

# Motherland

by

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## ***ABSTRACT***

MOTHERLAND is a series of stories and works which pay tribute to my mother's Métis lineage. I am using a personal lens of lived experience, my own and that of my family, to address historical realities of Métis disconnection, dislocation and enforced assimilation. I have drawn from Indigenous/Métis methodologies and epistemologies such as visiting Elders, establishing relationships, acknowledging visions, and embracing stories as medicine. To develop this story, I interviewed my family members and asked them questions about what their lives as Métis women and girls has been like. The responses to these queries are woven into the fabric of the exhibit MOTHERLAND, which is comprised of *Nia Mamaa Awaa*, *Monuments*, *Northwest* and *In My Blood I Stand*. These interconnected works use textiles, sculpture, fur, beads, deer hide, and embroidery to take the viewer on a journey through concerns about land and belonging, identity and loss, and meditations on absence/presence. These themes and questions punctuate the entirety of the exhibit and are the threads which connect one piece to the other.

## ***ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS***

First, I must thank my Aunties Jackie Bouchard, Denise August and Gratia Charette Lysne (D.2020) for making their voices heard for this work. The stories, pictures and time they gave me form the core of my thesis. I dedicate MOTHERLAND to the women who are alive with me in spirit and whose voices are also integral to this work: my mother Beatrice Charette, Grandmother Louisa Nault Charette and my sister Louise Charette.

Thank you to the University of Manitoba School of Art for allowing to participate as a fine art graduate student. It was an honour to be accepted into the program. I have gained confidence by being welcomed into this supportive community of faculty and fellow students.

Thank you to Katherine Boyer, my graduate studies supervisor and advisor. She has been instrumental in helping me to develop my voice as an artist, to think critically and objectively about my work and to be slightly more attentive to details - a task not meant for the faint of heart. I humbly thank Willow Rector, Leigh Bridges and Suzanne McLoud for being on my committee, sharing their expertise with me. Each one has gently pushed me to do better and to accomplish more than I thought I could. I am also grateful for my graduate student colleagues: Christopher Reid Flock, Jimmie Kilpatrick, PJ Anderson and Pani Bolbolabadi.

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## ***BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCES***

“Story is Medicine”, says Métis writer and scholar Catherine Richardson, in her book Belonging Métis. According to Richardson, “Good stories are ones that reinforce the sense of belonging and identity. Bad stories are the ones that make people feel bad for being Aboriginal”<sup>1</sup>. I embarked on my thesis work knowing that I had to tell a “good” a story about my family, my aunties, and the words to had to be authentic. The stories had to come from the women in my family because, for too long, we have been defined by others. As Richardson says, “If not countered by one's own cultural stories, the Métis fall prey to the stories of others who tell them who they are.”<sup>2</sup> Stores must be told by those with the lived experiences of being Métis. These personal accounts need to be supported and reinforced by Métis writers, artists, poets and historians. As Métis, we have not been able to rely on or trust Eurocentric academics, writers, or historians to tell us who we are. Too often, this is where the “bad” stories unfold – stories that reinforce our shame and which deny us a right to assert our Indigeneity and to proudly claim our Métis self.

This thesis, therefore, is a simply written and articulated account of my history and my family. As such, I do not want to alienate my audience with overtly academic theories or obscure theoretical language. We Métis have encountered barriers in education and language in the past. I do not want to reconstruct those here.<sup>3</sup> I want my aunties, cousins, nieces and sisters to see and hear themselves in all aspects of this text and in the art. I hope this generates a positive sense of identity and a strong link to our proud past. It is important to me that my aunties, as women and as Métis, are full participants in this story and their perspectives on identity, culture, and history are honoured.

So, for this thesis to authentically represent my Métis culture and identity, it must speak for and to these women. Métis women, generally, been invisible in the written records of the Métis Nation. Métis women in my family have been marginalized through poor education

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<sup>1</sup> Richardson, Catherine, Belonging Métis, JCharlton Publishing Ltd., Vernon BC, 2016 p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p 36

<sup>3</sup> Richardson, Catherine, Belonging Métis, J.Charlton Publishing Ltd., Vernon BC, 2016 p 23

opportunities, poverty, racism and sexism. I believe that one way to correct the wrongs against Métis women is to bring our voices to the frontlines of the current Métis discourse. I know that the Métis women in my Charette/Nault family are the matriarchs who nurtured Métis identity and maintained culture through their creativity, labour, attention to kinship, and by teaching the children. I credit my Aunts Denise, Jackie, Gracie, Terry and Linda and, of course, my mother Beatrice with the strength to survive a mainstream settler culture that was so often demeaning and which sought to deny our history and identities. Since I want my voice to honour the truth of our lived experiences, I have chosen to speak to my relatives directly and to record their voices in the tradition of oral story telling.<sup>4</sup> Each of my aunties' stories is a piece of the web that links one story to the next. No two accounts of being Métis, a Charette, and female are exactly alike. The result is a series of linked themes that speak of connection, identity, belonging, loss, land, ancestral lineage and the reclamation of Métis women's voices.

An evolving and deepening interest in the material culture of Métis women is an integral part of this story. In 2020, I was invited to be an Indigenous Scholar in Residence at the Manitoba Museum in a program to recover and revitalize Indigenous traditions in art making. Every week we met as a group to examine and talk about pieces from the collection that were so beautifully designed and decorated.<sup>5</sup> Many of these pieces were functional as clothing or as domestic "objects". What made visiting with these historic pieces remarkable was not just the obvious skill of the maker, but that these "objects" transcended notions about craft versus so-called high art. Furthermore, we looked at these "objects", not as artifacts from the past, but as living beings with wisdom and histories from which we could learn. These Elders "spoke" to us through the materials from which they were made, and from the way in which the quills, beads, furs and hide were arranged and designed.<sup>6</sup> This approach to the study of material objects awakened in me a new way of understanding my ancestors. Looking closely at exquisite quill work, fine silk

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<sup>4</sup> Transcript: Charette Aunts Jackie and Denise, 2022

<sup>5</sup> Matthews, Maureen, D. Phil., Report to Winnipeg Foundation, October 2021

<sup>6</sup> Fiola Chantal, Returning to Ceremony: Spirituality in Manitoba Métis Communities, University of Manitoba Press, 2021, p 68.

embroidered flowers, and meticulously stitched beads revealed the personality and the life of the maker. Stories and histories were embedded in these sacred pieces.<sup>7</sup>

The processes of close observation, sharing of knowledge, and building relationship within the group pulled me more fully into Indigenous ways of knowing and creating. This, in turn, has manifested in my work with more conscious use of materials that reflect on my own Métis culture and history. I have used deer hide and furs to reference the fur trade that my grandfather, like the Charette men before him, was involved in all his life. Likewise, beads that I stitch into the hide and on textiles represent the fur trade and craft economies of the Métis. The beads and thread work, moreover, show the versatility of the women artists and makers.<sup>8</sup> By employing these in my art, I am bringing the voices, experiences and identity of long-ago relatives/ancestors to the foreground.

Writers whose works enrich this story and who have brought social, political and historical fact to my research are Gregory Scofield (Thunder in my Veins), Jeanne Teillet (The Northwest Is Our Mother) and Catherine Richardson (Belonging Métis). Richardson offers an analysis of identity and evolution of Métis self through culture and story. Teillet's work is an historical account of the development of the Métis Nation but, in its essence, it is also a memoir of the Northwest - what the Métis call our Motherland. Scofield, Métis poet and teacher, shares his life experience of growing up as a disconnected Métis who finds his identity through relationships and through the material art of beading. Together, these authors' writings have helped me to frame my personal story and to construct an accurate picture of a shared Métis past.

Books that have grounded me in Indigenous epistemology, and methodologies are Decolonizing Methodologies, by Lind Tuhiwai Smith, Research as Ceremony by Shawn Wilson, and Returning to Ceremony by Chantal Fiola. Each of these authors speaks to the need for Indigenous frameworks that incorporate lived experience, story, healing and ceremony as

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<sup>7</sup>Wilson, Shawn, Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods, Fernwood Publishing, Halifax and Winnipeg, 2008, pp 39-41.

<sup>8</sup>Racette, Sherry Farrell, *Sewing Ourselves Together: Clothing, Decorative Arts and The Expression of Métis and Half-breed Identity*, PhD Dissertation, Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Manitoba, 2004, pp.6-9.

legitimate alternatives and that challenge the dominance of institutionalized, patriarchal and colonial perspectives. Tuhawai Smith says: “In some fields of academic study, it is already a reality that Indigenous scholars and students no longer have to perform the ritual and referential practice of deferring to the white scholar expert of Indigenous matters”.<sup>9</sup>

Fiola speaks about her quest for a specifically Métis –centred research as she reflects on the importance of respect for an Indigenous consciousness in the “decolonizing of our minds and lives”. As she puts it: “I understand that knowledge can come from texts and people, from dreams, prayer, plant medicine and ceremony”.<sup>10</sup> These insights into Métis-centred research has given me energy and courage to bring story, dream and vision into my research and writing, and to revitalize a process which typically demands scholarly objectivity, distance, and critical analysis.

In addition to these writers, I am drawn to visual artists who integrate traditional materials into their work. These materials are used to relate stories through a contemporary Indigenous lens. Artists such as Jane Ash Poitras, Amy Malbeuf, Nadia Myre, Maureen Gruben, to name a few, have cut paths for artists like me to follow. These women are part of a movement which is giving voice to the Indigenous experience, the relationship of people to the land, and bringing attention to resistance against the colonizing forces of nationality, religion and politics. Collectively, they are revitalizing traditional craft and art-making through experimentation. They are addressing questions of land, labour and Indigeneity in contemporary visual language, while also renewing and reviving traditional practices and art forms.<sup>11</sup> Maureen Gruben, Catherine Blackburn, and Katherine Boyer bring poetic sensibilities to current issues, such as the politics of land and identity, into their practices using stitch, beads, bones, and fur.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Smith, Linda Tuhawai, Decolonizing Methodologies: Third Edition, Zed Books, Bloomsbury Publishing, New York, 2021, p. 192.

<sup>10</sup> Fiola Chantal, Returning to Ceremony: Spirituality in Manitoba Métis Communities, University of Manitoba Press, 2021, p 54.

<sup>11</sup> Berlo Catherine, Ruth B. Phillips, Native North American Art, Second Edition, Oxford University Press, New York, 2015, chapter 8.

<sup>12</sup> Landmarks, 2017, and Canadian Encyclopedia, accessed January 2022



My thesis work echoes some of themes which are found in the contemporary Indigenous worlds of art. Like some of the above-mentioned artists, I am adding to the conversation of identity, relationship, connection to the land and Indigenous ways of knowing. Hand stitching in embroidery and beading, important aspects of Métis material culture, have a physicality that suggests an inner memory or knowing. In Indigenous circles, this is sometimes referred to as “blood memory”. My use of stitch, beads, and fur link me to the Métis culture, to my family’s history, and to feelings of belonging, identity, and spirituality. These materials and methods, as mentioned earlier, connect my work to that of my ancestors, my culture and to the story of my Métis roots. The narrative that follows is one in which I address questions of origins, belonging and culture, all of which make a good story – one that makes me feel proud about being Métis.

## ***PART ONE: THE STORY***

“Story is all that we are,” says Indigenous writer and storyteller, Thomas King.<sup>13</sup>

King's words have a particular resonance for me. All my life has been about story. From a very young age I would make up stories and tell them to whoever would listen. I asked the adults in my life to tell me stories about the “olden days”. I listened carefully to stories told by others, including my father, mother, grandfather, and aunts. When my life was turned upside down, I concocted stories in my mind which helped me cope. When I needed comfort, I always turned to stories, either through reading or by creating my own.

So, when King talks about the power of story, I understand. When he speaks about the Indigenous story and how it is different from the Eurocentric or colonial story of power and individuality, I concur. The following story is about a family who experienced the negative consequences of colonial policies of displacement and discrimination. It is about the women who persevered. This story is a story that is both personal and political.

Our Métis family line can be traced through my mother’s family for seven generations to 1770 when they lived in the Red River Settlement, St. Norbert, and LaRochelle MB.

The Charette and Nault families are old names. Our ancestors participated in Métis up-risings, the Riel Resistance, the Battle of Batoche, and served in the first government of Louise Riel. Members of my family were distinguished. Ambroise Lepine, my great uncle, sat on Louis Riel’s provisional government and Andre Nault Junior served in the Red River Resistance. Then there was Uncle Guillaume Charette, a writer, lawyer, and teller of Métis stories. He was president of the Union Nationale Métisse in the 1930’s. He wrote the book, Vanishing Spaces: The Memoirs of Louis Goulet: an account of Métis life in the 1800’s. His daughter, Sister Simone, became a nun and was the pride of the family into the 1990’s.

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<sup>13</sup> King Thomas, CBC Massey Lectures, The Truth About Stories: Part 1, 2003

The Charette and Nault women were the backbone of the families. Not only did women work alongside the men in farming, trapping, and preparing furs, but they also did the cooking, sewing, teaching, and made art by practicing the beading and embroidery for which Métis women were known. The men were buffalo hunters, trappers, farmers, and carpenters.<sup>14</sup>

Questions arise when I compare our proud past to what was experienced within the family in more recent times. How is it that I grew up feeling that there was something very wrong in being a Charette or a Nault? Why did my family try to pass as Quebec



Figure 1 Charette Family 1950s

French rather than Métis? Why were the women in my mother's and grandmother's generations so clearly living with trauma? Why were we ashamed of the Charette name? Why did I think that my Nault cousins at school in the city were wild and ignorant? Why was being a Métis, a Charette woman, a source of shame in my family? To this day, I have family members who have disassociated themselves from the family names and history because of the shame of connection.

Richardson points out in Belonging Métis that many Métis families hid their identity as Métis for fear of discrimination in employment and other forms of racism. Settlers, who came to dominate some of the Métis communities, denigrated them with taunts such as “half breed” or “dirty Indian”.<sup>15</sup> Richardson states that, “when cultural stories are hidden and untold, they tend to

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<sup>14</sup> Charette, Guillaume, translation by Ray Ellwood, Vanishing Spaces: Memoirs of a Prairie Métis, Editions Bois-Brule, Winnipeg, 1976, pp

<sup>15</sup> Transcript, Jackie Bouchard, March 2022.

disappear, at least temporarily, leaving behind, a void of information about oneself.”<sup>16</sup> This observation refers to the many disenfranchised Métis who were left without a sense of self or authentic identity. They became a lost people. I have felt the impact of this void as an identity crisis of sorts. Growing up, I did not know where I fit in Métis culture and community. Likewise, I did not feel accepted in the larger mainstream worlds of school, church and friends. My identity was not supported or strengthened by positive stories about my Métis family. So as Richardson points out, we need to find and to cultivate our stories because: “Stories are the medicine that fill in the gaps of the self and show us who we are.”<sup>17</sup> When we lose a connection to our cultural stories, as we did in my Charette/Nault family, we are robbed of dignity. Our Charette story became overlaid with shame which was told to us and reinforced by the government, church, education system and the white settler community.

Questions like; "How did I get here?" "Where do I belong?" and "Where is the land of my ancestors?"<sup>18</sup> assist us in finding and re-claiming our Métis story. This is what I have discovered as I have conducted my research, spoken to relatives, and re-visited the land of my relatives and ancestors. Exploring these questions with a lens focused on Métis history and lived experience has gradually led me and my aunts to positions of cultural healing, acceptance, and strength of identity.

The question of “How did I get here?” begins by saying that I was born in Winnipeg to a white settler father and a Métis mother. Although my parents, my sisters, and I lived in the north end of the city, weekends and holidays were spent in my family community of LaRochelle, a small village a few miles from the town of St Malo. This is where my mother, Beatrice Charette, was born. She came from a lengthy line of prominent Métis Charettes in the Red River Settlement. Her father, Roland, was a trapper and farmer and her mother, Louisa Nault, a descendent of Laderoutes, Lepines, and Henrys – Métis who were important in politics and resistance of the Red River Métis.

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<sup>16</sup> Richardson, Catherine PhD., Belonging Métis, JCharlton Publishing, Vernon, British Columbia, 2016, p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> Richardson, Catherine Lynn, “Becoming Métis: The Relationship Between the Sense of Métis Self and Cultural Stories”, University of Victoria, 2004, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> Richardson, Catherine PhD., Belonging Métis, JCharlton Publishing, Vernon, British Columbia, 2016, p.

As a child, I did not know any of this history. However, I was happy, in the very early years of my childhood, to go to the farm and spend time with close family. My Métis Aunts and my mother were the most prominent figures in my life until age six. The men, my uncles and Pépère, were around the farm but were often out working the fields or away hunting for moose and deer. The women, my mother and her sisters, were a constant presence in the old farmhouse. The conversations, as I remember them, were lively. They talked about the relatives, the community, their work, and even about the spirit of my grandmother who they believed came to visit on the eve of my auntie's wedding. There were parties and trips to the lake in St Malo. The neighbors - Carrières, Gosselins, Dubois, Naults, and Morins - were our community. They were cousins, friends, and family.

It was my aunts from the farm who came visiting when we lived on Alfred and Dufferin streets in the city. They kept my mother company when she had her hands full with an increasing number of babies and when my father was away from home working. They laughed, spoke French, and in the daytime went out to work at a sewing factory. I loved how they looked – Auntie Terry with her dark hair, olive skin, and her cigarette in hand was sophisticated. She was independent; she came and went as she pleased. Many times, I remember waking up and finding her asleep on the couch when she would show up in the city.

And then there were Auntie Linda and Auntie Gracie – only a few years older than me and my sisters. They would come and stay at our house from time to time and, typically, get into some kind of trouble. They were the wild ones – crazy and fun to be with. Another Charette who came to visit was my Auntie Denise. She was the third oldest daughter, and a close confidant of my mother Beatrice. Auntie Denise was at our place in the city or out at the farm in LaRochelle where we went on the weekends. She was beautiful. We loved to look at her dark eyes and little nose. It was a family joke that we all had the Charette nose except for her. We went to her wedding in St Malo when she married a local Métis boy. It was like a fairy tale.

But mixed in with the happy times spent in family and community was a sense that there was something bad about being French/ Métis. Some of the biggest issues, like drinking and fighting,

happened among family members and in the household. In visits and conversations, I have come to know the pain that my aunts experienced back then. When their mother, my grandmother, died on Christmas Day in 1958, their life on the farm became one of isolation. The link to the larger community of women was broken. No wonder, as Auntie Gracie told me: “When mum died, people felt sorry for us”.

Even before her death, however, tragedies seemed to visit the family with predictable regularity. As a family, we thought that the problems we had were primarily self-inflicted. We were filled with self-blame. When she talked to me about her early life in Manitoba, my Auntie Jackie said: “It was because we were Métis that we struggled more. It was as if someone said, this family is going to be born and they will suffer.” It made sense, in a way, to deny being Métis because this identity came with so much pain.

Much later, I found out that drinking, fighting and depression were a legacy born out of generational trauma, poverty, suppression of culture, and denial of identity. The pain that contributed to the creation of family trauma started when my family, like other Métis, were forced from their original homes in St Norbert during the late 1800’s. This was a homeland where Métis men had thrived for more than 100 years and where the women, with their First Nations mothers, had belonged for thousands of years. The actions of the Hudson Bay Company and its expansion in the 1800’s compromised the Métis economy of buffalo hunting and the fur trade. This led to economic marginalization of the Métis as they lost their main sources of income. The push by the company to bring more settlers into the Red River Settlement overwhelmed the Métis. The new settlers, for the most part, did not integrate into the Métis community. They participated with the Canadian soldiers in the physical and racial assaults on the Métis which caused us to flee to other locations.<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, our Métis extended families spread out west to places such as, St Laurent, Batoche, and Prince Albert which were located along the fur trade routes. Others went south to the Dakotas and west to Montana. Families were separated and people were displaced. There was

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19 Leroux, Darryl, *Distorted Descent: White Claims to Indigenous Identity*, University of Manitoba Press, 2019.

overt discrimination against the Métis and racist attitudes dominated. Many families were left landless after the scrip system of compensation was misused, manipulated, and dishonoured.

This discrimination and marginalization of the Métis continued for generations. The policies which gave preference to white settlers, who came to dominate in Métis communities, ultimately led to a common denial of Métis identity. My Auntie Gracie told me that she enjoyed being on the land and going hunting and trapping with her father as a young girl, but she couldn't understand why he downplayed being Métis. "He was the best hunter and trapper, but he seemed embarrassed to say he was Métis", she recalled. My Auntie Denise was clear about her sense of shame when she told me: "There was nothing good about being Métis. When you are Métis, people put you down."

A break from my mother's family came when I was six years old and my mother died. My mother Beatrice and my Auntie Yvonne's deaths in a highway accident, with me in the cab of the truck, was a trauma that has reverberated over time. The shock from this loss left a wound in me that was physical, emotional and spiritual. The accident had the impact of completely severing ties with my aunts, uncle, and grandfather. In a quick moment, I lost, not just my mother, but all of my Métis kin. From then on, I lived with a sense of being an outsider – of not fitting in with the larger community.

The sense of being an outsider existed even in my own immediate family. I never really felt a part of my father's Mennonite side. They were so different from my mother's family. My father's people were stoic and severe when compared to my livelier Métis family. The Mennonite family's homes were orderly; whereas, there had always been some chaos on the Charette family farm. What was markedly different, however, was how much poorer the Charette/Nault's were than the Fehr's. So often, at family gatherings, my five sisters and I felt like the poor relatives from the "wrong side of the tracks".

Despite the feeling of being less than others, I must have absorbed some sense of dignity and pride in being Métis. As a child and teenager, I proudly told my friends and teachers that I was "part Indian" to mixed reactions. Often the response was "You don't look Métis", or "Why do

you want people to know?”. Comments, such as these, implied that I was not Métis enough or that I did not have a right to claim my Indigenous self. Further, these ill-informed assessments of how a Métis should look suggested to me that others could define me and my identity.

Consequently, as a teenager and young adult, I stopped telling people that I was Métis. I was tired of comments that were uninformed, and which perpetrated racist and cultural stereotyping. So, I became quiet. I silenced the voice within me that said being Métis was something to honour and take pride in. Somehow, I had held on to a pride in being Métis but the wider white community did not agree. I felt minimized by comments such as: “How much Indian are you?,” “You cannot be Métis – you are not half and half,” or “That is nothing to be proud of.” My conclusion was that I did not belong. And, because of the separation I experienced so early in life, I did not feel connected to the land or my family.

The research that I have delved into during the two years of completing my MFA has grounded me in a new understanding of my Metis identity. I still take exception to comments like those above, but I no longer allow these ill-informed attitudes to hold power over me. I am confident in who I am and have claimed my place as a Metis woman, an artist, mother, daughter, and granddaughter of past generations of Metis women. The core of this newfound confidence has been uncovered and released by means of investigation and meditation on the MOTHERLAND – the land, waters, and legacy of my ancestors. The following portion of this thesis is a journey into the heart and soul of the MOTHERLAND: the Northwest, Nia Mama Awa, Monuments and finally, In My Blood I Stand.



## ***PART TWO: MOTHERLAND - THE JOURNEY***

My re-connection to my Métis past, to my relatives, my aunties, cousins, and ancestors has been ongoing in my adult years. What follows is the visual/sculptural representation of my passage from connection, displacement, and dismemberment to re-connection and resurgence. This is a journey through the MOTHERLAND. The artwork that comprises this story is manifested through sculpture, textiles, beads, and thread. This tour is an invitation into Motherland, “the land of my ancestors,” spanning the Northwest, the Red River Settlement, and my home community of LaRochelle, Manitoba. I wrote the following poem as an introduction to the MOTHERLAND exhibit. I completed a printed edition which will become a takeaway on the day of the opening. The verse can be read both vertically and across with meaning circling and flowing throughout.

### ***MOTHERLAND***

Landscapes, whole, complete with  
People unhindered  
un-fragmented.  
Over time, the cuts  
Cords of women, birthing  
seven generations  
In pieces  
Separation  
of memories, from body  
women woven, breaking  
trying to connect – dark and bright red  
lines of the disconnected  
flowers bleeding

beading  
inherited – embodied, absent or gone  
underground  
those who have gone before – those left  
behind  
all the remains  
rivers – Red and Assiniboine  
stolen and dispersed  
framed in boxes, lots  
lands separated like  
life force from water.  
connections  
stitching, people and places

striving to  
repair  
to re-draw the lines  
reaching across time and place  
to connect.  
broken but not gone.  
Hope lies  
And points to  
a map  
of the lost.  
Blood ties, connection, family,

absence/presence  
in the land  
Legacy  
flows through from ancestors to  
the living  
alive in blood  
memory and dreaming  
the collective  
light shines, circling  
home

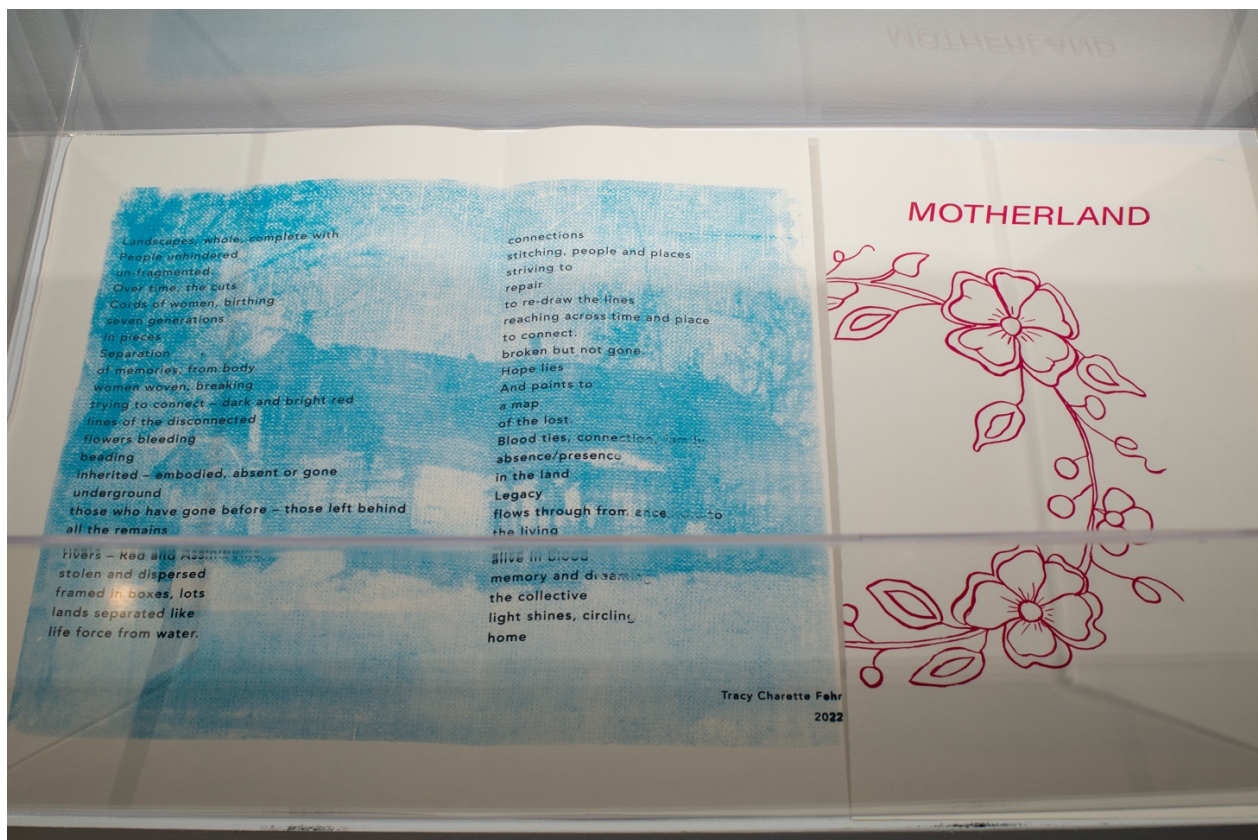


Figure 2 MOTHERLAND, Print Edition, Photo: K. Church, 2022

## NORTH-WEST

As we start this journey through MOTHERLAND, the first thing we see is that the landscape is whole and complete. I have used an historical map of the Northwest as my reference for beading of the map on deer hide. It is a depiction of the land, river and lakes of MOTHERLAND as it existed prior to the ultimate dispersal of the Métis in 1885, a time after which the Métis were stripped of their freedoms to hunt, trap and mix with other Métis families across the Northwest homelands. When the Métis were compensated for land, which had been stolen from them, it was through an often-fraudulent scrip system or with grants of substandard or non-existent lands. Before the dispersal, the land was free of the boundaries that would eventually separate north and south and east and west. These lines, imposed by the colonial Canadian and American governments, were responsible for the separation of communities and families.<sup>20</sup> The Métis people were not just stripped of their lands, but of physical proximity and connections to one another. To this day, the Charette family exists throughout these places. Until recently, I had no connection to those Charette's who are in Turtle Mountain, North Dakota, Montana, and Batoche, Saskatchewan. The process of re-connection with relatives from these disparate places has been a re-connection to my Métis self.

Jean Teillet, in **The North-West is our Mother** says:

*"The North-West is the birthplace and motherland of the Métis Nation...In the 1790's the North-West was an endless stretch of land with delicious food, clean water and rich resources. The lakes and rivers were the highways. The furbearers in the forests and the great herds of buffalo on the Plains were gifts from the land...The old ones thought of the North-West as a mother who protected them and provided for them. They called the North-West their Motherland. She was a thousand miles of plenty and in her hands she held the 'storehouses of the Good God'".<sup>21</sup>*

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<sup>20</sup> Leroux, Darryl, Distorted Descent: White Claims to Indigenous Identity, University of Manitoba Press, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Teillet, Jean, The North-West is Our Mother: The Story of Louis Riel's People, The Métis Nation, Harper Collins, Toronto, 2019, p. 17.

The North-West, as described by Teillet, is the mother – the matriarch or feminine spirit. She is generous, protective and cares for her inhabitants – her children. There is a mythological sentiment in this statement which suggests to me that being cut off, being displaced from the homeland, left the Métis without a powerful matriarchal anchor. That loss of “mother” is a theme that repeats itself in my family as it does for the Métis as a people.



Figure 3 Northwest, Photo: Reid Flock, 2022

So, on this journey we meet the *NORTHWEST*, a 10 ft. by 13 ft. wall installation in the shape of a medicine wheel, overlaid with stitched, beaded, and painted textile maps– an abstracted view of the Northwest landscape – the original homeland of the Métis. In this piece, I am envisioning the land as seen from above as though flying over the topographical landscape. The land and waters from this perspective, are entities containing spirit. The aqua blues, reds and golds of beaded waterways, lakes, and rivers are conduits representing the life force of the water. These are the veins and arteries in the body of the Motherland. I use beads to represent these waters of the Northwest. The beads reference multiple aspects of Métis culture including trade with

Europeans, an overlap and cross pollinating of cultures, and the unique art forms developed by Métis women. As I worked on this piece, I let the colours and shapes emerge organically. I allowed the process of choosing colours and of stitching these into place lead me. The natural unfolding of colours and shapes told me that the Northwest, before contact, was a pristine landscape of shining waters, flowing unhindered across the vast landscape. Similarly, the people flowed with the water on lakes, rivers, and waterways as they made their way across the Northwest for trade and travel. The waters formed into multi-coloured, spirit-like entities within the landscape which suggests that the land is alive with its own consciousness.

The mapping of this landscape became a process of linking the imagery of these abstracted maps to historical Indigenous maps. These differed significantly from the colonial European style of specific linear measurement, distances which can be seen in early Hudson Bay survey illustrations which are, to me, removed from the natural body and spirit of the land. Indigenous mapping, by contrast, were circular, meandering, and gave visual prominence to the character of the land, water, and the rivers. Elongated and rounded circles depicting lakes and wandering lines of rivers which are the life blood of the earth<sup>22</sup>.

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22 Warkentin, John A., Ruggles Richard, A Historical Atlas of Manitoba, Facimilies, Maps and Sketches from 1612 to 1970, Historical society of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1970.





Figure 4 Details, Northwest, Photo: K. Church, 2022

The waters of the Northwest are where ancestral memories are stored and where my collective family memories are stored and where my good story begins. As I see it, the waterways are the lifeblood of the Motherland – the rivers are the veins connecting the people with land, history. The depths of the lakes and waterways contain that history, story, and represent the collective memory of the Métis.

Gregory Scofield, in Thunder Through My Veins, analogizes the river to a place of memory going back thousands of years: “The river is good today. Below the surface are the memories of a thousand years. Somewhere beneath its murky water lay the beginnings of my story...It does not frighten me as it once did.”<sup>23</sup> Scofield’s analogy reverberates with me as I connect memory, story, and water together in this depiction of the Northwest.

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Scofield Gregory, Thunder Through My Veins: A Memoir, Anchor Canada, 1999, p.7.

## NIA MAMA AWA- THIS IS MY MOTHER

After the division of the land, the Métis were separated from those waterways. They moved to find homes in other areas of the homeland, but without the access they once had to water and fertile land. They became marginalized, separated, and more vulnerable without the support of the larger, extended Métis population.

In a similar fashion, the pieces of *Nia mamaa awa: this is my mother* are sculptural forms that have been separated and then sewn back together into differently sized shapes resembling body parts. These shapes represent seven generations of the mothers or matriarchs of my family in positions which reflect varying states of consciousness. Their cotton surfaces are like topographical maps of the land with embedded images of my family from the past 100 years. The human-like shapes are symbols of the fractures imposed by the colonial forces: the dissemination of the land base, dislocation of families, and the marginalization of the livelihood of the Métis.



Figure 5 *Nia Mama Awa*, Photo: K. Church 2022

These figures, some upright, slumped or laying down, are not dead, but in a state more akin to sleep. The surfaces are stitched and appliqued with family photographs and abstracted depictions of land, rivers, and lakes - memories of the Motherland. Memories of grandmothers, mothers and aunts are woven into the landscape. The red lines show that they are connected by blood, memory, kinship, and family lineage. Dark and light red wool strands on the surfaces represent old and new blood, reaching out to one another. Echoing the sinuous lines of *NORTHWEST*, these lines reach for reconnection from the ancestral to the present. This has echoes of my own life. The search for my roots and the longing for “mother” is expressed through these lines. Making this series of seven figures was both a physical and emotional experience. The process became a re-enactment of my story and of being physically separated or torn away from both mother and aunties. Creating and then tearing apart the seven pieces brought me into the performative actions of creating, deconstructing, and re-forming of self. This undertaking, I discovered, was not unlike the psychological and emotional processes of identity dissolution, re-formation, and re-connection.

To make these body-like forms, I started with a large 7ft. x 9ft. cotton textile, which I painted with oils and acrylic and embellished with wool, photos, and beadwork. My first gesture was to cut the large textile in seven vertical lengths along river lines depicted across the fabric. Cutting down along the rivers represents the first stage of the Métis dislocation from their lands which had been river lots. Lots, separated from water, become square boxes of land, confined by boundaries and enclosures. The tearing of the cloth also suggests the tearing apart of families who were then forced to relocate to other geographic places.

The exercise of ripping and tearing the large landscape on textile was a way of re-enacting the experience of my ancestors being torn from their homes and land. The ripped and separated fragments, when laid out in front of me, allowed me to reflect on their condition. They spoke to me about healing: the complex processes of repair and reconnection. I chose to hand-stitch the pieces together because the repetitive gesture of stitch gave me a feeling of communing with my ancestors, an expanding mental clarity, passing of time, and a sense of peace. Also, through this ritual of contemplative stitching, I was physically and psychically engaging in remembering my family’s past. Images of the women were coming forth and assuming a life of their own in



this work. Loving and meticulous stitching became a way to honour, acknowledge, and begin to heal losses experienced by these women. The tiny stitches become sutures. I handled the textiles gently as though cradling a loved one. I spent time choosing photos carefully and meditating on each person as I applied the image onto the surfaces. Through this deliberate selection of images and mindful stitching, I was undertaking a process of re-connection to my family, identity, culture, land, and the matriarchs who are the heart of *Nia Mama Awa*.

## MONUMENTS

My process of healing family wounds is especially notable in Monuments. From a distance, Monuments looks like a graveyard with headstones. My own family did not have much money, so many of our grave sites are not visible. My grandmother, grandfather, and Aunt Linda are all within the same plot, marked only by my grandmother's name and date of birth and death. Surrounding their site, in sharp contrast, are the French settler's graves marked by etched marble monuments.

The aluminum frames that display textile and fur pieces, are typically used for stretching and drying animal pelts. These are erected in honour of the women who did the fleshing, stretching and who made clothes and household items from the pelts of the animals.<sup>24</sup> The pelts were stretched and hung in the fall and stayed up until spring when buyers would arrive to buy them from my grandfather. The hides dried gradually over the winter in the bedroom upstairs where the family slept.

This grouping of stretchers is my effort to memorialize my Métis family. Photographs embedded on surfaces bring the individuals into focus. The process of healing my family's intergenerational wounds is to make their pain and loss visible alongside and in communication with their culture, creativity, and beauty. This is a visualization and reclamation of dignity. These stretchers hold space for the family members who did not have headstones and, thus, were denied a tangible record of a life lived. By constructing a presence via this grouping of sculptural textiles, patched,

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<sup>24</sup> Charette, Guillaume, translation by Ray Ellwood, Vanishing Spaces: Memoirs of a Prairie Métis, Editions Bois-Brule, Winnipeg, 1976.

stitched, and beaded, I am bringing them forward to honour them.



Figure 6 Monuments, Photo: K. Church, 2022



Figure 7 Monuments, Photo: K. Church, 2022

Monuments, as a whole piece, references the land, labour, and culture of my family. These stretchers act as markers, evoking the fur trade, an important economic and cultural tradition in the Charette family since the late eighteenth century.

The textiles, stitched on animal hides, suggest the Charette women and their labour from the early 1800s to the present day. The women were known to stretch and dry the skins as well as sew for the household to generate a source of income.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the stretchers are markers

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<sup>25</sup> Racette, Sherry Farrell, *Sewing Ourselves Together: Clothing, Decorative Arts and The Expression of Métis and Half-breed Identity*, PhD Dissertation, Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Manitoba, 2004.

which reference fur trade/trapping and the material culture of Métis women, which included quilting, beading and embroidery.

## CULMINATION: IN MY BLOOD I STAND

**In My Blood I Stand**, is the central but final figure of MOTHERLAND. She stands tall with arms/branches outstretched, and recalls “blood memory”, blood lines, healing, resilience, domesticity as integral to the land/scape, inheritance, memory, longing, healing. This figure is a culmination of the works that make up MOTHERLAND and is the complete, celestial, resurrected form representing all the Matriarchs who are rising and claiming space. Her body is healed. She is no longer lying on the ground in a state of dismemberment.



*Figure 8 In My Blood, Photo: K. Church, 2022*



**In My Blood I Stand** is a five ft. six-inch, female figurative sculpture made from tree stumps and tree branches. She asserts the power of the Métis women and points to a period of resurgence. The women that were sleeping in Nia Mama Awa have risen into their full power and consciousness. As Louis Riel famously was quoted to have said: “My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back”<sup>26</sup>



Figure 9 *In My Blood*, Photo: K.Church, 2022

“In My Blood I Stand” represents the rising up of the Métis women from the sleep to which Riel refers. In a very personal way, this awakening is about my grandmother and the other women in my family. The foundation of this piece is the cloak which I made with the words from a letter that my grandmother wrote to my mother in 1958. This was the last letter to my mother because, at the time of writing it, she was sick and dying from leukemia. My process, in making “In My Blood”, was to cut this letter, into pieces and then stitch the sentence fragments randomly onto a woolen cloak which is then draped over the arms/branches of the figure. The cloak, layered with words, stitching, and florals, is an all-over patchwork design that resembles a quilted landscape.

<sup>26</sup> Manitoba Metis Federation, <https://www.mmf.mb.ca/louis-riel-quotes>, accessed March 20, 2022.

Trimmed with rabbit fur, it reiterates the history of trapping and hunting from Monuments. The tree stump exposes visible marks of time, injury, heart wound and healing in its rough and craggy surface. The red wool strands are depictions of the blood line, blood memory, and family ties which keep the memory of these Métis women alive.

Sewing my grandmother's words together onto this cloak brought her essence to life. While I sewed, I could almost hear her speak. A sentence, which seemed to form itself as I was sewing the patches together, says boldly, "I am my blood". For me, this sentence was a reclamation of my grandmother's self and identity. The act of stitching the cloak was a physical recounting of all the minutes, hours, months, years and generations of Métis women in my family, giving birth, labouring, creating and healing. Taken together, the wood, cloak, stitching, flowing rows of red yarn are pulled together and standing tall in blood, bloodline, and blood memory. This figure is in the act of shedding or shaking off the legacies of shame. She is drawing strength from the threads, the blood that is flowing from her arms, her body. She is a matriarch – a mother – part of the land – standing tall and asserting an existence, a resurgence and a claiming of space. She represents MOTHERLAND in all her pain, power and joy.

## ***CONCLUSION***

MOTHERLAND has mapped a journey where land is contoured by belonging, identity and loss, and seeded with meditations on absence and presence. Each artwork on this tour has articulated one or more of these lines of investigation. Each piece communicates aspects of connection and identity, including land to identity and kinship to identity. Loss is a recurring part of the overall narrative as it describes the impact of disconnections between land, mothers and ancestors.

While it speaks to the existence and experiences of my family, this exhibition may also reverberate with a portion of the Métis diaspora. Clearly, not all Métis have a history of denying identity. Those Métis who lived in closer proximity to their First Nations cousins held on to traditions that were lost to some of the Métis attached to larger settler populations.<sup>27</sup>

Re-connecting with Métis relatives and discovering the land of my ancestors has been instrumental in healing old wounds, re-establishing and claiming my identity. The voices and memories of my aunts are at the core of this research. Details of their lives, which were disclosed and discussed at my Auntie Jackie's dining room table, are integrated directly and subtly into the artworks in my MFA thesis. Northwest, Nia Mama Awa, Monuments and In My Blood are manifestations of this process of sharing story and time.

The women, my mother's sisters, share a sense of pride in being Métis, one that eluded them through most of their adult years. They tell me that the work and research I am doing is bringing dignity back to Charette/Nault names. They thank me for this. However, as I have told them, they should be crediting themselves for their strength and the resilience that has brought them through multiple difficulties. These inherent qualities are what I have attempted to impart in my work. These women, along with my mother Beatrice and my Memere Charette, are my role models. I am grateful for their many contributions, and especially for holding families together and maintaining a sense of dignity in a world that had denigrated and denied Métis women an identity and a voice. Suffering took the form of generations of poverty, social exclusion, and internalized shame, but this has not destroyed the spirit of my aunts. Not long ago, Auntie Jackie

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<sup>27</sup> Fiola Chantal, *Returning to Ceremony: Spirituality in Manitoba Métis Communities*, University of Manitoba Press, 2021, pp 80-81.

asked me: “Have you heard that song, “I am proud to be Métis? I love it. I could listen to it all day. In those days there was none of that”.

It is my hope that the works in this exhibit will shed light on the life of these women and the efforts of Métis in general to celebrate Métis experience, reassert our identity, honour the women, and to take our rightful place in the arms of MOTHERLAND, the homeland of the Métis.

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## TRANSCRIPT



Figure 10 Auntie Denise August



Figure 11 Auntie Jackie Bouchard



Figure 12 Auntie Gratia Charette  
1952-2020

Transcript of table conversation with Auntie Jackie, Auntie Denise and sister Sandra on March 20, 2022 in Port Alberni, BC.

Tracy – What was it like for you? You knew you were Metis?

Denise- We knew but we were not telling anybody. We were hiding it.

Jackie – We were ashamed – we were not proud of it.

Denise – We were not proud of being a Metis because at school we got picked on.

Jackie – We were called savages and half breeds, and nobody wanted to be close to us. It's something that takes away from your self-esteem a lot, eh. When we could, we wanted to leave home and get away from all this.

Denise – I wanted to leave. I wanted to leave because we were “not good enough” – they thought that they were better than us.

Jackie – With a background like that you have trouble learning in school because you can't function and concentrate as much as you could if you were not Metis. We felt like we were isolated at school and had to work harder to get it at school.

Tracy – What about the language you spoke when you went to school?

Denise – I like speaking French but we were not allowed to speak French all day. We would speak French in the morning and then English in the afternoon. I was not getting English at all.

Tracy – What did people say about you speaking French?

Denise – They said we didn't speak French well – that we were Metis. It was a different French.

Jackie – They said their French was better. Some of them came from Quebec and some from France – so we were embarrassed. But we knew we were Metis – we didn't have to be told.

Sandra – I thought La Rochelle was all Metis?

Jackie– Well they are all Metis now but back then they were hiding it. We couldn't hide. Mum was half Native, Uncle Willie, Auntie Terry and Auntie Gracie all showed.

Denise – You know my kids they all have cards now – they are all Metis and proud.

Tracy – Can you tell me about p  p  re and his trapping?

Denise – That’s what he did and he liked it. He loved his animals.

Jackie – But we didn’t like it – he hung them all upstairs and they stunk until they dried up. You had to scrape them right down. The whole wall up there. You don’t remember Grandpa putting his hides on the wall up there?

Sandra – No I don’t remember that. I remember the upstairs clearly, but I don’t remember the hides.

Denise – But Grace got involved with it.

Jackie – We were there but not interested – but Grace was. Dad was probably happy to have her with him

Denise – He made a lot of money at it.

Jackie – Yes he was good at too. The salesman would come every year – I think it must have been in the spring. It was a guy from the city and he bought Dad’s hides. Dad told them in the book for the Festival Voyageur that he made so much money he was able to buy cigarettes for the whole year– Laughing. But he forgot to put booze on there. Everyone laughing – yeah he forgot to put food on the table and booze.

Denise – We had food though – we always had food.

Tracy – Tell me about Grandma Charette – did she help with the furs?

Jackie – No she didn’t get involved in the furs. She made our blankets for the winter.

Denise – She made our clothes.

Jackie – She would make big woolen ones – she would take old jackets apart so it was heavy sewing and by the peddle. The blankets were thick and heavy. If she could she would make us a jacket with the old coats. So those blankets – I don’t know how they ever got washed. We would take them out once in the spring and shake them out. Now quilting is all cotton but in mum’s day it was all to keep warm. I think she just used old clothing to make a lining in between.

Tracy - Aunt Gracie talked about the moccasins that Grandma wore – do you remember that?

Denise – Yeah I remember those

Jackie – I think Gracie took her moccasins and would smell them after she died.

Denise – They were beaded moccasins

Sandra – Do you remember Grandma clearly?

Denise and Jackie – Oh yeah...

Jackie – We had a little summer shack and I would go there and comb her hair. She liked to have her hair combed.

Denise – Yeah we would make pony tails in her hair. She just had plain short hair but we used to play with it.

Jackie – But then she didn’t have much time. At 3:00 or 4:00 pm she would have go get ready for the chores outside.

Sandra – She didn’t speak English – did she?

Jackie – No she didn’t really and that caused her trouble. There was a salesman who used to come from Winnipeg. His name was Bourget. He used to sell her old fruit that was thrown away at the supermarket. She would get bananas that were almost rotten and would mash them. He would come and make his trades. Sometimes he had material. But then mama passed away and we told him and he never came back.

Tracy - Did anyone listen to music around the house?

*Jackie* – Yes mum did. She would listen to “Santé Fe”. It was a show on the radio in those days –we had no TV. She would listen to the rosary on the French radio too. There was not a lot of free time to listen to music. I don’t think it was an easy life.

*Denise* – They would play cards with their friends.

*Tracy* – tell me about the one-room school.

*Jackie* – We all went there. Laurette, Jean, Therese...

*Denise* – And we had the reunion – that’s when Jason died.

*Tracy* – What do you think Sandra, when the Aunties talk about growing up in LaRochele?

*Sandra* – I identified with what I saw. For me, I was able to see the two contrasting lifestyles (Fehr vs Charette). I saw what was going on in mum’s house on the farm when she was alive, but even then, it seemed a bit different. It was nice but there was something not quite right. It was Uncle Willie – we were warned that he was bad. I think you warned us. I loved going there when mum was there – it felt safe. I remember watching Pèpère and Uncle Willie with their shenanigans.

*Tracy* – Sandra can you tell me what you remember about the house?

*Sandra* – Oh yeah – I loved the farm house. I remember on the outside it having no paint but I remember how warm and cozy it was on the inside. There was a table by a big window and I remember sitting there with Mum, Pèpère and Uncle Willie eating deer and moose meat and mashed potatoes and it was really delicious. I remember sitting around that table and having really nice meals with Mum and Pèpère and all of you and it was really cozy and nice. There were rooms off of the big room with no doors.

*Jackie* – When Mama was alive, there were no guns hanging there. The guns were hanging in the new home. The new house had no history. I didn’t like it.

*Jackie* – In those days you could have guns in the truck. In the house you had a special rack for them. Once Robert took one of the guns and aimed it at Suzanne. Dad came in and took the gun and the magazine out.

*Sandra* – The new house (built after the old one burned down) was never finished and it had no women’s touch. It was a man’s house.

*Jackie* – No matter how much you tried, it never did.

*Tracy* – What happened when Grandma Charette got sick?

*Jackie and Denise* – Mama got sick in the fall of 1958. We don’t know how mama did everything before she died and she came home. Before she died on Christmas, she did all of the sewing and the cooking.

*Denise* – She did all the baking and got things ready for Christmas. Then she went back to the hospital. She knew she was dying. She went to the hospital before Christmas and she never came back. She gave your mum (Beatrice) money so we could go shopping for Christmas. And she bought me those brown rubber boots...and the colouring book.

*Jackie* – The things we needed.

*Tracy* – What did you do for Christmas?

*Denise* – She died that day. We were at the farm house: it was just me and “Pitchoo” (Willie), and Therese, I think. Dad came in and told us “Mama is gone”. And the dog was howling and howling all day.

Jackie – We went to Betty’s (your mum). Uncle Paddy and Virginnie were there. She made a big turkey. We were going to visit and then they called and said mama had already passed away.

Sandra – How old were you then – when she died?

Jackie – I was 12.

Denise – I was 11.

Jackie – We couldn’t go see her in the hospital – You had to be 16.

Jackie- And back in those days we were born at home, not in the hospital.

Denise – I was born at the hospital and maybe Gracie. You were born at home Jackie.

Tracy – reads the conclusion of her thesis and asks; What is it like to be Metis now?

Jackie – Did you ever listen to that Metis song? They used to play it at the end of the gatherings out here.

Denise – They used to have a lot of gatherings here. And Auntie Grace was in the parade – do you remember?

Denise and Jackie – Laughing – oh we had fun at some of these. Jackie and Gracie and the parties and the parades. They decorated the hall and sang “Proud to be Metis”. I love that song. They had a fall parade at the Metis hall every year here in Port Alberni.

Jackie – I think it was Ray St Germaine who did the song. They used to “party hearty” those Metis!

Tracy- When did you start to feel proud about being Metis?

Denise – Since I ‘ve been hanging out with you!

Everyone- laughing hysterically!!!!

Jackie – I think when we moved out here to BC – when we belonged to the Metis group and we joined. I think when we got here we realized who we are and there was not as much.... you know....

Sandra – stigma!

Jackie – Yes and there was a lot of Metis here.

Denise – Yes, when I went to the Kings, I see a lot of Metis.

Sandra – How could you tell they were Metis?

Jackie– Well the Racette’s were here and you could tell.

Denise – Yeah the Racette’s. They are from Saskatchewan.

Sandra – You know when I tell people here in England that I’m Metis, they think its pretty amazing.

Denise – Do you tell people that you are Metis. Sandra?

Sandra - Well they don’t always know what Metis is but I tell them that my Grandmother was half native. They respect it here.

Denise – Well they don’t here. I never told anyone I was Metis until recently.

Tracy – But they could tell?

Denise – People used to always tell me I was Native.

Everyone – lots of cross talk and laughing.

Jackie – We’re just nicer looking – laughing – now we are getting silly!

Jackie and Denise – Lets have that lunch now. Tracy made bannock and boulette.

Tracy turns off recorder.