

**"The Undercover Indian": Explorations in Urban, Mixed-Ancestry
Aboriginal Identity and Culture**

by

Karen Elaine Froman

A Thesis

**Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
of**

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Abstract

“The Undercover Indian”: Explorations in Urban, Mixed- Ancestry Aboriginal Identity and Culture

Karen Froman

The literature review examined mixed-ancestry Aboriginal identity through the impact of colonization, legislated policies and practices, racism, images, culture and traditions and living in an urban setting.

An Indigenous research method which acknowledged experience, storytelling and sharing relationships as a legitimate way of knowing was used. Interviews with individuals of mixed-ancestry residing in the city of Winnipeg and personal reflections of the researcher were used to answer the research question.

The factors explored were: connection to a home community, role of family, socio economic status, obstacles, cultural resources, legislated policies and color of skin. The most influential factor was the knowledge and supports received in the University setting. The legacy of legislated definitions, skin color, parental silence, and lack of contact with a home community impacted the participants’ formation of their identities as Aboriginal people.

Preface

I have chosen to share who I am and my struggle with understanding my identity in keeping with the practice of many Aboriginal writers and researchers. This body of research arose from my lifelong awareness and experiences as an urban born mixed Aboriginal and “White” woman. I was aware of the differences in how one was perceived and treated by others based on appearance, as some of us were seen as “more Native” than others. Growing up in the city of Winnipeg which has the largest Aboriginal population of any major city in Canada, in a family that identified as both Mohawk and Dutch/British Canadian, I had always wondered where I “belonged”. The childhood questions of “who am I, “where do I come from?” were never fully explained to me. The question that most overwhelmed me for most of my life was my obvious difference in “colour” from the rest of my family. I wanted to know if I was “the only one”. Were there other pale mixed Native people like me who had similar feelings and experiences about our ambiguous identities? The personal need to answer these questions was what drove me to this research. I was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba. My father is a treaty Mohawk and grew up on the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario. My mother’s background is English and Dutch. My father was raised in a family that did not speak their language or follow traditional ways. He spent two years in residential school and left home for good when he was fourteen. I did not resemble the other members of my immediate family with my fair

hair and green eyes. I always felt I fit into the “non-conformity” category; where society had no idea what to do with people like myself. We do not “fit” anywhere as we do not “conform” to societal “norms” of what an Aboriginal person “should” *look and act* like. One cannot be economically ‘middle class’ or even be fair-haired and be an “Indian”. I grew up in a middle class community in south Winnipeg. Due to the social and economic choices of my parents, my life has been one of social and cultural angst; with a profound sense of not “belonging” and living from a position of exile in that I am disconnected from my Aboriginal “home” community. Though I am in my “own country”, I felt “cut off” from my past, my lands and my roots in many ways. I found that once people at school discovered my ancestry, I occasionally had the experience of being told to “go back to the reserve” and being called a “dirty half-breed squaw”. In stark contrast to this, I also had the experience of denial of my Aboriginal background based simply on my physical appearance. In other words, my green eyes and light brown hair gave me the ability to “hide” my heritage from my non-Aboriginal peers. I was never quite sure how to react to negative reactions to my Aboriginal heritage, as all my father ever said to me was to be proud of who I was. It was the same thing when I would see Hollywood images of Aboriginal people on television. I would ask if that was really what we were, and the response was a laughing “no”. That was it; there was no explanation of *why* what I saw in the movies was wrong or what the reality was.

My adolescence and early adulthood was spent in a downward spiral of identity confusion and self-destructive behaviours. In a twisted effort to “prove” my “Indianness”, I attempted to conform to the stereotypes held by “Whites”, to abuse alcohol and drugs and enter into violent domestic relationships, the “dirty Indian.” On the flip side of this, I also embraced environmentalism, a manifestation of the “noble, spiritual Indian”. I tried on different identities like pieces of clothing. Any attempt to “remake” myself in the image of the dominant class, in other words “White”, resulted in failure. I simply could never “pull it off” as some mannerism, the way I pronounce a word or something I would say would eventually “give me away”. I had become convinced that I really was just a stupid “half-breed”; that I represented all that was bad about both Natives and White.

It was not until adulthood and my entry into University that I began to know my history and to form a more positive and cohesive sense of my identity as an Aboriginal person. I found myself struggling to find out my history, who I was, what it *meant* to be Mohawk, especially in Manitoba, and being constantly challenged by my Aboriginal classmates to *prove* my “Aboriginality”. I was ashamed to admit that I did not know my language, that I did not grow up on the reserve and that I really did not know anything. Further, to be pale and green eyed and assert an Aboriginal identity amongst classmates who were predominantly, though not exclusively, reserve-raised and “obviously” Aboriginal in the physical

sense was an additional challenge. I was confused and angry with my parents for not giving me a sense of belonging in either culture. I have struggled with understanding that my father simply did not possess the knowledge that I was craving.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The research on identity within the Canadian context has been the focus in a wide variety of disciplines including psychology, sociology, anthropology, education, political science, women's studies and native studies (Rummens, 2001). Research on Aboriginal identity has primarily examined the identity of the Aboriginal communities as a whole rather than addressing the cultural diversity that exists. Many of the studies on Aboriginal identity address acculturation strategies such as assimilation, integration, segregation and marginalization. Although discussion of such concepts as Aboriginal healing practices, rituals, traditional culture and practices, cultural retention and maintenance have been addressed the research has not been from the perspective of Aboriginal people (Rummens, 2001, p.6). Study of the development of Aboriginal identity from an Aboriginal perspective within the Canadian context thus is in the beginning stages. Definitions of identity for Aboriginal people are a complex issue. Identity has been and continues to be profoundly influenced and controlled by government systems and Colonial power. Traditional Aboriginal ways of describing identity have been altered throughout this process of external control on Aboriginal identity. The influencing factors in identity development from both the historical and current perspective are complex.

Serious gaps exist in the research focused on the development of identity among those who are of mixed Aboriginal and European ancestry. Lawrence (2004) in *“Real” Indians and Others, Mixed –Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood*, examined issues of identity among mixed ancestry urban Native peoples in Toronto, Ontario. She found that individuals of mixed ancestry may or may not have ties to a reserve community, may or may not look ‘Aboriginal’, may or may not possess cultural knowledge or speak their Native language, may or may not have learned about their identity from a family member, and live and work in mainstream Canadian society (p. xv). She explored the process of identity development among mixed ancestry individuals through an examination of the external historical and current impact of Colonial power and control and experiences of genocide on Aboriginal identity. This included colonization, gender control of identity, the Indian Act, Bill C 31, the treaties, and the practices of genocide. She further explored the additional strain placed on the urban mixed ancestry Aboriginal person who navigates their identity in an environment that may not provide direction. Lawrence provides an important basis for further examination of this complex issue.

Parker (in Taylor and Spencer, 2004) in a review of the social identities of people of mixed race in Britain and the United States noted that little is actually known about the development of the individual’s sense of self identity. He proposed that:

Mixed race people reflect a complex three way mirror. To minority communities defensive about the degree to which they have already assimilated and who see 'mixed race' people as evidence of betrayal and racial 'traitor hood.' To a white majority fearful of the visible evidence of demographic change and mixture which 'mixed race' people embody. To liberals who see 'mixed race' children as signs of peaceful integration and living prefaces to a harmonious multicultural future. (p.125)

Taylor and Spencer (2004) proposed that "human identity is socially, historically and culturally constructed. While there is individual choice and freedom of movement, in practice this is circumscribed by shared conventions, codes and values" (p. 2). Although the authors see identity as a personal sense of self, identity also mirrors the individuals place in society, how the person is seen and categorized by others, the impact of dominant cultural meanings and how the power relationships in society impact on the person. Identity therefore was seen as part of a process within the specific social context of the person. Individuals of mixed Aboriginal and European ancestry living in the social context of Euro-Canadian society and who may not have access to resources to explore their Aboriginal ancestry may therefore struggle in their search for their identity.

Purpose and Research Goal

The purpose of the study was to explore how an individual of mixed Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian ancestry living in the urban setting of Winnipeg, Manitoba develops their sense of identity. The goal was to establish a basis for the understanding of the process and definition of

identity for individuals who are of mixed Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian ancestry. It was anticipated that additional understandings of the complex questions around identity development for urban born mixed ancestry individuals would result from this research.

Method

A basic assumption of this research was the perception that development of identity for those individuals of mixed ancestry is fraught with a multitude of difficulties. Lawrence (2004) proposed that the urban mixed ancestry Native must reconstruct their history “around the once-silenced voices of their parents and grandparents. In the process they have been reshaping their own lives to challenge the assumptions that their families’ Native identities are going to vanish. ..(they) struggle with the realities of both invisibility and placelessness” (p. xvii). Lawrence’s basic assumption was that identity for mixed ancestry Native peoples could only be understood through a legacy of genocide.

Two approaches were used to examine the research question, first an autobiographical story of my own personal search and reflections on my experience and second, interviews with mixed ancestry individuals living in the city of Winnipeg. The second approach in addressing the research question was to collect information about the experience of individuals of mixed Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian ancestry through an interview process.

It was intended that this research would serve the urban Aboriginal communities as well as the academy and society as a whole by building bridges of understanding. This research is intended to be disseminated throughout the urban Aboriginal and academic communities. The research reflects only the voices of the community of individuals who participated in the study. Through these voices a window into the dynamics of a sample of contemporary mixed ancestry peoples in an urban community will be heard. The text that will emerge at the end of this research will be "a blend of writing about the self, the group studied, and the methods by which that group was studied" (Reinhartz, 1992, p. 74). However, given the diversity of the urban Aboriginal population in Winnipeg, both culturally and in terms of socio-economics, this study was not, and nor was it intended to be, representative of the entire urban Aboriginal population. Rather, my intent was to focus on those who were urban born and raised with a particular focus on those who are of "mixed" ancestry.

The theoretical constructs used to form the questions, guide the way of thinking and gain knowledge about the research question were based in the philosophy of indigenous ways of knowing and searching from the radical Indigenous perspective proposed by Garrouette (2003) and Kovach (2005). Several factors that potentially influence choice making were explored including living in an urban setting, historical factors, influence of family related to identity and culture, self identified obstacles, racism, socioeconomic status, the education system, the Aboriginal

community and services, designated or legislated status as Treaty, non Treaty or Métis, Aboriginal language, culture and spirituality and self exploration.

American scholar Eva Marie Garrouette (2003) in *Real Indians Identity and the Survival of Native America* explored Aboriginal identity through the theoretical perspective of Radical Indigenism. This theoretical construct was based on the premise that using Native ways of knowing and viewing the world were valid research methods in exploring Aboriginal issues. She proposed that any exploration of identity must be from the basic knowledge and philosophies, traditional teachings, and various ways of acknowledging kinship of Aboriginal people.

Kovach (2005) writing in *Research as Resistance* (in Brown and Strega) proposed that indigenous research link Aboriginal epistemology with an indigenous theoretical framework. She drew four assumptions from Aboriginal epistemology to guide research: “(a) experience as a legitimate way of knowing; (b) Indigenous methods, such as storytelling, as a legitimate way of sharing knowledge; (c) receptivity and relationship between researcher and participants as a natural part of the research “methodology”; and (d) collectively as a way of knowing assumes reciprocity to the community” (p.28). She proposed that indigenous theory provides a particular perspective on the research methodology that includes Aboriginal ways of knowing, is founded in research principles, respects the research process protocols and ethics, is respectful of the

natural world and incorporates looking back at the history of colonization. Canadian research that focuses on the development of identity among Aboriginal people and mixed ancestry people remains minimal and as such is a relatively unexplored concept.

This research was a beginning step in the use of an Indigenous research paradigm to understand the process of identity development among those of mixed Aboriginal and European/Canadian ancestry.

Definition of Terms

Identity was defined as a concept which embodies our sense of uniqueness as a person, the internal sense of self and the person's place in society as a member of a group sharing values and beliefs. Identity is a 'work in progress, a negotiated place between ourselves and others that is constantly being reassessed in relation to society. Identity is a concept that is individually, socially, historically and culturally constructed (Taylor and Spencer, 2004, p. 1-3).

There are a number of terms used to describe Indigenous peoples. These include Indian, American Indian, First Nations, Native, Native American, and Indigenous.

For the purpose of this research the terms Aboriginal and mixed-ancestry Aboriginal were used throughout the paper as an inclusive word to refer to *all* people of Aboriginal ancestry, including Status, non-Status, Inuit and Métis. "Aboriginal peoples of Canada include the Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada" (Canadian Constitution Act, 1982, Section

35(2). Although this term may be seen by as supporting the colonial agenda of assimilation (Alfred 1999, Corntassel, 2003) the intent in the usage was not to perpetuate negative connotations surrounding the word but to ensure that the term used was inclusive. Terms such as “mixed race”, “mixed blood” and “half-breed” are avoided as they are inherently racist terms and appear only in cases of direct quotation.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

Colonization, Post Colonialism, and Decolonization

Colonization

Canada's history began as one of colonialism in which the French first began the colonization of this land succeeded by the British. Exploration of identity of Aboriginal people thus begins with the history of the colonization of Canada. The relationship between Aboriginal people and the colonial state was one where the colonial people assumed that as the conquering people, they held power and dominance over an inferior group. The process of colonization has had a major impact on the identity of Aboriginal people and those of mixed Aboriginal/European ancestry. Colonialism has been defined in a variety of ways. Said (1993) defined it as a consequence of imperialism where imperialism is seen as the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory; and colonialism is the consequence of imperialism and is the implanting of settlements on a distant territory (p.8). Boehmer (1995) defined colonialism as the process of occupying a land, exploitation and development of the resources and governance of the people of the land (p.2). Gandhi (1998) saw colonialism as the process where those of the dominant group, the West, systematically work to cancel, negate and deny the cultural beliefs and values of the dominated non-West group (p.16). Maori scholar Smith (1999) described colonialism as a process that began

in the fifteenth century as European's began the march to conquer the world. She described colonialism as a part of the European economic expansion which included subjugation of the conquered people, development of the superiority of European thought and ownership of knowledge (p.21). Laenui (2000) provided a description of the process of colonization that clearly outlines the impact of colonization on the identity of Aboriginal people. The process is summarized as follows:

1. The dominant colonizing group denies the value and existence of the Aboriginal people occupying the land.
2. Through a variety of means including aggression and legislation the dominant group destroys, devalues and prohibits the values, beliefs and cultural practices of the Aboriginal people.
3. The dominant group creates new systems for the Aboriginal people through legislation such as controlling agencies, education, religion, economic, residence i.e. reserves, that support the goal of destruction and devaluing of Aboriginal people.
4. Aspects of the original culture are allowed as a demonstration of good faith and respect of the Aboriginal people such as exhibitions of dances, crafts, folktales, and mystical religious beliefs.
5. Aspects of the Aboriginal culture that have continued are expropriated by the members of the dominant group into their own culture such as the use of the Medicine Wheel, or Sweat Lodge ceremonies in new age religious practices. (p.150-160)

Frideres (2001) provided an explanation of the colonization process in the Canadian context that reflects the impact of colonization on all aspects of Aboriginal life and thus identity. The process begins with conquering the geographical territory of the Aboriginal people occupying the land. It is

followed by destruction of economic, social and cultural systems, and assumption of total control over the conquered people. This is accomplished through both aggressive and non-aggressive methods. The ongoing process of colonization ensures that the Aboriginal people are economically dependent on the colonizers through establishment of the policies and structures that enable the colonizer to assume control over all aspects of Aboriginal life. Psychological destruction and control of Aboriginal people's identity and value systems is accomplished through the colonizers belief in their superiority and regulation of social interactions. Colonization with its control over all aspects of the lives of Aboriginal people had a major impact on development and maintenance of identity.

Post -Colonialism

Post-colonialism focuses on the processes of imperialism in colonial societies and examines the strategies to deal "with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies" (Ashcroft et al, 2000, p.186). Although the term began as a reference to a period of time after the initial conquest of a culture the definition has broadened to include the;

wide and diverse ways to include the study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the various institutions of European colonialisms, the discursive operations of empire, the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects.(Ashcroft et al, 2000, p.187)

Post colonialism has been critiqued as primarily addressing the needs of the western academy in examining the non-western culture and identity “post colonialism continues to render non western knowledge and culture as ‘other’ in relation to the normative ‘self’ of Western epistemology and rationality (Gandhi, 2000, p. x). Boehmer (1995) proposed that Western writers had assumed without question that their understanding and writings about colonized people’s culture is understood and universal, “It is widely taken for granted that post-imperial cultural diversity is not only comparable across regions, but is all more or less equally transparent and accessible to European, North American or Australian reader, especially given a shared history of colonization. (p.245)

Garrouette (2003) observed that although in the exploration of the post-colonial theorists non-western peoples were seen as having intellectual traditions these traditional beliefs were studied through Western eyes and as a result were often distorted, over whelmed and dismissed. She proposed that a major difficulty was that the post colonialist academic was steeped in the Western tradition of gaining and disseminating scientific knowledge thus indigenous knowledge “can be integrated onto scholarly discourse only if it is severely pared down, sanitized of the spiritual elements...presented as a set of primitive beliefs that have been superseded by contemporary ‘factual knowledge’, or is reconstructed as *symbolically* rather than *literally* truthful. (p. 102-103)

Decolonization

Colonization has deeply impacted the lives, knowledge and identity of Aboriginal people. As Ashcroft et al (2000) states;

Decolonization is the process of revealing and dismantling colonist power in all its forms. This includes dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remain even after political independence is achieved. (p. 63)

This process involves an understanding of where Aboriginal people have come from and a critical analysis of the history, the causes of oppression, the picture of the oppression, the role of both the oppressor and the oppressed and the degree to which the colonialist ideas and practices have been internalized. For writers such as Alfred (1999) the process of decolonization involves removing the state control over Aboriginal people with the end goal of achieving a sovereign Indigenous government. These three concepts have had and continue to have an impact on the identity of Aboriginal people and those of mixed ancestry.

Identity

Identity of Aboriginal people has been impacted by the colonial past, the writings and thoughts of the post colonialists and the more recent Aboriginal writers and researchers. As Mishibinijima (2004) points out the study of ethnic identity as it applies to Aboriginal people is important in understanding the “conflicting balancing act that Aboriginal people face in how they think of their own ethnic identity and what “others” expect of them (p. 2) .

Research on identity has been conducted in a variety of disciplines.

Rummens (2001) conducted an interdisciplinary review of the literature of Canadian research on identity. She identified five major thematic areas.

These were:

- 1). Types of identity; Aboriginal/Indigenous/Native/First Nations, Ethnic, Linguistic, National, Regional, Racial, Religious
- 2) Specific Identities; Aboriginal/Indigenous/Native/First Nations, Canadian ethnic, Linguistic, Religious, Visible Minorities
- 3). Identity Process; Development/Formation, Construction, Negotiation
- 4). Group dynamics; Intergroup Attitudes and Relations, Intragroup Attitudes and Relations
- 5). Role of the State; State sponsorship /Promotion, Citizenship/Naturalization, Communication, Constitutional Legislation and discourse, Cultural Policy, Education policy and practice, Human Resources, Human Rights, Immigration policy and practices, Justice System, Language policy, legislation, policies and Practices regarding Aboriginal/First Nations/Native peoples, Social Services and Support for the Arts (p. 2-3).

It was interesting to note that identity of people of mixed Aboriginal and European ancestry was not one of the themes arising from the literature review.

Rummens (2001) proposed that identity could be examined from three perspectives. First, identity as “the distinctive character belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or group...and is both a relational and contextual notion. (p. 3).

The second perspective looks at identity as self identity where the person understands who they are in terms of their own life history and experience and embraces the distinctive essence of the person. The third perspective social identity is seen as the characteristics of the individual as seen or

ascribed by others in society. Rumens concluded that there are several gaps in the research. The research on Aboriginal identity primarily addressed concepts such as healing practices, ceremonial rituals, sacred traditional beliefs, traditional games, traditional subsistence patterns, native cosmology and world views. She recommended that research was required to address the diversity that exists in the Aboriginal community rather than a general overview of Aboriginal identity. This oversimplification and generalization of Aboriginal identity has created a 'pan-Indian' value system that does not reflect the reality of the distinct Aboriginal groups in Canada. As Lawrence (2003) states;

Contemporary Native identity therefore exists in an uneasy balance between the concepts of generic "Indianness" as a racial identity and of specific "tribal identity" as an Indigenous nationhood. In general, Native resistance to colonization rejects notions of 'pan-Indian' identities that can, at best, only aspire for equality within a settler state framework. (p. 10)

A variety of terms have been used to describe identity. The term ethnic identity is commonly used to identify one group of people from another in terms of culture, nationality, race and religion (Rummens, p. 9). Early anthropological and sociological studies employed a primordial approach in studying identity. The primordial approach, proposed that ethnicity is a natural phenomena due to common heritage and traditions tied to that heritage. Blood ties to a specific group through birth were the basis of identity. This approach excluded those of mixed ancestry unless the structure of blood quantum was superimposed on the definitions of identity.