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# "It's not like I'm more Indigenous there and I'm less Indigenous here.": urban Métis women's identity and access to health and social services in Toronto, Canada

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**Abstract**

Colonial policies and identity debates have resulted in major gaps in access to culturally safe health and social services for Métis Peoples living in Canada. To address the Métis health service gap, this qualitative study explores urban Métis women's identity and their experiences with health and social services in Toronto, Canada. Métis women ($n = 11$) understand Métis identity as having connection to community, intergenerational identity survival strategies, a learning journey, and connection to land. Building Métis community determined understandings of Métis identity into urban health and social services may be one step toward addressing existing culturally safe health service gaps.

**Keywords**

Métis, urban, gender, identity, health, access

## Introduction

It is well known that Indigenous peoples' identities and cultures are inextricably connected to their health (Auger, 2016). For Métis Peoples in Canada, their identity is nested within 17th-century fur trade relationships that blossomed into a distinct cultural and social orientation (Macdougall, 2017). Métis identity has faced decades of assimilative and racist colonial policies by the Canadian settler government as a way to gain access to Indigenous land (Fiola, 2015). Colonial efforts have resulted in a "belief among Canada and its citizens today . . . that Métis people have no history, culture, society, or language . . . Métis identity is regularly challenged and their overall sense of self, peoplehood, and nationhood is diminished" (Macdougall, 2017, p. 5). The formal definition of Métis identity continues to be an ongoing topic of debate among political organizations in Canada (Richardson, 2016). Métis scholar Catherine Richardson (2016) states that "[i]ronically, part of being Métis is having one's definition of self-contested by others" (p. 11). Often missing from the conversations around identity are the voices of Métis Peoples themselves.

Colonial policies and identity debates have resulted in a severe lack of culturally safe health and social services that meet the needs of Métis Peoples in Canada (Ballingall, 2017; Bourrassa, 2011; Dyck, 2009; Wesche, 2013). Métis Peoples are often caught "betwixt and between" First Nations and non-Indigenous services and are unlikely to feel welcomed and/ or face discrimination, resulting in unmet health needs (Monchalin, Smylie, & Nowgesic, 2019; Smylie, 2008). While Métis People are unlikely to engage in health services that do not value their cultural identities, they are often left using mainstream options (Konsmo et al., 2012; Kumar et al., 2012; Laliberte, 2013; Monchalin, Smylie, & Nowgesic, 2019; Wesche, 2013). These gaps in health services are problematic given the severe disparities in health determinants and outcomes that Métis Peoples experience compared to the non-Indigenous Canadian population (Chartrand, 2011; Kumar et al., 2012; Reading & Wien, 2009; Smylie, 2008; Vizina, 2005).

This research study explores how urban Métis women define Métis identity and experience health and social services in Toronto, Canada. Understanding how Métis People conceptualize their identity in an urban context may provide policy makers and service providers with potential

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solutions toward improving the culturally safe service gap in Toronto.

## Background

Métis Peoples are a post-contact Indigenous group based on 17th-century relationships between early waves of European settler men and First Nations women across what is now called central and northwestern Canada (Smylie, 2009). Métis scholar Brenda MacDougall (2017) states that while the origins of their ancestors were mixed, Métis people are not, as subsequent generations formed separate communities. Since the origination of Métis communities, the Canadian settler government has implemented assimilative and racist colonial policies to clear the way for incoming settlers and "development" (Fiola, 2015; Iseke, 2010).

For example, "Half-breed rights" emerged during discussions for the 1850 Robinson treaties in Ontario. Within the Robinson treaties, the Canadian government would not recognize half-breeds as a separate group or band, as the motivation behind treaties were to limit the number of people who could claim treaty (Fiola, 2015). In some scenarios, the Robinson treaties allowed the Chiefs of neighboring First Nations communities to declare half-breeds as either "Indian" or "non-Indian" (Fiola, 2015). Despite many First Nation's communities wishes, Métis/Anishnaabe scholar Chantal Fiola (2015) states,

> [T]he federal government consistently made the final decision about who could and could not be included, ignoring the wishes of the Indigenous peoples themselves. While there are exceptions for individuals, in the end almost every treaty externalizes and excludes Métis Peoples as a group. (p. 43)

These actions from the Robinson treaties interfered with the organized development of Métis communities in Ontario and has resulted in ongoing detrimental impacts on Métis Peoples identity, health, and wellbeing in Ontario (Fiola, 2015).

Assimilative and racist colonial policies have dispersed Métis Peoples from their maternal homelands and fractured their traditional kinship societies that were largely sustained by the women. While specific to the prairies, Métis Peoples kinship societies can be best understood by what MacDougall (2006) describes as *wahkootowin*. Passed on to Métis Peoples from their maternal lines, *wahkootowin* is a Cree term meaning, "a worldview that privileged relatedness to land, people (living, ancestral, and those to come), the spirit world, and creatures inhabiting the space" (p. 3). Colonial policies and exclusion from treaties separated Métis Peoples from their homelands and each other.

Today, two-thirds of the Métis population in Canada now live in urban areas (Statistics Canada, 2011). Statistics Canada (2017) found that there were 8 metropolitan areas with a population of more than 10,000 Métis people in 2016: Winnipeg, Edmonton, Vancouver, Calgary, Ottawa, Montréal, Toronto, and Saskatoon. In Toronto, a third of the Indigenous population identifies as Métis (Statistics Canada, 2013). While government data collection is an inadequate indicator of the true number of Métis Peoples, Métis exist and are thriving in the urban landscape (Laliberte, 2013; Rotondi et al., 2017).

This paper draws on the concept of Métis identity as defined by Métis women living and accessing health and social services in Toronto, Canada. Given the large number of Métis Peoples living in urban settings, this paper is a call to action to policy makers and service providers to work toward improving the culturally safe service gap for urban Métis Peoples.

## Methods

### *Our Health Counts Toronto*

This research was driven by findings from Our Health Counts (OHC) Toronto. OHC is a longitudinal cohort study that is intended to develop comprehensive health status and health care utilization data that profiles urban Indigenous Peoples health and wellbeing, document unmet health service needs, and address gaps in health assessment in Toronto (Kitching et al., 2020; Rotondi et al., 2017). OHC Toronto was co-led by the Well Living House (WLH) and Seventh Generation Midwives Toronto (SGMT). From March 2015 to March 2016, WLH and SGMT recruited Indigenous adults who lived, worked or received health services in the city of Toronto, Canada, using a community-based Respondent-Driven Sampling (RDS) design (Rotondi et al., 2017). A total of 917 Indigenous adults (15+ years old) were recruited and deemed eligible for the OHC Toronto study. Ninety-seven OHC Toronto participants self-identified as Métis and 8 participants self-identified as both First Nations and Métis. Overall, the total size of the Métis adult population of the City of Toronto was estimated to be 8340 (95% confidence interval [CI] = 6,533–11,676);[1] 44% (95% CI = 31–65) of the Métis population in Toronto identified as female, 53% (95% CI = 31–74) identified as male, and 3% (95% CI = 0–5) identified as trans or other.

Results from OHC Toronto found that of the Métis female population, 34% said they needed health care services but did not receive them (95% CI = 13–55), 34% have been treated poorly or unfairly because they are Indigenous (95% CI = 16–53) and 32% (95% CI: 13,51) said their overall health and wellbeing had been affected by racism. The study presented here represents an in-depth qualitative follow-up to these results and was supported by an expansion of research engagement with the Métis community in Toronto. This included a series of informal consultation meetings with members of the local Métis council, Toronto Métis community members, a talking circle, and during the OHC Toronto community report launch.

### *Theoretical and methodological framework*

This research was theoretically guided by a decolonizing praxis woven with Indigenous feminist theory. These interwoven approaches motivated and informed engagement with Métis women for this research study.

Indigenous feminist theory recognizes that colonialism is the most prominent structural condition affecting Indigenous women (Green, 2017). We understood decolonizing praxis to mean returning to Indigenous knowledge systems, centering what has been marginalized, and communicating what has been silenced (Simpson, 2011; Starblanket, 2017). These interwoven theories push back against the patriarchal and political narratives that take precedence over Métis Peoples identity. This patriarchal and political narrative has silenced Métis women for generations. Desmarais' (2017) states:

> It is still the [Métis] women who carry the greatest burden of colonial impact: colonialism inhibited our capacity to maintain cultural cohesiveness by denying us a land base . . . [and] colonialism imposed and legitimized patriarchal systems of governing. (p. 211)

For example, to be enrolled as a citizen within a Métis organization, patriarchal forms of documentation are often required. This includes a Scrip or marital church records—which are both commonly documented under male's names (Poitras Pratt, 2011). Leclair, Nicholson and Hartley (2003) state that, "colonization requires that documentation take precedence over the authority of our mothers' words or their pained silences surrounding the specific details of their Aboriginal heritage" (p. 58). Emphasizing Métis patriarchal roots has resulted in strict geographical understandings of where Métis Peoples exist(ed), illustrating how colonial documentation has taken precedence over women's voices (LeClair et al., 2003).

The interwoven approaches recognize that Métis Peoples were matrilineal with respect to kinship, matrilocal with respect to residency, and influenced by their mothers,' aunties' and grandmothers worldviews. It recognizes how colonialism targets Métis People's traditional kinship societies that were sustained by the women (Anderson, 2010; Macdougall, 2010). Métis women traditionally held knowledge central to the health and well-being of their communities (Anderson, 2011; Campbell, 2012). Métis medical knowledge for example, *lii michin*, translating to 'the medicines'—was often passed down through the women in families, or a woman might acquire such knowledge from a respected Elder or mentor in the community (Métis Centre, National Aboriginal Health Organization [NAHO], 2008a).

As for the Indigenous methodology that guided this research study, this was inspired by Ojibway scholar Kathy Absolon's (2011) work. The methodology was centered around healing by looking to the past, to understand the present, to inform the future (Absolon, 2011). Absolon states that

> Healing is . . . implied through methodological concepts of reconnection, remembering, learning, recovering and reclaiming. In a sense, healing is woven throughout the re-search process. Indigenous re-search becomes a healing journey when what we gather helps us to recover and heal a part of our self, life, family, community, knowledge, culture, language, and so on. (p. 93)

The interwoven theories and methodology for this research study aimed to create a safe space that acknowledged Métis Peoples histories of being impacted by colonization. This research study created space for sharing experiences and perspectives of Métis identity and accessing services in Toronto by engaging with the traditional community health experts, Métis women.

## Ethics

SGMT retains full ownership and control over all data in accordance with the OHC Toronto project's academic–community partnership agreement (Rotondi et al., 2017). Consent was obtained from SGMT prior to the implementation of this follow-up study and they continue to be an active, collaborative partner (Schnarch, 2004). Following approval from SGMT, ethics approval was gained from St. Michael's Hospital and the University of Toronto prior to contacting the participants.

## Recruitment

We drew on the complete sample of OHC Toronto participants that identified as both Métis and female, other, or trans and who gave consent to be contacted for follow-up research studies. In total, 58 Métis and female/other/trans OHC Toronto participants gave consent for additional research studies and provided their telephone numbers to be contacted. The first author of this paper (RM) phone called each of these eligible participants. If no one picked up during the first call, a second and/or third call, if necessary, was made over the course of a month.

## Data collection and analysis

The first author (RM) interviewed each woman using a conversational interview method. Each woman was given a $50-dollar honorarium, dried herbal tea, and wild blueberry jam made by the first author (RM). Ten questions guided the conversations centered around the following themes: (1) Métis identity, (2) Experiences with health and social services, (3) Racism and discrimination, (4) Relationship to land/ traditional medicines, and (5) Recommendations for improving access to health and social services. This article focuses on the theme of Métis identity from the conversations.

All of the conversations were electronically recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first author (RM) identified major themes and patterns and consulted with the second author (JS), both whom are a part of the Toronto Métis community. Once a consensus was met, the transcripts were mailed to each respective participant for verification and corrections. Accompanying the hard copy of the transcript was a list of the major themes that had been identified from the transcripts and a personal note expressing gratitude. Participants were asked if the themes were an accurate reflection of their experience and if their transcripts were written correctly. Two participants requested minor deletions and 1 participant requested for

corrections to the themes. Verification, corrections or requested deletions were made upon their request to both the themes and transcripts. Once all of the transcripts were finalized, conversations were coded and analyzed by the first author (RM), using the software called "NVivo for Mac" (QSR International, 2018). The transcripts were thematically analyzed through a holistic coding and descriptive coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2015).

## Results

A total of 11 women[2] responded and agreed to be interviewed. All of the participants self-identified as female, Métis, and confirmed that they provided consent in the OHC Toronto survey to be contacted for further research. Two individuals responded but were unable to coordinate a meeting time.[3] Conversations were on average 75 minutes and were conducted in the summer and fall of 2018. During the conversations, each woman was asked, "What does being Métis mean to you?." The conversations provided an in-depth look into urban Métis identity in Toronto as defined by 11 Métis women. The women provided an array of responses that equated to four overall themes: connection to community; intergenerational identity survival strategies; identity learning journey; and connection to land.

### *Connection to community*

While defining what it meant to be Métis, the women described the meaning of being connected to community. The definition of community was inclusive of the women's ancestors, families, and the urban Toronto community. Community also meant sharing stories, teachings, and having a responsibility as a Métis person in the Toronto Indigenous community. For example, three women shared:

> Being Métis means being connected to my ancestors. It means being accountable to my community. It means . . . teaching my children in a good way. It means being willing to put myself out there as Métis. It comes with a lot of teachings but it also . . . comes with a lot of responsibility to actually name yourself and be present in the wider Indigenous community. (Ka-Wapiscikwaniyasiki)

> It means a connection both to my ancestors and my contemporary community. It means carrying certain responsibilities for the land and for my community. It means being part of a really vibrant culture. (Misaskwatomin)

> What it means to be Métis is just going to talk to my grandma and hear all of her stories. She lived in a tent and they traveled around in a covered wagon. She was born in a cabin. Her mothers were midwives. Her mother and her aunts were all medicine women and they were midwives. My grandma was born in December on the Prairies in a cabin in the cold and she was only four pounds when she was born. And she also was blind. She couldn't see for the first three years of her life, but her aunt actually cured her eyesight with—my grandma calls it Indian medicine. (Jenna)

One woman shared how when people outside of her community in Toronto did not understand the struggles that came with Métis identity, she had strong Métis women in her network to remind her of who she was:

> I think every Indigenous person goes through a lot of struggle with their identity, no matter who they are just based on what society's expectations are versus. . .all the colonial. . . laws that exist around identity and kind of searching for that connection and I just think that I was really lucky to have . . .very strong older Métis women around me . . . even if nobody else outside of the community understood or . . . was dismissive of Métis culture and identity, I had these older women who were really clear about who they were and that I was a part of them. And so that really was a very big. . . support for me, and you know, just it made it really easy. I struggled a lot with my identity, but it made it very easy to . . . keep coming back to remind myself what it means and what it meant. (Ka-Wapiscikwaniyasiki)

### *Intergenerational identity survival strategies*

Ten of the women shared experiences of "intergenerational identity survival strategies" when it came to their Métis identity. These strategies included how participants' siblings, parents, and/ or grandparents navigated their Métis identity. This included participants families telling them that they were other ethnicities, or to say they were other ethnicities to people outside of their immediate family for safety. In some scenarios, participants shared how they learnt about their Métis identity later in life by accident due to their families intergenerational shame. For example, 2 women shared,

> "My sister accidently told me we were Métis . . . And she had found out 10 years before I knew but didn't tell me . . . She said to me, "[My son] has applied for a Métis and engineering scholarship." And I had no idea because I'm thinking what kind of engineering is that? Because I'm expecting chemical or. . .some sort of industrial engineering. . .And she just took one look at me rather disparagingly and said, "Did no one ever tell you that papa's grandmother was a native?" And I went, "No!" She said we're all Métis. I went, "What?" (Marilyn)

> My Métis ancestry and identity was intentionally kept from me for most of my life. And I finally discovered it on my own when . . .I started reading this family tree and it's like "Wait a minute," these names are not typical white Canadian names, the further back I went and my Mamère said, "We've always had this information but just didn't really know if it mattered to you, if we should share it." And I think that it's just kind of the effect of a couple generations having to go very underground. (Otihimin)

To hide Métis identity, the women shared that their family members would practice "passing." Passing means to shift to any other racial group (including other groups of color) to avoid discrimination (Fiola, 2015). For some women in this study, passing meant to say family members "have a suntan" as a way to explain why they have dark skin, or identifying as Spanish. Other women shared how if their family members had lighter skin, they would pass as French or White. For example, two women shared,

> It's not very surprising . . . that [my mother] would choose to pass, not to pass on a lot of teachings, to sort of cover it up, marry a European person, move to the big city, move to the south, and . . . that's the end of it. But all of my aunts and uncles basically besides her just "look" Indigenous, and all of my cousins too and when I was little growing up. . . my mother would say your uncles . . . have a suntan from being out on the tractor all day. So that was the level of discourse going on, an alienation until when I was in university and I actually began to educate myself. I was thinking wait a second. (Heather)

> When [my grandma] was a kid, her parents told her if anybody asks, because it was in Saskatchewan. If anybody asks . . . what you are, you just say you're French. So being French or being white was the safe thing to do. So for my grandma that was also the safe thing to do because she had her baby taken from her. So . . . she couldn't associate with being a Native person and feel that it was safe to do so. So, it's complicated . . . . I just associate being Métis just with like being able to kind of adapt to any situation and to just . . . find your own little ways to practice, whatever you practice, wherever you are. (Jenna)

The strategy of "passing" for safety was shown to be adapted by the women in this study. For example, this same woman shared how when accessing mainstream services, she would choose to pass as White. Whereas when she would access Indigenous specific services, she would choose to pass as Indigenous:

> I mean I can pass whenever I want to. If I don't feel like it, if I don't feel like being asked, then I might just pass. (Jenna)

### *Identity learning journey*

For some women in this research study, they understood Métis identity as being a continuous learning journey. For example, for those whose identity was hidden from them, they shared about taking their identity learning journey slowly while coming to terms with how they never knew. For example, one woman shared how she began learning about Métis Peoples history. However, she feels on her own when it comes to learning about who she is:

> I just really wanted to start learning more . . . and understanding what [being Métis] could mean for me. And try find different ways to, not immerse myself in the culture, but I tiptoed for a long time. I tried to understand more history first. I was raised with the same ignorant school education that everybody else was raised with. . .which was just blatant lies in most cases about the actual history. So, there was a lot of anger for a period of time about that too. Just realizing I feel so duped by the educational system and my family. They still don't talk about it too much. I can talk about things with my pa père a lot and my father. And every now and then . . . we might go to . . . an event in North Bay, like a pow wow. Otherwise, it's just not really talked about. So sometimes it feels weird that I want to have that be more a part of my life and a part of my identity, but I feel . . . on my own in doing that. (Otihimin)

Another woman shared about how her identity learning journey involves reconnecting with family members, learning the traditional language, and learning recipes. She said,

> The gradual beautiful process of my amazing mother . . . coming to grips and coming to peace and starting to teach me bits of language that she knows and really connecting with my aunties and . . . learning exactly how to make bannock in my grandmother's way and really learning how to make different kinds of food and so, finally just being told everything that she remembers . . . My cousins are all really quite passionately identified now, as well. Lawyers and teachers at the U of M, sort of real activists on the Prairies for Métis stuff. And I deepened my connection with them too. (Heather)

One of the women shared how there is nothing wrong with admitting one has a lot to learn about their Métis identity:

> There's nothing wrong with saying, "I still have a lot to learn" or "I don't know everything." Like that's completely fair and that's . . . a thread of everyone's story . . . because that's just part of this life stage that we're at. You're uncovering all these things, you're learning your stories, you're gathering all of these pieces, picking up different medicines and what not . . . that are part of your identity. (Okinîwâpikwaniy)

While some of the women shared how their Métis identity was hidden from them, the women shared how the teachings of what it meant to be Métis continued to be passed down through their families. For example, one woman shared:

> Although it was never disclosed to me growing up that 'oh you're Métis' . . . I've started to think back to many lessons that my father taught me over the years and that my pa père taught me over the years that I know were carried down from those generations of Native ancestry. . .the teachings are still being given, it's just the story and the words are not there with it. . .they had to. . .be quiet about those things for some time when racism was more rampant. (Otihimin)

### *Connection to land*

The women shared about their connection to land as it relates to their Métis identity in Toronto. For example, one woman shared how learning about her identity strengthened her relationship to the land, and the challenges associated with living in an urban landscape:

> Maybe this is why I feel so connected to [the land]. Because this is such a part of my ancestor's life, that connection to Mother Earth, and if anything, finding out about my identity, it strengthened my relationship with the land. Because I had been living in Toronto, away from it for so many years. You kind of get used to the concrete jungle and that's when I started realizing I actually really miss the land . . . (Otihimin)

Despite living in an urban landscape, women in this study continued to find ways to connect to the land. This included getting involved in an urban Métis gardening group or finding nature in the city. For example,

> I went camping . . . a couple of weekends ago and it just hit me how much I needed it because I was just sitting there in the forest and was finally sort of at peace. And I was like, "Oh, damn I need to do this more often." And see, it's hard to get that feeling in the city but it's still possible and that's why I really got into urban agriculture and gardening for a little while. . .I participated in our little Métis community garden

> last year. That was fun, even though it was little, it was still a lot of fun. (Misaskwatomin)

One woman compared Métis Peoples being able to adapt to new places within urban contexts to living on road allowances. Road allowances were spaces allotted for workers to do maintenance for future roads, railway lines and other infrastructure in the late 1800s. About 10 feet wide, these thin strips of land (road allowances) were often left unused by the Crown, which many Métis Peoples ended up calling home (Thistle, 2019). For example,

> I'm in the city, I can't be on the land whenever I want, so I go to the ravine and I walk my dog and I hang out there and I just hang out on the land there and find . . . because so many Métis people are in urban areas. So just . . . trying to make your home wherever you are. Like they call them the roadside allowance people, so my grandma actually with her parents, they lived on the roadsides. (Jenna)

Other women in the study shared how they connect to the land in Toronto by recognizing the traditional land that they are on. For example, one woman shared about how she will hold small ceremonies, while recognizing traditional landmarks in the city:

> I mean we're talking small ceremonies here . . . we have a fire pit in the backyard. . .having a fire with the family or having full moon ceremony in the backyard or visiting even the places in Toronto . . . there's a mound in Scarborough that's in the middle of a neighbourhood that's just this big hill, with houses all around it. . .the road's called Indian Mound Road . . . I just feel like there's these places all around us if we're willing to look for them, but we're just so often . . . blind to them because society makes them invisible. (Ka-Wapiscikwaniyasiki)

Another woman shared how she recognizes that in Toronto, she is on traditional Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee territory, and as a Métis person, she has a responsibility to the traditional Nations of this territory:

> Growing up in Southern Ontario. . .on Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee territories, while I'm very confident in saying that I'm Métis . . . . I've known these territories and whether or not I've always been receiving Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee teachings. . .I've always been here. And so, as I'm. . .continuing to learn, figure things out, I feel a responsibility to those Nations as well because I've grown up here. (Okiniwapikwaniy)

While Métis Peoples connection to the land with(in) urban Toronto is complex, one woman described how whether in the city or out on the land, she will always be Indigenous:

> It's not like I'm more Indigenous there and I'm less Indigenous here. Right? I am the same person no matter where I am. (Ka-Wapiscikwaniyasiki)

## Discussion

Métis women hold perspectives around Métis identity that encompass concepts of community, learning, and relationships. These concepts of Métis identity were contrary to the dominant patriarchal and political narrative. For Métis women in this study, having a connection to community was inclusive of having a connection to ancestors, their families, and the urban Métis community. Community also meant storytelling, teachings, as well as upholding responsibilities as a Métis person. Traditionally, being connected to community meant survival for many Métis Peoples. In conversation with Métis Elder Maria Campbell, Smylie (2011) writes,

> Maria Campbell described how Cree and Métis families lived on the land in extended family groups and how these groups would regularly gather for ceremonies and the exchange of knowledge and medicines. She described individuals who spent their time travelling between Métis communities in northern Saskatchewan, carrying information, stories, medicines as well as some trade goods from community to community. (p. 192)

Traditional Métis kinship networks continue to be upheld by Métis women in Toronto. Colonial policies targeted these networks in an effort to assimilate and eradicate Métis identity in Canada. For example, the Canadian settler government implemented the Scrip system during the second amendment of the 1870 Manitoba Act (Fiola, 2015). Rather than fulfill a promise made to provide Métis with 1.4 million acres of land (their homelands), the settler government created the Scrip system to divide and administer the land promised to the Métis. Land allotments arranged through Scrip were unsuitable for agriculture, and prevented Métis solidarity and resistance (Fiola, 2015). This led to Métis families being forced predominantly Westward, and to be commonly known as the "road allowance people" as mentioned earlier (Fiola, 2015; Thistle, 2019). Despite having detrimental impacts, road allowances became sites of resilience and cultural resistance against the Canadian state as it was an effort to keep Métis kin groups together (Thistle, 2019).

These colonial policies resulted in many Métis Peoples bringing their identity "underground" to avoid racism and discrimination. Fiola (2015) defines going underground as self-identification strategies for survival. This included silencing, "whereby the individual/ family self-identifies as anything but Métis or Aboriginal" (p. 30) and would often "emphasize their Euro-Canadian heritage" (p. 31). Within this study, the theme of intergenerational identity survival strategies resulted in Métis families going "underground." Women were not made aware of their Métis identity until later in life, or in some cases, were told to adapt these survival strategies by "passing" as other ethnicities.

Linked to the themes of connection to land and identity navigation, was the assertion of resilience through adaptability to new environments—the idea that being Métis meant "being able to kind of adapt to any situation" and "trying to make your home wherever you are." Métis Peoples ability to adapt challenges public discourses that commonly define Indigenous and urban cultures as incompatible (Newhouse & Peters, 2003). As one participant in this research study shared, "It's not like I'm more Indigenous there [on the land] and I'm less Indigenous

here [in the city].” Evidence also confirms that Métis had frequently traveled through colonial urban York (later Toronto) (Thistle, 2016). The main trade route used by Métis between the years 1760 and 1821 was the Toronto Carrying Place; later Yonge Street. Early Yonge Street was Métis “voyageur central” prior to 1821 (Thistle, 2016). Fast forward 200 years later, Métis Peoples are living, thriving, and contributing to the urban landscape of Toronto. The women in this research study provided examples of how they are connecting to the Toronto landscape through identity revival practices. One example is the Toronto Métis community garden. This garden is a part of the Métis Women’s Talking Circle in Toronto that gathers monthly for food, teachings and conversations. The women are remembering, relearning, and reconnecting to their Métis identity through coming together and planting traditional foods and medicines in Allan Gardens (“Métis Women Bring Traditional Gardening to the Heart of Downtown Toronto,” 2017).

Building on the theme of connection and relationship to land, Métis women’s identity learning journeys included concepts of reconnection through learning about the history of Métis Peoples, reconnecting with family members, remembering the language, and learning recipes. As with many cultures around the world, recipes passed down through generations are significant to Métis identity and culture. This narrative is consistent with the findings of Métis scholar Monica Cyr (2018) who identified the intergenerational sharing of traditional Métis recipes through oral storytelling as an identity revitalization method. In regard to participants relearning language in this study, Métis scholar Monique Auger (2017) states that the traditional language of the Métis people known as Michif, is the foundation to Métis knowledge systems. The Michif language has been described as helping to shape Métis kinships, and holds Métis Peoples traditional teachings and values (Edge & McCallum, 2006). There are only an estimated 600 speakers of varying Michif dialects scattered across Canada and the northern USA (Iseke, 2013). It is important to note that many Métis also spoke languages of their First Nations counterparts, such as Cree and/ or Anishinaabemowin for example. These languages, along with Michif, are at risk due to colonial efforts to assimilate Métis Peoples which resulted in languages going underground (Fiola, 2015).

## Identity and access to culturally safe services

To improve access to culturally safe spaces for Métis in Toronto, foundationally building in or asserting Métis defined concepts of identity that are grounded in and aligned with local community understandings of Métis identity are fundamental. Incorporating the participants definitions of identity into services may include acknowledging and respecting Métis Peoples complex social, economic, political, and historical factors that shape their experiences. Acknowledging and respecting these factors may include hiring service providers who hold an understanding of Métis Peoples’ histories and their complex identities, and/ or having a Métis specific or informed service space (Monchalin, Smylie, Bourgeois, & Firestone, 2019). Métis specific or informed services are currently limited in Toronto; mainstream services in Toronto accommodate predominately non-Indigenous Peoples, while Indigenous-specific services are largely accessible to only First Nations Peoples.

Integrating Métis identity into the health and social service delivery must also reflect Métis social kinship systems and not be individually focused. The women in this research said that being Métis means being connected to community. Community was inclusive of having a connection to ancestors, families, and urban relations. Macdougall (2017) supports this and states that health and social services need to reflect Métis social kinship systems. She writes, “wellness and health [in Métis communities] were closely tied to the wellbeing of others as well as to the ability to extend family networks as widely as possible.” (Macdougall, 2017, p. 9). Reflecting Métis social kinship systems as shown in the participants’ learning journeys, may entail services offering regular Métis community feast’s, as “[t]raditionally, our food served to bring together individuals and communities in kitchens” (Métis Centre, NAHO, 2008b, p. 8). It also may encompass providing language revitalization initiatives. Language revitalization has been signaled by the United Nations, as they declared an International Decade of Indigenous Languages to begin in 2022. The resolution was adopted to bring attention to the critical loss, and the urgent need to preserve and revitalize Indigenous languages (Deer, 2019).

Integrating local community understandings of Métis identity into health and social services also requires having access to Métis specific funding. Much of the current funding for Indigenous health programming and research is pan-Indigenous and is utilized largely by First Nations groups (Monchalin, Smylie, Bourgeois, & Firestone, 2019). Indigenous health resources and funding need to be made accessible for Métis communities by acknowledging the limited resources rooted in an ongoing history of assimilation (Evans et al., 2012). This is echoed in the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019), as Call for Justice 17.7 states,

> We call upon all governments to fund and to support culturally appropriate programs and services for Métis people living in urban centres, including those that respect the internal diversity of Métis communities with regards to spirituality, gender identity, and cultural identity. (p. 211)

## Conclusion

Integrating Métis determined understandings of Métis identity into urban health and social services is critical in advancing the cultural safety of both Indigenous and mainstream health and social services for Métis people. Urban Métis women draw on a wholistic framework that is rooted in traditional kinship networks in their expressed understandings of their Métis identity. While displaced from their maternal homelands, Métis women understand

identity through concepts of community, family, learning, and relationship to people and place. Integrating concepts of Métis identity into health services that push back against the patriarchal and political narrative, may improve access to culturally safe services in Toronto and other urban contexts across Canada.

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## Notes

1. This estimate is slightly larger than that of 7,265 persons reported by the Canadian Census for this population (Statistics Canada, 2016). At the same time, the authors consider both numbers to be an underestimate of the actual size of the Métis population of the City of Toronto due to under participation of Métis in both the census and OHC Toronto.
2. Many of the women that participated in this research project requested that their name remain anonymous. Following each quote from the Métis women, rather than use the word "anonymous" or "participant 1, participant 2" and so on, a medicinal plant name was assigned for each woman. This idea was inspired by Métis author Catherine Richardson (2016) and how she shares that Métis stories are medicine. The medicinal names are in Michif (Île-à-la Crosse dialect) and come from Christi Belcourt's (2007) book called "Medicines to Help Us: Traditional Métis Plant Use" (translations were provided by Métis Elder/healer, Rose Richardson). For the anonymous women's quotes that were used in this paper, the medicines below can be translated as follows: Nîpisiy: Willow; Misâskwatômin: Saskatoon Berry; Otîhimin: Strawberry; Kâ-Wâpiscikwâniyâsiki: Yarrow; Tohtôsâpôwaskaw: Milkweed; Masân: Stinging Nettle; Okinîwâpikwaniy: Wild Rose; Akwâminakisîmin: Burdock. The remaining women whose quotes were used in this paper are identified by their first name upon their request.
3. This high non-response rate is consistent with the high mobility found in the larger OHC Toronto study (Well Living House, 2018).

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