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Metis Fiddling: A Matter of Identity

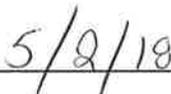
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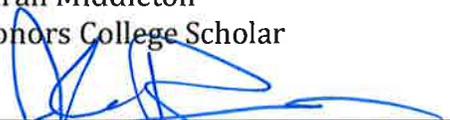
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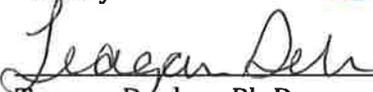
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### Abstract

The Metis, descendants of French and English fur traders and Native American women, have been politically and socially sidelined for centuries - branded as half-breeds or mixed - and the 1982 Constitution Act which finally granted them Aboriginal status in Canada is not the end of the story. In this paper, we will look at a brief history of the Metis struggle for recognition and identity and then focus in on the specific ways that the Metis fiddle tradition has mirrored this struggle. Although it could be dismissed as simply a holdover from French and British fiddle traditions of colonial times, we will see instead that the Metis fiddle has become a syncretic instrument that continues and exemplifies many of the traditions and values of Native heritage, including oral history, percussion, dance, and rhythm. Over the past two hundred years, the Metis have taken the fiddle and developed their own musical style which, although similar to European traditions, bears many uniquely aboriginal characteristics and values. This parallels the Metis' struggle for identity as they have come to terms with what it means to be Metis in a world that often seeks to define race and identity solely by ancestry. Just as the Metis fiddle tradition has descended from several different traditions, but become its own distinct tradition, the Metis have also forged their own unique sense of identity and culture.

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## **Introduction**

As a blended people, descendants of European fur traders and Native American women, the Metis have struggled to come to terms with their identity. The first section of this paper will look specifically at the Metis through three different lenses: (1) their history, (2) contemporary struggles surrounding their identity and (3) their treatment in scholarly literature. Throughout this section we will see that the Metis are a syncretic blend of two different cultures, and although they have suffered much injustice and disrespect, they are gradually gaining voice and presence in the academic community.

In the second section of this paper, we will look at the Metis fiddle tradition. We will see how the fiddle, a European instrument, has many uniquely Native American attributes. This syncretic blend of two different musical traditions is a microcosm of the larger identity issues found in Metis culture. Just as the fiddle tradition thrives as a unique blend of two cultures, the Metis as a whole thrive as a unique blend of two very different cultures.

## Section 1: The Metis

### History of the Metis People

The term Metis was first used to describe the children of Native American women and European fur traders and comes from the Latin word 'mixtus' or mixed. The Metis are first recorded in historical documents and research as early as the late seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> The Cree and Metis were documented as two very distinct groups in 1815.<sup>2</sup> They originated in Eastern Canada, but gradually moved west with the fur trade, settling mainly in the Prairie Provinces (Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan). Familiar with both Native and European populations, the Metis became the middlemen of the fur trade between Native tribes and European settlers.

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Metis had gathered significant political power in Midwestern Canada. In a Hudson's Bay Company memo written in 1856, George Simpson wrote that "the company's rights are treated by the ... halfbreeds as fictions of law which we cannot and dare not attempt to enforce, and in our present position this is correct"<sup>3</sup> The Metis were powerful enough that the Hudson's Bay Company felt that it could not enforce their laws and this caused significant friction which eventually led to the infamous Red River Rebellion in 1869 and then the North-West Rebellion fifteen years later. These 'rebellions' were both caused by built up tension between the Metis and the newly

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Driben, *We Are Metis: The Ethnography of Halfbreed Community in Northern Alberta* (New York: AMS Press, 1985), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Driben, 150.

<sup>3</sup> Driben. 29.

formed Canadian government, as the government tried to survey Metis settlements for agricultural development, and the Metis reacted against assumed invasion.<sup>4</sup> The land was eventually taken from the Metis as with most other Native groups.

Although Cree land claims in the area were dealt with in the late nineteenth century, Metis land claims were not settled until the 1940s and very unsatisfactorily at that.<sup>5</sup>

### **Metis Relationships with Euro-Canadian and Native Americans**

Metis relationships with other Native American tribes and Euro-Canadian settlers are complex. Historically, Euro-Canadians have lumped the Metis in with the Cree. Unfortunately, the interactions between Euro-Canadians and Metis have been characterized by cultural inequality, and the Metis almost always take the weaker role.<sup>6</sup> There are many different opinions about the main differences between the Cree and the Metis. Some anecdotal stories claim that the main difference is religious, as the Metis have a fairly strong Catholic tradition, while the Cree are much more likely to follow traditional Native religious practices.<sup>7</sup> Other researchers have asserted that the main wall between the Cree and the Metis was their difference in Federal status. Paul Driden argues that this inequality between the two groups created social, economic and geographic barriers.<sup>8</sup> In his study of the Metis, Paul Driden concluded that the Metis "remain a culturally independent unit very definitely set apart from their Euro-Canadian and Cree neighbours."<sup>9</sup>

### **Where are Metis found now?**

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<sup>4</sup> Driben, 29-31.

<sup>5</sup> Driben, 35.

<sup>6</sup> Driben, 149.

<sup>7</sup> Driben, 151.

<sup>8</sup> Driben, 152-153.

<sup>9</sup> Driben, 140.

The Metis make up a significant percentage of the Canadian population. In the year 2011, the Metis made up 32.3% of the Aboriginal population<sup>10</sup> and this population has been growing rapidly. Between 2006 and 2011, the percentage of Metis persons in Canada increased by 16.3%.<sup>11</sup> Although people who identify as Metis are not limited in geography, and can be found in every province in Canada and several states in the U.S.,<sup>12</sup> they are found in higher concentrations in the Canadian Midwest.

According to the Metis Nation, the 'historic Metis Nation Homeland' includes all Provinces between B.C. and Ontario and extends north into the Northwest Territories, and south into the northern U.S.<sup>13</sup> The first Metis followed the fur trade west during its early years and many ended up settling in the Midwestern provinces, like Manitoba and Saskatchewan, which both have high concentrations of Metis. The Metis represent 6.7% of the total population of Manitoba.<sup>14</sup> In this paper we will focus specifically on the Metis settlements of Southern Manitoba, where the Metis have been established since the early 19th century.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Annie Turner, , Susan Crompton, and Stephanie Langlois. "Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: First Nations People, Métis and Inuit." Statistics Canada: Canada's National Statistical Agency / Statistique Canada : Organisme Statistique National Du Canada. September 15, 2016. Accessed April 19, 2018. <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-011-x/99-011-x2011001-eng.cfm>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Evelyn Peters and Mark Rosenberg. 1991. "The Ontario Metis: Some aspects of a Metis identity." *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 23, no. 1: 71. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed March 16, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> "Metis Nation Citizenship." Metis Nation. Accessed April 19, 2018.

<http://www.metisnation.ca/index.php/who-are-the-metis/citizenship>.

<sup>14</sup> Annie Turner, , Susan Crompton, and Stephanie Langlois. "Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: First Nations People, Métis and Inuit." Statistics Canada: Canada's National Statistical Agency / Statistique Canada : Organisme Statistique National Du Canada. September 15, 2016. Accessed April 19, 2018. <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-011-x/99-011-x2011001-eng.cfm>.

<sup>15</sup> G.J. Brunskll. "Old Native and Metis Fiddling in Manitoba: Two Views." *Canadian*



Figure 1. The province of Manitoba, the subject of this study, highlighted in red<sup>16</sup>

### **Contemporary Struggles around Metis Identity**

Metis identification is a very important and essential debate. Some estimate that more than two million Canadians are eligible to claim Metis status.<sup>17</sup> The social, economic and political effect of that number of newly identified Metis people would be astounding and gives weight to this discussion.

Throughout their history, categorization has been a complex issue for the Metis. For centuries, they were simply ignored in Canadian federal Indian definitions. Although they were finally acknowledged in the Constitution Act of 1982, some researchers argue that this caused the term 'Metis' to become "a residual category of people left over at the irrational boundary of federal Indian definition."<sup>18</sup> They claim that the term Metis is being used as a catchall for Native peoples who do not fit into other,

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Folk Music 22, no. 2-4 (December 1988): 25-26.

"Manitoba-map.png" <https://s3.amazonaws.com/ps-services-us-east-1-914248642252/s3/research-wiki-elasticsearch-prod-s3bucket/images/8/8a/Manitoba-map.png> (accessed Sept. 23, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Heather Devine. 2000. "Métis Lives, Past and Present." *BC Studies* no. 128: 85. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed March 16, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Jennifer S. H. Brown. 2008. "Cores and Boundaries: Metis Historiography Across a Generation." *Native Studies Review* 17, no. 2: 1-18. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed March 16, 2018).

more clear, definitions. Whether this is true or not, it can be agreed that the Metis “defy and challenge fencing, just as they defy racial categorizations.”<sup>19</sup>

Two different types of criteria are often used when trying to categorize Metis people:

1. Ancestral and blood heritage
2. Political, social, economic associations and circumstances

Generally, these definitions can be connected to either an individual's ancestry or their current circumstances. By far the most popular type of definition in the past century has been ancestry. Historically, the only means of identifying Metis people was by this method, although even this definition has had a lot of variation. For example, in *Old Native and Metis Fiddling in Manitoba* the authors describe the Metis of southern Manitoba as "the mixed-blood descendants of Saulteaux Indians and French and Scottish fur traders,"<sup>20</sup> a very specific definition, but others have defined the Metis as simply 'mixed-blood.'<sup>21</sup> Despite the variation, the principle remains the same; a person's identity is defined by their blood.

Most Native American tribes have some sort of blood quantum qualifications for membership. Blood quantum, originally created by the U.S. Federal government, is a very controversial means of measuring how much Native American blood, or ancestry, a person possesses. For example, if a person's mother was Native, and father white, they would be 50% or one half Native. The rule for Native membership

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> G.J. Brunskill. "Old Native and Metis Fiddling in Manitoba: Two Views." *Canadian Folk Music* 22, no. 2-4 (December 1988): 25-26.

<sup>21</sup> Emilie Pigeon, "From New Peoples to New Nations: Aspects of Metis History and Identity from the Eighteenth to the Twenty-first Centuries by Gerhard J. Ens and Joe Sawchuk," *Labour / Le Travail* 78, no. 1 (2016). Doi. 10.1353/ilt.2016.0064.

by blood quantum is often one sixteenth or 6.25% Native blood. The U.S. government began using blood quantum to limit tribal membership in 1935.<sup>22</sup> Since then, it has become a very common way of defining Native American citizenship in most tribes. Although some view blood quantum as a neutral way to define membership, others see it as a government invention with the purpose of controlling and limiting Native American populations.<sup>23</sup>

In his article on the history of blood quantum law in the U.S., Paul Spruhan tracks the shift that took place in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century from “the almost exclusive use of political definitions” to the “selective use of biological [definitions].”<sup>24</sup> Spruhan argues that political definitions used to be the most popular, but since 1935, the federal government has popularized the use of blood quantum definitions for Native membership. By defining whether a person belongs to a group based on an arbitrary blood percentage, the federal government has been able to limit the number of people who are eligible for government programs.

Recently the concept of blood quantum has come under fire from some quarters. In *From New Peoples to New Nations: Aspects of Metis History and Identity from the Eighteenth to the Twenty-first Centuries* the authors insist that “the belief that the Metis are defined by ‘mixed race’ has been a long and enduring myth.”<sup>25</sup> The authors reject the idea “that ethnicity is determined by cultural structures such

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<sup>22</sup> Paul Spruhan. “A Legal History of Blood Quantum in Federal Indian Law to 1935.” By Paul Spruhan :: SSRN. January 07, 2007. Accessed April 19, 2018. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=955032](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=955032).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Emilie Pigeon, “From New Peoples to New Nations: Aspects of Metis History and Identity from the Eighteenth to the Twenty-first Centuries by Gerhard J. Ens and Joe Sawchuk,” *Labour / Le Travail* 78, no. 1 (2016). Doi. 10.1353/ilt.2016.0064.

as kinship, race, or language. Instead they adopt an approach that argues for Metis ethnicity as a product of context and circumstance – a combination of responses to political, economic, and social circumstances." <sup>26</sup> This is a revolutionary concept in this age of race conflict. For many, especially in Native American communities, blood quantum has long been the holy grail of identity, but these authors are arguing quite vehemently that blood quantum should not be a factor. While many throw the idea of ethnicity as a cultural construct as an insult to the Metis, some are embracing it as a viable and, in fact, desirable means of identification.

In the 1880s Louis Riel, a great Metis leader, wrote about what it means to be Metis. He explains that the word Metis comes from the Latin participle "mixtus" meaning mixed. He says, "Appropriate as the corresponding English expression 'halfbreed' was [for] the first generation of mixture of blood, now that European and Indian blood is mingled in all degrees, it is no longer adequate." He concludes, "True our Indian origin is humble, but it is right that we should honor our mothers as well as our fathers. Why should we be concerned about the proportion of our European and Indian blood? However little we have of each, gratitude and filial love command us to say: We are Metis."<sup>27</sup> Riel's point is that whatever the percentage of European and Native American blood in a Metis person, they should embrace their 'mix' of cultures, and not ignore either of them. Self-identity gives the Metis the ability to embrace their history as they see fit.

### **Self-Identity**

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Driben, 140.

In recent years the tide has shifted towards political definitions again. Self-identity, once scorned as the result of invention or imagination, is becoming a legitimate means of identification.<sup>28</sup> In 2002, the Metis National Council adopted this definition: “Métis’ means 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. [Emphasis mine]”<sup>29</sup> The ability to self-identify is very important to the Metis for several reasons.

First, blood quantum is generally difficult for Metis peoples. As a ‘mixed-blood’ people, blood quantum definitions are often not applicable. Also, many Metis births were either not recorded or records were lost. Since the Native blood of Metis peoples often comes through the matrilineal line, some researchers have argued that gender and ethnic biases could have played a significant role in the loss of family histories for the Native side of many Metis peoples.<sup>30</sup> In *Cores and Boundaries: Metis Historiography across a Generation*, the authors explain that “many Native family members before the 1980s or 1990s did not speak of their Aboriginal ancestry, especially to outsiders; many connections had been lost, dropped, or silenced. Family histories, oral or written, were scarcely done, and when done, might speak only of the patrilineal French or Scottish sides of a family.” Whether because of gender and ethnic biases or not, ancestral records for Metis peoples are scarce and blood quantum is thus hard to enforce.

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<sup>28</sup> Joe Sawchuck. 2001. "Negotiating an Identity: Métis Political Organizations, the Canadian Government, and Competing Concepts of Aboriginality." *American Indian Quarterly* 25, no. 1: 73-92. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed April 19, 2018).

<sup>29</sup> "Metis Nation Citizenship." Metis Nation. Accessed April 19, 2018. <http://www.metisnation.ca/index.php/who-are-the-metis/citizenship>.

<sup>30</sup> Brown.

Secondly, self-identity is important to the Metis because of the great diversity within their populations. Joe Sawchuck points out this problem in his article *Negotiating an Identity: Métis Political Organizations, the Canadian Government, and Competing Concepts of Aboriginality*, saying, “the Métis have many local, regional, and cultural variations which militate against their being considered a unified whole.”<sup>31</sup> If self-identity was not available to the Metis, they would have an even bigger problem of classification. Assumptions about similarities and differences between those who identify as Metis must often be discarded. The ‘Metis’ person in one community may not have many (or perhaps any) ancestral, political, or linguistic similarities with a ‘Metis’ person in another community. Although we do have basic information about whether people identify as Metis, further data concerning why they categorize themselves this way is not available.<sup>32</sup>

### **Problems with self-identification**

Although self-identification is often relied upon, it can be confusing and is often viewed as unreliable. Skeptics have speculated that the lack of verification inherent in self-identification has resulted in inaccuracies. Seemingly verifying this, researchers have documented cases of people changing their self-identification, specifically from Cree to Metis.<sup>33</sup> If people can change their identification at will, how can we (or even they) accurately understand who belongs in the Metis people group.

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<sup>31</sup> Sawchuck.

<sup>32</sup> Peters.

<sup>33</sup> Peters.

Other self-identification problems have also emerged. For example, many people who could be identified as Metis under certain (biological and historical) definitions do not identify themselves this way because of their own preconceived ideas about what it means to be Metis. In *Cores and Boundaries: Metis Historiography across a Generation*, the author tries to define the 'cores and boundaries' of identifying as a Metis and ends up identifying this problem. In one of the interviews described in this article a woman explains that she does not see herself as Metis, but instead "English-speaking Native," going on to explain that she was part Scottish, French and Indian. To her, 'Metis' meant 'part-French' and she explained that "those who identified themselves as Metis were politically more visible and active, and [had] closer and more visible ties with Franco-Manitobans."<sup>34</sup> Although this woman would be considered 'Metis' under many different definitions, to her, Metis was a much more complex term that factored in current language usage and political affiliation, perhaps more significantly than simply blood heritage.

Whether by political or blood quantum definitions or self-identification, Metis identification is not a simple topic. This problem is more difficult for the Metis, because other Native American groups are able to use blood quantum as a qualitative criteria. Researchers who try to fit the Metis in a tidy box, often find themselves concluding that Metis origins are "complex and varied."<sup>35</sup> It is no wonder that Heather Devine calls the Metis identity "that most elusive of concepts."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Brown.

<sup>35</sup> Peters.

<sup>36</sup> Devine.

## **The Importance of Language in Identity**

Although there is a wide swath of people with very different characteristics who self-identify as Metis, there do seem to be some common characteristics among most Metis-identifying individuals. In "The Ontario Metis: Some Aspects of a Metis Identity," the researchers suggest that one such common characteristic is a sense of Aboriginal identity. This is especially noteworthy since, as the researchers also note, most Metis do not speak an Aboriginal language in their homes.<sup>37</sup>

A lack of connection with aboriginal language has been a significant challenge to Metis identity. Often the main ammunition of those who claim the illegitimacy of the Metis identity is their lack of language, and appropriation of the English and French languages. Some of this judgment has come from within, as many Metis seem to struggle with the concept of identity apart from language. Unfortunately, this problem is more widespread among the Native peoples of North America, than just the Metis. This sentiment and problem are maybe best expressed in a saying that is popular among the Dene Nation in the Northwest Territories of Canada: "We are our language."<sup>38 39</sup>

Encouragingly, a new movement has been gaining momentum in recent years. A change in perspective among Native American writers and critics has now begun to view the appropriation of the English language in a more positive light. The irony of Native American writers using the English language to restore their own

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<sup>37</sup> Peters.

<sup>38</sup> Sylvia Bowerbank et al., "Literature and Criticism by Native and Metis Women in Canada." *Feminist Studies* 20, no. 3 (1994): 565. Doi:10.2307/3178188.

<sup>39</sup> It is important to note here that although this language/identity problem is common to most Native American people groups and not isolated to the Metis, that does not make it any less complex or difficult to navigate for the Metis people.

power of language is not lost on the writers of *Literature and Criticism by Native and Metis Women in Canada*. They say, "this new generation of writer is seeking, ironically through its appropriation of the English language and the transformation of European conventions, to restore the power of language to what Lee Maracle calls "the languageless generation."<sup>40</sup> The "languageless generation" is again finding its voice, and perhaps through this voice will eventually find its identity as well.

In *Grandmothers of the Metis Nation: A Living History with Dorothy Chartrand*, the author interviews many Metis elders. She is particularly vehement about the importance of not just language, but also stories, saying "we need these stories if we as Metis peoples are to understand fully ourselves, our culture, and our histories within the cultural, social, and economic history of Metis communities."<sup>41</sup> Through their use of the English language, the Metis, and other Native peoples, are strengthening cultural traditions passed down for generations.

### **Metis Scholarship**

Sadly, until very recently there was a decided lack of research on Metis peoples. Writing in 1985, Paul Driben says that the Metis are "practically unknown in the ethnographic record."<sup>42</sup> Later in his book, he goes on to attribute the general lack of interest in serious study of the Metis to two main problems: low cultural visibility and the belief that they are indistinguishable from the Ojibwa.<sup>43</sup> The editors of *Metis in Canada: History, Identity, Law & Politics* argue that instead of

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<sup>40</sup> Bowerbank.

<sup>41</sup> Judy Iseke-Barnes. 2009. "Grandmothers of the Métis Nation: A Living History with Dorothy Chartrand." *Native Studies Review* 18, no. 2: 69-104. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed March 18, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> Driben, 140.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 140.

being viewed as a forgotten people – as they have been in the past – the Metis should more accurately be characterized as an ignored people.<sup>44</sup> Their argument is that although there have been a wide range of records of Metis people stemming from early fur trade days, these records were largely ignored until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Whether malicious or ignorant, this neglect of Metis ethnography can not be excused.

There is evidence for both of Paul Driben's theories about this neglect. In an article written in 1960, Omer Stewart argues that the Metis should just be considered Ojibwa. His argument is that children of mixed heritage should inherently fall into either of the groups that they come from.

"The Metis have not been regarded as a group with distinctive culture. Rather, since they can trace their biological and social roots back to both the European and Indian populations of Canada, it may be that they have been regarded as only slightly atypical representatives of either of these large groups. Any similarities between Metis and Indian or European customs may then just serve to reinforce the idea that they can be legitimately ignored."<sup>45</sup>

This precludes the idea of a third and unique culture can arise and dismisses the Metis as merely a subgroup of either Native or Euro-Canadian culture.

The second theory about this neglect is low cultural visibility. Unfortunately, this excuse is backed by blatant racism. Commenting on Donald Creighton's description of the Metis in an essay on the major events preceding Confederation, Paul Driben laments that the Metis are there portrayed as "the half-savage, and presumably half-civilized product of an unfortunate bio-social experiment."<sup>46</sup> He

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<sup>44</sup> Christopher Adams, Gregg Dahl, and Ian Peach. *Métis in Canada History, Identity, Law & Politics*. Alberta: University of Alberta Press, 2013.

<sup>45</sup> As qtd. In Driben, 40.

<sup>46</sup> Driben, 7.

goes on to accuse Creighton of dismissing the Metis as not capable of developing their own cultural style and "having nothing new to teach us." In this case, the pretense of low cultural visibility is just an excuse for racism; it is not so much that the Metis are not visible, but that they are not worthy of being viewed.

Fortunately, the lack of Metis research has been slowly remedied in the last few decades. "Recent years have experienced a surge in scholarship on Metis history, identity, and politics."<sup>47</sup> Some have hypothesized that the resurgence in interest in the Metis stems from both the recent Federal recognition of the Metis as a distinct Aboriginal people group, as well as the recent hundred-year anniversary of the infamous Northwest Rebellion.<sup>48</sup>

Another significant change in Metis scholarship is the shift to hearing from Metis themselves. In the past, any Metis scholarship was from the point of view of outsiders, but recently Metis voices have joined the conversation.

Writing in 1985, Paul Driden concludes that the lack of significant study on Metis culture does not mean that the Metis do not have culture, but that it needs to be studied. Whatever the reason, the positive scholarship of the Metis is very encouraging. The second half of this paper will dive into a specific aspect of Metis culture: the fiddle, and attempt to begin to fill this gap.

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<sup>47</sup> Pigeon.

<sup>48</sup> Devine.

## **Section 2: The Metis Fiddle Tradition**

We saw in the first section of this paper that the Metis have struggled with identification almost since their beginning. Metis peoples throughout history have been dismissed as half-breed blends of disparate cultures. The Metis fiddle tradition serves as a microcosm of this phenomenon. Although it is clearly descended from European traditions – by its use of a European instrument and many European tunes – it also displays many uniquely Native American characteristics. Through the strength of their culture the Metis have turned a European based instrument and tradition into a uniquely Metis tradition that epitomizes the values and traditions that are the Metis culture. This strength of culture is mirrored in Metis culture as a whole. The Metis culture in general, as well as the Metis fiddle tradition specifically, are both syncretic, unique blends of two very distinct cultures and traditions.

In this section we will briefly look at the history and development of the Metis fiddle tradition. We will then look at several characteristics that the Metis fiddle tradition shares with Native American music traditions.

### **The Fiddle in the Folk Music Tradition**

Folk music in Europe found a huge resurgence after the Renaissance.<sup>49</sup> The colonization of North America brought European folk music to North America and over time the English, Scottish, and Irish airs of the settlers mixed together and with French and Native influences. The fiddle plays an important role in all of these traditions. As Stephanie Ledgin says, the "fiddle is...prominent in the traditional

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<sup>49</sup> David Dicaire, *The Early Years of Folk Music: Fifty Founders of the Tradition* (Jefferson, N.C., 2010), 10.

setting of old-time [folk] music."<sup>50</sup> It is impossible to quantify the importance the fiddle has played in traditional folk music. Anne Lederman asserts that the fiddle in folk music is primarily a rhythm instrument.<sup>51</sup> Her argument for this is primarily that it is often used as an accompaniment to dance in all of the cultures previously mentioned.

### **The Fiddle in the Metis Music Tradition**

The fiddle may have been brought to North America by the colonists, but there is evidence that stringed instruments had been present in North America well before that. Lynn Whidden, an ethnomusicologist, claims that "there is good evidence that stringed instruments have been in North America for millennia."<sup>52</sup> She goes on to describe how the French and Scottish encouraged the fiddle tradition through the fur trade. Since the fiddle came to North America, it has been firmly adopted into Metis culture, and become increasingly important to it. According to the *Encyclopedia of French Cultural Heritage in North America* the fiddle is a central tradition of the Metis musical culture.<sup>53</sup> Metis fiddling has been around for more than two centuries and is a unique blend of French-Canadian, Scottish, American, ethnic, and Native Canadian styles.<sup>54</sup>

Metis music is definitely unique when compared to other Native American groups' music traditions. The fiddle has completely overshadowed other music traditions in many Metis communities. Older Metis people who were interviewed

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<sup>50</sup> Stephanie P. Ledgin, *Discovering Folk Music* (Santa Barbara, Calif., 2010), 31.

<sup>51</sup> Anne Lederman. 2012. "Fiddle is a Rhythm Instrument." *Canadian Folk Music* 46, no. 4: 12-14.

<sup>52</sup> Azman, Norris Wardy. "Sierra's Song Metis Fiddle Music." YouTube video, 2:13. Posted Nov. 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9upbOO5Zsow>

<sup>53</sup> "Metis Fiddling and Dance," (accessed Sept. 23, 2016).

<sup>54</sup> Brunskill, 25-26.

for Anne Lederman's study *Old Native and Metis Fiddling in Manitoba* claims that they "never heard any 'pow-wow music' at Pine Creek in [their] lifetime, only violin."<sup>55</sup>

In the approximately two hundred years since the fiddle was brought to North America, the Metis have developed their own style that is unique yet not uninfluenced by the cultures surrounding them. The fiddle was so influential to the development of Metis culture that there is a saying among some fiddle players that "There's no [Metis] without no fiddle. The dancin' and the fiddle and the [Metis], they're all the same."<sup>56</sup> The interesting phenomenon of the intertwining of the fiddle in Metis culture is well understood in light of the many similar qualities it shares with the music traditions of other Native groups.

### **Similarities between Metis and Native American Music Traditions**

#### **Oral and aural traditions are related**

The passing down of oral history and culture is one of the most important practices in Native culture, and storytellers are often held in high esteem in Native communities. Native storytelling traditions are very closely related to aural music traditions and it makes sense that cultures which have oral history traditions would also have strong aural music traditions. The Metis, like other Native peoples, have operated in a mainly oral tradition.<sup>57</sup> The Manitoba Department of Education compares Metis literature and music, saying, "Manitoba Native peoples, *music, like literature, was strictly oral... in its perpetuation down through the generations.*"

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> "Metis Fiddling and Dance," (accessed Sept. 23, 2016).

<sup>57</sup> As qtd. In Iseke-Barnes.

[emphasis mine]<sup>58</sup> Lynn Whidden declares that “Metis fiddling is most definitely an aural tradition.”<sup>59</sup>

### **Oral and aural traditions are significant**

To those not of Native American descent, oral traditions can seem unreliable, but the seemingly tenuous nature of aural and oral tradition is an important driving factor in Metis fiddling. Whidden agrees, saying the aural nature of learning... [Metis fiddling] was learned by observation, by intent watching. [It is] a very active way of learning.”<sup>60</sup> David Chartrand, the president of the Manitoba Metis Federation attempts to describe the difference between learning aurally, by observation, and our more modern methods of fiddle instruction. He says, “learning from school, and learning how to play the notes and the fiddle ... is not the same as learning the traditional Metis music from the old time fiddlers.”<sup>61</sup> One way that aural teaching differs from our school learning is the encouragement, rather than constraint of, variation of the tunes.

### **Oral and aural traditions encourage variation**

It is generally accepted among Metis fiddlers that some variation is a good thing. Anne Lederman comments that “there seems to be a fairly widely-held belief that every fiddler should have his own version of a tune which is different from that of other players.”<sup>62</sup> This is very similar to the oral tradition view of storytellers as artists.

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<sup>58</sup> Manitoba Department of Education, 36.

<sup>59</sup> Azman.

<sup>60</sup> Azman.

<sup>61</sup> Azman.

<sup>62</sup> Lederman, liner notes to... “*Old Native and Metis Fiddling in Western Manitoba.*” 13.

Native American storytelling has a unique style and rhythm. The authors of *Literature and Criticism by Native and Metis Women in Canada*, refer to this as "the excellent conversational art of ... storytelling," and give a helpful description of some of its idiosyncracies, including: "funny asides, self-mocking comments, interruptions of laughter, and impromptu consultations."<sup>63</sup> This description of storytelling as an art is particularly apt when it is compared with the art of Metis fiddling. The impromptu variations that are described of Native storytelling, can clearly be seen in Metis fiddling. The laughing asides and extra comments are not only impromptu as in the added beats and phrases of the music, but they are also unique to each player and performance, as is also the case with storytelling. The same story would be passed down, while each storyteller would add their own flair and style. In the Manitoba Department of Education's *Reaching for the Sun: A Guide to the Early History and the Cultural Traditions of Native People in Manitoba*, the author describes the "dramatic effect"<sup>64</sup> of the different hand movements and facial expressions that each storyteller brought to the stories. Variation in fiddle music can take many forms. In the introduction to his demonstration of "Whiskey before Breakfast," master fiddler Trent Freeman points out that on the repeat of the tune Metis fiddlers often add in an extra bar.<sup>65</sup> Anne Lederman, an artist and composer who has studied Metis fiddle music extensively, has transcribed many Metis songs. Figure 2 shows her transcriptions of the first phrase of "Haste to the Wedding," by

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<sup>63</sup> Bowerbank.

<sup>64</sup> Manitoba Dept. of Education, Winnipeg. Native Education Branch. *Reaching for the Sun. A Guide to the Early History and the Cultural Traditions of Native People in Manitoba*. n.p.: 1993.

<sup>65</sup> Learnmichif. "The Metis Fiddle with Trent Freeman and Ry Moran." YouTube video, 9:59. Posted June 2008. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZtIL5k2gPM>

eleven Metis fiddlers in order from oldest at the top to youngest at the bottom. The vast variations between versions is almost bewildering to us, with each version almost unrecognizable, even in length, but it is a common practice among traditional Metis fiddlers. Melodic, rhythmic, and length of phrase variation are not out of bounds for the Metis fiddler.

**1. Haste to the Wedding - Phrase 1**

a. G. Fagnon  
M.M. ♩ = 104  
2,3

b. F. McKay  
M.M. ♩ = 112  
2,3

c. R. Ferland  
M.M. ♩ = 112-116

d. W. Mousseau  
M.M. ♩ = 120  
1  
2

e. L. Flett  
M.M. ♩ = 120

f. T. Houle  
M.M. ♩ = 116-120

g. E. Klyne  
M.M. ♩ = 112

h. O'Neill's 1001 Gems (standard form)

Figure 2. The first phrase of *Haste to the Wedding*, recorded by eight different fiddlers in order from oldest to youngest, as transcribed by Anne Lederman<sup>66</sup>

### Recordings have affected oral and aural traditions

<sup>66</sup> Anne Lederman, “liner notes to . . .,” *Old Native and Metis Fiddling in Western Manitoba.*, Falcon Productions, Compact Disc, 1987. 12.

There is some evidence that recordings may be having a detrimental effect on the aural traditions in Metis music. This phenomenon was labeled as the “phonograph effect” by musicologist Mark Katz when he studied how recordings have impacted live performance.<sup>67</sup> Interestingly, a study has found that young players have considerably less variation or flair in their playing, both in the tunes in general and also in repeats within the tunes. The study theorizes that this may be at least partly due to recordings which freeze the tunes in young players minds and “psychologically undermin[e] the art of variation.”<sup>68</sup> *The Encyclopedia for French Heritage in North America* says that Metis “repertoire and style have changed since the advent of readily-available recorded music in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>69</sup> This may have contributed to a generally negative feeling towards recordings in older players especially. There are even many reports of recordings being erased when a player dies.<sup>70</sup> Although the degree of variation has changed, the influence of oral tradition is still very evident.

Although this change in style is concerning, new repertoire is not necessarily negative. In *Old Native and Metis Fiddling in Manitoba*, Anne Lederman found that since the 1930s many new tunes have been introduced to the Metis through recordings, but she found that “in some cases these tunes would be adapted to be played in the ‘old style’ – with irregular phrase length, much variation on repeats of the tune, and using ‘all the strings.’”<sup>71</sup> The significance of this phenomenon cannot

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<sup>67</sup> Katz, Mark. *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

<sup>68</sup> Lederman, liner notes to... “*Old Native and Metis Fiddling in Western Manitoba*.” 5.

<sup>69</sup> “Metis Fiddling and Dance,” (accessed Sept. 23, 2016).

<sup>70</sup> “Metis Fiddling and Dance,” (accessed Sept. 23, 2016).

<sup>71</sup> Brunskill, 25-26.

be understated. The Metis fiddle style is so distinct and strong that fiddlers are able to adapt outside repertoire to its constraints.

### **Generational importance**

A culture based so heavily on oral history often places particular value on elders, as they are the only link to the people's history and identity. Because none of the music of this tradition has been written down or recorded until very recently, great value was and is still placed on elders in the tradition and learning from them, and Metis fiddling is still very much a family tradition. Jennilee Martineau is an accomplished Metis fiddler who describes how fiddling is a tradition in her family that has been passed down for at least four generations, saying, "I learned to play from my father, who learned from his father, and his grandfather."<sup>72</sup> Native cultural values of oral traditions and respect for elders are still alive and well in the Metis fiddling community.

Many old time Metis fiddlers have a huge repertoire of tunes. Anne Lederman estimates that some of these fiddlers know more than 200.<sup>73</sup> Many of these tunes are not transcribed or recorded and the only way that they will be preserved is through oral tradition.

### **Body percussion**

The Metis fiddle tradition shares many other characteristics of Native music besides oral traditions. One of these is the use of body percussion. This tradition is one of the most easily identifiable attributes of Metis fiddle music. Body percussion

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<sup>72</sup> Jennileemartineau. "APTN – Metis Fiddler." YouTube video, 6:24. Posted July 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWQRe6yv5UY&list=PL357CA731D4328B27&index=14>

<sup>73</sup> Brunskil, 25-26.

is achieved by use of the feet, and usually the fiddler is seated performing a sort of dance with their feet. Sometimes though, as seen in Figure 5, on page 11, the fiddler will dance while standing. Body percussion serves both visual and aural purposes in the music. Many people believe that the use of the feet as a percussive instrument is a replication of the drum beat.<sup>74</sup> Historically, the drum has been very important to native culture, often serving as the only accompaniment for ceremonies and celebrations. The Manitoba Department of Education describes the drum as the main instrument of the Native people of Manitoba.<sup>75</sup>

2/4 Time (reels, marches, two-steps)

Right Left R L R L R L etc.

heel toe toe, heel toe toe, heel toe toe, heel toe



6/8 Time (jigs)

Right Left R L R L R L etc.

heel toe toe, heel toe toe, heel toe toe, heel toe toe,



Figure 4. Transcriptions of the Metis clogging patterns for reels and jigs<sup>76</sup>

According to Anne Lederman's research, there are two different versions of clogging patterns for Metis fiddle music that can be clearly seen in Figure 4 above, although both are very similar. The first is used in 2/4 time signature pieces like

<sup>74</sup> Azman.

<sup>75</sup> Manitoba Dept. of Education, 25.

<sup>76</sup> Lederman, liner notes to... "Old Native and Metis Fiddling in Western Manitoba." 7.

reels, marches, and two-steps, and the second is used in 6/8 pieces like jigs. This technique is believed to be unique to the Metis people. The *Encyclopedia of French Cultural Heritage in North America* notes that although some characteristics of Metis fiddling can be traced back to European influences, “clogging with both feet...seems to have no European antecedent.”<sup>77</sup> The incorporation of dance and percussion in Metis fiddle music makes it unique.

A lot of the dances that accompany Metis fiddle music do have European roots (i.e. polkas, waltzes, quadrilles, reels and jigs, etc.), but one unique example is the Red River jig. Although it is called a jig, it is more accurately described as a reel.<sup>78</sup> It blends a “combination of Indian dance steps and French and Scottish jigs and reels.”<sup>79</sup> The dance and music of the Red River jig are so connected that a common anecdote among the Metis says that “the way to drive a Metis crazy is to nail his moccasins to the floor and play the Red River Jig.”<sup>80</sup> Dance and percussion go hand in hand in traditional Native music, and this is one way that Metis fiddle music clearly shows its Native influences.

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<sup>77</sup> “Metis Fiddling and Dance,” (accessed Sept. 23, 2016).

<sup>78</sup> Lynn Whidden. 1990. "A Note on Métis Music." *Canadian Folk Music* 24, no. 1: 12-15. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed March 18, 2018)

<sup>79</sup> Manitoba Dept. of Education, 64.

<sup>80</sup> Whidden.

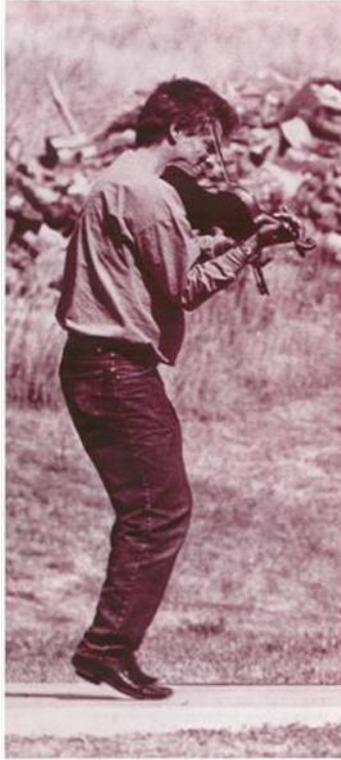


Figure 5. Lawrence Houle, a famous Metis fiddler, dances a jig while fiddling<sup>81</sup>

Dance is not the only way that the Metis incorporate percussion in their fiddling. Lynn Whidden believes that Metis fiddling can also be compared to Native drumming. She describes how Metis fiddlers "choke up on the bow" to create a very percussive sound.<sup>82</sup> This is a very significant, if sometimes subtle, distinction between folk and Metis fiddling, especially considering the importance of the drum in Native and Metis cultures. Another reason that stylistic differences, like the percussive and rhythmic nature of the bowing, have developed is because the fiddle was originally a solo Metis instrument that needed to accompany itself. In folk music, the fiddle was often accompanied by other instruments, like the banjo,

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<sup>81</sup> "Metis Fiddling and Dance," (accessed Sept. 23, 2016).

<sup>82</sup> Azman.

mandolin and guitar, but the Metis fiddle is often performed alone. Trent Freeman, a Canadian master fiddler clearly demonstrates the differing style of bluegrass and Metis fiddlers in comparative performances of *Whiskey Before Breakfast*, a tune popular in both traditions. The bluegrass rendition has much longer bowing, giving an overall smoother feel, while the Metis version has much shorter and more percussive bowing. Ryman comments, “the Metis player would add more rhythm with their bow...to accompany themselves.”<sup>83</sup> Both body percussion and percussive bowing can be credited to the strong solo voice and percussion tradition in Native culture.

### **Nonmetered rhythms**

The uniqueness of the rhythms of Metis fiddling goes beyond body percussion and bow technique, and into the actual rhythms themselves. Metis fiddlers tend to give all tunes they play a completely unique asymmetric feel. This non-metered feel of most Metis fiddle music is sometimes referred to as crooked<sup>84</sup> and corresponds with traditional Native musical feel. Anne Lederman says that “both Native song and Native fiddling reflect a kind of ‘one-beat’ approach to rhythm, in which the music is felt as a continuous series of steady beats without setting up any expectations in terms of grouping the beats into longer units.”<sup>85</sup> Lynn Whidden describes this “very unique style of fiddling”<sup>86</sup> saying that the tunes “have a steady pulse, but the meters ... can be 1 2 3 4 5, 1 2 3 4.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Learnmichif.

<sup>84</sup> DaddarioOrchestral. "April Verch on Canadian Fiddle Styles." YouTube video, 5:47. Posted. Feb. 11, 2009. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_qghmlPvct4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qghmlPvct4)

<sup>85</sup> Lederman, liner notes to...“*Old Native and Metis Fiddling in Western Manitoba.*” 15.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Azman.

In the program notes for the CD set *Old Native and Metis Fiddling*, Anne Lederman gives details about the asymmetric phrasing of the Metis fiddling traditions. She says that there are examples of asymmetric phrasing in Quebec, older American styles, and some European traditions, but goes on to claim that “the principle of asymmetric phrasing [goes] much further in the Native fiddling in [Manitoba] than in these other traditions, and its particular character is the main indicator of Native musical influence in the fiddling of these areas.”<sup>88</sup> In a review of the same CD set, published in *Canadian Folk Music*, G. J. Burnskill mentions the difference in Metis interpretations of classic folk tunes, saying, “if you are a fiddler, you will recognize some of these tunes, but you might have a hard time playing along with them.”<sup>89</sup> He continues, “they tend to add an extra beat now and then to a phrase in a reel, and they get an extra kick from their boot rhythm section.”<sup>90</sup> One cause of the uneven meter is cadence notes. They are often “reiterated or embellished for two or more beats...changing many phrases of standard Scots-Irish tunes from their original four beats into five, six or seven-beat phrases.”<sup>91</sup> This can be clearly seen in the transcription example in Figure 6 below. The first transcription of this phrase adds two full bars to the phrase compared to the second.

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<sup>88</sup> Lederman, liner notes to...“*Old Native and Metis Fiddling in Western Manitoba.*” 15

<sup>89</sup> Brunskill, 25-26.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Lederman, liner notes to...“*Old Native and Metis Fiddling in Western Manitoba.*” 15.



Figure 6. A transcription of the last phrase of *Haste to the Wedding*, transcribed by Anne Lederman.<sup>92</sup>

Although the music traditions of Europe and North America are vastly different, they do share some characteristics that have allowed them to blend. Anne Lederman lists several of these similarities including texture, rhythm, melodic embellishment, pitch set, and contour.<sup>93</sup> One of the similarities that it is easiest to see is the texture. As Lederman says, “both traditions consist of melody with percussive accompaniment.”<sup>94</sup> Solo voice accompanied by percussion is very important in Native music traditions. Because the fiddle is a very melodic instrument, the transition was relatively easy, and the fiddle eventually became a complete substitute for the voice in some situations.<sup>95</sup>

Cross-tuning is another method by which the Metis fiddle becomes its own solo instrument. Instead of the traditional G D A E tuning, a classic Metis tuning is A C# A E.<sup>96</sup> This gives opportunity for different chords and overtones and allows for open string plucking to be interspersed. In tunes with cross-tuning the left hand will often pluck by itself or even play chords. This is contrasted with the folk method of

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>96</sup> Learnmichif.

picking with the right (bowing) hand. This tuning of the fiddle is unique to Metis tunes and makes it especially suited to being a solo instrument.

It must be acknowledged though that although the fiddle is a solo instrument, it is not therefore a less social instrument. The fiddle plays an important role in the social dance tradition of the Metis people. Although fiddlers would play in their homes, the fiddle is “essentially part of a social dance tradition.”<sup>97</sup> It is used in social gatherings, some more formal, like weddings, and some informal, simple gatherings.

The fiddle, as an instrument and style, has been a huge part of folk music traditions for hundreds of years. Some would be tempted to say that the Metis are merely copying the folk traditions of the Europeans who destroyed so much of their culture, yet a close examination of the Metis fiddle does not hold this to be true. Anne Lederman summarizes saying, “the melodic and structural features...are remarkably different from the source fiddle traditions involved. Moreover, all of them reflect the aesthetic of older Ojibwa tradition. Therefore I maintain that this is indeed a syncretic music, a blending of Native and European musics of which other researchers have found no evidence in North America.”<sup>98</sup> The fiddle tradition of the Metis peoples of North America is a unique fusion of Scottish, French, and Native cultures that continues and exemplifies many of the traditions and values of their heritage, including oral history, percussion, dance, and rhythm, among others. The syncretic nature of this tradition, its mixture of European and Native characteristics

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<sup>97</sup> “Metis Fiddling and Dance,” (accessed Sept. 23, 2016).

<sup>98</sup> Lederman, liner notes to...“*Old Native and Metis Fiddling in Western Manitoba.*” 1.

that is not found in any other music tradition, shows the strength of Metis tradition, and mirrors the syncretic nature of the Metis as a whole.

### Section 3: Conclusion



Figure 7. "Music of the Metis," a piece by Amber Wilkinson uses a mosaic technique to depict a fiddle.

In her work, "Music of the Metis" – which won 5<sup>th</sup> place in the 2012 Indigenous Arts & Stories competition – Amber Wilkinson uses a mosaic technique to powerfully demonstrate the uniqueness of Metis culture. In her discussion of the piece, she describes the important role that the fiddle tradition – and the fiddle itself – have played in Metis life. Wilkinson, a Metis fiddler herself, has a strong message in this piece of art. Reflecting on her theme of Metis music, Wilkinson says this:

"The Metis and the Fiddle are closely intertwined. The Metis have embraced the fiddle as their own. Rarely is there a Metis gathering where fiddle music

is not present. The fiddles, as well as the tunes have been passed down from generation to generation and have been a big part in keeping the Metis culture alive. *Influenced by their Aboriginal and European ancestry, the Metis have developed a fiddling style that is uniquely their own.* [emphasis mine]. Wilkinson's use of the mosaic technique is indispensable and eloquent. As

she concludes, "The word mosaic, can be used to describe the Metis style of fiddling. Taking pieces from different places and creating something new."

In the end, Paul Driden sums it up well: "They are Metis – proud of their ancestry on both sides but nonetheless unique."<sup>99</sup> This is true of both the Metis culture in general, and also the Metis fiddle tradition specifically. It acknowledges a blend of cultures, but embraces this blend as a core strength. The Metis are not atypical examples of either Native or European heritage. They are a unique blend of both that warrants much further discussion and research.

Researchers are now realizing that Metis culture has developed into a unique blend of Native and European cultures that has much to teach us. The Metis fiddle is just one example of the depth and strength of tradition that can be found in Metis culture. Hopefully the future will see even more in-depth analysis and discussion of all of the many aspects of Metis culture.

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<sup>99</sup> Driven, 160.

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