respected” (24).

In Andersen’s final chapter, he details the struggles of the Labrador Métis to define themselves, calling it a “case of (mis)recognition.” Tracing an “evolving” claim to autonomy, Andersen bitingly catalogues this evolution of self-identification: “Labrador Metis Association/Labrador Metis Nation/NunatuKavut from Inuit to Metis to Inuit-Metis to NunatuKavummiut” (196). But he overlooks the history of pan-tribal collaborative tactics formed in the 1970s in order to counter colonial disenfranchisement as a consequence of the Indian Act policies affecting non-status, mixed Indigenous people, and the Red River Métis. The Native Council of Canada (from which the MNC formed, seceding from the NCC after Métis inclusion in the Constitution) welcomed people of mixed descent and galvanized them into self-identifying as Métis. Labrador Métis Nation scholar, Kristina Fagan Bidwell, recounts that mixed-blood people of Labrador did not start to self-identify as Métis until the 1970s, after the NCC’s Métis president Harry Daniels “visited Labrador to encourage the people to organize as a Metis organization, and Labrador Metis delegates attended NCC national meetings” (130). She also points out that when the NCC was in negotiation with the federal government over Métis rights in the Constitution “a delegation of Labrador Metis was present at the talks” (130). Fagan Bidwell suggests that equal weight ought to be given to the standardization of Métis identity and “an understanding of Métis identity that is expansive, inclusive, and grounded in the experiences of those who call themselves Métis” (133).

“Métis” is an erudite analysis of the present tensions, controversies, and conflicts over Métis rights and identity. Andersen comprehensively confronts the lack of knowledge

and confusion amongst the mainstream population—and many Indigenous peoples—of Canada and opens up and broadens the discourse of who the people of the Métis Nation are, what being Métis means, and where the boundaries between race and nation might be. Andersen does not claim that there is an easy resolution to the discord rooted in Canada’s colonial, racialized governmental policies. But it is disquieting that Andersen does not delve more closely into disparate communities outside of the historical Métis Homeland and how the resultant divisiveness that has been the consequence of these policies evolved. As Maria Campbell writes: “I believe that one day, very soon, people will set aside their differences and come together as one. Maybe not because we love one another, but because we will need each other to survive” (156-57).

Robin White, Goldsmith’s College

Works Cited

- Métis Registration Guide*. www.metisnation.ca Web. 19 Aug. 2015
- Statistics Canada. <http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb-bmdi/instrument/3250Q10VIeng.htm>
- Lawrence, Bonita, “Real” *Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. Print.
- Dickason, Olive Patricia. “From “One Nation in the Northeast to “New Nation” in the Northwest: A look at the emergence of the métis”, in *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*, editors Jacqueline Petersen and Jennifer S. H. Brown. Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1985. Print.
- Fagan Bidwell, Kristina. “Metis Identity and Literature”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2014. Print.
- Campbell, Maria, *Halfbreed*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973. Print.